



## Stop the free fall

### India and Canada must not allow their ties to deteriorate further

The diplomatic row between India and Canada has, as expected, begun to impact people who have ties with both countries. The unusual manner in which Canada made public its understanding that Indian officials were somehow involved in the 2023 murder of Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar has derailed bilateral relations. Washington's allegations regarding the plot against Gurburpat Singh Pannun further complicated matters. On November 3, a camp on the premises of the Hindu Sabha Mandir in Brampton, which was organised by the Indian mission to provide consular services, was violently disrupted by Khalistan activists. Later, a protest by a Hindu group also led to violence. Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the violence at the mandir as "deliberate" and attempts to intimidate Indian diplomats as "cowardly". Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau termed the incident "unacceptable". At least two people linked to Nijjar have been reportedly arrested by the police in Canada. One of them is wanted in India. An estimated 19 lakh people, or about 4% of Canada's population, are of Indian origin. Many of them maintain close ties with India and require varied consular services.

That a small violent group can even disrupt routine diplomatic functions is a sad commentary on Canada's standing as a stable democracy where the rule of law is supreme. The Canadian government must ensure that Indian diplomats are secure. India and Canada should not encourage or tolerate any kind of mobilisation that causes communal rift in either country. India's diaspora engagement must unfailingly reflect the multi-religious character of the nation. India-Canada bilateral trade in goods and services combined is around \$19 billion. It was expected to be boosted further through a bilateral trade treaty, but negotiations on this are now stalled. Both countries have been careful so far to insulate their economic relations, but disruptions in visa issuance on both sides can have an impact. India and Canada have significant convergence on many issues, climate change, for instance. Sustained people-to-people contacts have been beneficial, notwithstanding the fact that the current turmoil also originates from fractious diaspora politics. Independent of India ties, Canada is trying to tighten its border policy as nearly two-thirds of the population reportedly feel that there are too many immigrants entering the country. New restrictions on student visas will affect Indian aspirants too. While a complete normalisation of ties cannot be quick, both countries can and must avoid disruptions to their consular services.

## No time lost

In calls with world leaders, Donald Trump showed he is true to his own self

Within a week of winning the U.S.'s electoral mandate, including its popular vote, U.S. President-elect Donald Trump seems ready to pick up from where he left off in 2020. He has begun announcing his nominees for key posts including his National Security Adviser, Border and Immigration agency head, Environmental Protection Agency chief, UN Ambassador, and is completing the process for more senior posts. He is also relying more on his family than on Republican Party bosses. His son Don Jr., is leading the vetting process, saying that loyalty is the most important qualification, and he would pick candidates who "don't think they know better" than his father. Mr. Trump has received calls from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and the leaders of Australia, China, France, Japan, South Korea and the U.K., among others. Calls with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu were aimed at ensuring that the two major world conflicts are wound down. Here too were shades of Mr. Trump's unorthodox behaviour from his previous tenure: billionaire associate Elon Musk was a part of the call with Mr. Zelenskyy. Details of another call, allegedly with Russian President Vladimir Putin, were leaked to a leading U.S. daily, but the Kremlin called it "pure fiction". In what can only be seen as an imitation of Trumpian style, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto released his conversation with Mr. Trump on social media. The call with Mr. Modi appeared to have rekindled the friendship from Trump 1.0, with Mr. Trump's praise of Mr. Modi and the Indian readout recalling the Houston and Ahmedabad rallies.

While it is clear that Mr. Trump's unpredictable flourishes and hyperbole remain, New Delhi must be prepared that the substance of his bilateral agenda is unchanged despite the strides in ties since 2020. Mr. Trump's declarations on trade should be taken seriously – he withdrew India's GSP status for exports over high tariffs in 2019, and his desire to build American manufacturing will clash with the 'Make in India' programme and the 2021 PLI benefits scheme. His new partnership with Elon Musk may mean that India will be expected to consider demands from Tesla and Starlink for special duty waivers and tax holidays, as much as it has for other sectors. Mr. Trump favoured in the past, such as the Telurium MoU for LNG purchases (2019) or real estate projects. While the Trump administration and the Modi government will have more aligned policies on China, the West, South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, they will probably differ over Iran, the UN, immigration and subsidies. New Delhi will need to study Mr. Trump's nominees, deciding clearly where it is willing to concede to the incoming U.S. administration and where it intends to stand firm.

Once in a while, the World Bank publishes a visionary and profound report on an important aspect of human well-being. A case in point is 'Unlocking the Power of Healthy Longevity: Demographic Change, Non-communicable Diseases, and Human Capital' that was published in Washington DC in September 2024. A significant demographic transformation is underway with a rapidly aging population. This transformation is accompanied by a shift in most Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMIC) such that non-communicable diseases (NCD) are the leading cause of deaths. Most NCD deaths occur in LMICs, and the proportion of all deaths caused by NCDs is likely to surge among them.

Projections suggest a global surge in deaths from 61 million in 2023 to 92 million in 2050, as well as related increases in needs for NCD-related hospitalisation and long-term care. If LMICs can achieve ambitious yet feasible rates of progress, the world could avert 25 million deaths annually by 2050, effectively halving avoidable deaths and meeting the related Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Driven by this concern, the World Bank report proposes a healthy longevity initiative (HLI) which takes a life course approach. Briefly, healthy longevity entails sharply reducing avoidable death and serious disability throughout the life cycle, as well as increased levels of physical, mental, and social functioning through middle and older ages, and short period of time before inevitable death (World Bank, 2024). Whether this is feasible in LMICs, especially India, is debatable.

Curiously, it imagines a world in which health care is accessible, doctors and nurses, and para medical staff are competent, honest, and committed to proper patient care, hospitals are well-equipped, the monitoring of patients is systematic and digitised, and there is an awareness of benefits of early detection and treatment of NCDs. While the World Bank report discusses catastrophic health expenses and impoverishment, and inadequate state funding of health care, the chasm between the real world and that which is subsumed in the HLI is much too deep to be overlooked. Indeed, a world without quacks, corrupt doctors, exploitative hospitals, pharmaceutical companies pushing unsafe medicines, and patients with chronic conditions travelling hundreds of miles is rarefied.

The objectives and the strategy of reducing the surge in NCDs must, therefore, be modest and feasible. A recent study by the writers of this article of the growing burden of NCDs in India is a step in this direction.

**India's elderly population, disease concerns**  
The older population of India is currently the world's second largest – 140 million people who are aged 60 years and above (compared to 250

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The divide between the real world and the strategy to be adopted in the healthy longevity initiative is too wide to be ignored

million people in China). Moreover, the average annual growth rate of the older population is almost three times higher than the overall population growth rate of India.

The swift descent of the elderly in India (60 years-plus) into NCDs (for example, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes) could have disastrous consequences in terms of an impoverishment of families, excess mortality, lowering of investment and a consequent deceleration of economic growth. Worse, the government has to deal simultaneously with the rising fiscal burden of NCDs and infectious diseases. As a report by *The Lancet* (2018) emphasises, failure to devise a strategy and make timely investment now will jeopardise achievement of SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and target 4 of a one-third reduction in premature mortality from NCDs by 2030.

NCD morbidity and mortality as shares of total morbidity and mortality have risen steadily in India. In 1990, NCDs accounted for 40% of all Indian mortality and are now projected to account for three quarters of all deaths by 2030. Currently, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, respiratory illness and diabetes are the leading causes of deaths in India, accounting for almost 50% of all deaths (*The Lancet*, 2018).

Underlying these rising shares are growing risks that are common to several NCDs. These include tobacco use, alcohol abuse, and obesity due to sedentary lifestyles and diets that are getting to be increasingly high in simple carbohydrates and saturated fats. Many populations, particularly in remote rural areas, lack easy or frequent access to primary health-care practitioners who can provide regular screenings for common NCDs.

### Impact of social security schemes

The focus here is on diabetes and heart diseases. The writers of this article examine whether participation in social security measures/schemes reduces the prevalence of two specific NCDs followed by whether utilisation of medical services/hospital visits also reduces the prevalence of NCDs. As the India Human Development Survey 2015 is the only all-India panel survey to date, the analysis is based on this survey, supplemented by Longitudinal Aging Study in India (LASI 2017-18) conducted jointly by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Harvard School of Public Health.

Even though pension amounts are meagre, they supplement scanty resources of the elderly poor in covering health-care expenses and thus reduce the NCDs. For treatment of such diseases, hospital visits are unavoidable. However, travel costs, fees and costs of medicines impose a huge financial burden, resulting in large out-of-pocket expenditure and indebtedness and immiseration. While health insurance is useful in restricting the financial burden, this potential is far from fully

realised due to limited awareness of eligibility requirements, elaborate documentation, delays in payments, and rejection of claims.

Diets high in refined grain intake cause an increased risk of premature coronary artery disease while rice intake beyond a threshold causes diabetes. Higher intake of red meats such as beef, pork and mutton also contribute to higher risks of diabetes and heart diseases. Besides, a rise in the price ratios of fat-dense foods (sugar and oil) aggravates the risk of both diabetes and heart disease.

Confirming the age gradient, the risks of diabetes and heart diseases are positively associated with age. There are various reasons why diabetes rises with age such as a sedentary lifestyle, high-calorie diet, visceral adiposity, and high genetic predisposition mellitus (type 2) diabetes among Indians at a much younger age and at a lower body mass index (BMI) than the western population.

Of particular importance is the Ayushman Bharat Scheme that aims to provide health insurance coverage to the bottom 40% of households. But its potential has been far from fully realised due to inadequate funding and stringent eligibility requirements, and colossal corruption as revealed by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) 2023 (for example, large numbers of ineligible beneficiaries, long delays in empanelment of hospitals, surgeries performed after discharge, and utilisation certificates without signature of competent authorities). However, insurance alone might not be sufficient to achieve access to quality care, which depends on health-care infrastructure, provider availability, and local culture.

### Hospital expenses

As private hospitals are notorious for inflated prices of health care, the Supreme Court of India directed the central government in February 2024 to find ways to regulate the rates of hospital procedures. As the Court observed, pricing decisions must be informed by a benchmark for price determination. While price caps do influence actors' behaviour by making them follow the regulations, these effects tend to be temporary when enforcement mechanisms are weak.

Behavioural changes are no less important, and perhaps also no less challenging. Lack of physical activity and unbalanced high-calorie diet promote weight gains. Obesity is a risk factor for cardiovascular diseases and diabetes and can aggravate risks of cardiovascular disease such as emphysema and bronchitis. Limiting tobacco consumption is expected to have benefits at the individual level but wider reduction in multi-morbidity prevalence requires taxation on unhealthy products.

In conclusion, if and when these policy reforms will be carried out is anybody's guess.

# Haryana — social dynamics, electoral outcomes

Sociologists have reduced elections and electoral outcomes to a mere number game. Electoral engineering remains important but it rides on an understanding of changing social dynamics. The electoral strategies of the organised and ideologically oriented Right are based on tuning in to existing sociality and creating and tweaking the old into newer imperatives. One does not fully understand if the Right is riding a momentum or creating a moment afresh. Based on a field visit to Haryana, after the recent surprise Assembly electoral outcome, there is ample scope to argue that the Opposition parties, in this case the Congress party, are also struggling to connect electoral strategies to changing social dynamics.

### Dynamics on the ground

It is now well known that Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) succeeded in Haryana because it managed to polarise the rest of the castes against the dominant Jats. However, such a polarisation is possible due to a changing ethic on the ground – that protest is the weapon of the privileged, and negotiation is for the poor. In the course of discussions with the lower echelons in the caste hierarchy, they asked how Jat farmers could protest for two years. It is only because they have the money and the time. They reminded us that the protesting farmers were using air conditioners and diesel generators at the protest site. Surprisingly, none of the respondents expressed concern for the plight of women wrestlers either. They feigned ignorance, even as they knew the nitty-gritty of all the other relevant issues. It reminded us of Wilhelm Reich's formulation that totalitarian regimes are constructed through a 'mixture of rebellious emotions and reactionary social ideas'.

If protest is a symptom of privilege, pragmatism is a privilege of the poor. Respondents from a weaker economic background asserted the importance of having a



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The recent Assembly polls are an example of how changing social dynamics impact the election result

favourable relation between the centre and the states for quicker dispersion of welfare benefits. Similar pragmatic logic was offered with regard to the Agniveer scheme. They acknowledged that a wider array of castes now get jobs under the Agniveer scheme, and without corruption being involved. Under the Congress it was a permanent job but with corruption involved and only for certain well-connected castes. Under the BJP it is for all but a job only for four years. It is a different kind of a 'redistributive strategy' that reduces economic security but with a trade-off with social inclusion. Newer castes now see the scheme as more of an opportunity than about insecurity.

### Inclusion and equality

The dominant castes, especially a section of the Jats who voted for the BJP, responded very differently. Their argument was that the BJP stands for parity. The party's line is 'Kamake kharu (earn and eat)', while the Congress is a 'daggi baggi' (slang for 'malpractices') party. Some said they are anti-Hooda and not anti-Congress. But the point is that the BJP had the capacity to mobilise the micro-fissures. When asked about the lower end sections, especially the Other Backward Classes (OBC) that seem to have consolidated against the Jats, respondents expressed that opinion that 'OBCs are our brothers' but saw reservation as a wrong policy.

The BJP's bid to draw cultural unity seemed to assure the higher echelons of a sense of parity, and among the lower echelons a sense of inclusion. There is a process of a culturalisation of social and economic policy that allows for a sense of unity. But it is not clear how this will address the question of existing inequalities and why the weaker sections do not perceive a sense of loss in drawing a cultural equivalence without economic parity. It looks as if inclusion has displaced the concern for equality.

The professional class in the peri-urban areas view the process as different from caste

based-responses. Many of them see the political ascendancy of the BJP as a game-changer. One of them said: 'what the BJP does becomes sentiment; it is not that the BJP caters to the sentiments.'

### Voter perceptions

The organisational heft of the BJP, with the support of the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh gives it an ability to capture the mindscape of the voter which no other party can. With a personalised door-to-door campaign, fighting an election is a long-time strategy for the BJP. The Congress, on the other hand, stirs to life just before an election. Further, the choice before the electorate is between the authoritarian service-delivery of the BJP versus the democratic dysfunctionality of the Congress. The Congress looks more democratic because it is disorganised. In the BJP, with the presence of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, decision making is perceived to be authoritative, and not authoritarian, for a large section of the electorate.

Finally, there are the last minute electoral strategies such as changing sitting Members of the Legislative Assembly and managing the dissent through money and fear. In the Congress, which is a much older party, there are entrenched interest groups. The BJP could have also sponsored independent candidates in order to split Congress votes. There are also about 5% of voters who are always indifferent and BJP alone has the cadre to cajole them and bring them to the booths.

The Opposition parties are unable to match this combination of a multi-layered bottom-up mobilisation that the BJP uses. The Opposition parties are struck with the old patronage politics but the intriguing story is that patronage is being replaced by submission. People are welcoming the breakdown of old patronage politics but have yet to recognise the costs of submission to a supra-power being put in place.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Manipur unrest

It is a pity that violence continues to stalk Manipur, with fresh attacks being reported across several districts (Page 1, "10 armed militants killed by CRPF in Manipur clash", November 12).

It is evident that actions taken by the State and

central governments are inadequate. With ethnic tensions running high and the security situation in the State fragile, the path forward for Manipur remains uncertain. Peace talks and thorough investigations into the violence are crucial to de-escalate the conflict and

restore stability.  
**Kshirasagara Balaji Rao,**  
Hyderabad

It is unfortunate that the top leader of the country has still not visited Manipur, a State that continues to be on the boil. Measures such as curfew imposition are weak steps. The use of

drones and rockets shows that conflict management is difficult. Manipur should not be allowed to burn like this.  
**Bal Govind,**  
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

**Delhi Ganesh**  
Actor Delhi Ganesh made a mark in stage plays. His dialogue delivery was

distinct. Years ago, when I met him at his residence, he recalled his indebtedness to actor director, K. Balachandran, who spotted his talent.  
**Mani Natarajan,**  
Chennai

The Tamil film industry has produced some legendary

actors, with one such artist being Delhi Ganesh. His range of roles cemented his place as a cherished character actor. He was able to seamlessly slip into a variety of roles. His ability to evoke humour and emot at ease won him acclaim.  
**R. Sivakumar,**  
Chennai



## A mixed report card for the IMEC

In September 2023, the ambitious transcontinental India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) was announced on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi. The proposed corridor is expected to reduce the transit time between its eastern and western nodes by 40%, and costs by 30%, compared to transportation via the Suez Canal. These numbers may vary as the actual benefits may end up being on the lower side, but there is no denying that the new corridor, once operational, will be a game changer for the international maritime trade. Therefore, it is important to understand how the idea has shaped since its announcement and what lies ahead of it.

### Progress on both ends

Over the past year, various challenges have delayed progress on the project. The announcement of the corridor came with much optimism. However, this did not last long, as the very premise which led to the conception of this idea, namely, the normalisation of Israel-Palestine relations, came to a sudden halt with the escalation of the conflict between Israel and Palestine on October 7 last year. This crisis engulfed the whole of West Asia for the larger part of the year, which put the corridor on the backburner. As a result of the temporary pause, two key stakeholders, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, have not been able to make any progress on the project. Though it may be argued that the official relations between Arab countries and Israel won't impact completion of work on the ground, the two governments, which will have to work closely with the Israeli establishment for the project, would not want the optics and its geopolitical dimension. Therefore, implementation on the northern part of the corridor, which is mostly in West Asia, is going to move slowly until the ongoing escalation subsides.



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Implementation on the northern part of the corridor is going to move slowly until the West Asian conflict subsides, while progress is faster on the eastern leg connecting the UAE and Indian ports

On the eastern leg of the corridor connecting the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Indian ports, things are moving forward at a relatively fast pace. The economic relations of the two countries are on a northward trajectory, which is also reflected in the increasing bilateral trade numbers. Post the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022, bilateral trade has grown from \$43.30 billion in 2020-21 to \$83.64 billion in 2023-24 (a staggering 93%). Another important feature of the growing bilateral trade is the diversification of the trade basket between the two countries, which is reflected in the growing non-oil trade. The non-oil trade between India and the UAE grew from \$28.67 billion in 2020-21 to \$57.81 billion in 2023-24. This represents a healthy shift from an Indian perspective, considering that most of these commodities will be transported further west and north through the IMEC, thereby improving India's export share in the larger region.

Beyond amplifying trade volumes, the two countries are also working on the standardisation and facilitation of trade processes. Recently, India and the UAE launched the Virtual Trade Corridor. This will be an integral part of the IMEC, aimed at the reduction of administrative processes and time, reduction of logistics and transportation costs, and ease of doing trade. The streamlining of trade processes would not only serve bilateral relations, but also pave the way and provide a working model for other countries involved in the IMEC to develop similar frameworks for cross-border trade facilitation.

After more than a year since the IMEC was announced, we see an uncertain western part of the corridor trying to navigate through the conflict and a committed eastern part that is forging new linkages to ready itself for the new maritime order.

Further, given the one-year progress and the situation on the ground, it is clear that only the connectivity aspect of the IMEC initiative is gaining some traction at the moment. Other elements of the corridor, including clean energy export, undersea fiber-optic cables and pipelines, energy grid linkages, telecommunication lines, and clean energy technology cooperation, will have to wait till the situation in West Asia normalises. Therefore, the countries on the eastern part of the corridor should use this time to develop their capacity to improve connectivity among them.

### What India can do

India, especially, can use this time to prepare its ports, develop specific economic zones along the connectivity nodes, and improve its domestic logistics for seamless integration with the IMEC. There is a need to improve the digital footprint in the domestic logistics landscape, which will help reduce logistics time and costs, thereby making Indian exports more competitive. Further, the corridor, as ambitious as it may be, is just the means. The actual benefits will be seen only if India can improve its integration in the global value chains. With IMEC, India aims to position itself as a global supply chain alternative. This can only happen if the country takes steps towards enhancing its manufacturing competitiveness.

Finally, it is time to push for the IMEC secretariat, which can make the structure and working of the IMEC more organised. For starters, the secretariat can work on developing the framework for streamlining the cross-border trade processes and empirical evidence-based research on benefits accruing to participating countries. This would help countries in the neighbourhood of the corridor to better understand the project. This may end up generating interest, which could result in them joining it.

## Reining in civil servants in Kerala

Recent incidents highlight the importance of official channels in resolving issues

### STATE OF PLAY

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In the last few days, the Left Democratic Front government in Kerala has been grappling with two controversies involving civil servants. In the first instance, the Director of Industries and Commerce, K. Gopalakrishnan, caused a stir after he allegedly formed a WhatsApp group titled 'Mallu Hindu Officers'. In the second, Agricultural Department Special Secretary N. Prasanth made some serious allegations on social media against his senior colleague, Additional Chief Secretary (Finance) A. Jayathilak. On November 11, following the submission of an inquiry report by the Chief Secretary, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan suspended both Mr. Gopalakrishnan and Mr. Prasanth on charges of official misconduct, neglect of service rules, and impropriety.

The incidents have provided ammunition to the Congress, especially since they came at an opportune time for the Opposition party — by-elections to the Wayanad Lok Sabha seat and the Palakkad and Chelakkara Assembly segments are being held this month. On the WhatsApp group issue, the Leader of the Opposition, V.D. Satheesan, accused the State government of turning a blind eye to the infiltration of religious fundamentalists in the administration. He alleged that Mr. Vijayan remained a mere spectator even as bickering between key police and administrative officials spilled into the public domain.

Shortly after the controversy erupted, Mr. Gopalakrishnan reported to the police that

his mobile phone had been compromised. Subsequently, he disbanded the group and denied that he had added officials to it. A police investigation did not uncover any evidence of a cyber attack on the device. Forensic examination of the phone also did not yield any relevant information.

However, it was Mr. Prasanth's posts that gave the State government a more severe headache. The officer took to Facebook, alleging that Mr. Jayathilak had leaked official reports to the media and had also proclaimed himself the next Chief Secretary.

Mr. Prasanth was provoked by a news story, which said that Mr. Jayathilak had submitted an adverse report against him to the Chief Minister, accusing him of falsifying attendance and frequently failing to report for duty. The report said that key files on the Unnathi project, set up for the welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, had gone missing during Mr. Prasanth's tenure as CEO.

Citing Article 311 of the Constitution, which acts as a safeguard to civil servants so that they are not dismissed arbitrarily from service, Mr. Prasanth alleged that Mr. Jayathilak had deliberately undermined the careers of upright IAS officers who had stood their ground against his demands.

Despite State Revenue Minister K. Rajan's stern warning that disciplinary action would

be taken against officers who violate service rules, Mr. Prasanth continued his diatribe on social media. In one post on Facebook, he used an advertisement of an agricultural weeder machine developed by the Kerala Agro Machinery Corporation, along with a dialogue from the Malayalam film *Lucifer*, to portray himself as a farmer removing weeds — an apparent metaphor for his efforts to expose alleged misconduct by his seniors.

Both Mr. Prasanth and Mr. Jayathilak, former Collectors of Kozhikode district, are no strangers to controversy. Incidentally, Mr. Prasanth was Assistant Collector when Mr. Jayathilak was Collector. Mr. Jayathilak was transferred out of Kozhikode during bypolls to the Thiruvambadi Assembly segment in 2006 for casting aspersions on an election observer from Andhra Pradesh. A decade later, Mr. Prasanth, as Collector, had a public spat with Kozhikode MP M.K. Raghavan on social media, accusing the Congress leader of threatening staff at the Collectorate. Popularly known as 'Collector Bro' during his tenure, Mr. Prasanth earned praise for initiating multiple schemes, including 'Compassionate Kozhikode', a platform to get people to feed the poor. His effective use of social media allowed for direct engagement with the public then.

Mr. Vijayan's decisive action serves as a reminder to officers that there are proper channels for addressing such matters and that social media is not the right platform. The situation also highlights the necessity for a sustained and meaningful dialogue between the government and IAS officers. Equally important is the IAS Association's role in fostering professionalism and decorum among its ranks.

## Gap widens between Maharashtra's richest and poorest districts

In 2024, the MVA secured a higher vote share in poorer districts, while the Mahayuti appealed more to the richer districts

### DATA POINT

**Samreen Wadhvani**  
**Vignesh Radhakrishnan**

Over the past decade, the richest districts of Maharashtra have grown even richer at a much faster rate than the poorest districts. A key factor behind this is the hastened transition in these districts to the services sector. On the other hand, a considerable portion of the economies in the poorer districts remains dependent on agriculture. Moreover, an analysis of voting patterns in the 2024 general elections across these economic divisions shows that a larger proportion of voters in richer districts favoured the NDA, while the INDIA bloc held significant sway in poorer districts. This becomes significant as the State votes in Assembly elections on November 20.

For the purpose of this analysis, districts in Maharashtra were divided into five economic groups — very poor, poor, middling, rich, and very rich — based on their per capita Net District Domestic Product (NDDP) at current prices in 2022-23. Districts in the 'very rich' category had a per capita NDGP of ₹2.4 lakh; those in the 'rich' category had a per capita NDGP of ₹2.4 lakh-₹2.9 lakh; those in the 'middling' category had a per capita NDGP of ₹2 lakh-₹2.4 lakh; those in the 'poor' category had a per capita NDGP of ₹1.5 lakh-₹1.9 lakh; and those in the 'very poor' category had a per capita NDGP below ₹1 lakh (Chart 1).

The gap between the average per capita NDGP of the 'very rich' districts — Mumbai, Pune, and Thane — and the 'very poor' districts — Nandurbar, Washim, Gadchiroli, Yavatmal, Hingoli, and Buldhana — was ₹97,357 in 2011-12. It exceeded ₹1.7 lakh in the three years before the pandemic. Though the COVID-19 years narrowed the gap, the disparity widened

ceeded ₹2.4 lakh (Chart 2).

While the average per capita NDGP of the 'very poor' districts increased by just around ₹75,000 in 2022-23 compared to over a decade ago, it rose by ₹2.2 lakh for those in the 'very rich' category. Simply put, the richest districts in Maharashtra got richer at a pace three times faster than the poorest districts in the State in the period.

The composition of the economy of various districts could explain the rapid shift in the districts' domestic product. Composition is measured across three sectors: primary (includes agriculture, allied services, and mining), secondary (includes manufacturing, utilities, and construction) and tertiary (includes services, trade, hotels, transportation, financial, real estate, and others).

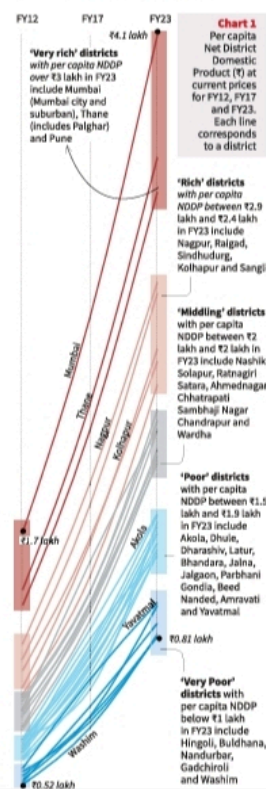
There has been a significant shift towards the tertiary/services sector across all the districts in the State — most notably in the 'very rich' districts, where services now contribute over 68% of the group's economic output in 2022-23 (measured by Gross District Value Added or GDVA) compared to 56% in 2011-12. The corresponding figures for the 'rich' districts were 61% and 49%. The dependence of 'very rich' and 'rich' districts on primary and secondary sectors has dwindled over time (Table 3).

The economic output of the services sector has also significantly increased in the poorer districts. It exceeded 50% of their GDVA in 2022-23. But the primary sector continues to contribute about one-fourth of their economic output.

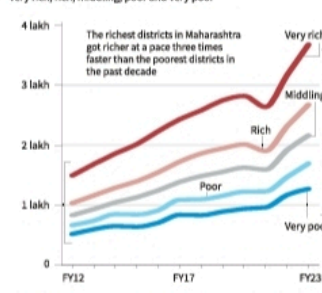
An analysis of vote shares secured by the Mahayuti and the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in the 2024 general elections shows that the richer districts backed the Mahayuti, while the poorer sectors stood by the MVA. The MVA secured 44-45% of the votes in the 'poor' and 'very poor' districts compared to the 38-41% obtained by the Mahayuti coalition. In the richer districts, the MVA secured

## Rich districts get richer

The data for the charts was sourced from Maharashtra's Directorate of Economics and Statistics and Lok Sabha. It also includes The Hindu's calculations.



**Chart 1** Per capita Net District Domestic Product (₹) at current prices for FY12, FY17 and FY23. Each line corresponds to a district category.

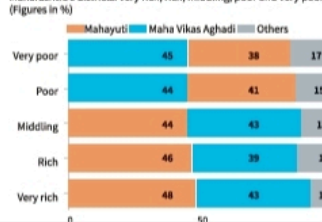


**Chart 2** Average per capita Net District Domestic Product (₹) at current prices between FY12 and FY23, across five types of districts: very rich, rich, middling, poor and very poor.

**Chart 3** Sector-wise share in Gross District Value Added in FY12, FY17 and FY23 across five types of Maharashtra's districts: very rich, rich, middling, poor and very poor. (Figures in %)

	Primary			Secondary			Tertiary		
	FY12	FY17	FY23	FY12	FY17	FY23	FY12	FY17	FY23
Very rich	30.7	7.6	3.5	33.7	30.1	26.3	55.7	62.3	68.2
Rich	23.4	18.7	16.1	29.6	26.5	23.4	49.0	54.8	60.6
Middling	22.5	20.4	20.6	29.2	25.9	22.1	48.3	53.6	57.3
Poor	26.4	24.7	23.1	27.7	24.5	21.4	45.9	50.7	55.5
Very poor	31.5	30.4	24.9	25.8	22.7	20.9	42.7	46.9	54.2

**Chart 4** Vote share secured by the Mahayuti and Maha Vikas Aghadi alliances in the 2024 general elections across the five types of Maharashtra's districts: very rich, rich, middling, poor and very poor. (Figures in %)



### FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 13, 1974

## Israel must learn to live with its Arab neighbours

London, Nov. 12: Israel's decision to devalue its currency by 43 per cent has had a mixed reception from Western economists. Most observers agree that Israel is a classic case of a country caught in the vicious spiral of an unmanageable inflation rate of 40 per cent, a country that lives well beyond its means by injection of massive doses of foreign capital by way of grants and charities from overseas Jews and above all a country which is cracking up under the strain of its own political and economic system. In principle Israel's latest austerity programme is designed to prevent the complete disappearance of the country's foreign exchange reserves which now are a bare \$900 million and sinking at the rate of \$100 million a month. Observers feel that while the socialist Government in Israel may be able to check the drain on the foreign reserves, it may, in the process of massive devaluation and imposition of unbearable income tax rates well destroy the country's work morale. The current tax structure does not permit "above the table" wage and salary payments on which a family can exist modestly. At a recent symposium speaker after speaker came out against the present tax system saying that it would turn both management and workers into liars by forcing them to submit and sign false accounts for travel, meals, expenses for non-existent cars, etc.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 13, 1924

## Everest expedition

Leaflet (Oxford), Mid. Nov. 12: The intense physiological difficulties attending the attempt to reach the summit of Mount Everest, the world's highest mountain, were described by members of the Royal Geographical Society by Major Hingston who was Medical Officer of the Expedition, led by Lieutenant Col. Norton after the retirement through illness of Brigadier General Bruce. Major Hingston said that at great altitudes breathing was quicker rather than deeper. At twenty-five thousand feet, seven, eight or ten complete respirations had to be taken for every single step forward. Even at that slow rate of progress one had to rest for a minute or two every twenty or thirty yards. At twenty-eight thousand feet, Col. Norton in an hour's climb ascended only eighty feet. The



KEYWORD

# The quest for freedom: is the ‘will’ truly free?

Free will, simply defined, is the power to make choices unconstrained by external agencies. However, this definition might be a bit misleading, for human beings are constantly constrained by such outward forces

Prathmesh Kher

Since the dawn of history, the most central question of human existence has been whether or not we have free will. The question might seem pointless to many and airy philosophising to others. However, attempting to answer it is foundational to our moral codes, legal framework, interpersonal relationships, religious belief, and even to the very meaning of life itself.

What do we mean by free will? Simply defined, it is the power to make choices unconstrained by external agencies. However, this simple definition might be a bit misleading. For we are constantly constrained by external agencies; whether they be physical, psychological, or social. A body starved of a steady influx of nutrition and hydration can sustain itself only for so long; a mind saddled with trauma will be too stunned to cogitate efficiently; a society which is despotic will be too asphyxiated to generate new ideas. And yet, the definition is not incorrect. After all, if consciousness is determined by existence, then existence in turn is reshaped by consciousness. This kinesia between the world and the self is the concentric and eccentric contractions of free will.

How then can one be truly free? Is not the human race bound to this principle of cause and effect? And if it is, as all things are, why does it have the ability to make choices at all?

## Of human bondage

There are those who argue against free will altogether. Many scientists, philosophers, and theologians argue that the architecture of the brain, the nature of causality, or the power of God precludes free will. Fatalism, in the sense that all things, including human action, are fated, is as ancient as the notion that human beings can make choices to alter the course of events. The *niyativāda* of the *Ājīvikas* of ancient India, the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, the mechanistic *weltanschauung* of the deists' clockwork universe, all conclude in characterising human beings either as automata or in a state of providential thralldom. "We are dogs tied to a cart. Somebody else is leading," as Chrysippus had pronounced, reducing the human to the canine; man had finally been cast in the role of "man's best friend".

Yet, far from the truth, the fatalists find themselves within a trap of their own making. If free will is nothing but mere illusion, then they are acting in that illusion even as they argue against it. If one chooses without choice, as the argument holds, then in fact one never chooses at all. It must then be conceded that the freedom of individuals declaring unfreedom as the rule is a sort of bondage. If that is true then those seeking the truth must push past these interlocutors. Instead of the fatalism that follows in these arguments, one must seek to understand. It is evident that absolute free will is a fiction of human invention, and pursuing a fiction must be child's play. Unfortunately, the rational faculties that ennoble a society have not yet embraced the notion of necessity.



ISTOCKPHOTO

Man does not come to earth armed with much except his mind. In order to feed themselves, early human beings had to hunt, or plant food. Both require a cognitive process – whether it be to understand the quality of the soil, to discern the climatic patterns, to understand the properties of seeds, to examine the behaviour of animals, et al. Our ancient ancestors' ability to develop agriculture and hunt or domesticate animals relied exclusively on their capacity to continually increase their understanding of the workings of nature. It was trial and error, and yet it was a rationally determined process. The freedom to choose was the apogee of human nature; the human capacity of reason was its *modus operandi*.

It is precisely a recognition that we have degrees of freedom rather than absolute freedom that liberates the human mind.

The philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt aptly stated: "Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity."

## Long walk to freedom

History is a record of the human struggle for freedom. The evolution of society is but a continuation of biological evolution. At the outset of existence, the individual human being struggled for existence in the face of an indifferent natural order; in order to make the struggle more effective, the individual began to co-operate with other individual human beings, giving rise to the collective unit of society. Thus, history is an organic evolutionary process.

The opposing view is to imagine man as a marionette, a puppet dancing on the strings of divine providence, or at the whims of social obduracy, incapable of self-willed action. As such, political systems, ideological tenets, or religious doctrine which undermine the rational human being at the expense of a mob's group-think, produce at best a herd like society, incapable of producing self-propelling individuals who by conquering nature contribute to an ever increasing share of progress for society as a whole. At the end of the belief that an individual exists only to serve communal interests, conceived either by birth to a grouping based on 'inborn' qualities or

through 'divine' fiat provided by prophetic writ, lies the cult de sac of dogmatism. This negates personal freedom, which is driven by the objective of personal happiness; society's happiness being the ever-welcome consequence of what comes first – self-realisation of the individual.

In essence, society is a product of rational human endeavour; even if it sometimes does not act rationally. But then society itself is an incorporation of its individual members. Freedom cannot be a patrimony of a collective, even if it can have collective consequence. The idea of group freedom negates itself, for it implies that it is the group that exists in primacy and not the individual. Knowledge might be collectively owned but it must be processed by the individual. There is no such phenomenon as a collective brain any more than there is a collective digestive system. It might be possible to feed people together but the act of digestion must be individuated. While there may be collective education, the process of learning is implicitly individual. Similarly, social freedom is also an expression of individual freedom.

Marx and Engels attest to the aforesaid logic of individual freedom. As *The Communist Manifesto*, often cast as the gospel of collectivism, aptly declares: "The free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

## Will to freedom

"I have free will; I have no choice but to have it," Christopher Hitchens had said when posed with the quandary of the origin of the freedom of will. The assertion that free will is a vestige of the human constitution is an ancient one; as is the affirmation that it is a holy patrimony, given to man by the grace of an almighty will. If, however, free will is deduced not from within the evolutionary process, it dissolves into transcendental morality, which is the belief that human beings can be moral only by the grace of divine law. In the process it destroys its very foundation. If human sovereignty is derived from a higher power, then it ceases to be truly sovereign. When life is believed to be a sequence of predetermined events beyond human control, then subordination to super-natural authority, and in concurrence, its agents or agencies on earth, is made to seem as the highest humanly attainable virtue. The corollary is denial of human creativeness.

Choice, however, is not a function of chance. Far from being an exception to the principle of causality, volition, and the subsequent action, is itself a type of causation. Man being an integral part of nature, his will to freedom is an instinctual urge – a manifestation of natural law. A monistic view of the cosmos precludes the apparent contradiction between nature's law and human will. There is no contradiction between reason and will; on the other hand, rationalist metaphysics and cosmological physicalism can be harmonised in a monistic philosophical system. Human reason is a continuation of natural law, and is a product of the causal relationships implicit therein. In that lies a reconciliation of the concept of necessity and the impulse for freedom.

The rationalist sanction of morality frees man from the mystic connotation traditionally associated with moral concepts. To a free man, the notion of good and evil must be understood by reference to the rationality implicit within him. It is within the capacity of human reason and will to work out a heaven on earth. It is as Shelley states in *Prometheus Unbound*: "Ceaseless, and rapid, and fierce, and free, with the spirits which build a new earth and sea, and a heaven where yet heaven could never be."



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
S. Upendran

"... and she was so angry she called him an animal."

"Not very complimentary, I must say. But the funny thing is we are always comparing ourselves with animals. And sometimes we are even proud to be associated with them."

"What are you talking about? No one is proud to be called an animal."

"True. But we are proud to be associated with certain qualities of animals. For example, you feel happy when somebody says you are 'brave as a lion', or you have the 'memory of an elephant'. Can you think of more examples?"

"How about 'to sing like a nightingale'? And when you're terribly comfortable you say you're snug as a bug in a rug."

"Very good."

"It's easier to find examples that are uncomplimentary. Take for instance, our national bird, the peacock. I'm sure you wouldn't like it if somebody said you are 'proud as a peacock'."

"No, I certainly wouldn't. And you wouldn't like it either if somebody said you were 'cunning as a fox' or 'timid as a mouse'."

"Me? Timid as a mouse? Certainly not. I'm more like a tiger."

"A paper tiger, you mean."

"A paper tiger? What's that?"

"A paper tiger is anything that looks powerful but actually isn't."

"Can I say that Raju is a paper tiger?"

"Yes, you can. The term 'paper tiger' can be used to refer to an institution, a country or a person."

"Well, I'm certainly not that person. And I'm not as timid as a mouse either."

"And you're too nice a person to be called a rat."

"A rat? Can you call a person a rat?"

"Yes. If you call someone a rat, you mean that the person concerned is an unpleasant one. 'Rat' also means a deserter from a party, cause, difficult situation, etc; a turncoat, a worker who refuses to join a strike."

"In many American films, I've often heard characters say 'don't rat on me'. What does that mean?"

"If you rat on me, for instance, you would reveal information about me to someone else."

"And by doing this, I'd be disloyal to you."

"That's exactly it. You would be disloyal to me. So remember, never rat on anyone. Oh, by the way, you can also rat on a promise or an agreement. And what this means is you break the promise or agreement."

"But that's what our politicians are doing all the time. During elections they make all kinds of promises..."

"... and after elections, they are ratting on them!"

"Yes. Remember you are taking me to a film tomorrow."

"Don't worry. I am not thinking of ratting on our deal!"

Published in *The Hindu* on January 11, 1994.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

Dozens of world leaders have convened in Azerbaijan for the 29th Conference of the Parties, or COP29. Here is a quiz on all the COP summits held until now

Sindhu Nagaraj

### QUESTION 1

Let's start with a fairly simple one. What is the name of the environmental agreement which acts as a framework for these conferences?

### QUESTION 2

This was an international treaty which extended the 1992 framework (answer to question 1). This was adopted in Japan in 1997. What was it called?

### QUESTION 3

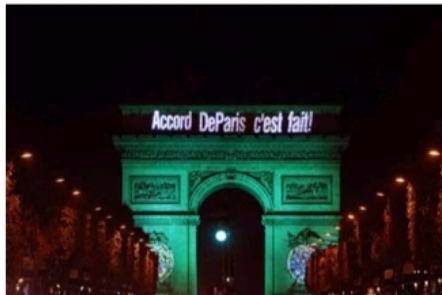
Where was the first UN Climate Change Conference held in 1995?

### QUESTION 4

At this meeting in 2001, negotiators wrapped up the work on the Buenos Aires Plan of Action, finalising most of the operational details and setting the stage for nations to ratify the protocol (answer to question 2). What is this complete package of decisions known as?

### QUESTION 5

This fund for climate finance has an objective to assist developing countries with climate change adaptation and mitigation activities. This fund was an outcome of the COP16, which was held in Cancun, Mexico. What is the fund called?



### Visual question:

This image signifies the ratification of which proposal? In which year was this signed? What is the goal?

### Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. This Chief Justice of the Supreme Court died while serving office, and was knighted by the British Crown in 1943. **Ans: H.J. Kania**  
2. This Chief Justice of India also served as Acting President of India during his tenure. **Ans: Mohammad Hidayatullah**  
3. This CJI was on the five-judge Bench that delivered the settlement order in the Bhopal gas tragedy case. **Ans: Ranganath Mishra**  
4. This CJI, a year after he stepped down as Chief Justice, was nominated to the Rajya Sabha. **Ans: Ranjan Gogoi**  
5. This to-be CJI will be the first woman Chief Justice of India. **Ans: B.V. Nagarathna**  
Visual: The objects the Lady Justice is carrying, and the objects the older Lady Justice was holding. **Ans: Constitution; a sword and the scales of justice**  
Early Birds: Tito Shiladitya| Piyali Tuli| M. K. Sudhakar| Sonali Das| Sumana Dutta

## Word of the day

**Obduracy:** resoluteness by virtue of being unyielding and inflexible

**Synonym:** adamance

**Usage:** The administrator was known for her obduracy even when there was proof that she was wrong.

**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/obduracypro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /ob.də.jə.səl/, /-dʒə-/

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



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

### The magnitude of the Sikkim earthquake on Tuesday

**3.5** A mild earthquake measuring 3.5 magnitude jolted some parts of Sikkim on Tuesday, officials said. There was no report of any damage to property or loss of life, they said. The epicentre of the mild earthquake was located 16 km west of Gangtok at a depth of 5 km. PTI

### Extortion calls to Delhi businessmen in the last 300 days

**160** The majority of these calls originate from foreign-based gangsters or their associates, using Voice Over Internet Protocol or international phone numbers, police sources said on Tuesday. Last week, seven such cases were reported in just four days. PTI

### Number of people arrested in Thane ahead of State polls

**105** As part of an 'All Out Operation' to crackdown on criminal activities and maintain law and order in Thane, the police arrested 105 persons for various offences, ahead of the November 20 Maharashtra Assembly polls. During the operation, they seized 43 weapons. PTI

### The first all-women reserve battalion for the CISF

**1,025** women. Officials said that the unit will be raised from within the sanctioned manpower of the force of about two lakh personnel. These units are kept in reserve and used as reinforcement when the force gets a new job like duties of conducting elections. PTI

### Market investors' loss amid mass stock correction

**5.29** in ₹ lakh crore. A sharp fall in the equity market made investors poorer by ₹5.29 lakh crore on Tuesday when the BSE benchmark Sensex tumbled by 820.97 points or 1.03% to settle at 78,675.18. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Why is Maharashtra poll fray fragmented?

Maharashtra's traditionally bipolar party system was torn apart during the 2014 Assembly elections when the four major parties contested independently. This division has led to confusion and cynicism within the electorate due to perceived opportunism and erosion of ideological commitments

### FULL CONTEXT

Sarthak Bagchi  
Vignesh Karthik K.R.  
Susmit Panzade  
Pradip Kapse  
Sumeet Gurli

Since 1960, Maharashtra's politics has been largely dominated by the Congress party through a cross-sectional alliance between the dominant Maratha-Kunbi caste group and support from Dalits and Muslims—a strategy termed "bahujan politics" put forth by Y.B. Chavan. This model ensured prolonged Congress rule as successive leaders replicated it. The emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Shiv Sena in the 1990s, however, introduced a new dynamic. These parties emphasised Hindutva and regional pride, and altered the State's political discourse amid economic transitions.

### The caste factor

Caste remains pivotal despite expectations that progressive movements and economic growth would diminish its influence. The Marathas hold dominant positions due to their numerical strength, land ownership, and control over sugar cooperatives and local governance. They legitimise their dominance through historical figures such as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Non-Brahmin mobilisations, which have shaped modern politics, are now reluctant to accept Brahmin leaders like Manohar Joshi or Devendra Fadnis. On the other hand, the BJP has mobilised Other Backward Classes (OBCs) like the Malis, Dhangars, and Vanjaris to counterbalance Maratha hegemony, with leaders like Gopinath Munde consolidating OBC support. Dalit politics is also significant, with parties like the Republican Party of India (Athawale) and the Vanchit Bahujan Aaghadi (VBA) representing the interests of Dalits, particularly the Mahars in regions like Vidarbha. Regional disparities, such as Vidarbha's agrarian distress and demand for separate statehood, further complicate the landscape, as do the issues of Mumbai-Thane and the unique socio-cultural fabric of the Konkan region.

Each sub-region experiences shifting party dominance. Vidarbha, once a Congress bastion, now sees close contests with the BJP, which has expanded its influence and leadership in this area. Western Maharashtra is dominated by cooperative society leaders who switch between the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). The BJP's emergence here depends on co-opting the local elites. The Konkan and Mumbai regions have long been Shiv Sena strongholds, with the party now gaining ground in Marathwada as well.

Other parties have generated influence by co-opting local elites rather than building grassroots support. The dominance of local elites and their factional networks over ground-level organisations leads to hyper-localised politics, even as State-wide issues dominate the discourse.

Maharashtra's politics are thus a confluence of caste equations, regional aspirations, economic interests, local elite dominance, and strategic party manoeuvres.

### On party splits

Maharashtra's traditionally bipolar party system fragmented significantly during the 2014 Assembly elections when the four major parties contested



**Fractured politics:** Maharashtra Deputy CM Devendra Fadnis pays tribute to B.R. Ambedkar during an election campaign in Nagpur on November 11, 2024.

independently. Post-poll alliances and subsequent cleavages led to further fragmentation after the 2019 elections. The Shiv Sena split into two factions led by Eknath Shinde and Uddhav Thackeray (UBT), while the NCP split between Sharad Pawar and Ajit Pawar. This reshaped the political landscape, with the 2024 Assembly elections seen as a test of each faction's legitimacy.

The BJP has become a formidable force but face challenges countering Shiv Sena's regional Hindutva appeal.

After an uneasy alliance with the BJP post-2014, the Shiv Sena joined the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) coalition with the NCP and the Congress in 2019 to keep its political identity intact. In 2022, the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena faction and the Ajit Pawar-led NCP faction allied again with the BJP. Mr. Shinde thus became Chief Minister.

This fragmentation resulted in two alliances, each with three parties: the MVA (Shiv Sena UBT, NCP Sharad Pawar, Congress) and the NDA (Shiv Sena Shinde, NCP Ajit Pawar, BJP). Thus, the electorate faces confusion and cynicism due to perceived opportunism and erosion of ideological commitments. Seat-sharing dilemmas have led to increased rebel candidates and voter disillusionment. The electorate feels unaccounted for as parties prioritise strategic gains over ideological consistency.

While this fragmentation has introduced instability, it has also heightened political awareness and led to alternative platforms with specific regional, caste-based, or economic interests. It compels parties to address localised issues more earnestly, and has led to the increased representation of marginalised groups.

### The diminishing role of ideology

Political alliances in Maharashtra are driven by leaders with their force of personality, patronage networks, caste groups, and diminishing ideological distinctions. Charismatic leaders like Sharad Pawar, Devendra Fadnis, and Uddhav Thackeray play pivotal roles due to their regional and community bases.

Patronage networks, especially in cooperatives controlled by the Maratha elites, are significant. Control over economic resources and local institutions dictate alliance preferences as parties seek to consolidate power. Ideology often takes a back seat to pragmatism, and alliances are formed based on strategic calculations rather than shared beliefs. The MVA alliance exemplifies setting aside ideological differences to prevent the BJP from gaining power. In essence, alliances are crystallised through leadership influence and patronage networks, with ideology playing a secondary role. Strategic considerations to maximise electoral success drive alliances.

### Significance of the AIMIM

Muslims, constituting 1% of Maharashtra's population, are under-represented electorally. The All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimin (AIMIM), led by Asaduddin Owaisi, has become significant in representing Muslim interests by addressing discrimination, socio-economic development, and political representation. AIMIM contests elections in Muslim-majority constituencies, and have established a foothold in the State.

Mr. Owaisi aims to forge a Muslim-Dalit coalition to consolidate marginalised communities, though success has been limited at the grassroots level. New parties

like the Azad Samaj Party also attempt this strategy. Muslims face polarisation, with most of them feeling that they are being taken for granted by traditional parties within the MVA, which has offered limited tickets to Muslim candidates. The Shiv Sena (UBT) has adjusted its rhetoric to appeal to Muslim voters, a significant shift from its past Hindutva stance. Conversely, the BJP and its allies have employed polarising narratives to consolidate Hindu votes.

AIMIM's rise has prompted mainstream parties to reassess strategies to patronise Muslim support. The Congress and the NCP emphasise minority welfare and opposition to communal politics. Past attempts to provide reservations for Muslims were reversed by the BJP-led government.

While AIMIM had electoral success in alliance with the VBA in 2019, the Dalit-Muslim consolidation has shifted toward the MVA. There is a consensus among Muslims to avoid wasting votes on parties unlikely to win, and focus on defeating the BJP and its allies. The Ajit Pawar faction of the NCP projects itself as secular, fielding many Muslim candidates, although it is allied with the BJP.

AIMIM has influenced Muslim politics by directly addressing community concerns and challenging entrenched political elites. Its presence forces mainstream parties to engage more substantively with Muslim issues.

Sarthak Bagchi teaches at Ahmedabad University; Vignesh Karthik K.R. is a postdoctoral research fellow at KITLV-Leiden; Susmit Panzade, Pradip Kapse, and Sumeet Gurli are researchers based in Maharashtra. This is the first article in a two-part series on Maharashtra politics.

### THE GIST

Caste remains pivotal despite expectations that progressive movements and economic growth would diminish its influence. The Marathas hold dominant positions due to their numerical strength, land ownership, and control over sugar cooperatives and local governance.

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# SCIENCE

## Team at Kolkata institute engineers bacteria to solve maths problems

Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics scientists introduced 'genetic circuits' in bacteria that could be activated by a combination of chemical inducers; then they combined bacteria with different engineered circuits in a solution to build bacterial computers that behaved like artificial neural networks

Sayanant Datta  
SRI CITY

**A**t the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, Kolkata, synthetic biologist Sangram Bagh has a major and somewhat unusual goal: to build intelligent bacteria.

Despite being single-celled, bacteria are very sensitive and responsive to their environments. Organisms that are generally called intelligent – including dolphins, chimpanzees, octopuses, crows, and humans – are on the other hand multicellular, with brains composed of billions of specialised cells called neurons.

But in a major breakthrough, Bagh's lab has engineered bacteria that can decide whether a given number is prime and whether an alphabet is a vowel. These could earlier be done only "by humans or computers," Bagh said, "but now genetically engineered bacteria are doing the same. Such observations raise new questions about the meaning of intelligence."

Bagh's team introduced 'genetic circuits' in bacteria that could be activated by a combination of chemical inducers. Then they combined bacteria with different engineered circuits in a solution to build bacterial 'computers' that behaved like artificial neural networks. In this setting, each type of engineered bacteria was a "bactoneuron" and the combination of bactoneurons behaved like a multicellular organism capable of abstract mathematics.

The team reported its findings in *Nature Chemical Biology* in September. The paper's publication has stirred significant interest among synthetic biologists – experts who engineer new abilities in organisms. For example Pawan Dhar, executive director of the C.V.J. Centre for Synthetic Biology and Biomanufacturing, Kochi, said, "We've entered a new era where bacteria can be programmed to solve mathematical problems through chemical conversations".

The creation of these bacterial computers could herald significant advances in the pharmaceutical industry and medical sciences and in the biomanufacturing sector, Dhar added.

In an artificial neural network (ANN), processing units called nodes are connected to each other in layers. Each node takes in an input (or inputs), performs a computation on it, and produces an output – which can be the ANN's output or the input for another node. ANNs with more layers can perform more complex computational tasks.

Bagh's team used tools from molecular biology to introduce transcriptional genetic circuits in *Escherichia coli*, a bacteria commonly used in research.

During transcription, a bacteria transcribes a part of its DNA into RNA and reads from that RNA to make proteins. The microbe knows to begin transcription when proteins called transcription factors recognise specific DNA sequences called promoters, and kick off transcription.

The team built the genetic circuits in bacteria by introducing synthetic promoters that could be recognised by four transcription factors, individually or together. "The transcription factors and promoters and their interactions formed various feed-forward, feedback, and combination mechanisms," the authors wrote in their paper. (Machine-learning models use these mechanisms to perform their calculations.)

In this way the researchers created 14 bactoneurons that could be brought together in different combinations, each working like a single-layered ANN.

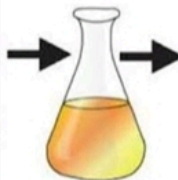
They tested each combination for its ability to perform specific tasks. A combination could be switched 'on' by the presence or absence of four chemical compounds in the solution containing the bacteria.

### The chemistry of input and output

Conventional computers manipulate the voltage of electrical devices made of silicon to perform calculations. High voltage is the 'on' state, represented by 1, and low voltage is the 'off' state, represented by 0. To mimic this in a bacterial computer, Bagh's team coded their problems first in the language of 0s and 1s and translated this to the presence (I) or absence (O) of the chemical inducers. For example, to ask a bacterial computer if a number between 0-9 is prime, the team first converted it to binary, then used the 0s and 1s in the binary form to present or withhold the chemicals. E.g., the presence of chemicals one, two, and three (III), and the absence of chemical four (O) would be read by the bacterial computer as 7, while the

## Is n a Prime Number?

n	Bits					
	(X4) ARA	(X2) IPTG	(X3) aTc	(X1) AHL		
0	0	0	0	0	0	1
1	0	0	0	1	0	1
2	0	0	1	0	1	0
3	0	0	1	1	1	0
4	0	1	0	0	0	1
5	0	1	0	1	1	0
6	0	1	1	0	0	1
7	0	1	1	1	1	0
8	1	0	0	0	0	1
9	1	0	0	1	0	1



A table from the study showing the input and the output for a bacterial computer calculating whether a given number is prime. ARA, IPTG, aTc and AHL are the chemical inducers. Green and pink boxes indicate the expression of green and crimson fluorescent proteins, respectively. SANGRAM BAGH

absence of chemicals one, three and four, and the presence of chemical two would signal '4'. Similarly, the team understood the output by checking for the presence or absence of red and green fluorescent proteins, engineered into the bacteria along with the genetic circuits.

In ANNs, the relationship between the output and the input of a node is captured in an equation called the activation function. When we write  $f(x, y) = z$ , we're using the language of mathematics to say the value of  $z$  depends in a specific way on the values of  $x$  and  $y$ . Similarly, the activation function says the value of the bactoneuron's output depends on (i) the strength of the input; (ii) its relative importance with respect to other inputs, called the weight; and (iii) a constant added to the weighted sum of all inputs, called the bias.

A node is activated when the weighted sum of the inputs plus the bias crosses a threshold. The weighted sum is calculated by multiplying the weight of each input with its strength and adding such terms for all inputs. For example, for inputs  $x$  and  $y$  with weights  $w$  and  $w_2$ , the weighted sum would be  $wx + w_2y$ .

According to Bagh, all ANNs have a similar activation function in form. The differences arise due to the inputs and their weights. Whether each bactoneuron produced red or green fluorescent protein was contingent on an activation function that captured whether a certain concentration of chemical inducers, their weights (i.e. each inducer's ability to trigger a genetic circuit relative to other inducers), and a bias (which the team is yet to explain in molecular terms) crossed a threshold.

According to Bagh, the team did this "by designing, constructing, and optimising the artificial genetic circuits such that the given chemical signals are recognised and processed by the circuits to produce specific fluorescent proteins (output)." The presence of the fluorescent proteins could be interpreted as 1 ('on')

### A striking feature of the work of Bagh et al. is that the bacterial computers are able to work on progressively more complex tasks

and their absence as 0 ('off'). A combination of 0s and 1s could be used to read the output as "yes" or "no".

When the team asked the bactoneuron computer if 7 is prime, it responded "yes" by expressing green fluorescent protein (I) but not the red (O).

The computer could also say whether a number between 0 and 9 was a perfect power (a number that can be expressed as one integer raised to another; e.g. 8 is a perfect power because  $8 = 2^3$ ) and whether a letter between A and L was a vowel. Encouraged by this success, the team raised the ante by having the computers answer more complex questions. They were able to say whether adding three to an integer would create a prime number (e.g. "Is  $2 + 3$  a prime number?") and whether the square of a certain number could be expressed as the sum of three factorials.

### Next level: optimisation

Finally, the researchers tested whether the bactoneurons could solve problems that couldn't be settled with yes/no answers. For this, they asked one computer to find the maximum number of pieces cutting a pie using a fixed number of straight cuts would create. This is an example of an optimisation problem, where researchers try to identify the best solution from a pool of possible solutions.

The team input the number of straight cuts in the form of chemical signals again, including certain compounds and leaving others out. Since the output in this case would have to be a number, the team modified some bactoneurons to express other fluorescent proteins (blue and orange) in addition to the green and the

crimson ones. The presence or absence of these fluorescence proteins could be read in binary and converted to decimal.

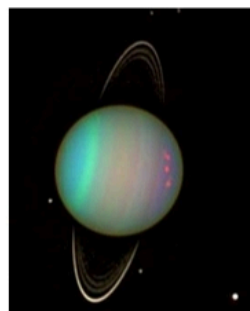
When they asked the computer to solve the problem for two straight cuts, it didn't express the orange fluorescent protein (O), expressed the blue fluorescent protein (I), and didn't express either the green or crimson fluorescent proteins (OO). 0100 in binary is 4 in decimal, and the correct answer. Then they asked it to solve for four straight cuts, and the computer responded by expressing the orange fluorescent protein (I), not expressing the blue (O), and expressing both the green and crimson ones (II). Together, IOII is the code for the decimal number 11, again the correct answer.

### Breaking new ground

Areejit Samal, a professor of computational biology at the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai, said a striking feature of the work of Bagh et al. is that the bacterial computers are able to work on progressively more complex mathematical and computational tasks.

Calling the paper "groundbreaking", Dhar, the Kochi-based synthetic biologist, said the future may not be far off where such biocomputers "recognise the molecular patterns of cancer at its earliest stages, signal their presence to physicians, and administer localised treatments before tumours ever form." He added that as scientists engineer bacterial computers with the ability to perform more complex tasks, "computational tasks could be outsourced to microbes, reducing the need for traditional silicon-based computers."

Whereas for Dhar the study reignited his hunger for more innovations in biocomputing, for Bagh, his engineered bactoneurons are a gateway to "think about the biochemical nature of intelligence." (Sayanant Datta is a science journalist and a faculty member at Krea University. dattasayanant95@gmail.com)



Uranus is the first planet to be discovered with the aid of a telescope. FILE PHOTO

## Scientists uncover a mix-up about Uranus

Reuters

In 1781, German-born British astronomer William Herschel made Uranus the first planet discovered with the aid of a telescope. This frigid planet, our solar system's third largest, remains a bit of an enigma 243 years later. And some of what we thought we knew about it turns out to be off the mark.

Much of the knowledge about Uranus was gleaned when NASA's robotic spacecraft Voyager 2 conducted a five-day flyby in 1986. But scientists have now discovered that the probe visited at a time of unusual conditions – that led to misleading observations about Uranus, and specifically its magnetic field.

The solar wind is a high-speed flow of charged particles emanating from the sun. The researchers took a fresh look at eight months of data from around the time of Voyager 2's visit and found that it encountered Uranus just a few days after the solar wind had squashed its magnetosphere, the planet's protective magnetic bubble, to about 20% of its usual volume. "We found that the solar wind conditions present during the flyby only occur 4% of the time. The flyby occurred during the maximum peak solar wind intensity in that entire eight-month period," said space plasma physicist Jamie Jasinski of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, lead author of the study published on Monday in the journal *Nature Astronomy*.

### The Voyager 2 observations left a misimpression about the magnetosphere of Uranus as lacking in plasma and possessing uncommonly intense belts of highly energetic electrons

"We would have observed a much bigger magnetosphere if Voyager 2 had arrived a week earlier," Jasinski said.

Such a visit likely would have shown that the Uranus magnetosphere is similar to those of Jupiter, Saturn, and Neptune, the solar system's other giant planets, the researchers said. A magnetosphere is a region of space surrounding a planet where the planet's magnetic field dominates, creating a protective zone against solar and cosmic particle radiation. The Voyager 2 observations left a misimpression about the magnetosphere of Uranus as lacking in plasma and possessing uncommonly intense belts of highly energetic electrons.

Plasma – the fourth state of matter after solids, liquids, and gases – is a gas whose atoms have been split into high-energy subatomic particles. Plasma is a common feature in the magnetosphere of other planets so its low concentration observed around Uranus was puzzling. "The plasma environment of any planetary magnetosphere is usually formed of plasma from the solar wind, plasma from any moons present inside the magnetosphere and plasma from the atmosphere of the planet," Jasinski said.

"At Uranus, we did not see plasma from the solar wind or from the moons. And the plasma that was measured was very tenuous," Jasinski said.

Uranus has 28 known moons and two sets of rings. The Voyager 2 observations had suggested that its two largest moons, Titania and Oberon, often orbit outside the magnetosphere. The new study indicates they tend to stay inside the protective bubble, making it easier for scientists to magnetically detect potential subsurface oceans.

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The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[ OUR TAKE ]

## India must cash in on chip war

The US's bid to stall China on chips and AI offers India an opportunity as supply chains realign

The US government's latest directive to TSMC, halting shipments of advanced semiconductors to China, marks a significant escalation in the global chip wars. The controls target chips of 7 nanometres (nm) or more advanced designs used in Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications. They follow the discovery of TSMC components in AI processors made by Chinese tech major Huawei, which has been virtually banished from most western markets due to American sanctions. TSMC is one of only three companies in the world that can make such advanced chips.

This isn't an isolated action. The US has tightened its grip on advanced chip sales to China, from restricting Nvidia and AMD's AI chip sales in 2022 to planning additional controls on about 120 Chinese tech firms. The Biden administration's sustained pressure is forcing global tech companies to rethink their manufacturing and supply chain strategies, and his successor, Donald Trump, is only likely to double down on this strategy since he was the architect of opening the US' most serious trade battlefield with Beijing.

These developments could accelerate the geographic redistribution of semiconductor supply chains too — a shift India must strategically position itself to leverage. Experts such as economic historian Chris Miller, author of *Chip War*, note that companies are creating parallel systems — one for the Chinese market and another for the rest of the world. Apple's expanding manufacturing presence in India exemplifies this trend, alongside other smartphone makers and component suppliers who have set up shop in the country. To be sure, India has recognised this opportunity. Its 2021 scheme offering incentives to chip companies has attracted investments to set up four fabrication units till now, but none approach the sophistication of the chips central to the technological arms race. The challenge lies in money, technology access, and talent. India has emphasised local partnerships and employment, but going forward, it must create an environment that attracts sophisticated manufacturing capabilities. This requires commitments to safeguard intellectual property and address technology transfer concerns of global players.

Three fundamental policy tweaks are essential: competitive incentives matching global standards, investment in specialised workforce development, and accelerated infrastructure improvements. However, expectations must remain realistic. Even with massive investments, building semiconductor capabilities takes years. The goal shouldn't be to replicate Taiwan's advanced chip manufacturing immediately but to strategically integrate into the global supply chain while building foundational capabilities.

## Perpetual firecracker ban needs serious work

The Supreme Court's direction to the Delhi government to decide within two weeks if there should be a year-round ban on firecrackers comes in the context of the city's abysmal air quality. Delhi is likely to end 2024 without a single good air day, and an HT analysis shows that despite overall improvement in the Capital, the air quality in eight out of 10 pollution hotspots hasn't improved much in the last five years.

Given how intractable the problem appears, banning firecrackers in perpetuity can help avoid one source of pollutants and toxic residue — at least on paper. Festive-time bans, an annual fixture now, have been blatantly violated, with the administration unenthusiast about enforcing the ban. Thus, the prospects of a year-round ban being effective seem rather dim. Without buy-in from buyers, manufacturers, and traders, it will be another conspicuous mockery of the State's ability and willingness to effectuate a progressive measure against popular will. At the same time, it has to be seen as an airtight shield rather than being limited to the Capital's administrative jurisdiction — quite like how crop stubble burning is being viewed today.

The Court did well in delinking religion and bursting firecrackers. There has been a campaign to paint firecracker bursting as integral to Hindu religious identity given its strong association with Diwali, and thereby equate pollution concerns with targeting of religious traditions. The Court's observations should encourage the political class to mould perceptions to the contrary — if short-termism doesn't get in the way. The city must also efficiently address other (and usually more significant) pollution sources, such as road and construction dust, and vehicular fumes, if the right to pollution-free living that the apex court has batted for is to be realised.

## Expect trade turmoil with Trump comeback

A promised protectionist turn, expected weakening of the rules-based multilateral trade order, and the likelihood of the US pulling out of strategic alliances, all have worrisome implications for the global economy

Two promises that United States (US) President-elect Donald Trump made during his election campaign could form the core of his economic policy. First, his promise to raise tariffs on everything that the world's largest economy imports by 10-20%, and second, his pledge to take manufacturing jobs from foreign countries by offering incentives to encourage companies to relocate to the US. In other words, the emergence of a staunch protectionist US could be in the offing.

Almost a century back, another Republican, Herbert Hoover, won the presidential election by promising an increase in tariffs. This culminated in the adoption of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, which raised tariffs by 40-60%. A trade war followed as the US's trade partners retaliated, and this, in turn, triggered the Great Depression, the worst economic crisis that humankind has seen. Trump's insistence on using trade protectionism to "Make America Great Again",

therefore, does not bode well for a global economy that is already facing considerable headwinds.

The probability of President-elect Trump implementing his promises on tariffs seems high for two reasons. The first is his fondness for using tariffs, which he described in a recent interview: "To me, the most beautiful word in the dictionary is tariff. It's my favorite word". The second reason for Trump to bank on tariffs is the Biden administration's adoption of an "industrial policy", long banished from the lexicon of US policymakers, to drive the country's economy. Biden initiated a series of legislative actions to support the rebuilding of manufacturing enterprises in the US, including the CHIPS for America Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022. The focus is on several critical industries, including semiconductors, electronics, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, communications devices, and autos and components. These industries are likely to receive the highest priority when Trump gets down to building his protectionist wall.

It is a no-brainer that a protectionist America will hurt India's interests. Exports to the largest market declined during the previous fiscal year and have barely recovered lost ground during the first six months of 2024-25. More importantly, most sectors that are the explicit focus of the US industrial policy are also those targeted by India's Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, which are intended to

deal to establish a semiconductor fab unit in Kolkata. Another issue that concerns India is that Trump is opposed to strategic alliances within the Indo-Pacific. In fact, he made a campaign promise to walk away from the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for Prosperity that the US has negotiated with partners, including India. The present administration has invested heavily in the IPEF as a bulwark against the dominance of China in this region; IPEF is widely seen as Biden's version of "pivot to Asia", quite like how the Obama presidency had designed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement. But, one

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Biswajit Dhar

## Fault lines underpinning politics in Maharashtra

After witnessing numerous political upheavals, vertical splits, crossovers of prominent leaders, and a constant tug of war for power, six prominent parties will undergo a litmus test on November 20 as Maharashtra goes to the polls. The 2024 assembly election is unprecedented in many ways as it has also exposed some of the crucial fault lines in the state's politics that are likely to shape its electoral and political discourse. This article presents five such fault lines and the complex web of challenges that these pose.

Reliance on freebies: Campaigns in the state are dominated by sops and freebies like Mahaj Ladki, Mahaj Yojana, free LPG cylinders, and free pilgrimages for senior citizens. There seems to be competition between the Mahayuti and Maha Vikas Aghadi on such announcements. Most of these schemes target women voters, who form nearly half of the state's electorate. The growing over-reliance on such short-term appeasement measures underlines the long-term failure of successive governments in effectively prioritising a welfare agenda for the state. To begin with, there are concerns over women's safety and well-being. In addition, over the past two decades, Maharashtra has slipped on key development indicators. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth has dropped by two percentage points over the last 14 years, as per a recent report of the Economic Advisory Council to the PM. Government school students in the state performed much poorer than before in arithmetic and reading skills, as per the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2022. The India Unemployment Report 2023 from the International Labour Organization stated that the proportion of educated unemployment in Maharashtra was 15% in 2022, an 11% rise from a decade ago. Instead of addressing these fundamental concerns, parties are doling out freebies for electoral gains.

Fluid alliances and shifting loyalties: The ruling alliance (Bharatiya Janata Party-Shiv Sena) breaking post the 2019 assembly polls led to the formation of the Maha Vikas Aghadi — seen as an unnatural alliance between parties of very distinct ideologies (the Congress, the Nationalist Congress Party, and NCP, and Shiv Sena). Their government was short-lived, and we saw the biggest vertical splits in two parties, the Shiv Sena and the NCP, with the larger constituents of both joining hands with

the BJP to form the government. While such crossovers are not uncommon in Indian politics anymore, the defecting figures retained the original party names and symbols, which created confusion among voters. This completely undermined the traditional equations that used to determine political outcomes — long-term alliances, ideological preferences, and cadre loyalties. This maligned the state's political culture; money, threats, and political opportunism have assumed a bigger role than they had earlier.

Disregard for agrarian distress and climate-induced challenges: A recent report by the Centre for Science and Environment reveals that 60% of the crop damage in the country in 2024 occurred in the state. Despite nearly half its population being dependent on agriculture, there is a lack of concerted efforts to address the agrarian crisis and climate-induced challenges in the state. Political parties seem to have no concrete plan to address this beyond immediate measures such as loan waivers. The demand for the Maratha reservation has roots in the socio-economic challenges faced by the Maratha community, which is predominantly agrarian. While parties across the political spectrum are trying to appease the community, given its electoral heft, there is little attention to addressing the root cause.

Delay in local body elections: Elections to many local bodies in the state have been pending for the last two to five years. These include 29 municipal corporations (including two new ones, Jalna and Ichalkaranji), over 200 municipal councils, and 27 district councils (and the panchayat samitis included in them). This year's local body elections are also yet to be held as the reservation has not decided on *sarpanch* reservation that is to be done in keeping with a Bombay high court order. The delay in local body elections has enabled the state government to assert greater control over local administration matters, leading to concerns about the erosion of grassroots democracy. Certain policy decisions within the purview of local bodies are increasingly influenced by political considerations. The issues of ordinary citizens pertaining to "putter, meter, and water" (sewerage, electricity, power, and water) remain unaddressed as constituencies have no elected representatives to attend to them.

Development approach: In recent years, Maharashtra has seen a significant emphasis on high-profile infrastructure projects like metro rail, express highways, and the bullet train, an approach that prioritises large-scale projects, sometimes driven by private and elite interests, that comes at the expense of strengthening essential services that would more directly benefit the broader population, such as local railways, state-run road transport, and accessible public roads.

The 2024 Maharashtra assembly election is seen as a battle for existence for all things old and new — parties, leaders and alliances. But beyond that, it will be a true test of voters as their choices will determine the course of the state's politics for decades to come.

Despite nearly half its population being dependent on agriculture, there is a lack of concerted efforts to address the agrarian crisis in Maharashtra

Sanjay Patil is a Mumbai-based researcher working on Maharashtra politics and urban informality. His doctoral work looks at the journey of Shiv Sena between 1985 and 2022. The views expressed are personal



In the absence of multilateral trade rules, powerful nations would use their brute force to extract concessions from smaller countries

of the first decisions that Trump made after walking into the Oval Office in 2017 was the US's withdrawal from the TPP. This was in keeping with his view (expressed then) that the US would sign trade deals only with individual allies. If President Trump sticks to his earlier position, geo-economic equations in the Indo-Pacific region could alter considerably.

The Trump presidency will also severely exacerbate the uncertainties that the World Trade Organization (WTO) is facing. The first Trump presidency had set these uncertainties off by breaking the dispute settlement body (DSB). Trump had refused to endorse the appointment of new members to the Appellate Body of the DSB, which meant that the settlement of disputes between members could not be completed. Given his opposition to the WTO, it is likely that the multilateral trading system could be weakened further in his second term as president. This happens, the global economy will be in jeopardy as a multilateral rules-based framework is essential for the orderly conduct of trade. In the absence of multilateral trade rules, powerful trading nations would use their brute force to extract concessions from smaller countries. Hedging against such a situation is

what WTO promises. The risk of dismantling the WTO can be phenomenal.

Historically, bilateral economic relations between India and the US have not been easy, with the two countries differing on a slew of trade and investment issues. Disagreements over intellectual property protection have often reached a flashpoint, as the US trade administration has complained that India provides inadequate levels of protection and enforcement. These differences have persisted irrespective of whether there is a Democrat or a Republican in the White House and may, therefore, play out in the future.

At the same time, however, India and the US have in place several bilateral processes that can help not only in navigating through their differences but also strengthen their relations. But, above all, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President-elect Trump have excellent personal relations; how they work together to build a better future for both countries will be watched with interest.

Biswajit Dhar is distinguished professor, Council for Social Development, and personal relations. The views expressed are personal

ANTONIO GUTERRES | UN SECRETARY-GENERAL

Developing nations must not leave Baku empty-handed. A deal is a must and I'm confident it will be reached

HT

## India needs to leverage Trump's China antipathy

The electoral victory of Donald Trump, and his comeback as the United States (US) President, has led to speculation as to the contours of his administration's policies with respect to the Indo-Pacific region. US presidents are said to get more ambitious in their second term, and if the past is prologue, Trump 2.0 may have a profound impact on the US's China policy. This is because, in his first term, Trump changed Washington's fundamental engagement with Beijing. Since the normalisation of relations between the two nations in the late 1970s, cooperation in economic, scientific and cultural spheres flourished. Trump mooted de-coupling, meaning the gradual severing of the intertwining between the two.

He also sought to address challenges in trade, geopolitics and security. The Sino-US trade war escalated on the back of the Trump administration levying tariffs on Chinese imports to reduce the trade deficit. Under the terms of the trade deal that China signed, it agreed to increase purchases of American products, address issues related to intellectual property, and give American financial institutions greater market access. The Trump administration labelled Xi Jinping's China as a strategic rival. This, a national security concern, became paramount and led to curbs on Chinese investment in sensitive sectors, restrictions on Chinese majors like Huawei and ZTE, and a thrust on countering Chinese influence in telecom networks, cellphone ecosystems, and cloud computing.

The Biden administration has built on this foundation, constricting flows of sensitive technology, investment and human capital to China. It is also seeking to have its allies board with the curbs on semiconductor exports. As Xi's China set much more by technology like electric vehicles, the US hit back with tariffs on the same. Thus, the political agenda across Republican and Democrat administrations has been to escalate measures that China perceives as seeking to contain it.

On the campaign trail, Trump sought to restore American primacy in manufacturing and zeroed in on Xi's China Manufacturing initiative that seeks to build dominance in important sectors like advanced information technology, high-end numerical control machinery, robotics, aviation equipment, maritime engineering technology, sophisticated rail equipment, energy-saving vehicles, electrical equipment, agricultural machinery, biopharmaceuticals and high-performance medical devices. He has called for higher tariffs on Chinese goods. Trump's China perception is also coloured by

his notion that Xi's mishandling of Covid-19 led to his rout in the 2020 election. This antipathy may translate into a tumultuous relationship.

For China, Trump's return has stoked worries over its political and economic trajectories. Xi has expressed fears that there may be attempts to dislodge the Communist Party through regime change; this has found resonance even among the general public. Economists speculate that it may not achieve its intended Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth target of about 5%. The economic slump and deteriorating relations between the US and China have taken the lustre off Beijing as an attractive investment destination for American firms. European businesses operating in China have voiced concerns that diminishing returns for capital invested did not justify the risks of operating in the Chinese market. They believe the problems in the Chinese market will linger unresolved, and they will have to rethink investing in China on account of regulatory issues, priority to state-owned businesses in government procurement, market-access hurdles, and overcapacity. This is also compounded by US tech companies exiting China amid geopolitical tensions.

India should try to leverage the churn to its advantage. Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi has been one of the first leaders to connect with Trump after his win. Modi has sought to build on the relations developed during the first Trump presidency. The question is can India use the disenchantment of the West with China to attract more investment?

Under the first Trump presidency, military cooperation flourished as evidenced by the signing of the foundational agreements. While India and China have taken steps to address the military standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Delhi must improve its defence industrial capacity to bolster its deterrent potential. A defining feature of Trump's first term was the emergence of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. Under Trump, Quad was resurrected in 2017. As Pakistan goes under, and terrorism re-emerges in Kashmir, India must engage with Trump who was receptive to Indian concerns in his first innings. There can be much closer cooperation between Washington and New Delhi on India's neighbourhood where divergences have been slowly emerging in the last few years.

Harsh V Pant is vice president for studies, and Kalpit Mankikar is fellow, China Studies, at ORF. The views expressed are personal



## Foreign funding

Higher FDI will improve growth outcomes

India needs sustained higher investment to grow at an increased rate for an extended period. Given its stage of development, India's domestic savings are insufficient to finance its growth, requiring the import of capital from the rest of the world. Foreign capital flowing into India comes in various forms and with diverse objectives. For instance, some foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) may be coming just to take advantage of the interest-rate differential between India and their home country, say, the United States. Such investment may be of a short-term nature and reverse quickly. The most stable variety of foreign investment is what is classified as foreign direct investment (FDI). Here the investor, often a large multinational corporation, brings a substantial amount of capital with a long-term horizon to set up a business independently or in association with an Indian partner. Besides capital, such investors also bring best management practices and technology, which has a much wider impact on the economy. Therefore, from a macroeconomic policy standpoint, FDI is seen as the most preferred method of capital import.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), in consultation with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), on Monday issued guidelines for reclassifying FPI as FDI when holdings in individual companies exceed the prescribed limit. Under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (Fema), FPIs can hold up to 10 per cent of the paid-up capital of a company. If an FPI exceeds the limit, it is expected to divest the excess holding or, according to the new guidelines, get it reclassified as FDI. Once the reclassification is done, even if the holding falls below 10 per cent, it will continue to be classified as FDI. However, the shift will not happen automatically. The FPI will need approval from the government and the concurrence of the investee company. This will help in complying with other conditions such as the FDI limits in some sectors. The reclassification will also be subject to conditions like investment from bordering countries.

The option of reclassification will help portfolio investors looking to increase their stake in a particular company and boost foreign investment. However, it must be recognised that FPIs are essentially financial investors and will not fit into the usual understanding of FDI. Some FPIs likely remain invested for a much longer duration, but they remain financial investors with expertise in asset management. From the policy point of view, such reclassification may end up showing an artificial bump in FDI flows. There could also be quick outflows. While the policy change may help some companies raise foreign equity more easily, subject to regulatory conditions, the reclassification may end up increasing noise in FDI numbers and convolute the overall understanding. A better way would have been to persuade Parliament to suitably amend Fema and make more room for portfolio investors to increase their holdings in Indian companies, possibly with conditions to ensure the stability of investment. India needs higher FDI and the flow has improved in recent years. However, there have been concerns about repatriation and disinvestment, which have increased in recent years. India needs to continuously improve its business environment to attract durable foreign savings.

## Credit for growth

Flow of credit can improve MSME performance

At the recently held National MSME Cluster Outreach Programme, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced measures expected to help micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The government has increased the lending target for scheduled commercial banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) to MSMEs this financial year by ₹1.54 trillion, aiming for a credit flow of ₹5.75 trillion in 2024-25. The target has subsequently increased to ₹6.21 trillion and ₹7 trillion for 2025-26 and 2026-27, respectively. In this context, public-sector banks (PSBs) are expected to take the lead in lending to MSMEs because growth in outstanding loans for PSBs was only 9.2 per cent over the last two financial years, while the corresponding figures for private banks and NBFCs were much higher at 25 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively.

Additionally, the government is set to launch a ₹100 crore credit-guarantee scheme for MSMEs, expected to be approved by the Union Cabinet soon. Under the scheme, collateral-free and guarantor-free term loans will be extended to MSMEs to boost their manufacturing and export potential. This follows the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS), which was fairly successful in meeting the liquidity and working-capital needs of the enterprises during the pandemic.

Loans to MSMEs have remained healthy, growing 20.1 per cent year-on-year as of March 2024. Yet, around 99 per cent of the MSME units in the country qualify as microenterprises and lack economies of scale. The current policy landscape in India perpetuates this problem by incentivising MSMEs to remain small. Although labour laws have been streamlined into four labour codes, they await implementation. Be that as it may, easier access to credit can help MSMEs to scale up. Recently, the government also enhanced the limit of Mudra loans for entrepreneurs who successfully repaid previous loans in the "Tarun" category. Moving from collateral-based lending to cash flow-based lending can reduce some of the friction in the credit ecosystem. Further, the deepening of the Account Aggregator (AA) framework and the launch of the Unified Lending Interface (ULI) are expected to improve financing for MSMEs.

However, caution must be exercised while extending loans. It is important to ensure that credit push doesn't affect underwriting standards, particularly for PSBs, which can lead to a buildup in non-performing assets (NPAs). Since credit is growing at a healthy pace, lenders must properly evaluate businesses before extending credit. As things stand, in 2023-24, NPAs on Mudra loans for PSBs declined to 3.4 per cent, an improvement from 4.89 per cent in 2019-20 and 4.77 per cent in 2020-21. Private-sector banks performed relatively well, registering Mudra loan NPAs at 0.95 per cent in 2023-24. The MSME sector has the potential to emerge as a growth engine by increasing exports and generating employment. Thus, enabling a better institutional flow of credit in this area can help MSMEs invest and compete in the market.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

## Slowing capex

Recognising growth dynamics is necessary instead of changing norms to chase expenditure targets

A slowdown in the Union government's capital expenditure is not only evident but has already raised doubts over the achievability of the target of spending ₹11.1 trillion, as budgeted for 2024-25. By way of comfort, however, officials in the Union finance ministry have indicated that the sharp fall in capital expenditure in the first half of the year should be corrected in the second half and annual expenditure could be slightly higher than in 2023-24.

Remember that the Centre's capital expenditure last year was estimated at ₹9.48 trillion, representing a rise of 28 per cent over that in 2022-23. It has been growing at a rapid pace after Covid. In the last four years, it has seen a compound annual growth rate of over 29 per cent, an unprecedented achievement. And this growth was ensured after strictly monitoring expenditure disbursements to ministries and even to states to prevent wastage and misuse. Steps were taken to improve the quality of expenditure by making sure that the central ministries did not bunch up their spending in the last quarter of the year or the states did not substitute their own expenditure with what they were getting from the Centre after Covid.

Now, it seems those guardrails are being relaxed to ensure that some growth in capital expenditure is maintained in the current year as well. Senior finance ministry officials have reportedly stated that curbs under cash-management guidelines could be relaxed in the January-March quarter of 2025. In other words, central ministries and departments could spend more than 33 per cent of their annual capital expenditure estimates in the final quarter this financial year.

This move may help the Centre step up the pace of its capital expenditure. But the idea of relaxing cash-management guidelines is not a wise move in the current context. Capital expenditure undertaken

in a rush with the primary intention of meeting the target before the end of the year dilutes the quality of that exercise and undermines the benefits that the economy reaps from such investment. Instead of quick-fix solutions like relaxing the cash-management norms, the government would do well to examine why the pace of capital spending has slowed considerably and introduce corrective measures.

It is, therefore, important to appreciate the underlying nature of the problem. The Centre's capital expenditure fell by 38 per cent in the first quarter of 2024-25, for understandable reasons. General elections were held during this period and the full Budget was presented only in the third week of July. In the second quarter, the pace of capital expenditure picked up, but grew by only about 10 per cent. Clearly, this was not enough to overcome the setback of the first quarter. Thus, the first half of 2024-25 saw an overall decline of 15 per cent in capital expenditure. From October 2024 onwards, therefore, it will be a difficult task for the Union government to ramp up its capital spending to achieve an annual growth rate of 17 per cent. The question, however, is whether those proposals for relaxing cash-management guidelines will have any real impact.

The problem with the slowdown in the government's capital expenditure is that even the states are facing problems in maintaining the momentum of such spending this year. Almost all the states saw their capital expenditure grow at a healthy rate in the past few years, although the pace was slower than that of the Centre. But the first half of 2024-25 has seen the major states' capital expenditure decline by about 12 per cent. In other words, the entire government system in the country is facing a kind of bottleneck in stepping up its capital expenditure. This needs to

RAISINA HILL  
A K BHATTACHARYA

## Key to Maharashtra's growth

India's economic reforms, which began in 1991, have created significant and unexpected opportunities for farmers and underperformers in terms of states' relative economic growth. One of the biggest underperformers is Maharashtra. While it led the growth pack between 1981 and 1994, with real gross domestic product (GDP) expanding at a robust 6.6 per cent per annum against the national average of 5.3 per cent, its subsequent estimated growth rate of 6.8 per cent per annum (1994 to 2020) was similar to the national average of 6.9 per cent. This relative decline in growth (1994-2020) was unexpected, especially given the state's economic profile and the status of most of the growth indicators across human development, physical infrastructure, and governance.

The globalisation of the economy, particularly in manufacturing, financial services, and information technology/business services — played a pivotal role in India's growth acceleration after the reforms. Together, they increased at a real compound annual growth rate of 7.2 per cent from 1994 to 2020. Maharashtra's growth rate of 6.1 per cent for the rest of the economy. One would have assumed that a state that is big in these sectors would benefit disproportionately. Not true with Maharashtra. It had a significant headstart in these sectors, accounting for about 45 per cent of its GDP compared to 30 per cent for the rest of the country. However, over the decades, be it availability of the educated youth or the gross enrolment ratio in higher education being at 22 per cent compared to 18 per cent all-India; infrastructure — per capita road availability at 53 per cent higher than all-India; or governance — an average fiscal deficit of about 2.6 per cent compared to 3.7 per cent for the all-states average, among others. This begs the question: Why has Maharashtra slipped up over the past couple of decades? Not only is this question

critical for the residents of the state, which goes to the polls on November 30, but given that it accounts for 14 per cent of India's GDP, a faster-growing Maharashtra implies a faster-growing India as well.

Mumbai (including suburban Mumbai), Thane, and Pune account for about 45 per cent of the state's GDP and hence hold the clue to decoding its growth performance. One common feature of all superperformers like Gujarat, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh is that the key economic centres (KECs) leading the growth charge. This has not been the case with Maharashtra; its three biggest economic centres, cumulatively, grew at the state average. Let's analyse the dynamics of Mumbai along with Pune and Thane to understand what is holding them back.

Despite underperforming the country's financial and entertainment hub, Mumbai, accounting for about 20 per cent of the state's economy, failed to lead the growth charge. Maximum City real GDP grew at 5.9 per cent between 1994 and 2020, significantly slower than the state average of 6.8 per cent. It was growing at a paltry 3.6 per cent (2005-20). Mumbai suffers mainly from two main challenges — expensive housing and weak transport. The price-to-income ratio (the median price of a 90 square metre apartment relative to median financial disposable income) in Mumbai is around 40, making it one of the most expensive real estate markets in the world. Likewise, road density in the poshest part of Mumbai, the Island City, is around 7 km per square km as against 10 km for Delhi. Furthermore, Mumbai started developing its metro network relatively late. While Delhi has around 400 km of metro network operational, it is close to 50 km in Mumbai, with about 150 km under construction.

Both Thane and Pune are prominent industrial hubs specialising in different industries. Thane accounts for about a quarter of the state's production of pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and textiles, whereas Pune claims between 50 and 75 per cent of the state's organised production of electronics, machinery, and the auto sector. Together, they grew at about 10 per cent faster than the state average. It was not because of their core strength in manufacturing but because

be studied before remedial measures can be planned. It would appear that the absorptive capacity of the sectors where the Centre and the states are trying to pump in additional capital expenditure is facing a constraint. The states need to be addressed before any other step is contemplated. Are these signs of a more broad-based slowdown in the pace of economic growth? The strategy of ramping up government investment immediately after Covid worked for the economy. Has the time for a change in that strategy come?

Equally important is the fact that in spite of an overall decline, capital expenditure on roads and railways has maintained a steady pace, accounting for a spending of ₹2.54 per cent of their annual capital expenditure outlay. It would appear that other sectors of the economy have been lagging. Taking a cue from this expenditure trend, the Centre should examine other sectors and study the specific bottlenecks that are coming in the way of a swift disbursement of funds.

It is also possible that a mid-year re-prioritisation of capital expenditure will help in directing more resources to sectors such as roads and railways, where the spending pace has been rapid. This might mean a cut in capital outlays for sectors that have failed to spend a large portion of the resources allocated to them. Cash-management guidelines should be used also to stipulate spending a minimum portion of the annual outlay allocated for a certain ministry. If that minimum amount is not used in the specified quarter, the government should be able to redirect the unused portion to ministries or sectors that are in need for financing their projects. The question then arises: what is allocated to a certain sector at the start of the year should be set in stone.

A more serious problem pertains to the states' inability to spend the capital expenditure their governments allocate for different sectors. Unfortunately, there is no coordinated examination of why some states are doing more and why others are experiencing a shortfall in their expenditure. The fact of the matter is that states like Assam, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tripura, Rajasthan, West Bengal, and even Punjab have seen increases in their capital expenditure in the first half of 2024-25, compared to the same period of 2023-24. Equally surprising is the decline in the capital expenditure during the same period in states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Telangana.

Patterns of capital expenditure have a bearing on economic growth. With their huge spending power, states have as big a role in economic development as the Union government. Perhaps a small division in the financials of the states would not matter, but the capital expenditure trends in the states and provide policy inputs to the state governments to introduce necessary corrective measures. States, after all, are important not just for reining in the government's fiscal deficit but also for maintaining the economy's investment tempo.

of faster growth in financial services and information technology/business services. This might be due to a positive spillover as a result of growth constraints in Mumbai, as discussed above. Consequently, Maharashtra's share in national chemical manufacturing declined from 39 per cent to 14 per cent and automobiles declined from 31 per cent to 20 per cent (1994-2020).

The National Package of Industrial Incentive announced in 2003 for Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, giving significant tax incentives to firms investing in these two states, may partly explain industry gravitating towards them. However, it does not fully account for why Maharashtra was disproportionately affected compared to other states such as Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Maharashtra's automobile production increased from 16 per cent to 25 per cent and also the chemical hubs in Gujarat, whose share increased from 23 per cent to 27 per cent in the respective national industries between 1994 and 2020. One intrinsic reason for Maharashtra's lagging industrial performance is the state's restrictive building laws. A 2023 Prosperity Index report highlights the restrictive nature of building laws in Maharashtra, resulting in large and mega factories (of 5,000 square metre plots or more) losing 50-60 per cent of the land compared to 30-40 per cent for Tamil Nadu and Haryana.

At the dawn of the reform process, not many would have expected Maharashtra to be an underperformer, given its strong industrial base and generally robust growth. However, the state's economic growth has largely due to its KECs, not letting the state take advantage of its underlying strengths. Maharashtra recently announced big connectivity plans for the Mumbai Metropolitan Region at an outlay of ₹58,000 crore over the next few years and an international airport is going to be shortly operational in Navi Mumbai. These developments highlight the state's growth prospects. If implemented on time, the economic agenda for the next government is clear: Focus on making Maharashtra's KECs its growth engines. Land reforms coupled with fast-track development of transport infrastructure offer good starting points.

The authors are, respectively, senior fellow and research associate at Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP). The views expressed are theirs and not of the CSEP.



SHISHIR GUPTA & RISHITA SACHDEVA

90 square metre apartment relative to median financial disposable income) in Mumbai is around 40, making it one of the most expensive real estate markets in the world. Likewise, road density in the poshest part of Mumbai, the Island City, is around 7 km per square km as against 10 km for Delhi. Furthermore, Mumbai started developing its metro network relatively late. While Delhi has around 400 km of metro network operational, it is close to 50 km in Mumbai, with about 150 km under construction.

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## Colonialism vs environmentalism



### BOOK REVIEW

RANJONA BANERJI

The premise of this collection of essays on prominent naturalists, mainly Indian, is not only studied and quite frankly, inspirational. It contrasts effectively the widely held notions that love for nature and the creation and adoption of methods that help the environment are western constructs and inventions that India has adopted. Nor does it pander to the equally western idea of the "Noble Savage", who by his or her daily behaviour has some spiritual connection with nature.

Ramachandra Guha has collected a formidable cast: Rabindranath Tagore, Radhakamal Mukerjee, J.C. Kumarappa, Patrick Geddes, Albert and Gabrielle

Howard, Madeleine/Mira, Verrier Elwin, K.M. Munshi and M. Krishnan. Each has a separate area of expertise and the reach here is broad—from poetry and understanding the ways of nature, to sociological ecology, grassroots Gandhian village view, town planning, agriculture, hands-on environmentalism, tribal and community connections to forests, tree-plantations from a Hindu perspective to a naturalist and wildlife specialist.

The essays are not only subjects of environmentalism as we understand it, and if climate change and global warming are missing from the list it is only because humans did not pay heed to the words and examples of those mentioned here.

Western imperialism and industrialisation are the threads that run through the essays because almost everyone saw them as evil, as the enemy to the natural world. Some of the names are well known, others such as the work of Radhakamal Mukerjee, J.C. Kumarappa and the Howards are revelations. The

Inclusion of Munshi is a bold move. Dr Guha calls him a "Hindu environmentalist" but his contribution is important.

Much is also revealed about how environmentalism grew in India during colonial rule and in the early days of independent India. The conflict between the village focus of Gandhi and the more industrial route of the first government under Jawaharlal Nehru shows up several times, especially in the chapter on the indomitable Kumaon.

Indeed, this quote from Gandhi (1928) begins the book: "God forbid that Indians should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts."

Sadly, none of the pioneers, fighters, poets and writers could stop India from following in those footsteps. Or indeed, the rest of the world. And that is a price we leave behind for the generations which

follows. On the other hand, they also set the background and the platform for the next more successful environmental policies. To read their stories and about their work serves as a timely reminder that our own history can sometimes save us from ourselves.

Where the reader will be disappointed is in the lack of analysis by the author, as the book is more of a pastiche of a historian, who has written extensively on the environment, on Gandhi and on Verrier Elwin. But quoting from the books and the words of the people profiled here, we are left wanting. The author's perspective would have been invaluable, and not just to provide context but also to interpret and explain the words and of so many ideas represented here. There is some analysis, don't get me wrong, but not enough.

In fact, the epilogue provides some of the much-needed analysis, which leads one to believe that it should in fact have

been the prologue. This would have helped readers start not just pushed them into the past but also into the future.

That said, there is much to be astonished and enlightened by. The travails of Geddes as he grappled with both the Raj and with maharajas, to get his nature-friendly towns approved into reality. The resistance the Howards faced with their successful methods of composting for agricultural use.

How Munshi was commandeered into the Hindutva movement after the 1947 partition, although he never expressly joined any Hindutva parties in his lifetime. The writings of

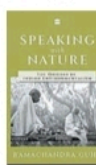
Krishnan were clear not just pushed them to keep away totally from wild life. Yet, as Dr Guha writes and as naturalists have since discovered, total segregation can also be detrimental to ecological systems.

Anyone interested in the planet, in India, and in India's history would be well-served by reading *Speaking With Nature*.

Each person presented is different and each serves a different aspect of the environment and ecology. As Dr Guha writes, we have reached such a stage that we are all environmentalists now. We should be. Since the people featured here played their role, many Indian environmentalists have emerged. Now we know whose shoulders they stood on. The authors are, respectively, senior fellow and research associate at Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP). The views expressed are theirs and not of the CSEP.

It is less repeated to us over and over again. Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times*, comes to mind here. Rampant developers, the underpaid and overworked. Here's a salute to the men and women featured here. May we pay their ideas some heed.

The reviewer is an independent journalist who writes on the media, politics and social issues



**SPEAKING WITH NATURE: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism**  
Author: Ramachandra Guha  
Publisher: Fourth Estate  
Pages: 406  
Price: ₹799



# THE IDEAS PAGE

## An unrealised gender dividend

Women today are not held back by social constraints, access to education or mobility, but by lack of employment opportunities



SONALDE DESAI

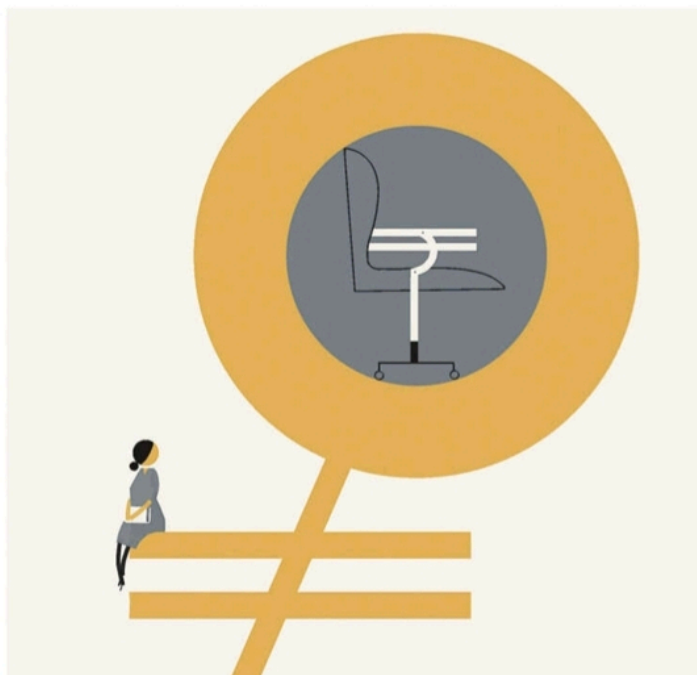
AS ECONOMISTS STRUGGLE to explain the stagnation in women's participation in wage work in India, conservative social norms have emerged as a handy target to explain why rising economic prosperity has not translated into greater employment for women. However, this assumption of social stagnation has little basis in reality. The India Human Development Survey (IHDS), organised by the University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic Research, has tracked changes in the lives of Indian households between 2004 and 2024. This survey of over 42,000 households documents steady changes in Indian women's lives and highlights the aspirational transformation that young Indian women in the 2020s are living through compared to their sisters who came of age in the first decade of the century.

The second wave of IHDS was conducted in 2011-12, and the third wave covering the period 2022-24 was recently completed. Here, I focus on interviews with approximately 18,000 married and unmarried women, aged 20-29, in each wave. Ten years is a relatively short time, but this decade was pivotal for changing the course of how young Indian women live their lives.

Over this decade, Indian parents have increased their investments in developing their daughters' capabilities. Parental aspiration for their children—both sons and daughters—has grown rapidly, resulting in a massive increase in education. Today, the gender gap in education has virtually disappeared, and girls seem poised to outdistance boys. In 2011-12, IHDS found that 27 per cent of 20-29-year-old women had completed class 12 and only 12 per cent had a college degree. In 2022-24, more than 50 per cent had completed class 12 and 26 per cent had a college degree. More importantly, there was no difference between the proportion of young men and young women with a college degree. This increase in girls' education was accompanied by delayed marriage. In 2011-12, 76 per cent of the women in their 20s were married, by 2022-24 the proportion had dropped to 66 per cent.

This expansion of girlhood allowed women to expand control over their own lives. Marriage remains a family affair, but whereas only 42 per cent of young women in 2012 had any input in selecting their partners, by 2022, 52 per cent did. Premarital contact between spouses has historically been low, but is increasing sharply. In 2011, 30 per cent of women met their husbands before marriage, and 27 per cent connected via phone, WhatsApp, or email. By 2022, this proportion was 42 per cent and 54 per cent, respectively. Many of these changes reflect how women view their lives and families. In 2012, 23 per cent of young women in 2012 thought having more sons than daughters was essential, the proportion had fallen to 12 per cent by 2022.

Young women also began to expand their connection with the world around them. The proportion of women who felt comfortable travelling a short distance alone by bus or



train grew from 42 per cent to 54 per cent, and membership in Self Help Groups increased from 10 per cent to 18 per cent for women in their 20s. Even political engagement and interest has increased. In 2012, 6 per cent attended a political meeting of a gram sabha or ward committee; by 2022, this proportion was 8 per cent.

These are not revolutionary changes; women continue to negotiate their lives within various constraints. But the sum total of these changes reflects the ongoing transformation in the social and normative climate in which Indian women live their lives. However, the one area where a transformation has not even begun relates to economic opportunities. Women continue to contribute to the economy by working on family farms, and the Periodic Labour Force Survey has documented a substantial increase in this work. However, participation by women in wage labour has stagnated. The IHDS shows that the proportion of 20-29 year old women in wage labour was 18 per cent in 2012, falling to 14 per cent in 2022. Some of it may be due to increased college enrollment, but even for women in their 30s, participation in wage labour stagnated.

The new economic orthodoxy tells us that women's low levels of employment are because of restrictive social norms that lock

The one area where a transformation has not even begun relates to economic opportunities. Women continue to contribute to the economy by working on family farms, and the Periodic Labour Force Survey has documented a substantial increase in this work. However, participation by women in wage labour has stagnated. Some of it may be due to increased college enrollment, but even for women in their 30s, participation in wage labour stagnated.

down on families where women work. However, among married women in our sample who were not employed, 73 per cent in 2011 said they would be happy to work if they could find suitable jobs; this proportion had grown to 80 per cent in 2022. Moreover, 72 per cent said their families would allow them to work if they could find a suitable job. These do not simply reflect wishful thinking. When MGNREGA started paying women the same amount as men, women jumped in with both feet to seek out even manual work. Today, more women work under MGNREGA than men. Improvements in transportation systems have also contributed to increased non-farm work by women.

Of the four key areas that define women's empowerment, personal efficacy, power in intra-household negotiations, societal engagement, and access to income-generating activities, we see improvements in the first three domains. In contrast, the fourth—access to employment—has stagnated. It is time to invite India's daughters to partake in the fruits of economic development; they have clearly shown that they are ready and willing to help harvest the gender dividend.

The writer is Professor and Centre Director, NCAER Data Innovation Centre and Professor Emerita, University of Maryland. Views are personal

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Manila should recognise that its collusion with the US is turning the South China Sea into a volatile and dangerous zone, going against the long-standing consensus [among] regional countries. It is positioning itself as a disruptor... a culprit in undermining regional peace and stability." — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

## The shrinking of Delhi Ridge

Episodes of breathing difficulty were my first intimate encounters with the green lung my city had once blessed me with



THE CITY AND I  
BY KAUSHIK DAS GUPTA

AMONG MY ABIDING childhood memories are that of drives in *kali-peeli* (black and yellow) taxis after asthma attacks. Not very far from my home in Rajinder Nagar, where Central Delhi met West Delhi, rows of Ambassador and Fiat cabs used to queue up, their drivers reclining, chatting, or sipping tea, waiting for business—my parents, for instance. My father would hold my hands as I slumped into the vehicle's fraying rexine seats.

Inhalers and corticosteroids were some years from being part of the asthma treatment protocol in India. Cough syrups and tablets rarely brought relief. But my parents seemed to know a way out. They rolled down the Ambassador's windows. As the car turned left and then right towards a broad road flanked on one side by foliage that seemed to extend far beyond sight, I felt that the air had joined my parents in comforting me. A sense of calm returned to my lungs. By the time the vehicle had taken the second or the third round of the road leading to Buddha Jayanti Park, I would doze off, free of the pain, and exhausted by what seemed like hours of short breath.

This was my asthma treatment almost three or four times every year. On days when the allergens were a little less taxing, I could sense the car slowing to let a troop of monkeys pass or allow a batch of headloaders carrying firewood to cross the road. At other times, I could strain my ears to hear the anecdotes and stories my parents were recounting, apparently to take my mind off the pain. Once, between the wheezing, I learnt of the terrible incident a few years back, when two adolescents had been abducted from the area we were passing by and then killed.

The episodes of breathing difficulty were also my first intimate encounters with the Delhi Ridge—the bronchodilator Delhi gave me when doctors and pharmacies could not.

Later, I learnt that my slice of the Ridge was the central aliver of the several thousands of hectares of discontinuous forests that follow the path of the Aravalli Mountain range in Delhi and parts of Haryana. From influencing rainfall and temperature to recharging aquifers, from providing fuelwood to cordoning off the city from dust and absorbing pollutants, this millennia-old ecosystem has played a critical role in the lives of Delhi's residents. With my lungs becoming resilient in adolescence, this salve for asthma attacks fell off my mental map. I did not care to

make connections, even when I went for a Social Science education in a university cradled in the southern part of the Ridge. At times, I did make sketchy associations between the nalgas that would sometimes visit the campus with the foliage and fauna I encountered on my taxi rides about 10-12 years back, but perhaps I was too caught up with Marxism, Subaltern Studies, the Cambridge School or The Nationalist School, Structuralism or Post Colonialism. I did not make the connection even when, as a student of history, I learnt that the 14th-century ruler Firoz Shah Tughlak had built a hunting lodge in a different part of the ridge or that the East India Company forces camped had there during the 1857 revolt.

The Delhi Ridge had, by then, shrunk by about 10 per cent to what it had been when it was my asthma medicine. A few years later, on my way to work at Jai Singh Road in Central Delhi, I would often pass by the road skirting the Ridge. But this was a different road, governed by phrases like "peak-hour traffic". The chartered bus that I took to work seemed to crawl along with other buses, cars, two-wheelers, and three-wheelers. There were scarcely any monkeys and no people carrying firewood.

In the mid-1990s, in response to a Save the Ridge movement, the government clamped down on "encroachers". But the Ridge continued to shrink. As sociologist Amita Baviskar and historian Thomas Crowley have written, the criminalisation of livelihood-related activities has only driven many of them underground. At the same time, urban amenities and construction activities have chipped away at Delhi's green lung. Today, it's almost half of what it was in the early 1980s.

My asthma attacks returned as I stepped into middle age. Three years ago, after a particularly nasty episode, a little after the Covid lockdown had eased, a friend drove me along the painkilling road of my childhood. The roads were sparse, much like during my rides in the *kali peeli*. My lungs felt soothed.

Let's, however, not take the analogy too far. Forty years ago, using a cab was a luxury even for a comfortably placed middle-class family like mine. For the better part of the last 15 years, I have used a car to commute—it's tailpipe, a contributor to the city's now infamous pollution load. My parents had to walk half a kilometre to fetch a cab. I use an app that brings a ride to my doorstep almost every day. In my childhood, the city played less of a role in my asthma. A rough comparison: I was the only one in my class of 30 who had the ailment; today, one in three children has it. When I often blame Delhi's polluted air for my breathing difficulties today, I also recollect that the city had once blessed me with a green lung. Perhaps I did not own or care for it enough to do justice to my privilege, education and lived experiences.

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ASHOK VAJPEYI

## Reinventing the erotic

In Bombay High Court's judgment on nudity in art, a lesson and a reminder

IT WAS IN the year 1954 that the Presidency Magistrate Bombay in *State vs Akbar Padamsee* quoted from an earlier judgment: "... For the purpose of deciding whether a picture is obscene or not, one has to consider to a great extent the surrounding circumstances, the pose, the posture, the suggestive element in the picture, the person into whose hands it is likely to fall, etc." It acquitted the artist, Padamsee, from the charge of obscenity for two of his works, *Lovers*, that had been seized by a police officer. Almost 70 years since, three of Padamsee's works (one drawing and two photographs) and four works of F N Souza were confiscated by the Assistant Commissioner of Customs (ACC) Mumbai who found them "obscene material" and prohibited them from being imported into the country by a Mumbai-based industrialist and art collector. He even ordered the works to be destroyed but the Bombay High Court stayed his order. The Court, while ordering immediate release of these artworks, observed that the ACC had failed to appreciate that "sex and obscenity are not always synonymous... Obscene material is that which deals with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interest," quoting the US Supreme Court in *Reds vs USA*.

There are many similarities between the two cases; First, both involve works of a widely acknowledged modern master of Indian art—Padamsee. Second, in both cases, the concerned officials making the crucial

decision share the view that nudity is per se obscene. Third, these worthy officials, one from the police and the other from Customs, have assumed authority to judge these artworks without even any elementary knowledge of or sensitivity to modern art. Fourth, both incidents took place in a city—Bombay or Mumbai—where a crucial and historically innovative movement for modern art started in 1947. Known as the Progressive Artists Group, it had both Souza and Padamsee as its members.

In the past 70 years, modern Indian art has been widely accepted for its innovation, imaginative courage, interrogative spirit, reinvention of many elements of Indian tradition and a noted indigenous modernity. Today, it is globally recognised as an important but distinct part of modernism and post-modernism. I have just returned from Venice and London. In the Venice Biennale, works of several Indian painters, including Souza and Akbar, are included. A major show of M F Husain is a collateral event there. In London, there is an innovative show called 'The Imaginary Institution of India' at the Barbican, covering art from India between 1975 to 1998.

But equally disturbing is the fact that in the last 70 years, time and again, there have been attempts to disrupt, malign, and shut down shows of art and artists on grounds of "hurt feelings" and moral outrage over depictions of homosexuality, politics, religion, etc. An artist of Husain's calibre had to

face charges for painting Saraswati in the nude when there is an entrenched artistic tradition to sculpt gods and goddesses in the nude, contest dozens of cases filed by Hindu zealots in many cities of India and leave the country he loved and painted in such vivid plurality to live and die in self-exile in London.

All these events have to be seen in the wider context. A skillfully orchestrated political move has resulted in cultural amnesia in the educated middle class who have forgotten that in our tradition, dichotomy of the physical and the metaphysical, the spiritual and the erotic did not exist. It was brought into play in the 19th century when the colonial policy, more or less, imposed notions of Victorian morality and several non-Indian binaries on us. Prudery, the assertion of a masculine Hinduism, are products of that imposed non-Indian value system.

In this sad loss of cultural memory, we seem to be forgetting that Indians wrote one of the first ever books on sexuality, *Kamasutra*; they sculpted erotic images in the temples of Khajuraho and Konark, to name only two of the many. One of the oldest erotic poems, *Geetavindam*, was not only written in India a thousand years ago but is sung and danced in temples across the country even now. To revise, rediscover and reinvent the erotic in our amnesia-ridden times, therefore, must be seen as a rehabilitation of the human elements of our tradition. In any case, no celebration and explo-

ration of life can be adequate without including the erotic impulse. The current judgment states that the petitioner has correctly pointed out that "nude sculpture and art are prevalent in several temples and celebrated for their artistic excellence."

Indian bureaucracy, with notable exceptions, have very much been a part of a widespread cultural illiteracy. It is notorious for interfering in matters it knows nothing about and all too often not acting where it is required to. Both the police inspector in 1954 and the ACC in 2024 are members of the same bureaucracy and chose to intervene in matters about which they had no knowledge. Nor did they feel it necessary to consult an expert before taking action. This arrogant prudery reigns all over. The two national institutions devoted to visual arts—the Lalit Kala Akademi and the National Gallery of Modern Art, born out of a democratic desire to promote modern artistic expression in all its plurality—have kept quiet. The media, largely insensitive to the arts, also does not ask questions.

After at least a hundred years of vibrant plural modernity, it is a pity that art in our country has to suffer harsh treatment from ignorant officials and are forced to defend themselves in courts of law. Are we, as a society, losing all aesthetic and moral sense and feel neither concern nor care for our own arts?

The writer is a Hindi poet-critic and art lover

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### THE WRONG MOVE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The trade debate' (IE, November 12). India's withdrawal from the RCEP was primarily driven by concerns over its potential impact on the country's trade deficit, domestic industries and economic growth. Delhi feared that the elimination of tariffs would lead to a surge in cheap imports from China, exacerbating India's trade deficit. India's decision to prioritise domestic interests over regional integration reflects the country's shift towards a more protectionist economic policy. By not joining the RCEP, India has shut itself out of a trading bloc which could have served as a huge export market to realise the potential of its manufacturing sector.

Surbhi Jha, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The trade debate' (IE, November 12). India's trade policy needs recalibration against the backdrop of a changed geopolitical milieu. The Narendra Modi government's strategy behind remaining outside the RCEP was to protect domestic industries. Free trade agreements with ASEAN, Australia and the UK can boost India's exports. India has a huge trade deficit with China despite tariff and non-tariff barriers. China is the world's second-largest economy. Therefore, India should reconsider the move. To benefit from the China Plus One policy, India should undertake the opening of its economy and focus on ease of doing business. Trade protectionism won't yield any long-term benefit to Trump's regime. India should rethink its trade strategy and strive to accelerate the reform process.

Atul Thakre, Nagpur

### WOMEN & POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The women who lead us' (IE, November 12). Indian democracy has numerous examples of women leaders: Sarojini Naidu, Amrit Kaur, Indira Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, J Jayalalithaa and Mamata Banerjee amongst many others. Some of these leaders were born into politics, while others chose this path. But they all became figures to look up to. But we should remain mindful of the statistics. Women have always constituted a minority in decision-making posts, so much so that even 33 per cent seems like an achievement. The recent incentives offered by various parties in state elections targeting women voters hint at a changing emphasis. A lot more is needed.

Ramanpreet, via email

### POLL PLEDGES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Not just a labharti' (IE, November 12). The battle for Maharashtra has entered its most intense phase, with both the BJP-led Mahayati alliance, and the Congress-led MVA releasing their manifestos for the elections. It is noteworthy that both PM Narendra Modi and Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge have cautioned against parties making promises beyond state governments' means. The BJP promises 2.5 million jobs in the next five years, the MVA offers to fill more than 100,000 vacancies in the public sector. Both parties have attached much importance to their manifestos once elections are over. Whether it has an impact on the electorate remains to be seen.

Khokan Das, Kolkata



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A CASE FOR CAUTION

Surge in inflation is likely to push back the beginning of the rate cutting cycle

IN ITS OCTOBER meeting, the newly reconstituted monetary policy committee, while keeping the benchmark policy interest rate unchanged, had voted unanimously in favour of changing the policy stance from 'withdrawal of accommodation' to 'neutral'. The change in stance could have been due to the committee's "greater confidence in navigating the last mile of disinflation". This widely anticipated decision, which followed the US Federal Reserve slashing interest rates by 50 basis points in September, was construed by many as opening space for the MPC to begin cutting the policy rate in its subsequent meetings. Some had, in fact, pencilled in a rate cut as early as December. However, inflation data released on Tuesday suggests that the committee is likely to remain cautious in its upcoming meeting.

Data from the National Statistical Office shows that retail inflation surged to a 14-month high of 6.2 per cent in October, up from 5.5 per cent in September. Inflation now exceeds the upper limit of the RBI's inflation target of 4 plus/minus 2 per cent. Much of the surge in inflation in recent months has been driven by food prices, and within the food category by vegetables, particularly tomatoes and onions. Vegetable inflation rose by 36 per cent in September and 42 per cent in October. Excluding vegetables, headline inflation is considerably lower. Some of this surge in prices was expected. In his comments on the October MPC meeting, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das had said that the "moderation in headline inflation is expected to reverse in September and likely to remain elevated in the near-term due to adverse base effects, among other factors".

However, there are expectations that food price pressures will ease with the arrival of the first harvest. The outlook for the rabi crop is also encouraging. The central bank expects food price pressures to ease later in the financial year largely "due to a good kharif harvest, ample buffer stocks of cereals and a likely good crop in the ensuing rabi season". However, it is possible that the latest inflation data will prompt it to revise its forecast — in October, it had projected inflation at 4.8 per cent in the third quarter and 4.2 per cent in the fourth quarter. At the same time, there are also concerns over the underlying economic growth momentum in the country with some indicators pointing towards a slowdown. While the central bank has projected GDP growth at 7 per cent in the second quarter, and 7.2 per cent for the full year, others expect it to be lower. For instance, Crisil expects growth at 6.8 per cent for the year. On balance, with inflation considerations likely to dominate, a policy pivot is unlikely in the immediate future.

FAILING MANIPUR

The continuing violence is a reminder of an unaddressed crisis, and abdication of political responsibility

THE RENEWAL and escalation of violence in Manipur underlines the continuing militarisation of the state. It has long been apparent, too, that it is also a reflection of the political impasse that has immobilised the work of governance. The neutralisation of 10 suspected militants by security forces in Jiribam district — the highest number of casualties in a single day this year — comes as reiteration of the state's abject failure to bring under control the smouldering ethnic conflict that continues to roil the state well over a year after it began in May 2023. The encounter comes in the wake of the killing of a Hmar woman that had escalated tensions in Manipur's westernmost district and in the aftermath of the tussle between the CM's office and the Unified Command of the security forces deployed in the state to restore law and order. In the push and pull of violent ethnic sub-nationalism, exacerbated by political turmoil in neighbouring Bangladesh and Myanmar, the biggest casualty remains the people.

The responsibility for this continuing crisis rests with the N Biren Singh-led state government and the Centre, whose actions have mostly been restricted to empty rhetoric and vague promises of dialogue. Even a cursory look at Manipur's history would indicate the need to tread with care. Since it attained statehood in 1972, contestations over indigeneity, land rights and resource allocation, reservation and a more equal political representation have dogged the state and its three main tribal communities — the Kukis, Meiteis and Nagas. In 1992, the Naga-Kuki clash marked the first long-drawn ethnic conflict in the region, followed by the Meitei-Pangal conflict in 1993 and the Kuki-Paite hostilities of 1997. The lesson to be drawn from these conflagrations would have been the efficacy of mediation over mayhem, dialogue over militarisation, and, above everything else, governance that puts the people — all people — at its centre. It would have meant working on creating economic opportunities, building infrastructure and developing healthcare. Manipur is crucial to India's Look East policy, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway stands to boost trade and commerce in the region. What the lacklustre political response to the ongoing crisis has achieved, however, is a deepening of identity politics.

The demand for accountability is urgent — from a CM who has simply not squared up to his task and from a Centre that refuses to engage with Manipur in any meaningful or ameliorating way. Manipur deserves better.

DÖNERS AND DON'TS

Turkey wants to set the criteria of preparation for the most popular representative of its cuisine in Europe. Why not?

FOR GERMANY, THE vertical spit has taken a worrying turn. In a recent application to the European Union, Turkey has asked for the döner kebab to be recognised as a Turkish specialty, with only kebabs that adhere to strict criteria — thin slivers of spit-roasted meat (only lamb, beef or chicken), served on a bed of rice, alongside fries, tomatoes and peppers — being recognised as "döner" kebabs. Should the application be accepted, it would effectively demote Germany's beloved street food — meat packed into a pita and topped with salad and a garlicky yoghurt sauce — to mere "kebabs".

There is an argument to be made for a broader understanding of food, liberating dishes from political borders and narratives about national pride. Food, after all, is the great traveller — over millennia, dishes have crossed plains, deserts, mountains and rivers along with people, adapting to new circumstances and tastes, finding homes far from their place of origin. This is also the story of the döner kebab: it arrived in Berlin in the 1970s with Turkish immigrants, transformed from a dish for a sit-down meal into a hand-held "sandwich" that could feed the busy German on the go. It could be argued that Turkey's own criteria for the döner are suspect: Traditionally, lamb was the only acceptable meat for the preparation, which was typically only served with sliced onions.

Still, Germany's chagrin over the application seems overblown, considering how extensive food and beverage protection is in the EU: If the Neapolitan Pizza can only be with type 00 or type 0 flour, with toppings from the Campania region, and champagne can only be made in the eponymous region in France using the *methode champenoise*, then surely Turkey is well within its rights to seek similar protection for the most popular representative of its cuisine in Europe. Either way, the kebab would be just as juicy and delicious, whether or not it's called a döner.



RAJA MANDALA  
BY C RAJA MOHAN

THIS WEEK AND next, a series of high-profile multilateral summits are set to unfold — the climate change conference in Azerbaijan, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Peru, and the G20 summit in Brazil. These gatherings, however, take place under the shadow of Donald Trump's recent re-election as US President. Already under strain over the last decade, multilateral institutions now face even greater challenges. Trump's second term compels India and other nations to reassess their strategies for engaging with global institutions. As the crisis of multilateralism deepens, India may need to devote more attention to "multilateral" groups and coalitions of "like-minded" countries in dealing with global issues.

Trump's first presidential term (2017-2021) marked a dramatic shift from traditional US foreign policy. His administration questioned the efficacy of multilateralism and prioritised unilateralism. Trump withdrew from key international agreements and organisations, including the Paris Agreement on climate change, Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), UNESCO, WHO, and the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Under Trump, US policies helped weaken the World Trade Organisation. These moves signalled a clear departure from the liberal internationalist vision that had long guided US policies. In his inaugural speech at the UN in September 2017, Trump articulated his "America First" doctrine, emphasising national sovereignty over globalism. Unlike Democratic administrations, Trump rejected the notion that the US was responsible for leading global institutions, arguing instead for a foreign policy rooted in national interest.

Critics of multilateralism within the US contend that decades of international engagement have come at a steep cost. They argue that American taxpayers have borne the brunt of globalist policies, prolonged military interventions in the name of securing different regions and preserving a rules-based international order. They also point to job losses stemming from an open global trade system that facilitated a shift in manufacturing from the US to countries like Mexico and China. While the emphasis on efficiency produced windfall profits for US capital, it devastated American communities in industrial towns.

Following Trump's defeat in 2020, the Biden administration sought to restore US commitment to multilateralism. The US re-

Multilateral institutions will face greater challenges during Donald Trump's second term

Multilateralism — economic, political, and institutional — that reached its peak at the turn of the 21st century is now in trouble. While globalists will bemoan the passing of an era, India's policymakers will have no choice but to adapt to the new dynamics shaping international order. To be sure, global problems need global solutions. But the hopes for collective solutions to our common problems have become politically unrealistic over the last decade. Expect Trump to bury those hopes. Unilateral development of new technologies, bilateralism in trade and economic cooperation, and like-minded coalitions in finding solutions to regional challenges are likely to gain ground in the next few years.

joined the Paris Accord, WHO, and re-enters UNESCO. But Trump's critique of the global trading order endured under Biden. As Trump prepares to return, the domestic backlash against globalism has intensified. With control over both chambers of Congress, Trump's second term is expected to bring transformative policies that challenge the foundations of multilateralism.

Trump is widely expected to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement again. At home, he has promised to dismantle the range of regulatory constraints on energy development, including on the hydrocarbon sector, imposed by the Biden Administration. He promises to enhance energy production in the US and embark on uninhibited economic growth. Trump underlines the importance of traditional forms of electricity generation needed for the AI industry that guzzles power. Climate activists see these moves as a significant blow to global efforts to combat climate change, undermining international cooperation and reducing financial support for developing nations' climate initiatives. Trump's stance is likely to embolden other countries to scale back their commitments, exacerbating global tensions. Several key leaders, including PM Narendra Modi, US President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Brazilian President Lula da Silva, are skipping the climate summit in Azerbaijan.

The APEC forum, created during a period of Sino-US cooperation, now finds itself at the centre of escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing. The forum's core mission of fostering economic integration across the Pacific has come under fire from Trump. One of his first actions in 2017 was to withdraw from the TPP, a cornerstone of the Obama administration's Asia Pacific strategy. The Biden administration responded by launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a more flexible arrangement focusing on digital trade, supply chain resilience, clean economy, and clean energy. Unlike the TPP, the IPEF avoids binding commitments on market access. Whether Trump will continue with the IPEF is unclear. However, his proposed 60 per cent tariffs on Chinese imports signal a potential intensification of the US-China trade war. Meanwhile, his administration is likely to ramp up scrutiny of China's growing economic influence in Latin America. China's

trade and investment links with Latin America will be showcased by President Xi Jinping's visit to Peru and Brazil to attend the APEC and G20 summits.

Established in 2008 to address the global financial crisis, the G20 has struggled in recent years to maintain its relevance amid deepening geopolitical and economic divides. In Trump's first term, the US clashed with other members on trade, climate, and migration policies. Although Biden sought to revive multilateral cooperation, achieving a landmark global corporate tax agreement, tensions have persisted, particularly over climate action, modernising financial architecture, debt relief and other development priorities. For India, which has invested heavily in multilateralism in general, and G20 in particular, the upcoming summit offers an opportunity to reassess the forum's effectiveness. More broadly, PM Modi's discussions with world leaders should help India rethink its approach to global governance during Trump 2.0.

Multilateralism — economic, political, and institutional — that reached its peak at the turn of the 21st century is now in trouble. While globalists will bemoan the passing of an era, India's policymakers will have to adapt to the new dynamics. To be sure, global problems need global solutions. But the hopes for collective solutions to our common problems have become politically unrealistic over the last decade. Expect Trump to bury those hopes. Unilateral development of new technologies, bilateralism in trade and economic cooperation, and like-minded coalitions in finding solutions to regional challenges are likely to gain ground in the next few years.

India has already moved in this direction. It has invested in the national development of renewable energy solutions and negotiated new bilateral trade deals. It is now part of several multilateral groups that seek to develop new technologies to address regional and global challenges as well as construct new global norms. These include the Quadrilateral Forum, the Mineral Security Partnership, the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence, and the Artemis Accords. India needs to invest more vigorously in these initiatives until the conditions for productive multilateralism re-emerge in the global arena.

The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

MUDDLED IN MAHARASHTRA

Take a look at making and unmaking of the political Opposition



VINAY SAHASRABUDHHE

THE LAST FIVE years in Maharashtra have been the most politically turbulent since the state came into existence in 1960. For cynical naysayers, with regard to the upcoming assembly elections, it is fashionable to complain that the voters have little real choice. To correct this perspective, it is important to understand the evolution of Maharashtra (MH), the prospects of which have been shaped by the misadventures of the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), particularly the Shiv Sena-LIBT.

The first severe blow to an otherwise ideologically and logically sound alliance politics in Maharashtra was served by Uddhav Thackeray five years ago. Bal Thackeray had total control over the Shiv Sena but kept away from formal seats of power. However, Uddhav allowed his son Aditya to contest the assembly election in 2019. Later, while moving away from the BJP and falling prey to the Machiavellian tactics of Sharad Pawar, Uddhav compromised with the second tenet of family tradition and became Maharashtra's CM. In the process, as Shiv Sena policy-principles, Uddhav made two shocking decisions, to the bewilderment of the hardcore Sainiks. First, he broke with the BJP and abandoned the Hindutva platform. Second, he entered into

If politics in Maharashtra today is seen as muddled, Uddhav Thackeray cannot escape the blame. Thanks to his largely 'work-from-home' chief ministerial tenure, Uddhav not only failed to make any significant impact but also lost his grip over the party's organisation — he couldn't keep his flock together.

an alliance with Congress and NCP. Uddhav becoming the CM also disturbed equidistance with his close confidants who knew that post-Uddhav, it would be Aditya.

Unlike several political dynasties — the Gandhis, Yadvavs, Patnais and Badals — the Thackeray dynasty did not become part of the government. Post-2019, it lost this uniqueness. After deserting the BJP-NDA, Shiv Sena's compromise on Hindutva issues is also out in the open: The Thackeray dynasty opposed Waqf reforms and openly disregarded Hindu sensibilities about beef consumption.

If politics in Maharashtra today is seen as muddled, Uddhav Thackeray cannot escape the blame. Thanks to his largely 'work-from-home' chief ministerial tenure, Uddhav not only failed to make any significant impact but also lost his grip over the party's organisation — he couldn't keep his flock together.

For those who want to understand the mess in Maharashtra politics, there are at least four lessons from the MVA saga. First, running an alliance is not a joke. The BJP has not just practised but also mastered this art since the days of AB Vajpayee. Second, although indirect politics has its pitfalls, when an inexperienced leader takes the wheel, they find out that

providing decisive leadership is not child's play. Third, in a party like the Shiv Sena where ideology is a motivating force, the loss of faith — smouldering — of the cadres is heavy. Lastly, with a succession plan confined to close blood relations, dynastic parties are bound to face a split.

The MY government came to power in 2022 in this context. Its governance has made an impact. During its 2.5-year rule, Maharashtra attracted FDI upto 26.83 per cent of the national total — under the MVA it went up to 36.90 per cent. Under MVA rule, the number of new MSMEs registered stood at 8,10,964 whereas, under the MY regime, it reached 14,41,145. Under the MVA rule, financial assistance to the tune of Rs 13,941 crore was disbursed to self-help groups; the corresponding figure for the MY regime was Rs 28,811 crore. All this indicates that the MY is recovering the ground partly lost in the Lok Sabha polls.

Apart from an obvious lack of coherence in the ideological positions of the MVA constituents, factors like difficulties in seat sharing and open squabbles over the CM face have punctured its post-Lok Sabha coherence.

The writer is former president, Indian Council for Cultural Relations and a BJP leader

NOVEMBER 13, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PM GANDHI'S PROMISE

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi promised to give the nation a clean and efficient administration which would afford no quarter "to the corrupt, lazy and the inefficient" and ensure full protection from outside pressures to those who worked with integrity and dedication. Spelling out his priorities in his first major policy statement to the nation over All India Radio and Doordarshan, he said the administrative system needed to be more "goal-oriented".

POLICE ROLE IN RIOTS

SURYAKANT S JOG, who took over as Police

Commissioner recently, has ordered an inquiry into the involvement of Delhi Police in the bloody riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Jog told newsmen that action would be taken against officers as and when failures were established. The inquiry would also look into the role of former Police Commissioner Subhash Tandon.

NEW CONG PRESIDENT

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi, who was unanimously elected president of the party has formed a new Congress (I) Working Committee and a Central Parliamentary Board with some new faces. A rather significant ap-

pointment is that of Arun Nehru, a close confidant of PM Gandhi. Soon after his election, he also formed a six-member manifesto drafting committee, which found new entrants who had fallen from grace.

CALM IN UP

NORMALCY HAS BEEN restored in Uttar Pradesh. The eruption of violence was sporadic on October 31 when the identity of the assassins became known. The initial grief and shock turned into a wave of anger against members of the Sikh community. The total casualties reported in UP were 174, including 30 bodies which were recovered from trains.





● RACE AGAINST TIME  
UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres

On climate finance, the world must pay up, or humanity will pay the price. The sound you hear is the ticking clock. We are in the final countdown to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius and time is not on our side

## Unpleasant surprise

The more-than-expected inflation number in October is quiet discomforting

THE UNPLEASANT SURPRISE in the retail inflation number for October, which rose to a 14-month high of 6.2% year-on-year (y-o-y), has all but pushed a rate cut by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in December out of the window. After a very benign 3.5% increase in August and 5.49% in September, the spike in October, higher than expectations, is discomforting. While the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) did ease the stance from withdrawal of accommodation to neutral at the last meeting in October, the RBI's tone didn't really soften. The central bank has repeatedly articulated it would stay steadfast in its objective to tame inflation and bring it down to 4% on a durable basis. In fact, over the past month, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has observed it would be "very risky" to cut policy rates, given the many imponderables including rising commodity prices and geopolitical conflicts.

The main reason for the October spike was the sharp 10.87% rise in food prices following an equally worrying 9.24% in September. To be sure, the RBI has, on occasions, looked the other way when prices of vegetables increased on account of their seasonal and transitory nature. However, the increases seem to be taking place far too often for comfort. It's not simply vegetables; even cereal prices went up nearly 7% and of pulses by nearly 8%, both of whom contributed to the higher inflation, as did edible oils. While vegetables may become cheaper with the winter setting in, the rise in prices of cereals and edible oils might prove to be sticky. Again, the monsoons have been reasonably good and the kharif estimates are reassuring, so prices of rice and wheat could remain where they are. However, this time around core inflation, which has been relatively benign, went up to 3.7% y-o-y from 3.5% y-o-y in September, the highest level seen since January. Experts believe core inflation may be bottoming out, in which case there is cause for concern.

In fact, headline consumer price index inflation could well retrace to 5.6-5.7% levels in November. However, current trends suggest that inflation in the December quarter could come in above 5%, above the RBI's projection of 4.8%. As such, thanks for FY25 could overshoot the central bank's prognosis of 4.5%, in addition to the several new variables that will come into play post-Donald Trump's electoral victory in the US. The most important of these is imported inflation due to the depreciation of the Indian currency—which fell to a new low of ₹84.3925 on Tuesday—against a strengthening dollar. The RBI will understandably want to assess the state of financial markets; in particular it will watch the yields on US treasuries, which have been rising on anticipation of a loose fiscal policy, and the currency, before it acts.

While high frequency indicators and corporate results for the September quarter were poor and suggest consumption demand, especially in urban India, has been weakening, some of the concerns have been alleviated by better data for October for goods and service tax collections, car sales, etc. The central government has lowered its GDP growth forecast for the second quarter in FY25 to 6.8% but retains the full-year FY25 growth forecast at 7.2%, much above consensus levels. The RBI's overriding concern on inflation might well see it looking past the loss of momentum in the economy. But, should the slowdown persist, it must cut rates.

## Powell doesn't fear Trump. He also can't contain him

THE US FEDERAL Reserve and its chair, Jerome Powell, are rightly choosing not to act on any assumptions about what Donald Trump might do as president. That said, if he follows through on his more extreme campaign promises, they'll struggle to contain the economic consequences—a problem that equity investors ignore at their peril.

The president-elect has been sharply critical of Powell, whom he appointed in 2018. Yet at the first Fed news conference since the election, Powell emphasised that Trump lacks the legal authority to fire him before the May 2026 end of his term, which he plans to serve out. He wisely avoided speculation about how Trump's promises of higher tariffs, mass deportations, and lower taxes might influence monetary policy. The Fed, he said, analyses the effects of such measures at the proposal stage, but doesn't consider them in its policymaking until they become law. "We don't guess, we don't speculate, and we don't assume."

The Fed's main economic model reinforces this deliberate approach. First, higher tariffs enter the model only once they're likely to be in place. Second, the model assumes that the monetary-policy response will be consistent with the Fed's employment and inflation objectives, and that businesses and households will fully anticipate such a response. This rules out systematic policy errors, mitigates the impact of economic shocks, and ensures that inflation expectations remain well anchored in the model—lowering the perceived cost of waiting. Thus, what Trump does will take considerable time to influence actual policy making.

If Trump's policy initiatives prove modest, the Fed's delay in responding won't matter too much. But if he does anything big and abrupt—for example with respect to tariffs or deportations—the central bank's response will occur too late to mitigate fully the economic impact. All else equal, higher import prices and labour shortages will raise inflation and push up expectations of future inflation. This will increase uncertainty and necessitate more aggressive monetary adjustments.

Trump might also want to influence the Fed, ensuring that it keeps interest rates low during his tenure. On that front, his options are limited. In the short run, there's no conflict as the Fed will likely keep easing anyway. Beyond that, the president won't have much room to manoeuvre until Powell's term ends.

Consideride idea floated during the campaign: Trump could try to undermine Powell by appointing his preferred successor to the Federal Reserve Board, leading markets to pay more attention to the "shadow" chair. I see three reasons this wouldn't be worth pursuing. First, it would take time. The president would have to either enter a board member to leave (say, to head the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) or wait until the next opening, which won't come until Adriana Kugler's term ends in January 2026. Second, Powell would still direct the board's staff and set the agenda of the policymaking Federal Open Market Committee, two key elements of the chair's authority. Third, forward guidance about how the Fed might act in the future—which is what the shadow chair could offer—isn't very relevant at a time when employment and inflation are both close to the central bank's objectives. Incoming economic data play the dominant role in determining the Fed's behaviour.

Markets' response to Trump's victory has been oddly divergent. The increase in bond yields is directionally appropriate, consistent with expectations that the Fed's short-term interest rate target will bottom out around 3.75%, not the 2.9% expected a few months ago. To some extent, this reflects the economy's sustained strength and rising estimates of what the "neutral" interest rates should be. But it also suggests concern about the stock market's pricing in inflation.

I find the stock market rally baffling. Yes, lower corporate tax rates, deregulation, and higher tariffs could lift profit margins, at least temporarily. But there are ample offsetting negatives, including the effect of tariffs on inflation and of deportations on the supply of labour. Add the 50-basis-point increase in real interest rates since the September and the fact that the Fed will have to take away the punch bowl if the Trump party gets too wild, and equity market valuations seem unduly rich. Investors may live to regret their exuberance.



BILL DUDLEY  
Bloomberg

● ADS IN DISGUISE  
RISE OF PROMOTIONAL CONTENT ON LINKEDIN HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR CLEAR BOUNDARIES

## LinkedInfluencers, don't conceal!

IF YOU'VE NOTICED LinkedIn posts sounding more like mini sales pitches lately, you're not alone. LinkedIn has long held a reputation as the place for serious networking and knowledge-sharing. Unlike Instagram or Twitter, where product placements and brand deals are out in the open, LinkedIn was supposed to be a space for career advice and unbiased industry insights.

But as LinkedIn evolves into a broader platform for thought leadership, a new wave of influencers—known colloquially as "LinkedInfluencers"—is emerging. While they may be CEOs, founders, and other high-profile leaders, many are being called out for crossing the line into unmarked promotional territory. What once felt like genuine industry insight is increasingly looking like undisclosed brand endorsements, sparking concerns about the erosion of trust on LinkedIn.

Corporate leaders have a unique standing on LinkedIn. They're seen as credible voices of reason, guiding their followers through complex industry landscapes. So, when they share advice or recommend a product, followers naturally assume it's based on deep expertise, not a hidden agenda. However, the problem arises when these leaders start endorsing products, services, or business philosophies without making their material connections clear. When the CMO of a tech company praises a software provider without mentioning that they're a vendor or partner, it blurs the line between genuine recommendation and hidden advertising. And when this happens repeatedly, it's not surprising that audiences feel misled. In a recent case, a CMO praised a full-page advertisement of an unrelated company. It was soon discovered that several others were sharing similar posts, making it evident that this was a campaign rather than a genuine post. The CMO was called out, and he sheepishly added a disclosure that his post was an ad.

Why are corporate leaders straying

MANISHA KAPOOR  
CEO and secretary general, Advertising Standards Council of India



into promotional territory on LinkedIn? The motivations are often more complex than simple profit.

**Financial incentives:** Some leaders might have direct investments in the companies or products they endorse, or perhaps they even receive compensation to promote them. By leveraging out this information, they make the endorsement look "unbiased" while benefiting financially.

**Personal branding:** LinkedIn is a prime platform for building one's personal brand. Leaders who regularly post about the latest tools or industry trends position themselves as innovators and visionaries. This not only boosts their influence but also makes it more appealing to potential business partners, clients, and even future employers.

**Corporate favours:** Many executives have partnerships, alliances, or long-standing relationships with other companies. A well-placed endorsement might be a way to strengthen these connections or reciprocate favours, even if no money is changing hands.

While these motivations aren't inherently unethical, they become problematic when adequate disclosures are absent. People come to LinkedIn expecting genuine insights and information and are likely to engage with content they believe to be impartial. Without transparency, they have no way of knowing what's driving these so-called "insights". One might argue that corporate lead-

ers should be more aware of advertising norms and regulations than the average social media influencer. They are often highly educated, hold important roles, and could also be managing their company's public image and communication strategy. They understand the importance of ethics and transparency in building trust.

The Advertising Standards Council of India and the Central Consumer Protection Authority have specific guidelines on influencer endorsements, requiring influencers to disclose material connections. By failing to disclose these ties on LinkedIn, corporate leaders not only risk damaging their reputations and that of their organisations, but they could also attract regulatory scrutiny.

Most major social media platforms offer tools for tagging sponsored posts and marking brand partnerships, making it easy for influencers to be transparent. LinkedIn, however, hasn't introduced such features. As a result, posts with material connections often blend in with regular content. While the lack of platform disclosure tools doesn't excuse LinkedIn influencers who promote brands and products, a standardised template helps.

LinkedIn's lack of disclosure tools also puts a heavy burden on the audience to "read between the lines" without standardised labels or tags, followers may interpret the endorsements as genuine, unbiased advice, potentially leading to poor decisions.

LinkedIn's lack of disclosure tools also puts a heavy burden on the audience to 'read between the lines'

## From deep haircuts to higher recoveries



SHRIRAM SUBRAMANIAN  
Founder and MD, InGovern Research Services

**INSOLVENCY AND BANKRUPTCY** Code (IBC) resolutions have traditionally been associated with significant losses for creditors, especially financial creditors taking deep haircuts. Early cases like *Monnet Ispat* (2018) and *Alok Industries* (2019) saw creditors get only a fraction of admitted claims. This left creditors, especially banks, frustrated and wary of the IBC's efficacy in protecting their financial interests.

However, there are signs of the insolvency regime shifting to a more creditor-friendly framework. This has been fuelled by judicial support for claims in specific scenarios, respect for contractual terms, and deference to the commercial wisdom of the Committee of Creditors (CoC). The early years of the IBC were marked by high-profile cases where creditors faced substantial losses. In *Monnet Ispat*, creditors took a haircut of nearly 80%, while in *Alok Industries*, recoveries were less than 10% of admitted claims. These cases reflected the harsh realities of a fledgling regime grappling with high levels of non-performing assets, particularly in steel and power sectors. As distressed assets came to the resolution table, creditors often faced a binary choice: accept significant haircuts or see firms go into liquidation, where recovery prospects were even bleaker.

This period underscored a key challenge for the IBC: striking a balance between rescuing companies and protecting creditor interests. The focus was on clearing bad debts from the banking system and quickly resolving cases to support economic stability.

Despite the challenges, a few landmark cases proved large recoveries were possible under the IBC. In *Essar Steel* (2019), creditors recovered nearly 90% of admitted claims, and in *Binani Cement* (2018), UltraTech Cement's acquisition yielded over 100% recovery, with financial creditors receiving not just the principal but also accrued interest. This significant outcome underscored the IBC's potential to attract high-quality bidders for valuable assets, a critical factor in maximising creditor recoveries. The Binani Cement case also highlighted an important legal principle: allowing interest to accrue during the resolution process. This set a precedent for creditors receiving more than their admitted claims if contractually justified.

In the past year, cases like *SKS Power* (2024) and *Sripriya Kumar* (2023) have reinforced this positive trend. Sarda Energy's acquisition of SKS Power resulted in 100% recovery for creditors, a rare but encouraging outcome that reflects the IBC's increasing ability to facilitate full recoveries in certain scenarios. The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) upheld Sarda Energy's resolution plan, dismissing challenges from competing bidders and ensuring full recovery for financial creditors. The ruling reinforced that in cases where competitive bidding and strategic interest converge, creditors can achieve outcomes well bey-

IBC's evolution from a regime linked with creditor losses to one capable of facilitating full or even excess recoveries marks a promising transformation

The code of conduct, once implemented, is expected to offer a standardised framework for CoC operations

and the early expectations set by the IBC. Another pivotal case is *Sripriya Kumar* (2023), where creditors recovered more than the admitted ₹34.27 crore because of a penal interest clause, ultimately recovering ₹46 crore. The NCLAT ruled that the moratorium under IBC does not waive contractual obligations for interest, highlighting a judicial willingness to uphold creditors' rights to receive additional payments when supported by contract terms. This ruling reaffirms the principle that contractual obligations remain valid, even in the context of insolvency, and can yield favourable recoveries when carefully structured.

Central to these developments is the judiciary's consistent respect for the CoC's "commercial wisdom". The Supreme Court's ruling in *K Sashidhar* (2019) established that courts will not typically intervene in CoC decisions unless there is a clear breach of law. This empowers creditors to make decisions based on commercial factors. Whether the CoC chooses to accept a deep haircut or pursue a full recovery, its decisions are rarely questioned by the judiciary, adding a layer of predictability and autonomy to the insolvency process.

The respect for the CoC's decisions aligns with the IBC's objective to place the interests of financial creditors at the forefront. Financial creditors, who typically bear the greatest financial risk, have sub-

stantial influence within the CoC. This structure is crucial for creditors facing cases where strategic recoveries are possible, as it allows them to maximise recoveries without undue interference.

The Delhi High Court's recent direction to the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) to frame a code of conduct for the CoC is another step toward enhancing creditor protections. In *Kunwer Sachdev*, *IBBI Bank* and *ORS* (2024), the court asked the IBBI to establish guidelines for the CoC's functioning within three months, with the goal of ensuring effective decision-making without diluting the CoC's "commercial wisdom". This code of conduct, once implemented, is expected to provide a standardised framework for CoC operations.

The IBC's evolution from a regime linked with deep creditor losses to one capable of facilitating full or even excess recoveries marks a promising transformation. By upholding contractual rights, deferring to the CoC's commercial judgments, and attracting competitive bidders for valuable assets, the IBC is gradually becoming a balanced framework that serves both debt resolution and creditor protection.

While haircuts remain a reality in many cases, the judiciary's willingness to respect contractually defined interest payments and the CoC's decisions has opened new avenues for favourable recoveries. As India's insolvency regime matures, the IBC's potential to deliver favourable outcomes has become increasingly evident.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Modern Caesar

Donald Trump is a quintessential businessman. He will not fight others' wars; Ukraine is Russia's business and perhaps Taiwan will be China's. He will rein in expenditure even if it means reneging on his North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies. A trade war with China is here to stay and his daily focus will be on the balance sheet: how little he can concede and how

much more he can extract. He will neither spare money nor effort to fight climate change, a cause too distant for Trump. Given the pre-eminence of the dollar as a global currency, Trump's trade and political disaster is set to roll unhindered. With both the House of Representatives and Senate likely under Republican control, Trump is a modern-day Caesar ensconced on the democratic throne in Washington. —N. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

### Green commitments

Apropos of "China's energy dominance gets a boost from Trump" (FE, November 12), Trump's promise to eviscerate the clean energy mission of Joe Biden and dismantle regulations on vehicle and power plant emissions shows his intention to decouple the US from its commitment on climate control. China can take this stand on increasing fossil fuel production and

sidetrack carbon emission control, optimising the use of fossil fuel and nudged by its stimulus package. But augmented production exported to the US will be imposed severe tariffs by Trump. It is advisable for China to retain commitments to curtail carbon emission in climate summit, since it is the major consumer of fossil fuel. —N. Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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EXPLAINED GLOBAL

'BIGGEST SHOPPING DAY ON EARTH': ALL ABOUT CHINA SINGLES' DAY

RISHIKA SINGH NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 12

NOVEMBER 11 has been marked as 'Singles' Day' in China for more than a decade, with the date (11/11) seen as representing lone figures. Over time, it has become a massive commercial activity, described as "the biggest shopping day on Earth". In 2022, goods worth \$157.97 billion were sold, according to consultancy firm Bain. Major Chinese retailers are offering 11/11 shopping deals and sales, with a slew of promotional events featuring the likes of James Bond actor Daniel Craig and superstar musician Taylor Swift.



Singles' Day banners at a retailer's headquarters in 2021. Reuters

What behind the idea of Singles' Day?

The idea of Singles' Day is believed to have originated at China's Nanjing University in 1993, and was originally called "Bachelor's Day". On the day, single people — particularly men — treated themselves with gifts and parties.

With the concept of dating gaining popularity in China as exposure to Western culture increased, Singles' Day became one to celebrate singledom, as so-called at large mostly associated festivals with couples and families.

How has Singles' Day fared of late?

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent slowdown in China's economy have tempered Singles' Day's expectations. According to a recent Associated Press report, yearly sales growth has dwindled to single digits. Some of its novelty has also worn off.

So how did the commercial angle come into the picture?

In 2009, e-commerce giant Alibaba turned November 11 into a 24-hour mega-shopping festival with attractive deals. According to a report by news website Quartz, one promotional slogan said, "Even if you don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend, you can at least shop like crazy." The strategy attracted people, many of whom felt liberated from the feeling of shame that they felt in being single.

Alibaba's success resulted in other

brands joining the bandwagon, employing glitzy marketing tactics. The 2016 event featured a live-streamed fashion show in Shanghai that allowed viewers to order items that the catwalk models wore.

Today, Singles' Day is billed as the world's biggest 24-hour online sale. It has inspired shopping fests such as Amazon's flagship Prime Day sale, launched in 2015.

The birth of Maharashtra

The old Bombay province sprawled from Sindh (now in Pakistan) to northwestern Karnataka, and covered all of present-day Gujarat and about two-thirds of present-day Maharashtra (excluding a few princely states). Two Marathi-speaking regions — Vidarbha, a part of Central Provinces (later Madhya Pradesh), and Marathwada, a part of the princely state of Hyderabad — lay outside the province.

The demand for a united Marathi-speaking state emerged in the 1920s, and gained momentum after Independence. In 1953, Marathi leaders signed the Nagpur Pact seeking to unite Bombay State, Vidarbha, and Marathwada, even as the State's Gujarati community led its own agitation for statehood.

The city of Bombay was caught between these two movements. Gujarat had played the preeminent role in its rise as the country's economic nerve centre, but it was surrounded by Marathi-speaking districts. As the linguistic division of the state became increasingly likely, many believed that Bombay would be a Union Territory. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru even made announcements to this effect.

However, the States Reorganisation Commission recommended in 1956 that Bombay State should remain bilingual, since it was to the "mutual advantage" of the Gujarati and Marathi communities "to be partners in a great co-operative venture". It recommended granting Vidarbha statehood, but the Centre rejected this, making it a part of Bombay State, along with Marathwada, instead.

Neither the Marathi nor the Gujarati side was happy with this outcome, and the agitation for statehood continued. The Centre finally agreed, and on May 1, 1960, Bombay State was bifurcated. The new states of Maharashtra and Gujarat got 264 and 132 of the erstwhile Bombay State's 396 seats.

Era of Congress dominance

In the years following Independence, the Congress was the only major political force in Bombay State — and in the first Assembly election held in 1951-52, it won 269 of the 317 seats in the Assembly. There were 268 constituencies in all — some constituencies sent more than one member to the legislature at the time. Nashik-Igatpur was the only three-member (one General category, one SC, and one ST) Assembly constituency in the country.

Moraji Desai became the first chief minister of Bombay in 1952. In 1955-56, as the Samyukt Maharashtra Movement raged, more than 100 protesters were killed in police firing in Bombay (Mumbai) city. In the face of intense criticism, Moraji, a Gujarati from Valsad, was moved to Delhi and made the Union Finance Minister in 1956. He was succeeded by Yashwantrao Chavan, an MLA from Satara. Under Chavan's leadership, the Congress won 234 of the 396 seats (330 constituencies) in the 1957 Assembly election.

In the 1962 Assembly election, the first to be held after the creation of Maharashtra, the Congress won 215 of the 264 seats, and Marotrar Shamshoo Kannanwar became Chief Minister. Following his untimely demise the following year, the chief minister's position passed to Vasantrao Naik, who remained in the post for almost 12 years.

In the 1967 elections, the Congress suffered setbacks in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Haryana,

Maharashtra: an electoral history

The Congress once enjoyed a virtually unchallenged hold over Maharashtra. Today, multiple parties — and factions — are at play in India's richest state which goes to polls to elect a new Assembly on November 20.

SHYAMLAL YADAV NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 12

MAHARASHTRA, INDIA'S richest state in per capita GDP, and home to big business, Bollywood, and large sugar cooperatives, was a Congress bastion once. Today, its political landscape is a complex patchwork of parties and factions, whose shifting alliances determine the shape and composition of its governments.

Polls and performance of major parties



The late Shiv Sena founder Bal Thackeray and Sharad Pawar. Express Archive

MAHARASHTRA ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS	
1962: Congress won 215 of the 264 seats.	1995: Congress 80 seats; Shiv Sena 73 seats; BJP 65 seats.
1967: Congress won 203 of 270 seats.	1999: Congress 75 seats; NCP 58 seats; Shiv Sena 69 and BJP 56 seats.
1972: Congress won 222 of 270 seats.	2004: NCP 71 seats; Congress 69 seats; Shiv Sena 62 seats; BJP 54 seats.
1978: Janata Party 99; Congress (U) 69 seats; Congress (I) 66 of the 288 seats.	2009: Congress 82 seats; NCP 62 seats; BJP 46; and Shiv Sena 44 seats.
1980: Cong (I) 186 seats; Congress (U) 47 seats; Janata Party 17 seats.	2014: BJP 122 seats; Shiv Sena 63 seats; Congress 42; and NCP 41 seats.
1985: Congress 185 seats; BJP 16 seats; Congress (S) of Pavar won 54 seats.	2019: BJP 105 seats; Shiv Sena 56 seats; NCP 54 seats; and Congress 44 seats.
1990: Congress 141 seats; BJP 42 seats; Shiv Sena 52 seats.	

BOMBAY	
1952: Congress won 269 of 317 seats.	1957: Congress won 234 of 296

Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, and West Bengal. But its dominance in Maharashtra continued — under Naik, the party won 203 of the 270 seats in the Assembly.

In 1969, the party split into two factions — the Congress (O) was led by the old guard of Moraji Desai and K Kamaraj, and the Congress R, where R stood for 'Requisitionists', by Indira Gandhi. The Congress (O), also known as the Syndicate, made inroads in many states — but failed to win even one seat in the Maharashtra Assembly in the 1972 election. Indira's Congress swept 222 of the 270 seats.

In February 1975, weeks before the declaration of the Emergency, Chief Minister Naik was replaced by Shankarrao Chavan, a close ally of Indira and her son Sanjay Gandhi. Shankarrao remained Chief Minister through the Emergency.

Musical chairs for CM

In the 1977 Lok Sabha election, as an anti-Congress wave swept northern India, Indira's Congress won 20 of Maharashtra's 48 seats, one more than the Janata Party. Shankarrao took responsibility for the loss of seats and resigned. He was replaced by Vasantdada Patil, the MLA from Sangli.

The Janata Party regime at the Centre dismissed governments in nine states, but did not touch the one in Maharashtra. However, ahead of the 1978 election in the state, the Congress suffered another split, this time led by the Karnataka leader Devaraj Urs. Urs's Congress (U) won 69 of the 288 seats, while Indira's Congress won 62, and Janata 99. With no party close to the majority mark, Vasantdada Patil became Chief Minister again, leading a coalition of the two Congress factions.

This government, however, fell in less than four months. Sharad Pawar, only 38 at the time, left the Congress to form the Congress (Socialist) party — and joined hands with Janata to become the youngest Chief Minister of Maharashtra in July 1978.

Meanwhile, the Janata experiment collapsed at the Centre, and Indira stormed back to power in January 1980. She dismissed Pawar's government soon after — and in the Assembly election that followed, the Congress won 186 seats and returned to power. In June, A R Antulay became Maharashtra's first and only Muslim Chief Minister.

For the next decade-and-a-half, Congress leaders played a game of musical chairs for the Chief Ministership, even as the party remained in power in Maharashtra, winning 185 seats in 1985 and 141 in 1990. None of the eight CMs during this time — Antulay, Basaheb Bhosale, Vasantdada Patil, Shivajirao Patil Nilangekar, Shankarrao Chavan, Sharad Pawar (twice after returning to the Congress in 1986), and Sudhakarrao Naik — completed even three years in office.

This was a period dominated by corruption scandals, trade union unrest, the rise of criminal gangs in Bombay (Mumbai), and communal tensions.

The rise of Hindutva

It was in this climate that the Hindu right grew in strength in the state.

Political cartoonist Bal Thackeray had formed the Marathi nationalist Shiv Sena in 1966, and the party had its first MLA in 1972. The Shiv Sena was close to the likes of Vasantdada Patil in its early years; however, after the birth of the BJP in 1980, the two parties moved closer together as natural allies.

In the 1985 Assembly election, the BJP won 16 seats, while the Sena did not open its account. By 1990, however, the two parties' tallies had risen to 52 and 42 seats respectively. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and the communal riots and serial blasts that followed in Bombay (Mumbai) further fuelled the rise of the Hindutva right.

In 1995, the Sena-BJP alliance came to power in Maharashtra, winning 73 and 65 seats respectively. Manohar Joshi of the Sena became Chief Minister, with the BJP's Gopinath Munde as his deputy. The victory was inspired by Sena supremo Bal Thackeray and the BJP's rising star Pramod Mahajan. The Congress won 80 seats.

Joshi moved to the Centre after the 1998 Lok Sabha election, and Thackeray chose Narayan Rane to succeed him. In 1999, after four-and-a-half years of Sena-BJP rule, early elections were called in the state.

Congress returns, with NCP

Meanwhile, Pawar had once again broken away from the Congress, quitting in 1999 after Sonia Gandhi became leader of the party. Along with P A Sangma and Tariq Anwar, Pawar formed the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).

This made the 1999 Maharashtra Assembly election a three-way fight among the NCP, Congress, and the Sena-BJP combine. The NCP won 58 seats, Congress 75, Sena 69, and BJP 56. With the Sena-BJP alliance falling short of the majority mark, Congress and NCP came together to form the government. Vilasrao Deshmukh of the Congress became Chief Minister, with NCP's Chaghan Bhujbal as his deputy.

This Congress-NCP coalition ruled the state for the next 15 years. During this time, Deshmukh became Chief Minister twice (1999-2003, 2004-08), while Sushil Kumar Shinde (2003-04), Ashok Chavan (2009-10), and Prithviraj Chavan (2010-14) enjoyed shorter stints.

Maharashtra in Modi years

When Assembly elections were held in 2014, Thackeray, Mahajan, and Munde — three key political figures in the state — were no longer there. The BJP campaign was led by Nitin Gadkari and Amit Shah, and Bal Thackeray's son Uddhav was in charge of the Sena.

The Narendra Modi wave sweeping through the country powered the Sena-BJP alliance to power in Maharashtra. The BJP alone won 122 seats, while Sena won 66. The BJP's Devendra Fadnis, only 44 at the time, took oath as Chief Minister.

By the end of this term, however, differences had begun to emerge between the partners. The parties shared a common Hindutva base, and the BJP's ambition to dominate the entire country was making the Sena insecure. Still, the partners won enough seats to be able to form the government after the 2019 election — the BJP got 105, and the Sena 56.

Their differences, however, proved to be the deal-breaker. With the Sena declining to cooperate, Ajit Pawar, Sharad Pawar's nephew, promised to support Fadnis on the floor of the House, and the former Chief Minister was hurriedly sworn into office. However, Ajit Pawar backed out, and Fadnis was forced to resign merely five days later.

A new formation — the Maha Vikas Aghadi — comprising the Shiv Sena, Congress, and NCP came to power. Uddhav was sworn in as Chief Minister, and Aji became his deputy.

But this government too was toppled after Eknath Shinde, an old Sena hand, broke away from Uddhav to ally with the BJP, and became Chief Minister himself. Fadnis became his deputy. They were supported by Aji, who broke the NCP and became Deputy Chief Minister alongside Fadnis. This alliance has remained in power today. Earlier this year, former Congress CM Ashok Chavan, the son of Shankarrao Chavan, joined the BJP.

AN ANCIENT OCEAN ON MARS: NEW STUDY PROVIDES FURTHER EVIDENCE

WITH THE assistance of China's Zhurong rover, scientists have gathered fresh evidence that Mars was once an ocean billions of years ago — a far cry from the dry and desolate world it is today.

Scientists said on Thursday that data obtained by Zhurong, which landed on the northern lowlands of Mars in 2021, and by orbiting spacecraft, indicated the presence of geological features indicative of an ancient coastline. The rover analysed rock on the Martian surface in a location called Utopia Planitia, a large plain in the planet's northern hemisphere.

The researchers said data from China's Tianwen-1 Orbiter, NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter, and the robotic six-wheeled rover indicated the existence of a water ocean during a period when Mars might already have become cold and dry and lost much of its atmosphere.

They described surface features such as troughs, sediment channels, and mud volcano formations indicative of a coastline, with evidence of both shallow and

deeper marine environments.

"We estimate the flooding of the Utopia Planitia on Mars was approximately 3.68 billion years ago. The ocean surface was likely frozen in a geologically short period," said Hong Kong Polytechnic University planetary scientist Bo Wu, lead author of the study published in the journal Scientific Reports.

The ocean appears to have disappeared approximately 3.42 billion years ago, the researchers said.

Like Earth and our solar system's other planets, Mars was formed about 4.5 billion years ago. At the time the ocean apparently existed, it might already have begun its transition away from being a hospitable planet.

"The presence of an ancient ocean on Mars has been proposed and studied for several decades, yet significant uncertainty remains," Wu said. "These findings not only provide further evidence to support the theory of a Martian ocean but also present, for the first time, a discussion on its probable evolutionary scenario."

REUTERS

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COP29 is underway, here's what is on table in annual climate conference

ALIND CHAUHAN NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 12

THE 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) began in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, on Monday. Delegates from about 200 countries, business leaders, climate scientists, Indigenous Peoples, journalists, and various other experts and stakeholders are expected to attend the summit, which will continue until November 22. The primary goal of COP29 is to bring together countries to develop a shared plan to curb further global warming. The conference will also focus on ways to scale up climate finance to help developing nations tackle the adverse effects of climate change.

What is COP, the annual global climate change conference?

COP, or Conference of Parties, is the annual meeting of the members of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), an international agreement signed in 1992, which has provided a basis for climate negotiations.

The UNFCCC commits its members or 'parties' to act together to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations "at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human-induced) interference with the climate system". Currently, there are 198 parties (197 countries plus European Union) to the UNFCCC, constituting near universal membership.

The parties have come together every year since 1995 (barring 2020, the year of the Covid-19 pandemic) to discuss and agree on international climate policy. One of the significant tasks for COP is to "review the national communications and emission inventories" submitted by member states. "Based on this information, the COP assesses the effects of the measures taken by Parties and the

progress made in achieving the ultimate objective of the Convention," says the UNFCCC.

What have the various COPs achieved so far?

The first major breakthrough came at COP3 in Kyoto in 1997 when the parties adopted the Kyoto Protocol. The international treaty placed obligations on the rich and industrialised countries to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by assigned amounts. Targets varied by country, but averaged at a 4.2% reduction below 1990 levels by the year 2012.

However, the Kyoto Protocol did not last long as the wealthy and powerful countries were not happy with it. The United States, the most powerful country in the world, signed the protocol but never ratified it.

At COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, the parties tried to establish a successor to the

treaty, but the attempt failed. A second attempt was made at COP21 in Paris in 2015, which led to the Paris Agreement — a legally binding international treaty to limit global temperatures to below 2 degrees Celsius, and preferably below 1.5 degrees Celsius. The parties also agreed to submit their climate action plans, known as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), by 2020.

The next milestone came during COP26 in Glasgow in 2021 in the form of the Glasgow Pact. The parties made a commitment to "phase down" the use of coal (this language was weakened from "phase out" late in the negotiations) and to "phase out" inefficient fossil fuel subsidies. This was the first time that a UN climate agreement explicitly mentioned coal.

At last year's COP28 in Dubai, a Loss and Damage fund was officially launched. The

fund is meant to provide financial help to countries struck by climate disasters.

What are some of the criticisms of COP?

COP has failed to enable enough emissions cuts to put the planet on a pathway to meet the 1.5- or 2-degree Celsius targets. Studies have shown that the world must cut its emissions by at least 43% by 2030 relative to 2019 levels to keep alive any hopes of achieving the 1.5-degree Celsius target. However, by 2023, the world had not even begun the downward journey. Emissions are still rising, and not yet peaked. In the best case scenarios, global emissions are projected to be just 2% below 2019 levels in 2030 instead of the 43% that is required.

COP has also been unable to provide climate finance to developing nations. For instance, in 2009, the wealthiest countries — which are disproportionately responsible for the climate crisis — promised to raise \$

100 bn every year from 2020 onward to help developing nations reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the impacts of the climate crisis. They have failed to deliver on their promise.

What should be expected from COP29?

Climate finance is at the top of the agenda of COP29. The parties are negotiating the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG), a new amount that must be mobilised by developed countries every year from 2025 onward to finance climate action in developing countries. The new figure has to be more than the \$100 billion that developed countries had promised.

But talks over the NCQG have not made much progress so far. Parties disagree on almost every element of the fund, including the amount of money that needs to be raised, who should contribute, etc. It remains to be seen how countries finalise the NCQG.

EXPLAINED CLIMATE