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[OUR TAKE]

Weaponising tariff to trade

Donald Trump's announcements suggest that global trade is set to see a major upheaval

United States (US) President-elect Donald Trump has announced that he will impose tariffs on countries beyond China on his first day in office. The list includes the northern and southern neighbours of the US, Canada and Mexico. This is a list that will only become longer during the Trump presidency.

To be sure, the US using tariffs and renege on its policy of promoting free trade in the world came into vogue during the first Trump presidency itself. And the idea came to enjoy bipartisan appeal with even the Joe Biden administration using tariffs against China. Its appeal has also transcended the Atlantic with European countries — although there are tactical dissenters here — also raising tariffs on Chinese imports such as electrical vehicles.

Trump is only seeking an escalation of this policy in his second term. What makes it even more potent is that Trump intends to use tariffs not just to seek a rebalancing of trade but also achieve objectives beyond trade such as curbing illegal migration and drug trade. Things like illegal migration, while widely condemned, are critical in labour markets such as in American agriculture and a severe crackdown could hurt constituencies that helped Trump's political resurrection.

How will all this change the world? Uncertainty will be the biggest byproduct. Trump and his advisors have been explicit in stating that tariffs will be the proverbial dog on the leash when the US negotiates with other countries. Its presence itself, even when it is not unleashed, will work to the US's advantage, they claim. Such an approach from the world's largest economy will only hasten the demise of an already bedridden multilateral trading order. Also, the Trump administration might end up drawing and redrawing tariffs as companies move borders to skip them. This will worsen policy uncertainty especially vis-a-vis long-term investment decisions.

In the rest of the world, not everyone will be affected equally. Countries that can offer a *quid pro quo* to the US will manage to do better in this bargain than the ones that cannot. Remember Trump's Harley Davidson-for-Indian-manages pitch? The US's strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific — this includes India — may hope to bargain better than its historical allies across the Atlantic. Still, these potential upsidies aside, everyone including India will have to work with what will be a more transactional and mercantilist White House. Global trade, as we have known it in the last three decades, will not be the same.

Poll-loss assessment must spare the EVM

The default response these days of a section of the Opposition, especially the Congress party, when it loses an election is to question the electronic voting machine (EVM). It has been no different after the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) lost the Maharashtra elections. Just as it did when the Haryana results did not match its expectations, the Congress has gone on the offensive against EVMs after the Maharashtra polls. MVA partner Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) has supported the demand to revive paper ballots. Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge, at a function to mark 75 years of the Constitution, hinted at the party launching a campaign against EVMs.

Against this backdrop, the Supreme Court's observations while disposing of a plea that raised doubts about the sanctity of the electoral process and the EVMs Tuesday are pertinent. The judges pointed out that the process and EVMs are questioned by a party only when it loses. In April this year, the apex court dismissed a challenge to the use of EVMs and described the demand as "unsound". It had then — and rightly so — viewed the introduction of EVMs as an electoral reform that improved the sanctity of the process by ending malpractices such as booth capturing. The Court had also expressed satisfaction with the Election Commission of India's submissions regarding the tamper-proof features of the machines.

The bafflement of political parties when the verdict goes against them is understandable. Voters seem to exercise their franchise with great sophistication: For instance, we have repeatedly seen the electorate in many states voting for different parties in the Lok Sabha and assembly polls even when elections are held simultaneously. It may well be time for the Congress to abandon its rhetoric on EVM manipulation and reflect on the political reasons behind its electoral defeats.

Military lessons from the stand-off on LAC

India must work towards rebuilding deterrence against China's military coercion

On October 21, India's foreign secretary announced that diplomatic and military talks had resulted in an agreement on patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), leading to disengagement and a resolution of the issues that had arisen in 2020. This was followed by a series of high-level engagements over the last month between Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and the foreign and defence ministers of India and China.

Despite the steps towards normalising ties, the reasons behind China's incursions along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh in 2020 remain unclear. Various explanations have been offered. Some attribute the actions to China's concerns over India's accelerated infrastructure development near the border.

Others suggest that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) exploited the unsettled nature of the LAC to enforce its territorial claims. Some experts view the incursions as a signal from Beijing to New Delhi to avoid aligning too closely with the United States in its China-containment agenda. China's actions are also seen as an attempt to assert regional dominance

and challenge India's growing influence.

The easing of tensions along the LAC has done little to address the underlying issues that led to the crisis. Infrastructure development will continue. The LAC will remain a contested and unsettled boundary, and the broader strategic rivalry between the two nations is unlikely to abate. Even as diplomacy now takes centre stage, the military lessons from the four-year standoff must inform India's strategy for managing the LAC, an area where China continues to employ military coercion in the future.

The first lesson is to improve the capability of intelligence analysis significantly. In January 2020, the *Global Times* reported that the PLA had started major military exercises in Tibet. There were media reports that Indian intelligence officials had informed the Army about hundreds of Chinese military vehicles moving northward from areas opposite Demchok in mid-April. Despite this information, the LAC achieved a strategic surprise.

It is important to understand the difference between information and intelligence. Information is raw data that could enhance general awareness but lacks context or relevance. On the other hand, intelligence is analysed and interpreted insights that give a clear picture of the intentions. India must work to strengthen its intelligence analysis capability by

enhancing data quality, leveraging advanced tools, and fostering a culture of collaboration between different agencies.

The second lesson is that the military must prepare a series of contingencies to deal with the PLA's actions at the LAC. These contingencies could range from localised incidents involving small numbers of troops to multiple incursions like the one that occurred in 2020. They must cover both defensive and offensive actions.

In response to Chinese actions, India's occupation of the Kailash range in August 2020 was the trigger that forced China to come to the negotiating table and led to the withdrawal of their troops from the North Bank of Pangong Tso.

Interviews of senior Indian Army officers indicate that planning for the Kailash operation commenced after the Galwan incident of June 2020. If contingency plans had already been in place, a *quid pro quo* operation could have been quickly mounted, and perhaps, the PLA would not have been a need for the somewhat ad-hoc response at Galwan.

The third lesson is that the Indian military should review some of the pre-2020 assumptions about the comparative warfighting capabilities of the two sides in case of a conflict along the LAC. For example, two assumptions were that the Indian Air Force had a significant edge over the PLA air force in air operations over Tibet and that



A successful deterrence strategy rests on three critical pillars, often called the 3Cs — capability, communication, and credibility

the PLA army lacked experience in fighting in high-altitude areas.

An analysis of Chinese infrastructure development along the LAC highlights a significant emphasis on strengthening air combat capabilities. New runways have been constructed, hardened shelters have been built, and air defence systems have been deployed extensively.

Over the past five years, the PLA has gained valuable experience in high-altitude operations through the continuous deployment of regular troops and the induction of modern equipment like Type 15 light tanks, PL-15 self-propelled howitzers, and Z-10 attack helicopters. These steps will address some of its existing military vulnerabilities.

The final lesson is that India must work towards rebuilding deterrence against China's military coercion along the LAC. I mention the word "rebuild" because the PLA's actions in

2020 exposed a weakening of India's deterrent posture, creating conditions that emboldened China to consider using military force.

A successful deterrence strategy rests on three critical pillars, often called the 3Cs — capability, communication, and credibility.

While enhancing military capabilities is vital, it is equally essential for India to clearly define and effectively communicate its red lines to China's leadership. To establish credibility, India must consistently demonstrate its commitment and resolve, ensuring that any breach of these red lines is met with a decisive and visible response.

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Democratic Party needs to take a citizen-centric path

Weeks after a devastating electoral defeat, the Democratic Party finds itself in a period of serious introspection. With Kamala Harris's historic candidacy ending in a loss, the blame game has been relentless, both within the party and among media pundits. While the shock does not rival the seismic political upset of 2006 when Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton, Harris's loss still stings deeply, as it represents a broader reckoning for the Democratic Party nationwide.

Until 2016, when many were blindsided, this year's election outcome was less of a surprise. The polls were tight and several analysts had forecast Trump as the likely winner. Nonetheless, the results delivered a sobering blow. Not only did Trump win the presidency, but the Republicans appear to have achieved a political trifecta — flipping the Senate and retaining their House majority based upon the congressional races decided to date. This complete control over the executive and legislative branches — combined with a conservative majority in the Supreme Court — has left many Democrats anxious about unchecked Republican power.

In the aftermath of the election, Democrats must shift their focus from despair and anxiety to assessment and then action. American politics operates in two-year cycles, with opportunities for renewal always on the horizon. The next congressional elections are less than two years away, and a majority in the US House of Representatives remains within reach, given the small margin Republicans will hold there.

However, for Democrats to win the House back, learning lessons from this loss are critical. In 2006, the party regrouped and leveraged Trump's polarising presidency to build momentum for the 2018 midterms, securing a decisive House majority. Similarly, the party must identify the reasons for the loss of the presidential race and use them to develop a road map for revitalisation of the party nationally. An initial analysis of the available data indicates that the key areas of focus for that road map should include:

Reconnecting to the working class: Historically, the Democratic Party has been the party of the working class — those without college degrees and in lower-income jobs. In this election, the working class voted overwhelmingly for Trump. This was the case because Trump's relentless focus on the substantial rising costs of living for individuals proved effective, overshadowing the gains of the American economy went large.

Winning back traditional constituencies: The Democratic Party has also been the party for minorities such as Blacks, Hispanics, and people of colour. Until too late in this election cycle, these groups were taken for granted. As a result, many of those voters — especially male — decided to vote for Trump. They did so in part because of his economic message but also

due to concerns related to the perceived negative impact of illegal immigrants committing crimes, taking away jobs, and harming communities.

Winning back young voters: Another factor in the Democratic defeat was the loss of support among young voters. Harris won the majority of voters under 30 — but only by six percentage points compared to Biden's 24 points win against Trump in 2020. The reduced support among these voters can be attributed to a number of factors. Two primary ones are: Insecurity about their personal future and the future of the US as a country, and an effective social media campaign by Trump and the Republican Party reaching out to young voters.

Identifying the most relevant social issues in this election cycle, the Democratic Party was characterised as the party of the extreme Left and radical activists. This was possible due to policies, practices or proposals put forward by Democrats over the past several years on issues such as prioritising treatment of illegal immigrants, trans rights, homelessness, and transgender individuals. This means that the Democrats must grapple with the perception of being out of touch with what issues matter most to the majority of Americans and/or where Americans stand on those issues.

Motivating the Democratic base: We discussed the importance of turnout in our previous column. The Democrats definitely had a turnout problem in this election. The *New York Times* reports the counties with the largest Democratic victories in 2020 cast 1.9 million more votes for Biden in 2020 than they did for Harris in 2024. By comparison, the counties with the biggest Republican victories turned out 1.2 million more voters in 2024 than they did in 2020. Various polls before the elections showed the Republicans were much more enthusiastic about voting than the Democrats. Those polls proved to be true.

To sum it up, the Democratic Party has been soundly defeated. The Senate may not be favourable for the Democrats, with structural disadvantages likely delaying any realistic chance of reclaiming a majority until 2028. The House, on the other hand, presents a more immediate opportunity. A shift of just a few percentage points in key districts could flip control back to the Democrats in 2026.

While the election results were a clear Republican victory, the margins underscore how competitive the race truly was. For only out 1.2 million more voters in 2024 than they did in 2020. Various polls before the elections showed the Republicans were much more enthusiastic about voting than the Democrats. Those polls proved to be true.

In conclusion, the Democratic Party has been knocked down but it has not been knocked out. If the party charts a citizen-centric path forward based on listening and responding to the needs of the people it will get back up and be positioned for success in 2026 and 2028.

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ISRAEL KATZ | DEFENCE MINISTER OF ISRAEL



We intend to make every effort to create the conditions for a new hostage exchange and bring everyone home — this is the ultimate goal

Mainstream Hindi cinema, with movies like *Thare Zameen Par*, *Black*, and most recently, *Sirfikaan*, has brought attention to the lives of children with disabilities, portraying their challenges and triumphs. While these movies undoubtedly raise awareness, they often rely on the "miracle teacher" trope — a heroic figure who single-handedly transforms a child's life. This portrayal, while emotionally impactful, risks oversimplifying the reality that inclusive education depends on collective, systemic support from educators, administrators, families, and policymakers. In *Thare Zameen Par*, the world of a young boy who struggles with dyslexia is transformed when his art teacher "unlocks" his potential through empathy and unconventional teaching, suggesting that one caring teacher can reverse years of neglect.

Black similarly follows the story of a girl with visual and hearing impairments, again someone whose life is transformed by her teacher. While their resonance lies in heartwarming narratives, the teacher is portrayed as the singular force behind the girl's growth, leaving out the broader support that true inclusive education demands.

Sirfikaan, a recent biopic, tells the story of a boy with a visual impairment who finds success with the help of a devoted teacher. The film highlights the obstacles he faces in an education system that resists accommodating his disability, but its resolution relies on the success of one individual against all odds with the aid of a teacher who believes in him when no one else does. Despite the rising representation of disabilities in Bollywood, films rarely challenge the systemic barriers impacting children, focusing instead on personal achievements enabled by one "miracle" figure.

Though inspirational, these narratives are overly simplistic. They suggest that the solution to educational challenges lies in exceptional intervention rather than in a sustained, collective approach. By framing one teacher as the agent of change, the myth that children with disabilities can only thrive through rare, heroic efforts rather than through comprehensive, inclusive systems gets reinforced.

The "miracle teacher" trope is part of a larger trend in disability-related films that position a saviour figure swooping in to "fix" a problem. It reinforces the notion that children with disabilities are passive recipients of help rather than active participants in their own education. This portrayal neglects the reality that genuine inclusive education is

about empowering children within environments that respect and accommodate their unique needs.

India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and National Education Policy, 2020 reflect this collaborative model, mandating training for all teachers, regular and special, to address the diverse needs of children with disabilities. Many states now emphasise shared responsibility among regular teachers and special educators, underscoring that inclusion is a group effort.

Beyond the educators, inclusive education also requires accessible infrastructure, tailored curricula, reasonable accommodations, and assistive technologies. These elements work together to create an environment where children with disabilities can thrive. Saviour narratives valorise individual resilience and gloss over the systemic efforts required for sustainable change.

Narratives that feature children with disabilities as empowered individuals — supported by a network of teachers, families, and schools — will better capture India's current educational landscape. When children are depicted as active participants, rather than passive recipients, the narrative aligns with the true spirit of inclusive education. This shift could educate audiences, encouraging society to see inclusive education as a shared responsibility rather than a challenge for a single teacher.

To meaningfully contribute to the inclusive education movement, mainstream cinema must move beyond the saviour trope and embrace a more nuanced portrayal of how inclusive education works. True progress lies in showcasing the collaborative efforts of special educators, individual resilience, and school administrators working in harmony. For instance, *Thare Zameen Par* hints at this idea towards the end, as the school collectively supports the dyslexic young artist, highlighting the importance of accommodation and teamwork.

As society's understanding of inclusive education grows, cinema has the potential to inspire further change by portraying it accurately. By moving away from oversimplified narratives, movies can highlight the collective efforts of educators, administrators, and policymakers to create schools that truly welcome children with disabilities.

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Researchers are trying to understand why resistant pathogens are so prevalent in the war-torn nations of the Middle East. As wealthier countries bomb poorer ones, devastating essential infrastructure, they have created social conditions that foster antibiotic resistance

FRANCESCA MARI

Last October, Christina Assi, a 28-year-old photojournalist for Agence France-Presse, took a selfie against the sunset and WhatsApped it to her mother. "Be careful," her mother replied. Assi and some colleagues had driven to the border in southern Lebanon to cover artillery clashes between Israel and Hezbollah. Wearing protective helmets and blue flak jackets that said "PRESS" in large white letters, they set up on an exposed hill a good distance away from the smears of smoke on the horizon. Drones buzzed overhead. Suddenly, a tank shell struck right next to Assi's position, killing her friend and colleague Issam Abdallah, a 37-year-old videographer for Reuters. The force of the impact slammed Assi into the dirt and pelted her with shrapnel.

"What happened?" she screamed. "What happened? I can't feel my legs." "No, don't let her go! Call and half of her left calf had been blown off. Within a minute, another shell struck the *Al-Jazeera* car, and it erupted in gassy, billowing flames.

By the time Assi arrived at the American University of Beirut Medical Centre, it was past midnight, and doctors assessed her chance of survival at 50 percent.

Fady Haddad, the university's head of vascular surgery, and his team painstakingly repaired and reconnected the damaged blood vessels, but 48 hours later, they had inexplicably clotted and failed. Haddad performed three more operations, but again and again the vessels failed. The reason became clear: Microbes were feasting on Assi's necrotic flesh. Despite aggressive debridement—daily surgical scrapings of her wounds to clean out the infection—and expensive medications, the tissues in her leg grayed at the edges. The hospital's microbiology lab identified three possible culprits: two bacteria and a fungus, a mucormycete mold. But as the infections kept worsening in spite of medication, one of Assi's infectious-disease doctors, Souha Kanj, suspected there might be another fungal pathogen at play.

Kanj prescribed a second, very expensive antifungal medication and sent a culture to an Austrian lab, which two weeks later confirmed her suspicion, finding a rare strain of *Aspergillus flavus*. The decision to add the second medication probably helped save Assi's life. But nothing could save her right leg. She was still alive when the doctors told her parents that they would need to amputate it, owing not to the initial trauma but to the aggressive, drug-resistant infections that set in afterward.

By 2050, *The Lancet* predicts that antimicrobial resistance will kill 8.22 million people per year, more than the number currently killed by cancer. And a growing body of research suggests that the 21st-century way of warfare has become a major driver of that spread. Nations of the Middle East now suffer from particularly high rates of multidrug-resistant pathogens, and some of the world's most fearsome superbugs have incubated in the region—Klebsiella pneumoniae, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, E. coli, MRSA and perhaps most notably A. baumannii, a strain of Acinetobacter that travelled home with US soldiers.

Humans are lost to more than a thousand species of bacteria, including many of the superbugs deemed critical threats by the WHO. But they rarely become pathogenic in healthy people. War changes that. It deprives people of food, clean water and sanitary living conditions. When bombs and bullets fly, the resulting wounds become perforated with shrapnel, debris and soil teeming with microbes. The injured and vulnerable often wind up in close and unclean quarters that allow infection to fester and spread.

As wealthier countries bomb poorer ones, devastating essential infrastructure, they have created the social conditions that foster antibiotic resistance. The public-health fallout knows no borders and can carry on indefinitely, even after the bombs stop.

About a decade ago, Ghassan Abu Sittah, a Palestinian reconstructive plastic surgeon newly arrived at the American University of Beirut, presented another new hire—Omar Dewachi, an Iraqi anthropologist and former physician—with a medical mystery that he was observing in his clinic.

Many of his patients were Iraqi, Abu Sittah explained. And a startling number of them were suffering from infections that stubbornly failed to heal. When civil war broke out in Syria, Abu Sittah began seeing Syrian patients, too, and their infections were even worse. Eventually, to protect the



A 25-year-old patient at the Specialised Burns Hospital in Baghdad's Medical City. Like many Iraqi hospitals, the facility suffers from high rates of resistant infection. FILE PHOTO/NTV

Modern warfare is breeding deadly superbugs. Why?

rest of the population, the university's immunologists began isolating all Iraqi and Syrian patients upon arrival until they could be tested for "AMR," antimicrobial-resistant pathogens—bacteria, fungi or viruses resistant to medication.

Abu Sittah had assembled some remarkable data: roughly 70% of his patients from Iraq and almost 70% from Syria had infections that were resistant to multiple drugs. What was driving this startling rise in resistance?

Dewachi's first thought was sanctions. He had grown up in Baghdad and did his residency at Baghdad Hospital during the devastating embargo that the United Nations Security Council placed on Iraq in 1990, after it invaded Kuwait. The sanctions lasted nearly 13 years. Baghdad Hospital, once the medical crown jewel of the Middle East, could no longer acquire cleaning supplies, surgical gloves, ventilators or medication, and the quality of care crumbled. Antibiotics in particular were in short supply; patients often couldn't finish the recommended course, or they were forced to take second-rate ones manufactured with lower concentrations of active ingredients than claimed on their labels. The suboptimal dosing killed some bacteria, but not all, increasing the likelihood of resistance.

This was especially a problem when patients were housed in groups, as they were in Baghdad Hospital. Infection spread easily, especially among the immunocompromised or malnourished. Vaccines were scarce and seldom prioritised. Patient mortality was high.

Abu Sittah never lived in Iraq, but he witnessed the medical crisis there as part of a public-health delegation. A Palestinian born in Kuwait, he emigrated to Britain in 1988 to attend medical school in Glasgow. Just after the Persian Gulf war, in 1991, he travelled throughout Iraq with a Harvard team studying infant mortality and nutritional status and saw firsthand how the so-called clean war with fewer civilian casualties was made more lethal by other means: infrastructure collapse—the decimation of electricity plants, generators, sewage and water-treatment plants. Most infant mortality was diarrhoeal, caused by unsanitary water. "If you dismantle the health infrastructure of urban life, you can take more lives than bombs could ever do," Abu Sittah told me.

As Dewachi and Abu Sittah continued to discuss AMR, Abu Sittah brought up a possible link between AMR and war that medicine, to his knowledge, had not considered. Maybe resistance accelerated because of how bombs had changed.

War and the toxic biosphere

Dewachi and Abu Sittah founded a conflict-medicine research group based at the university, and in 2018, Dewachi and some others organised a research retreat for microbiologists, historians of science, anthropologists, clinicians and public-health

experts studying war injuries. Over the course of the week, it really hit home for everyone that there wasn't one single cause driving AMR. War created the perfect convergence, a toxic biosphere for the acceleration of resistance.

At the end of June, I visited the lab of Antoine Abou Fayad at the American University of Beirut, who joined the conflict-medicine research group in 2017. Since then, the questions that Dewachi and Abu Sittah posed to him about heavy metals and AMR have become his major area of focus.

Resistant bacteria are classified in three ways, Abou Fayad said, approaching a whiteboard and scribbling abbreviations: multidrug-resistant (MDR), meaning resistant to at least three classes of antibiotics; extensively drug-resistant (XDR), meaning resistant to all classes but two (generally colistin and tigecycline); and pan-drug-resistant (PDR), meaning they're basically resistant to everything. Acinetobacter accounts for 20 percent of intensive-care-unit infections globally, and almost all of them are pan-drug-resistant.

Abou Fayad rummaged around his lab counters and plucked out some large vials containing bullets and shrapnel. He directed our attention to his lab's research assistant, Aya Taleb, who was masked and pipetting nutrients into one such vial, in which Acinetobacter was growing on an M4 casing—one of many that the Lebanese Army had fired into sandbags on Abu Fayad's behalf, so he could study the effect of their heavy metals on bacteria.

Many heavy metals are naturally antibacterial: copper, for example, is sometimes used to coat surfaces in operating rooms for that reason. Abou Fayad and Taleb began with an Acinetobacter control strain that was sensitive to all antibiotics. Every few weeks, Taleb cultures an agar, a petri dish with nourishment, with the microbe growing in the vial to see how sensitive it is to antibiotics.

The results won't be finalised or peer-reviewed for another year, but what Abou Fayad said he was witnessing was striking. The Acinetobacter was absorbing small particles of heavy metals and then developing a gene that constructed a pump within the bacteria—an e-fux pump—that evacuated the heavy metals. Because heavy metals and antibiotics resemble one another, that same pump worked to expel antibiotics. In other words, the microbe was learning how to flush out toxins. And then it was sharing its recipe with similar bacteria.

Many of the places that we need quality antibiotics are receiving sham versions that are less than full strength. Abou Fayad pulled out a bin of Syrian antibiotics. When tested in the lab, not one of them measured the concentration on its packaging. "If they say 500 milligrams, they're probably 100 milligrams," Abou Fayad said.

Then there was the issue of antibiotic dumping, an example of good intentions

gone awry. A pharmaceutical company or nonprofit will donate a big batch of an antibiotic that's near its expiration date—like meropenem, a very serious, intravenous carbapenem that should be reserved as a last-resort medication. "They start to distribute it like bonbons. Everybody will be on meropenem, even if you're not sick," Abou Fayad said, because everyone wants to use the drug before it expires.

In terms of driving resistance, this is like striking a match in a gas station. Bacteria are everywhere in our bodies; antibiotics select for resistance. With the more sensitive bacteria wiped out, there's nothing to keep the resistant bacteria in check, allowing them to gain ground and ultimately enter the environment in higher proportions.

"Wars can kill thousands, but bacteria kills millions," Osama Zubair Salman, the technical director of Baghdad Teaching Hospital, told me. Not only is bacteria developing antimicrobial resistance much faster than humans are developing antibiotics, but climate change is expanding the range of resistant pathogens, and globalisation makes spread inevitable.

"The world is a small village," he said. "The infection that happens in Delhi can have consequences in America and vice versa. So, your measures, however perfect they are, they are useless if they are not applied in all of the world at the same time."

Even before the war, 34% of Gaza hospital had resistant bacteria in their water. Now, water treatment and sewage treatment plants have been destroyed, with supply reduced by 94 percent. Oxford concluded that "Israel has systematically weaponised water" in Gaza; Israel has also cut off electricity for more than a year. Biological waste isn't incinerated; it's buried or flushed, pouring back into the community.

Thousands of bodies are decaying under more than 40 million tons of urban rubble, with asbestos and heavy metals that cause bacterial mutation. Every time it rains, carcasses and debris leach into the ground and infiltrate the groundwater. Mysterious skin infections are raging through the population. Polio has re-emerged for the first time in 25 years and left a 10-month-old baby partially paralysed.

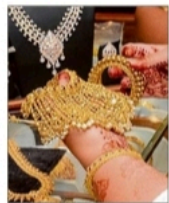
"Water currents in the East Mediterranean travel up from Alexandria past Gaza," Abou Sittah said, up "to Syria, to Greece, Italy." His point: the infections of war can't be contained to war zones: "Everything that reaches the sea is going to reach the Earth."

"This is the dark poetry of it," Dewachi told me. World War II, he pointed out, is what gave the world penicillin, but now the 21st century's brutal modes of conflict have brought all our means of fighting infection to the breaking point. The innovations of war have outpaced those of medicine, which has brought us to a grim possibility: Born in war, antibiotics now risk becoming another of its casualties.

The New York Times

For Indians, gold's still the standard investment choice

P SREELAKSHMI



Last week, I attended a family wedding and was struck by the sight of the bride, resplendent in shimmering gold jewellery. Curious, I asked my cousin how she managed to buy such a substantial collection, especially when gold prices are rallying in recent times. The answer was, "Thanks to ancestral inheritance."

Indeed, without this time-honoured tradition of buying and passing gold across generations, such abundance might not have been possible. Indians' enduring love affair with gold spans centuries. It is more than an adornment; it is an integral part of rituals and culture. Our ancestors, wise in their foresight, recognised the yellow metal as both a protector during crises and a hedge against inflation.

Gold's importance in India extends beyond tradition. The metal is indispensable, with wedding-related consumption alone accounting for nearly 50% of annual gold demand. This unyielding cultural demand for gold, coupled with gold's role as a safe investment to tide over crises and protect ourselves from uncertainties, drives its price and value.

Rising interest rates: Traditionally, gold and interest rates are negatively correlated. In times of economic prosperity, rising rates diminish gold's appeal. Because gold as such offers no yield. However, when interest rates are low, alternative investment options generate minimal returns, making gold more attractive.

Globally, interest rates in the US have a profound impact on gold prices because the metal is traded in US dollars. For instance, following Donald Trump's resounding victory in the US presidential race, gold prices dipped as investors anticipated stronger economic policies and a robust dollar. This created opportunities for Indian consumers to plan their wedding purchases and long-term investments.

Rupee-dollar equation: India's reliance on gold imports ties its price to the rupee-dollar exchange rate. A weaker rupee results in higher gold prices in domestic terms. **Safe investment and hedging tool:** In India, a 50% of demand for gold comes from rural consumption with purchases linked to agricultural prosperity. Farmers buy gold to create assets when the crop is good. It helps them generate funds during times of poor harvest.

Geopolitical factors: Geopolitical uncertainties, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, have made gold prices volatile. Amid escalating tensions, gold consistently proves its worth as a safe-haven asset. **Gold as an investment:** Despite price fluctuations, the demand for the yellow metal in the Indian markets is always on the rise. Gold is showing signs of recovery over the last few days following Trump's victory.

However, it still remains almost 5.5% below its October peak, giving an opportunity to those who are planning wedding purchases. The 20-year and 10-year data clearly show gold has outperformed equity markets during global economic crises. Examples include the 2008 global financial crisis, the FY 2011-2012 US debt ceiling crisis, the Covid period of

2020-2023, and the current Russia-Ukraine war. During such periods, gold has consistently beaten benchmarks like the Nifty index.

Gold has been on a run since mid-February due to many reasons: expectation of interest rate cuts from the US Federal Reserve, geopolitical tensions like the Russia-Ukraine war, and chaos in the Middle East. It's clear that during challenging economic times, investors tend to park their money in safer havens, and gold is a preferred choice. There are several reasons:

■ Gold protects against long-term inflation.

■ Unlike other physical assets, gold can easily be liquidated or used as collateral.

■ Investment in gold protects and helps diversify investment portfolios as it reduces the risk of volatility.

■ Gold remains a dependable asset during geopolitical or economic turmoil.

However, gold has its limitations. It does not generate returns or benefit from compounding. Unlike investments in stocks, the amount invested in gold does not contribute to economic growth or wealth creation.

The government has reduced customs duty on gold imports from 15% to 6% in the 2024-25 Union Budget, the steepest cut since 2013. Gold jewellery also attracts 3% GST.

Gold bonds issued by the Government of India could be an option worth considering as their value increases with time along with additional annual interest of 2.5%. These bonds, however, come with a lock-in period. The capital gains are tax-free, but the interest is taxable. Also, there are open-ended gold ETFs that track the value of gold directly and can be redeemed at any point.

According to reports, there is an increase of 1.5% in demand in early 2024 compared to the previous year. GOI plans to introduce 9-karat gold hallmarking to cater to the increasing demand and prevent fraud and chain-snatching crimes (reports suggest a 34% spike in chain-snatching crimes between 2021 and 2023). The hallmarking scheme is aimed at ensuring consumer protection and increasing the availability of gold jewellery to the middle class in the market. Currently under BIS regulation, hallmarking is mandatory for six gold purity categories: 14K7, 18K7, 20K7, 22K7, 23K7 and 24K7.

Amidst so many fluctuations, gold stands as a timeless hero for financial security. It has represented heritage and culture, provided stability, and remains an anchor offering value for the coming generations, making it one of the preferred choices of investors.

(The writer is an associate professor of finance at Christ deemed to be university, Bengaluru)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: NOVEMBER 1974

Kabini waters: Urs rebuts TN charge

Bangalore, November 27
Karnataka had rightly impounded water in the Kabini reservoir for the last 10 days. It was meant for the current summer crops. Chief Minister Devanur Urs told pressmen here today. The impounding had neither violated the understanding reached at the Chief Ministers' conference, nor had it been inexpedient. He said that out of Rs. 24 crore spent on the project, Rs. 8 crore had been expended on the canal system. Mr Urs who left for Delhi today to participate in the discussions on the Cauvery water dispute.

25 YEARS AGO: NOVEMBER 1999

BJP suspends Kalyan Singh

New Delhi, Nov 27

The BJP's central leadership, reacting swiftly to the unrelenting criticism of Kalyan Singh against Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, today suspended the "sulking" State leader from the primary membership of the party. An explanation has also been sought from Mr Singh within seven days after which the BJP high command would decide further course of action which could include the expulsion from the party. The decision to suspend the ousted chief minister was taken by the BJP parliamentary board.

Shape your own destiny

OASIS | ROHINI SMURTHY

Pull yourself out of difficulties by yourself. Save yourself by yourself. Be not afraid. Think not how many times you fail. Never mind. Time is infinite. Go forward; assert yourself again and again, and light must move.

This is Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of Chapter 6 Verse 5 from Bhagavad Gita. Reading these lines repeatedly can probably inspire us to the feel-good effect may last for a few moments. Human nature is such that we blame others and circumstances for our failure instead of believing that we possess the power to shape our destiny. It is true that the ability to develop posi-

itive thoughts, emotions and actions lies within us and by making small but significant choices in life, we can surely reach our goals. To illustrate this, I would like to narrate a true-life story. Way back in 2006, I was working in a public relations firm in Mumbai and there was a driver, Amol Thorave, in our office.

Our office had a fleet of cars and the drivers in their free time would huddle together, either drinking coffee or chat chatting. But Amol invariably choose to sit in the car with his head immersed in a book.

Whenever he would take me to a client's place for a meeting, he always asked me questions related to public relations or reach for his book the moment I would step out of the car. "I didn't know you were interested in reading story books," I remarked one day. He smiled and clarified, "Madam, this is a text book of the PG Diploma course I am doing on public relations. Our CEO supports and encourages me in this endeavour," he said proudly.

From thereon, the journey to a client's place became more important to me than the destination as I would

get inspired by his limitless thirst for knowledge and his resolve to become the person he dreamt to be. Soon, he passed his diploma exams and my boss offered him a job as a trainee PR executive. To my sheer luck, he joined my team. His perseverance to excel and earn accolades from clients and colleagues alike not only helped him scale the career ladder but taught us an important lesson that by mastering yourself, you can forge your own destiny. Ralph Waldo Emerson's words perfectly personify Amol's life's journey - "The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be."



BIBLIOGRAPHY



Winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997) stands as a powerful exploration of the experience of brutality. AFP

Echoes of survival: how witness literature confronts history's darkest chapters

Writers such as Han Kang, Svetlana Alexievich, Shehan Karunatilaka, Raja Shehadeh, through their stories on popular uprisings, nuclear disasters, civil wars, forced settlements, geopolitical tensions, ensure that voices of survivors and witnesses, individuals and communities, are not forgotten

K.S. Swati

With her groundbreaking win of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature, Han Kang has carved a unique place in history as the first South Korean and woman Asian writer of this esteemed award. The Nobel Prize website lauds her work for its "intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life," a fitting recognition of her unique voice in contemporary literature.

In *Human Acts* (2014), translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2016, Han delves into the tragic events of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, weaving together the personal stories of survivors to show the devastating impact of political violence. By amplifying the voices of those affected, she transforms individual suffering into a collective narrative that resonates with urgency and empathy.

Han's writing is a prime example of witness literature – a genre dedicated to documenting the lived experiences of those impacted by trauma and historical violence. Witness literature not only sheds light on the effects of war, disaster, and systemic oppression but also fosters empathy, compelling readers to confront the stark realities of conflict and injustice. It preserves crucial memories that might otherwise fade, ensuring that the voices of survivors are heard and acknowledged. Through these narratives, witness literature highlights the resilience of the human spirit and invites reflection on the broader socio-political contexts that shape our world.

Collective trauma

Through his memoir, giving a first-person account of the cruelty and barbarism imposed on people in Nazi concentration camps, Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1956)

transports readers into the darkest chapters of history. A memoir of his teenage years spent in concentration camps, Wiesel recounts his journey from a quiet, devout Jewish community in Hungary to the brutal existence in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, where he was stripped of his family, faith, and childhood innocence.

Through his story, readers are drawn into the raw horror of starvation, forced labour, and the systematic dehumanisation of people in the Holocaust. Wiesel demands that we remember, understand, and bear the weight of this trauma.

Winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997), translated from Russian by Keith Gessen, stands as a powerful exploration of historical and collective trauma. The book opens with the harrowing account of Lyudmilla Ignatenko, the wife of a firefighter who was among the first to respond to the reactor explosion, capturing both her personal grief and the excruciating toll the disaster took on her husband.

Through such first-hand testimonies from survivors, soldiers, and villagers, Alexievich reveals the enduring impact of the 1986 nuclear disaster, showing how each individual's suffering contributes to a larger and shared human. Alexievich's work amplifies voices often marginalised or forgotten, turning personal suffering into a collective narrative that resonates across generations.

Personal, political recollections

Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (1995) explores how collective memories and recollections shape our understanding of historical events. Focusing on the 1922 Chauri Chaura incident – where an angry mob set a police station ablaze, leading to

the deaths of 23 policemen and causing Gandhi to suspend the Non-Cooperation Movement – Amin examines how this event has been remembered, reinterpreted, and symbolised across generations.

He highlights how different groups, from nationalists to local villagers, have shaped and retold the story of Chauri Chaura to serve varied social and political narratives.

Through detailed oral histories, archival research, and analysis of how memories change over time, Amin reveals how historical events are not fixed but are continuously reimagined in public memory. This suggests that history is not merely about facts but also about how events are remembered, retold, and used to reflect present-day values, ideologies, or identity.

Under the theme of personal is political in witness literature, Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2020) uses the journey of a single character to reflect the larger issues within a conflicted society. The novel follows Maali Almeida, a war photographer who, after his mysterious murder, finds himself in a bureaucratic afterlife where he has seven 'moons' (days) to solve his own murder and share his photographs that expose the brutal realities of Sri Lanka's civil war.

As he navigates this supernatural world, Maali reflects on his dangerous career documenting war, violence, and corruption – images he hoped would someday hold the powerful accountable.

Through Maali's life and death, Karunatilaka paints that, in times of conflict and oppression, individual actions – whether in art, resistance or mere survival – are deeply political. The novel shows that personal stories are not only affected by political forces but also play a critical role in exposing,

challenging, and understanding those forces.

Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape (2007) by Raja Shehadeh captures the complex layers of loss – both environmental and cultural – shaping the Palestinian experience. Through his series of six walks over nearly three decades, Shehadeh bears witness to the physical transformation of the West Bank, where trails, hills, and ancient paths are reshaped, restricted, or erased by settlement expansion, geopolitical tensions and wars.

Each walk serves as a quiet testament to the gradual disappearance of landscapes that hold cultural and historical significance for Palestinian identity. The familiar paths he once roamed freely become inaccessible, altering not only the physical terrain but also severing a spiritual and cultural bond with the land. His descriptions of olive groves, wadis, and ancient rock formations create a vivid image of a place slipping away, not only geographically but symbolically, as the meaning of land and identity is transformed by conflict.

Witness literature feels more urgent than ever. By preserving the firsthand accounts of people who have lived through war, exile, political oppression, or environmental crises, literature helps safeguard truths that might otherwise be lost or distorted. It does not just document facts; it captures the raw, human experience of suffering and survival, inviting readers to connect deeply with voices that might otherwise go unheard.

In times of misinformation and political upheaval, these stories prompt us to confront our shared humanity, serving as both a warning and a call for accountability – urging us to learn from history to shape a more compassionate, just future.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

K. Subrahmanian
Upendran

"Is there any difference in meaning between the sentences, 'You must get married' and 'You ought to get married'?"
"There certainly is. If I say, 'You must get married,' I'm giving you an order to get married. I am giving you an order and I expect you to follow it."

"O.K. I think I've understood that. 'Must' is more or less an order. What about 'ought to'?"

"'Ought to' is similar to 'must' in that it's the speaker who is telling the listener what to do. For example, if I say, 'You ought to get married,' what I'm saying is that it's about time you get married.' It means I would like you to get married but I'm not sure whether you will."

"So 'ought to' carried with it an element of uncertainty."

"That's right. But remember this: In the case of both 'must' and 'ought to,' it is the speaker who is exerting authority over the listener. He/she is telling the listener what to do."

"Does 'need to' have the same meaning?"

"No, it doesn't. If I say, 'You need to buy a new pair of shoes,' I'm not ordering or forcing you to buy a new pair. I'm not using my authority to make you do it."

"Well, if you're not forcing me to buy a new pair of shoes, then who is or what is? The circumstances 'I'm in'?"

"Exactly. Your shoes are in really bad condition..."

"...and you think that it would be a good idea if I replaced them."

"There's no compulsion form the speaker. It's the circumstances that dictate the change. That's what is important. It's the listener who feels the need to make a change."

"I think I've understood that. You don't have to repeat it."

"Would you like me to 'three-peat' it then?"

"Three-peat?"

"Yes, three-peat. It's a word you would have found in the sports sections of most American newspapers in the first week of February. You see, one of the football teams won the championship for the second consecutive time. Now everyone is wondering if the team can win three times in a row. They want to know if the team can do a 'three-peat'. A newspaper headline screamed, 'Three-peat would be an unprecedented feat.' And a player's response was 'Once the dust settles, we'll start thinking of three-peat.'"

"So the word 'three-peat' doesn't actually exist?"

"You won't find it in dictionaries, but people are using it. And they seem to know what it means."

"Can you five-peat that for me?"

Learn to write well or not at all – Dryden.

March 15, 1994

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on milk and its revolution in India

Sindhu Nagara

QUESTION 1

Launched on January 13, 1970, this was the world's largest dairy development programme and a landmark project of India's National Dairy Development Board. What was it called?

QUESTION 2

Apart from NDBB, Dr. Verghese Kurien was the chairman of which dairy brand?

QUESTION 3

What is the name of the subsidiary that was commissioned in 1974 under the programme (answer to 1). It comes under the ownership of the National Dairy Development Board.

QUESTION 4

For his contributions to increasing the dairy output, Kurien is associated with what phrase in India?

QUESTION 5

One of the longest-running ad campaigns in India, this is an advertising mascot used by a dairy brand (answer to 2). The mascot is a hand-drawn cartoon of a young Indian girl dressed in a polka-dotted frock with blue hair and a half-pony tied up. What is it called?

QUESTION 6

What is the name of the film, directed by Shyam Benegal and inspired by the pioneering milk cooperative movement of Kurien?



Identify this dairy. Which State does it belong to? THE HINDU

Answers to the previous day's quiz:

1. How many persons have served as the Chief Minister of the State? **Ans: Seven** 2. Who is the only Chief Minister in the State to complete a term uninterrupted? **Ans: Raghubar Das** 3. Who was the first Chief Minister of the State? Which party did he represent? **Ans: Babulal Marandi, BJP** 4. The first Assembly election after formation of Jharkhand State was held in 2005. Name the leader who became Chief Minister for just 10 days after this election? **Ans: Shibu Soren** 5. Who took over as the Chief Minister when Heman Soren stepped down from the post before being arrested in an alleged land-scam case? **Ans: Champai Soren** 6. Visual question: Name this leader who became the Chief Minister of the State as an Independent MLA **Ans: Madhu Koda**

Early Birds

Bharath Viswanathan – Prashanth Nain – Varghese Joseph – Devansh Dhariwal – Shankar Priyavrat

Please send in your answers to
dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Word of the day

Pyrotechnics:

a fireworks display, a brilliant performance or display of a specified skill

Synonyms:

fireworks, spectacle

Usage: He thrilled his audience with vocal pyrotechnics. Many musical groups use pyrotechnics to enhance their live shows

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/pɑːr.əˈteknɪks/

Pronunciation:

bt.ly/pyrotechnicsw

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Text & Context'

SCIENCE

New moiré superconductor opens the door to new quantum materials

Scientists have found that moiré materials made from semiconductor materials can also be superconducting, a property once considered to be exclusive to graphene; exploring why semiconductor moiré materials behave differently is key to advancing understanding of quantum materials

Tejasri Gururaj

Scientists are constantly engineering new materials that exhibit exotic properties. Moiré materials, in particular, are deceptively simple.

Take a material made of a single type of atom, like a block of graphite. Slice off a thin layer from the top so that you have a two-dimensional sheet of carbon atoms bonded together (graphene). Place one sheet on top of another. Finally, twist the top sheet by a small angle. You now have a moiré material.

These materials have unusual electronic and quantum properties. The one made of graphene has even been found to be a superconductor.

In a recent study in *Nature*, scientists reported that moiré materials made from semiconductor materials can also be superconducting, a property once considered to be exclusive to the graphene system.

Exploring why semiconductor moiré materials behave differently from graphene in terms of superconductivity is key to advancing our understanding of quantum materials. This in turn can pave the way for new materials with more unusual properties – and unusual applications.

The moiré pattern

The researchers explored superconductivity in twisted bilayer tungsten diselenide (tWSe₂), a moiré material created by stacking two layers of tungsten diselenide, a semiconductor, and rotating one layer by a small angle.

Even though the two layers of a moiré material have the same arrangement of atoms, the misalignment caused by the small twist produces a completely different pattern when seen from the top (see image above). This is called the moiré pattern.

In moiré materials, the moiré pattern gives rise to new behaviours that are not present in the individual 2D materials alone. This is because the twist leads to the formation of flat bands in the electronic structure of the material.

Flat bands to superconductivity

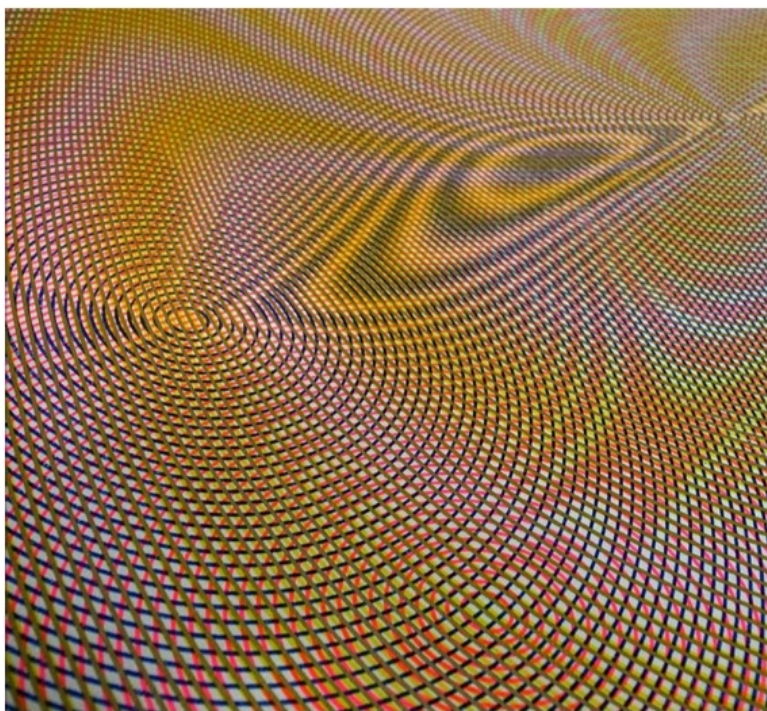
The electronic structure of a material describes how electrons in the material behave. The energy bands are a way to visualise the energy the electrons possess and how fast they move within the material.

Imagine the energy bands to be a ladder: each step (or band) represents the range of energies an electron can have. As you go up the ladder, the electron possesses more and more energy and momentum, meaning it will move faster.

A flat band means that the energy values of the electrons across the ladder are nearly constant, creating a flat region within the band. In this scenario, all the electrons have the same energy, unlike in typical materials where the energy levels are spread out over a range.

Also in typical materials, electrons gain or lose kinetic energy when they move across different energy levels, which affects their speed and momentum. But in moiré materials, because the bands are flat, the electrons experience very little variation in energy.

As a result, the electrons move slowly and are said to be heavy. These slower-moving electrons are more likely to interact with each other, creating strong electron-electron interactions that



As this example of screen-printing shows, a moiré pattern emerges when two layers, one with red circles and one with black circles, are overlaid and one layer is twisted by a small angle. JEAN-NO (CC BY-SA 4.0)

aren't seen in typical materials.

These interactions can lead to the formation of Cooper pairs, where two electrons pair up across a short distance and move around as a single unit. This pairing is central to the phenomenon of superconductivity. (Leon Cooper, for whom the pairs are named, passed away on October 23.)

Their coordinated movement helps them avoid scattering, a process where electrons collide with atoms or impurities in the material and deviate from their path, causing electrical resistance. On the other hand, Cooper pairs can travel through the material without scattering, leading to zero resistance and energy loss, and thus superconductivity.

The devil in the twist

The researchers used tWSe₂ with a twist angle of 3.65° to form a moiré material.

Then they examined how the electrons behaved when the material's electronic states were half-filled, a configuration strongly associated with superconductivity in moiré materials. (These states refer to the steps on the energy ladder: each state can accommodate a fixed number of electrons.)

They also examined the behaviour of the electrons when the energy gap between the subbands within the material is small, since this influences the superconducting properties. Sublattices are smaller grids of groups of atoms within the material.

In typical materials, electrons gain or lose kinetic energy when they move across different energy levels, which affects their speed and momentum. But in moiré materials the electrons experience very little variation in energy

The researchers found that tWSe₂ was a robust conductor with a transition temperature of around -272.93° C. The transition temperature is the critical value below which a material enters the superconducting state, exhibiting zero electrical resistance.

The temperature observed is on par with those found in high-temperature superconductors. Conventional superconductors transition at around -250° C.

The superconductivity in tWSe₂ occurs precisely when the electronic states are half-filled. The team also found that the moiré material could transition to an insulating (non-conducting) state by altering the electronic properties of the material.

The material had a coherence length about 10 times longer than other moiré materials, meaning that its superconducting state is not fragile.

The study also revealed that superconductivity in the moiré material occurred only in certain regions,

determined by the filling of the electronic states. In its non-superconducting state, tWSe₂ had the properties of a strongly correlated metal, where the strong electron interactions play a pivotal role in determining the material's overall behaviour.

Stability in unity

Previous research with tWSe₂ has shown potential superconducting states, but it was unstable when researchers cycled it between room temperature and the transition temperature. The material couldn't maintain its superconducting properties because it was unstable.

According to the new study, tWSe₂ actually has a robust superconducting state – and one that's different from how the property emerges in graphene-based moiré materials. For tWSe₂, superconductivity is driven by electron-electron interactions and half-band filling, while graphene-based systems depend on flat bands and electron-lattice interactions.

As a result, while graphene-based systems become superconducting at higher temperatures, tWSe₂ is more stable. This study creates a new avenue to explore superconductivity in semiconductor-based systems. It also offers valuable insights into the material's electronic structure changes when its 2D layers are twisted.

(Tejasri Gururaj is a freelance science writer and journalist with a master's degree in physics. tejasrigururaj@gmail.com)



Greenpeace activists hold placards against plastic production in Busan on Monday. AFP

A primer on plastic pollution treaty talks

Associated Press

A last round of negotiations on a legally binding treaty to address the global scourge of plastic pollution has opened in Busan, South Korea. National delegations still have a lot to hammer out before there is a treaty. Most contentious is whether there will be a limit on the amount of plastic that companies are allowed to produce.

Led by Norway and Rwanda, 66 countries plus the European Union say they want to address the total plastic on Earth by controlling plastic design, production, consumption and what happens at the end of its life.

Some plastic-producing and oil and gas countries, including Saudi Arabia, vigorously oppose such limits.

Global plastics production is set to reach 736 million tons by 2040, up 70% from 2020, without policy changes, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Negotiators must also decide whether the treaty will reduce or eliminate single-use plastics. They'll have to resolve whether to end the use of

Industry leaders want a deal that prevents plastic pollution by redesigning plastics to be reused, recycled, and remade into new products, keeping the materials in circulation

hazardous chemicals in plastics and whether these steps will be mandated or merely encouraged. There are some things many countries agree on. They want provisions in a treaty to promote the redesign of plastic products so they can be recycled and reused. They want to invest to better manage plastic waste. They want to increase recycling rates and help waste pickers transition to safer jobs. They agree there needs to be a mechanism to help countries pay for anything required of them.

Graham Forbes, who is leading a Greenpeace delegation in Busan, said his group could support an agreement that puts sensible guardrails in place to reduce the amount of plastic produced, eliminates toxic chemicals and protects people from the uncontrolled use of plastics. That's achievable, but will take political leadership and courage not seen yet in earlier negotiations, he added.

Frankie Orona, executive director of the Texas-based Society of Native Nations, said they demand a treaty that tackles the root causes of the crisis rather than just managing plastic waste.

"We must seize this moment and leave a legacy we can be proud of, with a non-toxic sustainable future for all children and our children's children," he said. Industry leaders want an agreement that prevents plastic pollution by redesigning plastics to be reused, recycled and remade into new products. They say this will keep the materials in circulation and out of the environment.

Company executives said they'll support a treaty that recognizes plastics' benefits to society, while ending pollution. "I would hate to miss this opportunity because we get fixated on issues that divide us rather than unite us in this purpose of ultimately addressing the issue of plastic pollution," said Steve Prusak, president and CEO of Chevron Phillips Chemical Company. "It's a really critical time. We're really hopeful that what we get out of the meetings will lead to practical, implementable policies and harmonization across the globe."

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

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Break out the world map, let's go for a ride

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

In the late 1990s, a piece of land called ATOW1996 was considered to be the northernmost point of land on the earth. But it lost its distinction soon after when an airborne survey failed to spot it. What was ATOW1996 made of?

QUESTION 2

The world's southernmost continent is Antarctica, and right next to its famous ice shelf – the continent's largest of its kind – is the world's southernmost piece of open ocean, in the Bay of Whales. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 3

If you had to travel the longest distance on land by a land-based

vehicle and could only travel in a straight line, your best bet would be to start at a coastal location in the Khabarovsk Krai of Russia and drive all the way to a point in coastal _____.

QUESTION 4

While the highest point on the earth's surface from sea level is the peak of Mt. Everest, the farthest you can travel from the earth's centre and still be on the surface is the peak of Mt. _____ in Ecuador. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 5

Name the world's largest city that's also located below sea level. Hint: It was in international headlines in the second and third weeks of November. It's also the world's lowest-lying national capital above land.



Visual question: This image shows the world's highest volcano, which also hosts the world's highest natural lake and probably the world's highest motorable location. Name it. SERGE.F (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Please send in your answers to science@thehindu.co.in

Answers to November 26 quiz:

- Land system that the Great Dividing Range typifies – **Ans: Cordillera**
- Classification of 17 countries that includes Australia – **Ans: Megadiverse**
- Tall tree species in southwest Western Australia – **Ans: Eucalyptus diversicolor**
- Placental mammal introduced to Australia 4 kya – **Ans: Dingo**
- Mineral with energy potential whose largest deposit lies in Australia – **Ans: Uranium**

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Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Adjournments sought by Congress on the Adani issue

9 The Congress was the only party to demand a discussion in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday on setting up a Joint Parliamentary Committee to probe allegations against the Adani Group. Of the total 18 adjournment notices given, at least nine were from Congress members on the Adani matter, while others sought discussion on violence in Manipur and Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal. PTI

India-Russia trade marks fivefold increase over past five years

66 In billion U.S. dollars, A senior Russian diplomat said that bilateral trade between the two countries has reached a record \$66 billion in 2024, marking a fivefold increase over the past five years, with a 9% rise in the first eight months of this year. Maxim V. Kozlov said Russia and India are on track to achieve the ambitious \$100 billion trade target by 2030. PTI

Economic losses and physical damage in Lebanon due to war

8.5 In billion dollars, The war between Israel and Lebanon caused \$8.5 billion worth of combined economic losses and physical damage in Lebanon. The EU, U.S. UN stepped up efforts to broker a truce. A ceasefire took effect on Wednesday, and thousands of displaced Lebanese began the journey back home, with many celebrating an end to the fighting. AFP

Districts affected by mobile Internet suspension in Manipur

9 The Manipur government on Wednesday extended the suspension of mobile Internet services for two more days in nine districts until November 29, Mobile Internet services, including VSATs and VPN in Imphal West, Imphal East, Kakching, Bishnupur, Thoubal, Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Pherzawl, and Jiribam of Manipur will remain suspended. PTI

Contribution of fossil fuel to India's PM 2.5 pollution

8.5% Emissions from residential heating, power generation, and industries contribute up to 60% of India's PM 2.5 pollution, with about 80% of this coming from fossil fuel combustion, a new study has found. The study said biomass burning contributed less than 3% to annual PM 2.5 levels. PTI

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The right to work deleted

Why has there been a surge in the deletion of workers from job cards? Does this have any relation to the government making Aadhaar-based payment systems (ABPS) mandatory in MGNREGA? What is the procedure to be followed to undertake deletions?

ECONOMIC NOTES

Chakradhar Buddha
Rajendran Narayanan

Central to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is the legal right to work for 100 days per year per rural household. Each household gets a unique job card containing the list of all its registered adults. One cannot work in MGNREGA without a job card. Addition of new members to job cards happens upon furnishing appropriate documents establishing adulthood.

Schedule II, Paragraph 23 of the Act outlines the procedure for deletions of workers from job cards – “If the Gram Panchayat is satisfied at anytime that a person has registered with it by furnishing false information, it may direct the Programme Officer to direct his name to be struck off from the register and direct the applicant to return the job card.” Regarding due process, it says that a deleted worker, if alive, must be “given an opportunity of being heard in the presence of two independent persons.”

Guidelines for deletion
Implementation guidelines for MGNREGA are available in Master Circulars which are released either annually or once in two years by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). The Master Circular from 2021-22 specifies clear protocols for worker deletions as follows. A job card can only be deleted under the following situations: (a) when a household permanently migrates, (b) the job card is found to be a duplicate, (c) it was issued based on forged documents.

Additionally, if a Gram Panchayat is reclassified as a Municipal Corporation, all job cards in that Panchayat are deleted. In line with the Act, the circular emphasises due process, requiring independent verification by the Programme Officer before any deletions. Moreover, all deletions must be documented, reported to the Gram Sabha/Ward Sabha, and updated in the MGNREGA Management Information System (MIS). The MIS is the digital architecture of MGNREGA. Beyond the listed reasons, the MGNREGA MIS has drop-downs in its menu with 12 reasons for deletions of workers and job cards. Some of which are “Duplicate Applicant”, “Fake Applicant”, “Not willing to work” etc.

In 2021-22, 1.49 crore workers were deleted, which surged to 5.53 crore in 2022-23 resulting in a 247% increase in deletions in 2022-23. In the last four years, names of 10.43 crore MGNREGA workers across India have been deleted.

The surge of deletions in 2022-23 coincided with the period when the Union Government issued several circulars making Aadhaar-based payment systems (ABPS) mandatory in MGNREGA. For ABPS to work, as a first step, every worker's Aadhaar number had to be seeded with her job card. Senior officials rely on the percentage of workers whose Aadhaar has been seeded with their respective job cards as a metric of compliance. Strict diktats were issued to field officials to increase this percentage.

In response to questions in the Lok Sabha on February 6, 2024, regarding worker deletions in MGNREGA, the Minister of State for Rural Development, Sadhvi Niranjan Jyoti, in a written reply



In 2021-22, 1.49 crore workers were deleted, which surged to 5.53 crore in 2022-23 resulting in a 247% increase in deletions in 2022-23.AFP

Disappearing jobs

In the last four years, names of 10.43 crore MGNREGA workers across India have been deleted

Since 2022, close to 1.65 lakh workers have been deleted. Following are the top five States



Five main reasons for deleting the names of 2.67 lakh workers (excluding West Bengal)

Reason for deletion	Number of workers deleted	Percentage for each reason (rounded to nearest whole number)
Not willing to work	1,89,555	71
Duplicate job card	21,705	8
Duplicate applicant	12,630	5
Non-existent in Panchayat	10,690	4
Family had been shifted	8,598	3

stated: “Updating and deletion of job cards is a regular exercise conducted by the States and Union Territories under MGNREGS. These actions are undertaken to maintain accuracy and transparency.” However, a paper published by Chakradhar Buddha and Laavanya Tamang establishes how field officials resorted to deleting job cards without verification in a rush to increase ABPS compliance percentage. Deleting workers is akin to reducing the denominator to make the fraction bigger.

Methodology followed

The overall number of workers deleted in each State can be easily obtained from the MIS but accessing the official reason in the MIS for such deletions is computationally intense. So, to investigate the reasons for deletions we have resorted to statistical sampling. We randomly sampled one block each in 21 States for the last four financial years including the current one. This yielded data of worker deletions from 1,914 villages. In our sample, more than 2.98 lakh workers were deleted with nearly 1.65 lakh of them being deleted in 2022-23 and around 30,000 deleted in the last six months alone. Figure 1 shows the five States with maximum worker deletions (rounded off) in our sampled villages. Nearly 53,000 workers were deleted in Madanpur block in Aurangabad district of Bihar and around 32,000 workers in Mayureswar-I block in Birbhum district of Odisha were deleted. There is noticeable intra-block variation in the

number of workers deleted. For instance, in Madanpur block, 4,877 workers were deleted in Dakshini Umang village while only three were deleted in Shekhpur village. The situation in West Bengal is different from the rest of the States. As the Union Government has not released any funds to West Bengal from December 26, 2021, no MGNREGA work has happened here since then. In our sampled block in West Bengal, the number of workers deleted jumped from 550 in 2021-22 to 31,861 in the next year. Out of these, half were officially categorised as “Duplicate Applicant” while 10,446 workers who were deleted were categorised as “Non-existent in Panchayat.”

Job cards provide the legal guarantee to work at any time, not just on the day when deletions happen. Deleting workers' names from job cards on grounds of “not willing to work”, denies the worker her legal right to work. And yet this is the main reason for deleting nearly 1.90 lakh workers in our sample. This is also the main official deletion reason in the MIS for each of the four years in our sample; from 63% of deletions in 2021-22, it jumped to 83% in the ongoing financial year. What is more intriguing is that nearly 20,000 workers who got deleted as “Not willing to work”, actually worked or demanded work in the same financial year in which their names were deleted. In our interactions with civil society organisations working on MGNREGA across 10 States, we found that deletions are often not carried out through Gram Sabhas as mandated by the

Act and, alarmingly, without the workers' knowledge. We have also met workers who are victims of wrongful deletions. Further, the official reason for deleting 1,500 workers in our sample is “Village becomes urban.” This reason is observed in 153 out of 1,914 villages in our sample. But as per the Act, if a village becomes urban, then the job cards of all the workers in that village would have to be deleted. So clearly, using this reason to delete a subset of workers appears absurd.

Sticking points

Since our sample contains all the transactions of deletions in the selected blocks, the trend we observe is likely to hold for the whole country although the actual proportions might fluctuate a little. Two points from the data are hard to believe. First, despite high rural unemployment, as per official reasons, 71% of workers in our sample are “not willing to work.” Second, the government's claims that the surge in deletions has no connection with making ABPS mandatory although all the circumstantial evidence concerning deletions suggest otherwise. The response to our RTI application from MoRD suggests that, despite listing deletion reasons in the MIS, the ministry has not conducted any verification and analysis of deletion reasons, including the “Not willing to work” reason. This further corroborates the arbitrariness concerning the violations of the right to work.

Adhering to the verification processes and protocols outlined in the Act and Master Circular is crucial to prevent arbitrary deletions. Conducting independent audits, regular reviews, involving gram sabhas and efficient grievance redress systems can reduce irregularities. Training Gram Panchayats to conduct impartial inquiries and including worker representatives in decision-making panels are needed. Public consultations and proactive measures to enhance transparency, accountability, and fairness are vital to guarantee MGNREGA's mandate of employment and social justice.

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THE GIST

The MGNREGA scheme ensures the right to work for 100 days per year per rural household. However, it has been observed that there is an increasing number of worker deletions with a total of 10.43 crore MGNREGA workers across the country in the past four years alone

The surge of deletions in 2022-23 coincided with the period when the Union Government issued several circulars making Aadhaar-based payment systems (ABPS) mandatory in MGNREGA

Deleting workers' names from job cards on grounds of “not willing to work”, denies the worker her legal right to work. And yet this is the main reason for deleting 1.90 lakh workers in the sample surveyed

Editorial

Schooling in India in times of poor air quality



Protest nation

Pakistan's establishment must heed the voices of democracy

Another mass protest. Another shutdown of the capital city. And another violent crackdown on the protesters by the security forces. Pakistan is witnessing circles of crises, with a prolonged showdown between the military-backed government and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the party of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan. In the latest episode, PTI supporters marched towards the capital, after Mr. Khan made the "final call" for protests, demanding the release of their leader and other party functionaries. The government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had taken many preventive measures — thousands of PTI workers were arrested, security forces blocked city entrances with shining containers and tens of thousands of forces were deployed. Still, many of the protesters managed to reach D-Chowk, the main protest town square in Islamabad. The PTI later called off the rally temporarily after the protesters were pushed back by the security personnel. But their main demands remain unchanged, and given the pattern of protests in Islamabad in recent years, it could only be a matter of time before the PTI launches another "long march".

Mr. Khan, in jail for more than a year, has a list of grievances. Once a favourite of Pakistan's powerful establishment, he had back-to-back political and legal setbacks after falling out of favour with the generals in 2022. He faces over 150 criminal cases. There was a crackdown on the PTI ahead of the February elections and it was barred from using its popular "cricket bat" poll symbol. Still, PTI candidates, who contested as independents, emerged as the largest bloc in the new Parliament. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan People's Party joined hands with smaller parties to form a coalition government, with the establishment's blessings. Mr. Khan says the election was rigged and the cases against him politically motivated. Despite the crackdown, the PTI possesses enormous street power and Mr. Khan's calls from jail for protests have set the country towards a prolonged showdown. And this is happening at a time when Pakistan, which has entered into a deal with the IMF for a \$7 billion bailout package, is struggling to stabilise an economy battered by hyperinflation, a falling currency, and depleting reserves. Political instability is making the painful economic recovery even more complicated. The military and government have, so far, taken a no-compromise approach. Their attempts to break the PTI and Mr. Khan's political base have barely been successful. Mr. Khan has proved that he can continue to challenge the establishment even from within his jail cell. For political stability and a healthy economic recovery, Pakistan's establishment should be willing to heed the pro-democracy protesters.

Fair share

Compensation of news publishers by Big Tech platforms is a must

In a speech on the occasion of National Press Day last week, Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw called attention to the issue of fair compensation to media companies for the use of their content by big technology platforms. The Internet's rapid growth has created a power imbalance between news publishers and large online enterprises which now set the financial terms for their use of content created by others. Many countries are grappling with this issue, and new regulations are taking shape. In Australia and France, Google and Meta are increasingly required to negotiate fairer revenue-sharing agreements and licensing deals with publishers. A similar push in India will be an essential step to ensure the continued vibrancy and financial sustainability of news organisations, which are under threat in their traditional and online formats. The government's affirmation of support for fair revenue sharing in favour of news publishers — first expressed last year — is more important than ever. As Artificial Intelligence makes stealthy, large-scale appropriation of content easier and when new business models are built on that technological capacity, fair compensation for original creators is an urgent question. The time has come to rapidly act to give force to these pronouncements through law. The pushback that these steps will likely face from Big Tech platforms make it that much more important to start the work quickly, and with resolve.

The Minister has also expressed concern on the issue of misinformation and fake news. It is important for the government to establish trust as a good faith broker and avoid the temptation to act as a regulator of content. Trust comes, for instance, by taking steps to improve the public's media literacy in general. The government's desire, now stalled by the judiciary — to act as a fact-checker — in fact, to be the final authority over what is or is not true about the Union government, is not helpful. Trust is established by empowering a strong press to pursue and verify falsehoods vigorously; and not by state regulation and censorship. The partisan application of existing rules by authorities that go after the Opposition parties on charges of misinformation while turning a blind eye towards violations by the ruling party must also stop. Only an even-handed application of laws against misinformation will act as a deterrent for bad actors. India's news industry has always suffered from fundamental financial and political challenges. The Internet age offers the opportunity to work on remedies. The firms that control the Internet must be more effectively regulated, and government interventions, which are necessary, must not result in state big-handedness.

In a stark reminder of the COVID-19 pandemic period, schools in Delhi State, in mid-November 2024 — as a part of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) to tackle air pollution, which is triggered when the Air Quality Index (AQI) is "poor" — had been asked to switch from physical to online mode. While other restrictions imposed as a part of GRAP might have an impact on air quality, the decision to switch schools to online mode needs to be examined for its scientific rationale, practicability, and benefits and risks.

Poor air quality in many north Indian States is harmful for all age group and not just children. The harmful health effects of poor air quality are on a continuum from the moment the AQI crosses normal range. Children (and everyone in any age group) should be protected from poor air quality the moment the AQI crosses 50, which is considered 'good' air quality by Indian norms. However, there are only a few days in a year when the AQI is within acceptable limits. In 2024, till now, there has not been even a single day with 'good' air quality in Delhi; there was just one such 'good' air quality day in 2023. Alongside, it is naive to believe that an AQI that is more than 400 (classified as 'severe' or 'severe plus') is harmful and anything below this is not. This arbitrary and high cut off does not help except inadvertently normalising the harmful health effects of air quality that is in the range of AQI 51 to 399.

More importantly, most children in Delhi or other parts of the country are likely to have the same air quality inside their homes or in their schools. For some underprivileged children, air quality in the classroom might be better than at home as many schools have air purifiers. The idea of having online classes due to poor AQI puts all children at an additional disadvantage of learning loss and nutritional loss (as many children get mid-day meals in schools), while there is no respite from the health impact.

It is widely known that online classes are not a replacement for school-based learning and the only beneficiaries here are EdTech platforms and Apps. Then, the younger children are not supposed to have exposure to screen time. Therefore, when they are forced to attend online classes, they are being exposed to more harmful behaviour than receiving any possible or perceived benefit. In the three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of us have learnt that schools are not the places where children read only books; there is life learning. Therefore, the focus has to be on keeping schools functional and ensuring learning continuity. There was an article related to this, in this daily, by one of the writers: "The pathology of school closure in India", February 16, 2022.

The oversight idea of face masks

Poor air quality nearly always brings up the issue of face masks. Even before GRAP stages III and IV recommended the suspension of physical classes,



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Considering scientific rationale and the benefits and risks, the functioning of schools needs to be delinked from Graded Response Action Plan measures

a few schools sent out advisories to parents that children should wear face masks in order to attend schools. Though it was argued that these advisories were to provide guidance, what was forgotten was that such advisories from schools became an 'informal mandate' for children and parents. Such a uniform advisory for all children to wear a face mask is not fully backed by science. As far as children are concerned, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, masks were not recommended for children who were younger than five years for various scientific reasons and utilising empirical data. For those between six to 11 years, masks were advised (and not mandated). There is no rationale for anyone to wear face masks if the set-up has air purifiers. In short, the face mask wearing guidance for children has to have a nuanced and personalised approach. Therefore, schools should refrain from issuing such advisories, which should come only after guidance from medical experts.

Adopt a science-based approach

First, schools should not be made to switch to online classes, no matter what the level of AQI is. The focus should be on keeping the school functional and ensuring learning continuity. This could be done with some mitigants such as completely halting all outdoor activities in schools when the AQI is poor. Everyone should take appropriate personal protective measures, such as the use of purifiers and face masks, taking into account recommendations by age, and pre-existing health issues. Those who have any pre-existing respiratory health issue are likely to benefit more from mask wearing, specifically in a polluted and open space.

Second, to attend school, there is no need for a uniform directive for mask wearing. Schools are not the source of pollution. Arguably, air quality in schools is similar to the homes of children. Therefore, it does not make any sense to do anything differently in school than what is done at home. So, if children and parents wear a face mask at home, they can wear it at school as well. Else, no additional mandatory mask wearing measure is needed. There is a need to remember that face masks can also have negative effects such as causing a skin allergy and other discomforts. So, one should keep in mind the benefits and the associated risks. Also, except for medical recommendations, children younger than 12 years should not be made to wear N95 masks. During periods of severe or above AQI, children who have pre-existing health issues or any other parents who wish to keep their children at home, should be given an 'opt-out' option from physical classes, and the rest of the children should have the opportunity for learning continuity.

Third, in schools or other settings which have functional air purifiers, mask wearing is not going to provide any additional advantage. For such settings, i.e., schools, ensuring that the classroom

doors and windows are closed properly and switching on air purifiers at least an hour before children arrive would ensure 'good' quality air.

Fourth, 'online schooling' is an oxymoron — it is not school if teaching is online. The option of hybrid classes should not be interpreted conveniently by schools. Also, other than air quality, there are other reasons such as foggy or cold winter days, which many schools exercise as a reason for switching to online or hybrid classes. These should be actively discouraged and teaching should be in physical mode for all parents, who are willing. In fact, it is problematic that school classes are often referred to as 'offline' or 'online', placing electronic devices at the centre of teaching and learning. We need to break this mode of thinking. Therefore, in future, if and when the government or any authority fails children by passing an order to switch to online classes, the management in every school needs to come up with innovative approaches to ensure that learning is not in front of a mobile or computer screen.

Fifth, poor air quality is a reminder that anyone who has pre-existing health or respiratory conditions should take better care of their health. This means having a routine checkup and a regular follow-up visit with health-care providers. Preventive interventions such as annual influenza vaccination or age-appropriate recommended vaccines like pneumococcal, measles, *Haemophilus influenzae* Type B (Hib) are administered to those who need it.

Policy must be people-centric

From a larger social angle, most of the actions recommended as a part of GRAP, adversely and disproportionately, impact the poor and the vulnerable in terms of wages (for the poor and the marginalised) as well as learning and nutrition (for children) losses. This is a reminder that whatever is done in the name of the policy should have a people-centric and pro-poor focus. Air quality and school functioning need a nuanced approach. India had one of the longest closures of schools during the COVID-19 period and we need to learn from those mistakes. There was another article on this, in this daily, by one of the writers: "Building back to avert a learning catastrophe", April 28, 2022.

Schools are not the source of air pollution. Rather, there is far greater loss than benefit from school closure. While there are valid reasons for implementing other measures under GRAP to improve the AQI, closing schools for physical classes makes the least sense. It has happened for the last eight years, but now is the time that school functioning is delinked from GRAP measures. Nelson Mandela had said, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children." When it comes to handling air quality and the functioning of schools, Indian States and society seem to be failing in their responsibility and their duties.

A Karnataka social security plan that has a problem



Mohan Mani

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Much has been written about the Karnataka government's draft notification of a cess-based social security for platform workers, and on the benefits it offers. However, a key aspect that did not receive attention was the platform cess to generate the funds required to implement the social security scheme. The draft legislation was ambiguous on the issue, both on the rate of cess and the manner of its application (based on worker's earning per transaction or the turnover of platforms in the State). The legislation followed the language of the central government's code on social security which prescribed a cess of 1%-2% on platform turnover, subject to a maximum 5% of the earnings of workers. The problem with the cess arises from this very definition.

The example of an annual report

The financial details from the annual report 2023-24 (FY24) of the food delivery platform Zomato (the only listed platform company) will help a reader understand this problem. The first issue is with defining turnover. While the Gross Order Value from food delivery during FY24 was ₹32,224 crore, the Adjusted Revenue was ₹7,792 crore, just under a fourth of the order value. We might assume that Zomato excludes the value of the orders while recognising its revenue. The issue here is that the platform undertakes business for outside restaurants as well as delivering merchandise from its own dark stores. How does its revenues from its own stores get reflected in the turnover? Does using turnover as a metric lead to ambiguities?

The alternative then is to use worker earnings, which is a relatively less ambiguous metric. For FY24, the 'delivery and related charges' were ₹3,915 crore. The component of payment to

delivery workers out of this amount is still not clear. The advantage for the worker is that this metric is known to the worker, and can be tracked by her/him for each transaction of food delivery or taxi service.

The question then is to determine at what rate the cess should be charged on the payment to the delivery worker. From the annual report, the 'delivery and related charges' per order was ₹52. The whole amount cannot be seen as payment to the worker, as there would be other supervision costs. As a conservative measure, one may assume ₹50 an order as the normative value. The cess at 5% works out to ₹2.50 an order. The difficulty does not stop here, as the cess also has to satisfy the condition of not exceeding 2% of the turnover.

Degraded cover

is ₹2.50 an order adequate to provide adequate social security cover to the average Zomato delivery partner? On average, the delivery partner completes 1,880 orders in a year. This means a contribution of ₹4,700 towards social security in a year. In comparison, a garment worker in Karnataka earns around ₹10,000 a month. The contribution from the employer towards Employees' State Insurance and Provident Fund (ESI and PF) benefits add to around 15% of the wage, or ₹18,000 per annum. The social security contribution from the platform cess per platform worker in the food delivery sector on average is just over one-fourth that of the garment worker. The result, consequently, would also be a very degraded social security cover. Even this might not be available if the 5% earnings metric exceeds the 2% platform turnover for the platform.

Finally, there is another issue. What if 1% of the

platform turnover is greater than 5% of the workers' earnings for a platform? This might be the case in situations where the turnover far exceeds payment to the worker, as is the case with high value merchandise. In the case of Zomato, as the company includes greater quantities of its own products in the pipeline, and as it tries to reduce delivery costs through measures such as electric vehicle use, this might become a reality. In such a situation, it becomes a mathematical impossibility to arrive at a cess percentage that simultaneously satisfies both the conditions of not exceeding 1% of turnover and 5% of worker payments. The cess mechanism itself breaks down under this not impossible situation.

A way out

Governments in other cess-based plans often do not specify a unique cess rate; this might be their way of appearing to be generous, while leaving elbow room to bring down the cess rate. For example, the construction workers' cess prescribes 1%-2%, but in reality, the cess has always been fixed at the lower limit of 1%. In the platform, an additional challenge has been introduced through a third cess limit — we may, with a nod to a popular science fiction novel, even call this the 3-cess problem. This would, additionally, result in different rates of cess at the platform level (different for food delivery from that for ride-hail and for urban services), or even at the enterprise level. That becomes an open field for platforms to use their influence with labour regulators to short-change their workers.

The way out is simple: have one simple, unambiguous cess, a 5% cess per transaction calculated on the payment to workers, with no other conditionality.

are always in power.
P.R.K. Raja,
Pandalam, Kerala

Some of our politicians seem to miss the good old days of booth capturing and ballot stuffing. It is amusing to see how some people who cannot even spell the word 'electronics' come up with bizarre theories on how EVMs can be hacked.
J. Hareesh,
Houston, Texas, U.S.

At Perth
Team India's victory at the Optus stadium in Perth against Australia in the first Test is a stupendous achievement. The nerve and confidence shown by the entire team is what worked. Way to go, boys!
S. Kamat,
Mysuru

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Constitution day

It is quite pertinent for our lawmakers to rededicate themselves to the ideals enshrined in the Constitution. Yet, it is baffling that most of the time, the oaths that our representatives take are not respected while discharging their duties. The architects of the Constitution gave pivotal importance to "equity and probity" in governance.

Given the overarching imperatives for the last mile delivery of welfare governance, there needs to be an unflinching congruence in the functioning of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary.
G. Ramasubramanyam,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

Court on EVMs

The Supreme Court of India has sent the right message

to political parties (Inside pages). "EVMs are tampered when you lose, fine if you win: SC", (November 27). It may be recalled that the Election Commission of India had conducted an all-party meeting to demonstrate the perfect functioning of EVMs. In view of these findings, one fails to understand why some political leaders, and this includes the Congress, nurse doubts about EVMs.

Had the Congress alliance won the Maharashtra election with a huge majority, what would the reaction have been?
J.P. Reddy,
Nalgonda, Telangana

As was expected, EVMs are in the news again, following ritualistic complaints by failing political parties. The situation now is because political parties are always after power while people

Opinion

Ban this carcinogenic 'heart-burn' drug

Last month, the multinational pharmaceutical company, GSK announced a record settlement of \$2.2 billion in the United States in order to settle multiple lawsuits regarding one of its best-selling drugs to treat "acid reflux" - Zantac, containing the active ingredient Ranitidine, after it was revealed that the drug contained high amounts of a cancer-causing carcinogen called N-nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA).

According to Valisure, the American pharmacy which first raised the issue, testing of various brands of Ranitidine in its labs found NDMA in excess of 3,000,000 nanograms in some samples; the acceptable limit in the U.S. was 96 nanograms. Like all carcinogens, high exposure to NDMA can cause cancer.

The high amounts of NDMA have been attributed to stability issues with the molecule, which means that it is not a GSK-specific problem. Any company manufacturing Ranitidine will face the same issue; the reason why the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) and the European Medical Agency (EMA) stopped the sale of the various brands of Ranitidine in their jurisdictions as far back as 2020. GSK itself informed stock exchanges in India, in 2020, that it was withdrawing all Ranitidine products in India. Characteristically, India's Ministry of Health has taken no steps to stop other pharmaceutical companies from continuing to manufacture and sell Ranitidine.

A widely used pharma drug Back in 2021, after reports in the Indian press pointed out how Ranitidine was still being sold in India, there were some murmurs from the government indicating that it was "looking into" the issue, but there has been no action from the government since then.

There are two questions to ask of the government in this backdrop. The first is, why did the



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is the co-author of 'The Truth Pill: The Myth of Drug Regulation'

Indian regulatory apparatus never detect/respond to similar levels of impurities in Ranitidine, which is widely consumed in India. The second, why has the government not acted over the last five years in a similar vein as its counterparts in the West to stop the sale of Ranitidine in India, especially when there are enough substitutes in the form of other drugs such as famotidine, cimetidine, esomeprazole, lansoprazole or omeprazole which also treat "gastroesophageal reflux", the medical phrase for "acidity".

To answer these questions, it is first important to identify the key institutions within government responsible for different stages of regulating generic drugs.

The chain of standards setting

The task of setting standards, including acceptable limits of impurities and analytical methods for testing generic drugs for such impurities lies with the Indian Pharmacopoeia Commission (IPC), an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Health and chaired by the Secretary of Health. In addition to publishing the *Indian Pharmacopoeia*, which lays out standards (including limits for impurities) and testing protocols for different drugs, the IPC is also required to manufacture and supply "reference standards" and "impurity standards" against which drugs such as Ranitidine can be tested in quality control laboratories in the public and private sector.

The task of ensuring that drug manufacturers comply with the quality standards laid down by the IPC lies first, with the State drug controllers responsible for issuing manufacturing licences for such drugs and, second, with drug inspectors of the States and the Centre who randomly draw samples of drugs from the market for testing by analysts in government laboratories against the standards laid down by the IPC. Drugs that fail to comply with the IPC's standards are deemed to be "not of standard quality".

With this background, the key questions to ask of the IPC are why did it not detect the NDMA issue with Ranitidine and what exactly has it done since 2020 to lay down permissible standards for NDMA in Ranitidine, along with the testing protocols. We cannot answer these questions because we have no access to copies of the latest version of the *Indian Pharmacopoeia*. It costs ₹50,000 to purchase the most recent version of the *Indian Pharmacopoeia*. Ideally it should be made available for free given that it contains binding legal standards and is very important from a public health perspective. Once the IPC sets the permissible limits for NDMA in Ranitidine, ideally, the manufacturers of Ranitidine who cannot comply with the impurity standards laid down by the IPC either stop manufacturing Ranitidine or drug inspectors prosecute these manufacturers for manufacturing "not of standard quality" drugs.

Separate and apart from the role of the IPC in setting standards, there is the question of who in government is responsible for acting to prohibit a drug from being sold in the market once a public health concern has been flagged anywhere in the world. Under Section 26A of The Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940 only the central government, or more precisely, the Drug Regulation Section within the Ministry of Health has the power to prohibit the manufacture and sale of drugs in the country. This section in the Ministry lacks the technical competence to perform its job since it is typically headed by a faceless joint secretary from the civil services who knows little about the pharmaceutical industry or pharmacology.

Perhaps it is now time, after a \$2.2 billion settlement, for the Ministry of Health to swing into action and issue an order under Section 26A prohibiting with immediate effect, the continued manufacture and sale of Ranitidine in the country.

A financial tightrope walk for A.P.

The annual Budget for 2024-25 paints a grim picture of the State's finances

STATE OF PLAY

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After presenting two vote-on-account Budgets, Andhra Pradesh Finance Minister Payyavula Keshav presented the annual Budget for the financial year 2024-25 on November 11. The annual Budget, fiscal policy statement and Comptroller Auditor General (CAG) reports tabled in the A.P. Assembly paint a grim picture of the State's finances, and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government will have to cross many hurdles if it is to fulfil its promises - particularly the 'Super Six', made during the run-up to the 2024 general election.

Second, going by fiscal trends, the State finances are heavily stressed. Third, the State government has to augment its resources, to repay within the next seven years, 39.15% of the debt, which now stands at ₹1,39,567.14 crore.

A cursory look at the Budget document indicates a decision to postpone implementation of some key electoral promises. The Budget provides limited scope for ambitious projects. The government has not allocated any funds for the poll promises except for 'Deepam 2.0' and 'Taliki vandanam'. There is an allocation of ₹2,684 crore for the 'Deepam 2.0' scheme and ₹6,500 crore for 'Taliki vandanam', a poll promise of ₹15,000 a year to each school-going child. There is no mention of the other major poll promises including a ₹1,500 monthly pension for women (19 to 59 years); the creation of 20 lakh jobs, a ₹3,000 monthly unemployment allowance,

and also free bus travel for women. The cost of implementing all these major poll promises is an estimated ₹74,000 crore an annum. Despite financial challenges, the NDA government has managed to allocate ₹85,577 crore for welfare, focusing on women and children, minorities, Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Impact of debt liabilities

Restoring A.P.'s financial status to a state of health will be an arduous task. The government will have to focus on debt liabilities. The State's total debt at the end of FY2022-23 was 32.17% of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP); but when off-Budget borrowings are included, it amounts to 43.80%, exceeding Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management limits. The public debt-GSDP ratio of Andhra Pradesh increased from 22.15% in 2018-19 to 27.05% in 2022-23. The State projects a fiscal deficit of 4.3%, which exceeds the Finance Commission's recommended 3%. This raises questions about Andhra Pradesh's borrowing capacity and its ability to pump in money for projects such as 'Capital Amaravati'.

The government has secured funding of ₹15,000 crore from multilateral funding agencies through the central government for developing the trunk infrastructure in the dream city of Amaravati,

that was abandoned for five years. The financial assistance from external agencies for Amaravati will be in the form of a loan, which again impacts future financial commitment.

There has been a massive cut on financial outgo when it comes to the predecessor YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government's populist measures and schemes. The Budget has hinted at a paradigm shift to develop infrastructure. Despite this, the capital expenditure is estimated to be ₹32,712.84 crore, while the revenue expenditure is estimated at ₹2,35,916.99 crore.

Mr. Keshav said, "What we are doing is aimed at restarting the financial wheels of the state." There is no clear road map how the government proposes to do this. Instead, the Budget says that the government would have to raise ₹71,000 crore from open market borrowings out of the total outlay of ₹2,94 lakh crore. A CAG report (2022-24) has said "the finances... are marked by increasing trend of liabilities (debt, guarantees, off-budget borrowings, etc.) which pose (a) risk to (the) target of debt stabilisation and debt sustainability. The State has a committed expenditure of nearly ₹1.30 lakh crore annually towards salaries, pensions, loan repayments and interests. The salaries of ₹1.79 lakh employees and 3.59 lakh pensioners are ₹57,827 crore and ₹21,696 crore, respectively; salaries and pensions will be ₹79,523 crore. Interest payments and debt servicing is around ₹29,295 crore.

The government also needs to bring down the dependency on borrowed funds and formulate a debt management strategy. The focus must be towards wealth creation rather than just bridging the revenue or fiscal deficits.

Tax cuts may have saved ₹3 lakh crore for India's corporates

In the five years since FY20, company profits grew at 32.5% while corporate taxes paid grew at only 18.6%

DATA POINT

Samreen Wani

Taxed at a significantly lower rate following the introduction of the concessionary tax regime in 2019, India's largest corporates may have saved over ₹3 lakh crore in tax payments since then. This is in addition to over ₹8 lakh crore in revenue foregone through various deductions granted to companies in the decade since 2012-13 (FY13).

Experts note that while the tax cuts point towards the need to rationalise tax incentives, a decline in corporate tax-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio could limit the government's ability to finance additional development expenditure.

Until 2019, a corporate tax rate of 25% was levied on domestic companies with an annual turnover of up to ₹400 crore. It was 30% for the rest. The new tax regime slashed the rate to 22% as long as the companies forgo certain deductions under the Income Tax (IT) Act. In addition to this, tax rates for new manufacturing companies were lower, provided they fulfilled certain conditions.

Suranjali Tandon, Associate Professor at NIPFP, explains that the new tax regime is indicative of a preference for a "simpler tax system with lower rates" as corporate tax rates have undergone changes at different points before to align with the country's economic priorities.

"However, there is no consensus on the optimal corporate tax rates as this may vary as per economic circumstances and context," she says.

R. Nagaraj, Distinguished Senior Fellow at IIT Bombay, argues that a reduction in corporate tax rates mainly serves the "class interests" of the "business community" - evident in the simultaneous increase in luxury consumption. "This is the standard Laffer curve

argument which was popular during the Reagan administration in America. But we do not have any evidence of this working anywhere in India, especially not in India." To get a sense of the amount saved in taxes as a result of this incentive, data of India's largest companies, those on the BSE 500 index, were considered, which were sourced from the Capitaline database.

So, until FY19, *The Hindu's* analysis shows, the effective tax rate for these companies, which is the average rate at which the profits (before taxes) of corporations are taxed, was 30% or higher. The ratio declined in the subsequent years, and touched a low of 21.2% in FY24. Moreover, the top 10% of the BSE 500 companies continued to enjoy lower effective tax rates compared to the overall average for all companies, even as the gap has considerably narrowed in recent years (Table 1).

"As large companies opt for the new regime, the lower effective tax rate is expected," says Prof. Tandon.

In absolute terms, this could have translated into a tax saving of roughly ₹3.14 lakh crore for these companies since FY20.

The figures were estimated by calculating the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) in taxes paid by companies in the five years ending at FY19 (which was 11.5%) and also assuming a similar rate of growth for the subsequent years until FY24 had the tax cuts not been introduced, provided all other factors remained constant (Table 2).

Company profits grew at a much slower pace at 10.4% in the five years ending at FY19. In the five years since FY20, however, company profits have grown at a rate of 32.5% while corporate taxes paid by these companies have done so only by 18.6%.

Apart from tax rates and profits, the level of economic activity also influences corporate tax collections, says Zico Dasgupta, Asis-

stant Professor of Economics at Azim Premji University.

While the intent behind such changes was to encourage private investment, create jobs and "establish a globally competitive business environment for certain domestic companies", Prof. Dasgupta says there is little evidence to suggest that tax incentives make businesses more competitive.

... But since tax concession also means forgone expenditures by the government, it seems to me that the more important policy question pertains to a cost-benefit analysis of providing greater tax concession."

He says, "The corporate tax concessions announced in the pre-COVID-19 period do not seem to be based on such considerations."

Prof. Tandon notes that since the incentives coincided with the pandemic, the evidence to suggest increased private sector investments due to rate cuts is "mixed". "Nevertheless, the profitability of companies has allowed them to create reserves and to invest in current assets. In part, the anticipated demand can influence the decision to make capital investments."

Companies also avail tax concessions in the form of deductions under various sections of the IT Act. For instance, tax incentives are granted on donations made to charitable trusts, contributions to political parties, expenditure on scientific research or on profits of undertakings set-up in north-eastern States among others. The government calculates the revenue impact of such concessions in the Budget document each year and this is done for a larger database of over 10 lakh companies.

Revenue forgone due to such deductions amounts to ₹8.22 lakh crore in the decade ended FY22 (latest data). The data show an underestimation of the revenue impact in six of the ten years considered (Table 3).

Impact analysis

The tables were sourced from Budget documents and the Capitaline database. It also includes *The Hindu's* calculations



Table 1: Shows the effective tax rate in %

	All BSE 500 companies	Top 10% companies
2013-14	28.9	28.3
2014-15	32.3	29.5
2015-16	33.5	27.8
2016-17	29.8	26.7
2017-18	31.9	26.1
2018-19	33.6	28.9
2019-20*	33.1	24.9
2020-21	25.2	23.7
2021-22	21.5	20.5
2022-23	22.7	22.3
2023-24	21.2	19.9

Note: Shows data for BSE 500 companies
* Tax cuts introduced

Table 2: Shows tax data for BSE500 companies for which figures were available*

Year	Corporate taxes (Actuals)	Corporate tax projections
FY14	1,49,125.1	
FY15	1,63,629.6	
FY16	1,68,073.0	
FY17	1,86,726.6	
FY18	2,08,366.9	
FY19	2,52,840.0	
FY20	2,02,379.1	2,81,897.8
FY21	2,34,574.0	3,14,295.2
FY22	2,91,037.9	3,50,415.8
FY23	3,31,247.7	3,90,687.6
FY24	3,99,758.4	4,35,587.7
Sum	14,68,997.7	17,72,884.4
	A	B

A: Sum of corporate tax actuals for FY20 to FY24

B: Sum of FY20 to FY24 for corporate tax projections (at a CAGR of 11.5%)

Table 3: Shows the revenue impact of the major tax incentives for corporate taxpayers, in ₹ crore. It also shows the projected revenue impact in ₹ crore. The data show an underestimation of the revenue impact in six of the 10 years considered

	Revenue Impact	Projected revenue impact
2012-13	68,720.0	68,007.6
2013-14	57,793.0	76,116.3
2014-15	65,067.2	62,398.6
2015-16	76,857.7	68,711.0
2016-17	86,144.8	83,492.0
2017-18	93,642.5	85,026.1
2018-19	1,08,113.1	1,08,785.4
2019-20	94,109.8	99,842.1
2020-21	75,218.0	1,03,285.5
2021-22	96,892.4	84,394.6
2022-23		1,09,333.4
Sum	8,22,558.5	

Note: Shows data for BSE 500 companies for which figures were available*

* Tax cuts introduced

Year	Corporate taxes (Actuals)	Corporate tax projections
FY14	1,49,125.1	
FY15	1,63,629.6	
FY16	1,68,073.0	
FY17	1,86,726.6	
FY18	2,08,366.9	
FY19	2,52,840.0	
FY20	2,02,379.1	2,81,897.8
FY21	2,34,574.0	3,14,295.2
FY22	2,91,037.9	3,50,415.8
FY23	3,31,247.7	3,90,687.6
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Sum	14,68,997.7	17,72,884.4
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A: Sum of corporate tax actuals for FY20 to FY24

B: Sum of FY20 to FY24 for corporate tax projections (at a CAGR of 11.5%)

Note: Shows data for BSE 500 companies for which figures were available*

* Tax cuts introduced

In Table 3, the rows in bold are under estimations

Impact estimates for FY23 were unavailable

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 28, 1974

U.S. Mission to Study Mineral Exploitation

NEW DELHI, Nov. 27.

A U.S. trade mission specialising in mining, earth-moving and construction equipment, which is described as one of the largest and most prestigious group of American firms ever sent out by the U.S. Department of Commerce, is arriving in India on December 1 on a two-week visit to discuss with the concerned Government departments, public sector undertakings and private industrial establishments the possibilities of increased American participation in the exploration and exploitation of the country's mineral resources. Though the idea of sending out such a mission was initiated earlier and the necessary market research done well ahead, the size and composition of the 14-member group representing some of the top American firms in this field certainly reflects the new confidence generated by the Kissinger visit for opening up fresh vistas of India-U.S. economic cooperation. The idea behind this exercise is that Indian and U.S. officials and businessmen should discuss together the prospective areas of collaboration in India and neighbouring countries through joint ventures. The talks will cover subjects like licensing procedures, financial arrangements, supply of money on credit, product-sharing agreements, repayment in raw material or semi-finished products, and sub-contracting of some of the American-built projects in the region for the utilisation of Indian materials and personnel in their construction.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 28, 1924

Fierce Tempest in England.

(Reuter's Agency.)

LONDON, Nov. 27.

Tempest has caused terrific havoc throughout the country especially in Southern, Eastern and central England and partially interrupted telephonic communications. There has been a number of casualties. The foreshores of the south coast have been strewn with wreckage. Several lifeboats were called out. The Channel boat "Dieppe" while entering Newhaven was lifted by the enormous sea and lodged on a sandbank. It was refloated after five hours. A tug which was proceeding to assist her smashed against the seawall and foundered. The crew were rescued by a lifeboat.

Three steamers were lost off Portland, Whitley and Isle of Man respectively. The tempest has worked havoc in England. The wrecks include the two-thousand tonner steamer "Hartley".

Standards on trade

India must aim to adapt

News reports suggest that India and the United Kingdom (UK) will resume negotiations on the free-trade agreement (FTA) early next year. Both countries have been negotiating to arrive at a mutually beneficial agreement since 2022. The progress in recent months was halted owing to elections in both countries. Since India is not a member of major regional trade agreements, it is crucial to finalise ongoing trade negotiations to unlock opportunities for market access and global integration. However, as developments thus far show, all this will not be easy. Several issues will need to be addressed on both sides. India, for instance, expects increased mobility for its skilled labour force. The UK, which has a strong services sector, also wants better access to Indian markets besides lower tariffs on a range of goods.

However, the bigger impediments could be issues like environment and labour standards, which are said to be high on the UK's agenda. Some of these need to be addressed also in other negotiations such as the FTA with the European Union (EU). The EU is in the process of implementing the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). The idea, according to the EU, is to check "carbon leakage" and would initially apply to products with high carbon intensity in production such as cement, iron and steel, fertilisers, and aluminium. By imposing higher tariffs and other costs, the mechanism will essentially affect the competitiveness of countries like India. The UK is also implementing similar environmental norms. Therefore, issues like environmental and labour standards could pose challenges to concluding meaningful FTAs.

Such standards are seen as discriminatory from a developing country's standpoint. There are multiple layers to how the global trading systems are evolving and will create problems for developing countries. The imposition of such standards at various levels indicates developed countries' inward-looking policies and restricting imports through non-tariff barriers. The CBAM, arguably, also goes against the established principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in addressing climate change. Developed countries, having historically contributed the most to carbon emissions, now expect developing countries to adhere to stringent standards, even at the expense of their developmental requirements.

There is also a debate about whether such mechanisms comply with World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. However, given the WTO's dispute-resolution mechanism is dysfunctional, such concerns may remain unaddressed. From a policy perspective, given the evolving global environment, India's options are worth debating. India should undoubtedly put forward its position in negotiations to protect its interests. However, this may not be enough. Also, putting retaliatory tariffs is not an appropriate response and is unlikely to benefit in the long run. Instead, to be able to get into trade agreements, India needs to start preparing. It was announced in the Budget that the government will do a comprehensive review of Customs duty rates. Not much is known about the progress and whether the government is consulting domain experts in the exercise. Lower tariffs will help India integrate into global value chains. According to estimates, about 70 per cent of global trade happens through value chains. Besides, India should aim to improve labour and environmental standards. Reducing carbon intensity, for instance, is also in India's interests. Given that India's share in global exports remains around 2 per cent, it is not in a position to dictate terms. Practically, it is in India's interests to adapt to the evolving global conditions.

Efficient movement

City logistics plans can bring down costs

Increasing freight movements, including by e-commerce firms, and associated first- and last-mile journeys contribute to congestion and noise pollution across Indian cities. To manage urban freight movement and reduce logistics costs, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) has prepared Comprehensive City Logistics Plans (CLPs) for major metro cities, starting with Bengaluru and Delhi. The initiative must be welcomed as it aims to streamline freight and logistics management, addressing the negative externalities associated with vehicular activity, such as congestion and pollution, while advancing sustainability goals and improving the overall quality of life. It is also in line with the National Logistics Policy, launched in 2022, which includes support for the development of city-level logistics plans.

Estimates by the National Council of Applied Economic Research show that India's logistics costs ranged from 7.8 to 8.9 per cent of gross domestic product in 2021-22. Last-mile vehicular movement in cities accounts for 50 per cent of total logistics costs in the e-commerce sector in urban India. Further, urban freight amounts to 10 per cent of India's freight-related carbon dioxide emission and is usually the biggest contributor to in-city transport-related nitrogen oxides (NOx) and particulate matter (PM) emission. This underscores the need to implement a systematic plan of action to rein in logistics costs. Japan and several European countries like Germany and France are pioneers in city logistics. In this regard, India must adopt global best practices related to efficient city logistics. These include route optimisation through the use of analytics to reduce the number of trips and associated costs, improvement in packaging design and practices to enable higher load factors and hence fewer trips, adopting multi-use lanes and night-time deliveries to enhance productivity in urban freight delivery, and the use of digital platforms for load matching to improve the quality of the match and reduce empty miles and wasted time.

Studies have shown that moving freight on larger vehicles leads to higher transport efficiencies and reduction in the emission of carbon dioxide because larger vehicles can haul the same amount of freight with fewer vehicle-kilometres travelled. A report by the NITI Aayog suggests that by shifting bulk goods movement to rail, optimising truck use, and using cleaner fuels, India can save 10 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide and reduce cumulative PM and NOx emission by 28 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively, by 2050. However, implementing CLPs is also fraught with problems. Most Indian cities have only 10-12 per cent of their land area under roads, almost half the global standard. At the same time, bringing more land under roads post-development is highly complex and costly. High human and vehicular density on Indian city roads also results in frequent restrictions in freight movement, either through time restrictions, vehicular size limits, and permissible weight of freight carried by transport vehicles. Thus, the success of CLPs depends critically on state governments and urban local bodies. It is important to back cities with resources. There is little that local governments can achieve without adequate fiscal support.

Trump 2.0 and the Asean dilemma

US trade policy may compel Asean economies towards deeper ties with China, despite the heightened vulnerabilities



There has been much speculation about the consequences of Donald Trump's return as President of the US. Among the most talked about issues is the US trade policy and the likely imposition of higher tariffs (potentially up to 60 per cent) on China. Bilateralism and the violation of multilateral norms in the conduct of US trade policy with its partners are no longer new. However, a steep and selective increase in protective tariffs and an inherent disdain for institutions under Trump 2.0 is likely to create particularly difficult circumstances for Asean economies.

Containment of China has long been a centrepiece of US foreign policy. However, the economic aspects have been more pronounced in the last two decades relative to the dominance of strategic aspects in the preceding decades. Propelled by the spillover implications of the global financial crisis, global trade imbalances, and a growing realisation of the shift in the centre of gravity of the world economy to the East, Barack Obama adopted the US "pivot to Asia" strategy in 2011. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was its key economic pillar. The TPP was envisioned as a high standard, ambitious trade agreement in accordance with the US liberal trade policy at the time. Contributing almost 40 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP) and a third of global trade, the agreement had significant potential benefits of economic integration for the 12 member economies in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, the TPP, with its focus on "behind the border" policies, was designed to ensure transparency and protection of intellectual property rights, labour rights, and the environment in trade and investment. The underlying motivation for the TPP was to limit

China's choices to either joining the agreement and abiding by the higher trade rules, and in the process be transformed into a more open, transparent market economy, or be excluded from the benefits of the preferential trade and investment agreement. The TPP was concluded and signed in February 2016.

However, in less than a year, with Mr Trump as the newly elected President, the US formally withdrew from the TPP, consequently derailing its entry into force. This was an early indication of US trade policy priorities under President Trump — a re-orientation towards the adoption of bilateralism as the preferred mode of trade negotiations. The TPP pullout also raised doubts about US interest in and commitment to strong engagement with the broader Asian region and the pursuit of regional economic alliances. This shift in US policy was also significant given the imperative to counter an increasingly assertive China and its expansionist claims in the South China Sea.

At this point, Japan displayed uncharacteristic leadership in Asia and convinced the remaining 11 members to go ahead with the trade agreement, thus giving a major impetus to the agenda of regional economic integration. In November 2017, the trade agreement was resurrected as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The CPTPP has created a new liberal trade architecture with ambitious standards in areas beyond those mandated by the World Trade Organization. The agreement has seen recent enlargement with the accession of the UK. Several other countries have shown interest and some have formally applied for membership.

President Joe Biden sought to revive the multilateral

approach to broaden US regional economic engagement by launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for prosperity in 2022. The 14-member IPEF has nine members from Asean and East Asia and four key pillars on trade, supply chain resilience, clean energy, and tax and anti-corruption. However, as it lacks market access and deep liberalisation provisions, the IPEF is a far weaker instrument compared to the TPP/CPTPP in setting trade rules and shaping the regional economic integration architecture. Thus far, the IPEF members have not been able to finalise a trade deal, while the agreement on supply chains that went into force earlier this year has only limited potential in terms of ensuring resilience (see my "Limits to Supply Chain Diversification", *Business Standard*, November 30, 2023).

More importantly, Trump 2.0 may "knock-out" the IPEF as proclaimed by the President-elect during his campaign. It may also be worth recalling that Mr Trump's interest in other Asian regional fora, such as the East Asia Summit and Asean-US Summit, were minimal in his earlier term. There is also little doubt that the second Trump term will see an intensified focus on "America first" and technology and geopolitical competition. This will likely mean a reversion in US foreign policy, with strategic issues outweighing the regional economic institutional engagement.

This would be a big blow to the Asean economies. In the China-IPEF strategy of multinational corporations, the Asean economies have emerged as among the most attractive alternative locations for global value chain shifts. In the process though, there has also been an increase in the intensity of their supply chain linkages with China. Furthermore, Chinese firms are relocating production in proximate Asean economies to avoid the higher tariffs imposed by the US. However, there is a possibility that the increase in tariffs under Trump 2.0 may not just be on imports from China but also from Asean economies if produced by Chinese firms with minimum local value addition. This would be a double whammy for the Asean economies.

As for Japan, its trade and supply chain linkages are not as dense as those of China with Asean economies. Additionally, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) continues to be important for these economies in overcoming their critical infrastructure deficits. Notwithstanding the slow pace of implementation and the downsizing of BRI projects to debts raised about their commercial viability, China is likely to remain the dominant financier of infrastructure projects in the region. Similarly, China has been the leading source of green energy and climate-related development finance and investments in the region.

To sum up, in the evolving geopolitical context of much-reduced institutional economic support from the US and given the limitations of Japanese economic leadership potential, Asean may well face a predicament of increased linkages with China, even when that implicitly implies heightened vulnerabilities.

The author is senior fellow, CSEF, professor of economics, SJU, and author of India's Trade Policy in the 21st Century, Routledge, London, 2022. The views are personal

STRAIGHT TALK

AMITA BATRA



The welcome shift from rankings to lives

Viksit Bharat is a welcome citizen-oriented vision that hopefully will reposition our discourse about ourselves. It goes beyond the competitive chest-thumping of world rankings that has been in vogue in government and business these past few years — explicitly defining the goal of economic prosperity in people terms as providing opportunities and a high standard of living for all citizens (though several press reports have missed this point and read it the old way of aggregate gross domestic product and world rank improvement). If read holistically, it shifts the discussion towards building and utilising the potential of all Indians, rather than being content with hitting favourable world rankings by utilising the potential of only a small segment.

Our world rankings are, without question, a stunning achievement that calls for monumental pride. However, to declare victory based on that and say there's not much more to be done except hold the course and to dismiss as naysaying the view that there are still miles to go before we sleep, seems monumentally blinkered, if not callous. After the recent financial quarter ended, a flurry of business conferences were organised with discussions marked by this "tyranny of O" (a phrase used by management guru C K Prahalad). One section held the view that the only truth to recognise was performance relative to others — the enormous number of gross domestic product (GDP) dollars added, and how much further this trajectory of just holding the course would take us in size and rank. This, its proponents felt, was at odds with another section that was being "impractical" in pointing out that a lot of work still needed to be done because much of the benefit was as yet con-

fined to the top of the income pyramid — a reality that holds true even for the famed increase in stock market participation.

Viksit Bharat offers a people-oriented vision that ought to transcend this fruitless "either/or" conceptualisations. As is the hallmark of India, many apparently contradictory things are all true and equally noteworthy — the right to call victory over our superb world rankings, the truth that they are valid for aggregate, not per capita metrics, and the imperative that large numbers of people need to be both upgraded to decent living standards and equipped for upward mobility. The beacon it offers is around what India ought to be for herself and for all her citizens to improve their lives and realise their potential, not where we should stand with respect to others. It reminds us that the many people we have are not our burden to sidestep in the pursuit of economic growth but are the very purpose of economic growth and need to be equipped to be drivers of it.

Competitive ranking is, of course, a useful metric for pulling in a larger share of global investments in a competitive world. However, there is no contradiction here. To paraphrase strategy guru Kenichi Ohmae, the heart of strategy is not about beating the competitor but about creating value for the customer and avoiding the competitive battle altogether. So if we achieve the Viksit Bharat vision by 2047, marching in that direction a little bit every year with broad-based improvement right across the socio-economic pyramid, the rest will follow. The world will come to our door, and power equations will be more balanced.

Granted that vision statements and high-level strategies are the talk that needs the walk of execution.

However, vision statements are the proverbial "well being is half done." It can inspire and unite disparate segments towards a singular definition of success, and make everyone dream the same dreams (or smoke the same opium as we know from boardrooms, where aspirations are sometimes hallucinations of weak bodies winning Olympic golds in high jump).

There are points in history when vision statements can cause inflection points in the thinking of a country. Mahatma Gandhi's vision of reforms with a human face and the concept of "inclusive growth" did change the way we thought about ourselves. He too had people's well-being at the centre when he said, "We will take the process of development forward and create new opportunities for the poor and down-trodden people to participate in the development process." What is different is that Viksit Bharat is not offering new opportunities for weaker sections as a special strategy. It is offering to build people's potential and create enables so that the weaker sections can have access to all opportunities that economic growth throws up.

The good news is that it is more concrete than slogans of the past, and its picture of what success will look like is more like an architectural drawing than an artist's impression. The worrying news is that the early execution rollout we are seeing seems to have the government telling the *am janta* a lot more of "What can you do for Viksit Bharat?" and a lot less of "What can Viksit Bharat do for you?" It seems to want to harness youth power with the same old tired, poorly functioning educational institutions rather than reimagining them entirely. The people of India have always stretched for more rather than settle for less. It is the spirit with which Viksit Bharat has to come to life.

The author is a business adviser in the areas of corporate-business strategy, and a researcher on India's consumer economy

'Persistent' + 'perfect' = profitable



BOOK REVIEW

NIVEDITA MOOKERJI

As 2024 draws to a close, with the number of newly minted unicorns (startups valued at \$1 billion or above) in the year at only four till now, here's a book on unicorns. Well, if unicorns are getting rare, e-unicorns are even more so. The term refers to profitable unicorns — almost an oxymoron. In the world of startups, that mostly pride themselves for fund-raising from marquee global investors at dizzying valuations irrespective of their own bottom line, profitability is almost a bad word. Startups, unicorns included, have been about adventure (misadventure too), independence (at least from the

outside), pitches (that may or may not make it with investors) and rounds of fund-raising in dollars. The *E-unicorns* by Dhruv Nath takes the reader through all these steps and more to narrate the journey of four e-unicorns — Nauki.com, Zerodha, Dream11 and Zoho. Weaving the stories together is their ability to make profit in a universe that has for years believed in a business model of piling up losses and extravagant spending. Through interactions with the protagonists, including the founders of these unicorns, Mr Nath, a professor, an angel investor and a mentor, has tried to bust the myth that profit and entrepreneurship contradict each other. But, the author, who has written on startups earlier as well and is familiar with their inner workings, has pointed out that three of the companies mentioned in the book are private limited entities and their detailed financial data is not available in the public domain. Info Edge, which owns the Nauki portal, is listed. The reader would do well to keep that in mind

while taking a plunge into the lives of some of the well-known founders through the pages of this book.

The *E-unicorns*, through a complimentary and admiring narrative, promises to be a template for the future generation of startups. Some critical analysis may have added another dimension to the book. In his introduction, Mr Nath says, "There's something absolutely critical that I must tell you." He goes on to say that none of these founders was chasing valuations. Instead, they were chasing their businesses. "And because of this, their businesses did well and valuations went up to unicorn levels," he says.

Good point, but the writer must appreciate that it would be tough to find a founder who would say he or she is chasing valuations rather than business. Also, it's possible that a company may still not make a profit while being fully focused on business for a variety of reasons. Take Amazon. Founder of the e-commerce major, Jeff Bezos, is known for the much-

talked-about focus on customer and trying to be "the earth's most customer-centric company." Yet Amazon remained unprofitable for years. "Famously unprofitable," as Mr Bezos had said in a BBC interview back in 2000.

Mr Nath has made "persistent business" and "perfect attitude" his central points to illustrate the success of the four startups. The book is well-written about, and each letter of "persistent" and "perfect" denotes something. In the case of persistent, P stands for problem (solving), E for earning model, R for risks, S for size of the market and so on. As for perfect, P stands for persevering. E for ethical, R for responsible etc. "I'm delighted to inform you that all businesses as well as all the founders [in this book] fit perfectly into these

frameworks (of persistent and perfect)." The writer's tip: To be successful, a business needs to be "persistent" and the founder needs to have the "perfect" attitude — including, of course, the traits of each letter in those two words.

Such "how-to-do" advice through the book has been peppered with voices of the founders saying interesting things. To paraphrase strategy guru Kenichi Ohmae, the heart of strategy is not about beating the competitor but about creating value for the customer and avoiding the competitive battle altogether. So if we achieve the Viksit Bharat vision by 2047, marching in that direction a little bit every year with broad-based improvement right across the socio-economic pyramid, the rest will follow. The world will come to our door, and power equations will be more balanced.

involved in running the business... You need to take quick decisions and run, and you can't do that if you have to wait for someone else's approval every time." Sridhar Vembu of Zoho, who also shunned VC money, has this to say: "When you take external funding, you lose your freedom..." In fact, Sanjeev Bikhchandani of Info Edge

shares similar views on access to easy money: "But a frugal business, if you have too much money sloshing around, you get into bad habits." And caught in the game of skill versus game of chance battle, Harish Jain of Dream11 recalls his famous \$2 crore loan from his father (a prominent businessman) to start a business and how he was left with only \$1.5 lakh within two weeks. When he went back to his father for another \$8 crore, he got it with ample help from his mother. About five years after this, things started moving at Dream11 and it was time for funding. "Our investors were truly hands on... They spent time with us and guided us — particularly Sridhar Vembu of Zoho, who said, 'You must build a life-long business. What we call *dhandha* in our Marwari business families.'"

The writer draws similarities between the four unicorns while underlining the importance of being profitable. At a time when quick commerce is the flavour of the season, with many unicorns and startups being unicorns only to end up each other in making superfast deliveries, the *E-unicorns* could be a useful reference point.

THE ASIAN AGE

28 NOVEMBER 2024

Govt, Opp. should desist from strangling Houses

It appears that some kind of a sinister script has been holding sway over the proceedings in both Houses of Parliament in the Winter Session, like several preceding sessions, which ensures that no meaningful discussion or transaction takes place in what is called temple of democracy. Both the Opposition and the Treasury benches may have their reasons for agitating in the House and for adjourning it but the fact is that the people of the country are deprived of the benefits that will accrue to them when Parliament conducts the business it is meant to conduct.

The Opposition is demanding a discussion and the formation of a joint parliamentary committee to investigate the allegations of corruption involving the Adani Group and several state governments related to power purchases. The information came into the public domain when the US department of justice and the US Securities and Exchange Commission initiated legal proceedings against the group. The US may have its own political and economic rationale apart from legitimate legal concerns about the business practices of an Indian corporate which has raised money from the US investors; but for Indians, the allegations present to shady deals for which ordinary Indians will have to pay.

It is incumbent upon the Opposition to raise the issue in Parliament and force the government to do the follow-up on the allegations. Adjournment motions are often decided by the Chair after seeking the opinion of the government, and hence the government, which often insists that it is willing to discuss each and every issue that concerns the country, must acquiesce to the Opposition demand and answer questions on the issue instead of running away from it. The Opposition is also likely to have a case since all those who have been arraigned in the US are perceived to be close to the ruling establishment in India. But stalling proceedings for a JPC is unlikely to produce results.

While it may claim a pyrrhic victory in the serial disruption of Parliament, the Opposition is in fact doing itself a disservice and the government a favour by disallowing even the scope for a discussion there. The government which commands a bare majority in the House cannot steamroll the Opposition in the way it had last time. The Opposition must now rise to the higher expectations the people have bestowed on it and hold the government accountable in Parliament.

PAN 2.0: Long-awaited upgrade

The Central government's approval for the income tax department's Permanent Account Number (PAN) 2.0 Project is a long-awaited upgrade for a card that has been in use for decades. The 10-digit alphanumeric number for income tax assesses, which was introduced in 1972 as an optional number, was made mandatory for all income tax payers in 1976. Ever since, the PAN card has not changed much.

With an existing PAN database of 78 crore PANs, the PAN 2.0 project addresses the requirements of taxpayers, focusing on consolidation of multiple portals and efficient services to PAN holders.

Currently, PAN-related services are being offered to people through three different portals — the e-filing portal, ITDITSL portal and Protean e-Gov portal. Through the PAN 2.0 project, all PAN and TAN related services will be hosted on a single unified portal of the income department. The unified portal will also host all end-to-end services related to PAN and TAN, like allotment, updating, correction, online PAN validation (OPV), know your AO, Aadhaar-PAN linking, verify your PAN, request for e-PAN and request for reprint of PAN card.

Apart from integration of platforms, the income tax department will also switch to completely paperless processes for applying for a PAN card. The issue of PAN cards will get faster and they will be protected through enhanced security measures, including a PAN data vault.

Under the new project, a centralised mechanism for resolving the issue of duplicates would minimise the instances of one person holding more than one PAN, which will improve tax administration in the country.

While the new PAN card will have a QR code, the income tax department has clarified that the older PAN card will continue to be valid which is a great relief for people. However, they will have an option to apply for a new card with a QR code now.

Subhani



Naga peace talks: Untying the knot might be difficult



Wasbir Hussain

Twenty-seven years after a landmark ceasefire, and 600 rounds of negotiations later, the peace talks between the rebel National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak Muivah), or NSCN-IM, and the Government of India has reached a near tipping point. The NSCN-IM, like the first Naga insurgent group Naga National Council (NNC), took up arms to achieve a sovereign Naga homeland. Later, in course of the negotiations with New Delhi that began after the August 1, 1997 truce, the NSCN-IM obviously agreed to reach a solution within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

However, the rebel outfit always said it would not compromise on its dignity and honour and wanted a separate flag and constitution for Nagaland (Yezhaho) for the Nagas.

After keeping mum or saying nothing concrete on these two demands of the NSCN-IM, which the outfit, in course of time, came to call its 'core issue', the Government of India finally said no to a separate flag and constitution for the Nagas. Two senior Naga political leaders that the writer spoke to in recent weeks quoted Union home minister Amit Shah as saying that the Centre cannot concede any of these two demands of the NSCN-IM.

Former Nagaland chief minister S.C. Jamir quoted Amit Shah as saying that India was a sovereign nation where there can be only one flag, one Constitution and one Prime Minister. Nagaland deputy chief minister T.R. Zeliang, who met Mr Shah earlier this month along with chief minister Nethajit Rizo and the other deputy chief minister Y. Patton, also quoted the Union home minister as saying on similar lines as stated by Mr Jamir.

A day after S.C. Jamir, also a former governor, met Mr Shah in New Delhi, the NSCN-IM made the most belligerent statement in recent years, threatening to resume its armed struggle and resort to a violent armed resistance against India in order to defend, what it calls, the unique history and sovereign existence of 'Nagalim', or a Naga homeland. In a lengthy five-page statement issued on November 7 by NSCN-IM general secretary Thuingaleng Muivah, who is also the Ato Kilonser, or 'prime minister', the NSCN-IM leader said that the Government of India may now impose a political agreement that will not respect and honour the Framework Agreement of August 3, 2015 in letter and spirit.

The Framework Agreement was signed by the Government of India and the NSCN-IM amid much fanfare and the ceremony took place in presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr Muivah and was supposed to be the basis on which the final Naga peace accord was to be reached.

In its most direct confrontation with New Delhi ever since the 1997 ceasefire, the NSCN-IM general secretary said that if there were to be any violent face-off between India and what he called 'Nagalim', it could be on account of not honouring the 2015 Framework Agreement. Mr Muivah, in his statement, once again made it clear, that an honourable political settlement can only be expected if the Government of India officially recognised and acknowledged a sovereign flag and constitution for 'Nagalim' in any political agreement that may come.

Significantly, the NSCN-IM general secretary also said that his group would like to propose a third party intervention to ensure that the 2015 Framework Agreement is honoured in letter and spirit by the authorities. Mr Muivah also said that such a political initiative, the NSCN-IM will resume a violent armed resistance against India in order to protect what he called 'Nagalim' sovereignty, freedom and its unique history. Clearly, this can be seen as a separate flag and constitution to call off the ceasefire that has succeeded in holding on for the past 27 years.

The NSCN-IM threat and New Delhi's firm stand against a separate flag and constitution has brought the Naga peace process back to square one. After all, following the scrapping of Article 370 and the various changes that Jammu & Kashmir has seen, New Delhi is in no position to grant concessions on symbols like a separate flag anywhere else in the country. Several questions arise, if the deadlock with the NSCN-IM cannot be broken, will the Government of India go ahead and sign a peace agreement with the NSCN-IM?

Non-NSCN-IM rebel groups that goes under the umbrella called the Naga Nationalist Army (NNA) and the NSCN-IM, or NNPPs? Like the NSCN-IM which signed the Framework Agreement in 2015, the NNPPs signed what is called the Agreed Positions in 2017. Now, the NNPP is of the opinion that the NSCN-IM is the Government of India, as far as the group is concerned, are over and that it is ready to sign a peace accord. But the big question is whether a Naga peace accord signed without a key stakeholder like the NSCN-IM can bring the Naga peace process back to square one.

Wasbir Hussain, author and political commentator, is editor-in-chief of Northeast Live, Northeast India's only satellite English and Hindi news channel. Views expressed here are personal.

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LETTERS CLIMATE REVOLT

At COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, India firmly rejected the proposed climate finance commitment of \$300 billion annually by 2035, deeming it inadequate to address the critical needs of developing nations disproportionately impacted by climate change. Representing the Global South, India's negotiator, Chandni Raina, criticised developed countries for failing to uphold the principle of equity and for attempting to transfer the financial burden onto less-resourced nations. She emphasised that the proposed funding falls significantly short of what is required for effective mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Amarjeet Kumar Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

IPL RICHES

VADHAV SURYAVANSHI, a 13-year-old from Bihar, has grabbed a lot of media attention by landing a contract of ₹1.4 crores with the Rajasthan Royals. It would be very easy for a 13-year-old to lose focus from his game by the fame and fortune of lucrative contracts. He needs to have his feet on the ground or rather the cricketing ground to make full use of the opportunities which have opened up for him. Rajasthan Royals may have their own reasons; but just a few good performances cannot become the criteria of a good batter. Good luck to him, but a word of caution: Only a handful of those thousands sweating it out on the cricketing fields make it to the top in cricket!

Anthony Henriques Mumbai

YOGI GYMNASTICS

IN A BEZARRE move to hide its inability to maintain law and order, the UP government is planning to recover the cost of damages to public property from protesters involved in the Sambhal violence, while posters of so-called state pelters will be displayed at prominent public locations. In a comparable move, the government had earlier displayed posters of individuals accused of vandalism during the anti-CAA protests in 2020. However, those posters were eventually taken down following a court directive.

Sankar Paul Chakdaha, West Bengal

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Krishnan Srinivasan

Is France likely to implode next, as PM Barnier needs Le Pen to survive?

In the European Parliament elections this year, France's far-right National Rally (RN) led by Marine Le Pen did very well, as expected. In a knee-jerk reaction, President Emmanuel Macron, no longer the "Jupiterian" figure of an executive standing loftily above the fray, decided to call a snap parliamentary election, knowing that the budget deficit would be over six per cent of GDP, and he would be unable to implement any programme to make France more competitive through his immigration and pension reforms.

On July 7, the legislative election resulted in the success of the centre, left and extreme left in an opportunistic alliance in order to counter RN. The left-oriented parties comprising Greens, Socialists, Communists and the extreme left under Jean Luc Mélenchon, proposed a Communist, Lucie Castets, aged 37, as Prime Minister. The appointment of a PM needs 289 votes to be endorsed, very difficult to achieve in a deeply fragmented Parliament. By threatening to vote down any Macron choice for leader of the government other than Castets, Mélenchon effectively handed the initiative to Le Pen.

After about 60 days without a government, Macron was obliged on September 5 to defer to Le Pen by appointing Michel Barnier, 73, a former four-time minister, from the Gaullist conservative Les Républicains (LR), which secured only 47 seats, counting on Barnier's experience to bring people together. Barnier expected to secure 235 seats, with

Macron's coalition of 166, 47 LR votes, and a centrist catch-all group of 22, but short of the 289 needed. Le Pen's RN was disappointed to come only third in the election, but proved nevertheless to be critical to Barnier's appointment, and because the Constitution does not permit Parliament's dissolution for 12 months, Le Pen counts on another parliamentary election in June next year.

An obstacle for Le Pen's own political aspirations is that she is implicated in a decade-old court case where she is accused of falsifying the number of her co-workers in the EP to take funds from a regular European Commission for herself and 24 colleagues on false pretences. The worst outcome for her could be a ban from taking public office for a minimum of five years. The hearings started October 1 and will take several weeks.

Also on October 1, Barnier outlined his policies. He aimed to make "dialogue and the culture of compromise a principle of government." This is implicitly criticism of Macron's governing style, considered both unrealistic and condescending. He promises to resume a dialogue with Parliament early next year on assisted dying and palliative care, and wants consultations with the general public on a regular basis. Barnier declared his aim to reduce the deficit to five per cent of GDP next year and three per cent in 2026, with severe cuts from reduced spending. He cited a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions this year as evidence that France can be effective on environ-

mental issues.

President Macron had passed legislation for a rise in retirement age to 64 from 62, despite opposition that led to widespread street protests. Barnier stated that he was open to talks with the unions over the pension system and reasonable tweaks to the pension law. He also increased from November 1 the minimum wage by two per cent, and promised stricter immigration policies.

As head of a minority government, Barnier faced a vote of no-confidence on October 8, which he overcame with the help of Le Pen's RN. He then presented the Prime Minister's readiness to consider the system of proportional representation.

There is now the obstacle of having his first budget for 2025 passed. His draft was presented on October 10, but the new finance and budget ministries had little time to frame the proposals and many are stated only in rough outline. The deficit-slashing budget is a major test of Barnier's staying power, considering the adverse circumstances, his draft is a balancing act and it remains to be seen if the taxes and spending cuts will survive the parliamentary debate. Most likely, there will be significant amendments before the budget can be passed.

France's budget debates have earlier triggered no-confidence motions and Barnier's plans sparked opposition even before their details were known. "This is the most violent austerity plan that this country has ever seen," said a far-left MP, "it will cause the

French people to suffer". Barnier, under pressure from the European Commission to bring deficits and growing debt under control, said it will improve France's budgetary position by 60 billion euros, through spending cuts and tax increases on high earners and large companies. Most of the cuts focus on government spending, followed by social security cuts. He also promised to raise the anti-CAA higher debt premium than Spain, and edging closer to the high yields demanded of Italy and Greece, Barnier has little wiggle room. Le Pen has stated she would only support Barnier's budget if he increases the purchasing power of French citizens.

If the Opposition parties together oppose the budget draft, the government has the option of forcing it through without a vote using a special procedure that deems a bill adopted if it is not rejected by a majority of MPs. But this paves the way to a second vote of no-confidence, putting Barnier's survival again in the hands of Le Pen, and her far-right politics. Macron has other options, none of them attractive: to reappoint the same Prime Minister, appoint a new Prime Minister, to resign (which he has previously ruled out) or call a referendum. Now as Germany seems to be politically imploding, France, the second most important country in Europe, seems to be heading the same way.

Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Indian foreign secretary

THE IDEAS PAGE

In defence of India

China's assertiveness, decline of American military industrial complex and emergence of new weapon supply chains are openings for India to accelerate modernisation of its defence production system



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

TWO RECENT DEFENCE agreements, highlighted during Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to a Southeast Asian defence ministerial forum in Laos, point to the many untapped possibilities for developing India's security cooperation with like-minded Asian countries. Building defence networks with Asian friends is an urgent imperative for India amid China's growing military capabilities and the urgent need for modernisation of India's defence industrial base.

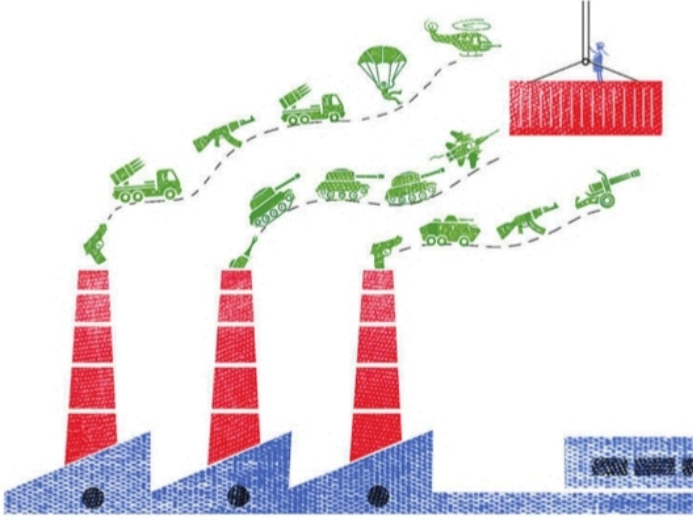
The agreement with Australia facilitates air-to-air refuelling between Indian and Australian military aircraft. This will extend the reach of both air forces and promote their interoperability. In his consultations with his Japanese counterpart, Rajnath Singh continued recent conversations with Tokyo on defence industrial collaboration. A few days earlier, Delhi and Tokyo signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on joint production of stealth equipment for Indian warships. Though limited in scope, these agreements point to the direction India and its Asian partners must travel, given their shared interests in the regional security order.

One key concern is Chinese assertiveness on territorial disputes in the region. To be sure, Beijing is turning on its charm diplomacy these days after years of muscular unilateralism on disputed frontiers with its neighbours, including India, and intense "wolf-warrior" diplomacy. Sceptics remind us that China's mood could easily swing the other way at any time.

What matters more than Beijing's current positive diplomatic posture is the nature of China's military capability. Current intentions must always be viewed in the context of China's military weight on the ground. Its defence expenditure overshadows that of its neighbours, including India and Japan, combined.

Beijing's defence production has reached formidable proportions, thanks to China's expansive industrial infrastructure, impressive military modernisation over the last three decades, and massive investments in defence research and development. Consider this example: China commissioned 70 submarines between 1995 and 2020 — nearly three a year. This scale of military production hasn't been seen since the height of the Second World War. No Chinese neighbour, including major powers like India, can cope alone with the rapidly widening gap between their defence capabilities and Beijing's. This explains why China's Asian neighbours have been open to greater security cooperation with the United States over the last decade. For most, including Delhi, it's clear that stabilising the Asian balance of power requires America's presence.

There was a time when the region believed in "Asia for Asians" and saw no reason for "external powers" to maintain their military presence. China still plays on this sentiment, arguing that "outsiders" shouldn't meddle in its disputes with Asian neighbours. Few in Asia today accept this "Asia for Asians" rhetoric, though not all express this openly



C R Sasikumar

for fear of offending Beijing. Many of them can see that the slogan of "Asia for Asians" is about consolidating Chinese primacy over the region.

In fact, China's assertiveness has produced strong regional support for American armed forces in Asia. It's also Washington's fear of Beijing replacing it as Asia's dominant power that drives increased US strategic attention to the region.

The question isn't about the political legitimacy of American military presence in Asia, but rather its intensity and sustainability. Unlike earlier, the US no longer enjoys overwhelming military dominance in the East Asian theatre. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is eroding that dominance on a daily basis. Though US armed forces and weaponry remain qualitatively superior, the PLA's quantitative advantage is beginning to shift the regional balance.

Another challenge is America's involvement in multiple theatres. While China can focus its military resources on its immediate Asian neighbourhood, the US must spread its forces across Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Hopes of reducing US commitments to Europe and the Middle East to focus on Asia have diminished significantly in recent years.

America's NATO commitments have proven enduring due to the collapse of post-Cold War security arrangements in Europe and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Similarly persistent is American involvement in the Middle East. The October 7, 2023, terror attacks on Israel and Tel Aviv's ongoing war against Gaza and Lebanon have pulled the US back into the region. While some in Washington claim the US can fight on all three fronts, sceptics highlight the growing challenges of effective operations across these theatres.

A major US military constraint is its inability to meet weapons demands — am-

India has talked of a greater role for the Indian private sector in defence production and has put special emphasis on arms exports. A high-level committee of the government has also recommended the reorganisation of the Defence Research and Development Organisation. India has also stepped up its military diplomacy in the region and beyond. India will need to move much faster on the reform front than it has so far to cope with the massive gap in the defence capabilities with China as well as seize the international opportunity for the transformation of its defence industrial base.

munition, missiles, or drones — for ongoing conflicts in Europe and the Middle East. The renowned American military-industrial complex can't mass-produce weapons to meet current demands, let alone prepare for a potential conflict with China in Asia.

Many American military production facilities are outdated, and the US defence industry lacks skilled personnel. As it works to revamp its defence industry, the US is turning to allies and partners. Washington, for instance, is negotiating collaboration with Japanese and Korean shipyards to regain maritime competitiveness against China. Policy makers in Tokyo and Seoul have problems of their own — a declining population and an ageing workforce.

The reshaping of global defence supply chains amid growing military challenges is also urgent for Europe, which struggles to meet the war material needs of Ukraine. This new international situation presents an opportunity to accelerate the modernisation of India's defence production system. Delhi has signed defence industrial roadmaps with the United States and France and plans to negotiate with Italy. India has talked of a greater role for the Indian private sector in defence production and has put special emphasis on arms exports. A high-level committee of the government has also recommended the reorganisation of the Defence Research and Development Organisation. India has also stepped up its military diplomacy in the region and beyond.

India will need to move much faster on the reform front than it has so far to cope with the massive gap in the defence capabilities with China as well as seize the international opportunity for the transformation of its defence industrial base.

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

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Senate Republicans who give in to Mr. Trump's demands to violate norms by packing the court system should remember that they will not always be in power and that once a norm is broken by one party, the other party is likely to use the same methods later."

— THE NEW YORK TIMES

A gift to the nation

The ability to amend its provisions has proved to be Constitution's strength. It has adapted to changing needs of a diverse society



ARVIND P DATAR

ON NOVEMBER 26, 1949, the Constituent Assembly passed a resolution approving the final draft of the world's largest constitution. Tom Ginsburg, a professor at the University of Chicago who has studied over 200 constitutions of various countries that were adopted after 1789, found that their average lifespan was just 17 years. It is a tribute to our founding fathers that their draft, with amendments, has lasted 75 years. In contrast, Sri Lanka replaced its constitution three times, Pakistan six times and Nepal five times. Undoubtedly, there is something special about the second-order constitution that we can be justifiably proud of. It is, therefore, time to look back at the origins of this document that continues to be the basis for the functioning of the world's largest democracy.

The last of the enactments that were made for the governance of undivided India was the detailed Government of India Act, 1935, that was based on a White Paper and Joint Parliamentary Committee Report. In April 1936, at its 49th session held in Lucknow, the Indian National Congress rejected this Act as being designed to facilitate and perpetuate the domination and exploitation of the people of India. The Congress reiterated its demand for a Constituent Assembly consisting of elected Indians who would frame its own constitution.

After World War II, it was clear that India would get freedom before the end of that decade. The Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 envisaged the creation of a Constituent Assembly that included representatives of Congress, Muslim League and the princely states to draft a constitution for a united India. Lord Wavell, the then Viceroy, made a fervent appeal to these three parties to work together in what he called "the greatest and momentous experiment in the whole history of the world — a new Constitution to control the destiny of 400,000,000 people."

Sadly, the Muslim League decided to boycott this Assembly which began its first session on December 9, 1946. The final draft of the Constitution was prepared over a period of two years, 11 months and 17 days. Out of eight major committees, the drafting committee, under the chairmanship of B R Ambedkar, was appointed on August 29, 1947, and took 141 working days to prepare a final draft that initially consisted of 243 articles and 13 schedules. This committee had the invaluable assistance of B R Rau as the constitutional adviser and S N Mukherjee as the chief draftsman of the Constitution.

Just a fortnight earlier, India had at-

tained freedom, and Section 8 of the Indian Independence Act, 1947 enabled the Constituent Assembly to perform dual functions: To draft the new Constitution and to function as the federal legislature under the Government of India Act, 1935. It is supremely ironic that the 1935 Act, which was condemned by Congress in 1936 because of the basis of its Constitution.

Ambedkar presented this draft to the Constituent Assembly on November 4, 1948. He explained why the parliamentary system of government was preferred to the presidential form that prevailed in the United States. India was also to have a federal structure but with greater power being given to the Union. He was at pains to point out why our Constitution, unlike others, was lengthy and detailed. In the United Kingdom, there is no written constitution but there are established conventions that are scrupulously followed, as part of what is called "constitutional morality". India was an infant nation, with no conventions, and with a population having several languages, castes and religions. It was, therefore, necessary to have a Constitution that set out, in great detail, the roles of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary.

The Constituent Assembly had outstanding legal experts and analysed the draft with great care. A total of 7,635 amendments were tabled and 2,473 were considered, resulting in the final draft that had 395 articles and eight schedules. Its Report, in April 1949, at its 49th session held in Lucknow, the Indian National Congress rejected this Act as being designed to facilitate and perpetuate the domination and exploitation of the people of India. The Congress reiterated its demand for a Constituent Assembly consisting of elected Indians who would frame its own constitution.

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The writer is a senior advocate

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HOW VOTERS CHOOSE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A question for the Opposition' (IE, November 27). In an undemocratic society, modern democratic principles inevitably face challenges. Political elements compete not just ideologically but through identity-based rivalries. While representation is visible in elections, it's overshadowed by Hindu/non-Hindu divisions rather than traditional left-right politics. Identity politics has undermined the electoral process's fairness. Voters choose representatives based on caste, community, and financial interests rather than democratic principles. In this context, warnings about democracy being "in danger" become meaningless.

Dev Athawale, Amravati

ADANI & PARLIAMENT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Discuss Adani & more' (IE, November 27). Prime Minister Narendra Modi deriding the Opposition as individuals rejected by the people cannot be grounds for dismissing a discussion in Parliament. One, the US court has issued arrest warrants against Adani and others. Given the Adani investments in infrastructure and other areas, the allegations impact the market and investor confidence in the Indian economy. Parliament must discuss it. The Parliament is supposed to hold the government accountable, and the Opposition is entitled to seek this accountability. Avoiding this obligation is disrespectful to the Constitution and democracy.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Discuss Adani & more' (IE, November 27). As India marks 75 years of its Constitution, it is crucial to reflect on this visionary document. The forthcoming Winter Session of Parliament presents an opportunity to uphold the ideals of the Constitution by addressing pressing national and international concerns; the recent indictment of the Adani Group in the United States being one. This matter warrants transparent discussion to ensure corporate accountability and protect India's global standing. Parliament must consider stronger regulatory frameworks for Indian multinationals to align with international standards.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The trade salvo' (IE, November 27). Donald Trump's threat to impose steep tariffs on goods imported into the US has set the stage for a bitter global trade war. Importantly, the rationale for these moves is not primarily, or even substantially, about trade or economic policy. These tariffs aim to pressure Mexico, Canada and China to alter their policies on migration control and illicit drugs. Trump is wielding tariffs as a diplomatic weapon — even as a means of coercion — on topics entirely unrelated to global trade. His threat would harm all the economies involved, as inflation would spike and domestic labour markets. For India, too, keeping a close watch would be prudent.

Sankar Paul, Nadia

Mandir, Masjid, Vastu

Sambhal shows we are short of leaders who can walk into a conflict and resolve it



FIROZ BAKHT AHMED

Mandir bhi le la, masjid bhi le la/Insaan ke laho se megar ab na kholo. (Take away the mosque, take the temple/But stop shedding human blood.)

— Afzal Manglori

FOUR INDIAN CITIZENS have been killed in Sambhal. Their brutal killing has left the Muslim community shaken. Around the same time, news that the Indian Space Research Organisation will launch a European solar mission from Sriharikota was reported. Many will present this as the perpetual paradox that is India. But the contrast does not present a sanguine picture. Progress is predicated on trust between people. While every politician swears by the constitution and waxes eloquent about it, turning 75, there are political elements who seek to damage and destroy that trust and our composite culture. Ironically, we advertise this diversity and culture on every global stage and have cited it in our Olympics hosting bid. But at home, all is forgotten.

Even the sensible comment by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, that it will not do to go digging under each mosque looking for a temple, is forgotten. Or, maybe the sarsangchalak needs to again come out and tell his Parivar that his statement wasn't an afterthought or an aspiration but an

instruction. After all, the RSS, as the Maharashtra election results show, is taken seriously by the BJP.

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act is under challenge in the Supreme Court. As an editorial in this paper flagged, the highest court has called it a cornerstone of our secular principles and at the same time has asked what's wrong in finding "facts" about a structure. This act of "fact-finding" is itself fraught with peril and often motivated. What stops anyone from going to any court and magistrates ordering "surveys" of mosque after mosque, church after church, gurdwara after gurdwara? Of course, some Islamic rulers destroyed or defiled Hindu temples, they defiled the Islamic temple of "Lakum dinulom waley yadeen" (To you, your religion, to me, mine).

The Sambhal Shahi Masjid controversy is a cleverly engineered conspiracy to keep the Hindu-Muslim pot simmering. The way the petition was filed, and the speed with which the survey was ordered all raise questions about the sanctity of due process.

After the moral and legal victory of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, there is a campaign for Kashi and Mathura. Leader after leader has said these three and no more. Now, there's Sambhal. Every other day, a mosque is under the scanner of the so-called "Hindu"

activists, TV cameras and YouTubeers sit waiting, lawyers are ready to file a petition. All sound and fury signifying something.

For a moment, let's agree with the premise of Vishwa Hindu Parishad that there are more than 40,000 mosques built after demolishing temples. But today's Muslim community has nothing to do with this. It's like arresting a British tourist at the airport for her forefathers' crimes during colonial rule. Muslims in India feel proud not to trace their lineage from the Mughals, but from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Sufi saints, and their Indian heritage.

For Hindu-Muslim amity, Bharat Ratna Maulana Azad drew a parallel between "Vedantism" and the Islamic principle of "Wahdat-e-Deen", meaning the oneness of religion. This was meant to combine the efforts of Hindus and Muslims for a brighter and better India.

If the British rulers banked upon the Hindu-Muslim divide, today's vote-bank politics is hell-bent on reviving it. Talk of counting castes and "batenge tob kange", go hand-in-hand with one nation, one everything, sabka saath, sabka vikas. The disruptions caused by the new economy, the rural-urban divide, the crisis in education and employment, and the political mobilisation around caste and community, are all

forces of change — but they can also easily become forces of division and tension.

Former Prime Minister V P Singh, the architect of Mandal, described a politician as a resolver of conflicts. He spoke of a scenario where people are standing in line with their buckets to collect water when a fight breaks out about who should be the first in the queue. Many people just look for the other way, no one wants to get involved until one person walks up to make both sides talk and settles the matter amicably. That's the politician, Singh said, the aam aadmi is aam neta. A person who uses the moral authority of their power to resolve conflict rather than deepen it.

Let's look around. Of course, the Constitution tells us — it has been telling us for 75 years — what governs the resolution of conflicts, but how many politicians today talk the language of trying to calm people down, and find a way out? There can be and there will be another Sambhal. We will all be tested for our professed commitment to the Constitution and the nation. Do we have the courage and the wisdom to walk up, like V P Singh's aam neta, and help find a solution?

The writer is former chancellor, Maulana Azad National Urdu University

12 THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Congress's call for a return to ballot paper shows it's still looking for an imagined villain — rather than within

IN THE AFTERMATH of the Maharashtra election results, a clamour is rising in the Congress ranks with some of its allies joining in. It is the soundtrack of a sore loser. "We should start a movement for the return of paper ballot," says party president Mallikarjun Kharge. The EVM dunnit, Congress leaders say. It is not that Congress hasn't attempted to blame its electoral defeat on the voting machine before — it has, most recently after last month's Haryana result. But its comprehensive drubbing at the hands of the Maharashtra electorate seems to have left it particularly singled. The party is entitled to its bewilderment. But as the leading party of the Opposition, it also has a duty to be responsible in defeat. It must know that casting aspersions on the established process of free and fair elections, and the rules of the game that anchor it, is a step too far — it cannot be taken lightly. It must be based on verifiable evidence, of which there is none so far; not on "gut feel" or an injured sense of entitlement, or the desperate desire to find a fall guy.

The Congress's fumbling for answers that has now hit the conspiracy theorist's dead-end began in 2014, when the Narendra Modi-led BJP first swept to power at the Centre. Its return to the saddle in 2019 and for a third term in 2024, and several assembly elections won by the BJP in between, have only made Congress sink deeper into incoherence. This has even made it undermine its and its allies' own successes. Congress recently won Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh, and humbled the BJP in the Lok Sabha election in Rajasthan, Maharashtra and UP. Even as it was routed in Maharashtra, it and its JMM has brought it back to power in Jharkhand — it is mean-spirited, at best, and absurd in fact, to say that the BJP "let JMM win" Jharkhand, all the better to hijack the mandate in Maharashtra. This search for easy and imagined villains, this politics of sticking pins into voodoo dolls, is taking a rising toll. It is holding Congress back from an honest reckoning. It needs to ask itself whether it is giving the voters a reason to vote for it — or it is only criticising the BJP? It is evading the big questions because of its own flawed record, or because of a lack of conviction and clarity? Is its strategy of going hyper-local in response to the BJP's choreography of large, ideology-drenched narratives a cop-out? When its leader, Rahul Gandhi takes a strong view, does his own weak CV come in the way, or the inability or unwillingness of local Congressmen and women to take their cue from him?

At the same time, it is true that the conduct of the election monitor, the Election Commission, leaves much to be desired. When it comes to the ruling party, it wears kid gloves; it is seen to take notice of its violations of the model of conduct. The Opposition may have chosen temperate words in its attack but the language of the EC's official responses reads bitter and angry, as if it were the text of a political party, not of a constitutional authority. The election system has imperfections — any playing field is skewed when one side is a three-term government with a formidable range of resources, financial to institutional — but it has served this large and diverse country well, and continues to set an example. Sharad Pawar has told his party's candidates to search for "evidence" to nail the EVM conspiracy. That search should surely continue, no stakeholder would wish otherwise, but the Congress would do well not to project on the system its inner crisis. Some of its allies have been more judicious in their response. Other players, like AAP, which has started making conspiratorial noises ahead of Delhi's upcoming election, must also take a deep breath, look at the voter — and, most importantly, look within.

A MUCH-NEEDED PAUSE

Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire is the first meaningful de-escalation. It must be expanded to Gaza, serve as a step towards peace

FOR A REGION on the brink, the 60-day ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah provides a much-needed pause and an opportunity. Brokered by Washington, it will be enforced by the US and France. According to the deal, 5,000 Lebanese military personnel will replace Hezbollah forces in South Lebanon, and Israeli and Lebanese civilians will return to the region. The ability of Lebanese forces to enforce the ceasefire has been doubtful in the past. However, Hezbollah has been considerably weakened and this may be an opportunity for the state of Lebanon to reassert control. Israel's PM, Benjamin Netanyahu, has warned that Tel Aviv reserves the right to take military action if "terrorist" infrastructure is rebuilt.

The ceasefire deal is the first meaningful de-escalation in the Middle East since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. Israel's response has been unconscionably disproportionate — the killing of over 44,000 civilians is a form of collective punishment that cannot be justified. With the conflict expanding to Lebanon and Iran and its proxies, there was every indication that the region was in for a prolonged regional conflict. The next two months are an opportunity to ensure that those fears do not translate to reality. US President Joe Biden has said that the agreement "is designed to be a permanent ceasefire". For something resembling peace in the region, it is a necessary, not sufficient, step.

An end to the conflict is in the interests of both Israel and Iran and its proxies. Both sides have faced casualties, displacement of thousands of people, economic disruptions and both are less secure than before. For the agreement with Hezbollah to turn into something more durable, however, the violence must end in Gaza. The attacks by Israel in this region are at the core of the current conflict. For Netanyahu, who faces several political challenges domestically and rising opprobrium internationally, the window for negotiation is now open. He must use it, as patience for Israel's actions is wearing thin in the global community.

MIRROR, MIRROR

TikTok has banned beauty filters on its platform for underage users. Given the toll it takes, it is the bare minimum

THE GRIM SUBTEXT of German fairy tales had it right: When you ask the mirror on the wall to judge the fairest of them all, the answer can open up the darkness within — dipping self-esteem, crippling anxiety or envy. And unlike fairytales, there may not be happily-ever-afters at the end of the ordeal, especially if the mirror happens to be social-media platforms where the metric of beauty is set by algorithms primed to fuel insecurities. Earlier this year, parents in the US had launched a petition against TikTok and YouTube for promoting body dysmorphia among children through the use of AI-generated beauty and wellness influencers. Now, TikTok has announced restrictions on the use of beauty filters by users below the age of 18.

Given the premium placed on appearances, this is a welcome move, even if its effectiveness is reliant on peer behaviour at such their age on social-media platforms. The toll of dissemblance — hiding one's appearance with filters to look a certain way — and the consequences of harassment or cyberbullying are immense. Study after study has established correlations between social-media usage and mental-health afflictions. The restriction also reignites the conversation around the ageist, sexist approach to beauty reinforced by airbrushed perfection. And yet, beauty can be a fluid curve that embraces ageing bodies, arthritic limbs, puffy eyes and sagging skin. Maggie Smith became the face of fashion brand Loewe at the age of 88. Zeenat Aman remains sassy at 73, pushing back at the beauty stereotype. For the message to percolate down to youngsters on social media, however, it needs to be a combination of legislation, better role models and parental guidance that helps them negotiate the minefields of online platforms better.



S Y QURAISHI

NOVEMBER 26 MARKS a significant milestone in independent India's history. On this day in 1949, after the Constituent Assembly (CA) members worked hard for two years, 11 months and 17 days, India adopted its Constitution. The zeal with which they participated in materialising this idea of India is reflected in the fact that the CA members proposed 1,635 amendments to the draft, before giving the nation its sacred book, comprising 395 articles and eight schedules.

If a democratic country was the goal for the CA, free and fair elections were its means. Sixteen articles were enacted exactly two months before the Constitution became fully operational. These included Article 324, which laid the foundation for the establishment of the Election Commission that was mandated with "superintendence, direction and control" of all elections. The Election Commission of India (ECI) was established on January 25, 1950 — a day before India became a sovereign democratic republic.

During the Assembly's proceedings, the sub-committee on Fundamental Rights recognised the independence of and non-interference by the executive and legislature in elections as a fundamental right. The Constitution, through Article 329, barred even the judiciary from interfering in the poll process to ensure uninterrupted elections. This provision has been the envy of many election commissions.

A significant issue in the CA debates was which agency should conduct elections to the state legislatures — the state election commission or the central agency. In a far-sighted move and a radical departure from the federal principle, the Assembly placed Vidhan Sabha elections under the Election Commission of India. B R Ambedkar summed up the rationale for this bold move: "No person who is entitled... should be excluded merely as a result of the prejudice of a local government... To prevent injustice being done by provincial governments to people other than those who belong to the province racially, linguistically and culturally, the whole of the election machinery should be in the hands of a Central Election Commission." How prophetic was he. We increasingly see overt or covert attempts in different parts of the country to exclude sections of citizens from electoral registration.

Indian elections have not only earned national respect, they have also received accolades from across the world. US Senator Hillary Clinton called it the gold standard. The New York Times described it as 'the greatest show on Earth'. The ECI's International Institute of Democracy and Election Management has attracted the top management of election bodies, including commissioners of over 130 countries in the last 12 years, to learn from us.

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However, well-conducted elections do not necessarily mean a good democracy. Many world democracy indexes have described India as a flawed democracy. What is holding us back? Several factors, including illiteracy, poor gender participation, corruption, attack on civil liberties and the country's political culture. This points to the need for urgent democratic and electoral reforms.

One of the great blessings of our electoral system is the protective role of the higher judiciary. The Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasised that it is the EC's mandate for free and fair elections is absolute: "Democracy cannot survive without free and fair elections" (Union of India vs. ADR, 2003); "Free and fair elections is the basic structure of the Constitution" (PUCL vs. Union of India, 2003; NDA judgment, 2013); and "The heart of the parliamentary system is free and fair elections" (Mohinder Singh Gill vs. Union of India, 1977). In February 2024, the SC struck down electoral bonds as "unconstitutional and manifestly arbitrary" annulling the legislative changes which had institutionalised crony capitalism in India. In doing so, the Court ended dark money.

Low participation of women, both in terms of voter enrolment and voter turnout, despite the Constitution giving them equal voting rights from Day One, was an important flaw in our democratic system. ECI's concerted efforts have led to the gender skew being addressed in electoral rolls. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the gender ratio of registered voters improved to 948 women per 1,000 men, up from 928 in 2019. The gender gap in voter turnout, which used to be 10 per cent one time, has disappeared. In 19 of 36 states, more women turned up to vote than men in 2024.

While the ECI has fulfilled its gender justice obligation impressively, legislative action remains far behind. Reservation for women

in local bodies elections is a commendable achievement. The NDA government has done well by enacting 33 per cent reservation for women in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas, to be operational from the 2029 elections.

While several reforms have sought to improve the electoral system, many new challenges and threats have emerged, which, if not dealt with urgently, could derail our democracy. The use of black money and the increasing criminalisation in politics, for instance. In the current Lok Sabha, 46 per cent of members have criminal cases registered against them, and crepe ratio number 93 per cent. Political defections have plagued government formations in the country since the 1960s. The Anti-Defection Law, 1985, the Constitution's Tenth Schedule, has proved ineffective. Horse trading is now much less of an equestrian term than a legislative jargon.

EC has been demanding criminal reforms. These include a ceiling on political parties' expenditure, like for candidates, state funding of parties (not elections) with independent audit, and a ban on private donations. An independent National Election Fund can be established for tax-free donations and allocation can be made based on electoral performance.

Article 324(2) expected Parliament to make a law for the procedure and service conditions of Election Commissioners. This remained unattended for over seven decades. The Act was finally passed in 2023, on SC's directions, with some mixed features. A partisan collegium makes no sense. Even an iota of doubt about its neutrality is fatal for democracy. The Act does not protect the two Election Commissioners from removal from office so that they do not feel as if they are on probation.

Despite these flaws, the ECI is one of the Constitution's greatest gifts to the nation. It has stood the test of time and emerged as a powerful watchdog of democracy. Cooperation of the executive, legislature and the judiciary is required to keep our democracy strong. Only then can the largest democracy on the planet hope to become the greatest.

Quraishi is a former chief election commissioner of India and the author, most recently, of India's Experiment with Democracy: The Life of a Nation through its Elections



MRINAL PANDE

RECENTLY, ONE of the biggest Hindi dailies reported that a case of impersonation and cheating had been registered against three Muslim men from Aaransa village in Chazipur district. Officials told the media that the men were singers and, dressed in saffron robes of jogis, had long been earning a living by singing Gorakhpanti bhajans. The men claimed this was their ancestral vocation. But the villagers, led by a powerful BJP leader, were adamant that they could not be jogis or jogis, belonging to what most now claim is a Sanatan sect.

How do we judge who is a real Gorakhpanti yogi?

Most people today believe that yoga is an ancient Hindu practice created by a sage named Patanjali and that it helps blend body, mind and soul, and leads to perfect peace within. But in its long history, yoga has undergone many mutations and the form practised today was shaped out of Patanjali's version after the 11th century, when one Raja Matsyendranath rebranded it. The Raja, it is said, was a great yogi and alchemist who renounced his kingdom and Vedic traditions, opting for the life of a wandering sadhu. Heresy and diversity have always been part of India's sectarian landscape and interesting things happen when religious thoughts and practices meet. Under Matsyendranath, there was a new bridge between the Tantric Shaivite rituals and Tantra-inspired Buddhism. The re-

THE REAL GORAKHPANTHI

The sect's history shows how it defied divisions based on caste, religion, gender

IN GOOD FAITH

When the British arrived, they accepted many of the prevalent biases in mainstream Hinduism against heretic sects like the Gorakhpanti. The image of a yogi on a bed of nails and pictures of naked fakirs and sadhus brandishing tridents and swords became symbols of a degenerate and dangerous tribe. But this was not the Nath Siddha cadre of Guru Gorakhnath. He had wished for the sect to be free from the degenerated form of bhakti that the Brahmanical clergy had fattened itself on, while also defying divisions based on caste, creed and gender. Gorakhnath professed an unwavering rationalism ("Gorakhi yugbhog, bhagyai bhakti, jagay jog"). He came down hard on the use of foul language and induced both Hindus and Muslims (mostly weavers) into the sect, along with women.

sult was the Nath Siddha tradition.

This tradition created by Guru Matsyendranath was fine-tuned by his prime disciple Gorakhnath, better known as Guru Gorakhnath. Gorakhnath was a great traveller and is believed to have travelled to Jyoshim in Uttarakhand, one of the great centres of Sanatan Dharma founded by Adi Shankara. As a great unifier of religions and breaker of caste taboos, Guru Gorakhi also created a centre for Gorakhpantis in Jyoshim. The current narrative about Gorakhnath being a protector of cows leaves out much of this story, as well as his aesthetic side as a creator of verses and adroit player of percussion and stringed instruments.

When the British arrived, they accepted many of the prevalent biases in mainstream Hinduism against heretic sects like the Gorakhpanti. The image of a yogi on a bed of nails and pictures of naked fakirs and sadhus brandishing tridents and swords became symbols of a degenerate and dangerous tribe. But this was not the Nath Siddha cadre of Guru Gorakhnath. He had wished for the sect to be free from the degenerated form of bhakti that the Brahmanical clergy had fattened itself on, while also defying divisions based on caste, creed and gender. Gorakhnath professed an unwavering rationalism ("Gorakhi yugbhog, bhagyai bhakti, jagay jog"). He came down hard on the use of foul language and induced both Hindus and Muslims (mostly weavers) into the sect, along with women.

According to the scholar Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, in time, as sectarian and political polarisation grew, some Hindu godsees tried to induct Hindu gods and goddesses into the pantheon of the sect that had, until then, only worshipped Adi Nath (a form of Shiva). At that point, the Gorakhpantis from lower castes opted for Islam, but continued to call themselves Nathpanthis. Up until the 1921 census, there were 629,978 listed Hindu yogis, 31,158 Muslim yogis and 141,132 Hindu fakirs all associated with the Nath Panth.

By the 14th century, the Nath yogis had acquired military muscle. Jogs in Gujarat had reportedly become so aggressive that they would forcibly convert men by tearing off their earlobes. In the 16th century, there were violent clashes between them and the Sikhs. Kabir scoffs at these tendencies for violence driven by greed: "Brothers, never seen a yoga such as this, staking the land, full of idleness! Did Narad Muni ever fire a gun or (Ved) Yajur a bomb like them? In the name of asceticism, don't let them create divisions and give a bad name to jogis! (Aisa jog na dekha bhai, bhool firai liye gajalai/ Narad kab bandook chala? Yajur dev kab bomb bajay?/ Karan larai mai ke munda.../ Bhaey virakt lohi man thama... [Bhakti]).

President's words from the poet!

The writer is former chairperson, Prasar Bharati

NOVEMBER 28, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

UK DIPLOMAT KILLED

THE BRITISH DEPUTY High Commissioner in Bombay, Percy Norris, was shot dead at the Coopers junction on the morning of November 27 by two unidentified foreigners. He was on his way to his office at Flora Fountain from his residence at Altamont Road. The Indian government has tightened security measures for all British High Commission officials following the incident and has ordered a full-scale investigation into the assassination.

NOMINATIONS FILED

ABOUT 6,200 CANDIDATES have filed their

papers for the 515 seats of the Lok Sabha as nomination for December's general election closed on November 27. More than 7,300 candidates had entered the poll arena in 1980. However, the number of contestants left in the field after the withdrawals was 4,620.

GANESAN QUITS CONG-I

IN A MAJOR blow to Tamil Nadu Congress-I, actor-politician MP Sivaji Ganesan, announces his resignation from the party since the claims of his fan association had been overruled in the allocation of seats for the coming elections. Ganesan said that the lists were now packed with men recommended

by an AICC-1 General Secretary from Tamil Nadu. Ganesan told reporters that he was also resigning his Rajya Sabha seat.

PARTY BROADCASTS

THE ELECTION COMMISSION has finalised the scheme for election broadcasts by political parties over All India Radio and Doordarshan. Recognised national and state parties can avail this facility from the principal AIR station and Doordarshan Kendra in every state where the Lok Sabha elections will be held. Parties will be allowed two rounds of election broadcast over AIR and one round of telecast on Doordarshan.



16.EXPLAINED



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

What is gov't's 'One Nation One Subscription' initiative?

RITIKA CHOPRA
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 27

THE UNION Cabinet on Monday approved a budgetary allocation of Rs 6,000 crore for the 'One Nation One Subscription' (ONOS) initiative which aims to provide government-run higher education institutions (HEIs) equitable access to 13,000 scholarly journals under a single platform.

How do HEIs currently access journals?

As of now, HEIs can access journals through 10 different library consortia which are under the administrative control of various ministries. A library consortium is a group of two or more libraries that have agreed to cooperate to fulfil similar needs, usually resource sharing.

For instance, the INFUNET Centre (Information and Library Network Centre) in

Gandhinagar is an Inter-University Centre of the Ministry Grants Commission under the Union Ministry of Education. The organisation oversees the UGC-Infonet Digital Library Consortium which provides access to selected scholarly electronic journals and databases in different disciplines.

HEIs also subscribe to several journals individually. According to government estimates, roughly 2,500 HEIs can access 8,100 journals through the previously mentioned networks and individual subscriptions.

What does the ONOS scheme offer?

Through the ONOS scheme, the Centre aims to consolidate the disaggregated approach to journal access for all government HEIs. The initiative will enable these HEIs to access thousands of journals on one platform, which will be active on January 1, 2025.

This common platform will host 13,000 journals published by 30 international pub-

lishers including Elsevier Science Direct (including Lancet), Springer Nature, Wiley Blackwell Publishing, Taylor & Francis, IEEE, Sage Publishing, American Chemical Society, and American Mathematical Society, among others.

Institutions will only have to register on the platform to access these journals. INFUNET

has been designated as the implementing agency for this initiative. The Centre negotiated one subscription price for each of the 30 different publishers, and approved Rs 6,000 crore for three calendar years — 2025, 2026 and 2027.

"If HEIs still want access to journals outside the 13,000 available on the common platform, they can subscribe to them individually," a central government official told The Indian Express.

What is the need for ONOS?

The ONOS scheme has been launched for

four reasons:

■ To expand access to the best scholarly journals for 55 lakh to nearly 1.8 crore students, faculty, and researchers across roughly 6,300 government universities, colleges, research bodies, and Institutions of National Importance (INIs).

■ To avoid duplication of journal subscriptions across different library consortia, and individual HEIs which would reduce excess expenditure on overlapping resources.

■ To provide better bargaining power when negotiating with publishers through a single subscription for all government HEIs. The official said, "We have been meeting with representatives of different publishers over the last two years, and during this time, we have worked to negotiate the best price. As a result, the initial cost of Rs 4,000 crore per year for 13,000 journals has been re-

duced to Rs 1,800 crore."

■ To help the Centre gain insights into the extent to which journals are being used and downloaded by the government higher education ecosystem, according to the official.

When was ONOS conceptualised?

The initiative originates from the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasised research as a cornerstone for achieving excellence in education and national development. The policy strongly recommended the establishment of a National Research Foundation (NRF) to seed, fund, nurture, and promote research and development while fostering a culture of innovation across India's higher education ecosystem.

Today, the Centre formed a core committee of secretaries, chaired by the Principal Scientific Advisor, in 2022. This committee then constituted a cost negotiation panel to negotiate with journal publishers for the ONOS

initiative, which would complement NRF.

What happens next?

The Centre will now negotiate Article Processing Charges (APCs) with journal publishers. APCs, also known as publication fees, are charges authors must pay to publish in certain journals. Scientific journals have various ways of generating income to cover publishing, editorial, operational, peer-review, and other functional costs. Open-access journals typically charge a specific fee for article processing, known as the APC.

According to government estimates, authors in India paid nearly Rs 380 crore to journal publishers as APCs in 2021. Similar to how the government negotiated a single subscription rate for all government HEIs, it now aims to do the same for APCs. The Centre believes this approach will reduce overall costs.

The government is yet to decide if ONOS will cover private HEIs also, the official said.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

HOW AN ASTEROID'S DESTRUCTION GAVE MARS ITS TINY MOONS



Phobos, the larger of Mars' two moons, is seen in this image taken by the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter. NASA

SOMETHING'S NOT quite right about the moons of Mars. They are too small: Phobos is 27 km across, and Deimos is a mere 14 km in length. And they are not round but lumpy, misshapen objects. Frankly, they do not resemble moons at all.

"They look like asteroids, they smell like asteroids, as well as looking like potatoes," said James O'Donoghue, a planetary astronomer at the University of Reading in England. Perhaps then, astronomers have suggested, they are as asteroids — two space rocks captured long ago by Mars' gravity.

A study published last week in the journal *Icarus* makes a case that the moons did indeed start out in asteroid form. But it is not the genesis everyone was expecting.

Issue with asteroid theory

The notion that Phobos and Deimos may be captured asteroids has long come up against one major problem: Their orbits are too circular and too neatly aligned around Mars' equator. Asteroids approach planets at all sorts of angles, and if these moons were once asteroids, their orbits would be expected to be tilted and perhaps somewhat oval.

That they are not seems suspicious, and supports the theory that they were forged another way. This is akin to the favoured origin story of Earth's own satellite, wherein a Mars-sized object slammed into the nascent planet, creating a spray of debris, which glued itself together to form our moon.

If something similar had happened to Mars, scientists would expect this debris

to form a disk aligned to the Martian equator, leading to the construction of moons with the same orbital alignment — something observed today.

What the study hypothesises

Using supercomputer-powered simulations, the new study suggests that a large-enough asteroid was captured by Mars long ago. The asteroid then plunged toward the Red Planet and would have gotten extremely close: anywhere from about 5,150 km above the rust-hued desert to grazing the surface.

Consequently, the gravity of Mars would have ripped the asteroid into fragments. "Some of them can escape from the system completely," said Jacob Kegerreis, who is a research scientist at NASA's Ames Research Center in Mountain View, California, and one of the authors of the study. But, "some of them can hit Mars," he said, "scarring the surface with smouldering craters."

Many shards would remain in orbit around the planet. Over time, these shards would be affected by the gravitational influence of both Mars and the Sun. Eventually, several of the fragments would careen into one another, sending out sprays of debris that would then collide into other fragments.

This destruction would create a cloud of asteroidal rubble that eventually aligned itself with the Martian equator. The detritus that stayed far enough from the planet would eventually clump together to form Phobos and Deimos.

THE NYT

EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI
ABBAS



IN THESE early days at least, the fresh ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah is holding.

Principally, the (unpublished) ceasefire mimics UNSC Resolution 1701, which was adopted in the wake of the 2006 conflict. Hezbollah is supposed to withdraw to the north of the Litani river, Israel to the south of the Blue Line, with the Lebanese Army remaining as the only armed force allowed between the two in South Lebanon. It gives both forces 60 days to withdraw to their respective positions.

A crucial novelty in the agreement is the addition of the United States and France to the tripartite mechanism of Lebanon, Israel, and the UNHCR 1701. Notably, it does not call for a complete disarmament of Hezbollah in Lebanon, north of the Litani, while Israel proclaimed that it retains the right to strike again if Hezbollah violates the agreement (something that the Lebanese government rejects).

Why did Israel agree to this deal?

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has outlined three reasons for the ceasefire — to focus on Iran, to give Israeli forces "a breather and replenish stocks", and to "separate" the Hamas and Hezbollah fronts by taking one of them out of the war. Indeed, Hezbollah had opened a parallel front to support Hamas just days after the latter's terror attack, and the beginning of Israel's bombardment of Gaza.

Three further factors might have influenced Israel's decision. **FIRST**, there has evidently been at least a mild fracture in Israel's civil-military framework. Former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant (along with the IDF Chief of Staff) had been pressing for a ceasefire in Gaza and Lebanon. He had repeatedly questioned Netanyahu's political and military objectives, as well as vociferously called for clarity on a day-after plan from the government.

While Gallant was fired less than a week publicly expressing his disagreement with the prime minister, it is evident that the IDF thinking that he represented, while appreciative to some degree. Note that far-right national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir (the sole dissenter during the cabinet's vote on the ceasefire), has long hankered after Gallant's views, along with representatives of towns



Lebanese troops in the city of Tyre in South Lebanon. As per the ceasefire deal, the Lebanese Army will be the only military presence in the "buffer zone". Reuters

in Northern Israel who opposed the ceasefire till the end.

SECOND, Israel's experience of fighting in Lebanon has always been tactically effective but strategically bitter.

A long-term military presence in Lebanon would severely wear down the IDF. This is perhaps why it kept its initial objectives, outlined on October 1, vague in military terms to allow for a withdrawal whenever Hezbollah was deemed to be weakened enough for Israel living in the North to return to their homes.

Continued Israeli presence in South Lebanon could also enable a stronger re-consolidation of support for Hezbollah within Lebanon (which had been facing significant popular domestic resistance by mid-2023).

THIRD, despite the loss of its entire senior leadership and significant loss of infrastructure, Hezbollah evidently maintained the ability to strike Israel until the end. Its most extensive bombardment of Israel — with 250 rockets — occurred less than two days before the ceasefire, and after Israel's strike on central Beirut killed at least 29 people, including health workers.

Even with the IDF being militarily superior, Hezbollah's fighting capacity would ensure a protracted war. The IDF pressed for a ceasefire almost hours after it reached the Litani river, achieving what might be seen at least as a symbolic victory.

What does the ceasefire mean for the Israel-Lebanon frontier?

The most important underpinning to every development around Israel across the past year, has been the fact that October 7 decimated Israeli perceptions of security. This is what drove Israel to unleash a literal firestorm first in Gaza, and then in Lebanon.

International pressure on Israel has been concerted, with the United Nations' experts characterising Israel's acts as a "genocide", the International Court of Justice calling for Israel to withdraw from occupied territories, and the International Criminal Court issuing an arrest warrant against Netanyahu. This has evidently not stopped Israel from pushing on in Gaza, as Israel now views this as its ultimate quest for complete security against all threats; a new "never again".

That said, the strong dent in Netanyahu's image as "Mr Security" still lingers, and Israel's threat perception has usually not differentiated between any of the Iran-sponsored groups. It is curious then that the post-ceasefire status quo post-bellum uncannily resembles the state of affairs at the end of the 34-day Israel invasion of Lebanon in 2006. (The current invasion spanned 57 days.)

Then too, the Lebanese Army was mandated to be the only armed force between the Litani and Blue lines post the ceasefire; its heavy armament and troop trucks rolled into the effective buffer zone by August of 2006. The American addition to the new "tripartite"

arrangement in 2024, that is supposed to differentiate it from the 2006 predicament, has come with explicit non-commitment of any combat troops, which is arguably also more palatable for the incoming Donald Trump administration in Washington DC.

However, Hezbollah still remains entrenched in Lebanon's society and government, with 15 members in Parliament and an ally in the Speaker's office. Notwithstanding the fillip of Western presence in ceasefire oversight, Hezbollah can now shift to regaining its socio-political base, having forced Israel again to withdraw as it did in 2006.

Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah on Tuesday vowed to "carry on resistance", adding that the force that was "fighting in the battlefield will itself help to rebuild".

What does it mean for the region at large?

Two things. **FIRST**, the acceptance on the part of Lebanon and Hezbollah of even a cursory US presence in South Lebanon, could not be ignored without Hezbollah Chief Naim Qassem (who televised his acceptance to the US-proposed ceasefire draft at least a week ago) consulting Tehran.

As Iran engages the IAEA, keeps up a steady stream of signals to engage the United States for sanctions relief, and deepens its (well-reciprocated) rapprochement with its Arab neighbours, the country no longer has to worry about what seemed to be an existential threat to its largest proxy in the region, at least momentarily in early October. It is useful to remember that Iran's principal objective in raising and sustaining Hezbollah is to ensure a military buffer between itself and Israel, despite the Palestine-linked framing of Iranian support to the resistance.

SECOND, Israel can now ensure complete military focus on not just Hamas in Gaza, but also Iranian proxies in Syria (which includes Hezbollah and allied troops), Iraq, and Yemen for the first time since the beginning of its campaign in Gaza. Netanyahu's address specifically warned that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is "playing with fire". With Iran indicating some measure of restraint and preparing for a Trump administration, Israel retains the option to both continue striking Iranian proxies, or to meet restraint with restraint, as it focuses on Gaza where the death toll is now touching 45,000.

In the Lebanon theatre specifically, however, all elements of conflict that sparked this latest war remain. Much more water has to flow down the Litani before complete stability is guaranteed in Lebanon and North Israel.

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

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12 December | 6 PM

Older, richer: What new Maharashtra, Jharkhand Assemblies look like

ANJISHNU DAS
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 27

THE NEWLY-elected Assemblies in Maharashtra and Jharkhand are older, and significantly wealthier than before. Maharashtra has also seen an uptick in the number of MLAs facing pending criminal cases, while Jharkhand has elected a record number of women legislators.

Maharashtra Assembly

With an average age of 54, the new Assembly is older than in 2019 when the average age was 51. In fact, the average age of the Assembly has increased considerably in recent years — it was only 49 years in 2009. A factor behind this increase is the number of re-elected members. As many as 183 sitting MLAs were re-elected this year. The state Assembly has 288 seats.

Eighty-six Maharashtra MLAs are 60 or

older. Chhagan Bhujbal, 77, the NCP MLA from Nevla, is the oldest legislator. Only 10 MLAs are 35 or younger, with Congress' Tassgaon-Kavathe Mahankali MLA Rohit Patil, 25, the youngest.

The new House is also significantly wealthier. Average assets held by MLAs grew from Rs 22.43 crore in 2019 to Rs 43.43 crore in 2024. BJP MLAs boasted average assets of Rs 59.69 crore, up from Rs 27.47 crore in 2019. Congress MLAs' average assets were Rs 43.91 crore, up from Rs 24.46 crore in 2019.

The Shiv Sena and NCP MLAs boasted average assets of Rs 30.62 crore and Rs 22.33 crore respectively, while average assets of the NCPSP and the Sena (UBT) MLAs are at Rs 51.31 crore and Rs 10.43 crore respectively. In 2019, MLAs of the then undivided Shiv Sena and NCP had average assets of Rs 13.74 crore and Rs 15.02 crore, respectively.

BJP's Parag Shah, elected from Ghatkopar East, is the richest MLA in Maharashtra with assets worth Rs 3,383 crore. A real estate de-

PROFILE OF MAHARASHTRA AND JHARKHAND ASSEMBLIES

MAHARASHTRA					JHARKHAND				
	2019	2024				2019	2024		
Average age	51 years	54 years	Average age		50	53			
MLAs facing cases	176	187	MLAs facing cases		40	43			
Average assets	₹22.43 cr	₹43.43 cr	Average assets		₹38.87 cr	₹69.9 cr			
Cropetests	264	277	Cropetests		56	71			
Graduates & above	157	165	Graduates & above		49	50			
Women	24	22	Women		12	10			

Source: The Election Commission of India, The Association for Democratic Reforms

veloper and now two-time MLA, Shah says his assets grew by Rs 500 crore over the course of the election campaign alone.

As many as 187 MLAs face criminal charges in the new Assembly, compared to 176 in 2019. The BJP has the most such MLAs at 92, followed by the Shiv Sena at 38, the NCP at 20, the Sena (UBT) at 13, the

Congress at nine, and the NCPSP at five. NCP chief and eight-time Baranati MLA Ajit Pawar faces 40 pending cases, the most among elected MLAs.

After electing a record 24 women to the Assembly in 2019, 22 women were elected this time around. Women account for under 8% of the House strength.

Jharkhand Assembly

After electing a record 10 women to the House in 2019, Jharkhand has elected 12 women legislators this time around. Since the state was carved out of Bihar in 2000, the number of women MLAs has consistently been rising — this year they account for 15% of the 81-member strong Assembly strength. The Congress has the most women legislators at five, followed by the BJP at four, and the JMM at three.

The new Assembly in Jharkhand is older than in 2019, with an average age of 53 years, up from 50 the last time around. As many as 42 MLAs got re-elected. While there are 17 MLAs aged 60 or older, only four are under 35.

The oldest MLA is Rameshwar Oraon, 77, a Cabinet minister elected from the ST-reserved Lohardaga on a Congress ticket. The youngest MLA is JKKM founder and chief Jaiwant "Tiger" Mahato, a 29-year-old

who won his debut election from Dumri.

The new Jharkhand Assembly is also much wealthier than last time, with average assets held by MLAs rising from Rs 3.87 crore in 2019 to Rs 6.9 crore now. The BJP MLAs are the richest on average, with assets worth Rs 7.57 crore, followed by the JMM at Rs 6.28 crore, and the Congress at Rs 5.31 crore. Congress's Rameshwar Oraon is the richest MLA, with assets worth Rs 42.2 crore.

The number of MLAs facing criminal cases is marginally down from 44 in 2019 to 43 this time. The BJP has the most such MLAs at 13, followed by the JMM at 12, and the Congress at eight. All of the RJD's and CPI(M)'s MLAs face pending cases.

Former chief minister and state BJP chief Babul Marandi, elected from Dhanwar, has the most cases at 15. JKKM's Jaiwant Mahato comes a close second with 14 pending cases against him.

EXPLAINED POLITICS



DECCAN HERALD
ESTABLISHED 1948

A costly delay in local body polls

Article 243U of the Constitution mandates the timely completion of municipal elections before the expiry of a local council's term. The provision is intended to ensure effective local self-governance at the grassroots level. However, persistent delays in Urban Local Body (ULB) elections across various states are undermining the very essence of this constitutional mandate. A survey by Bengaluru-based NGO Janaagraha has revealed that about 61% of ULBs in major states have faced delays in holding elections. In Karnataka, the situation is particularly alarming, with 70% of the ULBs functioning without elected representatives. The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), for instance, has not seen elections for over three years now, with successive governments, irrespective of the party in power, finding excuses to postpone them. These delays are supported by legislators who view elected local bodies as a challenge to their power, particularly over controlling the purse strings of municipal bodies.

The delayed elections to the ULBs, Zilla Panchayats (ZPs), and Taluk Panchayats (TPs) — both pending for three years — have significant financial implications, with the state missing out on about Rs 2,800 crore in central funds. According to the Finance Commission norms, local bodies that fail to hold timely elections are ineligible for a share from the central tax pool. The delay in ZP-TP elections has also led to a situation where officials take unilateral decisions on the implementation of schemes. The Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasised the constitutional duty of State Election Commissions (SECs) to conduct regular elections to the local bodies. In a scathing rebuke, the court had described such delays as "a breakdown of the rule of law". The court had also ruled that SECs cannot cite reasons like delimitation of wards to justify the postponement. Under the 74th Amendment, SECs are entrusted with the responsibility of superintendence, direction, and control of municipal elections, to ensure that they are fair and conducted on time. However, in most states, this power is diluted — only 11 states and Union Territories have empowered SECs to manage the delimitation process. In the remaining states, including Karnataka, the responsibility remains with the government.

SECs need to be held accountable for these delays; they should be fully empowered and independent and not be beholden to the whims of state governments. They should ensure that the delimitation process is completed in advance and is never used as a pretext for the postponement. Local elections are the foundation of democratic governance. Delaying them, in essence, is a denial of democracy itself. It is crucial that all stakeholders, particularly SECs and state governments, act with urgency to address the issue.

PDS leaks call for systemic reform

A recent study of the country's Public Distribution System (PDS) has found that nearly 28% of the foodgrains supplied through the system did not reach the beneficiaries, causing a loss of about Rs 69,000 crore to the exchequer. The study has quantified the leakage as 20 million tonnes of rice and wheat. That would be enough to feed the entire population of some countries. The study was based on data from the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) and the FCI's (Food Corporation of India) monthly off-take data from August 2022 to August 2023. The study was done by a team led by Ashok Gulati, former chairman of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). The leakages are systemic and need to be addressed to ensure better food security and optimum use of public resources. India's PDS is the world's largest and provides subsidised grains to over 800 million people. Providing food security to such large numbers of people is a major achievement but the government has the responsibility to ensure that the grains reach all intended beneficiaries. A leakage of 28% is high and needs to be plugged. The leakage varies from state to state. States such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Gujarat report the highest rates of leakage, while UP tops the list in absolute terms, with an estimated leakage rate of 33%. Among the southern states, Tamil Nadu has high leakage rate of 15% while Karnataka is at 6%. The study has noted that the leakage has come down from 46% in 2011-12 to the present level, but more needs to be done.

It was the linking of the ration card with Aadhaar that helped reduce the leakages. The introduction of Point of Sale (PoS) machines in fair-price shops was another factor. However, there is a need for improved tracking and systemic reforms. The study has suggested better beneficiary targeting, transitioning to food stamps or vouchers, and direct cash transfers "which could enhance transparency, reduce inefficiencies, and ensure nutrition security." The grains leaked from PDS are often diverted to the open market or for exports. They distort the market and impact food price levels, apart from denying food to the deserving. The government's food subsidy bill for the current year is budgeted at Rs 2.05 trillion. It is important that such huge spending is done most efficiently so that it is not wasted. There should be the will to make it leakage-proof and the best available technologies should be used for that. It is also important to weed out undeserving beneficiaries from the system.

At 28%, the leakage threatens to derail the idea of food security

New pathways to women's workforce reintegration

Organisations need to tap into the demographic of women aged 45 and above. Innovating solutions to accommodate them can help create a competent, motivated talent pool

POOJA SHARMA GOYAL

Indira Nooyi famously said, in 2014, that the biological and career clocks of women are at odds with each other. The prime years for building the careers of women (25 to 50) are also the years when they are having children, bringing them up and taking care of their ageing parents. All of that care-giving mostly falls on the women and each exit out of the workforce, for however brief a period, takes a toll on the woman's career. This was certainly true a few decades ago but it might be time to question that narrative in the world of today when we are in the midst of an extraordinary transition that involves rapidly increasing life expectancy. A child born today in the West has over a 50% likelihood of reaching the age of 105 or beyond. In 2014, that number was 79. This shift has phenomenal implications for how we design our lives and our workplaces.

This could be a tremendous opportunity for us to redesign our workplaces on two counts — not only accommodate women's unique career trajectories but also take advantage of that difference. In the current workplace, careers are commonly portrayed as consisting of two stages: one, there is a gradual ascent towards financial growth, recognition, and authority; this is followed by an extended period of sustained endeavour in positions of power and in some cases, service to others. Both men and women pay a high price for taking a break from their careers. This trajectory has been termed as the 'norm'. On the other hand, women's professional journeys have been characterised by multiple entries and exits in the professional world. A UK-based national study of

2,000 people that was conducted by Applied, a recruitment firm, revealed that women were three times more likely than men to take a career break; this was attributed to caregiving duties they take up. This was also corroborated by a McKinsey and Company study which found that women were more likely to experience career interruptions. The study said 43% of highly qualified women leave their careers temporarily at some point.

Women's careers are, thus, less linear and more 'curved'; but once their caregiving priorities are fulfilled, they are raring to join back the workforce. If a woman were to re-enter the workforce at 45 years, she still has about



25 to 30 years to reach leadership positions. The recent ranking in the FORBES' 100 Most Powerful Women List shows that about 80% of them are aged over 50 years, and half of them are aged over 60. Designing and implementing effective returnship pathways might be a silver bullet to take advantage of this large skilled, competent and hungry talent pool.

Issues of parity, pay

It has often been highlighted that when women do return to their workplaces, they are not employed at the levels they left at. Another issue is that they rejoin work with significantly reduced pay. Women struggle with readjusting to the workplace demands and a lack of confidence which in many cases leads to significant attrition. That is true

because we continue to use the outmoded design of entry and exit. Notice that I used the term 'pathway' and not 're-entry'. Think of the situation as re-entering the highway after you stopped for refuelling. It is important that the programme is designed with a linear ramp to ease into the workplace which would be followed by a non-linear career growth.

And as society tries to bridge the gap between men and women's division of labour within households and communities, even men will require longer breaks and career restarts. Not just working women, but all working parents have been facing this issue. This calls for a revamp within the organisations to tap into the demographic of women who are aged over 40 to 45 who can build a solid career for the next two decades. When organisations learn to change their old, outdated and linear career maps, designed for single-career men, they can end up discovering a pool of talented women who can bring much-needed experience and pragmatic skills of problem-solving, managerial proficiency, and multitasking.

Women who navigate non-linear career paths serve, at once, as role models and mentors. They inspire the younger generations, especially girls, to pursue their ambitions. It also makes economic sense. It is more than well-established that economies benefit when they employ women. In 2015, a report by McKinsey Global Institute suggested that if women participated in the Indian economy at the level men do, the annual GDP of the country could be increased by up to 60% above its projected GDP in 2025. Women are more than ready to invest themselves in organisations, build the economy of the country, and reclaim their autonomy and financial independence. By recognising and valuing the unique skills and perspectives that women bring from their life experiences, we can transform the perceived career discontinuities into opportunities for growth and innovation. But this is a two-way street, and smart companies have already recognised that. It is time for the others to follow suit.

(The writer is the founding CEO of Udaiti Foundation)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Rediscovering beauty in Bengaluru

It took an outsider to make me appreciate the beauty of Bengaluru

SADHANA M KUKREJA

When I often take things, people and places for granted. And when we do this, we tend to focus only on the mundane or negative side of things—whether it's people, places, or events. Bengaluru is one such victim.

We are constantly bombarded with news about the problems of Namma Bengaluru, which are many and highlighted in newspapers, social media, and on television. As a resident of this city for more than three decades, I often join the chorus of complaints when conversing with friends or relatives. The seemingly endless waits in traffic jams, the potholed roads that flood even after short spells of rain, the lack of last-mile connectivity while using public transport, and frequent power cuts with irregular and poor water supply—the list could go on endlessly. In fact, even a few acquaintances abroad identified Bengaluru easily as the city in India

infamous for its traffic jams, further reinforcing the negativity.

However, a recent visit of my nephew, Mihir Rathia, from the city of dreams, Mumbai, changed my outlook, making me see this city in a new light. Being a triathlete, he often visits Bengaluru to take part in cycling events. His recent visit in November, to participate in the Nandi Epic (where he came third), opened my eyes, making me realise how I had been allowing all the negativity about the city to overshadow the positive side of Bengaluru.

"Wow! I just love the weather here," he'd exclaim every morning after returning from his cycle ride on the highway towards Devanahalli, showing me pictures and videos of the beautiful scenery along the highway road, the mist of November mornings, the sunrise, the smooth roads, and so on. "Even a bath here is so refreshing," he exclaimed one morning over breakfast. "Back home, one feels so sticky right after coming out of the shower, the light Bengal foodie, he enjoyed the gastronomic delight of the variety of cuisines that Namma Bengaluru had to offer—be it the *idlis* and *dosas* or the assortment of dishes offered by the nu-

merous cafes and restaurants.

"Bengaluru is such a happening place," he raved enthusiastically one morning after returning from a run at Cubbon Park. "This city has such big and wide-open lung spaces," he added, "with several events happening there. So many youngsters out there, cycling, running, walking, going to pet parks, and attending book readings... I've not experienced this anywhere else. It's amazing," he went on.

Listening to him bubbling over with excitement about his experiences got me thinking. It dawned on me that because I had been reading or hearing only the negative aspects of the city, I had forgotten to appreciate the beautiful little things this city has to offer.

I started looking around my neighbourhood in a new light—admiring the flowering trees in the nearby park, enjoying the cool and pleasant mornings, being delighted by the views of sunrise and sunset from my window with the sky resplendent in a glorious spectrum of colours, enjoying the refreshed feeling after a shower—things that I had overlooked, taking them for granted. Thanks to him, I have rediscovered beauty in Namma Bengaluru!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Seers must stay out of politics, preach peace

The Vokkaliga seer Kumara Chandrashekararathna Swami's call to disfranchise Muslims is unfortunate and divisive (Amid waqf row, Vokkaliga seer wants Muslims disenfranchised, Nov 27). Instead of promoting peace and harmony, the seer seems to be influenced by a political ideology of hatred and demonstrates a lack of

understanding of India's Constitution. His comment that Pakistan has deprived voting rights to non-Muslims showcases his ignorance. As a respected figure, he needs to update his knowledge to avoid causing harm to religious harmony and democratic ethos.

TV Pandarinar Naidu, Kushalnagar

protected at all costs.
Trisha S, Bengaluru

Promote harmony

With reference to your editorial 'Sambhal row reveals divisive designs, again' (Nov 27), the recent deaths at the 16th-century mosque in UP underscore the long-standing unrest surrounding religious sites in India. It's crucial for authorities to ensure peace and safety and actively promote understanding between communities.

Anshu Vijayan, Bengaluru

EVMs stay

It is laughable that every time op-

position parties lose elections, they raise the issue of EVM tampering, but when they win, they remain silent. This has been a pattern after every election. The Supreme Court has rightly dismissed the plea by Congress leaders to revert to paper ballots. EVMs have been proven tamper-proof multiple times by the Election Commission. Opposition parties should stop blaming EVMs for their electoral losses.

Surappa Ravindranath, Bengaluru

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

SPEAK OUT

I am not upset...I am not disappointed, we fight and don't cry...we all have worked together...for me CM is a common man...I work for common people...I will continue to do so till the last drop of my blood. I worked as the CM not to become popular but for the welfare of people of Maharashtra.



Ekknath Shinde, caretaker CM of Maharashtra

To read between the lines was easier than to follow the text.

Henry James

TO BE PRECISE

'Conspiracy to halt India's growth story', BJP MP on Adani US Case



IN PERSPECTIVE

Trump and the looming threat of tariffs

The president-elect's proclaimed policies can cause inflation to rise significantly

ALOK RAY

A key factor that contributed to Donald Trump's emphatic win in the US presidential election was voters' discontent over high prices of everyday goods and houses, compared to what these were four years ago. Though inflation has come down from over 10% in the aftermath of Covid to around 2% (the target rate), the price level is much higher than in the earlier Trump presidency due to the cumulative effect of high inflation over several years. Trump supporters believe that the president-elect can bring down prices and create more jobs for Americans.

But Trump's self-declared policies, if implemented, would push inflation up very significantly. Trump wants to impose flat 60% tariffs on all imports from China, 100% tariffs on Chinese cars, and 10-20% uniform tariffs on imports from all other countries. These would surely raise prices in the US, hurting US consumers and benefiting US producers of import-competing goods. However, all US producers would not benefit. The cost of production of US producers using imported (especially Chinese) materials/components will go up, leading to higher prices and reduced sales. The biggest problem would be for US producers producing for the competitive export market where they cannot raise prices while their cost of production goes up. This would reduce exports and cause consequent job loss in US export industries. So, even if jobs are created in US import-competing firms, the net job creation would be correspondingly less.

In addition, the proposed mass deportation of "illegal" immigrants who mostly work in agriculture and construction would cause labour shortage and hence, a rise in wages and prices of food and houses. Higher prices, along with proposed expenditure cuts by the US government, would particularly hurt low-income groups that would not benefit from tax cuts but would lose to the extent the cuts in government expenditure fall on social security and health benefits. Oil prices would fall as Trump would go for more drilling of fossil fuels, without caring for the climate impact.

Risks of retaliation
Not only China but also 'friendly' countries facing higher tariffs are most likely to retaliate by imposing match-

(The writer is a former Professor of Economics, IIM Calcutta, and Cornell University, US)