

THE ASIAN AGE

1 MARCH 2025

Good start in Manipur but gov faces law & order 'test'

The decision of Manipur governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla to extend the deadline, first fixed as February 26, by another week for rebels to return weapons looted from police stations and state armouries when ethnic clashes broke out in the state on May 3, 2023, is a welcome move that must be followed up diligently.

The decision follows radical Meitei group Arambai Tengsol surrendering its arms and ammunition voluntarily to the 1st Manipur Rifles Camp in Imphal. Reports suggest that the group deposited 300 weapons of all varieties. Reports also say its members could deposit more arms in the following days. This is seen as a highly positive response as the Meitei groups were seen as having been mainly responsible for the looting of arms from various police stations.

The extension of deadline has been given upon the expiry of the seven-day ultimatum on the basis of "requests from both the valley and hill areas", according to the governor. This is "the last opportunity for everyone concerned to contribute to peace, communal harmony, the future of our youth, and the security of our society", Mr Bhalla said.

The ethnic clashes between the majority Meitei community and the Kukis who belong to the tribal Zo community were exacerbated by the actions of a partisan government led by BJP leader N. Biren Singh. While the Kukis were forced to take arms to defend their families, even the Meiteis were unhappy with the Biren Singh administration which did nothing to bring about an understanding between the two communities as political expediency got the better of the chief minister. The Union government played ball and offered unwavering support to him despite warnings by none other than the Supreme Court of India, amid damning reports by numerous independent organisations and investigators.

The Centre moved to remove Mr Singh from his position only when it realised that the tensions in the border state, till then limited to its capital and surrounding areas, was spreading to the border districts posing a serious threat to national security. But the basic democratic function of a government, to offer protection to the lives of the people and their properties, had long been abandoned. So much so that several villages inhabited by the Kuki-Zo people had actually formed their own defence committees. Law and order could not have been worse in an Indian state in recent history.

The governor, who took charge at the breaking point, has taken measures that seem to be working for now. With distrust for the fellow citizen and the government at its peak, his attempts in essence have been to regain the trust a ruler and the people must share. The extension of the deadline must induce more people to return their weapons and repose trust in the government machinery.

The test for Mr Bhalla, however, lies in how he follows up on this auspicious start — whether he acts impartially and takes stern action against law-breakers once the March 6 deadline for returning the weapons gets over. For, it's up to him to prove to the people of Manipur that the Constitution is a fair document that can ensure justice for all.

Hyperloop too costly for India?

The development of a 422-metre hyperloop test track by a team of engineers from IIT Madras, in collaboration with Indian Railways, is a milestone in India's technological journey. While it is just the first step in the long journey towards developing a functional model of hyperloop transportation system, the test track lays the basic foundation for the future progress.

Hyperloop is an advanced transportation system in which a capsule travels through vacuum tubes at supersonic speeds of Mach 1 or 1,200 km per hour. The capsule, which carries either passengers or freight, levitates as it moves in the charged pod. Though hyperloop technology is still at a nascent stage across the world, it can offer a green alternative to the existing high-speed transport systems such as air travel.

Questions, however, are being raised in some quarters about India's focus on hyperloop — which has no working model in any country yet — instead of Maglev (magnetic levitation) trains, which have been operational in several places for over a decade. The cost of building a hyperloop is estimated to be between \$100 million and \$200 per kilometre, whereas Maglev trains could be built for \$50 million to \$80 million per kilometre.

Currently, a hyperloop connecting Chennai and Bengaluru, which are 343 km apart, would cost between \$54.3 billion (\$2.95 lakh crore) and \$68.6 billion (\$5.83 lakh crore), while a Maglev would cost half that amount. Though Indians may not afford such high-cost transportation at present, the wider adoption of technology around the world could eventually make it affordable.

Notwithstanding the affordability or feasibility of hyperloop for commercial use, the IIT Madras team must be appreciated for its members' efforts to master advanced technologies, as it will have several positive ripple effects. Just as the Mangalyaan project sparked interest among Indian children for science, especially engineering, the hyperloop project could inspire hundreds of thousands of young minds to pursue careers in science, helping India to become a scientific superpower.

THE ASIAN AGE

KANISHK MITTAL

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K. SANKARAN

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Subhani



Shun prejudice, racism, or India will pay heavy price

Patralekha Chatterjee
Dev 360

Talk about solidarity with the Global South is all very well, but unless India counters prejudice in its myriad forms, on the street and in university campuses aggressively, it risks more reputation loss. Anger rages on in Nepal, more than a week after a 20-year-old woman student from that country died by suicide inside her hostel room at Odisha's Kalinga Institute of Information Technology (KIIT).

The death, front-page news both in India and Nepal, has sparked widespread protests. The young woman was allegedly subjected to intense harassment and blackmail by an Indian student at the university. Her death sparked protests by Nepali students. A flurry of media reports, both in India and Nepal, suggest mistreatment of Nepalese students at the institute. A video clip which has gone viral on social media captures the heated exchanges between students and KIIT staff members. In the clip, female staff members can be heard taunting Nepali students. One claim — "the university provides free meals to 40,000 students, which is more than Nepal's GDP". The institute, now in damage-control mode, is on the dock not only for crass, abusive behaviour but also coercing many of the Nepalese students to leave the campus. There has been a rash of public apologies from the institute's administration, stern words from the Odisha government which has ordered a probe to determine the circumstances that led to the 20-year-old woman's death and what prompted the institute to issue suspension letters to students who were seeking justice. KIIT has dismissed two of its officers for making "extremely irresponsible" statements. At the time

What happened to the Nepali student is part of the mindless arrogance and toxic prejudice which leads to targeting of so many students from India's Northeast when they move to the country's megacities

of writing the police in Odisha has arrested nearly a dozen individuals, including an engineering student, booked for allegedly abetting the suicide. The matter reached the Odisha Assembly, with Hiju Janata Dal chief Pratap Deb demanding the state's BJP government to take action for the deteriorating law and order.

Diplomats on both sides are now frenetically trying to deuse the fire. But Nepal continues to seethe. Condolences and expressions of deep sorrow continue. The clamour for justice gets louder every day. The Nepal government has said it may stop issuing "no objection certificates" (NOC) to students who wish to study in institutes in Odisha if the situation stemming from the death of the student at the Bhubaneswar-based university is not resolved in a "justifiable and legal way".

On February 25, the Kathmandu Post, a leading English-language daily from Nepal, carried a report flagging serious accusations from the family of the deceased. The family accuses the university of hiding crucial details about the incident. Concerns about the safety of Nepali students in India remain. "Students who returned home in distress are now hesitant to resume their studies. It is vital for the Nepal government and relevant stake-holders to take immediate action to ensure their safety," the deceased's maternal uncle told the Kathmandu Post.

According to the most recent All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020-21 report, a total of 46,678 foreign nationals/students from 170 nations were enrolled in various courses in India. Out of this, 25,000 are from Africa. There are around 1,000 Nepali students studying in KIIT, Odisha. The survey conducted by the Union educa-

tion ministry covered 1,162 universities, 42,825 colleges and 10,576 stand-alone institutions. The death of the B. Tech. student who had hoped that her education in India would be a passport to upward mobility and enable her to buy her father a car — a surprise gift — is heart-breaking, but not an isolated instance of vicious harassment, racism or assaults. It is part of the bigger picture of intimidation, bullying, harassment, and "othering" of young students who are visibly and culturally different from the dominant community.

How did we get here? The short answer lies in looking at what some Indians do to other Indians whom they perceive as too different, and to many foreigners, especially those without rich world passports. Universities are meant to be safe spaces where students exchange diverse ideas and nurture the mind and soul. That is the hope that lies in the heart of students who travel long distances, sometimes cross international borders. But for many young women and men these turn into hostile terrain.

What happened to the Nepali student is part of the mindless arrogance and toxic prejudice which leads to targeting of so many students from India's Northeast when they move to the country's megacities for higher studies. A similar mindset is behind the targeting of African students, sometimes even leading to incidents. In January 2014, shopkeepers in a South Delhi market taunted Nido Nido, a 19-year-old student from Arunachal Pradesh, for his blond, streaked hair when he asked them for directions to a particular place. Unable to bear the

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.

LETTERS TUNNEL VISION

Tunnel disasters one after another point to a tunnel vision on ecology and safety protocols. Fifteen months after the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel disaster in Uttarakhand in November 2023, now eight workers have been trapped in a tunnel in Telangana. The Silkyara tunnel had collapsed trapping 41 workers for 17 days. After they were miraculously rescued by rathole miners, the project restarted and an operator was killed when a machine on which he was sitting fell into a 25-foot-deep trench near the mouth of the Silkyara tunnel. There must have been a lack of evaluation of safety and environmental issues before undertaking such projects. Any compromise on environmental issues in the name of development should be avoided.

Sujit De
Kolkata

MAMATA IS RIGHT

THIS REFERS to the news report "Mamata claims BJP bid for fake votes" list in WB" (Feb. 28). I would like to comment that as the political wisdom of Mamata Banerjee is still active she did not require much cerebral exercise to understand the modus operandi of the BJP to inflate the voter lists by roping in fake voters. This is not about alarming the TMC leaders to be vigilant. When institutional independence is at its low ebb, the democratic rights of the people can be devoured at any time and Mamata's timely warning must be taken seriously.

Arum Gupta
Kolkata

DOG DAYS AHEAD

GONE are the days when February was considered a pleasant month with the arrival of spring and the blossoming of flowers. With temperatures rising all over India, winter is all but gone. Delhi saw the warmest February nights in 74 years. Some parts of Kerala and Karnataka, too, hit 41 degrees. The way in which climate changes are taking place in India there is serious worry about impending flash floods, earthquakes, avalanches and drought conditions. Meanwhile, dog days lie ahead.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



"I suppose there were songs of Innocence
Myself and friends at play
Then, inevitably, songs of experience
Lament of the long-lost day
Where have they gone, the girls and boys
Who danced in the moonlight rains?
Is the devil the only one who enjoys
The futures which God disdains?"

— From *Dust to Daastan*, by Bachchoo

Bollywood movies, yoga, curry... Can India's soft power rise like America's?

I very many publications today the phrase "soft power" features for discussion. I think its presence is probably to highlight a contrast with what must be called "hard power", though I haven't seen the latter phrase formulated in print. I must admit, gentle reader, that though I'm fairly literate, I have never quite pinned down the meaning of the first phrase, though I am fairly certain that its opposite means what it says.

In the present political situation, it means the possession of missiles that can deliver nuclear bombs or military capabilities that evacuate, say, Gaza, of all reluctant Palestinians and launch drone attacks on Ukraine.

It also means economic bullying — the imposition of trade tariffs, which Donald Trump every day boasts about. It's all about who can, being richer, impose conditions on those who are poorer. The United States, in a classic example, talks to Ukraine demanding its minerals in exchange for perhaps —

only perhaps — persuading Russia's Vladimir Putin to go easy on killing its population.

I presume, then, that "soft power" means, in its broadest sense, cultural influence and spread.

There is no regretting now the universal influence of pop music, dominantly American till the advent of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and the films with which I and my generation of Indians grew up with and were influenced by. Most of my Indian contemporaries can still recall the entire lyrics of "See you later Alligator" or, less regretfully, those composed by Bob Dylan or Joan Baez.

Then there was the prank we played in college on poor Professor Kerkar, who lectured on chemistry. Most of the hundred and twenty in his class had been to see *The Ten Commandments*, in which a hold Yul Brynner had played the Egyptian Pharaoh and peremptorily commanded his chameleons. So, when Prof. Kerkar wrote an equation on the blackboard and asked us to copy it and work it out, the whole class, saying, "So it shall be written, so it shall be done!"

Soft power compels.

Does or did India possess any comparable soft power? In the decades when we picked up phrases from American films and pop songs, our own Hindi films became hugely popular in most countries of the Third World, including the non-metropolitan satrapies of the Soviet Union.

Raj Kapoor's films had, throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s perpetrated the modern myth of

India — that the poor, the peasants, Raju the boatman, even the awara pickpocket of the cities, were pure, admirable and heroic. The villains were the fellows who imitated the West and wore ties. The popularity of the myth spread to the places where the population identified with it.

Indian soft power of those times.

Today, perhaps Indian soft power is represented by the spread of Indian cuisine. "Curry" is pretty much universal and the "Star of India" or other such restaurants are probably owned and run by Indians.

More seriously, we've exported yoga and the idea, true or false, that India and Indian culture are a fount of spirituality. We are a nation of ancient spiritual truth.

Centuries ago, India did export Hinduism to Southeast Asia and Buddhism elsewhere, and now to the West, in several pure and adulterated forms — it being not so much a philosophy, but a sort of systematic practice to keep people, or perhaps that's harsh — there must be practitioners who adopt yoga as the ultimate salvation for their souls.

Apart from a continuing appeal to the Indian diaspora, the age of the Hindi film as one of the perpetrators of the subcontinent's soft power, is long gone.

Even so, the West is, in perhaps small and selective part, indicating a curiosity to understand the subcontinent through its media.

Britain boasts two Asian film festivals and I have, gentle reader, attended both over the years and witnessed them grow from esoteric concerns of the diasporic communities to general cultural ingredients of Britain's exhibitions.

While this may be true, my half-British Indian friends and their friends may know that I worked with a famous Indian actor called Aamir Khan, but have no real idea who he is.

I don't think any amount of persuasion will win them over to watch today's output of Indian films, unless of course one wins a prize at Cannes. They'd much rather follow, with the rest of the British population, something on Netflix or Amazon Prime.

Despite a flourishing prevalence of philosophical and cultural analyses and commentators, I haven't come across even one who expounds convincingly on the connections, historical and contemporary, between hard and soft power.

There is no doubt that the colonial might of Britain in the past imposed the English language on even resistant natives of the globe.

America's predominant hard power is directly responsible for the universal spread of its modern myth of "superheroes" such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Magagamen (er... soon to become an icon?) through which humans acquire the powers — flight, X-ray vision, invincibility to bullets etc.

Hard causing Soft? A new book?



Outpouring of grief when the bodies of those killed by 23-year-old Affan was brought for homage at Perumala Junction, near Venjaramoodu. The Venjaramoodu murders are the latest in a series of family-killings that have shocked Kerala in recent years.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Debt, despair and death

A young man's chilling confession unravels a spree of murders within his family, leaving Kerala in shock as investigators uncover a complex web of financial troubles and personal despair. **Sarath Babu George** explores the horrific rampage, rooted in distress and strained family dynamics. The sequence of events has left the local community in Thiruvananthapuram in shock and raised questions about mental health and the breakdown of support systems

Trigger warning: The following article has references to suicide and murder. Please avoid reading if you feel distressed by the potentially disturbing subjects.

Around 6.15 p.m. on February 24, 23-year-old A.R. Affan casually walked into the Venjaramoodu police station on the outskirts of Kerala's capital, Thiruvananthapuram. Without a hint of distress, he told the officer manning the front desk, "I have come after killing six people at Perumala, Pulpam, and Pangode."

At first, the officer thought the youth could be of unsound mind, but what followed would turn the evening into a blood-curdling revelation that would haunt the State for days.

Officers promptly took Affan into custody and grilled him further, only to hear him reel out the same chilling information. Immediately, a police team was sent to his home at Perumala based on the details he provided. As the police attempted to break the lock, curious onlookers gathered.

A.M. Nasarudeen, a retired sub-inspector who resides across the street, recalls the macabre scenes: "We entered the house through the backdoor as we could not open the door of the house. We were hit by a scene of horror inside the house. Affan's 13-year-old brother, Ahsan, was lying face down, dead in the living room."

The dreadful discovery didn't end there. In a bedroom of the house, the police found Affan's 55-year-old mother, A. Shemeena, alias Shemi, alive but severely injured and unable to move. The police quickly summoned ambulances to shift both to a nearby hospital.

Grotesque discoveries

As the police team continued their search, the smell of cooking gas filled the house from an LPG cylinder that had been left open. The policemen were quick to close its valve to avoid a fire accident. While the neighbours claimed there was no one else in the house, the police dashed upstairs to stumble upon a grotesque sight - Affan's 23-year-old girlfriend Farsana's lifeless body was found in a sitting position in a chair, her face mutilated beyond recognition. Suggestive of a possible struggle, Ahsan's notebooks lay scattered in the courtyard of the house.

The situation grew more disturbing when the police, following Affan's lead, visited the home of his uncle, Latheef, located about eight km away. Inside, they found the 63-year-old retired CRPF officer dead on a sofa, while his wife, Shahida, 57, was found lying in a pool of blood in the kitchen. As if this weren't horrific enough, 88-year-old Salma Beevi, Affan's grandmother, was also discovered dead at Pangode around 15 km away. Initially thought to be an accidental fall, it soon became clear that she too had fallen victim to Affan's killing spree.

The violence was staggering. Latheef had suffered over 20 blows to the head, while Shemeena needed 13 stitches on the back of her skull and had both her cheekbones fractured. The brutality of the attacks left the entire police team shaken. Shortly after the confession, Affan admitted to

having consumed rat poison before arriving at the police station. He was immediately hospitalised, but the investigation into the murders continued, though many questions remained unanswered.

Later, the police recovered a hammer from Affan's house, which they believed was used to commit the murders. However, there was no evidence suggesting that anyone helped carry out the killings.

K.S. Sudarsan, District Police Chief (Thiruvananthapuram Rural), who is overseeing the investigation, feels that the murders might have taken place over six hours. An officer privy to the investigation feels that the murders might have begun around 11 a.m. when Ahsan, a ninth-grader, had left for school to appear for an examination.

Sequence of events

Affan is suspected to have first attacked his mother. After leaving her for dead, he purchased a hammer, backpack, and rat poison. Around 1 p.m., he might have allegedly murdered his grandmother after she reportedly refused to part with her gold necklace to pawn.

He was later found to have pawned his grandmother's jewellery for about ₹70,000, part of which is believed to have been used to repay a loan. Soon after, he is believed to have received a call from Latheef, enquiring about Shemeena. The uncle and his wife would soon become Affan's next victims.

Returning home, Affan found his mother regaining consciousness and, in a violent fit, purportedly struck her with the hammer again and left the house to drink at a bar.

Around 3 p.m., Affan learnt that Ahsan had returned from school and found the house gate locked. He then called in an autorickshaw driver, Sreejith, who is known to the family, to take Ahsan to a restaurant. He then called Farsana instructing her to come to his house. CCTV footage showed Farsana leaving her house at Mookkannoor, near Venjaramoodu, at 3.31 p.m., confirming the sequence of the events that unfolded.

He is then believed to have taken Farsana to his house, where he kills her, shortly before his

brother's return. Ahsan became his final victim when he arrived home with his favourite 'kuzhi-manthi' (a popular Yemeni rice and meat dish). Afterwards, Affan consumed liquor laced with rat poison, showered to wash away the bloodstains, and called Sreejith, asking for a ride to the police station, a police officer, reconstructing the events on the fateful day, says.

The driver did not find anything amiss in his behaviour. "He claimed his two-month-old motorcycle had developed a snag and he needed a spare part from a shop near the police station. I suggested a service centre, but he insisted on going to the shop. He spoke casually and used his smartphone, conveying a sense of normalcy," Sreejith recalls.

The brutal murders have left the local community in a state of shock, with those who knew Affan struggling to comprehend the violence. Abhinav Sathesh, who was Affan's junior at Government Higher Secondary School, Koduvahannoor, recalls him as an affable fellow. "We used to travel together to and from the school. Affan was always approachable," he says.

Suhara Salim, a member of the Vamanapuram block panchayat, remembers how Affan had been protective of his younger brother. "My daughter used to offer classes to Ahsan a few years ago. It was Affan who dropped Ahsan at my house and later picked him up. During our brief conversation, Affan came across as a genial person," she says.

Investigators believe that financial distress was a possible motive for the killings. The family had struggled for years, reportedly burdened by a debt of around ₹65 lakh after a business failure in Saudi Arabia, where Affan's father, Abdul Raheem Hassan Kunju, had worked. A vehicle upholstery and accessories store, which he used to run in Riyadh, had run into rough weather following the introduction of Nitaqat law (the Saudi Arabia government policy that sets quotas for hiring Saudi nationals in private companies to boost local employment) and the COVID-19-induced downturn.

Suhara reminisces Shemeena confiding in her about the family's financial troubles, and they had even mortgaged their house in the hope of

getting back on their feet. "They also hoped to claim a chit from the Kerala State Financial Enterprises, but were unable to provide surety to obtain the money," she says.

Although the family's kin have largely supported them over the trying times, their patience could have worn thin of late. "Affan could have probably felt that his family was being gradually isolated by the others, particularly Latheef who is known to have been an influential figure in Abdul Raheem's household," an investigator suggests.

The accused reportedly told the police that the family had considered a mass suicide "with no respite to their despair". This could have led Affan to murder his mother, brother, and Farsana, even while the reasons behind the attack on Latheef and Shahida remain hazy. He felt his dear ones would not be able to cope without him.

G. Mohan Roy, Professor and Head of the Department of Psychiatry, Government Medical College Hospital, Kollam, believes it is a case of murder-suicide pact, where Affan, possibly acted as the dominant personality and decided the fate of his family members.

Plight of father

For Hassan Kunju, the tragedy is a nightmare. Separated from his family for seven years, he watched the funeral of his loved ones on television. He was unable to perform the funeral rites of his dear ones as a travel ban imposed due to the expiry of his residence permit (iqama) held him back in Saudi Arabia.

Nass Vakkom, a social activist based in Saudi Arabia, points out that Hassan Kunju's residence permit expired nearly three years ago. "He now faces two options - seek legal assistance from the Indian embassy or pay the fine for the expired permit, find a new sponsor, and renew the permit. However, this process will take at least two weeks. Efforts are being made to expedite his return home," he explains.

The Venjaramoodu murders are the latest in a series of family-killings that have shocked Kerala in recent years. The murders of six persons over 14 years at Koodathy, near Kozhikode, allegedly by lacing their food with poison, grabbed headlines in 2019. The bloody memories of the Nanthancode murders, in which four family members were killed eight years ago, still haunt residents of the State capital.

Dr. Roy, who had evaluated the mental health of Cadell Jeansen Raja, the accused in the Nanthancode case, flags the gaps in community support systems as a key factor in such tragedies.

"Kerala is known for its strong network of voluntary workers and social activists working at the grassroots level. These support systems have helped cushion families in distress. However, a growing social disconnect is now threatening to undo these efforts," he feels. He emphasises the role of residents' associations in keeping a watchful eye on neighbourhoods and highlights the importance of teaching social skills to children from an early age. "It is crucial to instil a sense of community and empathy in youth to help prevent such tragic events," he says.

(Suicide prevention helpline: DISHA - 1056, 0471-2552056)



People flock to Perumala, near Venjaramoodu, a suburb in Thiruvananthapuram, a day after the murders to view Salmas House, the site of the mass killing; (right) A.R. Affan. SARATH BABU GEORGE, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



(Clockwise from above) In agrarian Punjab, which shares the border with Pakistan, parents encourage youth to migrate in the fear that they may take to drugs; Vishal Sharma, who was deported in 2023; Sarwan Singh, whose brother left for the U.S. using an illegal route. SUSHI KUMAR VERMA

Waiting for life to happen

While the Donald Trump-led U.S. government continues to deport illegal immigrants to India, those who were sent back earlier despair at the lack of remunerative job opportunities. While most have returned to a life of farming in Punjab, some say they will try taking the 'donkey route' again, finds **Alisha Datta**

Sitting on a beige velvet sofa in his two-storey house at Lopoke village in Punjab's Amritsar district, Vishal Sharma, 38, turns the pages of his passport, tracing the stamps of various countries with his fingers. He looks longingly out of his window at a replica of the Statue of Liberty in his village bordering Pakistan. In 2023, Sharma and 275 others, who had left home to live the 'American dream', were deported to India after they had tried to enter the U.S. illegally. Now, he lives in the village of his birth, practising farming with his elder brother.

In a statement made in Parliament on February 6 this year, S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, said since 2009, the U.S. has sent back 15,756 illegal Indian immigrants. This was after a U.S. military plane landed at the Amritsar airport with 104 illegal immigrants in handcuffs.

With a sullen face, Sharma says ever since his return, he has been trying to make peace with the fact that he will no longer be able to work in the U.S. "There are no legal restrictions on my movement, but having seen so many people being deported in the past few weeks, there is no way I'm going to ever make it through," he says. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, there were 2.2 lakh Indians living as illegal immigrants in the country in 2022.

The despondence in Sharma's voice is partly from seeing three flights carrying deportees from the U.S. land in India in the past three weeks and partly from knowing that other than the illegal 'donkey route', it is unlikely that he can reach the U.S. legally. "I have to accept that what my life will be: farming, a shared income with siblings, and a life limited to this village," he says.

Like many around him, Sharma dreams of a life in a developed country in the West since his early adulthood days. "Initially, it was the fascination of a foreign land, then it was earning in dollars, and now it is about respect and the promise of a better future for me and my family," he says. Parents of youth in Punjab urge them on, fearful that the State's drug problem will reach them.

Hope and reality

Pointing towards the houses in his neighbourhood — some sprawling mansions, others with

thatched roofs — he says everyone around him only aims to move abroad, sometimes through scholarships to study and sometimes on work visas. Then there is the 'donkey route' that involves unregistered agents taking people through different countries, landing up at the U.S. border, where they cross over on land.

Being a high school graduate from a government school with a low score in the International English Language Testing System that gauges the English proficiency of non-native speakers, Sharma was sure that his pathway to the U.S. was not through higher education. "Some of my friends had started working there as drivers and managers at grocery stores. I too wanted a job like them and earn as much," he says.

He began to check with his friends' agents about the possibility of moving and the associated costs. Every friend had a different agent, and each agent had a different route to take him to the U.S. border. "Some suggested going through the Panama forest, some through layovers in multiple countries on tourist visas, some even promised the direct route via a work visa," he says. In 2023, he sold a *killa* (about an acre) of the land he had inherited to fund his dreams.

The agent first flew him to Thailand on a tourist visa. Then over the next few months, he sent him to Vietnam multiple times, again on a tourist visa, promising that once he was there a work visa for the U.S. would be granted. "I spent weeks in Vietnam, Thailand, and Egypt, waiting for a way to reach the U.S., but each time I would have to come back to India because the agent could not get the visa and my tourist visa would expire in those countries," he says.

After multiple such trips, a Dubai-based agent assured Sharma that he could avoid the 'donkey route' by taking a private flight from Dubai to Nicaragua, a central American country. "The private flight left on December 22 (in 2023) from a small, not very popular airport in Dubai. It was stopped in France, where it had a layover. From there the flight was turned back to Mumbai," he says.

When the flight landed in Mumbai, Sharma realised that the ₹10 lakh he had spent on staying in multiple countries waiting for a visa to the U.S. was for nothing. "The agent stopped taking my calls. The flight back had Punjabis, Gujaratis, and Haryanvis. The police had started investigating it as a human trafficking case on the order of the Indian government," he says.

Sharma gestures towards a cowshed. He helps his brother with farming and takes care of buffaloes.

"We spent over ₹2 lakh on the buffaloes and one has broken his leg. Farming has diminishing returns," laments Sharma. He adds that no father wants to get his daughter married to a man who lives in a village with no prospects of going abroad. "With my education, I can only get a job that will pay ₹10,000 to ₹12,000 (a month) here. Who will marry me?"

Caught for re-entry

This feeling of being stuck in rural, agricultural Punjab since being deported is common across homes. Gursharan Singh, 22, a resident of Mehoka village in Amritsar district, was deported in 2023. His brother has been working in Spain as a farm labourer for eight months now. "In Spain, he makes ₹90,000 a month. Here, we sowed *gobi* (cauliflower) that sold at ₹50 per kg. Now, it is being sold at ₹1.50 per kg (in the wholesale market), yet we are supposed to continue staying here, content with our earnings," he says, resentfully.

Gursharan's mother Rajwant Kaur, 55, says, "Dollar kamayana bhi bhagya mein hona chahiye, warna kyu itne saas dunki se chale gaye aur yeh pakda gaya (To earn in dollars is a matter of destiny, why else would so many successfully enter the country by taking the donkey route and he be caught)." Gursharan was caught on the U.S.-Mexico border.

After being deported, many have settled back into life as they knew it. Some reattempt entry, sometimes ending up in deportation camps. A month ago, Balwinder Singh, 55, a resident of Manawala village in Amritsar district, received a call from an unknown number.

All he could make out from the man who spoke with a foreign accent was that his younger brother, Sukhdev Singh, 35, was in a detention camp in Texas, U.S. "Sirf naam aur location pata laga; baki kaisa hai, aur ab kya hoga kuch pata nehi laga (I only got to know the name and location; I was not told how he is and what will happen now)," says Balwinder.

Sukhdev, who had been working as a carpenter in Dubai for close to a decade earning

₹50,000 a month, had been attempting to go to the U.S. for a few years. His family did not know of his aspirations or plans.

"One day, he told me that he wanted to sell his portion of the land and buy a car," says Balwinder. "Mujhe laga Dubai mein hi business karega, toh maine ek killa zameen bech diya (I thought he would start a business in Dubai, so I sold some part of the land)," he says, adding that the deal fetched him ₹30 lakh.

Sukhdev, his wife Rajneet Kaur, 32, teenage son, and infant daughter then boarded the Nicaragua-bound flight from Dubai, which was turned back to Mumbai in 2023. He was grief-stricken, but determined to return again through the illegal route. Kaur did not know this. "He never shared his plans with me. He confides in his older brother, so when he left in August 2024, I did not know he was going to 'America'," she says.

She is worried about the situation her husband is in, but sitting in her asbestos-roofed home amid green fields in Manawala, Kaur is unable to understand the ground realities of a detention camp in Texas. "Ab itna kharcha ho gaya hai toh kuch kamakar hi wapsi aye (Now that so much has been spent, he might as well earn some money and come back)," she says.

Balwinder hopes Sukhdev can stay on in the U.S. "Here I can hire a farm labourer for ₹300 a day and get work done. He does not have to lend me a hand. Anyway, earnings are going down with every harvest season. How much will he even make here?"

High prices to pay

Meanwhile, 10 km from Sukhdev's house, Sarwan Singh, 26, working on a rented field in Chagan village, says the youth in India, especially in Punjab, have no option but to go abroad.

"My brother, a 12th pass, tried finding a job," he says, referring to his sibling's highest education as being a school graduate. "He got a job in a cloth mill where he was offered ₹8,000 a month. He then tried starting a dairy farming business, but it did not take off. Now with two unmarried sisters and ageing parents, what other option do we have?" Sarwan says.

His brother, Nishant Singh, 24, like many in his village, joined a 'chain' of people who helped each other migrate to the U.S. and Canada, all illegally. "One friend had been working as an Uber driver there and another in a shopping mall. They told us that they were making ₹4 lakh-₹5 lakh a month," Sarwan says, standing in his field, where a Canadian flag is painted on a cement water tank.

As he pauses to utter his next sentence, a four-wheeler zips past, blaring Cheema Y and Gur Sidhu's song 'Trump', which went viral on social media. Smirking at the lines "Jattan deputation nu rok sake na Trump (Trump can't stop the sons of the Jatts)", Sarwan says he hopes that his brother is not sent back home.

Tear-eyed, he looks at his harvest and says sometimes there is flooding, sometimes the government does not buy the grain at a rate that will secure farmers a profit. Then there is the ever-increasing rent of land, making it difficult for any small-scale farmer like him to save any money, he says.

"The rent for an acre is ₹70,000. In addition, there are other fixed costs. I hardly get anything to take back home. If my brother comes back after spending over ₹40 lakh, how will we even pay back the loan?" he says.

He knows his brother could well be on the next flight out of the U.S. Each time the phone rings and he sees an unknown number, he is anxious.

alisha.datta@thehindu.co.in



A replica of the Statue of Liberty in Amritsar, symbolising aspirations in Punjab to work in the U.S. SUSHI KUMAR VERMA

KARNATAKA

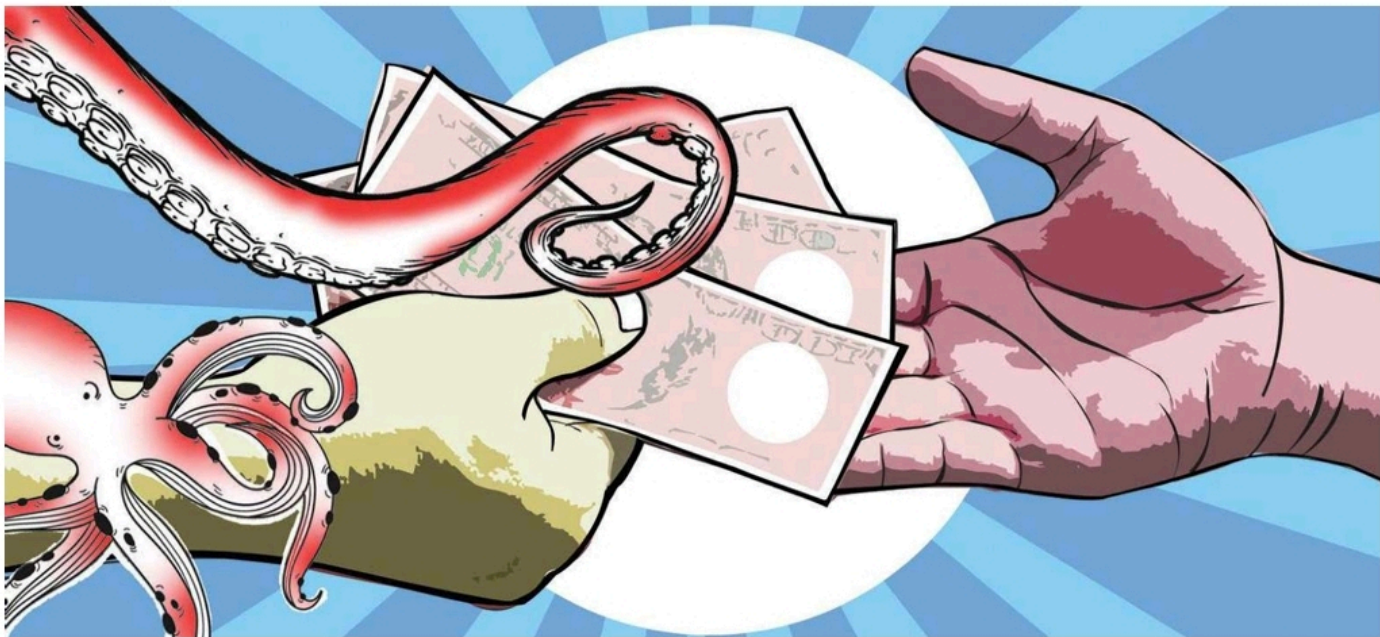


ILLUSTRATION: SEBASTIAN FRANCIS

The huge burden of small loans

The last few months have seen a slew of cases in Karnataka where microfinance institutions employed coercive methods to recover loans, leading to the passing of an Ordinance to regulate them. **Sharath S. Srivatsa** analyses the multiple factors, including key policy changes, which brought the situation to such a pass

Twenty-five-year-old Madhuri L., mother of a baby barely two months old, taking shelter under the stairs of a private building in the dry winter month of January at Tarihal village in Belagavi in north Karnataka became one of the defining images of the plight of those who borrowed from microfinance institutions (MFIs) and defaulted on repayment. By extension, it also reflected distress in rural Karnataka.

Madhuri's father Ganapathi Lohar, 60, a farmer, who had availed a home loan of ₹5 lakhs from an MFI, defaulted on payment for nine months. "I paid most of the instalments earlier, but could not pay in the last nine months. I suspect the banking correspondent misused the instalment amount I had paid," he said.

The Lohars, whose default ran into about ₹2 lakhs, stayed under the stairs until Minister for Women and Child Development Laxmi Hebbalkar intervened and moved Madhuri to an anganwadi and negotiated with the company for a settlement. "The company has allowed two months to repay. I will have to take another loan from some private money lender to repay the old loan," said the father.

Similar cases of defaulters facing harassment have been reported across the State since late August last year. Use of coercive methods and gross violations of guidelines laid down by the Reserve Bank of India have been reported as defaults have increased. There are also reports of nearly a dozen borrowers ending their lives unable to repay loan, though there is no verified data on this.

Post-COVID-19 scenario

Over the past few years, especially post-COVID-19, rural indebtedness increased as income fell or stagnated, inflation increased and individuals tried to meet aspirations or emergencies through loans from MFIs. As the lending increased with policy changes, the industry grew at 32% in 2023-24 over the previous financial year in Karnataka and the total outstanding loans in the microfinance sector involving 28 MFIs governed by RBI have been currently pegged at ₹60,597 crores in ₹1.11 crores outstanding accounts in Karnataka.

The distress in microfinance lending is not new in the country, but it was a first in Karnataka on such a scale that has gained visibility.

Enticement into fresh loans

The problem, according to industry insiders, blew up as defaults increased over repayment of multiple loans availed over time. "The industry lent, overlooking the borrowers' repayment capacity, enticing them into fresh loans that naturally came at a higher interest rate. They were offered as top-ups," an industry source pointed out.

Twenty-four-year-old Amulya, a transgender woman from Kalaburagi in the Kalyana Karnataka region, along with her sister-in-law, availed loans of ₹50,000, ₹35,000, and ₹30,000 from



Recovery agents, accompanied by a dozen women, would come to my house daily and abuse me. I beg, relying on the small amounts shopkeepers offer. When even survival is a daily battle, repaying the debt became an impossible task.

AMULYA, in Kalaburagi

three MFIs a year ago for a family wedding. Though they paid some instalments, they could not keep up as their incomes dwindled, says Amulya.

"The recovery agents, accompanied by a dozen women, would come to my house daily and abuse me. I beg, relying on the small amounts shopkeepers offer. When even survival is a daily battle, repaying the debt became an impossible task," she said.

Absence of credit score

Many vulnerable borrowers like Amulya went to MFIs either to refinance a loan taken from a local moneylender or because they did not have access to institutional lending. They do not qualify for institutional loans in the absence of a credit score or have almost nothing as collateral. "A large number of defaults in individual lending were in this category. The rate of delinquency in Karnataka has increased from 3.6% to 6.8% currently. It is also a national phenomenon," said the industry insider.

As repayment became a problem and aggressive recovery agents persisted, several women in the Haveri district in north Karnataka resorted to courting their *Mangalsutra* to the Chief Minister, seeking protection from the harassment of loan recovery agents. "Our husbands have left home after receiving threatening calls. We are appealing to the Chief Minister to save us," said Ranebennur native Savithramma, in her mid-40s, who led the protest.

Collateral-free loan

The cap on the collateral-free loan amount to an individual was raised to ₹3 lakhs in 2022 from the ₹1.25 lakh cap introduced in 2019. "The RBI directive in 2011 capped the loan amount or total indebtedness of the borrowers to ₹50,000. In 2022, the RBI increased the limit to ₹3 lakhs. Has the income grown six times in this period? What was the wisdom in fixing ₹50,000 then and the wisdom to enhance the limit to ₹3 lakhs now?" asked a leading expert on microfinance.

"In a system that pumps loans to vulnerable

people, regulation should be more stringent. MFIs have been found to violate RBI norms in their quest for growth. Here, the RBI does not regulate much on NBFCs, and it has been outsourced to self-regulatory organisations MFIN and Sa-Dhan," he added.

2-plus-1 scheme

With the enhancement of the borrowing limit, individual borrowers were enticed through a "2-plus-1" scheme by the lending institutions, which meant an individual having taken an unsecured loan of ₹2 lakh received an additional ₹1 lakh as a top-up. Along with this, a "Micro LAP", another product for loans against properties, were offered to these individuals with property documents as collateral. Micro LAP is a cross sale offered to the customer, who is repaying his micro finance loan regularly.

Many of the small and petty businessmen, especially the small village-level provision stores or small seed sellers, availed of this loan, all of which came beyond their means to repay. This was, for instance, the case with the Lohar family. Though the collateral in the Micro LAP came under the purview of the Securitisation and Enforcement of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 for default, the norms had not been followed as coercive measures were deployed to recover the properties.

In other cases, the joint liability groups (JLGs), comprising women, received unsecured loans, the success of which depended upon the prompt payment of all the members in the group. If one defaulted payment, the group payment could get into default.

Delinquency rates among women

Women have been found vulnerable to both enticements to take loans and threats during the recovery process. Though delinquency rates among women are believed to be lower as the group works on a kind of "social guarantee or a collateral" for repayment of loan, many of the JLGs have faltered on payment.

An expert on microfinance borrowings observed, "Women have been found to use the loan for income generation activities initially, but they slowly get into purchase of white goods or consumer products."

Role of guarantees

The Congress government in Karnataka introduced guarantee schemes, especially two aimed at women - Gruha Lakshmi which provides monthly financial assistance of ₹2,000 and Shakti which allows women to travel for free across the State in State-run public transport corporation buses - with an aim to give them greater agency, to be mobile, seek employment or meet emergency household needs.

Asked if there was an underlying rural distress despite these interventions, Gowda said, "Earnings do not remain in the hands of the working class and poor due to inflation. There is stagnation of income, and income in real terms is de-

clining. There is distress at the lower level of pyramid that the Centre is not even acknowledging, but pandering to only the wealthy."

Role of intermediaries

The role of intermediaries and banking correspondents in creating a crisis situation has also come under the scanner. For example, Yallava Bannibag, the founder of the Rani Channamma Rural Micro Finance Company in Halabhavi village in Belagavi taluk, who promoted micro societies and self-help groups of women across Karnataka and Maharashtra, is now under investigation for large-scale financial irregularities. Bannibag and her team face charges of swindling crores of rupees from over 6,000 women in Belagavi and surrounding areas.

"Yallava encouraged women to form SHGs to start saving small amounts of ₹50 - ₹100 per week. Then, she would strongly urge them to take loans from MFIs, saying they should be treated as JLGs. But once they took the loans, she would lie to them that she was the intermediary of a government agency that was offering a 50% subsidy on their loans. She convinced the groups not to repay the loans. She also convinced them to part with half of their loan amount, telling them that she would repay the full amount using the subsidy," a police official said.

Investigators have traced documents that reveal Yallava had got over 50 MFIs to lend to women. However, there is no proof of her working as an intermediary for any of them.

Allowing on-lending

According to former General Secretary of All India Bank Officers Federation Thomas Franco, RBI, which earlier discouraged on-lending, has now allowed on-lending by scheduled commercial banks. The RBI has also relaxed the lending rate, and NBFCs are charging up to 36% or even more in addition to the processing charge and others on which the cap has been removed.

With the crisis assuming a larger proportion, the State government came under pressure to act against the illegal and inhuman ways of loan recovery. After much deliberation and over half a dozen drafts, the government came up with the Karnataka Micro Loan and Small Loan (Prevention of Coercive Actions) Ordinance, 2025, to curb the menace of harsh recovery procedures adopted by the middlemen.

It brought all microfinance businesses of cooperative societies, NGOs, SHGs and trusts besides private money lenders who are not under the purview of the RBI under the new state legislation.

These organisations together have been estimated to have lent about ₹40,000 crores in the State and have a substantial network in rural areas. The Ordinance was brought in as the existing legislations, the Karnataka Pawn Brokers Act, 1961, the Karnataka Prohibition of Charging Exorbitant Interest Act, 2004, and the Karnataka Money Lenders Act, 1961, were found to be lacking teeth. After initial reluctance, Governor Thawar Chand Gehlot cleared it and the Ordinance was promulgated on February 12.

Not strong enough

However, experts believe that the Ordinance is not strong enough as it exempts the NBFCs, MFIs and small banks that are registered with the RBI and have a bigger share in the market. Questions on the ability of the vulnerable borrower to complain against the money lender/organisations, who most often receive political patronage, have been raised.

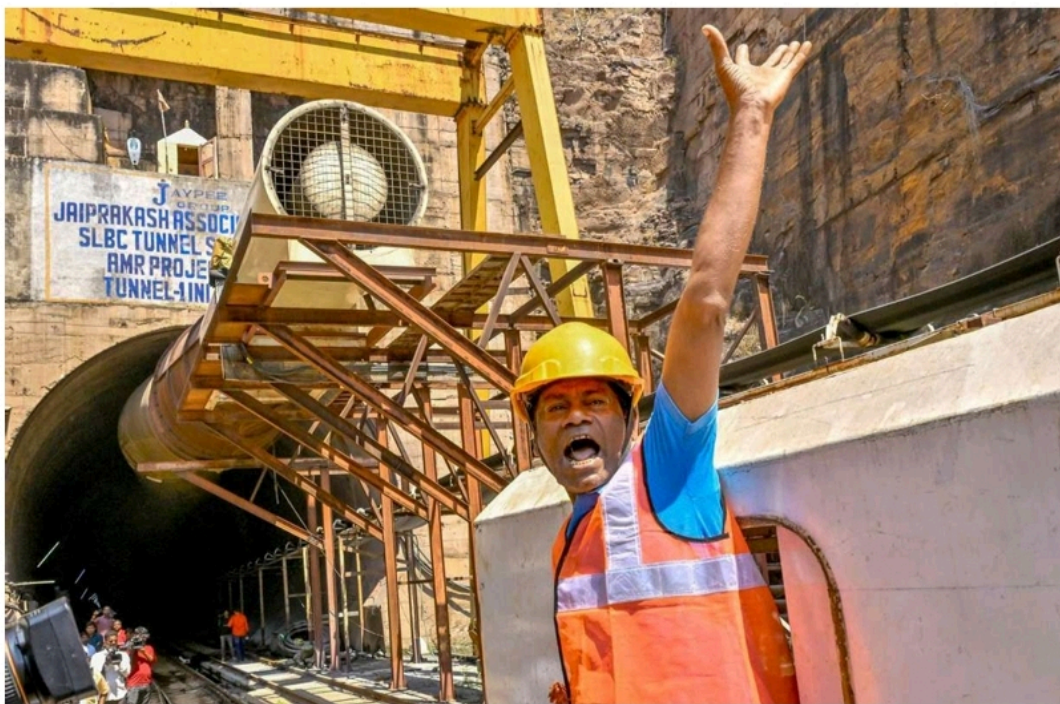
Krishna Byre Gowda, however, argued that nothing prevents the government from acting against the coercive measures of any RBI-registered company too. He pointed that after the Ordinance was promulgated, complaints have come down drastically.

Meanwhile, the MFIs are expected to go slow on lending during the remaining part of the financial year and revisit their credit policy during the next fiscal.

(With additional inputs by Rishikesh Bahadur Desai, Kumar Buradikatti, Girish Pattanashetti, Sathish G.T. and Raghava M.)



A mother with her barely two-month-old baby along with her family members sitting outside their locked house in Naganur of Belagavi district, which was sealed by a finance company over loan default. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



A rescue worker at the SLBC tunnel in Domalapenta village, Nagarkurnool district. NAGARA GOPAL

Looking for workers at the end of the tunnel

On February 22, a routine workday turned into a nightmare for workers at the Srisailem Left Bank Canal tunnel in Nagarkurnool district, when a portion of the structure collapsed in the morning, trapping eight men. An intense, multi-agency rescue operation is going on to rescue the workers who have no food and water and cannot be contacted. **P. Laxma Reddy** and **B. Chandrashekhara** report on the difficult operation

The quiet village of Domalapenta in the Nagarkurnool district of Telangana is generally a pit stop for wildlife enthusiasts as it is nestled in the lush Nallamala forest range, which houses the Amrabad Tiger Reserve. Devotees also often flock to the village to grab a quick meal or snack before heading to the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel, which is situated, as the name suggests, on the left bank of the Srisailem dam. They are Manoj Kumar and Sri Niwas from Uttar Pradesh; Sunny Singh from Jammu and Kashmir; Gurpreet Singh from Punjab; and Sandeep Sahu, Jagta Xess, Santosh Sahu, and Anju Sahu from Jharkhand.

However, over the last week, there has been unusually hectic activity in the village. Since February 22, eight men have remained trapped inside the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel, which is situated, as the name suggests, on the left bank of the Srisailem dam. They are Manoj Kumar and Sri Niwas from Uttar Pradesh; Sunny Singh from Jammu and Kashmir; Gurpreet Singh from Punjab; and Sandeep Sahu, Jagta Xess, Santosh Sahu, and Anju Sahu from Jharkhand. Rescue teams from the Indian Army, Indian Navy, Border Roads Organisation (BRO), National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), Singareni Collieries, agencies from the Central and State government, as well as private agencies have all been working tirelessly to pull them out. Worried families and journalists have remained stationed at the spot too, regularly seeking updates.

Jagta Xess' elder brother, Jitruam, who works at a private company in Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, has been waiting at the site for days. He was flown in here by the Jharkhand government. His hope is to somehow see his brother emerge unscathed from the depths of this tunnel.

"Since I am the eldest in a family of three brothers and sisters, Jagta, who is the youngest, hardly speaks to me. But he speaks to my wife, Basanti. Everyone loves him a lot," says Jitruam.

Then his face falls. "Officials have been saying the operation will take a lot of time. I just keep praying that all the men come out safely," he says.

A boom, debris, and gushing water

The SLBC tunnel is part of the Alimniti Madhava Reddy Project, which was started in 1983 to provide irrigation facilities in the drought-prone areas of Nalgonda district and to supply drinking water to fluoride-affected villages. The agreement to build the SLBC tunnel was made in 2005 when Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy was Chief Minister.

According to officials of the Irrigation Department, until February 22, work on the tunnel had been completed for 13.93 km from the side of the Srisailem reservoir and another 20.43 km from the side of the Dindi reservoir, leaving 9.55 km of work to be completed. The tunnel is located 400 metres beneath the surface of the hilly region.

On the morning of February 22, there were 50 workers inside the tunnel, according to Jaiprakash Associates, the firm that was given the project contract and which is the flagship company of the Jaypee Group.

Phoolchand Sahu, 26, a worker from Jharkhand's Gumla district, says while he was going to

work that morning, he met some workers who were returning from night duty. They warned him and several other workers that water was seeping into the tunnel. Since seepage incidents were not uncommon in the tunnel, the workers cautiously went inside.

"We arrived at the tunnel entrance at around 7 in the morning and entered it using a locomotive as usual," says Sahu. After an hour and a half, when the tunnel boring machine was being operated, Sahu recalls hearing a thundering noise. In an instant, cement and concrete blocks fell on the tunnel boring machine and water from the hole in the roof gushed down. "We saw that a portion of the tunnel had collapsed, burying the tunnel boring machine," he says. "We just ran." The tunnel had collapsed 14 km from its mouth.

A senior State government official coordinating the rescue mission says the incident happened in phases. "It occurred on a minor scale at 8:22 a.m. and then again at 8:40 a.m.," he says.

Due to the strong water current, Sahu recalls nearly being swept away in the tunnel. "The power supply had stopped and the tunnel was engulfed in darkness. But we just kept running towards the entrance. Some people held the pipelines and some got onto the conveyor belt. We then saw the locomotive, jumped into it, and came out of the tunnel," he says.

It was only when Sahu and the others exited the tunnel and checked the register that they realised that eight men — two engineers, two technical staff members, and four workers — who were closest to the tunnel boring machine were

missing and 13 others were injured. At around 1 p.m., Nagarkurnool Superintendent of Police Vaibhav Gaikwad arrived at the spot, followed by District Collector Santosh Badawath. Telangana Irrigation Minister N. Uttam Kumar Reddy also rushed to the site from Hyderabad by helicopter to take stock of the situation.

That night, at around 10 p.m., the NDRF launched a rescue operation. Later, other agencies, including the Marine Commando Force of the Indian Navy and a 12-member team of rat-hole miners, who were involved in the rescue of 41 workers trapped in the Sikyara tunnel in Uttarakhand in 2023, also joined the efforts. Firoz Qurshui, a member of the rat miners' team, says removing the mud is the biggest challenge. "The situation at the SLBC tunnel is different from the Uttarakshi tunnel accident. Here, we are dealing with water and mud instead of rock," he explains.

The Chairman and Managing Director of Singareni Collieries, N. Balaram, says the tunnel boring machine broke into two due to the impact of the roof collapse, which further complicated rescue efforts.

The other workers remain sceptical about the possibility of the trapped labourers' survival. "We don't think they are alive," says Sahu.

Pulling out all the stops
The rescuers have reached over 13 km inside the tunnel. However, the water and slush in the next few hundred metres have prevented them from getting to the trapped men. Since the day of the incident, 11 specialised teams from various organisations, including Jaiprakash Associates, have been involved in rescue efforts.

On February 27, a team from the BRO inspected the tunnel and suggested cutting the rear parts of the tunnel boring machine. Initially, BRO experts had suggested using plasma cutters, which are often used in automotive repair and restoration, industrial construction, and salvage and scrapping operations, but the idea was abandoned as these are heavy and cannot be easily transported inside the tunnel.

A team from the South Central Railway also arrived with an ultra thermos cutter, which is designed to cut through metals thicker than 8 millimetres. They began cutting the dismantled parts of the tunnel boring machine to shift them out.

The National Geophysical Research Institute has also joined rescue efforts. A team from the institute entered the tunnel with a Ground Pen-



The situation at the SLBC tunnel is different from the Uttarakshi tunnel accident. Here, we are dealing with water and mud instead of rock

FIROZ QURSHUI
Rat miner

trating Radar unit, which is capable of detecting objects up to 10 metres deep. Another Ground Penetrating Radar unit was deployed on the hill-top for external assessments. Metal cutting experts have also been brought in.

"Meanwhile, de-watering operations have nearly been completed, with multiple teams using loco-dumpers to remove accumulated silt from the tunnel," says an official. However, no one has been able to establish contact with the men, who are trapped without food and water.

Uttam Kumar Reddy says the teams will finish their operation within the next two-three days and work on the tunnel can resume in about two months. About the chances of survival of the victims, he simply says, "We remain hopeful until the operation is complete."

A rigorous job

Workers who are watching the rescue operations are angry. Some unskilled daily wage labourers from Jharkhand allege that they had not been paid wages for the last three months. Munna Sahu from Gumla district says the workers receive only ₹600 per day from their agency, despite the dangers posed by tunnel excavation work. "The construction company provides no additional support, such as a common kitchen facility with LPG gas," he says. "We collect firewood from the forest to cook our meals."

Around 800 workers have been hired for this project. While 300 are from the region, the rest hail from Jharkhand, Odisha, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. The workers live in tin sheds, about 4 km away from the tunnel entrance, where they are provided with steel or iron beds, fans, and power points for charging phones. "We came all the way from Jharkhand (some 1,400 km away) because we got only ₹300 per day for an eight-hour shift there. But the poor safety measures here are posing a threat to our lives," says a worker from Gumla district. If there is a health emergency, the workers say they visit the government health sub-centre at Domalapenta or the primary health centre at Mannanur, about 100 km away.

Describing their daily routine, Sahu says the workers usually wake up at 5 in the morning. By 7 a.m., they are expected to be sitting in the buses provided by the company, which take them to the tunnel. "It takes 12-15 minutes to reach the tunnel entrance via a 4-km-long ghāt road that has no boundary rails. We leave our mobile phones in a storeroom at the entrance before boarding a locomotive vehicle into the tunnel," he says. The workers are all given helmets.

"While the debris is primarily removed by the conveyor belt attached to the tunnel boring machine, we assist in clearing debris from the ground," Sahu says. However, the workers voice concerns over safety. "We are forced to work for 10 hours instead of 8. Moreover, if an accident occurs inside the tunnel, there is no way out," says another worker. Workers say they are not sure whether they want to continue working for the project once the rescue operation is completed.

'No human error'

The chief engineer of the project, V. Ajay Kumar, says there was no human error involved in assessing the safety conditions of the tunnel. However, the formation of fresh cavities in the roof of the tunnel could have led to increase in seepage, leading to the collapse of the reinforced cement concrete slabs used as revetment, he explains.

"The work agency took all precautions before resuming work. We arrested the seepage with cement mixed with specified chemicals for grouting. But the intensity of seepage increased all of a sudden and a few roof slabs fell on the front portion of the tunnel boring machine before those deployed there could react and come out to safety," he says.

"Those behind the tunnel boring machine suspected that something was wrong when they heard the noise and ran back to the mouth of the tunnel. They shouted to those positioned in front of the machine but they got no answer. They didn't wait for them, fearing for their lives," says an official coordinating the rescue work.

A retired Chief Engineer of the Irrigation Department, M. Shyam Prasad Reddy, says engineers of the Irrigation Department were happy when the contract of the tunnel excavation work was given to Jaiprakash Associates, a company that was part of the prestigious Sardar Sarovar Dam project in Gujarat.

Even as rescue operations are in full swing, hope is diminishing. Sandeep Sahoo, 28, was supposed to return home to Nakti Toli village this month. "We were informed about this tragic incident on the evening of February 22 by fellow workers from our village," says his father, Jitru Sahoo. "Right now, all we are doing is praying."

Sandeep's mother Bursimuni Devi, 50, says she spoke to him a day before the incident. "He was very happy and said that he would come home before Holi. He spoke to me, Arjun (his younger brother), and Purnima (his younger sister) that day. He was asking me what to bring from Telangana. I told him to bring whatever he likes. Forget seeing him, I haven't even heard his voice for a week now," she says.

Arjun says his brother earns around ₹15,000 a month. "He is the only earning member of our family and we just want him to be safe. My father has gone to bring him back," he says.

pandita.laxmareddy@thehindu.co.in;
chandrashekhara.bhaskar@thehindu.co.in

With inputs from Anil Bhaduri



Nagarkurnool



Daily wage workers from Jharkhand look for updates on the rescue operation near Domalapenta village. NAGARA GOPAL



Turning point

In Bihar, the BJP is now clearly the senior partner in the alliance with JD(U)

The expansion of the Bihar Council of Ministers – seven new members, all from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have been inducted – is the clearest public statement that the party wants to rewrite its terms of engagement with its partner, the Janata Dal (United), or the JD(U). The BJP now has 21 of 36 cabinet positions, while the JD(U) has 13, including Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. The Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) has one Minister while the remaining post is an independent. With the Assembly elections only a few months away, the BJP has made it clear to the JD(U) that it will now act as the senior partner of the alliance. The expansion was after Mr. Kumar's meeting with BJP president J.P. Nadra and just ahead of the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the State, marking an early beginning of the election campaign in his characteristic style. The Assembly election in 2020 was a turning point. The JD(U) contested 115 seats but won only 43, while the BJP won 74 out of the 110 seats it contested. The partners flipped their positions within the alliance, with the BJP emerging as the senior partner after playing a supportive role to Mr. Kumar for nearly four decades. The BJP conceded the Chief Minister's post to Mr. Kumar in order to avoid any potential blowback from the Extremely Backward Classes (EBC) which continue to support Mr. Kumar.

At 73, Mr. Kumar is younger to both Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is 74, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)'s Lalu Prasad Yadav, who is 76, the other key figure in Bihar. The JD(U) supreme, however, is at a vulnerable moment in his career after having been the Chief Minister for two decades, hopping between the RJD and the BJP for partnership. The BJP is trying to capitalise on this and consolidate its dominance. The caste composition of its Ministers is a clear indicator of the party's strategy to directly engage with a wide array of communities and reduce its dependence on Mr. Kumar even further. This is in keeping with a pattern that the BJP has been following over the years – the party reaches out to newer electorates by making alliances with parties first and then gradually expands its own direct contacts with them. The most recent example of this was in Maharashtra where the BJP replaced the Shiv Sena as the dominant party. While Mr. Kumar may sense the danger involved in his partnership with the BJP, his options are limited. Having switched between the BJP and the RJD several times in the past, he only managed to delay, but not avoid, this moment of utter helplessness.

Truce under fire

All sides must ensure that the war in Gaza ends permanently

As the first phase of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire comes to an end on Saturday, there are growing signs that the already fragile truce is under enormous strain. When the deal was reached in mid-January, the understanding was that it would be implemented in three phases. In the first, Israel was required to reposition some of its troops, letting displaced Palestinians move from the south to the north, and release more than a thousand security prisoners in return for some 32 hostages. In the second phase, both sides are required to bring the war to an end, while the third phase is about the reconstruction of Gaza. In the first 42 days, both sides stuck to their commitments despite challenges – Hamas released 38 hostages and Israel freed hundreds of prisoners. Talks for the second phase were to begin days earlier – Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent a delegation to Cairo only on Thursday. And, according to the deal, Israel was to complete the withdrawal of its troops from the Philadelphi corridor, the 14-kilometre stretch along southern Gaza's border with Egypt, by Saturday. But on Thursday, an Israeli soldier ruled out an Israeli pull back from the corridor, casting doubts on the future of the ceasefire.

When Israel launched the war on Gaza, following Hamas's October 7, 2023 cross-border attack in which 1,200 people were killed, Mr. Netanyahu's declared objectives were the dismantling of Hamas and the release of the hostages. But after 15 months of war, in which nearly 48,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 1,00,000 wounded, Israel achieved neither of the goals, which eventually forced Mr. Netanyahu to strike a deal with Hamas to get the hostages out. For a permanent end of the war, Israel has to leave Gaza. If Mr. Netanyahu withdraws his troops, Hamas will remain in power in the enclave, an outcome that could lead to the collapse of his right-religious government. The proposal by United States President Donald Trump to "own Gaza" and ethnically cleanse the strip's 2.3 million Palestinians seems to have hardened Israel's position further. But by keeping its troops in Gaza, Israel is not only violating the terms of the ceasefire but is also stepping into the abyss. Despite its superior forces and unmatched fire power, Israel has failed to destroy Hamas, which, in the words of Israel Defense Forces spokesperson Daniel Hagari, is "rooted in the hearts" of Palestinians. After the first phase of the ceasefire, Hamas will still have over 60 hostages. So, if Israel refuses to exit Gaza and extend the ceasefire, what is awaiting the enclave is a war of attrition. Instead, the Jewish state should honour its commitments under the agreement. The U.S., rather than make outlandish statements such as ethnically cleansing Palestinians, should use its leverage over Israel and its Arab neighbours to implement the ceasefire and draw up a plan for post-war Gaza, that includes its governance and reconstruction.

The necessity of mainstreaming wetland conservation

The suo motu public interest litigation by the Meghalaya High Court very recently, to monitor the conservation of wetlands in the State brings the focus back on this important ecosystem. Since 1971, February Day is observed every year as 'World Wetland Day' to mark the adoption of the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty for the conservation of wetlands, which was signed in the Iranian city of Ramsar. The theme this year was 'Protecting Wetlands for Our Common Future'. It is a theme that has appropriately positioned wetlands in the sustainable development perspective, as espoused in the Brundtland report, 'Our Common Future', and published by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987.

Many pressures

Wetlands, one of the most biologically productive ecosystems, provide multiple benefits. Globally, wetlands cover an area of 12.1 million km², or around 6% of the earth's surface, providing 40.6% of global ecosystem services. However, they are under severe stress, both qualitatively and quantitatively, due to various development activities including population growth, urbanisation, industrialisation, and increasing demand for land to cater to various human needs and climate change.

Since 1900, as much as 50% of the area under wetlands has been diverted to accommodate various other uses, as one of the studies indicated. Wetland surface area, both coastal and inland, declined by about 35% between 1970 and 2015. Globally, the rate of loss estimated with the Wetland Extent Trends (WET) index is (-)0.78% a year, which is more than three times higher than the loss rate of natural vegetation as estimated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Around 81% of inland wetland species population and 36% of coastal and marine species have declined since 1970. The extinction risk of wetland species, both plants and animals, is increasing, globally.

The conservation and the management of wetlands have emerged as a major challenge as they are linked to other development issues and can serve in devising nature-based solutions for water management and the mitigation of climate change impacts, besides providing blue-green infrastructures in urban areas. Recognising the importance of wetlands in the larger development context, the Ramsar Convention COP14 that was held in Wuhan, China and Geneva, Switzerland from November 5-13, 2022,



Srikanth Chattopadhyay
is Scientist (retired),
Centre for Earth
Science Studies,
Thiruvananthapuram
and Consultant,
Kerala Development
and Innovation
Strategic Council,
Thiruvananthapuram

The conservation and the management of wetlands have emerged as a challenge as these are linked to other development issues

laid stress on preparation of the fifth Ramsar Strategic Plan and recognised that the conservation and management of wetlands cannot be a stand-alone initiative. It needs to be contextualised and appropriately linked to other international environment development initiatives.

Accordingly, the COP14 argued that implementation of the Ramsar Strategic Plan would be an important contribution towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, meeting the Global Biodiversity targets, the United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change. It would also align with the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, and any relevant work of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other global programmes relating to wetlands. The global changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and greater knowledge about the impacts of biodiversity loss and climate change since COP13, or the 13th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (2018), reinforce the urgency to arrest the loss of wetlands.

The situation in India

India is a signatory to the Ramsar Convention. As of 2023, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has designated 75 Ramsar sites (wetlands of international importance) in the country. These are distributed from the coasts to Himalayan territory, and are diverse in nature. Even some of the river stretches such as that of the Upper Ganga river are designated as Ramsar sites.

However, identification of Ramsar site does not necessarily contribute to its conservation. Moreover, the area under Ramsar sites together cover 1.33 million hectares or around 8% of 15.98 million ha wetlands, presently known and mapped as reported in the National Wetland Decadal Change Atlas, 2017-18 prepared by Space Applications Centre (SAC), Government of India. Based on the location, wetlands are classified as inland and man-made. By 2017-18, India had 66.6% of wetlands as natural wetland (43.9% as inland wetland and 22.7% as coastal wetland).

The area under wetlands is not a static figure. The general trends indicate a reduction in natural wetlands and an increase in man-made wetlands across the country. The SAC study showed that natural wetlands along the coast are declining even in a short span of 2006-07 to 2017-18.

According to an estimate by the Wetlands International South-Asia (WISA), nearly 30% of the natural wetlands in India have been lost in the last four decades due to urbanisation, infrastructure building, agricultural expansion and pollution. The loss is more in urban areas, especially around major urban centres. It is reported that from 1970 to 2014, Mumbai lost 71% of its wetlands.

Another study has shown that wetlands in east Kolkata have shrunk by 36% in 30 years from 1991 to 2021. A recent WWF study has indicated that Chennai has lost 85% of its wetlands. There have been several studies indicating the loss of ecosystem services due to the degradation of wetlands around the world. One such study, of Cali city in Colombia, has brought out that the estimated loss of total ecosystem services due to loss of urban wetlands is \$76,827 a hectare in a year. In the peri-urban area the loss is estimated at \$30,354 a ha a year.

The bigger dimension

At present, most wetland management initiatives in India address the ecological and environmental aspects of the wetland ecosystem. The studies are also limited to some of the major wetlands. At the global level, apart from wetland biodiversity, there is stress on wetland distribution and a characterisation of wetland and human impacts to evaluate and prioritise wetlands for conservation.

Given the varied ecosystem services and values that they offer to society, wetlands form an integral part of ecological, economic and social security. It is important to recognise this larger dimension and investigate the physical, social and economic factors, including alterations, in land use within the catchment area, the drivers which have led to modifications in wetland surroundings, and the ex-situ pressure contributing to wetland degradation and the governance structure.

Wetlands act as a source as well as sink of carbon. Therefore, their role in climate change mitigation has to be carefully evaluated and monitored, something which is hardly attempted now. More effective and comprehensive management strategies are required in response to escalating stress from various climatic and anthropogenic factors. The present approach is insufficient to address all these issues. Wetland management warrants an innovative ecosystem-based approach and it should be mainstreamed within the development plan, as advocated during the Ramsar COP14.

The steps that will shape India's AI ambition



Badri Narayanan Gopalakrishnan
is Visiting Senior
Fellow, the Centre for
Social and Economic
Progress (CSEP),
New Delhi



Hosuk Lee Makiyama
is the Director of the
European Centre for
International Political
Economy (ECIPE)

If it wants to lead in the AI race, India must recognise that the challenge lies in whether market regulations will stifle its momentum

business practices. Regulating AI will interfere with technological adaptation, which will have undesirable consequences on India's relative competitiveness.

India has already localised a significant portion of the AI value chain, and additional AI-related compliance costs may hamper India's ability to outpace commercial rivals such as China and the United States, which have decided to leave AI unregulated.

Navigating the global AI race

India's position as the world's IT powerhouse gives it a unique advantage in the AI era. Attempts to govern and regulate AI occur as industrialised nations compete globally for industrial leadership. The European Union (EU) opted for strict regulation to address risks and societal impacts. In contrast, the U.S. maintains a more hands-off stance, prioritising innovation. India finds itself in a delicate balancing act between these two paths. But the sooner misconceptions about quickly outdated market rules addressing a limited set of hypothetical risks are set aside, the better India can focus on outpacing commercial rivals such as China and the U.S.

There are very good reasons why the EU has chosen to legislate through binding laws, mainly due to its unique structural deficiencies. The EU lacks a supranational constitution that safeguards human rights and protects citizens against AI-based surveillance or policing by its member-states. Therefore, unlike India, the EU must enact binding rules to pre-empt AI laws by national governments that will otherwise fragment its single market.

Additionally, the costs of regulatory failure are too high if India's exporting capabilities are at stake, particularly given Chinese dominance in hardware and cloud technologies. India has previously taken inspiration from EU or U.S. laws. However, it must follow its own paths and pursue its national interests based on its services-driven industrial profile.

Introducing regulatory attempts that can

impede AI development in India may allow businesses to repatriate from India and relocate IT development and software research and development to other countries with more AI-friendly rules. In other words, Indian IT services and consultancies held back by AI regulations run the risk of losing their hold of the global market.

Instead, the Indian government can use its diplomatic influence to ensure that open-source models remain open, accessible, and commercially viable, paired with international strategic partnerships for energy security, computing resources, and international standardisation.

A case for regulatory clarity

Building on the expected strong adoption of AI, public officials have a responsibility to listen to political and social concerns. While India is not explicitly pursuing ex-ante product regulation on AI akin to that in Europe (or previously planned in California), various agencies have launched conflicting policies, resulting in a minor power struggle that resulted in a fragmented policy landscape.

Lessons learnt from the EU and the U.S. point to the need to strengthen and future-proof existing laws rather than produce new ones. Current transitional guidelines have shown a feasible pathway to avoiding overlapping liability or regulatory blindspots by re-interpreting existing legislation. India has a comprehensive framework for antitrust, corporate liability, free speech, and public order that covers AI development and use cases. India may not need AI-specific rules legislation such as the IT Act. India must choose its own path according to its national interests. The challenge lies not in whether businesses prefer a local or foreign AI platform but in encouraging rapid adoption and supporting open-source and other alternatives accessible for fine-tuning and transferring learning in its IT industry.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Delimitation and the South

The issue of delimitation in India appears to have upset leaders of the southern States, with good reason. To begin with, the South Indian States contribute significantly to India's economy, with higher per capita income and better human development indicators. If despite this they end up having less representation in Parliament, it could add to concerns about an unfair

distribution of central resources. If political power shifts more toward the Hindi-speaking States, the fear of marginalisation may increase. This could deepen regional tensions. But there are possible solutions. Instead of focusing on population alone, representation could be linked to economic and social development indicators. There could also be steps to ensure that States have more control

over policies affecting them. Finally, there could be an increase in Rajya Sabha seats for the South Indian States to balance the seat losses in the Lok Sabha.

Md Sabir Hussain,
Arrah, Bihar

The last word

The debate on the nation's languages has been revived and may appear both opportune and cynical to many, and a need of the times to others. Many

Indian languages are far too older than even global tongues. India has had its share of civilisational onslaughts with many alien tongues but was able to tackle them by assimilation or assertion, to the benefit

of its cultural enrichment. States south of the Vindhyas, zealously linguistic, resisted Sanskrit. The anti-Hindi agitations are of recent memory. However, the compulsions of modern-day

technological advances saw many States embrace English to manage their technical interface. Great civilisations have thrived on diversity and vanished on inward-looking, isolationist credos or a false sense of superiority, be it in race, religion, language or any other.

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai
Letters emailed to
letters@thehindu.co.in
must carry the postal address.

Corrections & Clarifications

The Finance Commission's advice is recommendatory in nature and is not binding on the government, as mentioned in a Reuters report. 'Centre seeks to reduce the share of States in federal tax revenues' (Business page, February 28, 2025).

The Reader's Editor's office can be contacted by telephone: +91-44-2044.8217/20576300; E-mail: readerevents@thehindu.co.in

Call for polls gets louder in Dhaka

As fractures show in the grouping that ousted Sheikh Hasina, impatience over the caretaker government's poor performance is growing

Bangladesh army chief General Waker-uz-Zaman this week called for holding elections within the year, a demand that came against the backdrop of emerging fractures in the grouping of political and student forces that came together to oust Sheikh Hasina in last year's popular uprising. Zaman's call has now been echoed by former premier Khaleda Zia, whose Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) supported the uprising. The BNP urged the interim government in Dhaka to organise polls after rolling out the minimum necessary reforms. Other senior leaders of the BNP have been more critical of the caretaker administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus while demanding elections, with some airing their suspicions about the impartiality of the interim government.

Meanwhile, leaders of the Anti-discrimination Student Movement that spearheaded the uprising against Hasina have decided to form a new political party called the Jatiya Nagorik Party (JNP), claiming that the ideologies of existing political parties do not reflect the will of the people. The formation of a party by the students has been in the pipeline for some months and seems set to challenge the dominance of Bangladesh politics by the BNP and Hasina's Awami League. It remains to be seen what sort of relationship the JNP will have with Bangladesh's smaller political parties, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party and Islami Oikyo Jot, which have traditionally backed either the BNP or the Awami League when they were in power. However, the close links between some elements of the student leadership and the Jamaat-e-Islami, traditionally perceived as an anti-India force, has not gone unnoticed in New Delhi.

While the Awami League has not been banned yet by the caretaker administration — and the country's election watchdog has not so far ruled out its participation in a popular election — it has been greatly weakened by last year's ban on its powerful student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, and the fact that the narrative in Bangladesh's streets and textbooks is systematically erasing the party's role as well as that of its founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the country's freedom movement and initial years as an independent nation. International observers have also questioned a push by sections of the student leadership for a ban on the Awami League given such action does not augur well for Bangladesh's democratic credentials.

While Yunus is highly regarded, the interim government has little to show so far when it comes to the handling of Bangladesh's economic problems or the restoration of complete normalcy following the chaos and instability that accompanied last year's uprising. When Zaman called for the holding of elections, he made it clear how much the political setup is beholden to the military for the maintenance of law and order. In this context, Zaman's call for Bangladesh's political forces to end their squabbling was especially striking, as were his comments denouncing political attacks on the armed forces. His public comments emphasised the need for the interim government to come up with a firm timeline for holding elections, instead of linking the polls to the completion of political and other reforms, a process that can drag on interminably.

India will need to keep a close watch on developments in Bangladesh and safeguard its relationship with its Eastern neighbour in a party-agnostic manner — all the more important against the backdrop of China reportedly hosting a delegation of representatives of the student movement, political parties and think-tanks from Dhaka.

[THIRD EYE]

Barkha Dutt

HT@100 OPINION



The death knell for myth of American exceptionalism

With Donald Trump in the White House, America is in free fall. But the myth of its deeper democracy, freer press, immunity from oligarchic control has been thoroughly exposed

Have you lost count of the number of times your jaw has dropped in the last few days thanks to Donald Trump? I know I have. It doesn't matter if you are a fan or a critic of the US president. For a moment, let's set aside the oft-discussed crisis of liberal politics globally or why Right-wing populism has risen on the back of tone-deaf elitism.

What is evident from Trump's last few weeks in office is this: The myth of American exceptionalism is done and dusted. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines American exceptionalism as the "idea that the US is a unique and even morally superior country for historical, ideological or religious reasons". We have seen this manifestation of superiority in everything, from ill-thought-through military interventions, regime-change plots, and even ponderous op-eds. The worn-out trope of a "values-based order" was cited non-stop during the Russia-Ukraine war, to poke at India's cautious navigation. Right up until the unimaginable happened! The Americans voted with Russia, and India abstained at a United Nations vote.

Trump's upending of policy, both foreign and domestic, is, by turns, wildly entertaining and often unstable and dangerous.

But there is a conclusive busting of the myth that American values, American democracy, American media, or American oligarchy are somehow institutionally freer, healthier, or deeper than other parts of the world.

I might giggle, if not altogether guffaw, the next time an American think-tank does a condescending dipstick test of Indian democracy. Or if another report is published by the US administration on the state of human rights in India.

You don't get to lecture India on human rights if you feel the need to chain and shackles illegal Indian immigrants on a 40-hour journey home and then videograph the thick metal restraints to set the images to music.

You don't get to wring your hands about the nexus between media and business empires in India after the long line of corporate titans at the Trump inauguration. Heck, one of them, Tesla and X owner Elon Musk, seems to be pretty much running the US government at the moment. But at least Musk bet on Trump before it was certain that he would win. Perhaps the most audacious turnaround was that of Mark Zuckerberg of Meta/Facebook who essentially reversed years of policy (on fact-checking, politics et al) to cozy up to the new Washington elite.

Or take what's happening at the *Washington Post*, the once-venerated newspaper, where I have written a column for several years. The paper, which has been lurching from one crisis to another and has seen a series of abrupt changes in its editorial leadership, has been thrown into uncertainty after its owner, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, declared a confusing shift in direction. Its opinion pages editor, David Shipley, quit in protest.

This is not *schadenfreude*, but as a columnist who has, in recent years, struggled and battled to explain her perspective as an Indian to an



Trump's upending of policy, both foreign and domestic, is, by turns, wildly entertaining and often unstable and dangerous.

insular, orientalist, western gaze at the other end, there is something ironic about this moment. Shipley, to my mind, presided over the wreckage of the paper's op-ed pages, till even he could take it no more.

But Bezos's dictat on how the paper has to follow the motto of "free markets and personal liberty", announced publicly on X (presumably for Musk and Trump's approval), smashes the illusion of a wall between promoter and editor. Add to this the White House replacing established journalists with social media influencers partial to their side at press conferences, and the knockout punch is dealt to media freedom.

The overweening power of oligarchs, the challenges to a free press, and the lack of assured access to the institutions we report on — these are all serious issues. To be sure, we in India, like everywhere else in the world, wrestle with them — often imperfectly. But surely the next time a US newspaper editorial lambastes the dying lights of India's media, we might point the finger back in the direction it came from. This week in America has been capped with

the return of the Tate brothers to the US from Romania. Andrew and Tristan Tate have been accused of rape and sexual trafficking charges. A cursory search online will take you to the horrific statements by Andrew Tate, including his declaration that all women are sex workers and women who bear the responsibility for sexual assault. His videos are gross, violent and nauseating. The brothers are avid fans of Trump, and the *Financial Times* reported that the US administration spoke to Romanian officials to let them come home. Even the American far right is apologetic, with Florida governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican, saying they were not welcome.

America is in freefall. Maybe Trump's political fortunes will soar. But American exceptionalism — which I would argue never really existed — has been well and truly exposed for its shambolic claims.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal.

Building India through science and scientists

As India sets its sights on becoming a developed country by the 100th anniversary of Independence in 2047, concrete goals are being played for various sectors. Science will play a pivotal role in attaining this vision of reaping the demographic dividend, eliminating the gender divide, enabling longer and healthier life spans, ensuring economic security and equitable progress, effectively and inclusively adapting to the climate crisis and increasing India's contributions to the world. Indian science must evolve from isolated islands of excellence in a few academic institutions to widespread adoption of the latest technologies and scientific methods to solve societal challenges. This will require broad-based investments in science (from primary education onwards), incentives and rewards for impactful research (different from purely academic achievements), partnerships (with NGOs and the private sector), and increased participation of under-represented sections of society, particularly women.

Continuously and significantly expanding investments in science are paramount for achieving India's vision. Traditionally, investments in basic science necessarily come from government action on policy, implementation, and financing. These aspects are often determined by the political discourse, which, in turn, is shaped by people's trust in and perceptions of science and scientists to tackle important challenges.

During and after the Covid pandemic, people's trust in scientists grew. Given the prevalent information of fake news and half-baked knowledge that pervades social media, it is even more impor-

tant to inculcate a scientific temper in our young minds. Investments in evidence-informed solutions will sustainably increase when opinion in social discourse starts matching scientific opinion on pertinent issues. Mis- and disinformation, and their amplification in social media, are relatively new challenges. But they do not become an obstacle to progress, if not effectively handled.

The government should prioritise those serious scientific problems that hold back progress for which solutions do not exist, or where market failures or high risks and uncertainty do not allow for private investment. Many recent

missions such as BioRx, National Quantum Mission, and Deep Ocean Mission have tried to focus researchers' attention on solving such problems. In an inspiring move, the 2025 Union Budget has more than doubled the allocation for science and technology initiatives.

Public goods in agriculture, environment, health, education, and finance make a compelling case for investments. In these areas, the entire process from discovery to development of the product, followed by implementation research and support for scaling must come from the government. Across Indian scientific laboratories, I am sure there are many examples of promising discoveries that are sitting on shelves, due to a lack of opportunities and incentives to take them forward. Tackling risks like air pollution, lead and arsenic poisoning, waste management and plastic pollution, especially in our water bodies and

oceans, could be some of the big challenges thrown open for our scientific institutions to tackle in consortium mode.

Through more effective direct institutional grants, government investments should prioritise cutting-edge basic science in areas that will become foundational for building science-based solutions. Translational research for bridging basic science with proven applications, commercialisation, and broadening the base of research can be fuelled through partnerships. In India, we have a small but growing movement of corporates and high net worth individuals serving community needs by investing in scientific institutions, best exemplified by the Tata group over 100 years.

The rising tide of private capital, indigenous philanthropy, and CSR that is complementary to government funding augurs well for widening the societal relevance of science. The government should continue to encourage private investments in science, for example, by incentivising through tax breaks, viability-gap funding, and concrete partnership-based roadmaps.

Indian women have been global achievers in many fields. The tragic death of her newborn infant motivated Anandil Joshi to overcome numerous barriers and study medicine at the Women's College of Pennsylvania. She became the first Indian woman physician in 1886. Though she succumbed the next year to tuberculosis, Dr Joshi has inspired generations of women doctors and medical researchers in India.

Despite many such illustrative cases, women are grossly under-represented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) in India. A recent study of Indian STEM academic institutes found that only 16.6% of the faculty were women, while the median for the top eight institutes as per the National Institutional Research Framework was a paltry 10%. Alarmingly, only 26.2% of these women were in the senior career band, pointing to a very narrow pyramid for

women and persisting imbalances. Decades of evidence clearly show that women in leadership positions enhance team and organisational effectiveness, cohesion, and fairness; reduce stereotypes and improve decision making.

Science and health institutional constructs in India will require system-wide and combined measures to solve deep inequities. A representative share of women should be made mandatory in decision-making bodies related to strategy, resource allocation, talent management, and career progression across organisations in the science sector. Institutional mechanisms must be set up and operated for mentoring and coaching women across the hierarchy. Female role models can positively influence the preference of adolescents and young women towards STEM while breaking gender stereotypes. Measures such as creches/daycare services, maternity leave, breastfeeding rooms, flexible timings, and work from home options must be uniformly implemented — this will do a lot to retain women in the workforce. It will be equally critical to take affirmative action that truly reflects the diversity of India by considering women not as a monolithic block but as straddling socio-demographic segments such as marginalised communities, tribes, and deprived income groups; residents of neglected regions; and representatives of diverse cultural milieus.

The world recognises the leadership demonstrated by Indian science in serving society in domains such as agriculture and food security, space exploration, defence manufacturing, vaccines, diagnostics, pharmaceuticals, and information technology. In the 75th year of the Indian Republic, we take inspiration from these successes. But we can tackle emerging global threats to health and development only by increasing public investment in science, creating global public goods and inculcating a scientific temper in the population.

Soumya Swaminathan is chairperson, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation. The views expressed are personal.

[ANOTHER DAY]

Namita Bhandare



Our continuing love affair with the sari

I do not know of any Indian woman who cannot tell you a sari story, or 10. Some will recall a purchase from a first salary, others will remember a graduation gift, and almost all will tell you of what they wore at their wedding.

Across generations, regions, religions, and socio-economic status, this unstitched garment has endured for 5,000 years through handloom and polyester, hand-embroidered to mass produced, nine-yard to pre-stitched, paddy field to Met Gala. In a

country where we speak in many tongues and the imposition of one can be fractious, the single unifying dress of Indian women is the sari.

My first was a navy blue with what was then a fashionable polka dot blouse. I was being uprooted from a fairly anglicised education in Mumbai to study in the far more nationalist-leaning boarding school founded by Gayatri Devi to educate a generation of independent women steeped in the culture of India. Among the list of clothes to

be packed in my trunk was a sari to be worn by students over the age of 13 on formal occasions. And so, the practical 'drip-dry' came along with me. And although my stint at the school lasted for only one year, my love for the sari continues.

The title of Malvika Singh's *Saris of Memory: Fragments of My Life*, immediately resonated. For those of us who wear saris on occasion, each tells a story. And through the saris she has acquired over five decades, Singh tells hers with aplomb.

The book is an important repository or, to use Singh's word, *bhandaar*, that tells the story of India and the non-stop love affair of its women with the sari. There are regional variations from the tie-and-dye of the Kutch to the area embroideries of the Mumbai Parbat with styles of tying from the Maharashtrian nine-yard hitched between the legs for freer mobility to the household keys clanging from the ends of a Bengali tangail.

While the sari has made its debut in the museums of the world — London's Design Museum featured 90 in 2023, including a copy of Tarun Tahsiani's foil jersey sari-

gown for Lady Gaga — few in urban India wear the sari as an everyday garment. For one there's the question of expense; a sari requires a blouse, petticoat, the stitching of a fall.

And, yet it endures. Partly it is, as Singh reminds us, because of the women — and men — who have nurtured, travelled, catalogued, reproduced, patronised, and most important, reinvented it. From Pupal Jayakar to Marjand Singh, from Laila Tyagi to Rakesh Thakore.

But partly, it's also because the sari is constantly reinventing itself to remain relevant, from the college student who pairs it with sneakers to the badlans of Bundelkhand, the members of the Gulsati Gang armed with *laathi* dispense gender justice; dressed in rain pink saris. Our greatest strength is when we are united," gang founder Sampat Devi Pal told the *Financial Times* in 2011. "We always attract attention, because we all wear pink saris."

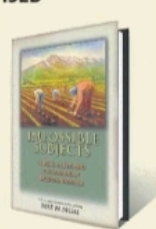
Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal.

[EDITOR'S PICK]

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

THE DESIRED AND THE DESPISED

Donald Trump's talk of a Gold Card for accelerated citizenship is a troubling contrast to his administration's treatment of illegal immigrants who fled poverty, conflict, and natural disaster, in the search of a better life. Against this backdrop, we recommend Columbia University historian Mae T. Ngai's 2004 book, *Impossible Subjects*, this week. The book is a detailed analysis of the formation and implementation of US immigration and citizenship legislation, its impact on the constitution of the citizenry and how some groups came to be designated the imagination of an "illegal" "alien" in the country and how some groups seemed to be as desirable prospects for citizenship and residency. It lays bare the policies' early history of racial preference and how the contradictions contained in later iterations worsened the problem. It also underlines the seminal contribution of the despised and denigrated "alien" in the US in creating and sustaining the economy that seems attractive to a potential Gold Card holder.



Impossible Subjects
Mae T. Ngai
Year: 2004

15 BIG PICTURE



SAVITA'S SCORELINE

301

The number of international matches Savita Punia has played. She is only the second Indian woman hockey player to reach the 300-match milestone, with Vandana Kataria being the first.

A CAREER OF MANY FIRSTS

Savita Punia, along with the likes of Rani Rampal, Vandana Kataria and Sushila Chanu, has led the Indian women's team to many firsts. They include:

■ Ending the three-decade-plus Olympic exile of the women's team by playing a crucial role in their qualification for the Rio Olympics in 2016.

■ Was one of the leaders of the team that ensured India qualified for back-to-back Olympics for the first time after they made the cut for the Tokyo Games.

■ Her performance in the goal was crucial as India finished 4th in that campaign, their best-ever show on the biggest sporting stage.

A BONE-CHILLING night in the winter of 2008. Street, dark. Bus stop, secluded. Exhausted and edgy, Savita Punia waited for a Hissar-bound bus while guarding her two jumbo bags — one, a goalkeeping kit and the other with her clothes stuffed in it.

Only 17, Savita was returning to her home in Jodhkan, Sirsa, from Kurukshetra after appearing in the selection trials for Haryana's hockey team. The clock showed 8 — she had to be in Hissar four hours ago, from where her father was to pick her up. But the bus she took from Kurukshetra that afternoon had broken down, leaving Savita stranded in the middle of the highway, near Kaithal, more than 125 km away from home.

"Before boarding from Kurukshetra, I had called my father from an STD booth," Savita says — those were the days when the cellphone was still a luxury. "He was to pick me up from the Hissar bus stop around 4:30 pm and from there, we were to drive down to Sirsa. We had a second-hand car, so it wasn't reliable for long distances."

Savita waited on the highway that night, with no way of letting her father know of her situation. A bus finally showed up. Savita saw no empty seats and there was barely any place to stand but she thought she would manage. "It was around 8:30 pm. I requested the conductor to help with my luggage," she says.

The conductor stared at her and smirked: "Ladki ho, Ek bus, dus oanger (You are a girl, you will have many to pick you up)."

Alarmed, Savita didn't step in despite not knowing when the next bus would be, if there would be one.

Luckily for her, another bus swung by minutes later. This time, an elderly woman who had witnessed Savita's harrowing experience, stood in front of the bus with both arms outstretched, asked a gentleman to keep my luggage on the carrier and ensured I got a seat. Finally, at 10:30 pm, I reached Hissar," Savita says.

Her father Mahender Punia says, "She cried a lot after reaching home. We cried a lot, not knowing what had happened to her."

That night, Mahender bought his daughter a cellphone and his family a better second-hand car so that she would never have to travel alone again.

Savita knows her episode isn't uncommon, especially during the early years when young girls travel alone in trains and buses to far-off venues to play hockey. "We have come a long way in other areas, but safety shouldn't be a reason for a child to worry about her future in the sport," she says. "If not for the support of my family, I might have quit after that incident."

Instead, the player who considered quitting that night — or thought she would say goodbye to hockey after just one match — played her 300th international on February 24.

Not bad for someone who never went looking for hockey. Hockey simply happened to her.

Her story: 'An athlete's life'

Savita stands next to an arrow pointing towards 'Punia Niwas', a pretty white bungalow in the middle of sprawling green fields. It's her first visit home in months. She has less than 48 hours with her parents — "every night before I sleep, I thank them in a prayer," she says — before she leaves for Vancouver to be with her husband Ankit Balhara and her in-laws, Bhai Singh and Mumta, a former athlete. "I have reached this far because of my husband and his parents," she says. "I have seen too many women players having to end their careers after marriage. But my in-laws

Savita Punia & hockey: A love story

Bas ek baar... Just this one time — Savita Punia kept telling herself as she struggled through her game and life. Until she fell in love with the goalpost and her hockey stick. MIHIR VASAVDA travels to Sirsa to meet India's star goalkeeper who recently played her 300th international and now has set her sights on Los Angeles 2028. Photographs by PRAVEEN KHANNA

went out of their way to support my career."

Savita sits for an interview with an unusual demand: she doesn't wish to talk about her career highs. "That people know or can read online," she laughs.

This, despite seeing more good days than her predecessors. Savita belongs to a generation — that includes the likes of Rani Rampal and Vandana Kataria — that transformed women's hockey in India. Together, they ended India's three-decade-long Olympic exile, led the team to back-to-back Games and came agonisingly close to a medal in Tokyo, where they finished a historic fourth.

But Savita, whose job description as a goalkeeper is quite literally to take blows for the team, wants to talk about the struggles. Or, as she puts it more eloquently, "an athlete's life". As if they are both the same.

"I am not saying the world should know my story or that it is interesting. But if a young, upcoming athlete ends up reading it, she should feel that all of this is normal, whether good or bad is a separate discussion," she says. "After all, most athletes face the same challenges. It's about the choices you make."

'I don't even like hockey!'

Savita had just entered her teens when she had to make her first big choice: whether to stay at home to help her ailing mother or move to a bigger town to join an English-medium school that offered a chance to play.

"There was this school in Sirsa that offered admission if we played one of the three sports — judo, badminton or hockey. I had no interest in sports and couldn't even differentiate between a team sport and an individual game," she says. "Yet, I accepted the offer to appear for the selection trials only because it would mean going to a better school. I was in a government school, and playing a sport would give me a chance to get enrolled into an English-medium, CBSE school."

But she faced a quandary. Moving out would mean leaving behind her mother Lilavati, who suffered from "such severe arthritis that she couldn't even comb her hair or eat by herself."

"By Class 5, I had to learn to do all the household work... A to Z, everything. My father was already overburdened. He cooked, fed mummy, took care of me and my brother and then went to work. So, the first thought I had when it came to leaving was, 'Who will perform the daily chores at home?'"

But Mahender, who worked as a pharmacist at the Sirsa Primary Health Centre, was clear about what needed to be done.

Egged on by her father, and nudged by her



(Top) Savita outside her home in Jodhkan, Sirsa; with parents Mahender and Lilavati. "Every night before I sleep, I thank my parents in a prayer," she says

grandfather Ranjit Singh — he had watched a hockey match during a trip to Delhi in his youth — a 13-year-old Savita, "dressed in a salwar-suit", appeared for the trials barefoot.

After a gruelling audition — with shuttle runs, frog jumps and the 800m, where she came first — Savita was admitted to the school. "And thus began my hockey journey." A journey so full of challenges that the teenager had almost made up her mind that she would give up.

The first was the sudden shift from Hindi medium to English. "I started fearing books. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to compete with my classmates and couldn't even converse with them. I wanted to learn but lacked the courage. Slowly, I got into a shell," she says. In the hostel mess, the sight of *dalia*, *bhindi*, and *dal* with tomato and onion made her homesick. And then, there was the nagging concern about the situation at home, with her mother's health.

Every other day, Savita made excuses to bunk school and go home, which her teachers promptly rejected. During classes, she would stare outside the windows and plot escape plans. "It continued like this from 2003 to 2005. I was scared of books, barely had any interest in hockey and had no goal."

One Friday, she was informed that her father was coming to pick her up the following

khehna hai (I will play an international match once) and that's it," she laughs.

She had to wait another year to get picked in the Indian team — for a test series against the Netherlands and Germany.

It has been 17 years but Savita still can't believe that she was picked. "There were seven goalkeepers in the trials. I never thought I would be among the top two who were to be in the team," she says. "At the time, the way the selection system worked was very different."

These days, there is a method to a team selection, though not always perfect. There is a core group that trains together all year long and players are chosen from that bunch following selection trials. Coaches, too, are more sensitive, and take time to explain selections and exclusions individually to players.

Back in 2008, however, the system was less empathetic. "After the trials, the selectors used to sign on a sheet. Within 15 minutes, the entire group had to assemble and they would announce the team," Savita says.

Dipika Murthy, the first-choice goalkeeper, was injured so it opened the door for others. Savita didn't think it would be her. But they first called the name of Marita Tirkey, followed by Savita's. "For a second, I thought I had misheard. Everyone was surprised — even I was. I double-checked to see if my name was on the list. I asked them, 'Can I tell my family?'"

The next second, she was on a call with her parents, breaking the news. "Dad said something I'll never forget. 'It feels like you are reborn.' But even amidst the flood of emotions, the thought of leaving the sport wasn't far away. 'I was still in the same phase. Bas ek baar hi khehna hai.'"

Then, something happened which ensured a lifelong bond with hockey.

Savita's brother, Bhavishya, was reading out the newspaper coverage of her selection to their grandfather, stressing on the part where he was credited for pushing her towards the sport.

"My grandfather always remained aloof. He had seen many tragedies in the family in the form of untimely deaths of some of the members. Growing up, I never saw him happy," Savita says. "But when the article got published and my brother read it to him, he broke down and said, 'Ranjit Singh Punia has an identity because of Savita.'"

He went on to make her a promise: that he would save the newspaper copy, learn how to read within a year so he could read for himself his name and Savita's.

"Imagine, this one sport changed the mindset and pushed the oldest member of

my family towards literacy," she beams. "I felt that if hockey could make him forget all the bad times and get motivated to do something, then I would never leave this sport. I'll continue playing till it is physically possible. *Ab dil se khehna hai* (Now I'll play my heart out)."

'What if you get injured?'

Finally, Savita started falling in love with hockey. But now, the sport was testing her love.

Unlike the cricketers, India's hockey players have never been paid any match fee. If you were a woman player a decade ago, there would only be a few job opportunities outside the Railways. But unluckily for Savita, even that door was shut.

For 10 years, from 2008 to 2018, as Savita played — with no match fee and no employment — she took India to never heights.

"I always thought I never fulfil all my wishes once I got a job, so I never asked for anything from my father. I didn't want to burden him. If he gave me Rs 50, I would take that; if he gave me Rs 500, I would take that," she says. "But mothers can't hide their emotions. So mummy would keep telling me, 'What if you get injured, what about your future?'"

It got so dire at times that Savita would even have to think twice before buying a cup of tea, especially when travelling outside India.

In 2018, when she was given the Arjuna Award, Lilavati had just one question for her daughter. "She asked, 'Does this mean you'll now get a job?' Mummy didn't know what the Arjuna Award was. She just knew a job would secure my future... But at that moment, I started crying."

Weeks later, she applied for a coaching role with the Sports Authority of India (SAI) when a vacancy came up. And with that, a decade of struggle ended. "It's a long time to remain without a job, not everyone's parents will be able to support a career," says Savita, who continues to be a SAI coach.

As the deal with financial instability, Savita simultaneously found herself caught in the touchy politics of the dressing room.

Savita admits her first big break came only because former India goalkeeper Yogita Boli got injured. But in the dressing room, some of her teammates grudgingly her place in the team.

"I won't take names but during the 2014 Commonwealth Games, I was repeatedly told that 'I didn't belong to the team'. I was constantly reminded that Yogita Boli had to be there. My performance got affected."

Two years later, after the Rio Games, where India finished last of 12 teams, Savita felt she was singled out for the team's dismal show. "I couldn't have lived my life with that feeling. Harsh words and taunts were directed at me and I was sure I wouldn't be recalled to the team," she says.

However, Dutchman Sjoerd Marjine — the coach who took charge after Rio and later masterminded the Tokyo Games performance of the women's team — placed his faith in Savita, even making her the vice-captain. "After Sjoerd sir came, my hockey career was reborn."

At 34, after a two-decade-long love-hate relationship with hockey and three international goalkeeping of the year awards, Savita finds herself at a similar crossroad.

India's women failed to qualify for last year's Paris Olympics. As the captain for the qualifiers, Savita got so much flak that she had made up her mind to quit. Harendra Singh, who is the current coach, talked her out of it. And now, she seeks redemption in Los Angeles.

"When you achieve something after struggling a lot, the happiness you feel that is tough to express," she says. "I just want that sukoon [peace]."

THE IDEAS PAGE

Needed: The big leap

The era of incremental progress in AI is over. With nations competing to dominate the ecosystem, India needs to do more than be a participant



B V R SUBRAHMANYAM,
DEBJANI GHOSH

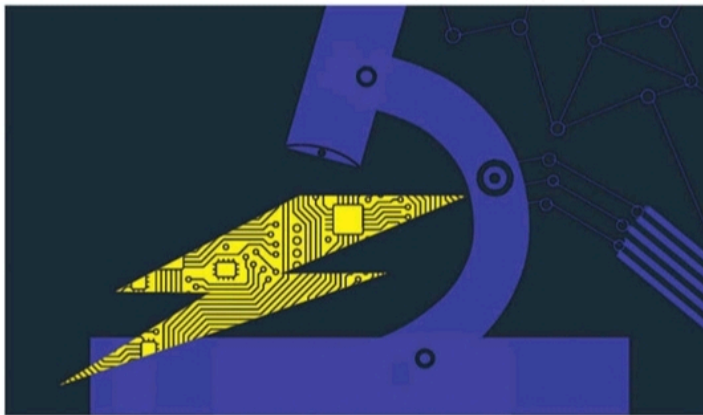
THE PAST SIX WEEKS have shattered conventional wisdom about AI dominance. A new era of innovation, disruption, and geopolitical manoeuvring has arrived. Those who fail to adapt risk being left behind.

January brought a stark wake-up call with the emergence of DeepSeek. The Chinese start-up unveiled its AI model, DeepSeek-R1, which matched the capabilities of leading models like OpenAI's GPT-4 while also being open source and free. This breakthrough wasn't just a technological feat, it was a warning shot. The balance of AI power is shifting, proving that true innovation isn't just about resources but about the speed, efficiency, and strategic intent behind the technology.

Meanwhile, the AI Action Summit in Paris, where leaders from nearly 100 nations convened to shape AI's future, sent a resounding message: Growth must take precedence over excessive regulation. A defining moment came when France unveiled a €109 billion AI investment plan, underscoring the urgency of substantial investments to maintain global competitiveness. In a landmark shift, President Emmanuel Macron and the Finnish Minister of Transport and Communications Timo Harakka committed to scaling back regulations in Europe to keep pace with global AI developments.

India's advocacy for a human-centric AI approach, passionately championed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, also gained traction. The summit concluded with a commitment to inclusive and sustainable AI, ensuring the technology drives labour market growth while aligning with environmental security and social well-being. As the world accelerates AI-driven innovation and economic expansion, a nation's ability to disrupt and control the AI supply chain is no longer just a competitive advantage—it will determine who writes the rules of the future.

DeepSeek's success serves as both a wake-up call for established players and an inspiration for emerging challengers. Kai-Fu Lee, former President of Google China, put it aptly: "The US is great at research and innovation and especially breakthroughs, but China is better at engineering... In this day and age, when you have limited compute power and money, you learn how to build things very efficiently." This insight underscores the critical role of engineering excellence and R&D prowess in advancing artificial intelligence. Faced with export controls, Chinese AI companies shifted their focus to optimised model architecture, leading to breakthroughs. These include Pure Reinforcement Learning, or enabling AI models to refine themselves through self-play and real-world feedback, a Mixture-of-Experts (MoE) Architecture, or activating only a fraction of parameters per task that Join FREE: Whatsapp Channel https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VR6RGJOK16d0dF



C R Sesikumar

drastically reduces computational costs while enhancing efficiency. Multi-Head Latent Attention or improving data processing by identifying nuanced relationships and handling multiple input aspects simultaneously, and distillation techniques that involve efficiently transferring knowledge from large models to smaller, more adaptable ones.

In addition, China's pivot from NVIDIA's proprietary CUDA to PTFX isn't just a workaround—it's a strategic masterstroke. By breaking free from a locked ecosystem, they are ensuring their AI advancements remain resilient, adaptable, and unshackled from external constraints. This isn't just about efficiency; it's about rewriting the rules of AI dominance.

These advancements prove that necessity fuels innovation, and that the new disruptors in the era of AI will be those who master both breakthrough research and cost-effective, scalable engineering.

In the final days of his tenure, former US President Biden issued two pivotal directives aimed at securing US leadership in AI. On January 13, his administration introduced an Interim Final Rule to regulate the export of GPUs, a critical component for AI development. This measure aimed to restrict the transfer of advanced AI-enabling technologies to adversaries while ensuring streamlined exports to allies. The very next day, Biden signed an executive order prioritising clean energy development for AI data centers, directing federal agencies to lease land for infrastructure projects powered by low- or zero-carbon energy sources.

Interestingly, while President Donald Trump swiftly revoked Biden's AI safety order, these two directives have remained untouched—at least for now. Vice President Vance has since reaffirmed the US's intent to dominate AI, with a sharp focus on chips, software, and regulatory influence.

The AI race has reached a breaking point. Nations are no longer just competing on innovation—they are battling for control. Those who Join FREE: Whatsapp Channel https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VR6RGJOK16d0dF

Our success will depend on three non-negotiable imperatives. One, world-class talent to drive AI excellence and global competitiveness. Two, cutting-edge R&D and innovation to ensure India is not just a consumer of AI but a creator of breakthrough technologies. Three, an uncompromising commitment to human-centric AI, ensuring that innovation serves society and strengthens our global standing.

who lead will shape the future, while those who lag will find themselves dependent, vulnerable, and left behind in the new AI order.

As the industry and nations adapt to this new paradigm of AI development, the coming months and years will witness intensified competition and rapid advancements. The global AI landscape is no longer just about progress—it's about who drives the disruption and who gets left behind.

The world is increasingly dividing into two camps: disruptors and disruptees. The pressing question for countries is: Which side will you be on?

India stands at a decisive juncture. Our aspiration to become a developed nation by 2047—Viksit Bharat—is not merely an ambitious goal but a defining mission that requires a fundamental transformation of our economy and society. This shift hinges on our ability to unlock the full potential of emerging technologies like AI to drive the transformation.

For India, the era of incremental progress is over. If we are to achieve Viksit Bharat by 2047, we cannot afford to be mere participants in the AI revolution—we must lead its disruption. Our success will depend on three non-negotiable imperatives. One, world-class talent to drive AI excellence and global competitiveness. Two, cutting-edge R&D and innovation to ensure India is not just a consumer of AI but a creator of breakthrough technologies. Three, an uncompromising commitment to human-centric AI, ensuring that innovation serves society and strengthens our global standing.

This must be the hallmark of India's AI leadership—one that is bold, visionary, and unapologetically ambitious. As PM Modi aptly reminded the world at the AI Action Summit, as AI writes the code for humanity, we, humans, must lead the key to shaping its future responsibly.

Subrahmanyam is CEO Niti Aayog and Ghosh is Distinguished Fellow, NITI Aayog. Join FREE Telegram Channel https://t.me/+Bu5enHqQdH0DgI

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"It seems all sense has been lost on the US president, who shared on his social media an AI-generated video depicting a dystopian 'Trump Gaza'." —DAWN

The senior who changed my life

He was my pillar of support. With his sharp intellect, great oratory, Iqbal M Chagla towered above his colleagues, seniors at the bar



JANAK DWARKADAS

THE LINEAGE OF all thoroughbred horses can be traced back to three legendary Arabian stallions—Darley Arabian, the Byerley Turk, and the Godolphin Arabian. Similarly, the legacy of some of India's greatest legal minds can be traced to the chambers of Sir Jamshedji Kanga on the Original Side of the Bombay High Court. His chambers came to be famously known as "Chamber No. 1". Chamber No. 1 has been the cradle of some of the greatest legal minds and jurists of the country—Bhulabhai Desai, Motilal Setalvad, H M Seervai, Nani Palkhivala, right down to Kharasidhi Bhambhani. Three of Kharasidhi's most distinguished juniors were Fali S Naairman, Soli Sorabjee and my own senior Iqbal M Chagla, who we fondly called Mickey. Mickey's own pedigree was no less. His father M C Chagla was the first Indian Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court and a great jurist.

Mickey reminded me of Edmond Dantès, the protagonist from *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas. Like Dantès, he was tall, imposing and swash-buckling figure with a French goatee. His barrister's half jacket, worn beneath his counsel's gown, gave the impression of a flowing cape, reinforcing the image of Dantès. The only thing missing was the sword slung in a scabbard at his waist. Yet, Mickey wielded a far more formidable and potent weapon—his magnificent voice and his powerful oratory with which he could vanquish any and every opponent.

By reason of his professional integrity and high ethical standards, Mickey commanded the highest respect in whichever court he walked into. Although he was not a Commerce graduate, by dint of his hard work and ability to understand and digest the most complex of problems, he soon became one of the foremost commercial lawyers in the country. In addition, his uncluttered mind, sharp intellect, coupled with the greatest oratory I have ever seen, placed Mickey head and shoulders above his colleagues and even seniors at the bar.

Mickey had an extremely versatile practice which extended to commercial, corporate, intellectual property rights, constitutional law as well as trials in civil cases. What I found most interesting about his style of cross-examining witnesses in civil trials was his ability to pull the witness into a false sense of security before tightening the noose. He did this by being gentle and respectful rather than browbeating the witness.

When I joined Mickey as a junior, what struck me about him was his equanimity. At the same time, he had the uncanny ability of getting to the nub of the problem almost instantaneously and with remarkable accuracy.

Mickey was a true leader, inspired by

Albert Camus' belief that courage is essential. As president of the Bombay Bar Association, he boldly moved a resolution against five Bombay High Court judges, questioning their integrity and calling for their resignation, despite warnings of contempt. His actions led to one judge resigning, two being transferred, and two losing judicial work. Five years later, he spearheaded another resolution against a corrupt chief justice, resulting in his resignation. Mickey undertook these challenges not for personal gain but because he believed that judicial independence depends on the strength and integrity of the lawyers before them.

The Original Side of the Bombay High Court has a unique tradition where law graduates join the chambers of established seniors. Unlike other regions where juniors are salaried, no remuneration is expected or paid. The goal is to let juniors attend conferences, read briefs, assist, and accompany seniors to court, learning advocacy in all its facets. More than training, this tradition fosters a lifelong guru-shishya bond that transcends the professional relationship. I was privileged to share such a relationship with Mickey. Though I trained under him for about nine years, our association lasted until his passing this year. He was my trusted confidant, guiding me through career and personal decisions.

The work-life balance Mickey encouraged has stayed with me through the years. In his chambers, I learned that work was work and play was play. I cannot forget the wonderful times I had as a junior in what we called the "tea club". This was a short time after court when we gathered for tea and snacks. The first rule was to keep work and court matters off the table, allowing for light-hearted conversations and jokes that kept everyone in good spirits. Once the "tea party" ended, we returned to work with full focus.

Mickey taught me not to take myself seriously. Whenever he would see me looking tense or anxious, he would remark "Is the sky falling on your head?". The wisdom of his words, "There is a life beyond the law", has been a foundation for me to continue pursuing my multiple interests. I encourage my juniors to do the same.

Mickey was unpretentious—on one occasion when his wife Roshan could not fetch him from his chambers, he requested me to give him a ride. I used to own a motorbike in those days. He gladly sat with me in his black coat, tie and pipe in hand while making my friend, Jimmy, remark—it was the first "chauffeur-driven bike".

The adage "behind every successful man, stands a woman," could very well have been written keeping Roshan in mind. She played a significant role in his life and extended her warmth, love and affection to all his juniors. Both were strong pillars of support through the ups and downs of my life.

While I mourn the loss of Mickey, I pay tribute and celebrate the life of a person who has played a unique and special role in my life. Mickey, I wish you farewell in your onward journey to eternity. You will be missed by many, but never forgotten by those who were fortunate enough to have known you.

The writer is a senior advocate



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

THE SIX-WEEK-LONG Maha Kumbh has come to an end. Analysts, though, are still commenting about the crowds, arrangements, water quality and the devotion of millions who thronged Prayagraj. Prime Minister Narendra Modi too penned his thoughts, calling this mammoth congregation the Ekta or Mela Kumbh—the Maha Kumbh of unity. It is hard to predict the exact number of people who visited the mela and took a holy dip in the sacred waters at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. But it is undeniable that the numbers this time were mind-boggling.

The Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj was the first Kumbh to take place in the era of the omnipresent social media. Popular mediums of communication such as YouTube, Instagram and X provided perfect platforms for more people to know about the grandeur and sacredness of the event, and many proceeded to take part in it. There is no denying the FOMO factor (fear of missing out). Photographs and videos of people taking a dip instantly reached remote corners of the country and encouraged many to undertake the pilgrimage. This FOMO factor should not be dismissed. Instead, it should be seen as a demonstration of the deep-seated spiritual calling of the Hindus. On earlier occasions, the number of devotees was known to diminish towards the mela's end. However, this time, crowds kept swelling until the end. Nobody was willing to miss this "once in 144 years" occasion.

Mela of unity in diversity

Maha Kumbh showcased the spiritual oneness of India

Some armchair intellectuals tried to find ways to criticise the Kumbh Mela. Nobody claims that there were no lapses. Two tragedies led to a painful loss of lives. But the way the central and state administrations conducted the task of managing millions deserves praise. We hosted ministers from several countries where people of Indian origin (PIO) live in large numbers. For them, such crowds were unimaginable. One minister commented that the population equal to that of his entire country was in front of him, it was fascinating for many of them but also intimidating to some. Some of them found perfect urban management lessons in the arrangements made by the administration. Prayagraj is a city of 1.4 million people. It took many pilgrims from all over the world every hour during Kumbh. Yet, the civic administration did not collapse. That proves the efficient management of the event.

One columnist bemoaned that Kumbh Mela was symbolic of the codification of Hinduism and the destruction of its spirit of diversity. Taking a holy dip in sacred waters exists in every stream of Hinduism. Hence describing the same at Prayagraj as "performance" or "obligatory" and accusing it of the "remoteness of Hinduism" is ill-informed. Hinduism is always and diverse. But it always had an inherent streak of unity. Hinduism represents "unity in diversity". It stood for the idea of *sarva panth samadard*—equal respect for all ways of worship. But, in the Bhagavad Gita, through Bhagwan

Krishna, it also called upon people to "sarva dharmaan parityajya, मामेकam sharanam vraja" (leave all religious doctrines aside and just find solace in Me). Occasions like the Kumbh Mela were designed to promote both the spiritual principles. Prayagraj was replete with gurus from hundreds of different faith traditions. Hence, the worry that the diversity of Hinduism is threatened is unfounded. The great sages of yore had also emphasised the spiritual oneness of the national society. Melas and pilgrimages are meant to promote that idea of innate unity.

Adi Shankara, one of the greatest sages of Hinduism, established four mutts (Hindu monasteries) in four corners of India to bring a semblance of unity among the diverse Hindu sects who worshipped deities like Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Ganesha and Surya. He propagated Advaita Vedanta, a non-dualistic philosophy emphasising the oneness of the individual soul and divine spirit (*atman* and *brahman*). Like the Kumbh Mela, Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta too was not an effort to destroy the diversity in Hindu religious practices. His teachings provided a framework to reconcile diverse beliefs and practices, including those of the Buddhists and Sanatanis.

It was that unity which one witnessed at the Kumbh Mela. PM Modi summed this up beautifully: "At this Ekta ka Maha kumbh, every pilgrim, whether rich or poor, young or old, from villages or cities, from India or abroad, from the East or the West, from the

North or the South, irrespective of caste, creed and ideology, came together. This was an embodiment of the vision of Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat that filled confidence in crores of people".

Massive religious congregations are known in Islam and Christianity as well. For the Shias, the annual multi-day Arba'in pilgrimage to the shrine of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad and the third Shia Imam, is a big religious affair. This pilgrimage marks the martyrdom of Husayn and takes place annually at Karbala in Iraq. An estimated 20 million people attend the pilgrimage. Equally important and a relatively smaller pilgrimage for the Muslims is the Hajj to Mecca, which brings three to four million followers from all over the world to the holy city. For the Christians too, festival like Semana Santa in Spain and Sinulog in the Philippines attract millions of followers.

Kumbh Mela is undoubtedly much bigger and more inclusive than many of these festivals. Importantly, as PM Modi pointed out, it has now acquired the stature of a "global occasion". It attracts people of all religions and several nations. It may be the time for the PM to consider handling over the management of future Kumbh Melas to a national body so that its global stature can be further enhanced and Indian spiritual traditions are showcased before the world in a fitting manner.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NEW NORMAL

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Gave no notice, razed shop down to compact, crowd: Civic chief of Malvan' (IE, February 28). This self-incriminating admission by Malvan Municipal Council chief Santosh Jirage, that he bypassed the due process of law because he received a complaint by the owner of the land where the shop stood, a letter from local MLA, and the crowd of 200-300 people, which necessitated the demolition of shops. This reminds one of the SC's observation about the new normal in mass lynching cases. However, two differences are noticeable. First, here the victim is property, not an individual. Second, the property was not demolished by vigilantes but by the government itself.

L R Murtu, New Delhi

NEED NEW RESEARCH

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Mahakumbh for New India' (IE, February 28). The organisation of Mahakumbh on a gigantic scale deserves fresh research. Planning, execution, direction, control and coordination of massive crowds for long periods should be one of the themes. It is a subject for deep study of a unique blending of tradition and religious practices, with technological advancements. The digitisation of the "lost and found" services, advanced technologies to enhance safety and coordination, and the Artificial Intelligence cameras that could count the number of people present in any given place have

received high praise. Another topic is how the Maha Kumbh, which attracted 66.3 crore devotees, was kept clean without robust sanitation infrastructure.

Y G Choudhary, Pune

BALANCED APPROACH

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'There aren't many options for athletes' (IE, February 28). Badminton legend Gopichand has discouraged middle class parents from investing everything they have in their children's sporting careers. It is a long struggle for parents and players in sports. The advent of private leagues in sports like kabaddi, hockey, football, apart from cricket, has brought much needed money into the games. But we should not assume that it is going to be a smooth ride for middle-class children. A balance between study and sports is the key.

Bal Govind, Noida

DELIMITATION ROW

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Not a zero sum game' (IE, February 28) by delaying the democratic process of delimitation since 1976, we have done injustice to central and north India. There is no law on child birth, so if a state has a higher population, you can't just snatch away its democratic right. Saying the next delimitation will not be based on population is tantamount to adding insult to injury. It's a clear matter of choice unless we have a law restricting child birth.

Rahul Chouhan, Ujjain

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A new American empire

Trump administration is rewriting rules of engagement and Europe has little role in it



FAISAL DEVIJI

UPTICK, DOWNTURN

After second quarter slump, economy has picked up pace. Concerns over the robustness of the momentum remain

AFTER SLOWING DOWN sharply in the second quarter of the ongoing financial year, the Indian economy rebounded in the third quarter, growing at 6.2 per cent as per data released by the National Statistics Office. The rebound, which was driven more by government spending and private consumption, was expected as several high-frequency indicators had pointed in that direction. With this estimate, growth for the year so far (April-December) comes to 6.1 per cent. Alongside, the NSO has revised upwards its estimates for full year growth — it has now pegged the economy to grow at 6.5 per cent in 2024-25, up marginally from its earlier estimate of 6.4 per cent. However, despite this upward revision, the revised estimates for last year's growth — the economy is now estimated to have grown at 9.2 per cent in 2023-24, in part, due to higher government spending for which relatively more timely and accurate data is available — shows how steep the deceleration in growth has been.

This has been largely due to the industrial sector, in particular, manufacturing. The sector is expected to grow at just 4.3 per cent this year, down from 12.3 per cent last year. And while both construction and the electricity and gas and water supply segments continue to grow at relatively healthy rates, they have witnessed a slight moderation. Within the services sector, most segments have also grown at a slower clip this year. Agriculture, though, has fared better. Agri-activities have been healthy, due to strong kharif output, and healthy rabi sowing. Implicit in the NSO's latest data is the expectation that the economy will grow at 7.6 per cent in the fourth quarter. This could be challenging considering that recent data on core sectors shows that in January, electricity production grew by 1.3 per cent, steel by 3.7 per cent, and coal by 4.6 per cent. However, a pickup in rural demand and government spending — the Centre's capex rose by 51 per cent in January — could provide a fillip to economic activities.

The last few quarters have seen a souring of investor sentiment. On Friday, the BSE Sensex fell 1.9 per cent, ending the day at 73,198. Since its peak of 85,978 on September 27, 2024, the Sensex has fallen around 15 per cent. The fall has been driven by a combination of global and domestic factors. On the global front, Donald Trump's moves on tariffs weigh heavily on investors, while on the domestic front, corporate results have been subdued amid growth concerns. The sharp fall in growth from last year does suggest that further monetary easing is on the cards. Inflation has been trending lower — in January it had fallen to 4.31 per cent. With analysts expecting prices to fall further in February — the last print before the next meeting of the monetary policy committee in April — it then increases the odds of more rate cuts.

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END THE GUN CULTURE

With militias surrendering weapons, possibilities of peace in Manipur have increased. Centre shouldn't let opportunity slip

IN MANIPUR, NOW under President's rule, part of the reason for the ethnic conflict persisting for 21 months is the flow of small arms. Thousands of firearms, including assault rifles, carbines, and ammunition have been looted, reportedly even from police stations and armouries, enabling village volunteer organisations and Meitei and Kuki militia groups to engage in armed confrontations. The situation is compounded by the fact that Manipur shares a porous border with Myanmar, a known arms smuggling hub. Security forces have struggled to curb gun violence and disarm militias, despite the recovery of small quantities of arms in combating operations. Last week, Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalu did the right thing in issuing an appeal to people of all communities to surrender looted and illegally held weapons. On Thursday, the deadline set by the Governor, the Meitei radical group Aamabai Tengsol surrendered 246 weapons in Imphal West. Apart from them, more than 100 weapons were surrendered this week in different parts of the state.

Last week's initiative was not the first time a call to surrender looted weapons was issued in the strife-torn state. In June 2023, a few weeks into the ethnic conflict, a drop box for returning weapons was set up outside the home of a BJP legislator from Imphal East with a poster carrying a message in English and Meitei language: "Please drop your snatched weapons here." According to the last update in September 2024 by the Security Advisor to the Manipur government Kuldeep Singh, 1,200 of the approximately 6,000 looted weapons had been recovered by security forces. While thousands of weapons continue to remain in circulation, it is assuring that the last major shootout in Manipur occurred in the early hours of January 1 in the Kadangband area of Imphal West district, hours after former Chief Minister N Biren Singh's New Year's eve apology.

The easy availability of arms made it difficult to restrict the conflict to a few localities in Manipur. The sense of insecurity arising from the Biren Singh government's continued administrative failures created fertile grounds for radical groups in nearly all parts of the state to take matters in their own hands. Until all looted weapons are recovered and militias are disarmed, a permanent peace — not merely the absence of war — would remain elusive. The cross-border arms flow will also have to be stopped. Failure to do so would diminish the advantage gained by the state with the surrender and recovery of looted weapons. With radical groups starting to agree to surrender looted weapons, the Centre has a chance to finally break the cycle of violence. It must not let this opportunity slip.

THE LAID-BACK CHAMPION

Boris Spassky blended psychology and unpredictability. On the chessboard, he cut out clutter

LIKE ALL ARDENT sports rivals consumed by the intricacies of their craft, Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer ended up exceedingly fond of each other after their greatest face off — the 1972 World Chess Championship. Spassky, who passed away on Thursday aged 88, applauded Fischer's win in Game 6 of the championship. In a match framed by Cold War politics, the Russian saw his loss as a relief from "colossal responsibility". His American rival too didn't view Spassky as a villain he had slayed. Even as the match threw up scenes of manic suspicion and pressure, both seemed to know they were pawns deployed for political posturing. Three decades later after the two had travelled to play in Yugoslavia, while war raged in Bosnia Herzegovina, Spassky wrote to George W. Bush, "Bobby and myself committed the same crime. Arrest me. Put me in the same cell with Bobby Fischer. And give us a chess set."

Spassky's match with Fischer overshadowed some outstanding play in the Soviet Nationals as he defeated Vasily Smyslov, Mikhail Tal, Tigran Petrosian, Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov. He once told Levon Aronian, "Don't try to become a world champion, the majority of us became champions by accident." But the gentlemanly Spassky could not escape the cultural typecasting of his times. Hollywood portrayed the Russian champion as the symbol of the hegemonic East, and cast Fischer in kinder hues. One of Spassky's 1960 games with David Bronstein inspired a Bond movie opening scene in *From Russia With Love*.

Spassky blended psychology and unpredictability, never obsessed on openings and focused on mastering the mid-game instead. He was a Marie Kondo on the chessboard, uncluttering complexities. As Fischer noted, Spassky could "blunder away a piece and you were never sure whether it was a blunder or a fantastically deep sacrifice". The 1972 match was full of blunders, chess-wise — Spassky overlooking one-move combinations and Fischer hanging on. Spassky was the Borg to Fischer's McEnroe. Just that Mad Mac won this one.

IN THE LATEST episode of the Ukraine war, the United States voted to block a Europe-backed UN resolution calling for de-escalation and a peaceful resolution of the conflict for which it held Russia responsible. As a result, it found itself aligned with Russia, Belarus, Iran, and North Korea, along with Israel, Hungary, and a smattering of poor and dependent states in Africa and the Pacific. While much is being made of America's unprecedented abandonment of its European allies, the latter had themselves very recently sided against the rest of the world in refusing to condemn Israel's war in Gaza.

Having stood by the US in supporting the war in Gaza and Lebanon, Europe now finds itself having to defend an international order it has done everything to diminish. The coming together of the West over Gaza was perhaps meant to mirror the solidarity that had been generated by the war in Ukraine. But between them, the two wars did more to destroy the West than augment its strength because each was based on subverting the international order that had given the West its unity since the end of World War II.

It is only now dawning on European politicians that the most serious threat to the West faces as a geo-political actor is neither Russia's army nor China's economy. Even Muslims and migrants, long the favourite internal enemies of Europe's populists, pale in insignificance before the external threat posed by US policy on Russia and Ukraine, Canada and Mexico, and on Europe's military and economic status. While it is tempting to attribute this challenge solely to the Donald Trump administration, it has been in the making for much longer under Democrat-led administrations than under Republican ones.

The end of the Cold War allowed the US to displace with its old allies as well as its new-found enemies, since the former no longer held the same importance without the latter. This shift remained hidden for some time, as the Americans worked with Europe to globalise the world economy and usher in former Soviet republics into the EU. But in doing so, it also eviscerated the international order that had been put in place after World War II, one

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KULIN LALBHAI

ONE GOAL THAT India must prioritise if it has to become Viksit Bharat by 2047 is job creation. The textiles and apparel industry is India's second-largest employer after agriculture, providing direct employment to 45 million people. The sector is expected to motor on at an annual growth rate of 10 per cent and become a USD 250 billion market by 2030, with the potential to add millions of more jobs. If our exports grow from the current USD 45 billion to the targeted USD 100 billion, and if the economy grows at 6-7 per cent a year, textiles can add to one million jobs every year from now to 2030 — 10 per cent of what the country needs.

This is all very good. But we have an opportunity to be great. China, Bangladesh and Vietnam, the world's three leading textile exporters, are undergoing shifts for reasons ranging from geopolitics to internal turmoil. Global markets are increasingly looking towards India. We have a lot going for us — a relatively stable economy and government, good relationships with the world's leading nations, a centuries-old textile tradition and a young population.

The government has been forward-looking in its support of the industry. It has approved various schemes with outlays of several thousand crores that incentivise the sector — such as the Pradhan Mantri Mega Integrated Textile Region and Apparel (PM MITRA) Parks, the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme and the Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies (RoSCTL) Scheme.

The USD 100 billion Indian textile market

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DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

India's textiles and apparel industry is primed to weave a narrative of growth

presenting a huge domestic opportunity. Abundant middle class is driving demand and this trend is further amplified by Gen Z. The mainstreaming of e-commerce, and the emergence of quick commerce, has eased people's access to apparel and fashion. While there are lulls during a crisis like Covid or during recessionary phases, Indians retain a healthy consumption appetite.

With so many pieces of the jigsaw ready, how do we ensure labour efficiency and thereby generate more jobs and increase market share? India suffers a 15-20 per cent cost disadvantage compared to competing countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam. A big component of this is lower efficiency in the labour-intensive garment manufacturing process. How do we remedy this?

These are some of my suggestions. Often in India, if the jobs are in one hub, the workers are elsewhere. Even Tiruppur, the apparel mega-hub in Tamil Nadu, has a labour shortage because industries there are growing fast and workers quit. On the other hand, in places like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, where jobs need to be created, there's barely any industry. India will have to create jobs where they are required. That is why it is important to build the PM MITRA parks in areas where labour is available.

The rate of attrition in our textile industry is as high as 10 per cent. Workers often have to spend a big part of their salary in transport and accommodation and are liable to leave their present employer even for a small wage hike. Many of them tend to be migrants. This has a huge impact on production and eventually the bottom-line. Implementing industrial housing policy can be a game-changer. It could be a combination of a grant, easing FSI regulation or giving GST exemptions for industrial housing.

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Creating living quarters for workers near factories, as is done in countries like China, could reduce absenteeism, improve staff retention, and lead to higher productivity. It will also increase the amount of take-home salary for the workers. Textiles are a low-margin business, however. Manufacturers alone cannot pick up the tab for such huge infrastructure. It will need to be supported by the government.

A defining feature of the garment industry is that women represent 90 per cent of its blue-collar workforce. Stable jobs in safe environments empowers women. It can bring them into the formal economy and take the nation forward.

Automation is often associated with efficiency and reduced manpower. However, technology and human talent will continue to coexist. When efficiency goes up, the industry will grow, creating more jobs.

The challenges may seem formidable but are surmountable given India's demography and economic heft. With a little realisation, India can seize the opportunity and establish itself as a giant in the global textile landscape, where the Indian tiger roars while the dragon cowers like a market share.

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The writer is vice chairman, Arvind Limited

MARCH 1, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

BANDH SUCCESSFUL

WHILE NORMAL LIFE was paralysed in Bhopal and all major towns of Madhya Pradesh in response to a bandh call given by anti-reservation students, a division bench of the MP High Court stayed the government's controversial order reserving 25 per cent seats in professional colleges for backward communities. Reports suggest that the fortnight-long anti-reservation stir may foment in some areas.

PM'S NEW POLICY

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi said a new de-

velopment policy and a constructive programme for the youth were in the offing. Gandhi said the proposed education policy would be subjected to a national debate before its implementation in the next academic year.

BIHAR MLA KILLED

THE SITTING CONGRESS (I) MLA Janeshwar Prasad Singh was shot dead and three others, including his bodyguard and a sub-inspector of police were injured in a raid by "Naxalites" on the party office in Masaurhi, a sub-divisional town in Patna district. Although the situation in Masaurhi is "under control", tensions prevail necessitating round-the-clock

patrolling by police contingents.

PAK LEADERS IN EXILE

ALTHOUGH THE PAKISTAN People's Party (PPP) leaders in exile in London have called the election results in their country the people's verdict against the military dictatorship, privately, a majority of them admit that Gen Ziaul Haq had scored notable victory against opposition parties who he would now try to further demoralise by forming his own political organisation. Certain diplomatic sources in touch with Pakistan affairs say that Gen Zia had already formed his plans to launch his own party.



When being the China alternative isn't enough



DANIEL MOSS

Being "not China" may have been the easy part. A big tout for manufacturing in several important Asian economies was that they enjoyed cordial relations with Beijing and solid historical ties to the US. Leaders didn't mind taking a few rhetorical shots at America, if it was convenient for domestic politics, but professed no appetite for choosing between the two superpowers. This sort of oppor-

tunistic fudge is likely to get harder — and the consequences of a deeper transformation of trading arrangements stand to be profound. Call it friendshoring or China+1, this was never an exit from the Asian giant but a hedging of bets. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's pitch to a conference last year was illustrative: "I offer our nation as the most neutral and non-aligned location," he proclaimed. And Vietnam officials deserve a medal for the number of times I have heard the nation proclaimed a trade-war victor. Behind all this credential burrowing lurked hard questions: Was America's desire to curb dependence on supply chains anchored in China a passing phase or part of a more lasting change? President Donald Trump has delivered at least part of the answer. Try not to be too distracted by the guessing game about when or whether the promised tariffs on

Canada and Mexico will be implemented: Mr Trump gave a series of apparently contradictory answers on Wednesday about his plans for the two neighbours. These levies were never going to be a light lift given Mr Trump declared their free-trade pact renegotiated in his first term as a "model" agreement. A memorandum rolled out in recent days aimed at curbing China's access to tech, energy and a host of other vital US industries may be more indicative of his current direction. Mr Trump is also calling out Mexico to rein in imports from China, which have climbed. It will matter more where things are made, not just where they transit along the way to Stateside customers. This represents a new degree of trade disruption that will underscore the allure of regional alignments. "In the next phase of nearshoring, we expect pressure to mount for a migration of productive capacity," Morgan

Stanley economists Seth Carpenter and Rajeev Sibal wrote in a note on Sunday. "No longer will it be good enough for goods to trade through friendly partners." A shift of this magnitude won't be executed overnight. China remains the world's largest manufacturer and is dependent on exports to keep the rate of economic growth respectable, particularly when domestic consumer spending has disappointed and the overhang from a real-estate crash will take years to work through. For the US, it will take time to redevelop a broad manufacturing base, if it can be done at all. Mexico and Canada, consequently, will become more important to American industrial strategy, not less. If low-cost, efficient supply chains that easily pass from one jurisdiction to another fall from favour, this will likely put a break on disinflation for years. Asia is likely to be further pulled into China's orbit.

Uber-regionalism may be the underlying trend to keep an eye on. When economic historians chronicle this period, will they point to Mr Trump's first election in 2016? That is what many consider to be the big break with the so-called Washington consensus that had prevailed since the 1980s and championed the primacy of open markets, deregulation and asset price meddling. This neglects important markers along the way that were rich in symbolism, such as the rioting in Seattle that scuttled World Trade Organization talks in 1999. Dani Rodrik, an economics professor at Harvard University, sees the drive toward regionalism gaining momentum. He recently recalled the resistance to his 1997 book *Has Globalization Gone Too Far?* "When I circulated the manuscript among trade economists...one of them reacted by saying, you know, all this is fine, but don't you think you are giving ammunition to the barbarians," Rodrik told *The Economics Show* podcast from the

Financial Times this month. "Why is it the barbarians are only on one side of this issue and that somehow people on the other side pushing for hyper-globalisation regardless of its consequences were somehow doing it for everybody's benefit?" There will be caveats to these grand themes, and sometimes it's the exceptions that show the rule. For one thing, the reaction to globalisation has been largely confined to manufacturing, rather than services. And the dollar remains the hegemonic medium of exchange, and US Treasury notes, the prime financial asset. But for factories, a transformation is underway. There are legitimate arguments about how it will go, and how to prevent national security partners a long way from North America, like Japan and South Korea, from being frozen out. Supply chains have never been static — they are always evolving. This new chapter will test their durability.

Bloomberg



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As with US, so with India



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

Relations between the United States and India have been a subject of fevered domestic politics in the past. American criticism of India's non-alignment as "immoral and shortsighted" (1966) united Parliament behind Jawaharlal Nehru. Indira Gandhi's signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1971, definitively tilting India to the USSR even as the US was tilting towards Pakistan, was in part, a strategic riposte to the leadership challenge the lady faced in the Congress after the split of 1969. She fanned and developed the theme of animus to the US as "the foreign hand", which became part of the domestic politics lexicon in the elections that followed. The Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement (2008) nearly brought down the Manmohan Singh government after the Left parties withdrew support because it "undermined the sovereignty of India's foreign policy". Then why is it that the images of Indians deported from the US, shackled and chained, defeated and humiliated, are not having the same disruptive effect on Indian politics? Nitin Patel is not an unknown in Gujarat politics, even if his fortunes are currently in eclipse. A former Gujarat BJP deputy chief minister (2016 to 2017 and again from 2017 to 2021), he has been a six-time member of the Legislative Assembly, and has handled various portfolios, including finance and revenue, in the last 20 years. He opted out of the

Assembly elections in 2022 and, after staking claim to the Mehसा Lok Sabha seat, pulled out of the race last year without giving any reason. It was with some interest, therefore, that people listened to him when he held a press conference, asking the state government to take more care of those deported from the US and brought back in shackles and chains. Gujaratis are among the largest number of deportees and large complement among them comes from his area of influence, Mehसा. "I urge the state government to see to it that they are not harassed," Patel told local reporters in oblique criticism of his own government and a possible bid to resuscitate his political career. The state government responded by rounding up "illegal" Bangladeshi immigrants and sequestering them in camps, preparatory to sending them home. The reaction of the political class to deportation is interesting. There are many, including in Gujarat, who have no sympathy with the deportees and feel they deserve what is coming to them. For instance, Anu Vij, the stormy petrel of Haryana politics who is seven-term Bharatiya Janata Party MLA and minister and who has since been served a show-cause notice for criticising Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini, had to say to "Every citizen has the right to deport illegal immigrants and US President Donald Trump was within his rights to do so as well." Interestingly, his views were echoed by former Haryana chief minister and now Union minister M. L. Khattar, who said those who entered a country illegally were "criminals". For neighbouring Punjab, Minister for Non-Resident Indian Affairs Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal, who belongs to the Aam Aadmi Party, met the first lot of deportees at the airport. But airport visits by him and Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann have since ceased. Instead, Mr Mann is asking testily why only Punjab airports are being chosen to dump deportees. "Why did you choose Amritsar and not the national cap-

ital? You did this to defame Punjab and Punjabis," Mann said, asking why, if they are innocent victims and not criminals, the Haryana government is using police vans to transport them onward. The Opposition in Gujarat was a bit slow in responding. Last week, after three rounds of deportees had already returned home, Congress MLAs, dressed in black and chained to each other outside the Assembly, reminded (largely) unsympathetic crowds how the government had betrayed the interests of those who had voted for them. Congress workers in Telangana congregated outside the party office in Hyderabad, some in handcuffs, carrying placards that said "humans, not criminals". After many rounds of deportation, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee asked why Prime Minister Narendra Modi was not leveraging his friendship with the US President to ensure the deportees were afforded a measure of dignity. Sanjay Raut of the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena favoured direct action. "The US plane (carrying the shackled deportees) should not have been allowed to take off and go back," he said. Parliament has seen its share of disruption over the issue, including a statement by Minister for External Affairs S. Jaishankar. The fact is, deportation, which should have been like a cracker thrown in the midst of routine, slightly tied politics, has not compelled people to take to the streets. Instead, it is being used either as an issue by politicians to get even with the leadership of their own party or by Opposition leaders as a tool to criticise the government's handling. The underlying theme of popular discussion is: The deportees rejected the opportunities India offers and lowered the country's image abroad. On this issue, the government has managed to retain the political initiative which could spur it on to move swiftly on doing to illegal immigrants in India what the US has done to illegal Indian immigrants in the US.

Minimum Trump, maximum Modi

Trump is the insurgent, who sees the career civil servants as evil. For Modi, the career civil servant represents both continuity and change

At around the same juncture in history when Donald Trump has armed Elon Musk with flamethrower to gut his bureaucracy from inside, the Modi government has notified the 8th Pay Commission. The first is a dramatic, if chaotic, campaign to minimise government and cut costs. The second is a significant expansion of the government and wage bills, timed with the 2029 elections. Both now power, more or less, on the same promise: We'll prefer Mr Modi's world. Minimum government, maximum governance.

You need no better evidence of the dramatic divergence in the two leaders' approach to governance and its costs. Mr Trump is the insurgent who sees career civil servants as evil. They are assured a full career of service, irrespective of who wins or loses elections. They govern, or help the government by following set rules and norms.

By definition, this calls for no political or ideological loyalty. In fact, that is absolutely abhorred in this system. In the Trumpian view, this is an obscenity. It's the unchallenged reign of the unelected, and he will take no more of it. So, he'll burn it down.

For Mr Modi, the career civil servant represents continuity, change and loyalty. There is no real problem with our administrative structure and personnel as long as they adapt with the politics of the day. This is the reason we've seen the greatest empowerment of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) chief made a name for himself by promising to turn the FBI headquarters in Washington into a museum and either lay off most of its personnel or scatter them across the US, especially Alabama. It would be the Indian equivalent of sending the personnel of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to Kashi Nagar or Sonbhadra in UP, or maybe Medak in Telangana or Mumbai in Andhra Pradesh. But see the contrast in India.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has a stunning new and massive bhaavan of its own in the CGO complex by the side of the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium. The Delhi Police has a swanky new "home" in the heart of Lutyens while retaining its original one in the ITO area. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) had its own building. It's way better than its original office, in Lok Kalyan Bhawan, next to Khan Market. Lok Kalyan Bhawan, to be fair, is a *sarkari* slum, no human beings deserve to work there. I am hoping it is earmarked for demolition in the rebuilding of Lutyens Delhi. The NCRB and BPRD too got sprawling new headquarters in Mahipalpur, in 2017. The National Human Rights Commission is among those occupying one of the towers in the new red sandstone mini-city behind the INA market, abutting the Barapalaha flyover. The National Green Tribunal is now a massive New Delhi bureaucracy with a bhaavan of its own on Connaught Place and zonal centres sprouting across the country. Nobody would bother a performance audit on such privileged new bureaucracies. The state of the environment, and the impact of the NGTs, if any, you can see. In Modi's cabinet, too, the key positions now, from external affairs to petroleum, law, finance, income tax, and more with former civil servants. The Modi system's comfort lies exactly where the Trumpian hate begins. We aren't saying what's better or worse, because who knows where Trump's slash-and-burn will leave America. We are only making the point that the Trump and Modi approaches to building the bureaucratic structures stand in stark contrast to each other.



SHEKHAR GUPTA

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For Modi/BJP supporters, Deep State is some amorphous entity, including global foundations, Left-activist corporations and investors, and also intelligence proliferations working in cahoots with them. The Trumpian conception of the Deep State, by contrast, is the house where elected civil servants live, with the soft-pedals behind the door where the unsanctioned media resides and who won't bend to political will. He must burn it down. Ideally, he'd do this with his judges too.

Mr Trump and Mr Modi are two very different leaders, armed with contrasting political method and style. It's fascinating how this reflects in their view of governance, and more importantly, to the entity called government. One is wrecking, while the other continues expanding it.

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The geography of storytelling

EYE CULTURE

VANITA KOHLI-KHANDEKAR

A very sulky superintendent of police (SP), Meghna Barua, greets inspector Hatthi Ram Chowdhury and assistant commissioner of police Imran Ansaari at Dimapur airport. Barua (Tillotama Shome) is miffed at having to babysit the two officers from Delhi, where Jonathan Thom, a major local political leader from Nagaland, was brutally murdered. Chowdhury (Jaideep Ahlawat) and Ansaari (Ishwak Singh) have landed on the day of Thom's (Kagurong Gomel) funeral. Barua, rightly, anticipates trouble. Sudip Sharma's *Paatal Lok* (season 2, Amazon Prime Video) is gripping—superbly written, cast, and shot. As it takes you through the twists and turns of the investigation, you see Nagaland as you have never seen it before. The state's fantastic landscapes, hopes, conflicts, culture, and language—all feel real and accessible. A large part of the cast is from Nagaland, and Nagamese is spoken in almost all the scenes shot there. The first season of *Paatal Lok* (2020) was shot extensively in Chittrakoot, Madhya Pradesh, bringing home region's landscapes, hopes, conflicts, and culture to life. Raj and DK's *The Family Man*, another popular show on Prime Video, has just finished shooting its third season in the Northeast. The previous season was largely filmed in Chennai and Sri Lanka. Sharma's *Kolhara* (Netflix), which will see its second season this year, was shot entirely in Punjab. Ditto for Intiaz Ali's *Amar Singh*

Chamkila (Netflix). The list goes on. The rise of streaming video since 2016 has not only created the pan-Indian film and the domestic crossover — helping Indians discover Malayalam, Tamil, Assamese, and Bengali cinema, among others—but is also enabling us to explore different parts of India, rather vicariously, as the geography of storytelling expands. Writers and creators are telling more authentic stories based in states and cities that we may not have seen much of in mainstream media, such as Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Or ones that we have some mistaken notions about like Punjab, Delhi, Haryana, Bihar, Tamil Nadu. For many years, films helped us live vicariously. Zoya Akhtar's *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) was shot almost entirely in Spain, Karan Johar's *My Name is Khan* (2010) in the US, large parts of Ali's *Tamasha* (2015) was based in Corsica. There are dozens of such examples — some because the story demanded it, some due to co-production treaties and the incentives they offer, and others simply for a touch of exotica. Yash Chopra, who gave us gritty dramas such as *Deewar* (1975) and *Kaala* (2017), and a few of his films, shot shooting many of his popular songs in Switzerland. These movies became a trigger for tourism to those countries. But whenever the story was based in India, film makers usually stuck to studios in Mumbai, Chennai or Hyderabad. The few locations that have been used consistently are Kashmir, Wai in Maharashtra,

Mumbai, and Chennai. They were however just that — locations. Wai, in fact, has doubled as some North Indian location or the other in many films, including *Swades* (2004) and *Omkaara* (2006). The place had no role in the story. But the kind of visceral connection between the story and the place that, say, a *Paatal Lok* 2 or *Kolhara* have is wonderful. It works on two levels. First, it exposes us to a state — its language and culture — that we know very little about or have a stereotypical image of in our minds. The only thing I knew about Nagaland was that it's Hornbill Festival is much sought after. However, that it is a dry state with a really superb music scene is among the many revelations. The Nagas people's command of English is superb, of course, but most of them understand Hindi as well and are as plugged into popular culture as anyone else. A few hours of footage on the behind-the-scenes of the show itself is very revealing. Merenla Imsong, (who plays Rose Lizo) is an effervescent influencer and actor who plays a drug addict and key character in the story. I.C Leksho, who plays Reuben Thom, the hot-headed but kind-hearted son of Jonathan Thom, is another actor. That then is the second thing. A visceral story connection with the location spreads opportunities, reduces costs, and brings so much colour to shows and films that are fighting for the attention of one of the most overserved consumers in history. Let us have more of those please. <https://twitter.com/vanitikohl>

Sinner ain't sinning?

YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Janak Sinner has won the past two tennis Grand Slams, but less than a month after his Australian Open victory, he is the talk of tennis for a different reason: Agreeing to a doping deal that has led to a three-month ban. Sinner endorses many brands, including Gucci, Rolex, Nike, Lavazza, La Roche-Posay, and De Cecco. Despite the ban, not one of these brands has withdrawn its sponsorship of the "tainted" Sinner. In stark contrast, tennis star Maria Sharapova lost several major sponsors after admitting that she failed a drug test at the Australian Open, back in January 2016. The former world champion had been the highest-paid female athlete in the world for 11 years in a row till then: She earned \$29.7 million in 2015 — including \$2.3 million from endorsements and appearances. Nike quipped cut ties with the 28-year-old star. Her eight-year contract with Nike, extended in 2010, was said to be worth as

much as \$70 million, including royalties. Porsche "suspended" any further collaborations; luxury watchmaker TAG Heuer whose contract had run out in end-2015 decided not to renew. Danone, the owner of Evian water, said that it was "surprised" by the positive drug test but stopped short of cutting ties with Sharapova. The response of Sinner's sponsors has been very muted. No withdrawals, no cancellations, no negative vibes at all. It seems business as usual. Sponsors seem to have accepted, without demur, Sinner's explanation that traces of clostebol — a banned anabolic steroid — had entered his system through inadvertent contamination from his physio during a massage. Sinner's team stressed that they had scientific feedback that this was not a case of intentional doping, including micro-dosing. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) seemed to grudgingly accept it. Sponsors too chose to tamely buy the explanation. And Sinner seems to have gotten off with a light sentence, and with no damage to his lucrative endorsement deals. When Canadian track star Ben Johnson won gold in the 100m at the Olympic Games in Seoul, he not only established a new world record but also defeated his American rival Lewis. Then Johnson tested positive for the steroid stanozolol.

He had to return his gold medal, which then went to Lewis. Johnson had dizzying fame and million-dollar promotional deals before his fortunes reversed. Argentinian soccer player Diego Maradona, who'd led his team to victory in 1986 World Cup, tested positive for five different varieties of ephedrine at the 1994 World Cup. Though he'd been suspended for 15 months in 1992 due to cocaine use, Maradona had lost 26 pounds to get ready for the tournament. He was promptly tossed out of the competition. While his career lasted a few more years, he never played for Argentina again. American cyclist Lance Armstrong won seven Tour de France titles in a row from 1999 to 2005. In January 2013, Armstrong confessed to Oprah Winfrey that he'd been doping for all of his Tour de France wins. Doping has demolished many a superstar over the years. Where brings us back to where we started: Why are sponsors getting so tolerant of the usage of PEDs (performance enhancing drugs)? Sinner used to be a "clean" athlete and ment and blamed it on his team (a massage from the physio in this case). Wada decided to accept Sinner's explanation, that the presence of the clostebol did not artificially enhance the Italian's performance and its use was not intentional. His punishment? A mere three-month ban. Why? Because

The author is chairman of Rediffusion