

# Why the prestige of doctors is eroding

Every July 1st, India observes National Doctor's Day, to honour the legacy of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy. However, in recent years, this commemoration has become overshadowed by more visible policy events such as the roll-out of the Goods and Services Tax in 2017 and the implementation of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita in 2024. This erosion of a symbolic space reserved for doctors is symptomatic of a deeper shift: a slow and complex erosion of the moral authority, public trust, and professional respect that physicians firmly held.

## Epidemiological transition

This decline is not due to a failure of medicine; rather, it is due to its extraordinary success. To understand this shift, we must look beyond day-to-day grievances and dive deep into why public health scholar A. Omran (1977) described as the 'epidemiological transition'. He describes how societies evolve in their disease patterns. As populations move from poverty to prosperity, the dominant health threats shift from infectious diseases and nutritional deficiencies to chronic, non-communicable diseases and eventually to a complex coexistence of both.

Superimposed on this is the demographic transition, marked by falling birth and death rates, ageing populations, and shrinking family units. Together, these transitions radically redefine both the public's expectation of medicine and the role of doctors.

In medieval times, the social role of the healer was mediated not by scientific inquiry but by moral authority, religious education, and ritual purity. Medical advice was as likely to come from clergy or spiritual figures as from trained physicians. That changed rapidly with the dawn of scientific breakthroughs during the Industrial Revolution. From Pasteur's germ theory to Koch's postulates and to the discovery of anaesthesia to the



**C. Aravinda**  
Academic and public health physician.  
Views are personal

As the world faces a dual burden of infectious and chronic diseases, the expectations from medicine are more fraught than ever

isolation of penicillin, medicine acquired a cloak of rationality and predictability. Before the Victorian era, surgeons had the same social standing as barbers. They were elevated to professional status when the knife, supported by chloroform and antiseptics, began to promise not agony but a cure. These were the fruits of an age driven by the curiosity of lone experimenters, public laboratories, and academic idealism. After these discoveries, doctors were seen as saviours and miracle workers, wielding tools that bent nature. But this golden era, too, was transitional.

## Science becomes commerce

Stage four of the epidemiological transition (currently ongoing in many countries) is marked by delayed degenerative diseases. It has brought about a longer life but not a necessarily better one. The quality of life deteriorates even as costs escalate. In stage five, with emerging and re-emerging diseases (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), uncertainty rules again. Today, as India (and the world) faces this dual burden of infectious and chronic diseases, the expectations from medicine are more fraught than ever.

Dengue persists alongside diabetes. Tuberculosis coexists with obesity-related disorders. While infections are largely controllable (at a cost), chronic diseases are relentless. The treatment of hypertension, depression, or autoimmune illnesses offers no clear endpoint.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution; instead, we are handed complex risk algorithms, lifestyle prescriptions that defy common abundance, and therapies that offer more probability than certainty. In this climate, doctors are no longer seen as custodians of miraculous cures but as gatekeepers of advice that is often unaffordable, frequently incomprehensible, and occasionally ineffective. Statistics have replaced certainty. Protocols have replaced personalisation. A physician today must recommend

less salt, less screen time, and less red meat, which contradicts the freedoms of the modern consumer life. It is hard to respect the messenger when the message feels like moral policing.

## Caught in the crossfire

What worsens this fracture of public trust is that the discoveries once driven by individual scientific curiosity have become institutionalised commerce. The fruits of medicine are no longer shaped by academic purity but monetised by conglomerates, wrapped in patents, and rationed as commercial products. What began as a public good has become a market offering. Doctors serve as foot soldiers in an industrial healthcare complex, absorbing public frustration that cannot reach corporations or policymakers.

Lifestyle changes, now central to chronic disease care, require moral discipline that institutions cannot enforce. Political freedom and personal autonomy often clash with behavioural mandates. Obesity developed through constant ordering from food delivery apps, and insomnia developed through endless scrolling on social media, cannot be fixed by medicine. Doctors are left prescribing restraint in an age of indulgence and are expected to deliver miracle outcomes in a world where both disease and cure are entangled in sociopolitical contradictions beyond their control.

Modern medicine no longer offers the clarity or fairness the public expects. Until a new Pasteurian-like breakthrough emerges for treating non-communicable and degenerative diseases, doctors, caught between being healers, technicians, and scapegoats, must navigate a fractured moral landscape. Clinical encounters now resemble negotiations, with even advice met with suspicion. Doctors are not failing; they are operating in a world where societal expectations outpace what medicine can reliably deliver.

# Janaki, Zumba, and everything in between

Fundamentalist voices from various religious groups are getting louder

## STATE OF PLAY

**S.R. Praveen**  
praveen.sr@thehindu.co.in

Navigating the cultural landscape these days is akin to treading a minefield. It is becoming evident that the most innocuous creative expressions can blow up to become heated controversies. Over the past week in Kerala, everything from a character named Janaki in a film to Zumba dance performances by school students has angered some section or the other. Religion happens to be the common thread running through most of these controversies.

## What's in a name?

Though the regional office of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) cleared the film *Janaki vs State of Kerala* starring Union Minister Suresh Gopi, the CBFC headquarters in Mumbai demanded a change in the title as well as of the name of the titular character, Janaki, which is another name for goddess Sita. They told the filmmakers that the film's title and character, a survivor of sexual violence cannot be named after Sita. The makers of another film, *Token Number*, were also forced to change the name of a character from Janaki to Jayanthi after the Board objected to a character with that name having a relationship with a man named Abraham.

Given such arbitrary directives, it will likely become impossible to use a common name in a film's title or for a character. These instances show a disturbing tendency of the CBFC taking over the duties of the 'hurt sentiments' group and widening the scope of censorship. The Kerala High Court has pulled up the CBFC,



while film bodies in Kerala are up in arms against the body.

## Questioning moral values

While these two controversies raged on, joyful videos of school students of all ages dancing together in Zumba classes filled social media timelines in the State. The Kerala government launched Zumba sessions in schools and colleges this academic year as a part of its efforts to reduce stress and channelise the interests and energy of students away from drugs into positive alternatives.

However, even this made a section of people unhappy. Ultra-conservative Islamist groups including Wisdom Islamic Organisation and the Sunni Yuvajana Sangham, the youth wing of the Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, opposed the plan, branding the aerobic dance workout practice as a degradation of "moral values" and a violation of Islamic religious values. Some clerics claimed that students will be made to wear "skimpily clothes" while performing Zumba even though the students were seen wearing their school uniforms in all the videos on social media.

Such opposition to a relaxing workout revealed the misogyny of the clerics as well as their fears about the intermingling of genders. In the past, citing religious reasons, some of these Islamic organisations have opposed the government's decision to intro-

duce a gender-neutral uniform in schools and to do away with separate benches for girls and boys.

The ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) government has refused to back down on its Zumba plan. The General Education Minister, V. Sivan-kutti, said that the stand taken by these groups will only help fuel majority communalism. The CPI(M) General Secretary, M.A. Baby, who as the State Education Minister in 2008 faced a controversy over a rationalist lesson in a textbook, said that religious organisations can comment on educational issues, but they cannot dictate terms.

Curiously, the Bharatiya Vichara Kendram, a Sangh Parishad think tank, also criticised the State government for promoting "foreign practices" such as Zumba. It claimed that the government's agenda was to sideline yoga trainers.

Beyond the cultural sphere, the campaigns of orthodox Islamic groups against vaccination have had dire consequences. Two days ago, a one-year-old child died of jaundice in Malappuram after his parents, both practitioners of alternative medicine, allegedly denied him vaccination and treatment. They also buried the child in mysterious circumstances.

## Worrying trend

In Kerala, there are an increasing number of fundamentalist voices from different sides of the religious spectrum. Their narrow dictates on creative expressions as well as on issues that are beyond the boundaries of their understanding on religion does not augur well for a State that takes pride in its general progressive, secular outlook. The government and civil society need to push back with all vigour to isolate such intolerant voices.

# Voter verification drive in Bihar: too little time, too many hurdles

Within a month, a staggering 4.76 crore people will have to prove their citizenship in order to vote in the next election

## DATA POINT

**Rahul Shastri**

The Election Commission of India (ECI) recently issued an order for holding Special Intensive Revision of Electoral Rolls for Bihar. This exercise will then be carried out in all the States. The order is antithetical to the tradition of this august institution. From the first election held in independent India, the ECI has played a heroic role in seeding democracy through active voter enrolment and protection of the right to vote of the disadvantaged.

Though the ECI is facing a credibility crisis of late, this initiative is surprisingly radical. And unless it is substantially modified, it will disproportionately disenfranchise the poor and deprived electors irrespective of their party preference. We will leave the thorny questions of legality to the experts and just focus on the scale of the venture and its practicability within the proposed timeline.

As per the directive, all individuals who have not been featured in the electoral rolls of 2003 need to prove their citizenship as per the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, and Rules. Broadly, if the 2003 electoral roll features nearly all individuals who were 18 years or older then, these individuals, now 40 years and older, get a direct entry into the proposed electoral roll. How many then have to go through the hoops?

## The affected population

In 2020, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare published a report, Population Projections for India and States 2011-36. The report estimates the current voting age population of Bihar to be 8.08 crore. About 59% of this population (4.76 crore individuals) is 40 years old and under. The ECI, from July 1 to July 31, requires this staggering number to prove citizenship.

In its press note of June 28, the ECI stated that the electorate count in Bihar is 7.9 crore. As per the ECI, as "4.96 crore of the 7.9 crore already have their names in the last intensive revision of electoral rolls" in 2003, just 2.94 crore individuals will need to submit their eligibility documents.

This is clearly an oversight. The electoral roll of 2003 for Bihar did have around 4.96 crore individuals. By our calculations from the reports of the Sample Registration System, around 11 crore of them are dead. The ECI has taken them out of the rolls.

Plus, there is sizeable number of people who have permanently migrated out of Bihar. As per a paper by Pinak Sarkar, Professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, deriving from the Census, 93 lakh people permanently migrated out of Bihar between 2001 and 2011. Even if migration has slowed a bit after 2011, an average of 8 lakh out-migrants a year from Bihar in the period 2003-24 would mean a total of 1.76 crore out-migrants.

If the share of those over 18 years of age in the 1.76 crore group is the same as the proportion in the Bihar population, this amounts to 94 lakh voters who have migrated out of Bihar permanently. If even one-fourth of them remain electors in Bihar, 70 lakh are no longer electors in Bihar and are voting elsewhere in India. The ECI would have taken them off the Bihar electoral rolls.

Hence, of the 4.96 crore electors in the 2003 list, if we remove those who are dead and those who have migrated from Bihar permanently, around 3.16 crore electors remain in the present count of Bihar's electorate. These 3.16 crore people who were also on the 2003 list do not need to submit any eligibility documents. The rest of the 4.74 crore individuals (7.9 crore-3.16 crore) need to submit their documents.

This figure is very similar to our 4.76 crore estimate based on popu-

lation projections. The ECI requires this staggering magnitude to prove its eligibility to vote within a month.

## Proof of citizenship

What is this proof of eligibility? The ECI says a copy of one document in a list of 11 needs to be presented. Seems simple? Perhaps for some other State, but certainly not for a document-scarce State such as Bihar. Let us list the 11 documents and look at the data that is publicly available for our demographic of 18-40 years.

The first is identity card/pension card of State government/Central government/public sector undertaking. As per the 2022 caste census, 20.47 lakh Biharis have government jobs. Fewer than half of them will be from the 18-40 age group and pertain to less than 2% of this group.

The second is an identity card issued before July 1, 1987. This is not applicable.

The third is a birth certificate. As per the National Family Health Survey-3, 2.8% of Bihar's population born between 2001 and 2005 possess a birth certificate. Much of our age group of interest was born before 2001, so a negligible proportion possesses this document.

The fourth is a passport. Around 2.4% of Bihar's population possess a passport. The share would be higher in the 20-40 age group but would not reach double digits.

The fifth is a matriculation certificate. Deriving from the National Family Health Survey-2 and National Family Health Survey-5, around 45-50% of 18-40-year-olds are matriculate. As of 2019-20, there is a 10% point gap overall between male matriculates and female matriculates: females are at a definite disadvantage.

The sixth is domicile. In-migrants in Bihar are an insignificant proportion of the population.

The seventh is a forest rights certificate. The share of Scheduled

Tribes (ST) in Bihar is 1.3%, according to the 2011 Census. Of them, those living in forests form a much lower share.

The eighth is an Other Backward Classes (OBC)/Scheduled Castes (SC)/ST certificate. Data from the India Human Development Survey-2, analysed by Professor Ashwini Deshpande and Rajesh Ramachandran in *The India Forum*, notes that around 20% of SCs, 18% of OBCs, and 38% STs had a caste certificate. Considering that almost no upper castes possess caste certificates, around 16% of Biharis possessed a caste certificate in 2011-12 when this survey was conducted. Those eligible individuals who are 30-40 years of age today would already have obtained a caste certificate by 2012 had they wished; even if the rest obtain caste certificates in a higher proportion, overall not more than one in four households are likely to possess this document.

The ninth is the National Register of Citizens. This is applicable solely to Assam.

The tenth is the family register. This is also not applicable to Bihar.

The last is a land/house allotment certificate by the government. There is no data available on land allotment certificates. House allotment certificates seem applicable to government employees availing government housing. No such certificate is given to beneficiaries of schemes such as the Pradhan Mantra Gram Awas Yojana.

Most people without a matriculation certificate are unlikely to apply for a passport, a government job, or a caste certificate. By the ECI's new rule, the matriculation certificate has effectively become the main eligibility proof for voters aged 18 to 40. This shifts us from adult franchise to a system that favours only matriculates. As a result, around 2.4 crore-2.6 crore people who had to leave school due to poverty may now be left out of the voters' list.

The final number of people dis-

enfranchised will be even larger than this if we add the over 40-year-olds who have been missed in the 2003 voters' list and those over 40 whose present names don't match with those in the 2003 voting list. These hundreds of lakhs of people will lose their constitutional right to vote not because they are illegal migrants but because they are illegible to a State which lacked the capacity to issue birth certificates, render basic education, or issue caste certificates to the deprived castes. A State cannot penalise so many people for its own shortcomings.

## Why not Aadhaar?

This also begs a simple question: if the ECI allows for OBC/SC/ST certificates, why is Aadhaar not allowed if the proof of identity document for a caste certificate is Aadhaar? It should not be that Aadhaar's major flaw is that it is more available—around 9/10th of the Bihar population possess it. Does the ECI believe that it has issued voter cards to non-citizens? Also, why not allow ration cards?

Yet, even if the list of allowable documents is modified to be more inclusive, the project will disenfranchise people or become a bureaucratic waste because of the sheer paucity of time.

Let us suppose that all the 4.76 crore who are asked to submit documents do so; that is, on an average, 1.95 lakh per constituency. Each constituency has one electoral registration officer (ERO) who has numerous other important duties. (The ECI website has no information on there being any assistant EROs in Bihar.) In the 62 days between July 1 and August 31, they have to scrutinise almost 2 lakh applications, prepare a draft roll, issue a notice, and launch a suo moto enquiry to each elector whose eligibility is doubted. That is a superhuman task.

Rahul Shastri is a researcher associated with Bharat Jodo Abhiyan

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

**The Hindu.**

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 1, 1975

# Detention without assigning grounds: ordinance issued

The President has promulgated an ordinance amending the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) to empower the Central and State Governments to detain any person upon a maximum period of one year during the operation of the Emergency, without assigning any grounds for the detention.

The ordinance issued late last night under Article 123 of the Constitution, however, stipulates that the detaining authority has to make a declaration—and communicate it to the person concerned—that the detention is necessary "for effectively dealing with the Emergency."

When the orders for detention have been passed by a subordinate authority, it has to be reviewed by the State Government within 15 days of the issue of the necessary declaration. It will cease to have any effect unless it has been confirmed by the State Government. The question whether the detention of a person should be continued shall be considered by the appropriate Government within four months of the date of the original declaration and thereafter at intervals not exceeding four months in each case.

The ordinance empowers the Central and State Governments to detain a person without disclosing the grounds for detention during the operation of the Emergency or a period not exceeding 12 months whichever is shorter, but it also provides for the extension of detention of the same person beyond one year through a fresh order issued under the amended act.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 1, 1925

# Bolsheviks and India

London, June 29: Colonel Sir Walter De Frece asked whether the Government of India had recently received any indication of Bolshevik agitation in India or on the Frontier.

Earl Winterton replied he was not quite sure what Sir Walter De Frece meant by Bolshevik agitation. Attempts at Bolshevik propaganda in India and the Frontier were continuous and openly advocated by Communist leaders in Russia.





## Roll crunch

The ECI's rushed intensive electoral revision in Bihar risks voter exclusion

**E**lections in India feature a larger number of voters from among the poor and marginalised sections when compared to the West, offering them the best outlet to register their views while choosing their representatives. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has done yeoman work in increasing voter participation by easing the registration process, allowing the poor in even less developed States to vote enthusiastically. On Saturday, the ECI initiated a "Special Intensive Revision" of electoral rolls in Bihar ahead of Assembly elections scheduled in October. The objective of ensuring an accurate electoral roll is constitutionally sound as this includes adding all eligible citizens and eliminating ineligible voters such as the dead, those who have shifted and also non-citizens. However, the hurried timeline and the documentation requirements for verification raise serious concerns about the potential exclusion of genuine voters. The ECI has said that Bihar's Draft Electoral Rolls, as of January 1, 2025, stand at close to 7.96 crore electors. It has also said that 4.96 crore individuals, who were on the 2003 electoral roll, will not need to submit fresh documents, and for their children, only an extract of the 2003 roll can serve as proof for their parents. However, the figure from 2003 is not static. A significant number has either passed away or migrated. The Hindu's Data Point estimates this attrition to be around 1.8 crore. Thus, the number of living, resident electors from the 2003 list eligible for simplified verification is close to 3.16 crore. Consequently, the actual figure of those who need to provide fresh documents for enrolment would be closer to 4.74 crore.

These individuals would have to prove their elector status within a month when the draft roll is prepared. Their claims and objections will have to be filed within a month after that, which is too short a period. The challenge is compounded by the ECI's illustrative list of 11 acceptable documents. Bihar has historically lagged in birth registration, with very few in possession of birth certificates. The possession of other "official" documents such as matriculation certificates and government-issued IDs also remain low among a large section of the population, especially the poor and the less educated. The exclusion of widely available documents such as Aadhaar or current ration cards is also puzzling as these are more accessible to Bihar's marginalised communities. Considering the enormity of the exercise, the ECI should reconsider its approach. Such an intensive revision should be conducted over a much extended period, and for all States, and completed before the 2029 general election, rather than rushing it through before the Assembly election. The integrity of the electoral process demands caution and time, especially when dealing with the fundamental right to vote.

## Sheer negligence

India's shameful VIP culture has no place in public events

**T**here have been nine stampedes in India in the past 12 months, with six of them at religious gatherings. This includes the most recent one, at the storied Jagannath temple's annual chariot procession in Puri, Odisha, early on June 29. Three people were killed and more than 50 injured. Acknowledging "negligence" and "security lapses", the State government was swift to order a probe. The centuries-old chariot procession is an annual and month-long event between June and July. But the heart of the festival is the nine-day chariot procession, or Rath Yatra, when Lord Jagannath travels with his two siblings, Balabhadra and Subhadra, to their aunt Gundicha's home. About half a million devotees visit the three-kilometre radius around the temple. While a full investigation is pending, initial reports suggest that tell-tale signs of a stampede were overlooked.

On the first day of the yatra, officials paused the drawing of Lord Jagannath's chariot around 7.45 p.m. because of an 'unprecedented rush', allowing only Balabhadra's and Subhadra's chariots to move. The Jagannath chariot was moved symbolically and deferred till early on Saturday. In the intervening hours, about 750 devotees were hospitalised due to heat, dehydration, and crowd stress. Eyewitnesses reported that a common exit gate was closed to create a separate "VIP entry", forcing everyday pilgrims to exit through the same entrance path that was already congested. A single corridor that was being used for the flow in both directions resulted in more congestion, amplifying crowd pressure. The delayed arrival of the chariot also caused a bottleneck outside the Gundicha temple just before dawn. With exhausted pilgrims, merged traffic flows and no exit access, the stage was set for a tragedy. Further, trucks with religious materials entered this zone at 4.20 a.m. This unexpected movement shattered stalls, toppled devotees and triggered panic. This daily has highlighted India's tawdry record in crowd management, at religious gatherings, celebrity-studded events, political rallies or post sporting festivities. Given that the climate discourse is at front and centre globally, providing thermal comfort, hydration facilities and taking precautions to shield women, children and the elderly from the heat especially during peak summer should have been woven into the conduct of the rath yatra years ago. As for VIPs, one way to restrict any privileged entry and to provide access to the beginning or at the end of festivities, allowing other visitors predictable and barrier-free access. But the best way is to end India's entrenched VIP culture.

# In a perilous world, India must read the tea leaves well



**M.K. Narayanan**  
is a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

**I**ndia's foreign policy is currently facing an existential crisis. The second term of the Trump administration, which has upstaged India's carefully crafted foreign policy. The recent India-Pakistan conflict should also be viewed as a "wake-up call". As details of the extent of China's military connections to Pakistan and of equipment transfer tumble out, India must take notice.

Next to the China-Pakistan nexus in the region, it is India's approach to events in West Asia and the Israel-Iran conflict that clearly needs a rethink. India has tried, not very successfully, to sit on the fence as far as the current Israel-Iran war is concerned, but it probably needs to think through what is best in its interest. The stakes have become higher with the United States involving itself directly in the Israel-Iran conflict, which saw it using, for the first time, its GBU-57 bunker buster bomb to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz and another embedded nuclear site. Neutrality is no longer an option, and despite the announcement of a ceasefire, the possibility of an all-out war is a distinct possibility.

### A term that is no longer taboo

With the use of the GBU-57 precision guided bombs, the conflict in West Asia has clearly attained a new dimension. The dreaded 'N word' is no longer taboo. Hence, the question that India needs to answer is whether it can continue to keep up its stance of neutrality. The situation is turning increasingly complex and it is no longer a mere wake-up call for India and countries across the globe. The threat has become all too real.

It may be too far-fetched to assert that a neutral India is 'friendless' in the world of today. A look at the state of affairs that concerns India would suggest, however, that this could well become the case — and that it could continue for quite some time in the future. India's professed leadership of the Global South and its patronage of nations across West Asia brought it no dividends during the recent India-Pakistan conflict. Instead, India has since been reminded — if this was needed — that it confronts two hostile nuclear powers in its neighbourhood, both of whom would have no moral compunctions in utilising nuclear weapons, if the opportunity arose. Hence, India cannot, any longer, afford to believe that its current policies are bearing fruit. A correct reading of 'the tea leaves' as they exist at present is essential for India's present and its future.

Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) policies are today adversely impacting India at levels other than just trade and economics. The U.S. President's claims to have effected a ceasefire between India and Pakistan, following the short India-Pakistan conflict in May — something that India contradicts, but which

A changing world does not seem to favour India's long-held policy prescriptions; it would be wise for New Delhi to prepare for eventualities of every kind

Pakistan's 'Maximum Leader' Field Marshal Asim Munir, has publicly endorsed — sets India on a collision course with the U.S. President and his Administration. Mr. Trump's lunch for Field Marshal Munir and the fact that Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose not to respond to Mr. Trump's invitation to visit Washington (while returning from the G-7 meeting in Canada), is again likely to be played up by elements in the U.S. and across the world who favour Pakistan against India.

The Israel-Iran conflict is yet another situation in which India finds itself as an 'outlier'. 'Neutrality', in the compelling circumstances of today, is out of sync with reality as also the situation on the ground. India's tilt towards Israel in recent times, it would appear, has become something of an albatross around India's neck. India's Iran policy today has few takers beyond India's borders. Its policy of maintaining an equidistance between Israel and Iran has proved to be of little use in so far as extolling the virtues of non-alignment are concerned.

Admittedly, we live in perilous times. Today's situation does not seem to favour India's long-held policy prescriptions. Israel's premeditated attack on Iran's nuclear sites — aided by the U.S. dropping bunker buster bombs — has seen little condemnation across the world. Iran, which needed a strong voice of support like that of India's to counter the narrative of Israel, the U.S. and the West, will find little comfort in India's 'calls for restraint' on all sides. India's support and voice, based on its moral strength, would have mattered were it seen to support the victim of the attack, rather than maintain an equidistance between Israel and Iran.

It is true that in today's world, it is fashionable to denigrate consensus in favour of 'might'. For instance, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in May, the emphasis seemed to be on the 'criticality of 'hard power' as against 'soft power', with dialogue taking a back seat. The stage was set by the U.S. Secretary of Defence, Pete Hegseth, who declared that a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' was a sine qua non for peace in the region, and that China's 'calls for hegemony' in Asia were untenable. He reminded the Singapore audience that 'any unilateral attempt to change the status-quo in the South China Sea and the First Island Chain by force or coercion is unacceptable'. This disturbed the normally placid atmosphere seen at the Shangri-La Dialogue, and produced a strong reprieve from the Chinese delegate present. Subsequently, a Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman warned that the 'US must never play with fire on the Taiwan question'.

### What India needs to do

Hence, it would be wise in the circumstances for India to prepare for future eventualities of every kind. To start with, there needs to be a detailed

study of the growing China-Pakistan military connection as the India-Pakistan conflict in May this year has merely hit the 'pause button'. More importantly, India must try and better understand how deeply China's military capabilities have been meshed with those of Pakistan, the critical role being played today by Chinese weaponry in Pakistan's defence plans, and how Pakistan has managed to integrate Chinese systems with its own defence plans and procedures, including its claims of being able to lock on to hostile targets to counter an attack. Additionally, India needs more details regarding the numbers of J-10Cs and JF-17 fighters in Pakistan's inventory.

As a part of its preparations for a future conflict, India would also do well to examine whether it has the necessary wherewithal for conflicts of longer durations. The United Kingdom, for instance, recently undertook an in-depth study of its defence capabilities which helped highlight areas of critical weaknesses, including that of ammunition stockpiles, the need to set up a new National Armament System, and a new Cyber and Electromagnetic Command to oversee networks and electronic warfare. For India to prepare for a two front war, it should, apart from learning lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war, refine its policies on many such aspects as well. Undoubtedly, Artificial Intelligence (AI) will be a national priority. Aspects such as electro-magnetic manoeuvres to neutralise drones, loitering munitions and glide bombs that dominate the skies today in periods of conflict, should again have high priority.

### China's white paper

While India remains preoccupied with Pakistan, it would also do well to read the fine print in China's recently published white paper on 'National Security in the New Era'. This has a clear enunciation of Chinese strategic thinking today and mentions that 'development and security are like two wings of one body'. The white paper reads like a 'testament' on the importance of maintaining scientific and technological security at all times, and the importance of ensuring maintainability of supply chains. It also has a mention of the situation prevalent in the areas neighbouring China, underscoring the fact that these pose threats to China's borders.

To conclude, it might bear mentioning that if China intends to reinforce its strategic objectives in Asia, specially in South Asia, the criticality of its alliance with Pakistan to encircle India must not be underestimated. Also at a time, when the 'N word' is being openly bandied about, India must reckon with the fact that China has more than a 3:1 advantage over India in terms of deploying nuclear warheads, and an almost 5:1 advantage if the nuclear warheads of China and Pakistan are combined.

# GST reform and unfinished business in tobacco control

**A**s India marks eight years since the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on July 1, 2017, it is worth reflecting on this landmark reform. GST replaced a multiplicity of indirect taxes such as Value Added Tax (VAT), excise duties, and service tax, establishing a unified national market under the 'One Nation, One Tax' framework. The reform harmonised tax rates across States, enhanced ease of doing business, and facilitated greater economic integration. Economically, GST has been a consistent contributor to national revenue. Gross GST collections in 2024-25 reached a record ₹22.08 lakh crore, reflecting a year-on-year growth of 9.4%.

Beyond revenue generation, GST has advanced economic efficiency. The elimination of cascading taxes through the input tax credit system has reduced production costs, benefiting both businesses and consumers. Compliance has improved through digitised processes, which include e-way bills, simplifying tax administration and curbing evasion. The removal of inter-State checkpoints has enhanced logistics efficiency, cutting transportation time by 20% in some cases and reducing costs.

### Faultlines in taxation

However, this progress is accompanied by notable shortcomings, particularly in the realm of public health, specifically tobacco taxation. Tobacco use continues to pose a severe public health threat in India, causing over 3,500 deaths daily and incurring an economic burden of ₹2,340 billion annually (1.4% of GDP in 2017)—a figure far exceeding the ₹551 billion GST revenue generated from tobacco annually, on average, in the past five years. India remains the second-largest consumer of tobacco globally, with 28.6% of adults and 8.5% of students between the ages of 13 to 15 years using tobacco in some form. Taxation is globally recognised as one of the most effective instruments to reduce tobacco use. Yet, since the introduction of GST, there have been no significant tax increases on tobacco products. This stands in stark contrast to the pre-GST period (2009-17), when regular increases



**Rijo M. John**  
is a health economist and Adjunct Professor at the Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kochi, Kerala

A rate rationalisation exercise must address the shortcomings in the taxation of tobacco products, keeping in mind economic and public health outcomes

in excise and VAT contributed to a 17% decline in tobacco use prevalence. A stagnation in tax, Post-GST, increases risks, undermining past public health gains due to the increasing affordability of tobacco products (as pointed out in many studies). Currently, the overall tax burden on tobacco products remains well below the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation of 75% of the retail price: 22% for bids, 54% for cigarettes, and 65% for smokeless tobacco.

### A structural issue

A critical structural issue is the GST's heavy reliance on ad valorem taxes. While GST is inherently ad valorem, evidence shows that specific excise taxes — levied as a fixed amount per unit — are more effective in reducing the consumption of harmful products, as they are less susceptible to price manipulation by the industry. Since the implementation of GST, the share of central excise duties in total tobacco taxes has dropped significantly: from 54% to 8% for cigarettes, 17% to 1% for bids, and 59% to 11% for smokeless tobacco. In contrast, many countries with VAT or GST regimes impose additional specific excise taxes on tobacco to achieve public health objectives. In India, inconsistencies across products exacerbate the problem. Although cigarettes represent only 15% of tobacco users, they contribute over 80% of tax revenue. Bids, used predominantly by low-income populations, remain under-taxed. Notably, bids, despite being the most widely consumed smoked tobacco product and as harmful as cigarettes, are not even subject to the GST compensation cess. This omission lacks any evidence-based public health justification.

An urgent concern is the potential expiration of the GST compensation cess in March 2026, which constitutes a substantial share of total tobacco taxes (nearly 50% for cigarettes). Its removal would significantly reduce tax burdens and render tobacco products more affordable, undermining health policy objectives.

Raising GST rates on tobacco products to the peak rate of 40%, as permitted in the GST law,

alongside the enhancement of specific excise taxes, would be a very effective dual strategy. A mixed tax structure that combines ad valorem and specific components has demonstrated greater efficacy in both reducing consumption and increasing revenues.

### The illicit trade

The tobacco industry frequently argues that higher taxes drive illicit trade. However, independent peer-reviewed studies estimate that illicit cigarettes constitute only 2.7% to 6.6% of the market in India — substantially lower than the industry's claim of 25%. Research shows that tax increases have a limited effect on illicit trade. Instead, governance quality, regulatory strength and enforcement capacity are more decisive factors. India has ratified the World Health Organization (WHO) Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products and must now prioritize its implementation to prevent leakages.

As the GST Council undertakes deliberations on rate rationalisation and structural reform, it is imperative that public health considerations are given due priority. The Parliamentary Standing Committee, in its 139th Report (September 2022), highlighted that tobacco products in India remain among the most affordable globally and has stressed the critical need to enhance taxation on these products. Increasing GST rates to the statutory peak of 40%, alongside a substantial increase in specific excise duties, would serve the dual objectives of reducing the health and economic burden associated with tobacco use and strengthening fiscal consolidation. Such a strategy would reaffirm India's commitment to its public health objectives while aligning with its broader developmental goals. As the GST completes eight years since its enactment, the ongoing rate rationalisation exercise offers a timely opportunity to rectify existing shortcomings in the taxation of tobacco products. Addressing this issue would represent a meaningful advancement in the evolution of the GST framework and reinforce its role as a tool for promoting both fiscal and public health objectives.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Safety is not a priority

The statistic that India is arguably the country with the highest number of stampedes is nothing to be proud about (Front page, June 30). Whether it be the stampede on Sunday during

the Rath Yatra in Puri or the promotional event for the film, *Pushpa 2*, or the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad in 2013, or in Sabarimala in 2011, they all point to a recurring pattern of negligence,

mismanagement and inadequate planning. That such accidents recur, despite clear guidelines by the National Disaster Management Authority, implies that the authorities in India do not prioritise

crowd safety with actionable measures. Nor

do they learn from such ghastly incidents. Officials

### Corrections & Clarifications

In a snippet, 'Ahead of Amarnath Yatra, J&K L reviews arrangements' (News page — 'In Brief', June 29, 2025), the sitting Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah was wrongly referred to as former Chief Minister.

need to take a serious look at ensuring the safety of India's citizens.

**Thomas Palacuran**,  
Vellare, Tamil Nadu  
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.



# Why rail must reclaim centre stage in India's urban mobility story

A RAVINDRA

The recent Ahmedabad-London A171 crash, which resulted in the death of over 250 people, has drawn extraordinary attention. It was undoubtedly a terrible tragedy that has raised several questions. But part of the reason for the widespread coverage is that international air travellers typically belong to the better-off sections of society, including VIPs and the affluent.

Contrast this with 168,000 lives lost in road accidents in India in just one year — 2022. According to an airline safety study, between 2018 and 2022, the global death risk per flight boarding was one in 13.7 million. In comparison, the World Health Organisation estimated 1.19 million people died in road accidents globally in 2023.

These statistics speak for themselves. The intention here is not to compare the safety of air and road travel but to underline a simple truth: every life lost in an accident is precious — to families and to the nation in terms of productivity, whether it be a pilot, or truck or

bus driver. The focus here is on the relative merits of road and rail travel in India — and the urgent need to shift more passenger and freight movement towards railways, both for intra- and inter-city transport.

Historically, although the railways preceded highways, roads gained prominence globally due to the massive highway networks built in the 20th century, especially in the United States. The American way of life is synonymous with cars speeding down freeways. This trend extended to Europe with its autobahns and high-quality road networks.

In India, after decades of poor road infrastructure, a national highway-building programme began with the Golden Quadrilateral connecting Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai. Over the past 25 years, the country has witnessed tremendous growth: from 52,000 km in 2000 to 146,204 km of highways in 2025. With a total road network exceeding six million km, India now has the second largest road network in the world — next only to the US. But in terms

of road length per square km of land, India actually has twice the density. A staggering \$30 billion was invested in road construction in 2024-2025 alone, making national highways the single largest infrastructure project in the country.

In contrast, China, which has about 2.9 times larger than India, has also built excellent highways but has consciously prioritised high-speed railways as the centre of its transport policy. For instance, while the fastest train from Bengaluru to Chennai (around 350 km) takes over four hours, the journey from Beijing to Shanghai — four times the distance — is covered in the same time.

Encouragingly, Indian Railways has seen significant modernisation in recent years, with new trains, station upgrades, and dedicated freight corridors. The introduction of high-speed trains like Vande Bharat (operating at 180 km/h) and Shatabdi (150 km/h) is a step forward. Still, we are far behind China, whose high-speed trains operate at 350 km/h, and the new CR450 runs at 400 km/h — the fastest in the world.

Europe's high-speed trains reach speeds of 250-320 km/h; in the US, about 240 km/h, and Japan's iconic Shinkansen runs at 320 km/h. India's only bullet train project — from Mumbai to Ahmedabad, covering 508 km — was launched in 2017 but is moving at a snail's pace. Its first section is expected to be completed only by 2028, at a speed of 320 km/h.

Urban transport witnessed a revolution in 1863 with the Metropolitan Railway, now called the London Underground, which introduced dedicated rail corridors to bypass street-level traffic congestion. Other large cities like Paris, New York, Moscow and Tokyo soon followed. Today, metro rail systems operate in over 200 cities globally, covering a combined length of about 13,500 km (2023), according to the International Association of Public Transport (UITP).

In India, the first metro line was laid in Kolkata, between Esplanade and Howrah (3.4 km). It took over a decade for the next major initiative: the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) in 1985. DMRC's

first line, between Shahdara and Tis Hazari (8.6 km), opened in the capital in 2002. Bengaluru followed in 2011 with the Namma Metro's initial 6.7 km stretch between MG Road and Bayappanahalli. But progress has been painfully slow. By 2025, Bengaluru's metro spans only about 77 km — India's second longest — compared to Delhi's 390 km. Nationally, however, India crossed a milestone in May 2025, becoming the world's third-largest metro network with 1,013 km of track across 23 cities. But still India lags far behind China, which boasts of the world's largest metro system: over 11,000 km in 47 cities.

India's urban transport policy must clearly prioritise rail over roads. The advantages are obvious: cleaner transit, faster commutes, and greater safety. Projects like tunnel roads and double-decker flyovers, as proposed in Bengaluru, should be scrapped. Instead, we must accelerate metro expansion. The goal must be to promote public transport while actively discouraging private vehicle use, which is responsible for

traffic congestion, pollution and parking chaos — making urban life increasingly unliveable.

While states may take varied approaches, the central government — having specifically endorsed public transport in its urban transport policy — must now mandate its implementation. This is essential to improving the quality of life in cities.

It is time India takes bold measures: to build an efficient intercity rail network; expand integrated metro and bus networks in large cities and disincentivise the use of private vehicles.

(The writer is a former chief secretary, Government of Karnataka)

## The Catholic Church's effort to win young followers relies in part on influencers, DJs and two Brazilian nuns with plenty of rhythm

JACK NICAS

There was a party at the convent. One breakdancer who introduced himself as the Wizard was doing backflips. Another was spinning on his back. There were spotlights, a rapper, two cameramen and a Chevy low rider with a sound system in the trunk and the bass turned up.

In the middle of it all were Sister Marizele Rego and Sister Marisa Neves — Brazil's sudden star nuns — and their cluster of backup dancers in habits, crosses and veils.

The nuns were recording the music video for their new song, *Vocation*, which had become a hit since Rego sang the catchy hook and bearded as Neves danced in sync on a Brazilian Catholic television show three weeks earlier.

The resulting clip rocketed around the world, racking up tens of millions of views. There were memes, imitations and performances on late-night television. On ABC's *The View*, Whoopi Goldberg called the nuns a "real-life Sister Act."

Now they were lip-synching in the courtyard of their cloister, trying to extend their 15 minutes of fame with a music video they released Friday. God had sent them viral to draw more young people to the church, they said, and they were trying to carry out his mission.

"Why did something so simple and spontaneous take on such a huge scale?" said Rego, a singing nun who had already attracted 100,000 Instagram followers before becoming a global sensation. "Because the Holy Spirit wants to touch people's hearts."

"There's also the algorithm," she added, "there's also the Holy Spirit."



Sisters Marizele Rego and Marisa Neves record a video for "Vocation", a global viral hit after their breakdancing, beatboxing appearance on a Catholic television programme, in Ponta Grossa, Brazil on June 10. Sister Marizele, 46, and Sister Marisa, 41, are part of a wider movement in the Catholic Church to let go, loosen up and meet younger audiences where they are online.

## The beatboxing, dancing nuns expanding the flock in Brazil

nuns and 25 religious brothers that focuses on rehabilitating young drug addicts, often using music and art to do it.

Copious Redemption has long bred a relatively laid back and artistic vibe. The founder, a Redemptorist priest, was a prolific painter. Another nun, Sister Iner Carvalho, had her own brief run with fame as a rapper, releasing an album in the 1990s. This month, a Copious Redemption convent in southern Brazil was full of laughter, and much of it was coming from Rego and Neves. "Do you have life insurance?" Rego asked when getting behind the wheel of a car. When the car sped over a hill — the nuns were late for Mass — Neves shrieked in joy as if she were on a roller coaster.

Both nuns were born to corn and soybean farmers in the agricultural state of Paraná, and both came of age in houses full of music.

Neves said she and many of her 10 siblings would work in the fields and start to dance whenever one brother put on music. "Anything that could be danced to," she said. After entering the convent at 23, she continued to pursue dance, taking classes in hip-hop and breakdancing. She later got a gig on Catholic television, sometimes reporting from events, and other times dancing on air with priests.

Rego says she comes from a long line of musicians. Her grandfather made guitars and her aunts sang on the radio. She became a nun at 25 after she said a divine miracle saved her mother from cancer. She then sang regularly at religious retreats, eventually recording a gospel

album with fellow nuns.

The two nuns met in 2007, and the synergy was quickly clear. "If you just start a beat, she starts to dance," Rego said of Neves.

Rego said she taught herself how to beatbox, creating beats for other nuns as they sang. "I just started making rhythms with my mouth," she said. "I didn't even know it was called beatboxing."

Later, they both realised beatboxing and hip-hop dance were tools to connect with young women at the Copious Redemption rehab centres. Many came off the street and had little in common with the nuns. "It was an instrument to become closer and break down barriers," Rego said.

That charisma prompted the congregation to select Rego and Neves to recruit new nuns at a time when far fewer women are choosing a life in the convent. In the United States, for instance, the number of nuns has fallen by roughly half over the past 20 years, to about 36,000, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a nonprofit that studies the church. The number of priests has dropped 18% over that period, to 34,000.

On May 20, Rego and Neves went on a Catholic talk show to promote a retreat to attract new nuns. On the show, Rego began to sing, "Vocation," a song her congregation had written years ago about God's calling to serve. But she had added a new hook: "Voca-cao, oh, ohh."

As Rego sang, Neves said she couldn't help but dance. They rose from their seats, and Rego began to beatbox. Behind the

cameras, the show's director urged the deacon who had been interviewing them to join in, according to Neves, who could hear the director through an earpiece. He quickly stepped into the rhythm, following Neves' moves in lockstep.

That moment, distilled into a 30-second video clip, was internet gold. On TikTok alone, it has been viewed more than 34 million times, according to Tubular, a social media data firm. Interview requests quickly arrived from around the world.

Back at the convent, senior nuns spotted opportunity. Sister Daniela Duarte Santos, who runs the congregation's communication office, called a colleague back from vacation, and they began posting repeatedly to social networks to capitalise on the attention. Within days, more than 50 women had reached out about becoming nuns; they typically recruit only a handful a year. The nuns contacted a local DJ to create an actual track of "Vocation," and, in between media interviews, Rego recorded the vocals. The resulting track, with bass and synthesizers, is "tech-no-pop," Rego said. It quickly shot up Brazil's Catholic music rankings on Spotify.

Rego and Neves made the rounds on television, beatboxing and repeating the dance steps at each stop. They recorded the music video, directed by Santos, with a headset over her veil. And on the street, fans have been stopping them for selfies.

"We ask them for one Hail Mary per photo," Rego said.

The New York Times

the queen in ceremonial robes of the Order of the Garter. Legend has it that during a court ball, the Countess of Salisbury's garter slipped, prompting the king to retrieve it and declare, "Shame on him who thinks ill of it." That phrase became the motto of the order. In a twist of history, this statue, adorned in the robes of a chivalric legend, stood as a quiet bystander to the feminist protests of the 1970s. Not too long ago, the Mahatma Gandhi statue on MG Road was a regular rallying point for civic gatherings.

These monuments aren't passive. They structure movement, host emotion, and shape memory. They are landmarks, but also civic companions. However, as cities expand and priorities shift, these spaces are often re-layered, sometimes deliberately, often carelessly. In the churn of urban development, they risk being edged out of visibility.

Take the South End Circle, once the city's southern boundary, now part of Bengaluru's urban sprawl. Growing up in the 1990s, I often found it on my way to visit my grandparents. What always caught my eye was a bust, with "Te Nam Shri Circle" written on an old plaque. Curious, I asked my father, who told me that he was a great Kannada writer. Years later, a new music teacher at school turned out to be "Te Nam Shri's" granddaughter. I felt a quiet thrill — the statue that I had passed for years was never real, and a connection was made.

But over time, the space around the bust changed. A massive billboard went up, its pillar blocking the bust. Later, a lion sculpture was added, crowding the circle further. The bust became harder to see, increasingly obscured by commercial clutter and new commemorations. Even after moving away from the city, every visit home included a glance to check — is it still there? It was. Still is. But more hidden than ever. I recently read more about Te Nam Shri. He was the one who suggested the term "Basthi" as the vernacular equivalent of "president." What began as a passing childhood curiosity led to a deeper understanding of how everyday urban structures shape our memory and sense of place.

Statues and memorials are not just leftovers of history. They are part of our cities' social ecology. They root us across time and generations. To preserve these spaces is not just to conserve the past but to make room for reflection in the present. As cities transform, these quiet sites deserve renewed attention. To remember a city is to remember more than its skyline. It is to remember the quiet markers, the names nearly erased, the busts hidden behind billboards. To remember is to belong.

(The writer is a faculty at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru)

### OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JULY 1975

#### New Ordinance amending MISA comes into force

New Delhi, June 30  
Under an Ordinance promulgated by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed last night, amending the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, it will not be necessary to communicate the grounds of detention to the detainee. A person may be detained for a maximum period of one year. However, it will be necessary for the authorities issuing the detention orders to make a declaration to the effect that the detention of the person concerned is necessary for dealing effectively with the emergency.

25 YEARS AGO: JULY 2000

#### Cabinet will debate J&K autonomy resolution: PM

On board PM's special aircraft, June 30  
Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today said the Union Cabinet would discuss the autonomy resolution passed by the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly and follow up action, as permissible within the framework of the Constitution, would be taken. Talking to correspondents who accompanied him on his five-day tour to Italy and Portugal, he said the autonomy resolution was within the country's constitutional framework and a decision on it would be taken within the same framework.

### OASIS | ANANTHAPADMANABHAN

## Potential truly knows no limits

June 27 marked Helen Keller Day, a time to honour an enlightened soul whose life story is a vibrant testament to the indomitable human spirit. Helen's world was dark and silent at just 19 months old due to a mysterious illness. At the tender age of seven, a beacon of hope arrived in Anne Sullivan, a young teacher who would forever change Helen's destiny.

Anne spelled "water" into Helen's hand under a gushing pump and this experience unlocked language itself. With Anne's unwavering support, Helen shattered societal barriers, graduating from Radcliffe College with a Bachelor of Arts degree — the first deaf-blind person to

achieve such a feat.

Helen's life thereafter was a tapestry of remarkable experiences, including a deep, 16-year friendship with literary giant Mark Twain, who admired her sharp wit. She even piloted a plane at 65, astonishing the crew with her "sensitive touch" on the controls.

These remarkable personal achievements naturally propelled her towards a life of profound purpose. Helen transformed her personal resilience into powerful activism, dedicating herself to championing the less fortunate and becoming a vocal advocate

for crucial causes.

She fought for women's suffrage, legalised birth control, fair labour unions, unemployment benefits, and social security, understanding deeply that true progress demands justice for all.

Her commitment knew no borders; as a prolific author, lecturer, and fundraiser, she travelled to 35 countries, not only illuminating the challenges of blindness and other disabilities but also raising vital funds. This global vision led to her co-founding Helen Keller International in 1915 which stands as a global leader, even today, actively combating

blindness and malnutrition.

The impact of her tireless work and inspiring life continues to be felt decades after her passing away in 1968 — a living symbol of resilience, determination, and the transformative power of education and unwavering support.

The learning from Helen Keller's life in a nutshell: With courage, determination, and the right support, seemingly insurmountable obstacles can be overcome, leading to a life of profound impact and advocacy for others.

This offers a powerful call to action: embrace empathy, cultivate perseverance, and relentlessly pursue a more inclusive world, for in this pursuit that true fulfilment is found.





DECCAN HERALD

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## Ideas that matter, words that must stay

The demand for removing two words – “secular” and “socialist” – from the Preamble to the Constitution speaks more about the intent of those who make the demand than about the content of the Constitution. In recent days, the demand was first made by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath who said the words were “a brutal assault on the soul of India”. RSS general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale said the terms were inserted when “the country had no functioning Parliament, no rights, no judiciary” and so their inclusion needed a review. Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar and several BJP leaders, including ministers, have stated dissent against the words, describing secularism as anti-Sanatana Dharma and a Western concept. Though it has been made now on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Emergency, the demand is old. The government has in the past used the “watermark of the original Preamble” in announcements on the occasion of the Republic Day.

The words were added to the Preamble in 1976 through the 42nd Amendment which made many basic changes to the Constitution. After the Emergency, the Janata Party government restored the Constitution to its original form but retained the words. The government, which included A B Vajpayee and L K Advani, did not find it necessary to drop them. The Supreme Court, in the Bommai case in 1994, ruled that secularism is a basic feature of the Constitution. Last year, it rejected petitions challenging the inclusion of the words. The Court observed that the words had been widely accepted and their meanings clearly understood by the people. It said: “The word ‘secular’ denotes a Republic that upholds equal respect for all religions. ‘Socialist’ represents a Republic dedicated to eliminating all forms of exploitation – whether social, political, or economic.” A private member’s bill seeking deletion of these additions failed in parliament some years ago.

As the Court said, India has developed its own interpretation of the words. Secularism meant equal respect for all religions and the assurance not to penalise the profession and practice of any faith. Socialism refers to the idea of economic and social justice which ensures that no citizen is disadvantaged due to economic or social circumstances. The demand to excise the words is irrelevant and unnecessary because they did not add anything new to the Constitution. They only gave expression to what was already there. The challenge to these words only shows the opposition to these ideas. This demand is intended to send out the message that the Constitution does not endorse secularism as it is understood and should be rejected.

## Only deterrence can end violations

Bengaluru has witnessed multiple deaths over the years due to electrocution from overhead power lines, yet over 7,000 buildings still stand perilously close to high tension (HT) wires laid by the Karnataka Power Transmission Corporation Limited (KPTCL). This figure represents only a fraction of a larger crisis with thousands of other structures illegally erected close to low-tension cables. These buildings have turned into deathtraps. The KPTCL has issued numerous warnings since 2021, but the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) has responded with inaction, allowing violations to persist at the cost of innocent lives. The recent death of a 10-year-old boy in KR Puram, electrocuted by a power line barely four feet from his home, highlights the deadly consequences of this bureaucratic inertia. This was not the first such incident nor will it be the last, unless urgent action is taken.

The issue is not a lack of laws, but a complete breakdown of enforcement and accountability. The Central Electricity Authority (CEA) mandates strict vertical and horizontal clearances for buildings near power lines, but these regulations are routinely ignored. KPTCL can only identify and report violations, while the authority to demolish illegal structures or evacuate residents rests with the BBMP. However, the civic body has been complicit in the rampant violation of building by-laws. An internal BBMP survey itself corroborated that a majority of buildings in the city have violated construction norms, yet no significant action was taken against the officers or the builders. Illegal constructions do not emerge overnight but flourish due to a well-oiled system of corruption and negligence. Once occupied, these structures become vote banks, leading politicians to intervene under the guise of humanitarian concerns, forcing enforcement agencies to back down.

Merely holding meetings or exchanging letters between KPTCL and BBMP will not suffice. It is time to end the blame game and act. Bengaluru needs a joint task force comprising officers from KPTCL, BESCOM and BBMP to identify and demolish illegal structures without bureaucratic delays. Fast-track tribunals should be established to expedite cases where builders challenge demolition notices, preventing prolonged litigation. Most critically, accountability must begin at the top – BBMP officers who approved the illegal constructions must be suspended and prosecuted. Both unscrupulous builders and BBMP officers act with impunity in the absence of any strong deterrent action against them. Without penalising those responsible, violations will continue unchecked. The government has an inescapable moral and legal obligation to act with extreme urgency; it cannot wait for another casualty.

**Buildings near high-tension wires are deathtraps; Bengaluru cannot afford to be lax**

# Margins to mainstream: Reframing tribal inclusion

India's officialdom is distant from the lived realities of tribal communities; the gaps often lead to a denial of rights

NEERAJ KUMAR AND MAYA K

Since independence, India's development and growth story has taken many forms. It is remarkable to witness its success in the economic and social spheres. Yet, amidst this progress, there are sections of society that remain distant from the ladder of development. One such group is the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), who continue to be excluded from the fruits of growth and modernisation. Bringing them into the mainstream remains a significant challenge for the government.

The Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution deals extensively with Scheduled Areas and Tribes. A major milestone in identifying PVTGs came in 1960-61 when the Dhebar Committee played a crucial role in formally classifying these communities (then referred to as Primitive Tribal Groups). According to the 2011 Census, Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.6% of India's population. Within this, PVTGs account for just 0.6% – a small fraction, yet critically important. Among Scheduled Tribes, communities are at varying stages of social, economic, and educational development. While some have adopted modern lifestyles, others still live at a pre-agricultural stage, relying on hunting and gathering for survival. These groups have extremely low literacy rates, stagnant or declining populations, and subsistence-level economies. These are the PVTGs.

There are 75 officially recognised PVTGs across various states in India. Most reside in ecologically fragile and inaccessible regions such as forests, hills, and remote rural areas. These settlements often make it difficult for government welfare schemes to reach them. Their livelihoods depend primarily on subsistence agriculture, forests, and traditional occupations.

Karnataka accounts for 4.07% of India's total Scheduled Tribe population and is home to 50 tribal communities. Among these, two communities – Jenu Kuruba and Koraga – are recognised as PVTGs. The Jenu Kuruba population stands at 36,076, primarily residing in Mysuru, Kodaga, and Chamara Nagar districts. The Koraga tribe, primarily residing in coastal Karnataka – including Dakshina Kannada, Udipi, Kodagu,

Shivamogga, and Uttara Kannada – has experienced a significant population decline over the past decades. Their numbers dropped from approximately 16,322 in 1991 to 16,071 in 2001, and further declined to 14,794 by 2011. According to the Karnataka Tribal Human Development Report 2022, alarming health issues such as heart disease and cancer-like conditions have prompted genetic research initiatives. Chronic malnutrition, widespread anaemia, inadequate infrastructure, and social isolation exacerbate their socio-economic vulnerabilities. Even UNESCO has raised serious concerns, calling for urgent and targeted interventions to address the declining conditions of this PVTG.



One of the most significant legislative measures for tribal welfare has been the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, which aims to provide legal recognition of tribal rights over forest land and resources. While the Act is a landmark in upholding tribal dignity and livelihood security, accessing its benefits remains a challenge. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, as of July 31, 2024, a total of 2,24,489 Scheduled Tribes individuals and communities in Karnataka had registered claims under the FRA. However, only 16,326 titles were granted. This significant gap between legislation and implementation underscores the grim reality – despite the presence of a powerful law, systemic hurdles persist in delivering justice to tribal populations.

A recent incident underscores this disconnect. There was an altercation between Forest Department officials and police with Jenu Kuruba tribal families at their ancestral village Kardiallu Aturkollu, located within the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. The tribal community asserted their status as original inhabitants with the right to remain on the land. However, the Sub-Division Level Committee (SDLC) established under

the FRA rejected the claims of 52 families, citing the absence of official records to prove the village's existence. This case reflects the ongoing tension between official documentation and the lived realities of India's tribal communities, often leading to the denial of long-standing traditional rights.

**Need for integrative approach**  
A major reason for the limited effectiveness of tribal development programmes is the bureaucratic nature of their implementation, which often overlooks the involvement of tribal communities in decision-making. Tribal development requires an approach fundamentally different from existing models. Jawahar Nehrui, India's first Prime Minister, proposed such a vision in his work *The Discovery of India*, and later formalised it through the Panchsheel Principles for Tribal Development. His five guiding principles were: (i) People should develop a long line of their own genius and nothing should be imposed on them. Rather, they should be encouraged to give every way their own traditional art and culture. (ii) Tribal rights in land and forest should be respected. (iii) We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will be needed in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory. (iv) We should not over-administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through their own social and cultural institutions. (v) We should judge the result not by the statistics of the amount of money spent but by the quality of human character that is evolved. This humane and integrative approach is particularly relevant for PVTGs, who still live in isolation. Integration should be a gradual and respectful process – not one imposed by force or neglecting their culture and customs.

Efforts such as the PM-JANMAN (Janati Adivasi Nyaya Abhiyan) are aligned with a vision to improve the socio-economic conditions of PVTGs. The programme focuses on skill development, vocational training, education, healthcare, and infrastructure – especially in PVTG villages and habitations. Its objectives include providing pucca houses, clean drinking water, electricity, mobile and road connectivity, anganwadis, centres, and access to entitlements. By enhancing human capital through better education and health services, the initiative aims to foster inclusive development.

(The writers are assistant professors at the Department of Economics, Christ Deemed to be University, Bengaluru)

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

# The maestro of medicine

A life dedicated to healing and inspiring others is worth celebrating

VEENA BHARATHI

We were classmates in the pre-university course though in different sections, and I don't recall speaking to him during that time. We shared similar interests, having opted for PCB subjects. While he joined MBBS at Mysore Medical College, being under age by six months, I pursued Zoology in my BSc, secured first rank and secured a government quota for a medical seat at JJMMC, Davanagere. I transferred to Mysuru Medical College for my second year, where my batchmate was already an intern at KR Hospital and Cheluvamba Hospital.

In fact, his father, Dr Anke Gowda, was the medical superintendent of the Cheluvamba Children's and Maternity

Hospital and the head of the department of paediatric medicine. During paediatric postings, his father would explain childhood diseases and proudly share stories about his son's health. I recall Dr Gowda saying, “Look at my son Shekar, the Clive Lloyd of Mysore Medical College. When Shekar had measles at two, my colleagues advised against meat and vegetarian food, but he was fed chicken soup, and he recovered far more quickly.”

Beyond academics, Shekar and I played together in the college orchestra, with me on the mandolin and him on the guitar. I used to play Kannada and Hindi songs, with Shekar accompanying as guitarist. During the practice sessions, under the guidance of our OBC Prof Dr Rajamma, Shekar stayed only until he ate the samosas which were served at the end of an hour of practice. By that time, we would have rehearsed *Dum maro dum* and *Baunathu neene* at least twice. After the samosas, Shekar would quickly return, saying, “*Nannamma kaitta irutaru*”

(my mother would be waiting). Even after Shekar finished his higher studies and became a diabetologist, never once did he mention to anyone that he is the great grandson of violin maestro Chowdiah and nephew of rebel star Ambarish.

A recipient of the Dr BC Roy award, this July, Dr M A Shekar, vice-chancellor of a reputed medical university in Karnataka, retires after a three-year tenure and four decades of a “no-break” career as professor of medicine and director of a diabetology institute in Karnataka. I can't help but feel proud that I have known the distinguished doctor for half a century! I have had the memorable occasion to share the stage with him at the Mysuru Medical College Alumni Association gatherings, especially last year when our alma mater, Mysuru Medical College and Research Institute, turned 100 years old.

On Doctor's Day (July 1), I salute Dr M A Shekar for lighting up the lives of many diabetic patients and inspiring students and junior doctors.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

# EC must ensure bona fide voters are allowed to vote

Apropos ‘Massive voter verification drive begins in Bihar’ (Jun 30), if the Election Commission's intention is to remove names of voters appearing in more than one constituency or those who are deceased, it is commendable. However, mandating people to provide birth details to prove Indian citizenship simply because their names didn't figure in the 2003 electoral rolls raises suspicions of mala fide intentions. Millions of Indians, victims of corruption, injustice, and oppression, are dis-

illusioned and do not vote. Poor, uneducated, migrant labourers, and senior citizens may lack documentary evidence of their birthplace. Declaring them “ineligible” to vote would deprive them of their citizenship rights after living in this country for decades. Can they all seek judicial recourse? The EC should ensure that no injustice is done to bona fide citizens in the guise of voter verification.

Prabhu Harie, Bengaluru

reject narrow political objectives.

REPMEN, Bengaluru

## Navy's quiet heroism

The Indian Navy's swift response to a tanker blaze in the Gulf of Oman showcases its quiet heroism. While diplomacy falters and political postures, our forces answer the call, regardless of flags. This rescue was not just a maritime duty but a moral statement. In a conflict-ridden region, India

chose to lead through service, not slogans. Do we, as a nation, adequately celebrate such courage, or are we too shell-shocked by daily doom to notice silent valour? When duty calls, the Navy doesn't blink.

Mohammad Haseem, Muzaffarpur

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: [letters@deccanherald.com](mailto:letters@deccanherald.com) (only letters relevant to the news item will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

## SPEAK OUT

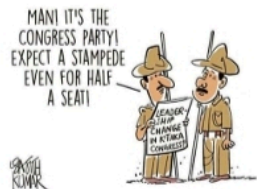
(D K) Shivakumar and I are doing well. Our government will stand strong like a rock for a full term of five years. Attempts are being made to create a rift between us, but that won't happen. We are united.

Siddaramaiah, Karnataka CM

A doubtful friend is worse than a certain enemy.

Aesop

## TO BE PRECISE



## IN PERSPECTIVE

# Oil spills call for new response

Recent incidents along the Kerala coast necessitate a shift from crisis management to risk prevention

SWATHI KALYANI

Following accidents involving the Liberian vessel MSC ELISA 3 and the Singaporean container ship Wan Hai 503, both along Kerala's coast, the Arabian Sea's vulnerability to marine transit hazards was further exposed when oil tankers ADALYNN and Frank Eagle collided near the Strait of Hormuz on June 17, sparking massive fires. These back-to-back incidents underscore a critical reality: as India's maritime traffic surges, so does its exposure to oil spills that demand immediate policy intervention and technological upgrades.

The response to such incidents demonstrates both India's maritime monitoring capabilities and critical gaps that threaten long-term coastal security. The Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS), India's Coast Guard (CG), and Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) coordinated effectively to monitor the oil slick and implement containment measures soon after the sinking of the Liberian vessel. CMFRI's ongoing coastal surveys following the accidents can be extremely useful for disaster management by the country's coastals.

ISRO's EOS-04 satellite provided spatial images, using Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) sensors capable of monitoring oil spills regardless of lighting or weather. However, this reliance on a primary Earth observation satellite highlights a concerning gap in India's dedicated ocean monitoring infrastructure. Real-time dependence on multi-purpose satellites creates potential conflicts between monitoring priorities and limits specialised maritime surveillance capabilities.

India's current oil spill trajectory modelling relies on adapted versions of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s General NOAA Operational Modelling Environment (GNOME) tool. These generalised international models using broad parameters and spatial data of coarse resolutions might struggle with India's unique peninsular coastline, without localised data inputs and specialised algorithms to predict oil spill behaviour.

These limitations become pronounced during monsoon periods, when tropical ocean patterns dramatically alter, necessitating a region-specific technology deployment. More critically, the sensors can only detect oil presence or absence, not its types – information crucial for determining appropriate response strategies.

Oil spills create cascading impacts across sectors and environmental damage beyond visible contamination – from marine biodiversity to coastal erosion, from health impacts on coastal communities to losses in the energy sector. Yet

these impacts rarely factor into policy discussions. Perhaps most concerning is the absence of comprehensive regulatory frameworks governing maritime pollution incidents. The absence of mandatory state-level oil spill contingency plans for vessels transiting Indian waters represents a significant policy gap. The State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA) also lacks independent capacity to conduct level of oil spill, enhancing dependencies on central agencies.

**Containment to intervention**  
India's National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan, last updated in 2012, suffers from weak enforcement mechanisms and fragmented institutional oversight. The divided by overlapping authority between ICG, Pollution Control Boards, port authorities, and including General of Shipping, creates coordination challenges leading to delays in legal action against polluters. The tiered response structure also creates bureaucratic bottlenecks during major incidents.

The recent incidents highlight the need to focus on addressing India's maritime vulnerability that requires dedicated technological infrastructure designed for ocean monitoring. Deploying satellites with advanced sensors capable of oil type identification would enable real-time characterisation of pollutants, allowing immediate deployment of appropriate response technologies. These sensors, already available, could transform response effectiveness from generic containment to targeted intervention.

Operational and decentralised geospatial dashboards integrating real-time satellite data, weather information, vessel tracking, and response resource locations would provide comprehensive situational awareness. Enhanced inter-agency coordination between state disaster management authorities and national agencies like INCOIS and ICG requires structured training programmes and regular drills. Beyond real-time, expecting universal expertise, shared capacity-building can enable seamless coordination during emergencies. Regular interactive training exercises in the state's specific geographic conditions would identify operational gaps and improve response protocols.

The Kerala chapter shows that the maritime future of India's coastal states depends on transforming reactive crisis management into proactive risk prevention. This requires immediate investments in dedicated ocean monitoring satellites, comprehensive regulatory frameworks with robust accountability measures, and integrated response systems designed specifically for India's tropical coastal environment. The technology exists – what's needed is commitment to implement ecological safeguards before the next inevitable spill tests India's resilience.

This is a research article at the Tushashila Institution



## Strategic opportunity

Mazagon Dock-CDPLC deal boosts India's maritime influence

The announcement that state-owned Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd (MDSL) will acquire a controlling stake in Colombo Dockyard PLC (CDPLC) in a deal worth \$53 million must be seen as an important milestone in strengthening India's maritime influence in a key corridor in the Indian Ocean Region. Mumbai-based MDSL, which builds warships and submarines for the Indian Navy and platforms and vessels for offshore oil drilling, is India's largest defence shipyard and a designated Navratna company. Its proposed acquisition of the loss-making CDPLC, which is Sri Lanka's leading ship-building and repair facility, will expand MDSL's portfolio, with the added benefit of the shipyard's strategic location near the deep-water harbour of Colombo Port, a significant transshipment port. As a state-owned company, this deal does much to enhance India's prestige in an island nation in which China has been making significant inroads. Beijing already holds 85 per cent of the Hambantota International Port group, and has a 99-year lease on the port, located south of the country.

This strategic deal between MDSL and CDPLC was the outcome of extensive discussion between Indian and Sri Lankan officials. The fact that the deal was struck with a major Indian public-sector company rather than a private-sector player must be seen as an important signal. It reflects growing cordiality between the two nations since the election of Anura Dissanayake in September last year. Contrary to expectations given his pro-Chinese reputation, Mr Dissanayake has managed a balancing act between Beijing, Sri Lanka's biggest creditor, and New Delhi, which extended an emergency credit line to tide over a period of economic turmoil. India was the first foreign country Mr Dissanayake visited in December last year after being elected President.

CDPLC has been in deep waters since November last year when its Japanese partner, Onomichi Dockyard Company, which owned 51 per cent, exited after discussion between Colombo and Tokyo for financial relief failed. As CDPLC faced a default and the prospect of closure and layoffs, MDSL was one of the companies shortlisted for its strong credentials. On the face of it, the deal appears to be mutually beneficial. CDPLC has order books of over \$300 million and sees access to MDSL's technology and Indian supply chains and markets as a source of opportunity. MDSL is building three Scorpene submarines and six diesel-electric stealth submarines for the Indian Navy. The acquisition of CDPLC will help the Indian dockyard in expanding its heavy reliance on a single buyer (the Indian Navy) to markets in East Asia, West Asia, Europe, and Africa, where the Sri Lankan company has a presence.

That said, the deal will also be a test of an Indian public-sector company's ability to manage an overseas venture competently. The state-owned sector's record in overseas ventures is decidedly mixed. The energy sector, with companies such as ONGC Videsh and Indian Oil Corporation, has established operations overseas. The Rail India Technical and Economic Service (RITES) and WAPCOS (a water consultancy) have proved competitive in international consulting programmes. But many others have faced the chronic problems that hinder public-sector efficiency in India — red tape and technological stagnation. MDSL does not suffer from these drawbacks and it has a reputation for efficient management. In a region where Chinese state-owned enterprises dominate, much hinges on its success.

## Scaling up garment production

Incentive schemes without structural reforms will not help

The textile and apparel industry is India's largest employment generator after agriculture, and contributes 2.3 per cent to the country's gross domestic product. Notably, 80 per cent of its capacity is spread across clusters of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), implying that a significant portion of the production process, from raw-material processing to garment manufacturing, remains labour-intensive. As reported by this newspaper last week, the Union government is in the process of formulating a production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for garments. This will be separate from the existing PLI scheme for textiles. While the proposal brings fresh hope, past evidence begs the question whether the PLI scheme can indeed transform India's manufacturing ecosystem.

Other than smartphones and pharmaceuticals, overall investment remains far from what was initially expected in other sectors where PLI schemes were launched. India's industrial strategy, instead of being harnessed to generate productive employment and boost export potential, is tilting towards import substitution. The PLI scheme shortlists firms and provides subsidies ranging from 4-6 per cent, based on conditions like investment and production. However, PLI-induced investment has been unable to create the scale of employment needed, especially in low-skill manufacturing. The PLI scheme for textiles is a case in point. Aimed at boosting the production of manmade fibre (MMF) apparel and MMF fabric, it was launched in 2021 with a budgetary outlay of ₹10,683 crore for five years. However, growth in investment in the sector remains slower than anticipated. In fact, textile exports stood at \$34.4 billion in 2023-24, marking a decline of over 3 per cent over the previous financial year. It is worth noting that what worked for electronics perhaps cannot be replicated for garments, a sector dominated by tiny artisan clusters and informal micro units. They may not benefit from a model designed to reward firms with capacity and scale.

The key issues in the textile and garment sector, including limited access to raw materials, inefficient logistics, cumbersome trade procedures, and restrictive labour regulations, have significantly eroded India's competitiveness, particularly in comparison to countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam, which have successfully positioned themselves as low-cost manufacturing export hubs for garments. A recent study conducted by the Global Trade Research Initiative also flagged several domestic barriers. These include high import duties imposed on fabrics, which raise production costs. Additionally, quality norms on key raw materials such as polyester and viscose staple fibres have created compliance burdens for businesses. Customs-related bottlenecks also hinder the smooth flow of raw materials and finished products. A particularly striking example relates to the Directorate General of Foreign Trade's import policy circular of 2001, which requires that all imports of textile into India be accompanied by a pre-shipment inspection certificate issued by a textile-testing laboratory accredited to the national accreditation agency of the supplier's country. Therefore, deeper structural reforms are needed to create the kind of competitive, inclusive ecosystem that allows not just a few firms but the entire industry to thrive.

## Slashing food tariffs: A risky bet

Why NITI Aayog's push for US market access could hurt India's food security

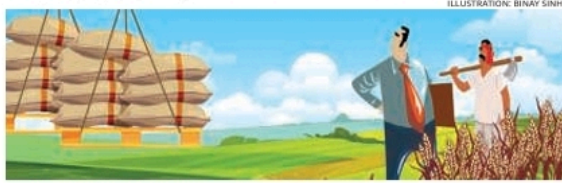


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

A recent NITI Aayog paper recommends sweeping tariff cuts on a range of agricultural imports from the United States — including rice, dairy, poultry, corn, apples, almonds, and genetically modified soy — as part of the proposed India-US Free Trade Agreement. The paper, titled "Promoting India-US Agricultural Trade under the new US Trade Regime," was published in May. We look at its key recommendations and what they could mean for India's food security. Let's start with rice — India's staple food across states.

**Rice** The paper suggests scrapping import tariffs on US rice, as India already exports large amounts of rice and hence faces little risk from imports. While this argument sounds reasonable at first glance, it overlooks a costly mistake India made in the past.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, India faced food shortages and depended on US food imports under PL-480 — a US law that allowed surplus food to be sold or donated to countries like India.

During global trade talks (Kennedy and Tokyo Round of General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade or GATT, 1964-1979), India — then a major food importer — agreed to US proposals to lock its tariffs at zero on key staples like rice, wheat, and skimmed milk powder. This meant India gave up the right to raise tariffs on these items in the future.

Later, the Green Revolution significantly boosted India's farm output, and by the early 1990s, the country had become self-sufficient in rice and wheat. Indian farmers now needed tariff protection from cheap, subsidised imports — but the old GATT commitments left India unable to raise tariffs. The only legal option was to renegotiate under GATT's Article XXVIII, which India did in the 1990s.

However, renegotiations were costly: India had to lower tariffs on other items, such as butter, cheese, apples, citrus fruit, and olive oil, to compensate its trade partners, including the US and the European

Union. Some of these subsidised products flooded the Indian market, hurting local farmers.

The key lesson is that once a country legally commits to low or zero tariffs, regaining flexibility is very difficult and expensive. Temporary surpluses should not justify permanent tariff cuts in core farm products. The NITI Aayog paper overlooks this critical point.

**Global grain price volatility** The NITI Aayog paper also overlooks the risks associated with global grain price fluctuations. For example, from 2014 to 2016, global grain prices crashed — wheat fell below \$60 per tonne — forcing many African farmers out of business. If India removes tariffs, cheap and subsidised US grains could flood the market in such times, leaving Indian produce unsold, and discouraging farmers from planting the next crop. This would make India dependent on imports.

If global prices later spike — as they did in 2005-08 and 2010-11 (wheat prices increased by 130 per cent, while maize prices rose by 70 per cent) — India would face expensive emergency imports, just as Ghana and Nigeria did during those years. Such boom-bust cycles have damaged food security in many African nations. India must avoid this. With over 100 million small farmers, it should keep tariffs on staples like rice and wheat to protect farmers and ensure stable food supplies.

Also, removing rice tariffs would reward the very groups attacking India's food policies. The USA Bio-Federation has repeatedly challenged India at the World Trade Organization, accusing it of breaking subsidy rules and distorting trade through its minimum support price and public procurement. Cutting tariffs in a US trade deal would only strengthen their efforts to weaken India's food security system, which protects both farmers and consumers.

With food security now shaped by geopolitics, climate change, and market manipulation, India must be cautious.



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

## The problems India ignores

What will India need to become a global economic powerhouse and a developed nation by 2047? Everyone, including this columnist, has pointed out that our gross domestic product (GDP) will need to grow consistently at over 7.5 per cent for a sustained period — ideally over 8 per cent (real GDP growth, not nominal).

What will help us grow in that manner? In my book — *Will India Get Rich Before It Turns 100* — I have pointed out that among the things we need to focus on are education and health care, without which no country has been able to take advantage of a demographic bulge. Apart from that, consistent, long-term, stable policies, improved logistics, manufacturing, and technology research and adoption are critical focus areas.

There are also looming threats, as well as opportunities, that policymakers need to develop strategies for. These include climate change and artificial intelligence. In addition, there is a need to develop and control the entire ecosystem in multiple critical areas — from key drugs to computer chips and rare earths — so that we are not dependent on other countries.

If we leave aside the big picture though, there are multiple issues that receive little attention simply because they do not require a grand vision. These issues slow our growth, despite many good policies and efforts by the government. They are often talked about informally among entrepreneurs — small, medium and big — when no government representatives are present.

These are all genuine pain points that the average entrepreneur, worker, and citizen face daily, resulting in reduced efficiency, lower productivity, and wasteful spending.

Let us look at some of these issues, starting with the quality of newly built infrastructure on which

hundreds of crores are being spent. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has maintained a steadfast focus on infrastructure development since its first term. Every Union Budget has allocated large sums for this purpose. Thousands of kilometres of highways have been built, and port and airport capacities have been expanded.

Unfortunately, much of the new infrastructure is inaugurated with great fanfare, only to start showing problems within weeks or months. New airport terminals struggle to cope with their first rains. Highways costing hundreds of crores develop cracks and potholes in no time. Roads meant to last two decades require repairs within six months. Several bridges have collapsed even before completion. Water tanks, built with crores of public funds, have collapsed within months of being finished. Examples of poorly designed roads, flyovers, and bridges from across the country keep surfacing on social media, along with their photos.

Apart from the expenses and time spent on repairing and rectifying defects in newly built infrastructure, what is often not captured is the lost time and productivity caused by badly built infrastructure. From extra time spent commuting to increased fuel, these affect people's productivity and show up in slower GDP growth. They are tiny but visible barriers to our logistic and manufacturing competitiveness.

The quality problems persist in sectors other than infrastructure. In some services or products, they manifest themselves as safety issues or non-standard quality goods. Take the case of the recent crash of the Air India flight. While the exact reason for the crash will be known later, after the investigation is complete, a veritable Pandora's box of issues has been opened following the crash.

From huge understaffing at the Directorate Gen-

**Dairy and poultry** The NITI Aayog paper suggests India should cut tariffs on US dairy and poultry imports and regulate imports through SPS (sanitary and phytosanitary) standards. SPS standards are designed to ensure food safety and protect human, animal, and plant health.

Replacing tariffs with weaker SPS measures — which are more easily challenged — would promote imports. The US has long opposed India's rule that imported milk must come from animals not fed meat or blood, a rule India considers essential for health and cultural reasons. Additionally, India's SPS enforcement is patchy and lacks robust technical support, rendering it an unreliable substitute for tariffs. Cutting tariffs on dairy and poultry, therefore, would be a mistake.

**GM corn, soy seeds** NITI Aayog proposes allowing imports of US corn for ethanol blending. This is currently banned in India. It supports importing DDGS (distiller's dried grains with solubles) — a genetically modified (GMO) corn byproduct used in animal feed — for processing and re-export. The argument is that this would prevent GM material from entering India's domestic food and feed supply.

The paper also recommends importing GM soybean seeds under a "controlled" model, where the seeds would be crushed in coastal areas, the oil sold locally, and the soy meal (which contains GM traits) exported to avoid domestic contamination.

However, India's fragmented supply chains and weak SPS enforcement make such controls unrealistic. Once GM products enter, they are likely to leak into local agriculture — jisking food safety, harming the environment, and exposing Indian exports to bans from countries that reject GM contamination.

**Recommendations** India should exercise caution before reducing farm tariffs under the proposed trade deal with the US. Once reduced, tariffs are tough to raise again. Even if global prices crash or Indian farmers suffer losses — which could leave India vulnerable, especially since countries like the US and the EU continue to subsidise their farmers heavily.

Keeping tariff flexibility isn't outdated protectionism — it's a necessary tool to protect food security, support rural incomes, and manage market shocks.

In today's world of rising food insecurity, climate risks, and unpredictable trade behaviour, India must preserve its ability to shield farmers and consumers from global market shocks.

India must hold open, transparent discussions with state governments, farmer groups, and experts before making any binding decisions on opening the farm sector under the FTA. Farming supports over 700 million people — it's not just a livelihood but the backbone of the rural economy and the nation's food system.

The author is founder, Global Trade Research Initiative



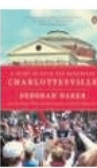
PROSAIC VIEW

PROSEJIT DATTA

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From huge understaffing at the Directorate Gen-



**Charlottesville A study of rage and resistance** by Deborah Baker  
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xx+442 pages  
₹1,299

population, led by a 15-year-old schoolgirl Zylana Bryant and activist black clergy, started demanding a name change for the park and shifting the offending statues. Eventually, in 2017, the area was renamed Emancipation Park and the Lee statue was placed on the list of removals. This put Charlottesville in the lens of numerous white racist groups, leading first to a torch march on Mother's Day in May and the vicious Klan rally of August that year.

Diligence and thoroughness do not do full justice to Ms Baker's enterprise. She covers an enormous canvas, spatially and temporally. She traces the antecedents of most activists on both sides. She analyses the ambivalence of Jefferson on the race issue. Despite his libertarian leanings, he owned a number of slaves (whom he freed) and sired at least one child from his house slave Sally Hemmings when he was 14. The University of Virginia and its

long programmes of research on eugenics resembling those of Adolf Hitler are examined. Ezra Pound, the admiral of Benito Mussolini who had declared admiringly that Jefferson was a fascist, is scrutinised. He was in residence at the university after his release from asylum. In an ironic twist of fate, Mr Trump just last week got the current president of the university to "resign" because of its stress on diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI).

What emerges from this churn? The new American right manifests as a Hydra-headed monster, with names such as Proud Boys and the Oathkeepers. They are seemingly independent, but united in their espousal of the "combustible mix of fascism, Nazism, white supremacy, homophobia, and Lost Cause doctrine." Mr Trump is not the cause of it, but is the distilled essence of it. The author says she failed to anticipate the

January 6, 2020 insurrection on the Capitol, but she calls it Charlottesville 2.0. She would surely think of the happenings of anti-ICE demonstrations in Los Angeles and Mr Trump's recourse to the National Guards and the Marines as Charlottesville 3.0. Ms Baker despairs. She quotes Dr Jeffrey Pugh, a white ordained minister on the cusp of retiring in Charlottesville, "I don't know another way of saying it. We're in the south. America is Charlottesville now. Everywhere is Charlottesville."

One only has to look at the diktats Mr Trump has let loose on America: Jettisoning DEI mandates, attempting to force universities, including the holiest of the holies, Harvard, to bend to his will; selective immigration controls, among other things. Those who had always seen America as the shining city on the hill would fervently want to believe that its moral fibre is resilient enough to withstand another 1,300 days of the abomination that passes for its leadership.

The reviewer is a Baroda-based economist

## 'America is Charlottesville now'



SHREEKANT SAMBRANI

Charlottesville in the Commonwealth of Virginia is a city of about 50,000, evenly divided among white and black residents. It is among the oldest cities in the state, with great historical significance. Monticello, the estate of Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the United States and its third President, is just outside the city. Jefferson's successor as President, James Madison, the "father of the Constitution," and the author of the Virginia Compromise, which equated electorally five free slaves to three white persons, was from the nearby town of

Orange. The Confederate General Robert E Lee was also a Virginian. He commanded the Army of North Virginia, which included Charlottesville. Yet, Charlottesville was a city where nothing much happened. Post-civil war Reconstruction quickly gave way to Jim Crow legislation, which left the freed slaves as poor as before and confined to a ghetto. The razing of the Vinegar Hill district in Charlottesville in the name of redevelopment further cramped the black neighbourhood. The segregated Lee Memorial Park with statues of Lee and Johnny Reb stuck out as reminders of the hateful past.

That changed quickly on August 12, 2017. The "beautiful ugly city" as author Deborah Baker of the book under review called Charlottesville, attracted national headlines because a race riot in the city resulted in a car running berserk in a no-drive zone killing one person. That would not have meant much as race riots go, but this was something else. The Ku Klux

Klan and its many variants garbed in their signature white-sheet-and-hood attire had gathered in the town to "take back" what was, namely, the park and the statues.

Donald J Trump, who had become the 45th President of the US in January 2017, pronounced that there had been very fine people on both sides in Charlottesville. Ms Baker, who hails from the town, felt that "A Rubicon had been crossed... People won't stand for that... but life continued as before." She started reading and researching and meeting people to understand what had happened and why. The result is a thoroughly researched long book, naming names and quoting the good and the bad. Nearly 80 pages of references, sources and notes attest to the depth of research. For lay readers, especially non-Americans, it is an eye-opening and harrowing read. Things had started stirring in the first decade of this century. The black



# 10 The EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## SECULAR

In the Preamble, it's not just a word. It's an article of faith in the way the nation defines itself and holds itself together

THE WORD "SECULAR" was included in the Preamble of India's Constitution through a process that was patently undemocratic. It was 1976, the Emergency was in place, many Opposition leaders had been jailed, there was a clampdown by the Indira Gandhi government on fundamental freedoms and imposition of press censorship. The 42nd Amendment Act made many other changes that were wide-ranging and controversial — curtailing rights, whittling down the Court's power of judicial review, giving Parliament unrestrained powers to amend any part of the Constitution, transferring powers from the states to the Centre, eroding the federal structure. So yes, the introduction of the word "secular" in the Constitution's Preamble — now the centre of a controversy among senior members of the BJP-led establishment have urged that it be removed (along with "socialist", but the latter word is not their real target) — did not take place in happy circumstances. And yet, having said that, "secular" was not deleted from the Preamble, and its inclusion has been upheld by the Court, even though other changes made by the 42nd Amendment were subsequently undone, because it belongs in the Constitution, fundamentally and inalienably. As the Supreme Court said in its landmark ruling in the *Kesavananda Bharati* case in 1973, secularism is a part of the Constitution's basic structure. And, more recently, last year, the Court, hearing a plea to delete these words, found no reason to do so, underlining that India has "developed its own interpretation of secularism".

The word secular may have been formally added by the 42nd Amendment, but secularism was already with into the Constitution of this diverse country. It is there in Article 25's guarantee of the freedom of conscience, to profess, practise and propagate religion to all citizens. It inheres also in the Preamble's emphasis on Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity — in a multi-religious context, these values are incomplete without a commitment to Secularism. That is not to say that India's secularism has not been debated extensively, or that it will not continue to be discussed. In an argumentative democracy, where secularism has acquired distinctly Indian characteristics — no hard lines are drawn between Church and State, there is no banishment of religion from public view, the state accords equal respect to all religions — there will be attempts to redefine what it means, and to shift its centre of gravity. Such attempts have picked up pace and force since the BJP came to power with a majority in 2014. The Narendra Modi government, now in its third term, presides over attempts to mount a more concerted challenge to the secular common sense than before — from anti-conversion laws and mandatory state clearances for inter-faith marriages in BJP-ruled states to state patronage of expressions of Hindu religiosity, from the PM himself taking the lead in rituals of consecration of a temple in Ayodhya to attempts to conflate the ideas of Rashtra and Ram.

At the same time, the government's refrain is "sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka Vishwas" and "vishuddhi karm" — in that lies hope for a pluralist, rights-respecting and inclusive democracy. The hope is that any homogenising political project will come up against its limits. That, regardless of the faith of those who rule, no government will be able to change the way this nation defines itself and holds itself together. India is secular and will remain so, the constitutional guardrails will hold. The word "secularism" in the Preamble, therefore, is not just a word. It's an article of faith.

## NO SAFE SPACE

Aftermath of Kolkata law student's alleged rape on campus underscores how crime gets hijacked by partisan politics

A COLLEGE, LIKE a hospital, is meant to be a refuge and a place of equality. For a 24-year-old law student at Kolkata's South Calcutta Law College, however, the campus became the space for brutal violation. Her alleged rape on June 25 — less than a year after the rape and murder of a trainee doctor at RG Kar Medical College — is an indictment of a state and society that pledges safety to its women only to betray these promises time and again. It is also a story of an abdication that has become a recurring feature in West Bengal — crimes against women are hijacked by a raucous and partisan politics in a state that professes to put women at the centre.

All four accused have been arrested and a Special Investigation Team constituted. But the outrage has been co-opted by political agendas. Opposition parties have spotlighted the Trinamool Chhatra Parishad (TMC student wing) affiliation of three of the four accused — a former student and contractual employee, and two current students; the BJP has formed a "fact-finding" committee to probe institutional lapses. The TMC government has promised "exemplary punishment", but not before tone-deaf, misogynistic remarks have been made by its own functionaries. The predictable aftermath of the crime sidesteps the foundational failures that enable such horrors. Gender-based violence in India is not an aberration, it is structural. Institutional safeguards are often more performative than functional, political expediency frequently trumps moral clarity. This is particularly acute in Bengal, where law and order is enmeshed in a shadow network of political influence and patronage.

The horrific December 2012 Delhi gang rape had spurred a long-overdue reckoning with misogyny. That reckoning must not be allowed to fade into complacency. Banerjee's government must reframe its commitment to gender equity in unequivocal terms. It must confront the culture of impunity head-on — rebuild institutional guardrails that have been systematically eroded, and hold both perpetrators and enablers to account, irrespective of political affiliation. When a woman cannot walk into a college or hospital without fear of violence, it is not just a failure of governance, it is a collapse of the very idea of a civilised society.

## MAPPING A STAR

In her lifetime, Annie Walker never got her due. It turns out she might have been one of the UK's first women astronomers

WHAT DID ANNIE Walker look like? Had she been a man, her portrait would have graced the hallowed halls of Cambridge University and perhaps even the Royal Society. Yet, both during her lifetime and for decades after she died in 1940, one of the most significant figures in the history of astronomy was all but unknown. Walker, recently unearthed evidence confirms, was the first British woman paid to map the heavens. Now, the Institute of Astronomy at Cambridge has appealed to readers of *The Guardian* in the UK and Australia for a picture of the forgotten scientist to correct a historical injustice.

Walker is not the only woman to be ignored by history. Rosalind Franklin did pioneering work with DNA, proposing the double helix model that is the foundation of modern genetics. Her contribution was ignored when the Nobel Prize for work on DNA was given in 1962. In literature, Zeldi Fitzgerald, the wife of F Scott Fitzgerald, was demonised for decades, in no small part because of how Ernest Hemingway portrayed her in *A Moveable Feast*. She not only helped her husband write and edit but could do little as he plagiarised and plundered her private diary. For long, it was believed that Walker was a mere human calculator, helping men chart stars. In fact, she mapped and identified thousands of heavenly bodies.

Women, workers, those marginalised across human history — there are many whose portraits are lost. People know the architect, not the mason; they remember the "gentleman" astronomer but not the miller's daughter who actually did the astronomy. Walker left after the Cambridge Observatory came to be headed by Robert Ball, who disapproved of women working. A science that looks at the infinite was hobbled by petty prejudice.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

HARUKI MURAKAMI ONCE wrote, "Unfortunately, the clock is ticking, the hours are going by. The past increases, the future recedes. Possibilities decreasing, regrets mounting." This might seem like a meditation on growing older — when the weight of the past grows heavier and the space of possibility contracts. But it also seems to capture the emotional register of the way in which nations speak about their histories.

This paper has witnessed scintillating debates about the nature of nationalism and the roots of the Emergency. These are a credit to the intellectual seriousness of those participating. Who can deny that we must return to the past: For insight, for inspiration, for forgotten histories, and above all, to understand the present? But even among the most well-intentioned, one cannot shake the feeling that we are litigating the past partly because we are at a dead end when it comes to imagining the future.

Take the debate over Indian nationalism. What work is it doing in our present context? Its primary function now seems to be boundary-setting: To distinguish the "good" from the "bad" nationalism. But the assumption that we must all operate within the horizon of nationalism remains unchallenged. The frame persists: Are you the right kind or the wrong kind? This framework, however, only reinforces the grip of nationalism on our political imagination.

There are three dangers in this enterprise — two historical and one ethical. First, as political diagnosis, this project is fraught. There is no easy mapping of morally good ideas onto virtuous political outcomes. "Good" nationalisms have often carried their own blind spots — and left their own corpses. "Bad" ones have tapped into suppressed histories. It is wishful thinking to believe that fixing nationalism will resolve our political crises.

Second, the search in the past often fails to properly historicise the past. To put it bluntly: We cannot build a future by relying perpetually on the crutches of whichever figure we admire — Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, B R Ambedkar, Ram Manohar Lohia. They did foundings, made their own judgements, acknowledged their own limitations. We can draw

Debates over Emergency, nationalism are necessary, but obsession with past hides a narrowing of the horizon

from them, even think with them. But they cannot substitute for thinking now, in and for our moment. In any case, we must ask: Are the debates we are having the ones the next generation ought to inherit? Much of our nostalgia is for "roads not taken". But those roads are closed not merely due to ideological error. Their closure demands deeper diagnoses of present transformations.

But the ethical worry is this. Take the dozens of important issues which divide us, everything from free speech to the nature of our development to our geopolitical environment. The problem with the idea that we somehow need to get the nature of our nationalism right before we tackle these issues is that it morally obscures what it is at stake. Rather than fixing good and bad nationalism, let us talk directly about the issues and values at stake. How will the "right" nationalism give an answer to the question: What are the boundaries of free speech? How do we combat practices of discrimination that still exist? How do we defend a free society? Should personal laws be allowed? How do we create a sustainable, inclusive, vigorous growth mode? The more nationalism, good or bad, colonises our imagination, the more obscure our answers to these questions become. Fixing the right kind of nationalism is not just irrelevant, it has become a dangerous form of diversion, producing a performative politics on all sides.

But the ethical worry is this. Take the dozens of important issues which divide us, everything from free speech to the nature of our development to our geopolitical environment. The problem with the idea that we somehow need to get the nature of our nationalism right before we tackle these issues is that it morally obscures what it is at stake. Rather than fixing good and bad nationalism, let us talk directly about the issues and values at stake.

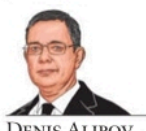
As far as I can see, there is only one question to which the nationalism debate might be relevant. This is the communal question, the place of minorities in India, an imagining of India where all communities with their histories have a place. But even there, it is morally obfuscating to mediate the debate through the category of nationalism. There are two simple ethical principles at stake: No number of any community should be targeted simply for being who they are, anywhere. We should not care what "nationalism" this principle fits into. If this principle does not move you, the right kind of nationalism is beside the point. And second, we need a conversation about the values on which our social contract will be founded. Do we imagine India as a zone of freedom, where each citizen is protected, from both

state and community power to the maximum extent possible? And do we create the material conditions for citizens to effectively exercise this freedom? If we embrace these moral principles and objectives, the issue of communalism goes away. The more we tie ourselves in knots over finding the right kind of nationalism, the more values will get obscured by historical debates.

The Emergency was a dark episode in Indian history. It raises profound issues of accountability. But has not some of our public discussion on the Emergency been, not an act of historical reckoning, but a diversion from the present? The BJP's use of it is politically understandable. It simply uses it to exonerate itself from creating a regime of poisonous and insidious control that will, in the long term, prove even more damaging. But even for non-BJP folks, the recourse to the Emergency now functions as a kind of psychological exoneration to passivity. All sides are guilty. Saying that authoritarianism is one of those cyclical things has become a way of escaping the gravity of the present.

All societies have relied on a usable past. What is disquieting about this moment is the sense of a loss of the future. Yes, we hear of Viksit Bharat 2047 — a technological dream built of roads and metrics — but this is a future shorn of moral imagination, obsessed still with the past. But the ideological response to that has also been to play on the terrain of the past. It is telling that the one patriotic song that now seems completely out of time, as it were, with no resonance at all, is "*Chhodo kal ki baatein, kal ki baat purani, naye dour me likhenge milkar nayi kahani*". This is truly ironic for a country whose population is so young. It is doubly galling that in an era of economic, technological and moral change on such a planetary scale, we still want to remain stuck in the Seventies. The past, indeed, increases, as the future recedes.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



DENIS ALIPOV

ON JUNE 25, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Alain Berset, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed an agreement to establish what they are calling a "Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine". The aim is supposedly to "hold accountable" Russia's political and military leadership for allegedly "using force in violation of the UN Charter". This move is just the latest in a series of anti-Russia legal stunts cooked up by Kyiv and its Western backers.

Originally, Ukraine tried to push this so-called "tribunal" through the United Nations. But the effort was largely ignored — unsurprisingly, given its pseudo-legal foundation. In fact, this is not the first time such overblown initiatives have fallen flat. Back in January 2024, the International Court of Justice threw out Ukraine's accusations that Russia had violated international conventions on terrorism financing and racial discrimination. Yet, Kyiv and Strasbourg still cling to the fantasy that this new "tribunal" can somehow legitimise their anti-Russia narrative.

To anyone outside the echo chamber of European politics, this whole idea seems delusional — but it is clearly designed to stoke fear among Europeans about the non-existent "Russian threat", which NATO

## WEST AND ITS ECHO CHAMBERS

Ukraine and Europe's new tribunal is the latest anti-Russia stunt

eagerly plays up to justify its own existence.

Let's not forget: According to the UN Charter, only the Security Council has the authority to determine whether an act of aggression has occurred and to impose sanctions. Neither the Council of Europe nor Zelenskyy has that mandate. Since they cannot get their way through international law, they are trying to replace it with a notorious "rules-based order" — a convenient excuse for applying double standards.

For years, the West has brushed aside reality — ignoring Russia's legitimate security concerns, its right to self-defence, and its actions grounded in international law. These factors were key in escalating the Ukrainian crisis in the first place. Now, this tribunal push feels like nothing more than a desperate attempt by Europe to shield Kyiv from an investigation into its own numerous war crimes and to mask the strategic mistakes in their reckless bid to "defeat" Russia at any cost.

Russia's stance on all this has been loud and clear: These schemes have no legal weight. They have no legitimacy and are not about justice or peace. To the contrary, they make a peaceful resolution even harder to achieve.

Now that the agreement has been signed, Kyiv and Strasbourg are shopping

this tribunal idea around to countries outside the region — particularly in the Global South. The strategy is to create a precedent that turns this legal fiction into a new tool of neo-colonial pressure against anyone who refuses to toe the line of the West. The endgame is as clear as it is cynical.

What is especially troubling is the timing. These moves come just as fragile negotiations are resuming — a clear attempt to sabotage any chance at dialogue. And they go hand-in-hand with Kyiv's daily drone attacks on Russian civilian infrastructure, deep inside our territory. Europe turns a blind eye, sticking to its one-sided narrative and pretending not to see the bigger picture. It is more proof that the creators of this tribunal are not interested in peace — they are playing politics, plain and simple.

Russia's position has not changed: We remain committed to a diplomatic solution, one that addresses the root causes of the conflict and reflects the facts on the ground. Russia's leadership has said it time and again — the longer this conflict drags on, the worse the eventual terms will be for Ukraine. Europe is now doing everything to make that happen.

The writer is Russian Ambassador to India

## JULY 1, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

### BLACK BOX MYSTERY

THE IRISH GOVERNMENT said that it was doubtful that the "black box" flight recorders had been located at the crash site of the Air India jumbo jet. In London, Britain's defence ministry maintained that the Irish had been over-hasty in concluding that faint, intermittent signals picked up by a British naval seabed operations vessel, HMS Challenger, came from the recorders.

### MANIPUR CABINET RIFT

A MAJOR RIFT appears to have surfaced between the Manipur Chief Minister, Rishang

Keishing, and his three cabinet colleagues — Lalit Singh (finance), J Tompok Singh (education) and S Laho (agriculture) — with the three ministers submitting a memorandum to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi against Keishing. A highly placed source in Imphal said that the memorandum listed several charges of corruption and anti-party activities against Keishing, besides alleged export of timber from Manipur.

### YAKUB KHAN IN DELHI

THE PAKISTAN FOREIGN Minister, Sahabzada Yakub Khan, will arrive in New Delhi at the head of a delegation for the second meeting

of the Indo-Pakistan joint commission. Before the formal inauguration of the joint commission, the Minister of State for External Affairs, Khurshed Alam Khan, will have the first round of talks with his counterpart.

### AMERICAN HOSTAGES

THIRTY-NINE AMERICAN hostages in a Red Cross convoy crossed the border from Lebanon to Syria, 17 days after they were hijacked aboard a TWA plane by Shiite Muslim gunmen. The Americans, released by Shiite leader Nabih Berri, were handed copies of the Koran by Lebanese Arab militiamen and pink camellians and roses as a parting gesture.



# THE IDEAS PAGE

## The thali index

Food subsidy needs more to be rationalised rather than eliminated



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN  
AND AMAN RAJ

THE PUBLICATION of the survey of household consumption expenditure for 2023-24 by the National Statistics Office in January 2025 has been followed by a flurry of estimates of poverty in India. Of these, two have received the most attention. The first off the block was a report from SBI in January, which was followed by one from the World Bank. They report more or less similar findings. The former flags "a remarkable decline in rural poverty, estimated at 4.86 per cent in FY24... urban poverty estimated at 4.09 per cent". The World Bank's report is far more optimistic, pegging "extreme poverty" at 2.8 per cent for rural India and 1.1 per cent for urban India in 2022-23. If poverty in India is what these estimates show, it would be a matter for rejoicing, as it would have been virtually eradicated.

These estimates of poverty have brought forth many responses. The Narendra Modi government's votaries have been quick to claim that the outcome reflects the success of its policies. Critics have focused on the non-comparability of the latest consumption data with those for 2011-12 as the survey methods have undergone change since. Both neglect the issue of the standard of living in India, and whether the extant methodology of poverty measurement underlying these estimates can lead to anything at all being said on the matter. Finally, more detached observers have brought up the question of what the "historic low" in poverty implies for the subsidy regime.

Officially approved poverty measurement in India has involved estimating the level of consumption expenditure sufficient to enable the minimum calorie intake necessary for living and working. As calories measure the energy ingested through food and drink, the methodology represents a physiological approach. Arguably, though, there can be another approach. This is to recognise that humans view food as the energy, nutritional value and satisfaction that it provides. Societies have over time arrived at a geographically and culturally mediated norm for food consumption. In India, arguably, this would be represented by a thali, a serving of food comprising carbohydrates, protein and vitamins. Though it may be referred to differently across the country, a thali would be understood to include rice/roti, lentils and vegetables, with dairy/meat/fish extra according to diet and affordability. Indians recognise the thali as a fairly complete and nutritionally balanced unit of food consumption, a meal.

Given the centrality of the thali in Indian life, it would be appropriate to treat it as the metric by which to measure the standard of living. This implies measuring the standard of living in terms of food, but then we believe that the level of food consumption should be treated as its most important constituent. Now, a meaningful question to ask would be, "How many thalis does the



daily consumption expenditure on food translate into?" We use the price of a vegetarian thali to measure the level of food consumption across the population as it is the most basic meal. The price of a thali at Rs 30 was taken from the rating agency Crisil, which calculates the cost of a home-cooked thali using data on the cost of its ingredients sourced from the east, west, north and south of India. The value of food consumption per capita given in the consumption survey for 2023-24 was expanded to include items purchased from the public distribution system and items received free as part of social welfare programmes.

We found that in 2023-24, up to 40 per cent of the rural population could not afford two thalis a day. In urban India, up to 10 per cent of the population could not afford two thalis a day. These findings indicate that levels of food deprivation are much higher than what are implied by the poverty estimates using the same data, which we recounted at the outset. A possible reason for the difference between our estimate of the standard of living and the poverty estimates from the SBI and the World Bank is that we take the expenditure on food as opposed to total consumption expenditure as the relevant measure of consumption. The reasoning was as follows. There are five items of essential expenditure – housing, conveyance, telephony, health and education – that a household cannot forgo if it is to ensure its livelihood.

Officially approved poverty measurement in India has involved estimating the level of consumption expenditure sufficient to enable the minimum calorie intake necessary for living and working. As calories measure the energy ingested through food and drink, the methodology represents a physiological approach. Arguably, though, there can be another approach. This is to recognise that humans view food in terms of the energy, nutritional value and satisfaction that it provides.

Now, expenditure on food ends up as the residual. Therefore, when appraising the standard of living in terms of food consumption, basing it on the actual expenditure on food would be realistic. Poverty estimation needs a food standard that is based on goods. The thali index serves this purpose while being compatible with accounting for the calorific value of food intake.

We may now address the issue of subsidies. Basing their argument on the much-publicised recent estimates of poverty, some observers have queried whether subsidies in general should be persisted with in economic policy. We believe that this is a discussion that needs to take place, as for too long the discourse on subsidies has been hijacked by political parties to justify competitive welfareism. However, our findings using thali index of consumption implies that the food subsidy needs more to be rationalised rather than eliminated. For instance, in rural India, the per capita subsidy at the 70th percentile is not much lower than it is at the fifth, even though those in the former class can afford more than twice the number of thalis even without subsidisation. Eliminating the food subsidy at the upper reaches of the distribution while enhancing it at the lower levels would now be optimal.

Balakrishnan is honorary visiting professor, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram and Raj is an economist based in Patna

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Israel's attack on Iran overshadowed the ongoing carnage in Gaza. Its allies are complicit in the horror; they must instead help to build a future for Palestinians."

— THE GUARDIAN

## Not just about the Emergency

The week in which Emergency was revisited, 50 years on, ended with an anti-pluralist clamour rising in the ruling establishment



VANDITA MISHRA

IT WAS A week of commemoration of the Emergency as a cataclysmic event in the distant past. It has been a week to acknowledge that the shadows cast by the suspension of democracy, 1975-1977, are long.

Many of the challenges are the same, and far too many have also been routinised – the weaponisation of laws to shrink spaces for free expression and dissent, a politics of labelling, suspicion and distrust, attempts by the Executive to undermine and subdue institutions like Media and the Court, the demoralisation of the Opposition. Other challenges are new, because in its long journey, democracy today stands at a different milestone.

At that time, when India's democracy was less than 30 years old, the Emergency was the result of, and it contributed to, a waning of brightness – it capped a draining of the lingering idealism of a newly independent nation which had pledged to be a representative democracy that abides by the layers of the game laid down in the wise and layered Constitution it gave itself. The Constitution set up a mosaic of monitoring institutions to scrutinise power, enforce accountability, enable checks and balances – political theorist John Keane has christened this new historical form of democracy, in the post 1945 era, as "monitory democracy".

Today, 50 years after the Emergency, India's monitory democracy is showing signs of wear and tear. It is also dealing with the added pressures of the age of communicative abundance. In a global context, Keane writes that "historical comparisons show that the combination of monitory democracy and communicative abundance is without precedent. It produces permanent flux, an unending restlessness driven by complex combinations of different interacting players and institutions, permanently pushing and pulling, heaving and straining, sometimes working together, at other times in opposition to one another..." Even as this combination makes democracy more exciting and vital, it also has corrosive effects. It breeds cynicism, disaffection and distrust vis-à-vis Parliaments and parties, politicians and governing institutions. Parliamentary democracy is being constantly and publicly "wrong-footed", says Keane, there is "decay amidst abundance".

In India and elsewhere, this fraught juncture is now the site of the rise of a populist politics. "We the people" is giving way to "Me the people", and a relentless search for the Other/Enemy within, and the winner takes all. This populist moment seizes on the accumulated disillusion as much as it speaks to rising aspirations. It frames an agenda of anti-elitism but it also propagates anti-pluralism.

It should not be surprising, then, that the week in which the Emergency was remembered and revisited, 50 years on, has ended with a disturbingly anti-pluralist political clamour. It seems to give the lie to the self-righteous lip service paid to democracy by the BJP-led establishment over the last few days.

An RSS general secretary set the ball rolling, asking for a reconsideration of whether the words "socialist" and "secular", added to the Constitution's Preamble by the Indira Gandhi government during the Emergency, should be retained. He was joined by the Vice President, who said that the change to the Preamble was a "sacrilege to the spirit of *sanatani*" and the words were

"hazoor", a festering wound. A BJP chief minister chimed in: "Socialism" and "secularism" are Western concepts, and have no place in Indian civilisation, he said. Two Union ministers added to the chorus the weight of their office.

This, when successive post-Emergency regimes have not reversed the Preamble's amendment even as other changes have been rolled back, and it has been upheld by the Supreme Court. Secularism was described as a "basic feature" in the 13-judge bench *Kesavananda Bharati* ruling even before the Emergency-era amendment, while the non-justiciable Directive Principles of State Policy have been invoked to recognise "socialism" as an ideal for those who framed a Constitution for a society of great inequalities.

It is evident, however, that the BJP's real aversion is not to "socialism" – in fact, on the broad direction of the economy, despite their other differences, all post-liberalisation governments have resembled each other, more or less. This choreographed controversy is about "secular".

Now in its third term, the Narendra Modi government has presided over the steady challenging of the constitutional commitment to secularism, defined in India as the equal respect for all religions by the state. On the Modi government's watch has been a spreading Hinduisation of institutions and public spaces. The PM's conduct of the rituals of consecration of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya in January 2024 marked a turning point. It underlined the message that, amid growing polarisation, the religion of the majority community would now be a visible marker of the life of a diverse and multi-religious nation, demanding deference, if not prostration, from all.

At the end of a week like this one, then, there is a question: Who is responsible for ensuring that the Emergency does not come again? Who is expected to take on the burden of an anti-Emergency politics that will guard against attempts to chip away at pluralism, and democracy?

In the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, "democracy-in-danger" and "Constitution-under-siege" became electoral slogans for the first time in recent history – while the outcome saw a whitening down of the BJP government's numbers, it was certainly no mandate for the Opposition. Does that mean that the people don't worry, or don't worry enough, about the spectre of diminishing democracy? There could be many answers to that question. It is possible that for a people cynical about power politics, democracy's worrying predicament is not a trumping argument – because they see no good guys out there. For the optimistic and aspirational, on the other hand, the system looks strong and self-correcting enough, it does not require their ministrations. And when voters feel disrespected, or "dis-esteemed", in a system with wobbly lines of accountability, they are more likely to grant governments the licence to rule arbitrarily, and to look for strongmen with steel fists.

Or it could simply be that for all the talk about democracy-in-danger, democracy never really was on the election menu, because the Opposition was unable to make a case that was vivid enough or eloquent.

Whatever be the real story of the 2024 Lok Sabha election and whichever the reading of its outcome, the onus is not, it should not be, on the vulnerable voter. Protecting democracy's letter and spirit is also a task too large to be left to the Opposition alone – it must not be, and must not be seen to be, a partisan project. The work of keeping democracy whole requires influential institutions and powerful stakeholders to take ownership, instead of putting it only on the Opposition or passing the buck to "the people".

vandita.mishra@expressindia.com



SHEHZAD POONAWALLA

THE NARENDRA MODI government has declared June 25, the day 50 years ago when the then Prime Minister imposed Emergency, as Samvidhan Hatya Diwas. It was the darkest chapter in the country's democratic history when Indira Gandhi undermined the Constitution, silenced dissent and plunged India into an abyss of authoritarianism. The party that destroyed the Constitution 50 years ago today claims to be its saviour.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi recently wrote an article in this newspaper ("Match-fixing Maharashtra", IE, June 7) accusing the Election Commission of India (ECI) of "match-fixing" the elections to the Maharashtra assembly last year. His hypocrisy is staggering. While Rahul Gandhi cries "four" over democratic processes without basis, he conveniently ignores his own family's and party's legacy of strangling India's democratic spirit during the Emergency.

The Emergency was a brazen assault on the Constitution's foundational values. The Preamble's promise of a democratic republic was crushed as Indira Gandhi ruled by decree, suspended fundamental rights and cancelled elections. The Basic Structure doctrine, established by the judiciary in the *Kesavananda Bharati* case, was rendered meaningless as Parliament's amendment powers were misused to entrench her regime. The 42nd Amendment sought to

## Look who's talking democracy

Congress undermined the Constitution. It now claims to be its saviour

make the executive unaccountable and undermined judicial review and the separation of powers.

State governments were dismissed using Article 356. The freedom of the judiciary was eroded through the supersession of judges and the appointment of pliable loyalists. The media was gagged. Newspapers were forced to publish government propaganda and dissenting journalists were jailed. The *Indian Express*, headed by Rammath Goenka, stood up against press censorship by publishing a "blank editorial".

Perhaps Rahul Gandhi should be enlightened that this wasn't "match-fixing" but an outright murder of democratic institutions. The excesses of the Indira regime spared no one. Artists and creative minds faced repression. Songs by Kishore Kumar were banned from All India Radio and Doordarshan because the legendary singer had refused to support the Emergency. Ordinary citizens, especially Muslims, endured forced sterilisations under Sanjay Gandhi's draconian population control campaign. Political opponents were hunted down. Over 1,00,000 people, including activists, journalists, and opposition leaders, were imprisoned without trial. In a podcast, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who was in jail during the Emergency, recounted how he was not even allowed to attend the final rites of his mother.

Among those targeted were towering figures like Jayaprakash Narayan, the Gandhian

socialist who led the movement against Congress's misrule. Socialist leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Lalu Prasad, who rose to prominence during the JP movement, were also jailed. These leaders fought Congress tyranny. Yet, in a tragic irony, their parties – the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal – now sit cosy with the Congress in the INDIA bloc. Lalu Prasad, in fact, named his daughter Misa after the draconian law which saw thousands jailed without due process. This U-turn betrays not just their principles but the sacrifices of countless Indians who resisted Congress's authoritarianism.

The Emergency was not a mere administrative misstep but the planting of *parivar tantra* (family rule) above *lokatantra* (democracy). Congress continues to do that. Today, when Congress accuses the ECI of partisanship without proof, when the Telangana and Karnataka Congress governments persecute journalists and social media activists, when Congress boycotts prominent journalists and arrests some of them, it continues to not only be in denial about their historical guilt, it also exhibits that its commitment to constitutional values and institutions is conditional – not based on convictions. If Congress wins an election in Telangana or Karnataka, the ECI is fine, if it loses in Maharashtra and Haryana then the ECI is "fixed".

Rahul Gandhi cannot escape his party's dark legacy. Its repeated use of Article 356 to impose President's Rule reveals the party's

disrespect of the Constitution's federal spirit and use of authoritarian shortcuts. If Congress truly cared about the Constitution, why did it oppose the removal of Articles 370 and 35 A which did not allow Ambedkar's Constitution to be implemented in Jammu Kashmir for decades and denied the implementation of reservations for SC and ST communities? Why does Congress advocate reservation on a religious basis in Karnataka and Telangana for Muslims, which is completely unconstitutional? Rahul accuses the BJP of "changing the Samvidhan" but in reality, his family and party trampled upon it.

The Emergency was the real match-fixing – the worst rigging of India's democracy. Far from being an exception, such actions have defined Congress's governance ethos for decades. Congress has never really been sorry for this dark chapter. Under Bhupesh Baghel, the Congress government in Chhattisgarh repealed an Act framed by an earlier BJP government to give a monthly pension scheme to people jailed under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) during the Emergency period.

This 50th year of the Samvidhan Hatya Diwas should serve as a reminder not just to every citizen to protect our Constitutional values, but also as a reality check for those who once murdered the Constitution's spirit and now masquerade as its defenders.

The writer is national spokesperson, BJP

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### INDIA'S NEIGHBOURS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "SCO reminder" (IE, June 30). China and Russia are leading members of the SCO. It is not wrong to assume that Pakistan, through its all-weather friend China, sought to influence the content and wording of the communiqué. The SCO

was formed as a counterpoint to the powerful blocs forged by the West. India breaking apart from the grouping, which is an important regional forum, will simply leave an open platform for Pakistan.

SS Paul, Nadia

### LET ART LIVE

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Respecting art" (IE, June 30). While the concern around misuse of cultural spaces is valid, rejecting technology entirely is not the solution. Even if digital tools may seem like a distraction today, in the long run, they are the strongest link to preserving and spreading cultural knowledge. We must find innovative ways to bridge the gap between tradition and technology. Instead of staying rooted only in the past, we must evolve. Progress is evolution.

Elksha Srivastava, Patna



[ OUR TAKE ]

## Behind credit fuelled growth

There is no cause for alarm, but erosion in household savings should not jeopardise future consumption

Private consumption accounts for more than 60% of India's gross domestic product (GDP), making it the mainstay of economic growth. Given the fact that India's per capita income levels are still rising (as they should be), consumption's importance in overall economic growth will only increase. It is in this backdrop that the statistical trend of rising indebtedness among Indian households is a development worth paying attention to. A pivot towards greater debt-financing of current consumption can boost GDP levels by generating tailwinds for overall GDP — but if this pivot is happening without a concomitant rise in income levels (this is easier said than proved because credit decisions are also driven by expectations of future income) it can lead to an erosion in household balance sheet health and jeopardise future consumption levels.

An HT analysis of various aspects of credit as applicable to Indian households shows that there is no immediate cause for concern. Sure, there is clear evidence of present-day consumption becoming more debt-financed than it was in the past, but there are no signs of any incipient distress in the bank credit market yet. This should rule out any alarmist interpretations on the recent rise in household credit. To be sure, a continuous and proactive monitoring of the sector is needed, which, to give credit where it is due, the Reserve Bank of India has been doing.

The fact that India's financial sector does not allow banks to indulge in the kind of (toxic) financial innovation which led to the housing market bubble in the US before the 2008 global financial crisis, adds another level of stability within the household credit system. Still, given the increased share of household credit in GDP, it is perhaps time that economic analysis of the ongoing credit binge were taken beyond the realm of just financial sector variables to their larger, medium to long-term, macroeconomic implications. Such a study should ask a broader question to better understand the ongoing credit binge. The fiscal policy arm of the state has been nudging households to pivot from saving to consuming more by decisions such as making the new income tax regime (it does not offer tax exemptions for savings) more attractive.

This might be adding to credit-fuelled growth right now, but is this growth coming at the cost of nudging households in a direction where they are paying inadequate attention to provisioning for their retirement? India will be better off asking this question sooner than later.

## Reimagining Quad in the shadow of Trump

The first diplomatic engagement of the second Trump administration, after it settled in office, was to host Quad foreign ministers. The joint statement of the four maritime democracies (India, Japan, Australia and the US) committed to strengthening "regional maritime, economic, and technology security in the region" as well as "promoting reliable and resilient supply chains". However, Quad foreign ministers met in Washington D.C., acutely aware that the sense of euphoria and continuity has made way for uncertainty. The Quad Leaders' Summit India was to host in September has been postponed and questions loom over the bloc's future as the US, under Trump, pursues its unilateral agendas on global trade, security, and economic development. The challenge before the leaders is to reaffirm the stated goals of the bloc, source funds and build capacities to deliver them.

Trump 2.0 has been indifferent to multilateral blocs. The US pivot to bilateralism has influenced Quad members to align agendas with Washington's preferences. The 2024 Wilmington Declaration, for instance, stressed on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as a Quad goal. With Washington curtailing spending on global aid, the focus now is exclusively on disaster relief. The Quad Cancer Moonshot, which was to see a major Indian involvement, seems low-priority now. New Delhi's ongoing trade talks with Washington may even influence the scheduling of the Quad Leaders' summit.

The considerations that led to the formation of Quad a decade ago remain. At a time when power blocs unravel and nations take refuge in bilateral arrangements to protect national interests, Quad must not lose sight of its long-term priorities. As for India, it is an opportunity to firm up ties with Japan and Australia, especially in the backdrop of Operation Sindoor and the churn in the neighbourhood.

# The lottery of life & the role of the State

What India needs is a dynamic and granular database on socio-economic inequalities

For most of human history, one's life trajectory was determined right at birth. If you were born in a royal family, you led an opulent life. If you were born in a servant's family, you led a life of misery. The industrial revolution and the spread of democracy helped create a more dynamic world. In the modern era, a cab driver's daughter can dream about becoming a billionaire. A billionaire's son can have nightmares about going bankrupt one day. Yet, even in the modern world, the distribution of wealth and power is far more unequal than the distribution of talent. A 2018 research paper by the Italian physicists A. Pinocchio and A. Rapisarda and the economist AE Biondo shows how randomness (or luck) could help explain this puzzle. Using a simple simulation, the trio show how mediocre-but-lucky individuals are likely to reach much greater heights of success than their more talented peers. Several studies on stock market investors reach a similar verdict: luck plays a big role in generating outsized stock market fortunes for a few. The rest have to be content with average or below-average returns.

In socially stratified countries such as India, it is not just randomness that generates unequal opportunities or outcomes. The place of your birth, the language(s) you speak, your parents' level of education, your caste, and your gender determine the life you lead. If one's peers from the same socio-economic background are doing well in life and one isn't, one can blame it on luck. When most people from one's community are struggling in life, one usually ends up blaming the "system". In a 1973 research paper, the American economists Albert Hirschman and Michael Rothschild had noted that people's tolerance for inequality depended on the pace of upward mobility for people around them.

Hirschman and Rothschild used the analogy of a traffic jam on a two-lane highway to drive home this point. If the right lane of the highway begins moving, then on the left one might initially feel optimistic, and wait for their turn to move. But if the left lane remains stuck while the right lane keeps moving, optimism will make way for frustration soon enough. If some communities get left behind as others progress, the former are bound to feel frustrated. Such resentments are socially corrosive and politically hazardous.

Over the past seven decades, the Indian State has used various tools to address such resentments. It has provided scholarships to students from deprived communities. It has funded a number of welfare and livelihood schemes to give a leg up to the poor. Most importantly, it has created a system of quotas to ensure better representation of marginalised caste groups in educational institutions, public sector jobs, and elected bodies (panchayats, state assemblies, and parliament).

Both supporters and critics of such affirmative action policies believe that the Indian State can do better in this regard. The Union government's decision to include additional questions on caste in the upcoming census is a welcome step in this direction. By providing more up-to-date data on caste groups and their living conditions, it can help fine-tune affirmative action policies.

However, there is only so much evidence a one-time census can collect. What India needs is a dynamic and granular database on socio-economic inequalities. This will need significant statistical investments, and can be best achieved if census operations are brought within the ambit of India's statistics ministry. Each census can then be followed up with more detailed district-level surveys on specific aspects of caste-based and other forms of deprivations.



The State may not be very effective in countering the role of luck in one's life. However, it can be quite effective in tackling structural inequalities. ■

Such data could also help us re-imagine the social justice agenda. The political scientist Suhas Palshikar has argued that the State should construct a multi-dimensional index of backwardness to determine the targets of affirmative action. The index could, for instance, take into account factors such as caste, occupational category, asset-ownership, and location. Such an index could be used to generate a "backwardness score" for each social group, and focus policy attention on the most disadvantaged.

The State may not be very effective in countering the role of luck in one's life. However, it can be quite effective in tackling structural inequalities. A new affirmative action toolkit built upon a revitalised statistical system would allow the Indian State to tilt the playing field in favour of the most deprived.

Pratim Bhattacharya is a Chennai-based journalist. The views expressed are personal.



Pratim Bhattacharya

## The art and science of healing needs revival

July 1, Doctor's Day, asks society to take a sacred pause, a moment to honour the unwavering commitment of doctors who serve throughout their life, often silently. On behalf of the medical fraternity, I want to thank everyone.

Yet, beyond the accolades and achievements, this day calls for something deeper: a renewal of the spirit of the physician, rooted not just in knowledge and skill but also in compassion, ethics, and purity of purpose. In a world increasingly governed by materialism, technology, and speed, it is time we reboot the physician within us.

William Osler, one of the founders of Johns Hopkins Hospital, had said, "The practice of medicine is not a trade to be learned, but a calling to serve, to enlighten, and to heal."

Between protocols and prescriptions, public or private health care, the art of medicine is under threat. The soul of the healer — the one who listens, who touches, who reassures — needs to be rekindled. A physician is not just a provider of treatment, but a custodian of hope, a sea of humanity.

The art of physical examination is slowly vanishing. Doctors have started leaning on blood and X-ray reports and AI models. The healing touch of compassion is dying. Compassion is more than kindness — it is the ability to suffer with someone. It is conveyed through words, silences, presence, and most powerfully, through touch. Patients remember your holding their hand, offering comfort beyond cures. Science treats. Compassion heals. Heal with purpose, not pride, even if you are the topmost doctor. Doctors are faced with thousands of ethical questions every day. "Doctor, my patient is admitted in a hospital, very sick. Doctor, there's your care? You are God?" "Doctor, my husband, is admitted with you. Please do not mention his alcohol habit in the case-sheet, else we will not get insurance claim. The other hospital did not."

There are thousands of ethical challenges faced by the doctors every day, perhaps more than in any other profession. There would be different responses from the physicians. I will only say that in an era of commercial pressures and systemic strain, ethical clarity is the shield that protects the sanctity of our profession. Do not publicly criticise your colleagues and do not allow yourself to be designated as God. Let us not compromise on honesty, even when it is hard. It is the compass of us, physicians. Bethink of "be ethical" is the core of all -isms, *dharma*, *trist*. Treat medicine as *dharma*.

This Doctor's Day, let us reflect. Realign. Let us remember why we chose this path — not for money, but for service. Let us teach the young, besides science and skills, the T3 of medicine: truth, tenderness, and togetherness. Revive the physician in you — the healer who listens, the human who cares, the soul who serves. Be an inspiration to youngsters and teach them to accept failures with humility. Accepting a knowledge gap or an omission is the most important form of humility, honesty. A whitecoat reaffirmation ceremony should be undertaken to teach youngsters these aspects of medicine. Avoid over-investigation, unnecessary procedures and medications. Use simple language and involve the family and encourage shared decision-making. Reflect also on your knowledge base. Basic decision on updated knowledge and not hearsay or habits. Clinical decision-making is an art deeply embedded in science and skills. Patients need a *C3* physician — competent, confident, and calm.

To reboot the overworked and ill-supported Indian physician, the responsibility has to be shared across the ecosystem. Society, regulatory bodies, judiciary and the government have to take full responsibility. We need competence-based, patient-centric, ethical training and futuristic AI-based medical education. The judiciary has to ensure the dignity of the profession and protect the physicians, and punish severely any violence against doctors. Competent, state generously those doctors dragged into frivolous cases by patients or the government. The government needs to provide modern infrastructure, tools and a non-bureaucratic and comfortable work environment. Of course, society must understand that physicians are human beings and not machines, and support them. Become health aware and not health blaming. Respect them, but not a doctor who has saved your life. Just a WhatsApp message, "Thank you, doc!"

While the medical fraternity needs to reboot service and ethics, society, law keepers and the government should comprehensively support the physician at all costs. Pope Benedict XVI, Saudi King Salman, and popular Tamil Actor Vijaykann had one thing in common. They needed timely advice and care of an astute and compassionate physician. Society should work hard to breed more efficient and compassionate physicians. We should initiate national awards for humanity and service, ethical excellence, and exemplary mentorship, among others.

On Doctor's Day, let society start a My Doctor, My Hero campaign and work to heal the ecosystem. And we doctors should launch a campaign: Make the Physician Great Again.

SK Sarin is professor of eminence, Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal.



SK Sarin

MAJID TAKHT-RAVANCHI | DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER, IRAN

We are seeking an answer to this question: Are we going to see a repetition of an act of aggression while we are engaging in dialogue?

Ruling out resumption of talks with the US unless the latter guarantees that there will be no more strikes on Iran

## Old horizons and India's new heritage diplomacy

While hosting Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto at this year's Republic Day, Prime Minister Modi announced that India will help conserve yet unrestored parts of the Prambanan temple complex in Java. This is an example of India's heritage diplomacy, a soft power tool centred around archaeology and conservation initiatives abroad. In the last decade alone, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has invested in at least 20 heritage projects across eleven countries, including 14 managed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

There are several reasons why India invests in such heritage projects abroad. As part of bilateral cultural, scientific and development partnerships, they promote a country's international image and help catalyse tourism and economic ties. Yet the most important driver for conservation or restoration initiatives abroad is often found domestically, as people seek validation for narratives that revive their States' past grandeur and civilisational identity.

MEA and ASI have started catering to a growing domestic demand for evidence of India's past glory and regional influence. When ASI excavates to search for Bharat abroad, it helps restore a sense of self at home. For example, in 2020, when a 1,000-year-old Shiva linga was found in Vietnam, external affairs minister S Jaishankar cast the discovery as "reaffirming a civilisational connect".

Our recent study of India's heritage diplomacy projects since 2004 indicates that they typically follow one of two models after receiving MEA funding. In the first model, ASI leads implementation, often alongside local government organisations. Especially across South and Southeast Asia, ASI has been conserving Ta Prohm temple complex, Asram Maha Rosel temple, Preah Vihear temple complex, and Wat Raa Bo pagoda in Cambodia, Vat Phou temple complex in Lao PDR, and My Son sanctuary in Vietnam. Indian conservation has also been at work at the Hukuru Miskiy (Friday Mosque) in Maldives, the Ananda temple and Bagan pagodas in Myanmar, and the Thirukoteswaram temple in Sri Lanka. In the last decade, the ASI also surveyed at Pashupatinath temple in Nepal, Ancient Termez in Uzbekistan, and Dong Duong monastery and Nham tower in Vietnam.

In the second model, implementation occurs through MEA grant assistance and is managed by host governments. Sometimes with Indian or international NGO partners. Since 2014, MEA has funded initiatives in five countries. In Afghanistan, it funded the restoration of Stupa

ace by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC). In Bolivia, it funded the illumination of the Tiwanaku archaeological site. In Maldives, MEA funded the renovation of a pre-Islamic heritage museum at the Maadhighe archaeological site and the conservation of Dhiyamiigili Ganduvaru palace by the government and private contractors. And in Mali, it contributed cash for the revival of the World Heritage Site at Timbuktu. Finally, in Nepal, it funded the construction of a dhammalaya and sanitation facilities at Pashupatinath temple by the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT). After the 2015 earthquake, MEA also funded the conservation and renovation of 28 cultural heritage sites in Nepal by the government, of which 12 were overseen by a partner NGO, the Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage (Intach).

With more interest at home in such investments abroad, three challenges stand out. First, both the MEA and the ASI will require more capacity to plan, implement, and sustain these projects. One positive step was the creation, in 2020, of an MEA division within the Development Partnership Administration (DPA), exclusively tasked with heritage, conservation, and restoration projects abroad.

Another significant challenge will be allocating sufficient funds under the meagre MEA budget to ensure appropriate technical expertise and resources to start new projects that benefit local communities. Here, ASI could deepen engagement with Indian NGOs that have an excellent track record in heritage conservation and international research collaborations. Finally, the private sector plays a vital yet underplayed role to ensure that India's excavations abroad are valued through a creative economy. There is a large market waiting to be explored by India's cultural entrepreneurs, whether by enabling new tourism circuits or by skilling and reviving local arts and crafts connected to India.

India has the potential to play a role in global heritage diplomacy. This is not just about excavating abroad to cater to popular ideas and ambitions at home. China's Global Civilization Initiative shows how history and archaeology are being leveraged for international influence, including at multilateral bodies such as UNESCO. New Delhi will have to invest more resources to play this game better.

Constantino Xavier is a New Delhi-based journalist. Aleksandr Kuzmenchuk is a former Public-Nebru scholar at Ashoka University. The views expressed are personal.



Constantino Xavier



Aleksandr Kuzmenchuk



# SCIENCE

## Kombucha can 'rebalance the gut ecosystem in people with obesity'

While kombucha's traditional use and composition suggest health benefits, few rigorous studies have tested these claims in humans. Most research until now has focused on its biochemistry or has been limited to animal models. This is why a recent study in *The Journal of Nutrition* stands out

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

From Instagram reels to supermarket shelves, kombucha — the fizzy, fermented tea drink — has found a growing audience among health-conscious consumers in India. Promoted as a probiotic powerhouse, it's touted for its supposed benefits to digestion, immunity, and metabolism. According to one estimate provided by Indian company Sbooch, the kombucha market in India grew from \$45 million in 2020 to \$102 million in 2024.

Yet much of the enthusiasm has outpaced science. While kombucha's traditional use and composition suggest potential health benefits, few rigorous studies have tested these claims in humans. Most research until now has focused on kombucha's biochemistry or has been limited to animal models.

This is why a recent study in *The Journal of Nutrition* stands out: it takes a closer look at kombucha's effects on the human gut microbiome and how they matter for human health.

The study followed 46 healthy adults in Brazil — 23 with obesity and 23 of normal weight — over eight weeks in a pre-post trial. The participants were classified using (World Health Organisation cut-offs of) BMI and waist circumference. Every day, each participant consumed 200 ml of kombucha that had been prepared in the lab using black tea and fermented with a symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast (SCOBY).

All participants were otherwise healthy and had no recent history of drugs, antibiotics, or supplements. Stool samples were collected at the beginning and end to assess gut microbiome changes. The researchers used genomic tools to profile bacterial and fungal communities.

They also measured fasting blood glucose, insulin, and proteins linked to gut barrier integrity since a weakened gut lining can allow harmful molecules to enter the bloodstream, trigger low-grade inflammation, and ultimately engender insulin resistance.

### What we know, what changed

After eight weeks, the overall microbial diversity was largely unchanged but the abundance of certain bacteria had changed in ways that suggested kombucha may help positively rebalance the gut ecosystem.

Chemical analysis of the kombucha revealed a rich array of phenolic compounds, mostly flavonoids (81%) and phenolic acids (19%). These polyphenols are largely unabsorbed in the small intestine, reaching the colon where they serve as fermentable food for gut microbes. The authors suggested that they may promote the growth of certain bacteria by stimulating the secretion of mucus and creating a more hospitable gut environment.

Notably, the population of *Akkermansia* bacteria had increased in individuals with obesity. Previous research has linked this shift with better blood sugar control and insulin sensitivity.

The levels of *Prevotellaceae* also increased, specifically in the obese group. Certain strains of *Prevotella copri* have similarly been linked to improved insulin sensitivity, hypertension, and inflammation. Both groups also reported a higher abundance of *Bacteroidota*,



No single brand of kombucha can claim to be 'good' for all consumers across geographies. DUONG NGAN/UNSPASH

which play significant roles in digesting complex carbohydrates.

Bacteria associated with less favourable outcomes including *Ruminococcus* and *Dorea*, declined, becoming similar to the normal-weight group by the eighth week. *Ruminococcus gnavus* has been positively associated with inflammatory bowel disease and liver fat accumulation, while *Dorea* with high BMI and cholesterol markers.

In normal-weight participants, *Parabacteroides* increased modestly. *Parabacteroides goldsteinii* has been known to reduce tissue inflammation, ameliorating chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and *Helicobacter pylori* infections.

The populations of *Exophiala* and *Rhodotorula*, two fungi associated with cystic fibrosis and obesity, respectively, decreased as well.

While the study offers promising clues about kombucha's influence, especially for individuals with obesity, the researchers urged caution. The microbial shifts were modest and didn't improve metabolic markers like blood glucose, insulin, or inflammatory proteins.

Vineet K. Sharma, a metagenomics researcher at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Bhopal, noted that while most studies in India have focused on associations rather than causality, microbial shifts have been linked to metabolic changes in several cases. "For

**While the study offers promising clues about kombucha's influence, especially for individuals with obesity, the researchers urged caution. The microbial shifts were modest and didn't improve metabolic markers like blood glucose, insulin, or inflammatory proteins**

instance," he said, "production of metabolites by gut microbes, such as short-chain fatty acids, bile acids, or tryptophan derivatives, has been shown to influence glucose metabolism, inflammation, and gut barrier integrity."

The team also pointed out that microbial responses vary by diet, genetics, and overall health, thus reducing the generalisability of the findings. And with a short duration and a modest sample size, the findings remain a proof-of-concept.

The results are still valuable in what they reveal, however: kombucha does appear to nudge the gut microbiome in directions associated with better metabolic health after two months.

### Kombucha and India

Whether the effects will hold for Indian populations remains an open question. Studies have indicated gut microbiota in

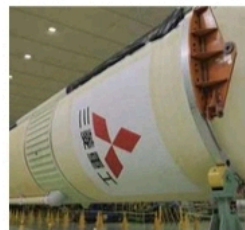
India are distinct. In one of Sharma's studies, Indian gut microbiomes formed a clearly separate cluster from Western populations.

Indian guts, particularly among those consuming traditional plant-based diets, harbour more *Prevotella*, an inversion of the typical Western microbial pattern. Since consuming kombucha increased *Prevotellaceae* abundance in the study, it may not drive the same degree of change in local populations.

"Even among Indians, microbiome composition varies with diet and location across the six regions we studied," Sharma said. While North Indians have more *Prevotella*, South Indians carry a higher load of *Bacteroides* and *Ruminococcus*. Women from rural high-altitude areas have greater gut diversity than their urban counterparts. Ethnic tribes from Ladakh, Jaisalmer, and Khargone can be differentiated based on their gut microbiomes alone.

Taken together, the new study is proof that no single brand of kombucha can claim to be "good" for all consumers across geographies. The drink may support gut health, but whether that translates to long-term metabolic benefits remains to be seen.

(Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and a science communicator from Delhi. [anirban.genetics@south.du.ac.in](mailto:anirban.genetics@south.du.ac.in))



This image shows Mitsubishi Heavy Industries' H2A rocket in Tobishima, Japan. AP

## Japan launches climate satellite on last flight for main rocket

Associated Press

Japan on Sunday (June 29, 2025) successfully launched a climate change monitoring satellite on its mainstay H-2A rocket, which made its final flight before it is replaced by a new flagship designed to be more cost competitive in the global space market.

The H-2A rocket lifted off from the Tanegashima Space Centre in southwestern Japan, carrying the GOSAT-GW satellite as part of Tokyo's effort to mitigate climate change. The satellite was released into a planned orbit about 16 minutes later.

The launch follows several days of delays because of malfunctioning of the rocket's electrical systems.

Sunday's launch marked the 50th and final flight for the H-2A, which has served as Japan's mainstay rocket to carry satellites and probes into space with a near-perfect record since its 2001 debut. After its retirement, it will be fully replaced by the H3, which is already in operation, as Japan's new main flagship.

"Even though our launches seemed stable, we have run into difficulties and overcome them one by one to come this far," said Iwao Igarashi, senior general manager of the space systems division at Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, which operated launch services.

"As we now move on to the H3 launch service, we will firmly keep up the trust we gained from H-2A."

The GOSAT-GW, or Global Observing Satellite for Greenhouse Gases and Water Cycle, is a third series in the mission to monitor carbon, methane, and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Within one year, it will start distributing data such as sea surface

**Sunday's launch marked the 50th and final flight for the H-2A. It will be fully replaced by the H3, which is already in operation, as Japan's new main flagship**

temperature and precipitation with much higher resolution to users around the world, including the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, officials said.

The liquid-fuel H-2A rocket with two solid-fuel sub-rockets developed by the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency has so far had 49 flights with a 98 per cent success record, with only one failure in 2003. Mitsubishi Heavy has provided its launch operation since 2007.

H-2A successfully carried into space many satellites and probes, including Japan's moon lander SLIM last year and the popular Hayabusa2 spacecraft in 2014 to reach a distant asteroid, contributing to the country's space programmes.

Japan sees a stable, commercially competitive space transport capability as key to its space program and national security and has been developing two new flagship rockets as successors of the H-2A series — the larger H3 with Mitsubishi, and a much smaller Epsilon system with the aerospace unit of the heavy machinery maker IHI.

It hopes to cater to diverse customer needs and improve its position in the growing satellite launch market.

The H3, is designed to carry larger payloads than the H-2A at about half its launch cost to be globally competitive, though officials say more cost reduction efforts are needed to achieve better price competitiveness in the global market.

The H3 has made four consecutive successful flights after a failed debut attempt in 2023, when the rocket had to be destroyed with its payload.

## THE SCIENCE QUIZ

### Physics's greatest hits: the effects

Vasudevan Mukundh

**QUESTION 1**  
In the \_\_\_\_\_ effect, a photon scatters off an electron, losing some energy and thus leaving it with a longer wavelength. The discovery of this effect also proved that light is made of particles. Fill in the blank.

**QUESTION 2**  
The spectrum of, say, a lamp is the various energies at which it is emitting radiation; each energy is called a spectral line. In the presence of a magnetic field, each spectral line splits into multiple. What is this effect called?

**QUESTION 3**

When a body moves in a rotating frame of reference, it experiences an apparent sideways deflection — an effect crucial to understanding cyclones and Foucault's pendulum. Name the effect.

**QUESTION 4**  
A fluid that is moving faster has lower pressure. This principle, also called an effect, explains many fluid flows in daily life, including the lift of airplanes. Name it.

**QUESTION 5**  
When the temperature of a (type I) superconductor drops below its critical value, the material expels all magnetic fields from within its bulk. Thus a magnet placed on the surface will start to

levitate. What's this effect called?

**Answers to June 26 quiz:**

- Planet whose day is longer than its year — **Ans: Venus**
  - First planet to be discovered with a telescope — **Ans: Uranus**
  - Saturnian moon with diverse surface features made of hydrocarbons — **Ans: Titan**
  - Body classified as both dwarf planet and largest asteroid — **Ans: Ceres**
  - Planet hosting the fastest winds in the solar system — **Ans: Neptune**
- Visual: **to**  
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | C. Saravanan | Tamal Biswas | Krick Gosai | Amar Pratap  
Note: The June 26 quiz incorrectly stated Titan to be a Jovian moon. It's a Saturnian moon.



Visual: This is a diamond exhibiting cathodoluminescence. Its inverse effect is called X. Name X. Credit: PAVEL SOMOV (CC BY)

Please send in your answers to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in)

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



Editorial

# Childhood Then and Now: An Observation

The Industrial and Technological Revolutions changed the world, and Indian families shifted from joint to nuclear systems. Earlier, multiple generations lived together, shared responsibilities, and practiced joint rituals. Today, emotional bonds have weakened, and individualism has grown within families.

The Industrial Revolution, followed by the Technological Revolution, brought about unprecedented changes across the world, and these changes have had a significant impact on the family institution, particularly in India. The traditional Indian joint family system gradually transitioned into nuclear or centralised family units. However, change is a continuous process. In the Indian context, this shift has moved from emotional closeness and bonding towards detachment and fragmentation. Earlier, families had generational depth—at least three generations lived under the same roof, ate meals cooked in the same kitchen, shared joint property, and worshipped the same family deity together. Everything was collective—assets, responsibilities, traditions, and values. As the economic structure shifted from an agrarian to an industrial, and eventually to a technological society, family systems also evolved—from extended families to joint families, and finally to nuclear units. Within these family systems, individuals were assigned roles based on age and gender. But as society grew more complex, these traditional structures weakened. The rapid pace of technological change especially affected the internal dynamics of families, weakening bonds and traditional value systems. Today, in regions like the Indian Himalayas, the rise of synthetic drug abuse—particularly “chitta”—has shaken the foundation of families. This is a serious concern because families now typically consist of just one or two children. If even one child falls



into addiction, the future of that family line is at risk. As a result, Indian family life is undergoing a phase of discomfort and uncertainty. Earlier, children were often disciplined through scolding or punishment from parents, teachers, relatives, and community elders. At home, in schools, or during festivals and social gatherings, children would frequently be reminded of their duties—whether it was studying, bringing firewood, collecting water, or maintaining silence. Despite the reprimands, children developed patience, tolerance, and resilience—qualities that appear to be diminishing in today's youth. Joint families had their own issues, but life remained generally balanced and fulfilling. In contrast, children today are raised with all modern comforts and

resources. Parents go to great lengths to provide every possible facility, yet this generation, raised in convenience, has developed a never-ending desire for more. This excessive dependence on comfort is fostering a generation that struggles with satisfaction and contentment. It is a matter of concern that today's society is increasingly producing dysfunctional personalities—lacking patience, tolerance, emotional depth, and wisdom. There is a stark deficiency in adaptability and compromise among the youth, which is leading society towards a kind of collective social breakdown. The noted sociologist Émile Durkheim, in his theory of social solidarity, emphasized the necessity and sacred nature of society. He argued that society plays a divine role in shaping individuals, much like a godly force. Without society, individuals cannot truly exist because the essence of humanity itself is drawn from social life. However, it is also true that not all nuclear families are antisocial or dysfunctional. There are valid reasons for the emergence of nuclear families, and both the advantages and disadvantages of such setups deserve consideration. With rapidly changing times, the task of socializing children has become increasingly difficult. Until the 1960s and 70s, family was the most powerful agent of socialization. But the high-speed changes triggered by the technological revolution have pushed families to the margins. Today, media has taken over as the dominant force in shaping children's minds. Children no longer learn values, culture, or discipline from their grandpar-

ents or even their parents. Instead, they absorb most of their knowledge and worldview from the digital world. Children today spend less time interacting with family members, neighbors, or peers and more time online. Social media has exposed them to a virtual world that is far removed from reality, pushing them into an illusory existence. As a result, children have begun arguing and debating every issue with their parents, believing themselves to be more intelligent and capable. This overconfidence is dangerous—it marks the beginning of moral and emotional decline. With constant internal conflicts at home and the overpowering influence of technology, children are becoming more affected by external environments, while parental authority and influence are steadily weakening. Today's youth need to reconnect with their elders to learn values such as hard work, patience, and emotional strength. At the same time, the parenting system must also evolve. Elders should be open to learning new technology from their children, and they should try to understand the emotions and struggles of the younger generation. There must be mutual respect and space for questions on both sides. A harmonious balance between the old and the new generation is essential. It is now the responsibility of media, thinkers, policymakers, reformers, and society at large to take the initiative. Only through conscious and coordinated efforts can we rebuild strong family systems and preserve the cultural and emotional richness of Indian society in the modern age.

## In the Age of Faces: From Human Emotion to Machine Recognition

The coincidence of matching faces is quite remarkable. If we meet the right face at the right time, things become easier; if we meet it at the wrong time, it feels like a pilgrimage. Often, we end up connecting with faces where there's nothing to gain, and where something truly meaningful could happen, we fail to find the right face. Now, machines have taken over—doing tasks by reading faces. Even the local ration depot now identifies people by facial recognition. If your face matches, you get your grains. One day, the ration dealer looked unusually sad. When asked, he said, “Earlier, there were no machines. We used to read expressions and emotions to decide how much someone needed. Everyone's face reminded us of someone familiar, someone dear. We worked from the heart. But now, the machine decides how many kilos a particular face is worth. Once, we could give a quintal to a deserving face even if it deserved only a kilo. Now, it's whatever the machine says.” The irony is, one day, my own smartphone—bought years ago—refused to recognize my face. My phone, my face, yet it refused to unlock. It made me anxious. What was it seeing in my face that I couldn't? For the first time, my phone looked like it was holding a sword to my identity. I tried everything—changing expressions, lighting, even posing beside my wife and son, trying to prove I was a loyal, honest face. But the phone remained unmoved. When I took it to the service center, they told me, “Your face has aged out. You're worn down, sir.” To my surprise, many other men stood there—faces no longer recognized by their own devices. Someone joked that phones are now gender-biased—recognizing women's faces but rejecting men's. Even in offices, faces are now being read before work is done. The most difficult place to prove your face is at a bank. It all depends on whether your face aligns with the mood of the bank manager's face. Even your signature is scanned for the “genuineness” of your facial intent. Banks carry a permanent look of suspicion on their faces—doubting even you, about your own money. But Indian media, in contrast, is generous—wherever a face is found, it's published. Electronic and digital media don't even bother to check whose face is being worn by whom while speaking. Media today hides public wisdom and restraint behind glorified faces, and shows everything we perhaps shouldn't be seeing. It's the media that has reduced a nation of 1.4 billion to just a handful of recognizable faces. If they had their way, the media would assign a single face to the entire country and its government—and perhaps that's the future: when we'll accept a singular face as the symbol of our nation, belief, and faith. In Parliament, we may or may not find worthy faces, but in the name of the nation, we are often forced to accept one of these faces as our own. On a stage, a spectator might spot a face that resembles his own, but after voting and sending representatives to the Assembly, that connection is rarely found.



The recent Israel-Iran war and India-Pakistan confrontation under Operation Sindoor reveal a new era of warfare—one where artificial intelligence (AI) and economic strength have proven to be more decisive than nuclear threats, which failed to deter actual conflict. In light of Pakistan's attempts—allegedly with Chinese support—to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of carrying nuclear warheads, it has become imperative for India to enhance its nuclear capabilities. Peace, as history suggests, is ensured through strength. Power not only secures a nation's borders but also prevents future wars. Today, India's scientists, technologists, entrepreneurs, and the general public are moving forward collectively to make India powerful in every domain. On June 24, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted that over the past 11 years, the government has significantly strengthened both the economy and national security. India has adopted a hardline stance against terrorism. Under Operation Sindoor, the Indian Army, using only indigenous weapons, forced the enemy to surrender within 22 minutes. The operation marked a strategic milestone—leveraging AI to destroy Pakistan-based terror camps and setting a new precedent in modern warfare. With this momentum, India is poised to become a global economic power and a tech-driven nuclear force, capable of countering the dual military threat from Pakistan and China. India's rapidly growing economy underpins its resilience. During the Israel-Iran war—when global markets trembled, oil prices surged, trade slowed, supply chains broke, and food inflation spiked—India stood firm. Unlike other nations, it managed to shield its economy. The Indo-Pak conflict under Operation Sindoor also had no significant adverse effect on India's economic stability. This is attributed to India's large domestic market, low export dependency, strong capital expenditure, increasing

## India's New Doctrine: AI, Economic Resilience, and Strategic Power in a Changing Global Order



purchasing power, and success in agriculture and manufacturing under the “Make in India” initiative. Even during times of conflict, India's exports grew, and foreign direct investment (FDI) continued to flow. Inflation remained under control, with retail inflation dropping to 2.82% and wholesale inflation at just 0.39%—the lowest in 14 months. India's food grain reserves are robust, with stock sufficient to meet over a year's demand. According to the Ministry of Agriculture's third advance estimate for 2024-25, food grain production is expected to rise by 6.5% to a record 353.9 million tonnes. Despite ongoing global tensions, international economic confidence in India remains high. India's export orders are increasing, and foreign exchange reserves have exceeded \$699 billion. The nation's GDP growth rate is

projected to be 6.5% for the fiscal year 2025-26. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has forecasted that India will become the world's fourth-largest economy by 2025. To reach this milestone, India must address some critical issues. Reducing imports from China to control the widening trade deficit is essential. India's trade deficit with China reached \$99.2 billion in FY 2024-25, up from \$85.07 billion the previous year. Boosting Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) can be a game-changer, as they enhance exports, reduce imports, and generate employment. India should also capitalize on the global demand for services. The nation is fast emerging as a hub for service exports, with earnings reaching \$387.5 billion in FY 2024-25. Strategic trade policies—including new Free Trade Agreements

(FTAs) and bilateral deals—will be key to reducing the trade deficit. Following the FTA with the UK, India must expedite negotiations with the US and the European Union, aiming to conclude them by December 31, 2025. Swift finalization of FTAs with Oman, Canada, South Africa, Israel, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is also crucial. One clear lesson from both the Israel-Iran war and Operation Sindoor is that modern wars are fought with economic resilience and cutting-edge AI, not with nuclear blackmail. However, given the rising threat from Pakistan and China, it is equally important for India to modernize its nuclear arsenal. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the era of nuclear disarmament is ending. Global trends show a renewed arms race, with countries increasing their nuclear stockpiles, developing new weapons, and abandoning arms control treaties. The world's nine nuclear powers—namely the US, Russia, UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel—are all upgrading their nuclear capabilities. The US and Russia together hold around 90% of the world's nuclear weapons. China has about 600, India has 180, and Pakistan possesses 170 nuclear warheads. In response to its defeat in Operation Sindoor, Pakistan is reportedly working with China to advance its nuclear weapons. This, coupled with the threat posed by China itself, necessitates India's investment in next-generation technologies such as AI, cyber warfare, and missile defense systems to maintain strategic parity and security. It is hoped that the Indian government will strategically implement the lessons learned from the Israel-Iran conflict and Operation Sindoor. With deliberate and visionary planning, India can transform into a true economic superpower equipped with AI capabilities and advanced nuclear technology. Only then can India claim its place among the developed nations of the world.

## Two Constitutional Controversies: Secularism in the Preamble and the Bihar Voter List Revision

Two constitutional issues are currently under debate and controversy. The first relates to the addition of the words “Socialist” and “Secular” to the Preamble of the Constitution through the 42nd Amendment in 1976. This was during the Emergency, a time when Parliament, the judiciary, and the media were virtually held hostage. Major opposition leaders were imprisoned. If we go back to the days of the Constituent Assembly, there was extensive debate over these words. Members like Prof. K.T. Shah and Kamath demanded their inclusion under Article 1 of the Constitution. However, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, argued that these values were already embedded in the soul of the average Indian. These words were mentioned in Article 31 and also featured in the Directive Principles of State Policy. Ambedkar believed that formally including them in the Preamble could destroy the flexibility of

Two major constitutional issues are currently under intense debate. The inclusion of “socialist” and “secular” in the Preamble during the 1976 Emergency is being questioned, especially after recent political remarks. Simultaneously, the Election Commission's large-scale voter list revision in Bihar has raised fears of manipulation. Together, these issues highlight growing concerns about democratic transparency and constitutional intent.

democracy—possibly even democracy itself. As a result, that proposal was dropped, and the words were not included in the original Preamble. After the 1976 amendment, the BJP-led NDA government under Vajpayee was in power for six years, and the Modi government has now been in power for over 11 years. Even the Janata Party ruled from 1977 to 1980. The question arises—why weren't these words removed during any of these governments? In 2020, a petition was filed in the Supreme Court, and in 2024, a bench led by then Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna ruled that after so many years,

these words should not be tampered with. The bench also provided definitions of “Socialist” and “Secular.” Ironically, during the “Mandal vs. Kamadani” political era, the word “Secular” came to be interpreted differently, and politics associated with the BJP was often labeled as “communal.” Recently, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar described the addition of these two words to the Preamble as a “wound,” making the political discourse even more toxic. Ahead of the Bihar Assembly elections, RSS General Secretary Datatreya Hosabale also reignited the issue, suggesting that the removal of these

words should be considered. The second issue concerns the Election Commission's revision of voter lists in Bihar. The opposition is raising alarms that many names from their voter base may be removed, while pro-BJP names might be added. The opposition has consistently alleged that similar manipulation occurred in Maharashtra and Haryana, leading to BJP governments being formed there. This raises a critical question: why, over the last 11 years, have the Election Commission's motives, electoral processes, and voter list revisions come under such suspicion? Why is the present Election

Commission often labeled as “pro-BJP”? If the Commission were so biased, why do Congress, DMK, Trinamool Congress, JMM, and Left parties still hold power in several states? Under Article 324 of the Constitution, the Election Commission is empowered to revise and update voter lists before any election. This has always been a part of the electoral process before Lok Sabha and Assembly polls. Some arguments from the opposition do hold weight—for instance, the Commission aims to verify voters added after 2003 in Bihar, a number close to 50 million. Can such a massive verification drive be completed in just 25 days? Over 98,000 booth-level officers are expected to collect household data. This process will also serve as evidence of citizenship eligibility. Officials will first visit homes to collect documents and personal data, then compile the information, print the revised lists, and address any objections raised by political parties or candidates.







ABSTRACT



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When does the gender gap emerge with respect to mathematical abilities?

A study in France found that boys and girls began school with the same mathematical abilities, but a gender gap began emerging in the first year of school. This finding was consistent across private and public schools, in schools catering to high- and low-income families, and in every region

Radhika Santhanam

Martinot, P., Colnet, B., Breda, T. et al, 'Rapid emergence of a maths gender gap in first grade', *Nature* (2025). doi.org/10.1038/s41586-025-09126-4

Across the world, women are under-represented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Their absence has consequences: it narrows perspectives in STEM, potentially hinders progress in research, and perpetuates gender differences at the workplace.

This inequality stands in stark contrast to the fact that boys and girls begin school with the same mathematical abilities. A gender gap begins to emerge only after boys and girls start learning the subject formally in school, that is, during the first year. These are the findings of a study published recently in *Nature* by researchers in France. Understanding this data and the underlying reasons are crucial as they can help policymakers intervene at the right time and in the right ways to narrow the gap.

Findings of the study

In the past, educationists, economists, sociologists, psychologists, and others have conducted several studies. One study in the U.S. showed that a maths gender gap favouring boys emerged within the first few years of schooling. Another study that followed 2,633 children in France found that a maths gender gap was absent in kindergarten but became favourable to boys by ages 7-8.

The latest study in *Nature* reinforces

what other studies have found in the past, but by using "an exceptionally large and exhaustive dataset," according to the researchers. The researchers studied 26.53 lakh children aged 5-7 years in France over four years. They analysed four consecutive cohorts from 2018 to 2022. All these children took the EvalAide, a nationwide battery of tests given to first and second grade students to assess their language and maths abilities.

When boys and girls entered school, their average maths performance was nearly identical in 2018. There were more boys clustered among the top and bottom performers. However, just after four months of schooling, the researchers found a small but highly significant gap emerging, which favoured boys. By the next year, there were twice as many boys as girls among the top 5% of performers.

Importantly, this gap was found in every cohort across the four consecutive years. This meant that it was not due to any specific societal, economic, or curricular changes in a particular year. The gap was found in each region of France, in schools serving communities at both high and low socio-economic levels, in private as well as public schools, and regardless of family composition.

Curiously, the gap between boys and girls was wider if the children were from high-income families – a phenomenon not found for language. It was also larger among high-income families where both parents held scientific occupations.

Analysing the gender gap

Since the children had similar abilities when they started formal education, we can conclude from the data that the gap is not related to any fundamental gender

differences in aptitudes. So what explains the gap?

First, a few caveats. Researchers write that since the data is descriptive in nature, it can't be used to pin down causes. Second, a study conducted at intervals prevents any evaluation of the potentially continuous effect of school exposure or the effect of vacations. Third, the tests were not strictly identical at all points of time during the study. Fourth, the data is limited to one country.

Nevertheless, they offer some explanations consistent with their findings.

Maths problems are solved in a particular time frame and in a competitive setting, and these are conditions that girls are taught to fear. Their consequent anxiety could be exacerbating the gap. The researchers say this explanation is congruent with their finding that greater test difficulty enhances the gender gap.

Stereotypes that boys are better at maths could also be widening the gap. The researchers write that "maths-related activities or exercises (for example, counting and subtracting) start to be more clearly identified as belonging to the maths domain" in primary school. They believe that this "sudden labelling of maths-related activities as 'maths' (whereas language activities start earlier in preschool) might give space for gender stereotypes surrounding maths to emerge, to be internalised by children and, eventually, to affect their self-concept and performance."

The attitudes of primary school teachers may be a factor as well. For example, teachers may encourage girls to read more and boys to do more division

and subtraction. That is, they may attribute intellect to boys and diligence to girls. Parents may also have such assumptions about aptitudes.

Suggested interventions

As the problem begins after children start schooling, the researchers believe improving teacher training will be a crucial intervention. If teachers are encouraged to question girls and boys equally often during maths and science classes, and also to focus equally on the talents and efforts of children of both genders, it could lead to improved outcomes.

Also, if teacher training in maths is increased to improve their confidence and interest in this topic, it could effectively reduce the gap. This, the researchers say, is especially true of a country such as France, where most primary school teachers are female.

Interventions could also be directed towards children. For boys and girls to become convinced that maths is worth the effort, they should be exposed to both male and female role models with whom they can identify.

The researchers also suggest that girls should be provided with ways to cope with anxiety related to competition. They suggest implementing self-affirmation tasks. They also express belief that accentuating an incremental view of intelligence – that is, emphasising that abilities and intelligence are malleable and can be developed through effort and learning – would help.

In short, it takes just a few months for a gender gap to emerge, so quick interventions could help close the gap effectively.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

K. Subrahmanian  
S. Upendran

"How was the test?"

"It was pretty easy, actually. Spent all weekend preparing for it though."

"What did you do during the weekend?"

"I was pottering about in the study."

"Pottering about? You mean you made pots?"

"No! No! 'Pottering about' is an informal expression used in British English. When you say you have been pottering about, it means that you have been 'spending time in a gentle, unhurried way, doing pleasant but unimportant things'. For example, I can say, my grandmother spends the mornings pottering about in the garden."

"Can I say, I spend every morning pottering about in the classroom?"

"Do you enjoy being in the classroom?"

"Of course not! You know I hate school."

"Well, in that case, you cannot say 'I potter about in the classroom.' You usually use the expression 'potter about' with unimportant things that you like to do."

"I see. Usha loves to potter about in the kitchen. Can I say that?"

"You can. You could also say, Usha loves to potter around in the kitchen. We can use both 'potter around' and 'potter about'."

"My father likes to potter around in parks."

"My boss tells me that even he likes..."

"... talking about your boss, did you show him your proposal?"

"I did. He gave it the thumbs down."

"Thumbs down! I've drunk Thumbs Up before. But what is a thumbs down?"

"Let me give you an example. If you release a movie and the audience give it a thumbs down, it means that the audience didn't like it. They think it is a lousy movie and that it is not likely to succeed."

"I see. So the expression 'thumbs down' is used to indicate disapproval. Is that right?"

"Exactly! When I was young, I wanted to join the army, but my father gave it the thumbs down."

"Meaning your father didn't approve of your joining the army and therefore didn't give you the permission to join it."

"Right again!"

"My sister wanted to visit Simla during the summer, but my mother gave it the thumbs down."

"My boss wanted to hire two more people, but the management gave it the thumbs down."

"But tell me, why did your boss give your proposal a thumbs down? I thought it was pretty good."

"My boss approved of it, but the management didn't."

"But why?"

"Because the management consists of a bunch of potatoheads!"

"A potatohead! What's a potatohead? A stupid person?"

"That's right! A potatohead is a stupid person."

Published in *The Hindu* on January 28, 1997.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

The Van Mahotsav is a week-long celebration from July 1 to July 7. A quiz on this festival

Prathmesh Kher

Mahotsav observed during the first week of July in India?

QUESTION 1  
What does the name 'Van Mahotsav' mean?

QUESTION 2  
Who organised the first tree-planting week in July 1947 that inspired the Van Mahotsav?

QUESTION 3  
In which year did the Van Mahotsav become a national festival observed in the first week of July?

QUESTION 4  
Why is the Van Mahotsav observed during the first week of July in India?

QUESTION 5  
Which government body is primarily responsible for organising and promoting the Van Mahotsav across India?

QUESTION 6  
At the time of the first event in 1947, an Indian freedom fighter and a founding figure of Independent India had said "A growing tree is the living symbol of a progressive nation." Identify this person.



Visual question:  
Identify the woman planting the sapling in the picture.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The primary reason for hosting the first-ever Wimbledon championships in 1877. Ans: To pay for the repair of the pony roller that was needed to maintain the lawns at the (then) All England Club

2. The first-ever winner in the inaugural event and the reward he got. Ans: Spencer Gore. He was awarded a prize money of 12 guineas and a silver challenge cup

3. Apart from Djokovic, these men have seven triumphs against their name. Ans: Pete Sampras and William Renshaw

4. The year when the balls were changed to yellow. Ans: The 'Optic Yellow' coloured balls were first used in 1986

5. The reason why competitors sport a pre-dominantly white apparel. Ans: To hide the 'unsightly' sweat stains which would show up on coloured clothing!

6. Name the first electronic line judging aid introduced in 1980. Ans: Cyclops

7. Though the Championships started in 1877, this is the reason why the current tournament will be the 138th edition and not the 149th. Ans: Because the Championships was suspended during WW I and WW II because of bombing threats and cancelled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Visual: Identify the statues and the reason why there are in the Championships' record books. Ans: Nicolas Mahut and John Isner, who in 2010 played the longest-ever match over 11 hours, 5 minutes with the final set lasting 491 minutes

Early Birds: Rahul Arora| Sukdev Shei| Sonali Das| Suchit Narottam| Siddhartha Viswanathan

Word of the day

Noisome:

causing or able to cause nausea; offensively malodorous

Synonyms: loathsome, nauseous, offensive, queasy, sickening, vile, fetid, foul, funky, smelly, stinking

Usage: You will need a calm retreat from the noisome fray.

Pronunciation: /noɪ.səm/

International Phonetic Alphabet: /noɪ.səm/

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



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Number of people killed in Iran during conflict with Israel**

**935** Israel on June 13 launched a major bombing campaign against Iran, killing top military commanders and atomic scientists. The Israeli strikes hit nuclear sites as well as residential areas. The death toll in Iran included 132 women and 38 children. AP

**Beneficiaries found ineligible for Women's Pension Scheme**

**60** In thousand. Over 60,000 beneficiaries have been found ineligible under the Delhi government's Women's Pension Scheme following a large-scale verification exercise conducted by the Women and Child Development (WCD) Department, officials on Monday said. PTI

**The decrease in India's industrial output growth in May**

**1.2** In per cent. India's industrial production growth slowed to a nine-month low of 1.2% in May 2025 due to poor performance of manufacturing, mining and power sectors caused by the early onset of monsoon, according to official data released on Monday. PTI

**Brazil's public sector debt as a share of GDP in the month of May**

**76.1** In per cent. Brazil's public sector gross debt rose slightly to 76.1% of GDP in May from 76.0% in April. The increase was driven mainly by interest payments, the central bank said, in a month when the primary budget deficit came in narrower than expected. REUTERS

**Amount approved for road and infra in Himachal Pradesh**

**3,667** In ₹ crore. The Centre has approved the annual plan of ₹3,667 crore for the construction and up-gradation of roads, bridges and related infrastructure in Himachal Pradesh for FY2024-25. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## How do unsafe cancer drugs reach patients?

Who is responsible for ensuring that cancer drugs are sterile and non-contaminated? How does the U.K. ensure drug safety? Do all low- and middle-income countries have adequate drug testing facilities? What happens when contaminated cancer drugs reach patients? How has the WHO intervened?

EXPLAINER

Andjela Milivojevic

The story so far:

A major new investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism published by *The Hindu* has revealed that bad cancer drugs have been shipped to more than 100 countries around the world. Before a cancer drug reaches a patient, they would have already undergone a long, complicated journey. Once the raw materials have been sourced, a typical drug will be manufactured, packaged, shipped, locally distributed and finally put to use. And at every stage of this process, the drug's quality must remain unharmed. Relatively innocuous events — a change in temperature or poor handling — can have critical effects.

**What are the risks in manufacturing?** One of the biggest dangers is contamination. Ensuring that cancer drugs are sterile is the ultimate responsibility of the manufacturers. Every action must be tightly controlled. Staff working without proper disinfection processes can carry contaminants. Even a technician moving too quickly in a clean room can create air movement that spreads bacteria. Everything is sanitised right down to the pens and paper. The process is unforgiving: if raw ingredients aren't tested adequately, if equipment isn't cleaned properly, and if water isn't filtered thoroughly, these lifesaving medicines can become lethal.

**How do countries ensure such safety?** About 80% of NHS prescriptions in England are generic drugs, identical copies of branded drugs that can be made once a drug's patent expires. About two-thirds of those come from abroad. To try to ensure that these drugs are safe, the following measures are in place — every batch undergoes two rounds of quality testing, at the manufacturing site, and



GETTY IMAGES

then on entering the U.K.; during each of these rounds of tests, 20 different markers of drug quality are checked; only specific experts are qualified to verify each batch; and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency regularly inspects manufacturing facilities, both in the U.K. and abroad.

Such testing systems are the gold standard. Many low- and middle-income countries, however, face significant challenges. In Nepal, for example, limited resources and expertise mean that there is no effective testing and monitoring of imported medicines. Many countries also lack the ability to track drugs through supply chains and, like Nepal, do not have any verified experts or facilities to check drug quality. These shortcomings, combined with corruption issues and porous borders, all mean that bad and potentially counterfeit drugs can enter healthcare systems.

**What are the consequences?** Drugs that have not been manufactured properly can be toxic or contaminated —

and put a patient in immediate danger. In 2019, five young patients from Saudi Arabia developed a high fever, and one died, after taking an Indian-made medicine given at the same time as chemotherapy drugs. In the same year, four children died and more than a 100 fell ill in Colombia when given the same type of drug. In 2022, at least 10 children in Yemen died after receiving methotrexate, a critical chemotherapy drug used to treat leukaemia and other cancers, that had been contaminated with a deadly bacteria. In 2023, the Bureau uncovered a dozen poor-quality brands of a childhood cancer drug used in Brazil.

**What's the WHO doing to ensure safety?** The World Health Organization (WHO) maintains a rapid alert system for dangerous drugs. After a concern has been raised, the WHO assesses it and an alert is then sent out to all member governments. However, this system only catches problems after harm occurs. The WHO has put several mechanisms in place to keep a check on drug safety in

low and middle-income countries. One is the Global Benchmarking Tool: a tool that assesses and rates national regulatory systems on a scale of 1 (least mature) to 4 (most mature). In 2023, 70% of WHO member countries were rated level 1 or 2, meaning they have limited capacity to check drugs coming into the country. Then we have the Essential Medicines List: a list of medications that are considered to be the safest and most effective for meeting the most important health system needs. While generic versions of drugs on this list could still be fake or substandard, the existence of the list helps countries prioritise limited resources. Third, there are prequalification programs which are lists that contain laboratories, specific drugs and sources of active pharmaceutical ingredients that the WHO has inspected, evaluated, and confirmed to be acceptable for use. This helps governments and national regulators procure safe medicines. Fourth, is the Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) certification which ensures that pharmaceutical products are consistently produced and controlled to quality standards. Most countries will only accept the import and sale of medicines that have been manufactured by internationally recognised GMPs. And finally the WHO certification scheme. A Certificate of Pharmaceutical Products (CoPP) can be requested by a country that wants to import a medicine, and it would issued by the exporting country according to the WHO guidelines. It acts like a passport for medicines, proving the item is approved and safely made in the exporting country.

These measures certainly provide some protection against dangerous drugs, but the protections they offer simply aren't enough. Without the level of oversight seen in countries like the U.K., these measures often fail to prevent substandard drugs from reaching patients.

Andjela Milivojevic is with The Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

THE GIST

Ensuring that cancer drugs are sterile is the ultimate responsibility of the manufacturers. Every action must be tightly controlled.

Drugs that have not been manufactured properly can be toxic or contaminated — and put a patient in immediate danger.

The World Health Organization (WHO) maintains a rapid alert system for dangerous drugs.

## Can a G.I. tag prevent cultural misappropriation?

How many Indian products are registered as GI-tagged goods? Do 'international' GI rights exist?

Kartikay Singh

The story so far:

On June 25, at its Spring/Summer 2026 menswear show in Milan, Italian luxury brand Prada unveiled footwear inspired by India's Geographical Indication (GI)-tagged Kolhapuri chappals, sparking accusations of 'cultural misappropriation'.

**What is a geographical indication?** It is a form of 'intellectual property' that identifies goods as originating from a specific country, region or locality, where their distinctive qualities, characteristics, or reputation are essentially linked to that 'place of origin'. In India, there are currently 658 registered GI-tagged goods, including Chanderi sarees (Madhya Pradesh), Madhubani painting (Bihar), Pashmina shawls (J&K), Kancheepuram silk (Tamil Nadu), and Darjeeling tea

(West Bengal). Importantly, GIs serve as a powerful marketing tool, driving rural development, boosting exports, enhancing consumer confidence, and preserving 'cultural knowledge' of local communities, farmers and indigenous groups. Unlike trademarks, which are owned by enterprises, GIs are public property belonging to the producers of the concerned goods and cannot be assigned, transmitted or licenced.

The legal protection of GIs stem from international instruments like the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property (1883), and later gained a clearer definition under the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement, 1995. India, as a TRIPS signatory, enacted the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, which came into force in 2003. The Act provides for GI registration, enforcement of rights, prohibition of unauthorised use

and penalties for infringement.

**How can infringement be tackled?** The registered proprietor or authorised users may initiate infringement action when an unauthorised user misleads the public about the origin of goods, causes unfair competition or passing off, or falsely represents goods as originating from a GI-registered region. However, it is important to note that GI rights are primarily 'territorial' and consequently limited to the country (or region) where protection is granted. At present, no automatic 'world' or 'international' GI right exists. Nevertheless, several mechanisms exist for cross-border protection. GIs can be protected internationally by first securing recognition in the country of origin, as many jurisdictions require this as a precondition and then obtaining protection directly in the jurisdiction concerned.

Is this the first such case?

Indian traditional products have time and again suffered exploitation by global corporations. In 1997, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) controversially granted a patent to Ricetec Inc., a Texas-based company, for novel "lines and grains" of Basmati rice. After significant Indian legal efforts, the USPTO disallowed the patent holder from using the name "Basmati". Similar challenges arose with 'turmeric' when the University of Mississippi medical centre was granted a patent in 1995 for turmeric's wound-healing properties — a use long known in Indian traditional medicine. The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research contested the claim, leading to the revocation of the patent. Likewise, the European Patent Office in 2000 revoked a patent granted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and a multinational firm W.R. Grace, for neem-based antifungal formulations, as the therapeutic use of neem was already part of Indian knowledge systems. To prevent such cases in the future, one could start by expanding the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library to include wider traditional grassroots expressions. Making a 'searchable database' would allow brands to conduct due diligence and searches to identify right holder communities for collaboration.

Kartikay Singh is a lawyer based in New Delhi. With inputs from Janhvi Singh.

THE GIST

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