

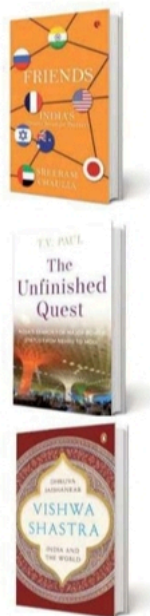




BIBLIOGRAPHY



The long game: Prime Minister Narendra Modi being welcomed by the Indian diaspora on his arrival at DuPont Hotel, Wilmington, Delaware on September 21, 2014. ANI



# In search of a 'grand strategy' for India's foreign policy in the 21st century

Three writers explore the past and present of India's relations with the world, and ties in the neighbourhood, to trace the path ahead. In doing so, they ask what should India's strategy be and explain why veering away from its traditionally peaceable and liberal ethos is not the way forward

Subhasini Halder

For as long as states have had conflicts, thinkers have tried to set out the terms of a "grand strategy" of a country, one that draws together its national power and resources with its diplomatic, military and economic ambitions. For India's Chanakya (*Arthashastra*), for military generals like Thucydides (*History of the Peloponnesian War*), Sun Tzu (*The Art of War*) and Carl von Clausewitz (*On War*), the focus was on how to wage war. Amidst present-day realities of relative peace, their writings are now quoted in books on battles for diplomatic influence instead.

## Friends and allies

At least three recent books have aimed to look at a 'grand strategy' for Indian foreign policy in the 21st century, harking in some measure to ancient strategic wisdom. In *Friends, India's Closest Strategic Partners*, Professor at Jindal University Sreeram Chaulia writes about the seven countries he thinks are India's most important allies, including Japan, Australia, the U.S., Russia, France, Israel and the UAE. While none of the partnerships constitutes an "alliance", he speaks instead of the need for friendships for India's strategy to "assume its destiny as a leading power" of the world. Chaulia's argument for a world of friendships is three-fold. One, that India cannot depend on a multilateral framework to advance on this path and needs specific bilateral relationships to power it forward. The second, India's friends are by and large those who believe in Indian strategic autonomy. The third, that these friends are invested in India

using its strategic independence as a countervailing or deterrent challenge to Chinese hegemony. There are obvious exceptions to these rules. The U.S. may not be a fan of Indian strategic autonomy — U.S. Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti recently indicated in a speech that in conflict, partners must choose sides. Russia aims to bring India and China closer (as President Putin sought at the recent BRICS summit with a Narendra Modi Xi Jinping meet after years). It is also clear that none of India's neighbouring countries qualify in Chaulia's calculus as countries that can help India's rise, a thesis by exclusion that many Indian thinkers would disagree with. The book is remarkable, however, for its clarity of thought in an age where writers often hedge their bets, in line with India's own amorphous and sometimes ambiguous foreign policy choices. The organisation of the chapters, with one for each of India's friends chosen by Chaulia is also helpful, especially for students of each of these important relationships.

## Positioning India's strengths

Also out this season is McGill University Professor TV. Paul's excellent *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi*. If Chaulia's 'Friends', works within the silos of each relationship, Paul's 'Quest' flows chronologically from India's independence, in a treatise on Indian power and its practical past. Long before External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said that India's ambitions have shifted from being a "balancing power" to a "leading power", Paul points out the Nehru had visualised India as "one of the 'four great powers' of the post-war international

system", along with the U.S., the Soviet Union and China. Paul also, correctly, positions India's civilisational attributes, including the cultural and religious aspects, now at the forefront of the Modi government's diplomatic forays, as part of its "soft power", adding that the status of "Vishwaguru" or even "Vishwamitra" would elude India if it veers from its traditionally peaceable and liberal ethos that contribute to it. Paul's evaluation of India's economic and military left is well researched and worth reading, particularly as he presents them in absolute and comparative terms to other global powers. Unlike Chaulia, Paul does carry a chapter on "The Neighbours", but like Chaulia, he concludes that India's global status will increase even without gaining leverage in South Asia.

## The turning point

Finally, there's Dhruva Jaishankar's *Vishwa Shashtra: India and The World*, a scholarly recounting of Indian foreign policy over the ages, that begins with ancient strategic treatises, goes through pre-independence foreign policy thought, followed by the first few decades of the Indian Republic. Jaishankar marks 1991 as a significant turning point of "fundamental change" in Indian foreign policy — broadly as a reaction to global events like the Gulf war, Israel-Palestine peace process, the collapse of the Soviet Union and withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the resultant period of U.S.-led unipolarity in the world. Jaishankar, the third in his family line of strategic thinkers, weaves the intricacies of India's foreign policy past with considerable ease, leading up to the present period in 2024. Part 1, "History", is scrupulously

well presented, followed by Part 2 titled "Strategy", where it is possible for different schools of foreign policy thinking to differ. Jaishankar lists 14 "priorities" for Indian strategy, ranging from the need to improve military and industrial capabilities, securing partnerships in the Indian Ocean, ASEAN region and Middle East/West Asia, to strengthening multilateral institutions. Jaishankar sets his case on India's challenges by simply saying that "China's rise is likely the primary factor influencing India's grand strategy", and the other priorities he lists — on managing China, working with the Quad and others in the Indo-Pacific etc — speak to this understanding. Unlike Chaulia and Paul, Jaishankar puts much more focus on India's ties with its neighbours, including Afghanistan (Prioritise Neighbours, Talk to Afghanistan), making an exception for Pakistan (Compel Pakistan) for which he recommends a different treatment.

All three books mark a refreshing departure from strategic works of the past decade that focused on the Modi "moment" in Indian foreign policy post-2014. Those works had portrayed policies of the Modi/UPA government as a break from the past, often mistaking innovations such as public rallies for the diaspora, personalised summit-level diplomacy (the Sabarmati swing with Xi or the car ride in the Beast with Obama), social media usage and the promotion of yoga, meditation, Hindi and Sanskrit, the scriptures etc for transformational foreign policy. On this, all ancient strategic thinkers such as Chanakya, Clausewitz et al were clear — a key component of effective policy formation is the ability to discern grand strategy from tactics.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

The Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral was reopened in December following extensive restoration work to fix the effects of a 2019 fire. A quiz in its honour

Vasudevan Mukunt

### QUESTION 1

Together with the Amiens, Chartres, and Reims cathedrals, the Notre-Dame de Paris is an example of which style of architecture? Structures built in this style tend to be tall, with additional architectural features designed to divert the resulting weight.

### QUESTION 2

Authorities commissioned restoration work on the Notre-Dame de Paris between 1844 and 1864 after a particular 1831 event. Name/describe the event.

### QUESTION 3

The term 'cathedral' comes from cathedra, a characteristically raised throne reserved for the \_\_\_\_\_, denoting this individual's authority in Catholic

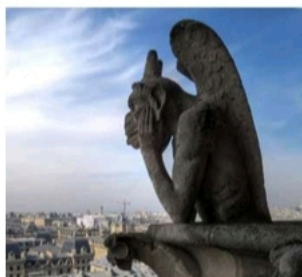
Christianity. Perhaps its most famous form is in the Cathedra Petri in Rome. Fill in the blank.

### QUESTION 4

Between the 14th century and 1766, the only clocks at the Notre-Dame de Paris were in the form of two \_\_\_\_\_. These devices measured the passage of time by allowing water to flow into or out of a vessel, with its volume denoting the time. Their name in Ancient Greece means 'water thief'. Fill in the blank.

### QUESTION 5

Until November 1789, the Notre-Dame de Paris belonged to the Catholic Church, but a particular event moved its ownership to the state of France in that year. In 1905, the French government allowed the Catholic Church to use the cathedral for religious purposes forever. Name the event.



Visual question: This is a depiction at the cathedral of a mythological bird that, in antiquity, was associated with witches and ill omen. Name the bird.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. According to India's national calendar, this is the first day of the year. **Ans: March 22, and for leap year March 21.** 2. The Calendar Reform Committee in 1952 was headed by this person. **Ans: Professor Meghnad Saha** 3. The different calendars the committee examined before selecting the Vikram Samvat. **Ans: 32. Thirty were from different States of the country, one was the lunar Hijri Islamic calendar and another was the solar Gregorian calendar.** 4. This Iranian poet and philosopher devised the rules for a leap year. **Ans: Omar Khayyam** 5. The unified Saka Calendar was adopted with effect from March 21, 1956 A.D. Saka refers to this. **Ans: Saka refers to Scythians who ruled from Ujjain between 130-395 CE** Visual: Name this American movie. **Ans: Ocean's Eleven** Early Birds: Nobody got all the answers correct



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
S. Upendran

"She graduated last year. And she got the gold medal. But companies won't give her a job because she doesn't have any experience. How can she get any experience if nobody gives her a job? It's really crazy."  
"It's a catch-22 situation."  
"Catch-22! What's that?"  
"A catch-22 is a 'condition whereby one fails no matter what action is taken because of a paradoxical rule or situation'.  
"You mean, no matter what you do, you just can't win."  
"It's a no-win situation. Take, for example, your friend's case. In order to get a job, she needs experience and in order to get experience, she needs a job. It's a paradox. A classic catch-22 situation."

"I think I'm beginning to understand. But tell me why is it called catch-22 and not catch-25 or 24?"  
"Catch-22 is the title of a novel by Joseph Heller."  
"O.K. And what was the absurd rule or catch-22 in the novel?"  
"Read the novel and find out for yourself. I'm going to the library presently. If you want..."  
"...You're going to the library right now?"  
"In a short while from now. 'Presently' means 'in a little while, soon'. For example, I can say, the theatre will open presently."

"The Minister will be here presently."  
"It's PREsently. The stress is on the first syllable."  
"O.K. But I thought 'presently' meant 'right now'?"

"Well, you're right. The Americans use 'presently' to mean 'at present, now'. The divorce rate in India is presently at its highest level. My cousin is presently living in U.S.A."

"Is he a U.S. citizen?"  
"No, but he's a resident of Georgia."  
"What exactly is the difference between a 'resident' and a 'citizen'?"  
"A 'citizen' is someone who shares in the political rights of a country. For example, unless you are a citizen of India, you cannot vote during the elections. A 'resident', on the other hand, is someone who stays in a particular place. For example, I can be a resident of Paris, London or Geneva."

"And just because you're a resident of Paris, it doesn't mean you're a citizen of France. Is that correct?"

"Exactly. You can stay or reside in another country without being its citizen. But remember, if you're just a resident, you have no political rights."  
"I'm not eligible to vote anyway!"  
Published in *The Hindu* on August 2, 1994.

## Word of the day

### Zeitgeist:

the spirit of the time; the spirit characteristic of an age or generation

Synonyms: feel, flavour, spirit, tone

Usage: The novel captures the zeitgeist of the late 1960s.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/zeitgeistpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /tsaɪtˈɡaɪst/

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



## SCIENCE

# Four UN environmental summits fell short in 2024. What happened?

At the heart of the breakdown lies a divergence in national priorities. Developing nations, grappling with developmental challenges, economic constraints, and the effects of climate change, have repeatedly demanded more technology and financial support from developed countries

Indu K. Murthy.

**T**he United Nations' efforts to address critical environmental challenges hit multiple roadblocks this year, with four key summits – in Colombia on biodiversity, Azerbaijan on climate, Saudi Arabia on land degradation, and South Korea on plastics – failing to deliver meaningful outcomes.

These meetings brought together governments, researchers, policymakers, industries, and civil society organisations to ensure their goals were aligned, build equitable accountability, and mobilise adequate finance for action. But all four summits achieved no or partial success on issues they had set to address. In fact, this is the fourth time UN discussions designed to push countries toward significant progress in addressing biodiversity loss, climate change, and plastic pollution have either ended without consensus or yielded unsatisfactory outcomes.

This is a significant setback in global efforts to address biodiversity loss and climate change, potentially leading to delayed action on critical issues such as climate finance, drought mitigation, and plastic pollution, with the most vulnerable countries potentially suffering the greatest impact.

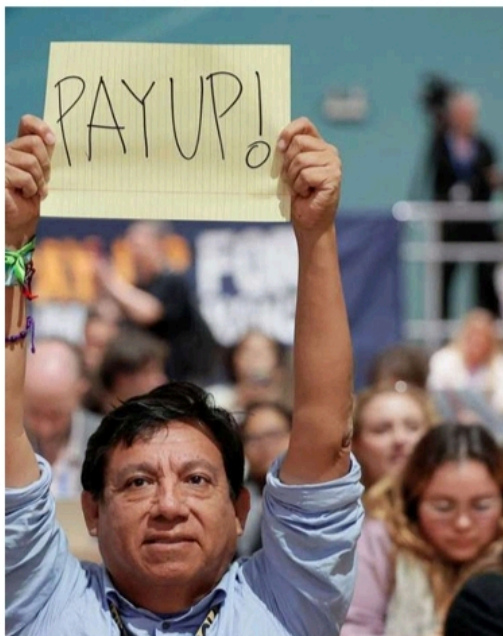
The partial or full failures of these talks raise pressing concerns about the global community's ability to combat biodiversity loss, climate change, and other urgent environmental crises. Understanding the reasons behind these setbacks and their implications for global cooperation is essential to charting a more effective path forward.

## Divergent national interests

At the heart of the talks' breakdown lies a stark and growing divergence in national priorities. Developing nations, grappling with developmental challenges, economic constraints, and the impacts of climate change, have repeatedly demanded more technology transfer and financial support from developed countries. But developed nations are reluctant to commit additional resources, citing domestic political pressures and economic challenges of their own.

For example, the Colombia talks on biodiversity conservation faltered as countries failed to agree on financing mechanisms to support sustainable land-use practices. Financing conservation at scale came to a gridlock with countries arguing in ambition, being nowhere close to delivering the \$700 billion-a-year requirement. In Azerbaijan, developing nations demanded \$1.3 trillion a year from developed nations, and the talks ended with the latter loosely agreeing to raise the amount from a wide range of sources, including private investment.

Also in Azerbaijan, countries were divided over the pledge to transition away from fossil fuels, a decision made during the last UN climate summit. The plastic pollution talks in South Korea also brought to the fore a significant divide among participating nations. The meeting concluded without reaching an agreement primarily because countries that rely on economies dependent on ongoing demand for plastics opposed a legally binding treaty. Instead, they



An activist at the 'People's Plenary' of the COP29 United Nations climate change conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November. REUTERS

pushed for proper usage and recycling of plastic waste.

## Consensus and crises

Several talks stumbled on disagreements over the frameworks needed to monitor and enforce environmental goals. In Azerbaijan, discussions on implementing the global stocktake under the Paris Agreement saw divisions over the accountability mechanisms for emission reductions, particularly for high-emission nations.

In Saudi Arabia, industrialised nations clashed with African countries over the establishment of a legally binding drought protocol. While the former wanted a broad operational framework, the African nations demanded a concrete plan with economic commitments.

Global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, and geopolitical conflicts, have created significant challenges for environmental action. They have diverted attention and resources away from pressing environmental priorities as governments grapple with urgent domestic concerns such as public health, economic recovery, and social stability.

For many countries, particularly those with limited institutional and/or financial capacity, the challenge to balance economic recovery efforts with long-term sustainability goals has weakened their negotiating positions. This has further reduced their willingness or ability to commit to ambitious environmental targets.

Developing economies, in particular, face heightened difficulties as they navigate inflation, debt burdens, and overall developmental challenges alongside climate vulnerabilities, leading to calls for greater financial and technological support from wealthier nations.

## Growing divide, lack of consensus

These setbacks in global negotiations complicate the already daunting task of addressing global environmental challenges.

**Delayed action:** The inability and failure to agree on frameworks and commit to concrete actions by nations postpone critical measures required to fight global issues such as biodiversity loss, climate change, land degradation, and plastic pollution. This delay increases the likelihood of pushing global systems closer to irreversible tipping points, with severe consequences for communities and economies worldwide.

**Incoherent, fragmented efforts:** As multilateral processes falter, there is a growing risk of countries turning to unilateral regional action. While these initiatives are well-meaning and can make progress, they would lack the global coherence necessary to address environmental issues comprehensively and equitably and could trigger new problems because of a lack of coordination among nations.

**Erosion of trust:** Repeated failures in negotiations risk undermining confidence among nations, making future

**In Azerbaijan, countries were divided over fossil fuels. The plastic pollution talks in South Korea also concluded without agreement because countries that rely on an ongoing demand for plastics opposed a legally binding treaty**

cooperation even more difficult.

**Pressure on future summits:** The failure of multiple global negotiations on the environment further forces upcoming meetings to deliver meaningful outcomes.

## Rebuilding momentum

To advance global environmental goals, several key strategies must be prioritised. Climate finance is key to this. Wealthier nations must honour their commitments to provide financial and technological support to developing nations. This would create a more equitable foundation for negotiations and help bridge trust gaps between developed and developing economies.

Equally critical is the need to enhance transparency and accountability by establishing robust mechanisms to track progress and hold nations accountable for their commitments. This would play a vital role in restoring confidence in multilateral processes.

Inclusive diplomacy is also essential to address geopolitical tensions and ensure all voices, particularly those of vulnerable nations, are heard in negotiations. By promoting equitable participation, global cooperation can become more effective and resilient.

Further, there must be a strong focus on implementation – shifting the emphasis from ambitious pledges to tangible action – backed by measurable outcomes. This pragmatic approach ensures progress even in the face of broader disagreements.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge and address connections between biodiversity loss, land degradation, plastic pollution, and climate change – a complex web of environmental crises that amplify one another. Climate change accelerates habitat destruction, ultimately leading to biodiversity loss, while degraded ecosystems such as deforested lands, desertification and land degradation or overexploited soils release carbon, exacerbating global warming.

Similarly, plastic pollution harms marine and terrestrial ecosystems and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions during its production and degradation. Addressing these issues in isolation has proven insufficient. Global environmental talks must therefore prioritise these interconnections, foster integrated strategies that protect ecosystems, restore degraded landscapes, and reduce pollution while tackling climate change.

The challenges are immense, but so are the stakes. As environmental crises intensify, the world can't afford further stalemates. It is imperative for nations to move beyond short-term interests and embrace a shared vision for a sustainable future.

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A large number of ants can together make more complicated decisions by having different ants make different parts of each decision. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

## Ants team up to make tough decisions

Arkatapa Basu

The small size of ants has nothing to do with their stature among insects and, in fact, in the animal kingdom. Over the years, they have colonised almost every major landmass on the planet, and their total biomass is expected to exceed that of birds and mammals combined. They are eusocial insects: their colonies are organised with a great degree of cooperation and division of labour.

A study published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on December 23 offered to add one more feather to their caps. In the study, Israeli researchers explored how two species – longhorn crazy ants and humans – dealt with challenges by working together.

Just as it's easier to haul a heavier object with a large number of people, the researchers have reported that a large number of ants can together make more complicated decisions by having different ants make different parts of each decision.

In an experiment, the researchers had the ants carry a T-shaped object through a series of ant-sized obstacles. This is a difficult task for ants because they can't talk to each other about how they can fit the object through a particular entrance using only their pheromone-based communication.

In a parallel setup, the team had a bunch of people navigate a similar obstacle course carrying a similarly oddly shaped object.

To level the playing field, the humans were made to wear sunglasses and masks and barred from speaking or gesturing to each other.

The team found that the ant groups outperformed their human counterparts. While individual ants struggled, ant groups were able to coordinate their efforts in ways that exceeded individual

**Ants banked on distributed coordination, allowing them to adjust and align their actions according to the actions of other ants, eventually arriving at the 'correct' solution**

capabilities – an example of emergent persistence.

On the other hand, the people weren't able to discuss and strategise their course, and often failed to improve on individual performances. Sometimes, in fact, human groups fared worse than individual humans.

According to the researchers, in the absence of communication, individuals tended to rush to do what they thought their teammates would do. This phenomenon, colloquially called groupthink, drove participants to pursue incorrect solutions like pulling the T-shaped object directly towards gaps in the wall.

Ants, on the other hand, banked on distributed coordination, allowing them to adjust and align their actions according to the actions of other ants, eventually arriving at the 'correct' solution.

The study highlighted the power of emergent behaviour in collective problem-solving.

"Similar examples in which grouping leads to newly acquired cognitive abilities are rare," the researchers wrote in their paper. "One example comes from fish that can expand their sensing range by grouping, which allows the school to respond to environmental gradients that occur over long length scales. Another example comes from fish that modulate their responsiveness to risk by modifying the spatial structure of the group."

It also remains to be seen how humans habituated to communicating in ways other than talking would perform.

## THE SCIENCE QUIZ

### Things sort of related to trees

Vasudevan Mukunth

**QUESTION 1**  
When a strong electric discharge passes through an insulating material, its progression can take the shape of a rapidly branching tree. What are these figures called?

**QUESTION 2**  
One example of the many abstract data types in computer science is the 'tree'. It's so named because each node in this tree has at best two child nodes. As the tree progresses, it branches out in factors of 2. Fill in the blanks.

**QUESTION 3**  
The \_\_\_\_\_ is a fractal shape that's also one of the easiest

to create. Start with a line segment and split one end into two branches. Then repeat the process for all new line segments created in this way. Fill in the blanks.

**QUESTION 4**  
In computational linguistics, what is the name for the tree-like representation used to understand the syntax's structure of any given sentence using specific grammatical rules?

**QUESTION 5**  
Name the hunting practice whereby hunters use dogs to chase animals up a tree, where they can be spotted and shot at more easily. The 'idiot' 'barking up the wrong tree' comes from this practice.

**Answers to December 31 quiz:**  
1. Property due to which (almost) all sets are also their subsets – **Ans: Reflexive property**  
2. Most abundant polymer on the earth – **Ans: Cellulose**  
3. Material that helped popularise motion picture films – **Ans: Celluloid**  
4. Condition in which skin becomes lumpy – **Ans: Cellulite**  
5. Variety of just-in-time manufacturing prized for agility – **Ans: Cellular manufacturing**  
Visual: Bass Violin or violone  
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Viswanadharao Batchu | Srividya Tadepalli



Visual: The tree in the garb of a person in this image is the unofficial mascot of which university? Credit: BrokenSphere

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

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subject 'Daily page'



The Tribune  
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Apology not enough  
Hold Manipur CM accountable for violence

MANIPUR Chief Minister N Biren Singh's apology for the ethnic violence that has ravaged the state since May 2023 is too little, too late. Over 250 lives have been lost, thousands displaced and women brutalised in unimaginable ways. Singh's acknowledgment of the tragedy cannot erase his culpability; his inaction and partisanship make him a war criminal. Under Singh's watch, Manipur spiralled into chaos, with armed militias terrorising communities. His failure to control the militias, prevent the widespread use of looted weapons and ensure the safety of all communities makes his apology appear more like a strategic ploy than a sincere effort to heal a fractured society. Women have been weaponised in this conflict. The horrifying sexual violence against Kuki-Zomi women, such as the ordeal of Reina Haokip, highlights the war waged on women's bodies. The victims carry psychological scars that no apology can heal.

The statistics he presented — declining incidents of firing and arrests made — are cold comfort to those who have lost loved ones or seen their homes burned. The wounds inflicted by drone bombings, mob attacks and communal targeting cannot be erased by words alone. The displacement of over 50,000 people is a testament to the state's inability to provide security and dignity to its citizens.

Allegations of bias against the Kuki-Zo community have further eroded any trust in his leadership. His apology is a transparent attempt to deflect blame rather than take responsibility. Singh's tenure has been marked by complicity and incompetence, rendering him incapable of fostering peace or reconciliation. Calls for his resignation are justified; accountability is non-negotiable. Manipur needs a leadership overhaul and a political solution grounded in justice, equality and genuine dialogue. Singh must face the consequences of his failures.

Haryana's graft taint  
Bribery cases against cops reveal the rot

HARYANA has had a 'double-engine' government since 2014. It's no mean feat that the BJP has won three Assembly elections on the trot in this state adjoining the Capital. No wonder voters continue to have great expectations in terms of good & clean governance. Even as the euphoria over the party's stunning victory in the October 2024 state polls is waning, a sobering fact has come to light — of the 104 trapcases in which officials were caught red-handed by Haryana's Anti-Corruption Bureau last year, 34 involved members of the police force. It is a good sign that the ACB is cracking down on corrupt officials, but what about deterrence and fear of the law? The functioning of the government and the police comes under a cloud when those tasked with law enforcement themselves demand and accept illegal gratification. Other departments have a better record, but there is no room for complacency as they also have their black sheep who need to be weeded out.

It was the anti-corruption plank that had helped the BJP decimate the scam-tainted UPA a decade ago, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasising his zero-tolerance approach with the slogan, "Na bhayunga na khane dunga". However, the rot in Haryana shows that the initiative to cleanse the system remains a work in progress.

Speaking at a 'Good Governance Day' event last week, the Haryana Governor rightly stated that information technology was the most effective means of curbing corruption. Indeed, e-governance has made a difference, but unscrupulous people are adept at finding new ways to bypass rules and procedures. The Union Government, which is often accused by the Opposition of missing Central agencies to settle political scores, must pay greater attention to Haryana, which is at risk of becoming a bad advertisement for the much-touted anti-corruption campaign.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 1925

Unity or cooperation?

IF the political organisations that hold their annual settings during the last week of December did not succeed at the sessions which have just come to a close in devising a plan by which the unity of the Congress can be restored, it is with some satisfaction we note that they did the next best thing. All of them, without exception, expressed their readiness to join in common deliberations on subjects in which there was general agreement. The Congress, as might have been expected, set the ball rolling. The Mahatma, who in his opening address to the Congress had called upon that body to plead with the Liberals and others who had seceded to rejoin the Congress, said in his concluding address that whether these parties were able to rejoin the Congress or not, his earnest request to them was that they might extend their sympathy and support to the Congress in everything that commended itself to their judgment. To this request, both the Liberal Federation and the Muslim League, the only two bodies whose positions were somewhat doubtful in this matter, expressed their readiness to respond. The former concluded its resolution on the subject of Congress reunion with the proposal that pending the fulfilment of the conditions on which its rejoining the Congress "depended, there should be cooperation between different political parties in matters upon which there was agreement". This was, indeed, the policy which the federation authorised the Liberal members of the committee of the All-Party Conference to advocate. The same, in substance, was also the position of the president of the Muslim League.

Close ranks to fortify the republic

The collective will of people is needed to safeguard India's interests



VIVEK KATJU  
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY  
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

WITH the onset of the year in which the Indian republic will celebrate 75 years of its establishment, the fervent hope of the majority of its citizens is for social peace and harmony. This can only be achieved if there is a realisation that the path to right the 'wrongs of history' lies through cementing a common nationhood that is respectful of the traditions and faiths of all Indians. That acceptance and respect are also the premise and promise of the republic's foundational principle, so eloquently expressed in the Constitution.

A deviation from this basic constitutional proposition will damage India's capability to successfully navigate the enormous strategic challenges that are growing because of the technological changes underway in a turbulent global environment. The regional situation, too, presents difficulties that can be ignored only at the peril of hurting national interests. And, for India, the key country connecting its regional and global challenges is China.

China's threat goes far beyond the border issue. A process of 'normalising' the relationship, which was acutely impaired by China's actions in eastern Ladakh in the summer of 2020, may now have begun. The Ministry of External Affairs' readout of the Narendra Modi-Xi Jinping meeting on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in October last year noted, "The two leaders affirmed that stable, predictable and amicable bilateral relations



WAY FORWARD: The path to right the 'wrongs of history' lies through cementing a common nationhood that is respectful of the traditions and faiths of all Indians.

between India and China, as two neighbours and the two largest nations on earth, will have a positive impact on regional and global peace and prosperity. It will also contribute to a multipolar Asia and a multipolar world". However, whatever China may agree to during formal summit-level meetings, it is working for, at least, a bipolar world order and is assiduously seeking a unipolar Asia in which its power and influence prevail. And, the backbone of both these quests lie not only in its economic success and growing military power but also its undoubted and deep advances in the areas of science and high technology.

In 2018, Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, had said, "The popular conception is that companies come to China because of low labour costs. I'm not sure what part of China they go to, but the truth is that China stopped being the low-labour-cost country years ago. And that is not the reason to come to China from a supply point of view. The reason is because of the skill, and the quantity of skill in one location and the type of skill..." He went on to say that the products that were Apple's requirement need-

In the current year and beyond, China's involvement in India's immediate neighbourhood will only increase.

ed advanced tooling capable of working with state-of-the-art material. He added, "That tooling skill is very deep here. In the US, you could have a meeting of tooling engineers and I'm not sure we could fill the room. In China, you could fill multiple football fields..."

That was over six years ago. China's drive to develop human capital in the areas of frontier manufacturing continues relentlessly. It is, however, not satisfied with becoming the

factory of the world. It is now seeking to reach US and Western European levels in design and innovation in large frontier technology sectors, including artificial intelligence (AI).

Till recently, it was commonly and correctly believed that in AI, the US excelled in 'technical innovation' while Chinese companies were competent at 'application innovation'. There was generally a gap of one or two years before the application occurred. However, the Chinese are now realising that there is a fundamental difference between 'technical innovation' and thereafter applying it. Hence, Chinese companies like DeepSeek have come up; they are going rapidly ahead in 'technical innovation'. They do not wish to be followers anymore. This will pose a challenge to US supremacy in AI, which is destined to change the world. The US will pose impediments in China's path, but will it succeed? It is difficult to predict how deep and extensive will be the transformation of individual lives and international power equations, but it is certain that this will happen, and that too early.

Where does India stand in all

this and other frontier and emerging areas of science and technology (S&T)? The truth is that while India's economic growth has led it to become the fifth largest global economy, there is a wide and perhaps growing gap in S&T not only with the West but also with China. Jawaharlal Nehru was acutely aware that European domination of the world, beginning with the 18th and 19th centuries that led to all the horrors of colonialism in Asia, Africa and South America, had occurred because of its Industrial Revolution. Hence, his determination that India should catch up in S&T, both in terms of human capital and industrialisation. In this context, it is good to become aware of the advances Indians had made in S&T in ancient times and convey that to the world, but is that really the path to becoming a strong and powerful country — a genuine pole in a multipolar world?

The answer is obvious. All the digging out of glories from our ancient past, which was ravaged by invaders, will not help us meet the challenges of today. They may satisfy emotional urges of certain sections of the people, and their long-standing feelings of hurt and anguish may be addressed too, but they will not address the strategic threat that the country faces from China. In the current year and beyond, China's involvement in India's immediate neighbourhood will only increase. Its intrusion in India's western neighbourhood, substantial for decades, will continue. The situation in Bangladesh is ripe for its pernicious intervention and it will increase its presence in the Indian Ocean Region.

In such circumstances, it is the collective will of cohesive people — shedding prejudices, not dwelling on the past but taking India forward to become a leader in S&T innovation and applications and strong in defence — that is needed to safeguard India's interests.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

One of the greatest perils to an extensive republic is the disregard of individual rights. — Calvin Coolidge

The indispensable domestic helpers

RK SABOO

DOMESTIC helpers make our life easier and less hectic. They are almost indispensable to working couples and the elderly.

My family has been fortunate to have had very good helpers. The first one I remember is Ram Dhani, who came as a boy from Bihar to work for my parents. My mother trained him painstakingly, and he gradually became a sort of all-rounder. I had a love-hate relationship with him because if I did some mischief, he would report it to my mother, and she would then scold me. Once, I took revenge by putting a live earthworm in his mouth while he was sleeping.

As children, we were taught to treat him not as a servant but a family member. When I got married and Usha came as a *bahu* in our home, she touched Ram Dhani's feet.

When Tulsi Ram joined our household, he was my age. We played cricket for several years. Before he retired, he brought his son, Dhanji Ram, to work with us. Dhanji is still with us, as sincere and loyal as his father.

Shambhu worked for our family for a long time as well. After my mother's untimely demise, he became a caregiver and companion for Babuji and even travelled with him in India and abroad.

When we came to Chandigarh in 1960, our first car driver was Sohan Singh. He lovingly taught driving skills to both my sons. He stayed with us for almost 30 years until cancer claimed his life. Another faithful driver, Ram Singh, joined us in 1985 and worked till 2013. He stopped driving when his vision became poor.

Domestic helpers are a good example of unity in diversity. They come from different parts of India, speak different languages, have their own customs and food habits. But here they live as one family, caring for us and caring for each other. Currently, our 'man Friday' is from Uttar Pradesh. Our cook hails from Odisha. Our maid is from Assam, the driver from Himachal Pradesh, our most trusted housekeeper is from Uttarakhand, the washerwoman from Jharkhand and the gardener from Bihar. All have been with us for decades.

Like all relationships, it is a give-and-take between us and our domestic helpers. If they are caring, we also do our bit for them. Years back, instead of performing *Kanjak Puja* during Navratri, we adopted nine girls of our staff members, opened small savings accounts in their names and put money every year until they became adults and could use it wisely. We also helped daughters of our driver and gardener get nursing training; both are now well-employed. We take care of their needs and problems — financial, medical, house repairs, employment and marriage of their children.

Nevertheless, what we do for them is minuscule compared to what they do for us. They give the best part of their lives for us and our children, making a sacrifice in many ways. A big salute to our super domestic helpers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Address farmers' grievances

Apologies of Looking ahead; it is an irony that the grower of crops cannot get the minimum price for his produce for survival. Bute market forces ensure that the same product fetches three times higher prices as soon as it is out of the farmer's hands and becomes a part of the supply chain. The government's argument against giving MSP on the basis of the C2+50 formula is that it has to watch the interests of the consumer class. Striking a balance can be the way forward. Grievances of farmers relating to farming as an economic activity are, no doubt, genuine and merit an acceptable redressal. Protesting farmers should take into account the government's budgetary constraints in order to facilitate a dialogue.

HMS NAGRA, FARIDABAD

Govt, farmers must work together

With reference to Looking ahead; the deadlock between farmers and the Centre has delayed action on the pending demands. Bandhs, road and rail blockades have become common, and the hapless public has to bear the brunt. The solution lies with both sides coming to the negotiating table to discuss and find out a concrete remedy. Policy experts, agricultural economists and political stakeholders should be consulted to decide a solution acceptable to both parties once and for all. Farmers mainly want legal guarantee of MSP; withdrawal of cases against those who participated in protests and the waiver of loans. Since the agriculture sector is the backbone of economic growth as well as food security of the nation, the government should seriously address the demands at the earliest in the interest of the nation and the public.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROHAT

Engage in meaningful dialogue

Refer to Looking ahead; farmers and the government must try to resolve the issues at the negotiating table with the spirit of give and take. The frequent road and rail blockades disrupt public life, even as farmers are losing the support and sympathy of the public. Pressure tactics often prove counterproductive. Both sides should collectively address the issues. With the intervention of the Supreme Court, Jagjit Singh Dhillon's fast has achieved its purpose. He should end it to pave the way for a meaningful dialogue.

WG COR CL RETD (HET), JALANDHAR

Strictly enforce labour laws

Apologies of 'Children in peril'; the revelation about children being employed as labourers is indicative of the fact that they continue to be vulnerable despite several laws. They often get sexually abused at the hands of unscrupulous elements. Owing to poverty they are not able to pursue their education and are forced to work as labourers in order to supplement the family income. Kids are the future of the country and must be saved from persistent exploitation and crimes. They must be educated to shape their careers, thereby facilitating a respectful and dignified life. The need of the hour is to ensure strict enforcement of labour laws and putting an end to the scourge of exploitation.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Fiscal discipline is non-negotiable

Refer to 'Time ripe for bold economic reforms'; the article aptly concludes that "without bold policies, it will not be possible to raise growth to the level of 8-9 per cent". Livelihoods of people grow with fiscal growth, which can be achieved and sustained only with consensus across the political spectrum. Sadly what the Centre proposes, some states dispose due to vote-bank party politics. This ought not to be the bone of our federal structure. For example, the retrograde return to the Old Pension Scheme undermines a bold initiative. There has to be an inviolable line drawn between welfare and the growing 'free this, free that' culture. The real challenge for fiscal discipline to prevail is that it has to be non-negotiable.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Govt should reduce imports

The government is facing two inter-related economic issues — the growing import-export gap and the falling rupee vis-a-vis the US dollar. The rupee is falling every day and the reasons are varied. It has repercussions like making imports costlier, resulting in a higher inflation rate. Students going abroad feel the real pinch. The government should take necessary steps like increasing exports, boosting FDI as well as tourism and reducing imports. Subsidies should be granted to garment, manufacturing and pharmaceutical units to give a fillip to exports. The fall in petroleum exports should also be looked into.

NPS SOHAL, CHANDIGARH



# MSP & policy alternatives for a fragile sector



**BS SIDHU**  
FORMER COMMISSIONER,  
AGRICULTURE, PUNJAB

THREE farm laws enacted by Parliament for improvement in the agricultural marketing system led to the eruption of farmers' protests in August 2020. After prolonged agitation, the government repealed these laws in November 2021, but the farmers have once again resumed the protest, alleging that the government has failed to fulfil their demands, including that of a guaranteed minimum support price (MSP) for all crops.

Dedining agricultural incomes, rising production costs and shrinking employment opportunities have exacerbated the Indian agricultural crisis. It is impacting small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers disproportionately. For millions of farmers, MSP is a beacon of hope, promising a reasonable return on their toil.

The high-level committee constituted by the Supreme Court of India, while sounding an alarm over the country's agricultural crisis, has echoed the sentiments of the protesting farmers in recommending a loan waiver for farmers and the legal recognition of MSP to protect their income.

Historically, the MSP was introduced in 1965-66 to achieve increased foodgrain

production by encouraging the adoption of high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice. It is an administered price of agricultural produce fixed by the Union Government for its purchase from farmers for the public distribution system (PDS) and to ensure that they get a reasonable margin on the cost of production. It also protects the farmers against a distress sale due to a drop in output prices during glut.

However, more than 60 per cent of India's population relies primarily on agriculture for its livelihood despite the sector contributing less than 20 per cent to the nation's economic output. Unfortunately, the underlying core issues of the agricultural crisis have been pushed under the carpet due to the farmers' protests for a legally binding MSP.

A legally binding MSP is necessary to make farming a more stable and successful business as no one will be able to purchase farm produce below this price, and doing so would be punishable by law.

The Standing Committee of Parliament on Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food Processing has also recently recommended the implementation of legally binding MSP for (a) safeguarding farmers' livelihoods, promoting rural economic growth, and enhancing national food security; (b) stimulating economic activity in these areas and benefiting local businesses and economies; and (c) providing an assured income to farmers to encourage them to invest in agricultural practices, potentially increasing farm productivity and sustainability.

However, the MSP is only a part of the problem and farmers



VITAL: A tactical balance between economic viability and farmers' welfare is needed. TRIBUNE PHOTO

will still be struggling for optimum income due to small-sized and highly fragmented landholdings, increasing production costs, lack of demand-driven production and depleting natural resources, namely soil health and water, including groundwater.

Despite its appeal to the farmers, the guaranteed MSP may incentivise them to produce more without paying attention to the market demand and may increase the expenditure of the government and divert funds away from other crucial investments. The purchase of the surplus produce beyond the need for buffer stocks will lead to its offloading to the general public at a discount or losses during storage, causing a financial loss.

Further, the MSP also got tied up in the web of vote-bank politics to garner public support during the recent elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. These states fixed prices higher than the MSP fixed by the

India should work out its requirement for cereals, pulses and oilseeds and prepare a farm production plan for these quantities by identifying the benign areas for their production.

Union Government. Accordingly, apart from a guaranteed MSP, a comprehensive policy to address these concurrent concerns is required to put the agricultural sector back on the high growth path.

A new policy alternative may be to provide a region-specific rather than a pan-India universal MSP. The country should work out its requirement for cereals, pulses and oilseeds and then prepare an agricultural production plan for these quantities by identifying the ecologically benign areas for the production of these crops. The legally binding MSP only for identified crops in benign regions may be implemented; this will encourage the production of required crops as well as import substitution and can go a long way in improving the sustainability of Indian agriculture, apart from meeting the trade deficit.

Another option could be the introduction of two types of administered prices, as was adopted till the mid-1970s. It

entailed an MSP below which the prices of commodities were not allowed to fall even in case of a bumper crop and a procurement price at which the cereals were domestically procured by public agencies for distribution through PDS. Such prices were fixed for paddy up to 1973-74 and for wheat from 1965 to 1969 and again in 1974-75.

A legally binding MSP worked out as per the recommendations of the Ramesh Chand Committee could be announced before the start of the sowing season. It could be (A2 + FL) + 25 per cent as management and marketing charges and a procurement price of 1.5 times C2. Or, a slightly different one could be fixed before the start of the procurement season, keeping in view the domestic availability and demand, terms of trade, international prices, etc. However, no imports of agricultural commodities below the MSP should be allowed.

Another policy initiative to achieve the purpose of sustaining the fragile economy of the farmers and maximising agricultural production without the government having to physically acquire the produce may be the Price Deficiency Payment Scheme (PDPS). It proposes to compensate the farmers for the difference between the MSP and the actual market price.

In 2017, Madhya Pradesh and Haryana experimented with the PDPS as the Bhavani Bhugtan Yojana. Under this, farmers were paid the difference between the MSP and the actual sale price, subject to a maximum of 25 per cent of the MSP fixed for that season. Based on their experience,

the scheme can be modified to guarantee farmers a minimum price while saving the government from large-scale financial and logistical challenges of public procurement.

The Indian state may have a moral, but has no legal, authority to squeeze the agricultural profits of *amandats* through price interventions to meet the needs of the consumers who cannot afford two square meals. At present, the MSP has become a peripheral instrument to fulfil the mandate of procurement of foodgrains for the PDS under the National Food Security Act 2013.

A consistent income due to MSP allows the farmers to plan better and maintain production without the fear of market fluctuations undermining their efforts. In his iconic Budget speech on July 24, 1991, the late PM, Manmohan Singh, had remarked that "markets can only serve those who are part of the market system."

The wretched peasantry, which lives on the edges of a subsistence economy, cannot be left at the mercy of the markets for the sustainability of its income, rendering it unable to enjoy its rights for a minimal standard of living, health and dignity.

To ensure the sustainability and prosperity of agriculture, which is moving towards an ecological disaster, a tactical balance between economic viability and farmers' welfare must be struck. A legally binding MSP, a crucial element of the agricultural price policy but no panacea for resolving the agrarian distress, is the minimum the government should do to keep the farmers in the business of supplying affordable food.

# Navigating Bangladesh's internal strife & external pressures



**G PARTHASARATHY**  
CHANCELLOR, JAMMU CENTRAL UNIVERSITY & EX-HIGH COMMISSIONER TO PAKISTAN

DESPIITE facing a strange and virtual US-China alliance during its birth in 1971, Bangladesh has had a record of rapid economic growth in recent years. Also, notwithstanding the uncertainties and frequent natural disasters since its independence in 1971, it has witnessed a robust economic growth and poverty reduction. One of the world's poorest nations at birth, it reached the lower-middle income status in 2015.

In the meantime, its former PM Sheikh Hasina has recently sought refuge in India after being threatened with arrest by the local 'authorities', headed by an interim administration led by a US-educated agriculturalist and Nobel Prize recipient, Muhammad Yunus. Yunus and the Bangladesh

Green Bank were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, for their work to "create economic and social development from below." Established in 1983, the bank's objective has been to grant poor people small loans on easy terms, also known as 'micro-credit'.

Sheikh Hasina, now living in exile in India, has seen her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman killed in a bloody military coup in 1975. He had led his people to freedom and democratic rule in 1971. Both the US and China appear to have had a distrust and dislike for Sheikh Mujib and his daughter.

Hasina, who was naturally friendly to India, had faced the none-too-friendly feelings displayed by the then blossoming anti-Soviet alliance of the US and China. She was succeeded by regimes not exactly friendly to India. Things, however, changed with time. If Sheikh Mujib faced US and Chinese hostility in the 1970s, his daughter and successor appears to be facing a similar situation today. Today, the US and China are not exactly the best of friends, as they were in the early 1970s.

Despite facing a US-China opposition, Hasina has had a track record of commitment to her country's strategic auton-



INTERESTING: Hasina's ouster from Bangladesh evidently has the backing of both the US and China. AP

omy, economic growth and secularism. She has also not forgotten India's role in the liberation of her country from Pakistani military excesses.

Bangladesh is now facing a situation where the US-backed Yunus has become a key player in the country's leadership. It is no secret that Yunus has strong pro-American leanings, which have helped in him being appointed head of the Bangladesh government recently.

Interestingly, Hasina's ouster evidently has the backing not only the Biden administration but also its rival China. What is also interesting is

While India should not get involved in the internal affairs of Bangladesh, it should continue to provide Hasina asylum.

that both China and the US appear to share identical views on the appointment of Yunus as her successor. It needs to be borne in mind that Yunus has high political ambitions.

There is no doubt that a concerted effort has been made, including by the US and China, to discredit Hasina. This effort ignores the economic progress that Bangladesh achieved in the years when Hasina headed the government. Moreover, it is for the people of Bangladesh, and not foreign powers, to both determine its leadership or undermine an elected government.

Bangladesh is the largest development partner of India today. New Delhi has provided it three lines of credit, amounting to \$8 billion, for the modernisation and development of such sectors as shipping, ports, roads and railways.

China and Pakistan are, by all accounts, determined to curb and limit India's influence across the Indian Ocean, through which oil supplies flow from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca and beyond.

As the Trump administration assumes charge, India must hold a comprehensive dialogue with the US and other like-minded countries across the Indo-Pacific region. This is needed to ensure the security of its sea lanes of communication. India is, meanwhile, developing its maritime capabilities in weapons systems, ranging from aircraft carriers and warships to missile power. This enables it to cooperate with the US, Japan and other like-minded countries, as also, most importantly, countries in the Persian Gulf.

Insecurity and instability across this region can have serious implications for global energy supplies. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's interest in this region is evident from

his recent visit to Kuwait.

Looking back, it was the budding Nixon-Mao-General Yahya Khan alliance of the US, Pakistan and China in 1971 that led to a virtual genocide in Bangladesh and the flow of an estimated 10 million refugees from the then East Pakistan into India. It was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who led the freedom struggle of Bangladesh. One also recalls that the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had no interest in keeping the Indian forces deployed indefinitely in Bangladesh. She was, however, shocked at the brutal assassination of Sheikh Mujib.

Things have moved on significantly since then, but India would need to obtain US support to contain a possible Chinese thrust into Bangladesh. China has recently strengthened access to the Bay of Bengal at the Kyaukphyu deep sea port in Myanmar.

While India should not get involved in the internal affairs of Bangladesh, it should continue to provide Hasina asylum. It should work with the US and others to see that Bangladesh strengthens its democratic institutions and holds free and fair elections in which Hasina and her party men are also free to participate.

QUICK CROSSWORD

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

ACROSS

1 Natural environment (7)

5 Discard as worthless (5)

8 Remain neutral in dispute (3,2,3,5)

9 Unresponsive (5)

10 A rotary engine (7)

11 Not well (6)

12 Quick-witted (6)

15 Requisite (7)

17 Mourful song (5)

19 Demand explanation from (4,2,7)

20 Drive out (5)

21 Unanimously (7)

DOWN

1 Plantain lily (5)

2 Remain silent (6,4,3)

3 Melodious (7)

4 South Pacific island (6)

5 Up to now (2,3)

6 Totally outclass (3,5,5)

7 Alleged reason (7)

11 Flamboyance in style (7)

13 Far-reaching (7)

14 For ever (6)

16 Ending in disaster (5)

18 Gate (5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Acute, 8 Lose face, 9 Quake, 10 Sound out, 11 Sharp, 12 Ant, 16 Joyous, 17 Outing, 18 Hay, 23 Unity, 24 One-sided, 25 Offer, 26 Butter on, 27 Drift

SU DO KU

7

4

1

2

5

6

9

8

2

5

9

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

4 2 1 5 7 6 9 3 8

7 3 5 4 8 9 1 6 2

9 6 8 3 2 1 4 5 7

3 5 7 6 1 8 2 9 4

6 4 2 9 3 7 8 1 5

8 1 9 2 4 5 3 7 6

5 7 3 8 9 2 6 4 1

2 9 6 1 5 4 7 8 3

1 8 4 7 6 3 5 2 9

CALENDAR

JANUARY 2, 2025, THURSDAY

Shaka Samvat 1946

Pooh Shaka 12

Pooh Panvishite 19

Hijri 1446

FORECAST

SUNSET: THURSDAY 12:33 HRS

SUNRISE: FRIDAY 07:18 HRS

CITY MAX MIN

Chandigarh 11 09

New Delhi 17 08

Amritsar 16 09

Bathinda 18 06

Jalandhar 16 10

Ludhiana 18 10

Bhawal 18 09

Hisar 17 07

Sirsa 18 06

Dharamsala 21 06

Manali 13 02

Shimla 17 08

Srinagar 04 -01

Jammu 14 08

Kargil 02 -12



## After 2024 leap, the landing year

Compared to the eventful last 12 months, 2025 will be a period of relative lull, with a fairly modest sporting calendar. Legends Virat and Rohit could finally walk into the sunset, leaving behind a void and battles of succession. Hockey and chess hold great promise. And do keep an eye out for Neeraj and Lakshya as well



**SANDEEP DWIVEDI**  
**LOOKING AT**  
**2025**  
**SPORT**

IT WOULD seem that the sporting scripts for 2024 were penned by a suspense writer with a sadistic streak. At virtually every major sporting event in the year just gone by, false clues were followed by unexpected twists and turns.

Nothing quite happened as it was supposed to be — and punters lost money, pundits their faces, and fans their fingernails. It was not easy following sport in 2024.

It was a leap year where the heart kept leaping up into the mouth, joy and heartbreak, the two emotions that define sport, were like sky muggers in dark alleys, trained to catch their victims off-guard.

What could have prepared India for that dreadful morning of August 13 during the Paris Olympics? Just the night before, Vinesh Phogat had taken out a GOAT wrestler, and what remained was the formality of writing the last page of her fairy tale.

And then the weighing scale showed that she was 100 grams overweight. She was mercilessly pushed out of the competition and thrown into a dark pit of depression. A shell-shocked India didn't know how to react.

At the same Olympics, the world thought Neeraj Chopra's competition would be the javelin throwers from Europe. Little did they know that a Jat boy from Mian Channu, a village in Pakistan's Punjab, would hurt the javelin with the nonchalance of a father lobbing a ball to his child at a park, and come up with a 90-plus throw to win gold.

Like the agony, the ecstasy too, arrived unannounced.

At the T20 World Cup final, all seemed lost for India — that old ICC event jinx seemed to have struck again. South Africa, meanwhile, had all but shed their choker tag. But Hardik Pandya bowled his redemption over and Suryakumar Yadav took a catch that will always be his calling card. Unimaginable, unpredictable, unbelievable — commentators had run out of the 'un' words.

2024 was also said to be about super athletes calling it a day but those grand farewells seemed to have been postponed. The aging legends Novak Djokovic, MS Dhoni, Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma — none of them spoke about retirement, fully or partly. Djokovic got an Olympic medal, Kohli and Rohit lifted the



Illustration: Savajji Dey

ICC Trophy, and Dhoni hit a few signature slog-over sizes. They all proved the sporting soothsayers wrong.



Being fully aware of the risk that comes with making sporting predictions and getting them horribly wrong, but remaining true to the tradition of dispensing year-ending/beginning prophecies, here's how sports and sporting careers are likely to unfold in 2025.

Compared to the eventful last 12 months, 2025 will be a period of relative sporting lull. After the leap, this is the landing year. 2024 had the Olympics, Euro football, World Championship chess, and the T20 World Cup. The frugal tournament list for the next 12 months can't match last year's magnitude or scale.

**CRICKET:** Of course, in February, there is cricket's Champions Trophy, a tournament that was to be fully hosted by Pakistan but because of India's refusal to cross the border will now have some games in Dubai. Pakistan is offended with the change, and in case the final two moves to Dubai — the understanding is in case India reach the title clash, it will — the least popular format will lose more fans.

**VIRAT, ROHIT, AND?** The big hope for the long neglected 50-over ICC tourney to hit the headlines could lie with happenings beyond the action on the field.

If India's two aging greats, Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, both in their late 30s and also on their last legs, don't hang up their boots

after the Australia tour and are out of the World Test Championship, the Champions Trophy could be where they will be expected to say their last goodbyes.

Retired from T20s, struggling in Tests, the ODI World Cup in 2027 — Virat and Rohit have been running out of reasons to keep turning up for India games and delay the transition.

These likely departures this year will be followed by a succession drama. Who will be India's Test captain? The BCCI, the selectors, the coach, and Indian cricket's other influential voices — their say in such important matters never defined or made known to the world — will take this all-important call.

Since these Test captaincy aspirants will be in leading roles for the franchise teams, the IPL will be watched with interest.

But does the handling of your team's resources in T20 cricket provide any clue about your Test leadership credentials? In India, it does. If Gautam Gambhir got the job of India coach within days of him taking KKR to the IPL title, the criteria could be too different when it comes to picking a captain.

Rishabh Pant, Shubman Gill, and K L Rahul wouldn't do their Test captaincy chances any harm by winning the IPL, though Bumrah could also be in contention following his showing as captain in the Perth Test in November.

**HOCKEY:** Indian hockey will also be watching its own franchise format tournament, the Hockey India League, for international gains. Although there have been two

short-lived attempts earlier, 2025 encourages us to say that this is an idea whose time has come now.

The Paris Olympics showed that Indian hockey has finally hit consistency. A second successive bronze at the Summer Games means India has the resources and the system to produce quality players. The spine of the team is young, and on the fringe are several 20-somethings with promise.

The HLL will bring foreign coaches, international stars, and new ideas. They would have money and also fame — Indian hockey has never had it so good since its run of gold medals.

**CHESS:** Chess too, is in the same happy space, if not better. If the year gone by was about India dominating the classical format with D Gukesh, 2025 will see "Vishy Anand's children" flexing their blitz and rapid muscles.

Such is India's talent in every format that wherever chess is played, Indians will be among the favourites. R Praggnanandhaa and Arjun Erigaisi will continue to bring India glory. Divya Deshmukh and Vanika Agrawal — both individual gold medalists for India at the Chess Olympiad — also have the talent to be household names in 2025.

**BADMINTON:** Chess threatens to take the place that badminton had in the Indian sporting landscape.

Denied a medal at the highest stage, there wouldn't be another shuttle as driven as Lakshya Sen to make a point at All England. Only a win can cure such disappointments,

and Birmingham is where the Paris score can be righted.

Satwik Chirag too will be keen to take a crack at the All England, though it might not be the ultimate priority. PV Sindhu has slid down the rankings over the past few years, but the only title missing from her collection — and the one that matters — is the All England.

There will be plenty of curiosity over which of the young women's singles brigade steps up this year — there is added spice with Sindhu having declared in Lucknow recently that she has no plans to make life easy for any Indian woman trying to defeat her.

**NEERAJ, VINESH:** In athletics, Neeraj Chopra will return to his gold-medal venue, Tokyo, for the 2025 World Championships in September.

Olympic champion Nadeem has left Neeraj with no choice but to crank up his distance to 90-plus metres, and with a new coach in Jan Zelezny, making up for the lost Olympic gold and crossing that barrier will be his priority.

There's also some suspense about Vinesh Phogat. Having won the Haryana Assembly election, she is likely to hit the gym and head for the mat in the months ahead.

If 2024 was about the big battles, 2025 could be mostly about war veterans retiring and war-room planning.

Sandeep Dwivedi is Sports Editor, The Indian Express

**SERIES CONCLUDED**

**DRISHTI JUDICIARY**  
JUDICIARY FOUNDATION COURSE  
Online (pre-recorded) & Live Online (via App)

Delhi	Prayagraj
English Medium: 10 Jan 6 pm to 10 Mar 6 pm	English Medium: 10 Jan 6 pm to 10 Mar 6 pm
Hindi Medium: 10 Jan 6 pm to 10 Mar 6 pm	Hindi Medium: 10 Jan 6 pm to 10 Mar 6 pm

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## SCIENTISTS DISCOVER 'ULTRABLACK' BRAZILIAN VELVET ANT: STUDY

THE FIRST thing to understand about velvet ants is that they are not, in fact, ants. They're wasps, named in part for their fluffy exteriors. One species of velvet ant, found across the tropical savanna and dry shrub desert in Brazil, is known for its distinct black-and-white markings.

A team of scientists led by Vinicius Lopez, an entomologist at the Federal University of Triângulo Mineiro in Brazil, recently found that the black parts on female velvet ants were actually ultrablack — so matte that they absorbed nearly all visible light. The discovery, published in the *Beilstein Journal of Nanotechnology* last month, makes this species (*Triclistus minutus*) the first known insect among Hymenoptera — the group of animals comprising bees, wasps and ants — to display such a striking shade.

In nature, some blacks are blacker than others. There's your run-of-the-mill black, which is caused by the presence of melanin and displays some sheen, like the feathers on a crow. Then there's ultrablack, sometimes called superblack, a shade achieved by microstructures that swallow nearly all of the light hitting a surface.

animal kingdom. In organisms that have it, it helps them hide from predators, regulate body temperature or even attract mates, as the contrast against brighter colors can be visually enticing.

Lopez's team was trying to uncover different mechanisms for colour production in insects when it realised the velvet ant was unique. Under a dense layer of hair the insects had an intricate arrangement of thin, stacked platelets that resembled the pages of a book. This, the researchers believe, is key to producing the matte, ultrablack colour. In addition to visible light, the ultrablack markings on female velvet ants also absorb nearly all ultraviolet light. That could be a helpful defense mechanism against predators that can see wavelengths not visible to humans, the scientists said.

But it's not clear that velvet ants actually need the ultrablack pigment for camouflage. Prior work has shown that predators tend to avoid velvet ants because of their hard exoskeletons, their painful stings and the screeches they let out when in danger. It's also a mystery why only the females of this species of velvet

**YASHEE**  
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 1

WEST BENGAL Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has announced that Kolkata's iconic Star Theatre would be renamed Binodini Mancha — a decision that has been hailed as the "correction of a 141-year-old wrong" committed against Binodini Dasi, or Nati (performer) Binodini, as she was known.

Who was Binodini, and what was her connection with Star Theatre?

### Promise and betrayal

Born in 1863, Binodini was one of the first women on the stage in Bengal. She found great success as an actor but struggled with the stigma of her birth in a red light district, and of being a public performer.

When the Star Theatre was being built, Gurmukh Roy, a young Marwari businessman, promised to fund it if Binodini agreed to be his mistress. She was persuaded to do so, with the promise that the theatre would be named "B. Theatre" in her honour.

But when the theatre came up in 1883 (at a location different from the present one in Hatibagan, North Kolkata), it was named Star Theatre. Many believe it was this betrayal that prompted Binodini to quit acting at the height of her popularity.

### Caste and patriarchy

After stepping off the stage, Binodini took greater control over her story. In her autobiography, *Amar Katha*, published in 1913, she wrote in detail about the challenges of caste, class, and patriarchy that she faced in her life.



Facade of the theatre now known as Binodini Mancha. Wikimedia Commons

"Even though it has taken more than a century to right this injustice, I am thrilled to learn of the decision to finally name Star Theatre after Binodini. It speaks volumes about the acceptance of a woman's worth and work without judging her on the basis of caste," theatre director Amal Allana, who directed the play *Nati Binodini* in 2006, told *The Indian Express*.

### She rode a new wave

Binodini was born into a poor family in a neighbourhood where sex workers lived. They took in a towfiq. Ganga Bai, as a lodger, who taught the child Binodini to sing, and introduced her to theatre.

This was a time when the stage was coming alive in Calcutta (Kolkata), with professional productions that were inspired by European-style plays. While the female parts had been traditionally played by men, theatre owners and directors were now

willing to cast women as well. But since women from respectable Bengali families would not perform in public, most female artists were recruited from among towfiqs.

Binodini first went on stage when she was 12 and her talent was quickly recognised. She was promoted by Girish Ghosh, one of the best writers and managers of the theatre scene in Bengal, and she soon became a successful actor.

But fame did not change some things. "Binodini's life saw heady highs and lows. While she was hailed for her talent, the class and caste-ridden society also castigated the 'polluted' woman donning the garb of either devi or Brahmin royalty on stage," Allana said.

### The 'public woman'

In her paper "Public Women: Early Actresses of the Bengali Stage: Role and Reality" (*India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 17), Rimli Bhattacharya noted the unique position that theatre actresses occupied in late 19th century Calcutta society — "public women" who were distinct from both "respectable women" who were confined to their homes, and the wall-to-wall sex workers whom men visited in secret.

Even the men who wanted to take these actresses as mistresses — thus offering status and a shot at some version of *ghar sansar* — often insisted on their quitting theatre as a precondition.

Star Theatre depended on Binodini's "star power" to attract both the initial investment and eventual revenues, but it could not be named after her. She learnt only after the formal registration that the new theatre

house was to be called the Star Theatre. It was felt that naming it after her would run counter to public opinion and might even invite a boycott," Bhattacharya wrote.

In 1884, Ramakrishna Paramahansa came to watch a play, and praised her performance. "If Binodini is well known enough to be cited as one of Calcutta's proud possessions, it is largely because she is seen to have redeemed/raised herself by virtue of her encounter with Sri Ramakrishna," Bhattacharya wrote.

### Her book, a record

In the preface to her autobiography, Binodini said she had chosen to put pen to paper as there was no one she could confide in, no kin or companion to share her pain with, because "the world sees me as a sinner — a fallen woman." *Amar Katha* also offers a historical record of a world that existed in the shadows, which women like Binodini inhabited.

"That Binodini was a fantastic actor is known from newspaper reviews of her plays and from what others have said about her in books and journals. But her autobiography is valuable also for what she says about others. It is a great documentation of the environment the earliest women actors on stage in Bengal encountered," Deepo Majumder, a theatre practitioner and assistant professor at Kandi Raj College in Murshidabad, said.

Allana said: "*Amar Katha* is not only a riveting account of a woman artist's long journey towards acceptance by *bhadralok* society, but also a document of how a traditional people flatteringly transit towards a new colonial world, coming to terms with its pressures."





## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## Gurugram, London Bridge

The current era of mass aspirations that defines Indian life is different from what has gone before



SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

## SORRY ISN'T ENOUGH

Manipur CM's admission of regret for violence on his watch is overdue and welcome. But he is part of the problem

THIS ENTIRE YEAR has been very unfortunate. I feel regret and I want to say sorry to the people of the state for what's happening till today since last May 3." On the eve of 2025, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh's admission of responsibility for the unabated violence on his watch in the state at a press conference in Imphal is that rare — and long overdue — thing in politics and government: An effort at honesty, a stab at introspection and accountability. Unfortunately, it has come far too late. It is prompted, possibly, by political exigency and the growing crescendo of protests not just from the strife-torn people but his own legislators and coalition partners. Allies of the NDA, from the Mizo National Front to the National People's Party, have called for a change of guard in Manipur because of the government's persistent failure in curbing the violence that has held the state hostage since May 2023. Singh's proximity to armed insurgency groups such as the Aizawl Tenggol, too, has drawn increasing scrutiny, with a section of his MLAs joining the chorus against him.

Notably, Singh's admission coincides with another rare and overdue acknowledgement of the turmoil in Manipur, this time from the Centre, that has maintained a studied distance from the crisis, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi not visiting the state even once through this period. In its annual report released on December 30, the Ministry of Home Affairs has attributed the rise in insurgency in the Northeast to the 20-month-long ethnic strife in Manipur: "The State accounted for about 77 per cent of the total violent incidents in NER (North-East Region) in 2023 (Manipur: 187, entire NE: 243)." This story of escalation is a reflection of the many ways in which Manipur has been failed by governments at the Centre and in the state, its ethnic vulnerabilities stoked by a lack of developmental opportunities, partisanship and a tone-deaf insistence on framing it as an insider-outsider issue, to be tamed by force rather than dialogue.

And yet, through the course of his own political rise, first with the Democratic Revolutionary Peoples Party, and then with the Congress, and finally with the BJP since 2016, if there's one thing that Singh benefited from, it was his ability to have an ear to the ground and to listen to people across board. In his earlier terms, Singh, a Meitei, was embraced by both Nagas and Kuki-Zoms. With flagship outreach programmes such as "Go To Hills" aimed at integrating the hill tribes into his developmental vision, he was seen as the people's chief minister who could repair the fragile bonds between communities. The fact that that tie has frayed, and that the Lok Sabha elections saw the BJP lose to the Congress in the state that has been enough of a signal for the CM to course correct. Now, with the trust deficit widening, the work of reparation, long delayed, must urgently be taken forward.

## IN GOOD HEALTH

Banks' bad loans continue to fall. But signs of stress in the unsecured and small loans segment require close monitoring

THE INDIAN BANKING system continues to record improvement across several parameters. As per the RBI's latest Financial Stability Report, bad loans of banks have fallen to a 12-year low of 2.6 per cent in September 2024. This improvement in asset quality is being observed across all sectors. Banks have also reported a healthy increase in their profitability. Their provision coverage ratios are high and their capital position is healthy. The stress tests carried out by the RBI also suggest that even if the macroeconomic environment takes a turn for the worse, banks would remain well capitalised, with only four banks falling short of the minimum capital requirement in one adverse scenario.

There are, however, areas of concern. Particularly troubling are the signs of stress in the unsecured retail loan book with the data showing a steep increase in write-offs in this segment. As per the central bank, this "could be partly masking worsening asset quality in this segment and dilution in underwriting standards." More than half of the new bad loans in the retail segment have, in fact, come from "slippages in the unsecured loan book." Signs of stress are also evident in the micro-finance sector which tends to cater to low income households. The share of stressed loans has increased and "impairment remained high" among borrowers with multiple loans. Equally worrying is that the share of borrowers who have taken loans from four or more lenders has increased, indicating growing indebtedness in this segment. Within consumer credit, the report also finds that of the borrowers with a personal loan of under Rs 50,000, 11 per cent were overdue, while 60 per cent "had availed more than three loans" in the ongoing financial year — further pointing towards growing household leverage and stress in repayment. There are other indications of this as well. As per a report in this paper, gold loan NPA's surged by 30 per cent to Rs 6,696 crore as of June 2024, from Rs 5,149 three months before.

Large borrowers appear to be faring better. Over the last few years, bad loans among the banks' large borrowers have steadily declined — from 4.5 per cent in March 2023 to 2.4 per cent in September 2024. However, loans where the principal or interest payment is overdue between 31 and 90 days rose sequentially in the September quarter. At the end of September 2024, the unsecured external commercial borrowings stood at \$65.48 billion. These areas of possible vulnerabilities and pockets of stress warrant close monitoring.

## MELBOURNE MELTDOWN

Gautam Gambhir ticked off his team. But there is more to this story than a coach cracking the whip after a defeat

INDIA'S HEAD COACH Gautam Gambhir was understandably angered by his team's Melbourne Meltdown and gave the players a mouthful. He warned them of repercussions — if they don't perform, he would not hesitate from taking extreme measures, irrespective of reputation or other indications of promise. Even the calmest are not immune to a flare of temper in stormy times. The legendary Manchester United coach Alex Ferguson once accidentally kicked a boot in the direction of his team's star, David Beckham. Liverpool's ex-manager Gérard Houllier gave a dressing down so severe that he was taken to hospital with a suspected heart attack.

But there is more to the story of a coach cracking the whip after a loss. This Indian team is wading through a classic transitional tumult. The old hands Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma and Ravindra Jadeja are fading; R Ashwin has retired in the middle of the series, Mohammed Shami is injury-riddled, the new wave of Nitish Kumar Reddy, Dhruv Jurel and Harshit Rana is still to settle in. Some are busy harbouring capricious ambitions and others exude a sense of exaggerated self-importance. Managing this team could be the hardest task yet in Gambhir's cricketing career — tougher than forging a successful career in the most competitive era for Indian batsmen.

Gambhir's responsibilities are many. The immediate focus would be on winning the Sydney Test and retaining the BGT. But given that planning behind the scenes will take time to reflect in results, perhaps his successor would reap the benefits of his labour. He has to phase out senior players, be both sympathetic and assertive. He needs to be on the same wavelength and frequency as his support staff, the selectors, the board and his own players. It's a tightrope, but one that he has to balance on. Whether and how he does so will help script a fascinating chapter in the history of Indian cricket as well as in his own record.

MY MOST ENDURING memory of 2024 is likely to be of a villager from Gurugram — a previously impoverished man of the Gujjar caste who is a recent land-sale millionaire — standing under the shadows of London Bridge. In the photo that I have, he is wearing a pair of fashionably ripped jeans, hands folded across his chest in a gesture of confidence that conceals an extraordinary journey from being a village milkman at the bottom of the rural caste hierarchy to global traveler. I have known him over the past 10 years of fieldwork in southern Haryana where, along with clods of earth thrown up by construction machinery, his fortunes have also turned.

As we begin 2025, the photo of a Gurugram villager standing under an iconic tourist spot — just one link in a global chain he intends to complete — is a sign of the new world of being, buying and believing that just over a quarter century of economic and cultural change has produced. It is a world of aspirations significantly made through policy-actions of the recently departed Manmohan Singh and successfully re-defined for its own purposes by the BJP and its alliance partners. And, just as importantly, it is also a chronicle of the making of an Indian type that has no precedence. We had better understand the worldview of the man under the bridge in ripped jeans if we are to come to grips with what the times portend. For, his demeanour is that of someone who has, actually, upended ways of thinking about modern life itself.

My 55-year-old visitor began life as a hand-to-mouth daily farmer, progressing to becoming a middle man for major real-estate companies, who was trusted by villagers to deal with "outsiders" in the sale of their land. His biography forms an integral part of the story of the making of a new Indian type: He is part of a very significant section of the Indian population whose lives make it impossible to think through the binaries of "modern" and "pre-modern". Why should we bother with this seemingly arcane distinction? Because it lies at the heart of the India that has come to life over the past quarter century and defines a range of cultural, social and (especially) political outcomes in the republic.

The crux of the re-enchantment lies — unlike the Weberian understanding of modernity — in what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai correctly identified as 'the capacity to aspire'. Strategies of aspiration now produce world views that are impossible to comprehend through uni-linear ways of understanding the new formations of Indian culture. We do not move from more to less magic. Rather, the new cultures of aspirations — now spread across all strata of society, rather than limited to a privileged minority — have given rise to an imagination that ascribes success to the power of magic and the divine. In a society with such great barriers to economic and social mobility, a magical modernity is not such a strange thing.

We live in an age where the world has not become a "disenchanted" place, to invoke a phrase made famous by the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), through a decline of belief in magic and religion. Rather, as my Gurugram visitor's life-story tells us, modern life has itself become magical and, hence, re-enchanted in ways that Weber may not have predicted. The crux of the re-enchantment lies — unlike the Weberian understanding of modernity — in what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai correctly identified as "the capacity to aspire". Strategies of aspiration now produce world views that are impossible to comprehend through uni-linear ways of understanding the new formations of Indian culture: We do not move from more to less magic. Rather, the new cultures of aspirations — now spread across all strata of society, rather than limited to a privileged minority — have given rise to an imagination that ascribes success to the power of magic and the divine. In a society with such great barriers to economic and social mobility, a magical modernity is not such a strange thing.

"I think to myself," my Gurugram visitor had once noted, "that I was a peasant with such a small landholding that I could not make a living through farming". And that "I had no choice but to earn my livelihood by delivering milk door to door on a bicycle... and it is so's grace that now my relationships are with such significant people in my bi-radar (fraternity) as well as the outside world". The extraordinary conditions of deprivation and discrimination that his community had endured — classified as a "criminal tribe" under colonialism, driven to rocky and un-cultivable lands and stigmatised by "higher" castes — makes its current affluence seem miraculous indeed.

However, the "miracle" owes little to divine intervention and is entirely due to strategies that are this-worldly. The men of my visitor's community have achieved their current level of affluence through learning the tricks of modernity. Land dealings are a very tricky matter, especially when a relatively disadvantaged community must deal with the guiles of large real estate companies and self-serving government machinery. Further, there are

byzantine legal procedures to be negotiated. In many instances, a combination of legal, administrative and corporate chicanery has had debilitating consequences for small-scale landholders who have found themselves in the maelstrom of new land markets. However, those who owned bits and pieces of land — unsuitable for farming but large enough for commercial building or a gated residential enclave — have struck gold.

A community banished to the fringes of rural life is now at the centre of national and global financial processes. God, however, has had little to do with it and learning hardheaded ways of dealing with administrative loopholes, legal minefields and corporate slyness is at the heart of the rise of the global peasant, (to use my visitor's self-description). He — men make greater headway than women — stands with poise against the backdrop of London Bridge, having mastered the ways of the world. But the new Indian type — of which the global peasant is a representative example — embodies a personality that interprets the world through the language of aspirations.

Aspirations constitute the politics of our times and more traditional forms of politics — human rights, anti-caste movements, land rights, etc. — are rarely imagined as part of the lives of those who are thought to be their key beneficiaries. The current era of mass aspirations is quite different from an earlier one that defined Indian life: Traditional nationalism. The latter produced ideas of community life through playing down the notion of individualised aspirations. The current shift to a time of aspirational individualism is, on the other hand, defined by the idea of the cut-piece: Gods come together with land markets, global financial and bureaucratic and statist processes and worldliness is enchanted with the mysteries of the divine hand. Enchantment as a feature of our times is important to understand. It derives from the most fundamental politics of our time, that of aspirations, and the latter itself has multiple political uses. Happy new times!

The writer is British Academy Global Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology SOAS, University of London



RAKESH K SINGH AND SUDIP SURAL

## ENERGY CHURN AHEAD

Higher costs could lead to consolidation in city gas distribution

HIGHER GAS COSTS will lead to faster consolidation in the city gas distribution (CGD) sector. The sector is facing headwinds from a sharp cut in the allocation of gas supplied under the administered price mechanism (APM) for the priority sectors — domestic piped natural gas (D-PNG) and compressed natural gas (CNG). The APM gas allocation for these segments has reduced from 72 per cent in the second quarter of the financial year to 44 per cent effective from November 16. This will compel players to rely on higher-cost alternate gas sources such as high-pressure high temperature (HPHT) gas or imported regasified liquefied natural gas (RLNG), which costs one-and-a-half and two times respectively of the APM gas costs.

The higher share of HPHT and RLNG will likely increase the gas costs of players in the priority segment by around Rs 5.0 per standard cubic metre (scm) or Rs 7 per kg. Considering that D-PNG and CNG segments account for two-thirds of the sector's volumes, this will significantly impact the overall profitability of players. With imported contracted RLNG, new well gas and part of the HPHT gas (subject to a cap) being linked to crude prices, the current benign crude prices of \$70-75 per barrel will only marginally offset the impact of lower APM allocation.

This increase in gas costs has come at a time when CNG is facing tough competition from diesel in the medium and heavy com-

CNG is facing tough competition from diesel in the medium and heavy commercial vehicles and light commercial vehicle segments. With benign crude prices that may pan out in the backdrop of Donald Trump's expected pro-drilling policies in the US, there's a distinct possibility of a price cut in diesel. This may narrow CNG's advantage even further.

mercial vehicles and light commercial vehicle segments. The superior cost competitiveness of CNG vis-a-vis diesel has been steadily declining over the last several quarters. With benign crude prices that may pan out in the backdrop of Donald Trump's expected pro-drilling policies in the US, there's a distinct possibility of a price cut in diesel. This may narrow CNG's advantage even further.

On the three-wheeler front that accounts for one-third of CNG consumption, new registrations for CNG vehicles have already flat-topped. Buses which account for 7 per cent of CNG volumes will experience faster electric adoption given the PM e-Bus seva scheme in several cities. All this is being manifested in a CNG volume growth slowing to 11 per cent in the first half of this and last year.

Given the above factors, CGD companies may be able to pass on the increase in gas costs only partly without impacting volumes significantly. To make up for the shortfall in APM gas, players will eventually replace the immediate procurement with HPHT gas or new well gas. Assuming only half of the gas cost increase is passed on to consumers, earnings (EBITDA) of the CNG segment are expected to reduce. This may wipe off Rs 2,300 crore from the profits of the CGD sector next financial year.

The commercial and industrial segment that accounts for one-third of CGD sector volumes is unlikely to offset this decline in

profitability as it is extremely price sensitive. CNG consumption by this segment had declined by 25 per cent in 2022-23 due to an increase in gas prices driven by higher RLNG prices as competing fuels like propane gained in competitiveness.

As margins tighten, larger CGD players who have already incurred the majority capital expenditure on network and CNG pump infrastructure and with an ability to contract HPHT and RLNG at competitive rates are more likely to endure challenging times. A stronger balance sheet will also definitely help endure this transition. On the other hand, smaller entities which do not have strong parentage, relying on spot gas and facing substantial capital expenditure, will struggle. There are 11 areas which do not have strong parentage and will be prime candidates for being acquired.

Additionally, there are 61 areas across PSUs and entities backed by strong parentage where significant capital expenditure needs to be done and given constrained cash flows, their reliance on debt will increase. The stage is thus ripe for consolidation within the sector. The changing dynamics of the compressed gas distribution sector present both formidable challenges and potential opportunities.

Singh is group head and Sural is senior executive vice president, HDFC Bank

## JANUARY 2, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

## KARNATAKA POLL

KARNATAKA IS LIKELY to go to the polls along with nine northern states and Andhra Pradesh in March but the Centre has not yet decided whether to bring the state under President's Rule or to let Ramakrishna Hegde continue as caretaker chief minister. Hegde tendered his resignation "on moral grounds" following the Janata Party's poor performance in the Lok Sabha elections in the state.

## UPDATE ON CABINET

THE EXPANSION of the Union Cabinet to allocate some of the key economic portfolios

of Industry and Commerce is likely to take place only after the Assembly elections. Some of the chief ministers are expected to be brought to the Centre. It is also explained that the splitting of Energy into three, adding coal to the Steel and Mines ministry, power to Irrigation and petroleum as a separate department, had been done to achieve better coordination.

## MANIPUR VIOLENCE

COUNTING OF VOTES in 35 assembly constituencies of the Senapati district has been suspended following police firing in which one person was killed and another injured.

outside the counting station. Chief Minister Rishang Keishing has requested that the counting be taken up at Imphal where the security arrangements are better. Ballots were torn to pieces at two places following complaints from the counting agents of different candidates.

## COLD NEW YEAR

IT WAS A cold New Year's Day for Delhiites, with the maximum temperature going down to 13 degrees Celsius, the lowest recorded in the capital during the past four years and weathermen warn that the cold wave will continue for a while.





# FIRST GLOBAL COOPERATION TO COMBAT CYBERCRIMES

It is said the first cyberattack was committed in 1834 in France, when two people hacked the telegraph system to steal data. This marked the beginning of the abuse of technologies that are inherently vulnerable to criminal intent within or outside systems. Nothing is absolutely foolproof, and there are many people out to exploit it.

The term "cybercrime" was coined by William Gibson in 1982 and his novel "Neuromancer" popularised it. Cybercrimes have evolved since the onset of the internet, ranging from denial of service attacks, website defacement, cyber-squatting, phishing, cryptomining, online gambling and drug trafficking, espionage, and disruption. The list keeps growing and so are the problems of tackling them. These days one is baffled by the ingenuity of tech-savvy criminals, evident

in identity theft, phishing, malware, cyberstalking, copyright infringement, ransomware, cyber extortion and cyber terrorism, too. Technology is being used as a means to coerce, stalk, harass, blackmail or trick victims into parting with their money or doing the bidding of criminals. Recently, we learnt of a youth killing himself and livestreaming it after prodding and coercion by cyber bullies.

The year 2024 saw an unprecedented surge in attacks on the cyber landscape. Prolific attacks were reported to have taken place in various ways confounding individuals and businesses. Spoofing, whaling, Trojan horse, baiting, compromising third parties, zeroing in on configuration security systems, DNS tunnelling, use of AI, increasing incidence of state-

sponsored attacks, cloud or device vulnerabilities — there had been overwhelming cyberattacks on persons and organisations alike.

It seems even the most advanced and most fortified systems cannot guarantee they are attack-proof. Criminals are developing new strategies faster than companies can update their defences. Hence, cyber insurance is gaining importance as it can help shoulder losses of cybercrimes. The global cyber insurance market was estimated at \$16.66 billion in 2023 and expected to touch \$120.47 billion by 2032. The Indian market is seen to have a potential business of \$3,556.5 million by 2032.

There are no exact figures, yet cybercrimes were estimated to have caused \$7 trillion losses in 2023. The world over, such crimes will cost gov-

ernments, businesses and individuals upwards of \$10.5 trillion losses in 2025. Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) has estimated that Indians lost over Rs 11,000 crore to cyber frauds in the first six months of 2024, with 6,000 complaints filed daily on the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal. In a few days, we will get to hear the total enormity of crimes in the year. As a global cooperation is felt indispensable against bands of cyber marauders, the UN General Assembly has adopted a landmark cybercrime treaty. It is the first international criminal justice treaty negotiated in over 20 years. With multilateralism (a form of cooperation between multiple countries to achieve a common goal) failing as far as climate change, plastic reduction and biodiversity are concerned, besides abject failures to

avert wars in Middle East, Israel's assault on Gaza and Russia's aggression on Ukraine etc., the UNGA approval marks recognition of the benefits of global cooperation. The Convention against Cybercrime will open for signature in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2025. Notably, the treaty binds states/parties to ensure implementation of their obligations under the convention is consistent with international human rights law.

The treaty efforts are laudatory given the blistering pace of cybercrimes; AI and quantum technologies will increase the current risks manifold. Lastly, while pursuing the promise, and harnessing the potential, of technological advances, everyone must be aware of their perils, too. Cyber hygiene has become more imperative than ever.

## MEDLEY



## LETTERS

### AAP desperately doles out freebies

Re: 'Delhi Assembly polls will not be a cakewalk' (Jan. 01). The AAP sensing an imminent defeat in the upcoming elections has been resorting to virtual rain of freebies on the voters. The monthly pension to all women beyond the age of 18 years and salaries to priests, granthis and Muslim clergy that the party did not think of during its ten years rule are being promised. It is also promising mind-boggling medical treatment to senior citizens.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

### AP neglecting health, edn sectors

THE present NDA government in AP is neglecting education and health sectors wherein the private players (Corporates) would exploit and reap the benefit at the cost of the middle class and the poor. The CM is well known for reneging on his own promises and among the many was that of the electricity tariff. Though he had promised in broad daylight that his alliance if voted to power would not enhance power tariff for five years, but within 7 months his government levied \$15,500 or power bill hike on the people of this state. He speaks and we the hapless people have to listen and believe in him!

Govardhana Mynedu, Vijayawada

### Time for all to act responsibly in NJ

REG: 'Time to resolve to usher in a brighter future' (Dec. 31). Let us hope the dawn of 2025 brings change. It is time for introspection by all, especially the Opposition, to put country's interests on the top of agenda that helps make the government more answerable and accountable. The great leap achieved by ISRO in accomplishing docking technology of space modules for India's space is commendable. The country has creditably achieved great milestones in 2024 in terms of EVs, rail connectivity, sports, health care, education and social welfare.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

### January 1 not New Year Day for all

THIS refers to 'Govt holiday today' (Jan. 1). January 1 cannot be considered as New Year Day, because various communities celebrate their own traditional New Year Days based on different calendars. For example 'Ugadi' in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka; 'Gudi Padwa in Maharashtra; 'Baisakhi' in Punjab; 'Puthandu' in Tamil Nadu; 'Vishu' in Kerala etc. Too many public holidays disrupt businesses, leading to potential losses in productivity and revenue, especially for small businesses and daily wage earners. Project deadlines and managing work schedules get affected. Students lose the continuity of learning.

Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

### SpaDeX success to keep ISRO flag high

INDIAN Space Research Organization's (ISRO) successful launch of its ambitious PSLV with two space docking experiment satellites (SpaDeX) from Sriharikota spaceport on Monday marks a significant milestone in India's space journey. SpaDeX aims to demonstrate advanced space docking technology which will be a key capability for future lunar expeditions and the planned Bharatya Antariksh Station. The SpaDeX mission is a strategic step towards several ambitious space objectives by India and will facilitate the much-awaited Gaganyaan mission. The SpaDeX mission's remarkable feat by ISRO scientists is yet another proud moment for us.

K S Rao, Thane

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Transition likely in Janata Dal (S) post-Sankranti

BENGALURU: As Karnataka approaches the post-Sankranti period, the Janata Dal (S) is gearing up for a significant organisational shift. The party is actively mobilising support to elect a new state president and three working presidents, with discussions surrounding the leadership taking centre stage. Emerging reports suggest that Nikhil Kumaraswamy, the current head of the JDS youth wing, is poised to assume the role of state president, marking a notable evolution in his political journey.

The JDS has embarked on a campaign to rejuvenate its organisational structure, especially in light of recent electoral setbacks. In an effort to bolster grassroots support, the party has already completed a membership registration drive. Following a brief hiatus due to the by-elections, the party is planning to reconvene in the second week of January 2025. This will provide a platform for consultations regarding organisational elections and overall party strategies. Nikhil Kumaraswamy's promotion is being seen as a strategic move by the JDS leadership, particularly under the guidance of the party's stalwart H.D. Deve Gowda. The senior leader has expressed confidence in Nikhil's capabilities to strengthen the party's roots and revitalise its image despite the backdrop of recent electoral defeats. Nikhil has been tasked with touring the state to connect with party workers and supporters, reinforcing his role as a youthful leader with a vision for the future. Nikhil's proposed presidency is viewed as a crucial step in re-establishing the JDS's relevance in Karnataka's political landscape. The JDS had faced significant challenges in both the general and by-elections, leading to a re-evaluation of leadership and strategy. Deve Gowda's decision to promote Nikhil is rooted in the belief that the younger generation could connect more effectively with the electorate, particularly among youth and first-time voters.

Read more at  
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

# The rage to gaze in wonderment

## TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

Exploration refers to the act of searching for new territories, resources, and knowledge, often driven by economic, political, and religious motivations. This quest for discovery led to significant encounters between different cultures and civilisations, resulting in both exchange and conflict. Exploration, either in search of places suitable for settlement, out of sheer curiosity or in the thrill of discovering something new or exciting, or in search of knowledge and information which can enrich the quality of life, has always fascinated mankind.

Many great explorers in the history of the world such as Xuanzang, Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus became legends and provided inspiration to thousands of others over centuries.

Among the most absorbing books I ever read is 'Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space' by Carl Sagan. In the most engaging and readable, manner, Sagan describes the unimaginably insignificant place, which planet earth has in the Milky Way Galaxy, or, for that matter, which the Galaxy enjoys, in the Universe. Most of the universe is beyond the ability of the available technology to observe. Out of the remaining, or observable, portion, man-

kind has so far been able to cover but a small fraction. It is the residual agenda that presents a fascinating challenge. Exploration of outer space, therefore, is one of the most exciting and alluring activity that great astrophysicists have engaged in for centuries. Be that as it may, and negligibly small though it may be, Earth still remains largely unexplored by man, be it in the atmosphere above, on the surface or under the seas.

The search for the unknown has also proved a fascinating theme for many wonderful novels, some of which were produced as movies subsequently. One such was the 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea', a science fiction adventure novel by the French writer Jules Verne. It is often considered a classic within both its genres and world literature. In a spellbinding and adventurous underwater voyage, in the submarine 'Nautilus', commanded by the mysterious but brilliant Captain Nemo, the passengers Professor Pierre Aronnax, a French Scientist, his helper Conseil, and an expert harpooner, Ned Land, visit many oceanic regions, some factual and others fictitious, viewing coral formations, sunken vessels from the Battle of Ugo Bay, the Antarctic ice barrier, the transatlantic telegraph cable, and the legendary underwater realm of Atlantis. The novel describes the protagonist's adventures aboard the Nautilus, which was built in secrecy and now roams the seas beyond the reach of land-based governments. In self-imposed exile, Captain Nemo seems to have a dual motivation: a quest for scientific knowledge and a desire to escape terrestrial civilization.

## PART-I

Sheer curiosity or thrill of discovering something new or exciting, or search for knowledge and information which can enrich quality of life has always fascinated mankind. Negligibly small, though it may be, earth still remains largely unexplored, be it in the atmosphere above, on the surface or under the seas. The lure of exploration has proven irresistible. The search for the unknown has also proved a fascinating theme for many wonderful novels



The Polar regions, which continue, largely, to belong to the realm of the unknown, have also drawn novelists to construct exciting stories filled around that environment. 'Ice Station Zebra', for instance, is a 1963 thriller novel by Scottish author Alistair MacLean, about Drift Ice Station Zebra, a British meteorological station built on an ice floe in the Arctic Sea which suffers a catastrophic fire several of its men die, and their shelter and supplies are destroyed. The survivors take refuge in a hut with little food and heat. The American nuclear-powered submarine, USS Dolphin, is dispatched on a rescue mission. It reaches Zebra after a near-impossible trek. Eight of the men on the sta-

tion are found dead, while the 11 others are barely alive. The surviving members of Zebra are brought on board the Dolphin. The sick men are cared for by Dohdohin. And the station is abandoned.

India officially acceded to the Antarctic Treaty System on 1 August 1983. On 12 September 1983, the country became the fifteenth Consultative Member of the Antarctic. The Indian Antarctic Programme is a multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional programme under the control of the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research, Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India. It was initiated in 1981 with the first Indian expedition to Antarctica. The programme

gained global acceptance with India's signing of the Antarctic Treaty and subsequent construction of the Dakshin Gangotri Antarctic research base in 1983, superseded by the Maitri base from 1989. The newest base commissioned in 2012 is Bharati, constructed out of 134 shipping containers. Under the programme, atmospheric, biological, earth, chemical, and medical sciences are studied by India, which has carried out 40 scientific expeditions to the Antarctic.

Another region that is a veritable storehouse of secrets and unimaginable resources is the portion of the planet that is under the oceans and seas. The lure of underwater exploration has proved irresistible for individuals, and institutions, either for the opportunity of sheer excitement it offers, for discovering valuable resources useful to mankind, as an activity in pursuit of facts which can expand the horizons of knowledge or for military or public safety purposes. Scuba diving is a mode of underwater diving whereby divers use breathing equipment that is completely independent of a source of breathing gas supply. Usually employs a system called the buddy system in which divers dive in groups of two or three in order to minimise, if not totally eliminate, chances of accidents.

While on the subject of underwater exploration, it is noteworthy that India has more than made its presence felt in the Arctic region with gratification. The exemplary work being done by the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) and the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT), Chennai,

I remember with great pleasure the rewarding experience I had when I visited NIO at Goa in 2016. I was on a visit to that city of joy and merriment to fulfil a lecture commitment in the National War College, and made a request for a visit to be arranged to that institute. This was also to fulfil a long cherished desire I had had, since my Andhra Pradesh Fisheries Development Corporation days in 1979.

NIO has many commendable accomplishments to its credit. One of the feathers in its cap is the spectacular discoveries made from aboard research vessel, Sagar Nidhi, in terms of capturing detailed images and gathering critical data from hydrothermal vents in an expedition which took place in December 2024. It was the first ever exploration at those specific sites and was jointly undertaken by scientists from NIO and National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR). Despite a long search, mounted for close to four decades, for extraterrestrial intelligence, mounted by Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI), no concrete evidence of life in outer space has so far been found.

## TAIL-PIECE

Before I leave you to await the second part of this article, here is a thought for those who believe that ours is a great planet. We all know how movies and novels are rated in terms of number of stars. It has been said that no aliens have ever visited earth because it only has one star!

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

# Childhood ends amid blood and gore

## MOST OF CHILDREN ARE ABDUCTED AND FORCIBLY RECRUITED

2024 marked the thirty-fifth anniversary of a UN commitment to protect children from being recruited as soldiers. However, armed groups have increased the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was hailed as a historic agreement when it was adopted by world leaders in 1989, and it has inspired governments to pass laws protecting children from violence and exploitation. Around a decade later, a protocol prohibiting the recruitment and use as soldiers of all children under 18 years of age was adopted. To date, it has been ratified by 173 countries.

Instead of ending the practice, armed groups have increased recruitment and use of children for armed conflict purposes, from Colombia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to the Lake Chad basin, Mozambique, the Sahel, Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Haiti.

Most of the impacted children were abducted and forcibly recruited. Most of these children are girls who have suffered rape and sex-

ual violence, and have been bought, sold and trafficked. On Tuesday, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, declared that the increase in the use of military force by governments and regimes has wreaked havoc on children, in situations such as Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Golan Heights; Lebanon; Myanmar and Ukraine.

"The cries of these children echo across conflict zones, but far too often, the world remains silent," said the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba.

"Their pain is a stain on our collective conscience. We must do better—because every moment we delay, another child becomes just another number in the long list of conflict-related casualties and violations in the children and armed conflict reports."

Gamba called for the granting of safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to children, the implementation of international laws,



the elimination of wide impact explosives in populated areas, the prohibition of the military use of schools, and the prohibition and elimination of anti-personnel landmines.

"As we move into 2025, let us choose compassion over indifference and peace over war," added the senior UN official. "Together, we can rewrite the stories of these children—not with fear and loss, but with healing and hope."

Meanwhile, the number of children being recruited into armed groups in Haiti has increased by 70 per cent over the past year, according to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). The unprecedented spike also reveals the alarming deterioration of

child protection amid escalating violence in the Caribbean nation. According to the latest estimates, children now comprise up to half of all armed group members, with recruitment driven by widespread poverty, lack of education and collapse of essential services.

The situation in the country's capital, Port-au-Prince, is significantly alarming, with 1.2 million children living under constant threat of armed violence. An estimated 25 per cent of all 703,000 internally displaced persons are children, living under dire conditions and exposed to multiple threats.

The deteriorating security situation has led to a sharp rise in violence against Hai-

ti's most vulnerable populations. Sexual violence and rape have become rampant, with reports from the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict indicating a tenfold increase in children exposed to sexual violence this year alone.

This year, UNICEF provided support services, including psychological support and community sensitization to over 25,000 people affected by sexual and gender-based violence in 2024.

Seventy-five years since the ratification of the Geneva Conventions, a former child soldier-turned foreign minister of Sierra Leone has urged greater international support for the key accords, highlighting their importance in rehabilitating him and tens of thousands of his fellow compatriots following the country's bitter civil war.

Here a moving plea by a child hero who said: "I stand here today as a former child soldier, forcibly recruited during the civil conflict that decimated over 50,000 of my compa-



## Economics of cash transfers

Increasing popularity needs to be debated

The ruling Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP's) announcement to launch the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojana and other schemes in Delhi has run into problems, with the Delhi government recently issuing public notice against registration for the schemes. While a government department's public notice against the promise of the ruling party reflects the unique administrative structure of Delhi, which is a separate debate, the motivation for announcing a scheme like the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojana is not very difficult to understand and will need a broader debate in 2025. According to the scheme, eligible women in Delhi will get ₹1,000 per month, which would be increased to ₹2,100 if AAP returned to power after the Assembly elections, likely to be in February. Although multiple factors affect election outcomes, similar cash-transfer schemes are believed to have helped incumbents return to power, most recently in Maharashtra and Jharkhand.

According to a report in this newspaper, at least 12 other state governments have already implemented some form of such a scheme. Given their popularity, it is worth pondering if they tilt the balance in favour of the incumbent at the cost of the taxpayer, and whether it disturbs the level playing field. The economic aspect is equally serious if not more. In a developing country like India, governments at both Union and state levels are bound by hard Budget constraints. There are always competing development demands on the Budget. The Indian state, for instance, needs to invest a lot more in both physical and social infrastructure not only to increase the productive capacity of the country, but also to improve the ease of living. Given the constraints, spending on cash transfers would leave so much less to spend on developmental needs.

Cash transfer needs more attention because, unlike other subsidies or support programmes — subsidised power, for example — this can be increased substantially over time perhaps owing to competitive electoral compulsions. AAP in Delhi, for example, has promised to more than double the cash assistance after the elections. Further, cash-transfer schemes are not limited to states. The Union government also has schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN). A parliamentary panel recently suggested doubling the annual assistance under the scheme from ₹6,000 per year. If implemented, it would require a doubling of allocation from the current ₹60,000 crore. However, it is hard to argue that even doubling the assistance would alleviate the stress in the farm sector. Nonetheless, as evidence suggests, cash transfers are becoming fairly popular and allocation to such schemes can be expected to increase over time. It is thus important to keep track of the expenditure.

However, as of now, it is not clear how much of general government expenditure goes into such cash transfers and what impact, if any, it has had on subsidy outlays. The Reserve Bank of India in its latest study of state finances has noted that state governments should contain such outgo because it could affect productive expenditure. However, for a meaningful debate on state support to vulnerable sections of society, it is important to gauge how much of general government expenditure goes to subsidies and cash transfers. As things stand, one family may be getting cash transfers under different Union and state schemes. A robust data analysis will allow both the Union and state governments to rationalise expenditure on subsidies and cash transfers with improved targeting and outcomes. As Union and state governments will be presenting their Budgets in the coming months, the issue will need greater public attention.

## A Quad future

China's assertiveness ensures its relevance

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, better known as Quad, evolved from a perceived need to preserve "a free open and inclusive Pacific" in response to China's territorial assertiveness in the region. It speaks much for its utility that foreign ministers of the four member-nations — the United States (US), India, Australia, and Japan — felt the need to reaffirm the grouping's steadfast commitment to its aims on December 31, 2024, marking the 20th anniversary of "Quad cooperation". This term refers to the informal initiative by the four countries to come together and extend assistance to countries affected by the 2004 Tsunami. The initiative and nature of this cooperation prompted a proposal from then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and the formal inauguration of the Quad took place three years later in 2007. Although the Quad had its roots in benign cooperation over humanitarian aid, its key focus has since shifted to shared maritime security. To this end, the annual Malabar joint naval exercises, which have been conducted between the US and India along the Malabar Coast since 1992, were expanded with the participation of Japan in 2007 and Australia in 2020.

Although the Quad is increasingly being positioned as a broad-based alliance that extends beyond maritime security to promoting democratic values, climate change, and health, its primary principle remains countering the rise of China in a region through which trillions of dollars' worth of US trade passes. No surprise, then, that Beijing refers to the Quad as the "Asian Tat" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The primacy of the China factor in the Quad's raison d'être was clear when Australia, under Kevin Rudd's premiership, withdrew from the grouping in 2008 following diplomatic protests from China, but rejoined in 2020. Significantly, it was under Donald Trump's presidency (2017-21) that the Quad regained its impetus and President Joe Biden has been active in taking the initiative forward. The prostrate impulse for the US' enthusiasm for the grouping lay in the aggressive expansion of Chinese influence via the Belt and Road Initiative. In the meeting in September last year, the last before Mr Biden departs office, the remit of the Quad was expanded to inter-parliamentary exchanges, cooperation in commerce and industry, and exploration of mutual investment opportunities.

For all the diplomatic attention accorded to the Quad, there have been concerns on its impact on the most consequential grouping in the Indo-Pacific, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or Asean. The exclusivity nature of the Quad has long been criticised as marginalising Asean, China's near neighbour with close security and trade ties. It is significant, therefore, that the foreign ministers' pledge mentioned the centrality of Asean in its concerns. For India, the Quad remains an essential balancing act. In 2024, tensions with the US over an alleged Indian government involvement in the plot to assassinate Sikh separatists on US soil meant that although New Delhi held the rotational chair for last year's gathering, the summit was finally held in the US. India is expected to host the summit sometime in the second half of this year. India, however, is also a participant in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where a military contingent has participated in joint counter-terrorism exercises. The rapid expansion of the original Brics grouping, with the addition of five new members and another nine countries as partner states, is positioning India, along with China, as a voice of the Global South. This balancing act will be tested under a second Trump presidency.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

## India 2025: Navigating an uncertain world

Managing the Trump trade and migration shock demands immediate focus

India starts 2025 on a sombre note with the passing of Dr Manmohan Singh, whose bold first-generation reforms in 1991 set the country on the path to faster growth. The economy is also slowing, with Q2 FY25 growth dropping to 5.4 per cent. Over the past three years, it performed well above expectations, growing at 8.7 per cent in FY22, 7.2 per cent in FY23, and 8.2 per cent in FY24, driven by public capital expenditure, substantial investments in global capability centres (GCCs), and surging service exports.

Government experts and analysts think the dip in last quarter's growth is temporary. That will be known soon but, nevertheless, with no widespread revival in domestic private investment and GCC investment having peaked, India's growth will decline, unless it undertakes much delayed second-generation reforms.

What is also worrisome are the rising global uncertainties. In its latest World Economic Outlook update, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects baseline annual global growth at a much lower 3.1 per cent for 2024-2029, compared to 3.7 per cent in the 20-year period from 2000-2019, which included the Global Financial Crisis, and warns it is subject to huge downside risks.

It highlights four risks: Conflict escalation; tariff and trade policy uncertainty; lower migration; and tightening global financial conditions, which combined could be lower by 1.5 percentage points. The first two risks, conflicts and trade policy, could each reduce global growth by 0.5 percentage points, while the last two, lower migration and financial tightening, could each lower growth by 0.25 percentage points. While the first risk, conflict escalation may not materialise, the second, tariffs, and the third, lower migration, are certainties and could collectively reduce global growth by 1 percentage point. With rising trade and fiscal uncertainty, the US Fed has signalled that it will slow down interest rate declines, thereby already tightening financial conditions.

If a China-US trade war does materialise, some experts believe India could attract more foreign direct investment under a China+1 strategy. However, India

has not seen significant investment relocating from China so far, except for iPhones. Despite production-linked incentive (PLI) subsidies, India's red tape, labour and land laws, and its approach to bilateral investment treaties make it challenging to attract investment. Additionally, India's dependence on Chinese intermediaries for iPhones and pharmaceuticals could hinder its position in a US-China trade war.

Some experts suggest India should join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), but with a huge trade deficit with China even with tariffs on Chinese imports, joining RCEP would likely exacerbate these deficits in the near term. And China has also applied for CPTPP membership. A trade agreement with the UK remains pending, while negotiations with the much larger EU market are even more complex. India's proposed Climate Border Adjustment Mechanism.

India will undoubtedly be in Donald Trump's tariff crosshairs. He has labelled India the "tariff king" and threatened reciprocal tariffs. Instead of engaging in a tariff slugfest, as during Mr Trump's previous term, a smarter approach would be to proactively negotiate a trade and investment deal with the US, India's largest export market. The goal should be to reduce the bilateral trade deficit while expanding overall US-India trade, which is projected to reach \$500-\$600 billion by 2030. This could be achieved by opening Indian markets to selected US imports, such as petroleum, oil products, LNG, nuclear and energy equipment, and defence.

On migration, Mr Trump appears to favour increased legal migration through H-1B visas and Green Cards. However, with nearly 800,000 undocumented Indians in the US, a mass deportation drive, if unleashed in full force, will affect India significantly.

Slowing growth is not the only concern. Despite a low current account deficit, the rupee is coming under pressure as funds exit India, particularly with the Fed expected to slow down interest rate cuts in



IF TRUTH BE TOLD

AJAY CHHIBBER

## Viksit Bharat: Time for new beginnings

The year 2025 has begun with a renewed promise for Viksit Bharat, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi telling the people of India that the government would work even harder to achieve the objective of a \$30 trillion economy by 2047. However, transforming India into a developed nation by the 100th year of Independence would mean many bright spots for the country along the way, well before the target year — which is still 22 years away.

Among other sectors, the digital economy, which is growing at a fast clip, should play a critical role in the Viksit Bharat journey. Estimated at around \$175 billion in 2023, India's digital economy could grow to \$1 trillion in three years, projections suggest. According to published data, the digital economy, which accounted for 4.5 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014, is expected to account for 20 per cent of GDP by 2026. With the digital economy leaping forward, current realities — such as the popularity of UPI transactions, the quick commerce wave, the rise in unicorns, innovations using 5G and 6G technologies, and advancements in artificial intelligence — could grow exponentially. For all this to happen, however, the core communication network and mobile subscriber numbers in rural areas have to strengthen significantly.

The digital divide between urban and rural parts of India in the telecom universe has narrowed over the years, but there's a long way to go. As reported in this newspaper, NITI Aayog Chief Executive Officer

BVR Subrahmanyam recently said that an alternative perspective on India's ambitions to grow tenfold and become a \$30 trillion economy by 2047 is that 90 per cent of the country is yet to be built. Similarly, about half of rural India still does not have access to any telecom service for a variety of reasons, leaving that much room for growth. It's this growth that will eventually drive not just the digital economy, but also the Viksit Bharat dreams.

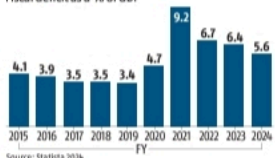
The latest figures from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) show rural telephony subscriber numbers moving closer to those in urban India. While urban subscribers stood at 660.42 million as of October 2024, rural numbers were at 527.79 million. In wireless, the gap is even lower — urban at 625.56 million and rural at 524.86 million. But telephony, which describes the number of telephone connections per 100 persons in a given area, reveals the real picture of the urban-rural divide. Urban telephony is pegged at 131.31, while rural is at 58.39.

Going back by about a decade, in August 2014, urban telephony was higher than it is now at 147.54, compared to a considerably lower rural telephony of 44.67. In absolute terms, the divide between urban and rural was reflected in these numbers — urban telephony subscribers at 566.60 million and rural at 385.25 million, while urban wireless was at 544.69 million and rural wireless at 379.63 million.

The telephony in the intervening years has moved something like this. In October 2016, rural telephony was recorded at 160.50, while rural was

## FISCAL BALANCE

Fiscal deficit as a % of GDP



Source: Statista 2024

2025. The rupee is depreciating in a familiar step function to around 86 per dollar, which will improve competitiveness but also increase prices and put unbridled borrowing at risk.

Fiscal policy faces tough choices, with public debt at 83 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and the FY25 fiscal deficit projected at 4.9 per cent of GDP for the Union government. A straight-line glide path for fiscal consolidation should reduce the FY26 fiscal deficit to 4.2 per cent of GDP, still higher than any year since the National Democratic Alliance came to power in 2014 (see figure).

The mid-year review, however, only promises it will be less than 4.5 per cent of GDP. The key to faster fiscal consolidation, while maintaining public capital expenditure, is aggressive privatisation, which has been inexplicably slow. State-level finances also require consolidation and quality improvement, as noted by the Reserve Bank of India.

The puzzle remains how to boost private investment. In the beginning of 2024, the excuse was election uncertainty, but now it can only be attributed to weak demand due to a K-shaped recovery. Capacity utilisation remains around 75 per cent, and surging imports make new investments less worthwhile.

India needs a more inclusive growth model and what economists call second-generation reforms. Encouraging greater investment in labour-intensive manufacturing by collaborating with state governments to ease labour and land acquisition laws and reduce red tape is both necessary and achievable. India requires "cooperative federalism" for initiatives like goods and services tax, but "competitive federalism" for areas such as labour and land reforms and cutting red tape, where progressive states can lead the way. Tourism, capable of creating millions of jobs and attracting investment, needs a significant push. With the elections behind us, the upcoming Budget presents an opportunity to move boldly in these directions.

The RBI has revised its FY25 growth forecast to 6.7 per cent and the IMF projects India's 2025 growth at 6.7 per cent. Even with such impressive growth in the last three fiscal years, averaging over 8 per cent, India's GDP remains below the level it would have reached if the pandemic had not occurred. A reversion to average 6-6.5 per cent growth with global conditions worsening and a looming Trump trade and migration shock is not inevitable but will require immediate focus. And if India aims to return to more growth per capita, even at 6.7 per cent GDP growth, much-delayed second-generation reforms are essential. Will India grasp this nettle in 2025 and stay on the path to a Viksit Bharat, initiated by Manmohan Singh's bold liberalisation in 1991?

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NOT FOR PROFIT

NIVEDITA MOOKERJI

August 2014, urban telephony was higher than it is now at 147.54, compared to a considerably lower rural telephony of 44.67. In absolute terms, the divide between urban and rural was reflected in these numbers — urban telephony subscribers at 566.60 million and rural at 385.25 million, while urban wireless was at 544.69 million and rural wireless at 379.63 million. The telephony in the intervening years has moved something like this. In October 2016, rural telephony was recorded at 160.50, while rural was

at 52.43. The following year, in 2017, around the same time, both urban and rural telephony moved up to 172.98 and 57.73, respectively. Reliance Jio launched its service in December 2015, and the low tariffs disrupted the market, leading to an upward trend in telephony, including in rural areas.

By June 2024, a few months before Covid-19 hit the world, telephony had begun to taper down. Around this time, the deep discounts in telecom tariffs were getting rationalised. Urban telephony at this point was 160.78, against 56.99 in rural areas. Following the lockdown in India, there was a noticeable decline in urban subscribers, but rural areas were such a small part of the total that rural telephony had dropped to 137.45 (down from 160.78 the previous year), while rural telephony had risen to 58.96 (up from 56.99 the previous year).

As for the urban-rural divide in internet connectivity, total subscribers increased from 251.59 million in March 2014 to 954.40 million in March 2024, according to a government statement last year. The statement said that, as of April 2024, 95.15 per cent of villages had access to the internet, with 3G/4G mobile connectivity. This would likely have been shared access, rather than individual subscription, based on the numbers given here.

Even with several flagship schemes of the government such as Digital India and Startup India, policymakers should understand the needs of both the industry and the end users to make a real difference on the ground. For the Viksit Bharat goal to be realised, rural telephony needs to increase along with other infrastructure and socio-economic measures. For this to happen, many silos will need to be broken — whether it's for satellite telecom to take off, the unicorn universe to flourish, or quick commerce to expand.

As someone who lost his faith at a very young age and has a deeply religious mother, Mr Kapila's quest to explore his faith shows an alternative in the present socio-political milieu that is not dependent on hating the "other" but is focused on rediscovering himself and understanding the diverse and lasting meaning of one's existence, creating an absorbing piece of prose along the way.

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## Bends in the Ganges



### BOOK REVIEW

CHITTAJIT MITRA

In the course of history, religion has led to tectonic shifts in not just human behaviour through the introduction of rituals and customs but also influenced the general cultural and socio-political landscape. Siddhartha Kapila in his debut book *Tripping Down the Ganges: A Soul's Exploration of Faith* takes us through his *yatra* across several prominent Hindu sacred sites along the holy river Ganga and tries to portray an experience rather than a mere travelogue or memoir.

carried by themselves.

The author first covers three of the four sacred sites from the Char Dham *Yatra* — Kedarnath, Badrinath and Gangotri — situated in the Garhwal Himalayas in the initial chapters. Then following the stream, he covers Rishikesh, Allahabad, Varanasi and finally Ganga Sagar in West Bengal, the site where, as the name suggests, the river meets the ocean. But at the centre of these journeys are the people he meets and what led them to be where they were — be records, for instance, the subtle bickering between the two pandits regarding their knowledge of Dhari Devi, the protector of the Char Dham, and subtle mysticism that surrounds the ascetic Naga Babas. It is through these encounters that we understand how the changing times have influenced devotees to either change or remain the same when it comes to their faith. As the experiences unfold, the reader also travels to Varanasi where the residents of the city expressed their contrasting views on the

demonition spree for the Kashi Vishwanath corridor that was built subsequently. But the sentiment that stands out is one of criticism for turning an ancient city of faith into a marketplace.

Though the book is principally focused on faith and its human experience, it also touches on certain realities that cannot be ignored. The author doesn't shy away from discussing the controversy surrounding the Gyanvati Mosque of Varanasi and offers an objective historical context to it that underlines the many complexities of the issue. He reminds readers that despite its deep roots in Hinduism, the city has remained essentially syncretic in nature. This, after all, is a city where the Sankat Mochan Temple hosted a

performance by Pakistani ghazal singer Ustad Ghulam Ali and where Ustad Bismillah Khan's uncle the late Ali Baksh "Vilayat" was the shahel player in the Kashi Vishwanath Temple.

Unfortunately, in today's socio-political environment, such syncretism would be hard to achieve, as loss that the country endures and will take time to heal. For me, reading this book was a personal journey too. As someone who grew up in Allahabad (now renamed Prayagraj), a historic city that also carries immense religious significance and is the meeting point of the Yamuna, Ganga and the invisible Sarawati, making it the *Sangam*, reading the author's experiences made me revisit my own memories. Especially interesting was the fact that the author underlines the changes he

saw between his visits in the 90s and those he undertook more than two decades later, showing simultaneously how some things remained the same.

These musings make this book a living tale of history and the present. Another noteworthy aspect of the book is the author's relationship with his mother and the role it played in helping him develop a keen but reasoned mind, which prompted him to become a seeker of knowledge rather than an all-knowing devotee. This, too, resonated with me, as someone who lost his faith at a very young age and has a deeply religious mother. Mr Kapila's quest to explore his faith shows an alternative in the present socio-political milieu that is not dependent on hating the "other" but is focused on rediscovering himself and understanding the diverse and lasting meaning of one's existence, creating an absorbing piece of prose along the way.



# THE ASIAN AGE

2 JANUARY 2025

Subhani

## Mere apology won't do, Manipur CM must quit

The open apology Manipur chief minister N. Biren Singh has tendered over the violence in the state that has claimed over 250 lives and rendered thousands homeless in the last one-and-a-half years is a welcome gesture, though it took a long time coming. "I really feel regret and would like to apologise to all natives," Mr Singh said about the mayhem which started on May 3, 2023, and has now grown into a major law and order situation within the state with ramifications for the entire Northeast, and even across the border.

It is perfectly legitimate for the chief minister to seek the people's forgiveness for what happened and call for making "a new beginning for a peaceful and prosperous Manipur". The CM's suggestion indeed offers a way forward for a state which, according to his own account, has "34-35 recognised tribes". It is only if the people of various ethnicities and tribal backgrounds are willing to forget and forgive that they can move ahead and put this behind.

However, it cannot be a blind exercise. The state which runs on the constitutional principle of rule of law witnessed armed marauders going about villages and towns, killing, raping and looting people and setting fire to homes, educational institutions and places of worship. There was organised theft of arms and weapons stored in police stations, a very serious crime of which has returned to the authorities despite appeals from people including the Union home minister. They are still being used to perpetrate violence across the state.

The state has seen very little progress on the law and order front compared with what was prevailing in August 2023 when the Supreme Court of India called out the total failure of the law enforcement machinery in the state. Worse, the state machinery has been accused of siding with one section of the population so much that rival gangs have formed their own protection committees armed with weapons. And from the capital, the skirmishes have spread out to border areas now. Peace has become so fragile in the state that even the homes and convoys of the chief minister and his kin are at risk. Even members of the majority community took out protests in the state capital seeking an end to the mayhem.

Mr Singh and his mentors in the South Block must recognise the fact that he had presided over one of the most inefficient government machineries in the history of Independent India. The events that followed, step by step, an untenable judicial decision have created a schism that will take generations to bridge. The damage cannot be undone by just an apology statement. The process of reconciliation must start with an earnest attempt to deliver justice to the wronged and it must start with the departure of the chief minister whose abject failure to perform his duties precipitated the whole mess. Our democracy has enough institutions, agencies and precedents to go deep into the issues, come up with solutions and restore peace. But justice is the prerequisite for closure. Peace, like war, is also an ongoing process, and needs more than lip service by the culpable.

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## Team India must turn new leaf

There can be no better time to turn a new leaf than at the start of a new year. Team India, floundering after a great start in winning the opening Test in Perth against the odds, needs to take several hard decisions if it is to justify its standing in world cricket.

Two of its most senior players have been letting the team down in their inability to deliver when the going gets tough. One of them being Rohit Sharma the captain, the team faces the dilemma of judging him on form and not on reputation when the deciding Sydney Test is to be played from January 3.

The underperforming Virat Kohli scored a century in India's win in Perth but since then has been a sitting duck whenever lured to edge in playing balls outside the off stump, perching five times in "bushy" expeditions. It is only a sentimental attachment to reputation and experience that might see both batters get another chance to play.

As professional sportsmen, they cannot expect not to be judged on contribution in the present to the team. Both were involved in India's T20 World Cup triumph in 2024, which was the lone bright spot in an otherwise underwhelming year for Team India.

Time and tide wait for no cricketer and such good players may be just past their sell-by date. While their continuing in white ball cricket would seem logical given their better performances in forms of cricket that make lesser demands on batter reflexes, Team India must build for the future without the two players in the Test team.

Team India may need to win the Sydney Test, their last engagement in the current WTCC cycle, and wish for favourable results in the Australia-Sri Lanka series to make it to the final.

There are youngsters performing in tough conditions in Australia where Jasprit Bumrah has achieved amazing results while becoming the first bowler in Test cricket to get 200 wickets at an average cost under 20 runs per wicket and that list includes fast bowling greats of all Test-playing nations.

Bumrah has shown outstanding ability to lead the Test team whenever given the opportunity, as evidenced in Perth when Rohit Sharma was on paternity leave. The Test reins should be handed over to Bumrah immediately if Team India is indeed to turn a new leaf.

## THE ASIAN AGE

RAJESH MEHTA

Editor

R. SETHI

Deputy Editor

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Maleeha Lodhi

In 2025, economy, rising tensions, tech holdups to create a very volatile world

Nevertheless, his threat of imposing higher tariffs on China as well as other countries with a

trade surplus with the US, has prompted many experts to warn that a more intense global trade war will be among 2025's top risks. The London-based risk consultancy firm, Control Risks, predicts that the coming year will establish "national security as the guiding principle of international trade and investment".

How far Washington will go in trade protectionism advocated by Trump will be consequential for Sino-US relations, as well as for the global economy. Major trading partners especially China, are, however, already working on how to Trump-proof their strategies. The Economist, in its annual publication, The World Ahead in 2025, notes that Chinese firms are already expanding abroad to get around trade barriers as well as to tap new markets in the Global South. An assessment by BlackRock sees acceleration in technology decoupling between the US and China as a high risk.

2025 will also determine how wars in Ukraine and the Middle East will play out. Trump's statements on Ukraine suggesting a radical shift in policy seem to be making European governments nervous. Often claiming he can end the war "in a day", Trump is expected to push Ukraine into negotiations with Russia. Although he has not offered any concrete plan to end the conflict, Trump may not be averse to a negotiated outcome that advantages Moscow, by which Ukraine has to cede territory.

Trump has also repeatedly said he wants to end

the war in the Middle East and ensure a ceasefire in Gaza. While he has avoided specifics, this will almost certainly be on Israel's terms. He has said the US should stay out of Syria, but it is hard to see how it can do that given the complex regional ramifications of regime change there.

Democracy will continue to be under challenge across the world. The trends expected to carry over from previous years are not encouraging: continuing political polarisation in many countries, with politics becoming increasingly fractured and volatile. The erosion or even disappearance of the middle ground and weakening of the political centre seem to have become a worldwide phenomenon. This is closely associated with the rise of right-wing populism, which is continuing to sweep across much of Europe and is evident elsewhere too.

Democracy has declined in almost all regions of the world. This global trend of democratic erosion, recorded by many international organisations, is expected to persist, with increasing "autocratisation" and backsliding in democratic rights and freedoms. Global think tanks that evaluate the health of democracy in the world are all quite pessimistic about the future. Political systems in general are seen not to be delivering at a time of "heightened public expectations" and "increased social media". Some global risk intelligence companies see the risks of civil unrest running high in most regions of the world.

I FIND NOTHING NEW, FATHER...  
SAME PLIGHT, DHARNAS, BANDHS.  
ROADS, TENTS...



## B'desh, Myanmar power shifts may hit N-E India



Wasbir Hussain

Will Dhaka under Md Yunus allow Pakistan's ISI and other non-state actors owing allegiance to Pakistan to work actively along the 1,879-km-long border that Bangladesh shares with four states in India's Northeast?

refugees, the fear of a large Rohingya Muslim influx is also on the radar of the Indian authorities. There has been an additional 60,000 Rohingya refugee influx into Bangladesh, which is already sheltering 12 million Rohingyas from previous rounds of influx.

New Delhi has responded by announcing the fencing of the 1,661-km Myanmar border and withdrawing the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with Myanmar that allows people along the border to travel up to 16 km into each other's territory. The decision to withdraw the FMR has been strongly opposed by the Meitei groups who fear that armed Kuki-Zo rebels could come into Indian territory and create trouble in Manipur under the guise of tourists or border people visiting their kinfolk.

There are others, though, who see the rebel takeover of states in Myanmar like Rakhine as being advantageous to India. This section feels that India's mega project in Myanmar, the \$2,500-crore Kaladan Multimodal Transport Transit Project located in Rakhine state is not moving at the speed it should have had because of delays by the military junta. India has already spent around \$1,000 crores in the watersheds part by building the Kaladan Seaway in Rakhine state, in a bid to gain access through Mizoram, bypassing Bangladesh. India has also spent another \$400 crores in building the 109-km road link to Sittwe from

Mizoram. But the road with in Myanmar to reach Sittwe has not seen much progress. Now that Rakhine state is in control of the Arakan Army, there is a view that India, which has always maintained good working relations with the military regime in Naypyitaw, must open channels of communication with the Arakan Army and other resistance forces and increase its influence in the region. China, too, is treading cautiously as Beijing has projects worth \$12 billion going on in Myanmar and would, therefore, do everything possible at its command to maintain its hold over Myanmar.

New Delhi too must intensify, fine-tune or modify its counter-hedging strategies. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, the regime there is showing clear signs of a policy that is inimical to India's interests. Getting the Pakistani Army to train its soldiers, the attacks on the minority Hindus, and although symbolically, commuting the death penalty of the exiled Assam insurgent leader Parag Baruah to a life sentence, Parag Baruah, the leader of the United Liberation Front of Asom-Independent, or ULFA, was accused of getting a shipload of arms and ammunition at the Chittagong Port in 2004, in which several Bangladesh bigwigs were involved and penalised.

The big question now is: Will Dhaka under Muhammad Yunus allow Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and other non-state actors owing allegiance to Pakistan to work actively along the 1,879-km-long border that Bangladesh shares with four states in India's Northeast? If that happens, Bangladesh will be offering beleaguered Pakistan a staging area in India's eastern frontier. That may become counter-productive to Dhaka in the long run and one only hopes the economic realist, will calculate his options well.

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

## LETTERS FISCAL CHALLENGES

As 2024 concluded, the RBI's biannual Financial Stability Report warns of challenges including a GDP growth dip to 5.4 per cent in Q2 2024, nuanced monetary policy decisions, and global economic pressures from high US interest rates, a strong dollar, and President Donald Trump's incoming policies. With global public debt at a historic high, Indian financial strategists are tasked with fostering growth while mitigating international risks to maintain financial stability in 2025.

Amarjeet Kumar  
Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

## LOVE CHRISTIANS TOO

ATTACKS on Christians, especially during the Christmas celebrations, have increased in number and intensity. So far, there has been no condemnation from any BJP leader of stature which shows whether their sympathies lie. Santa Claus who has little to do with religion is considered to be the villain enticing and luring children to convert. Those who do not have the slightest knowledge about Christianity are speaking as if they are experts on the subject. The fact that even the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, had joined in the celebrations does not seem to matter to the members of the right wing groups who are going around disrupting the Christmas celebrations.

Anthony Henriques  
Mumbai

## HAPPY! REALLY?

THE SUN, mountain and sea are the same every day, even dawn is a daily natural occurrence! But the dawn of January 1, 2025, is a time to take stock of 2024 and hope for a better year ahead! Globally, 2024 has been a depressing and disappointing year as egotist leaders have brought us on the verge of a world war! No state or country is without turmoil! Arrogant humans have declared themselves masters of the planet and have been destroying the environment. Nature has reacted with vengeance: floods, droughts, forest fires, global warming, landslides, disasters abound! Man alleged "a hand of God" in them. No one, however, owned up to who forced said hand! Therefore, wishing anyone a Happy New Year will be extremely optimistic.

Anil Bagarkar  
Mumbai

One of the top risks in the year ahead identified by the Global Trade Review, an international trade publication, is what it calls "grey zone aggression", that is "a threat that is difficult to define but critical to recognise". This includes disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and proxy wars, all of which it argues "blur the lines between traditional conflict and peacetime operations". These newer forms of warfare are now omnipresent, challenging states to develop the capacity and imagination to deal with them. There is also the possibility of "black swan" events when sudden, unexpected geopolitical developments with far-reaching consequences can transform existing power configurations.

Advances in generative artificial intelligence is another trend to watch in 2025. AI-powered tools in business, workplaces, entertainment, media, healthcare and personal life will become even more common. They have already brought about significant transformations in these areas. But they have also ushered in an era of tech challenges including for cybersecurity. The military uses of AI pose another challenge.

The coming year will see a world of geopolitical tensions and economic challenges that will test the resilience of nations as well as the international community's ability to evolve collective responses to common problems.

—By arrangement with Dawn



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, THURSDAY, JANUARY 2, 2025

# THE IDEAS PAGE

## A tale of two concerts

Listening to T M Krishna and sisters Ranjani and Gayatri, you could hear it loud and clear: Carnatic music is bigger than controversy — it can move on, and even thrive, after nearly a year of the discordant



RAMESH VENKATARAMAN

THE 2024 EDITION of the December music "season" in Chennai crested with two contrasting recitals bookending Christmas Day. At 9 am, the curtain rose on T M Krishna at the Music Academy to cheers and applause that would not have been out of place at a rock concert. At 6 pm that evening, Krishna's fiercest critics, the sisters Ranjani and Gayatri (RaGa to their fans), who had refused to participate in the Music Academy's festival, held their audience spellbound at the Narada Gana Sabha, barely half a kilometre from the Academy. Between them, the two *kutchis* showed how the Carnatic tradition can move on, and even thrive, after nearly a year of acrimony.

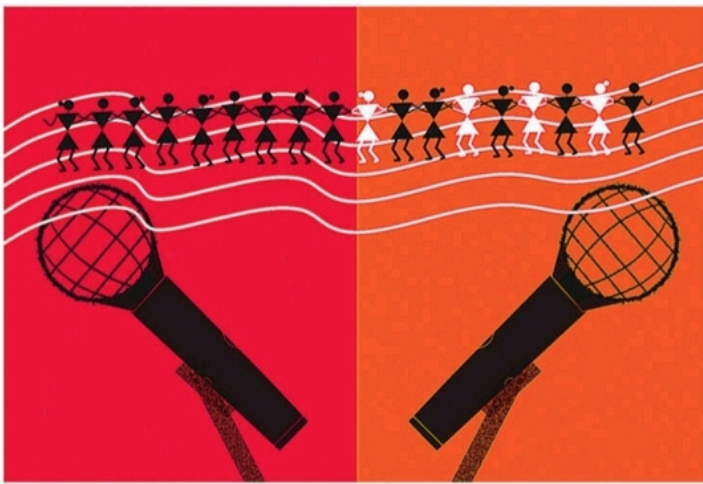
Krishna had stopped singing at the Music Academy and other Chennai *sabhas* about a decade ago, accusing them of Brahmin elitism. No community in the world is as closely associated with a high-brow cultural tradition as Tamil Brahmins are with Carnatic music (and its dance sibling Bharatanatyam) and the Music Academy has been their unrivalled bastion. Only Germanic Jews with Western classical music come close.

Therefore, when the Music Academy decided to award Krishna its highest honour of *Sangeetha Kalanidhi* in March 2024, it caused a kerfuffle. Conservative *rashiks* accused the institution of pandering to a "woke" leftist who had tarnished the tradition by accusing revered icons — the composer Thyagaraja and the vocalist MS Subbulakshmi — of casteism and undermining its Hindu devotional roots by singing in praise of Allah and Jesus Christ. Carnatic stars such as RaGa and the Trichur Brothers announced that they would not perform at the Academy's December festival. Behind all this was the politics of Hindutva (Hindutva, music and the elite). (IE, March 27, 2024) provoked by Krishna's mockery of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and his endorsement of Periyar, the Dravidian movement founder known for his anti-Brahmin rhetoric.

Krishna's Christmas morning performance was therefore a homecoming of sorts (he had sung at the Academy at a lower profile event last year). He had insisted that it be a free concert, in keeping with his campaign for Carnatic music to be more inclusive. Free entry, of course, ensured the hall was packed (unlike on previous days of this "season" when many of the usual *rashiks* kept away, likely put off by the controversy).

They were rewarded by a trademark unconventional performance. For two-and-a-half hours, Krishna sang, seated cross-legged in a twin-tongued lungi, slightly turned towards his violinist. As someone observed, this was rather like Roger Federer turning up at Wimbledon in striped shorts and serving from the middle of the baseline (Carnatic vocalists typically sit at right angles to their main accompanists, clad, if male, in crisp white vesties).

Krishna served up many more breaks with concert convention: Opening his recital with an extended 22-minute-long exposition of Thyagaraja's "Karubaru" (rather than a brisk *varnam* or *kriti*), starting the next song, "Lavanya Rama", with the middle verse and then returning to the



C R Sasikumar

opening *pallavi* to improvise upon it, rendering three pieces, including a serene *Dikshitar kriti*, with minimal accompaniment and skipping a *ragam-tanam-pallavi*, the highlight of a Carnatic concert and *de rigueur* at the Academy.

Krishna's political leanings also featured in rousing lyrics espousing freedom of expression, by the Tamil writer Perumal Murugan. For his closing pieces, he chose a song on the travails of a Dalit devotee of Siva and a composition by Narayana Guru, the late 19th and early 20th century social reformer from Kerala, which referred to Buddha, Christ, and the Prophet Mohammed, alongside Hindu deities, while probing the identity of the divine.

But it was Krishna's command of the classical idiom that shone through, not least in the three Thyagaraja *kritis* that he sang, and in his main piece in Kalyani by Swathi Thirunal. Carnatic's *enform* terrible, extended an olive branch to his critics by concluding his *kutchi* with "Dhava Vibho", a Marathi *bhajan* that M S had popularised. Krishna had also pointedly praised M S in his Academy address a few days earlier. The standing ovation that greeted him at the end suggested that he had made his point: Carnatic music can innovate and be more inclusive without compromising its classicism.

The RaGa sisters' nearly three-hour concert to a mostly-packed (and ticketed) house was as steeped in tradition as Krishna's was unconventional. Resplendent in their yellow-and-black *Kanjeevaram* silks and wearing jasmine flowers in their hair, RaGa looked straight from Carnatic central casting. However, while they stuck to convention in their concert format and musical form, their content was just as political as Krishna's.

Gayatri set the tone at the very outset with her assertion that Carnatic music is inextricably intertwined with *bhakti* and the programme was replete with pieces ingrained with Hindu devotionism. And what glorious music this was, even to my irreligious ear. But no Christ, the Prophet, or even the Buddha figured in their verses — indeed, they sang praising our nation as the land of Rama,

These two performances demonstrated that Carnatic music is capacious enough to accommodate both a "left wing" Krishna and the "right wing" RaGa sisters. No classical art form can remain relevant without constantly evolving. While *bhakti* is undeniably foundational to Carnatic, the tradition also has more recent strands that espouse reform and protest, and celebrate other faiths. Likewise, the current Carnatic concert format, while only a century old, already feels stale in certain aspects. Krishna is only the latest artist to push its boundaries; indeed, others have done so without being sanctimonious, as he has sometimes been.

Krishna, and Vittala. Their sublime *ragam-tanam-pallavi* in Jaunpuri had as its *pallavi* (equivalent to the *bandish* in Hindustani) a Tamil line celebrating Bharat as an upholder of *dharma* since time immemorial.

RaGa's uncritical nationalism tinged with Hindu revivalist sentiments made me cringe but it was hard not to be moved by their stirring version of "Vande Mataram" in Desh, sung in Sanskrit, Tamil, Brijbhasha and Marathi. The choice of Desh, and Jaunpuri earlier — both ragas derived from Hindustani music — and the multilingual renditions underlined Carnatic's catholicism and relative lack of parochiality. In one sense, RaGa may actually have been more inclusive than Krishna. They made it a point to announce each of their pieces while Krishna uncharacteristically stuck with the elitist practice of seldom naming his song or its raga.

These two performances demonstrated that Carnatic music is capacious enough to accommodate both a "left wing" Krishna and the "right wing" RaGa sisters. No classical art form can remain relevant without constantly evolving. While *bhakti* is undeniably foundational to Carnatic, the tradition also has more recent strands that espouse reform and protest, and celebrate other faiths. Likewise, the current Carnatic concert format, while only a century old, already feels stale in certain aspects. Krishna is only the latest artist to push its boundaries; indeed, others have done so without being sanctimonious, as he has sometimes been.

The Music Academy has a crucial role to play in ensuring that Carnatic music thrives. Its leadership showed courage in honouring Krishna for his stellar musicianship, despite him being out of favour with the BJP and the adherents of Hindutva. Now, perhaps, it can reinforce its commitment to musical excellence by naming the equally deserving RaGa sisters as its next *Sangeetha Kalanidhi*, despite their public diatribe against the institution for honouring Krishna. Would such magnanimity be too much to ask for?

The writer is a private equity investor and Carnatic music enthusiast

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Rewriting, rather than simply removing offensive language or storylines, confronts problematic texts. By changing the perspective of a novel, marginalised figures can be turned into the heroes of their own lives, to paraphrase the opening line of David Copperfield." — THE GUARDIAN

## Thank you, Doctor Sahib

Manmohan Singh remained above the harshness of politics and the cold power games around him



ASHWANI KUMAR

A TRULY SUITABLE eulogy to Dr Manmohan Singh is beyond my competence. This tribute can hardly do justice to the greatness of an extraordinary man whose life was marked by decency, integrity, humility and magnanimity. As the architect of India's economic reforms, he set the trajectory for the nation's rise as an Asian economic power and lifted millions of Indians above abject poverty. These contributions will remain a lasting testament to his vision and wisdom.

Singh's leadership role on the global high table in shaping the contours of the future world order amidst the transformational changes of our times makes the nation proud. Those who derided him for being "weak" need only recall his steely resolve in clinching the Indo-US civil nuclear deal that ended India's nuclear apartheid and established the nation's credentials as a responsible nuclear power. The forging of what has now blossomed into an all-encompassing special strategic and global partnership with Japan — seen as establishing an arc of peace and prosperity in Asia — is a tribute to his statesmanship and incisive understanding of the realities of geopolitics.

After appointing me as his special envoy to Japan for facilitating the historic visit to India of their Imperial Majesties — the then Emperor and Empress of Japan — he told me that this was one of the most important state visits to our country and the Indo-Japan relationship was the defining bilateral partnership of the 21st century. Subsequent events have vindicated his vision. The record of his spectacular achievements as prime minister will not be complete without reference to his path-breaking initiatives and rights-based pieces of legislation such as MGNREGA, RTE, RTI, and the farmers' loan waiver. His tenure will also be remembered for the foundational framework of Aadhar and the largest-ever budgetary allocations for education and healthcare.

His patience and forbearance in the face of grave provocation by allies and opponents secured the longevity of the government and ensured the political stability necessary for implementing the nation's ambitious development agenda. He saw and scripted the progressive future of our nation and seized upon the idea of a developed India whose time had come.

The unending accolades received by Singh, including from his vocal critics, affirm his towering stature amongst the world's foremost leaders. This is because of his innate humanity, selflessness, unimpeachable personal integrity and genuine

concern for the welfare of all. The generosity of his heart made no exceptions. He could instinctively relate to the pain of others. None who came to him for assistance or solace in moments of despair left without being comforted. His was a healing touch, one that was both humbling and enabling. He remained above the harshness of politics and the cold power games orchestrated around him.

In informal conversations, he would often mention the transience of power and perhaps, therefore, carried the authority of his high office with a lightness of touch. At a difficult time during the UPA II, when some of his ministerial colleagues unfairly derided him, he refused to crack the whip, saying that he did not wish to discipline them as a headmaster. His rare reprimands to his ministers were softly delivered. Those who see this as a weakness must know that his life and politics were a reflection of his spirituality anchored in compassion and an abiding faith in the goodness of people.

Even as he navigated the treacherous pathways of politics, Singh did not allow his moral clarity to be diminished. He was deeply saddened by the allegations of corruption during the UPAII and agonised over his name "being dragged in the mud".

In moments of intense anxiety and extreme despair, such as in the last days of my late wife, he lent his shoulder as a family elder and comforted me. I recall his telephone call to tell me that "miracles are known to happen". That was his way of keeping my hope alive.

On a happy occasion, when he had to cancel his presence at my son's wedding reception on account of last-minute security issues, he instructed several members of his personal staff in the PMO to represent him and his wife, Gursharan Kaur, who was his greatest source of strength. At the end of my last meeting with him, a little before Diwali in October last year, when I took leave of him, he patted me on my shoulder with a smile on his lips as if he was bidding me goodbye with his last blessings. This moment is etched in my consciousness, as are several other memories of his benevolence and grace that have given me a perpetual purpose in life — the pursuit of human dignity in all its manifestations.

Thank you, doctor sahib. And thank you Sonia ji or giving us an outstanding prime minister who elevated himself above his exalted office.

Farewell, sir. Rest assured that history is kind to you; your place is assured in its annals, in the pantheon of the great. For the sceptics, let me invoke the felicity of the celebrated poet, Mir Taqi Mir as a tribute to our beloved "Doctor Sahib": "Mat sehl hamein jano, phirta hai falak barson/Tab khat ke parde se, insaan nikalte hai" (Do not make the mistake of treating us as unworthy ordinary. For the skies wander for years, only then, from the cloak of dust, (such) human beings emerge).

The writer is former Union minister for law and justice

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### MIGRATION IN CRISIS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Migrants are us" (IE, December 31). The evolving positions of President-elect Donald Trump and Elon Musk, who has been tasked with leading Trump's new Department of Government Efficiency, on the H-1B visa programme are sending mixed signals. For India, which accounts for over 70 per cent of H-1B visa recipients, these contradictions create uncertainty about the future of a programme vital to its tech-driven economy and bilateral relations with the US. This uncertainty undermines the confidence of Indian IT firms and professionals who rely on the programme. For India, navigating this unpredictable ability will require strategic diplomacy.

Kholan Das, Kolkata

### SHATTER THE CEILING

THIS REFERS TO the article, "The year she stole the show" (IE, January 1). Women are at last getting credit where credit is due in the male-dominated film industry. From production to direction, women have proved their mettle on the global stage, with recognition coming from all major film festivals across the world. It is heartening to see this change in image, from a woman being portrayed as an "Abhla Naari" to now a strong and creative artist who can win at the Oscars and at Cannes. Yet, there is a need to address the pay disparity that exists between men and women. The glass ceiling is not just the glass ceiling and celebrate and uplift women in cinema.

Gurnoor Grewal, Chandigarh

### VOTERS IN MIND

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "A tryst in space" (IE, January 1). The message for the government and the Opposition is to understand their mandate from the people's perspective and to work towards the national good in mind. Failure of either leads to a decline in essential parameters of democracy as mentioned in the Global State of Democracy Report 2024. The election results have shown that voters hold the political parties accountable for omission or commission in governance. The upcoming Delhi and Bihar Assembly elections will test both sides.

I R Murmu, New Delhi

### THE SPACE RACE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "A tryst in space" (IE, January 1). From the days of carrying rocket cones on bicycles and shuttling satellites on bullock carts to becoming the first global space agency to land near the moon's South Pole, the story of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is no less than a story of courage and valour. Today, ISRO is the world's sixth-largest space agency and is a fast-evolving agency creating the world's biggest space tech ecosystems with missions such as Gaganyaan, Shukrayaan and Samudrayaan on its operational list. All these achievements are built on the ethos of prudence, self-discipline, reasonable management and rational thinking presented in an inspiring story to all individuals and corporates in this new year as a path to success.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

## The history of attention

It shows that focus is not linear and is a hard thing to tame



SUMANA ROY

MY FIRST MEMORY of hearing the word "attention" is in a male voice, a physical education teacher, perhaps mimicking his heroes in the armed forces, bellowing out "Attention!" on the sports field. We brought our feet close together, our hands straight. It was a semiotic — but how was one to pay attention when all the attention was on oneself, a performance of attentiveness? "Sadhana", beware: the other word in the binary of this drill is "bhisman", rest, relaxation.

By the end of middle school, I knew that I paid more attention when I was at rest than when I stood with my limbs close together, waiting for my body to uncoil from what seemed to my unfeeling body, an unnatural posture. I had realised, intuitively, against the instruction of my teacher, that attention was mostly outside the perimeter of intentionality, and, though there were moralistic stories about the harvests of attention in every culture, it was a hard thing to tame. This military-like understanding of attention feels a bit like the idea of fishing: That attention and its reward — the fish biting the bait — are like lumps on a straight line.

My experience of attention is that I am unaware of being attentive in a way that the angler isn't. The harvests of attention are

tion. Attention is not a 90-minute football game or a two-hour movie. Yes, I am arguing against the heightening of attention — it is exhausting, unrelenting, and hierarchical, for we have decided that certain things and moments are worth more attention than others.

Attention derives from "attend". *Dhyana*, the Hindi equivalent of "attention", comes from "dhi", meaning "to think". *Dhyana* is also "meditation", a word that has become both pop and puritanical in our time, one that demands discipline, mindfulness, single-mindedness, a hermit-like consciousness of one's thoughts. How are we to meditate in a world whose nature is to distract and disturb? Francis Bacon's definition of the essay as "dispersed meditations" allows us to see that the history of literary forms is simultaneously a history of human attention. It was also Bacon who famously said that some books were meant to be eaten, some chewed, and some digested — he is suggesting not different genres of books, as we are made to believe, as much as he is the contingencies of form to varying demands of attention.

Dispersed meditations — it is closest to our experience of being attentive in installments. What it also allows — in fact, encour-

as necessary to creativity as an imagined single-minded focus. Note the phonemic similarity between "wonder" and "wander" — it is only natural that you will wander to experience wonder. What I mean to say is that wonder, like wandering, is not a function of linearity. Our idea of attention, particularly in pedagogy, with its disciplinary impulse, is perhaps too masculine, even patriarchal. That is why it affects us, annoys us, when our students, instead of looking at us, as if we were the eye of the fish on whom *Ajuna* should focus his aim, stare at laptops in front of them, as they sneak into chat boxes on their phones. We take this personally, that we've failed in holding their attention, that our lectures don't have the glue that binds them to their cell phones or the OTT screen. Our language reflects this — we accuse others of "divided attention"; such a model of attention imagines it like a glass of water, not a drop of which should drip outside our mouths. We use the same noun for "life" and "attention", as if they were the same thing — lifespan and attention span. Courses are now designed with the intuitive traffic of "low attention span" playing on the minds of teachers; young humans, raised on the speed of the internet, seem to

thousand words. Student reading lists are being engineered to indulge that lack, even as publishers are happy to back 700-page novels while withdrawing their support for the poem and the single-essay book, genres appropriate to the attention deficit that seems to characterise the present moment in history.

But this is not a completely new moment in the history of the shrinking of attention. About 100 years ago, the modernists felt compelled to move from epical time to the time-impulse of the lyric, condensing a lifetime into a day, responding, as they were, to the World Wars, so that Hilda Doolittle, who wrote fragmentary epics herself, said that the epic would no longer be a feasible form that would be able to hold this fragmentary consciousness.

As our brains supposedly "rot" — as the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year leads us to believe — from looking at our phones, looking but not really seeing, a state of inattentive attention, we wait for the emergence of sophisticated genres. The rest which has had our brains reeling for a few years now, is inimical to *dhyana* — it is not a haiku, after all.





## Too little, too late

The situation in Manipur belies the Home Ministry's sanguine assessment

Conflict resolution and peace building, or the absence of both, and the prolongation of strife are dependent upon certain conditions. If there is a "winning side" in the conflict that seeks to reconstitute and reconcile with the losing side, then there is a guarantee of peace. If there are no winning sides but a honourable compromise is worked out between two sides, then too there is the possibility of lasting peace. There are also situations when conflicts are not resolved but a tenuous yet steady peace is maintained through dialogue and discussion. But a situation where violence raises its head time and again, and when actors in the conflict continue to be hostile without even talking to each other, cannot be described as "peaceful". The Union Home Ministry (MHA) has patted itself on the back by claiming that the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government has managed to "build bridges of unity in the North East... to usher in... peace with unprecedented success". But if the Manipur situation where outcomes of the conflagration that raged in May 2023 continue to roil the State with sporadic skirmishes, and recurring crises are anything to go by, then the statement is not only a false claim but is also in line with the regime's efforts to portray success where failure is apparent in order to win the battle of perceptions.

Soon after this year-end report of the MHA came out, the beleaguered Chief Minister of Manipur, N. Biren Singh, issued an apology for the ethnic violence in the State. This, in any case, is too little too late in the day as his government does not seem to enjoy the confidence of at least one particular ethnic community in the State. For the MHA to portray that the northeast is on the path to peace and prosperity, even as the embers of the ethnic violence in Manipur refuse to die down and restrictive measures are being reimposed, can only be described as burying its head in the sand. In December, the Union government had also reimposed the Protected Area Regime amid "security concerns arising out of influx from neighbouring countries" – a reference to refugees from civil war-torn Myanmar. The MHA also said that it will map demographic data along the Myanmar border to help in the fencing of the international border and stopping infiltration. Again, it will be a grave mistake to bracket refugees fleeing the Myanmar junta's repression as infiltrators and this might exacerbate already fragile ethnic relations in border States such as Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The MHA must instead focus on getting its act together in conducting the census and working with the State governments to bring out a humane policy of addressing the refugee situation. Short of doing so, the Ministry's encomiums to itself will be smug self-satisfaction devoid of all meaning.

## Farm fire

Dallewale should end his fast and press for talks on farmers' demands

The sit-in protest that began almost a year ago by a group of farmers owing allegiance to the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (Non Political) at the Punjab-Haryana border has taken a new turn with its leader Jagjit Singh Dallewale refusing to end his indefinite fast, which started on November 26. The stand of the 70-year-old leader, a cancer patient, has drawn the attention of the Supreme Court. Farmers in the State, across their organisational and political positions, supported a Punjab bandh on December 30, in solidarity with Mr. Dallewale. The Court has allowed the Punjab government time till Thursday to ensure that Mr. Dallewale gets medical aid. The farmers' outfits have told the Court that their leader would accept medical help only if the Union Government held a discussion with them on their demands such as implementing a legalised Minimum Support Price as per the formula of the National Commission on Farmers (constituted by M.S. Swaminathan), a debt waiver for all farmers and the withdrawal of all cases against farmers for protesting against the three farm laws, which were repealed in 2021. Major farmers' organisations in the State, including the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, Bharatiya Kisan Union (Eka-Ugrahan) and the All India Kisan Sabha, have urged the Centre and State governments to address the demands so that Mr. Dallewale ends his fast. Several Opposition parties had also demanded that the Centre start a dialogue with farmers.

It is debatable how helpful the Court's ultimatum is in situations such as these, when policy, law and order and politics are all intertwined. Perhaps, the courts should not be so interfering and governments should be more proactive and preemptive in dealing with such flare-ups. The demands on the table have been pending for long, and the crisis in agriculture is multifaceted. But allowing these permanent sit-in protests to be problematic when someone goes on a fast into death because there is no way to know if he is being forced to starve to death or not allowed to end the fast. Many of the farmers' leaders have met Mr. Dallewale requesting him to end his hunger strike. However, such requests have been turned down with his supporters labelling other farmers' leaders as agents of the government. Sane voices among the farmers have been maintaining that Mr. Dallewale should join the joint protests rather than adopting his fast into death protest. The Punjab and Haryana governments and the Union Government must ensure that his life is not in danger. Mr. Dallewale and his associates should heed the advice of other farmers' leaders and clear the apprehensions that he is under pressure to continue with the hunger strike.

The competitive disruptions of Parliament by both the Opposition and, more surprisingly, the Treasury benches, made the recently-concluded winter session of the legislature a travesty. There were more adjournments than discussions, hardly any work was done and the session was adjourned with the widespread sentiment that we had let down the people of India. A new nadir was plumbed when duelling demonstrations by Members of Parliament (MP) on the steps of the House led to accusations of assault and injury on both sides. For many of us who were brought up to regard Parliament as the temple of our democracy, its precincts as hallowed and its procedures and conventions as sacred, this seems a betrayal of everything the institution is supposed to represent as a cornerstone of our democracy.

Why have things come to such a sorry state? One obvious reason (as in everything to do with Parliament) is precedent. The recent demise of the distinguished director, Shyam Benegal, reminded me of the time when he and I both served, as private citizens in 2007, on a round table of eminent Indians invited by then-Speaker Somnath Chatterjee to advise him in the performance of his duties. Our group, which included N.R. Narayana Murthy of 70-hour work week fame, unanimously called for strict enforcement of the rules to ensure higher standards of decorum and debate, and were promptly disabused by the Speaker of our illusions. Disruptions, he said, occurred because an outnumbered Opposition saw them as part of their democratic rights; to thwart them by invoking the rule book would be condemned by all parties, including the ruling party, as undemocratic. So suspending, let alone expelling, MPs was not an option he could easily exercise.

'Part of convention' now, decline of civility  
Whatever the merits of this method of parliamentary protest – and, personally, it is not something I have ever cared for – it has become part of the convention of Indian parliamentary practice. Speaker of the Lok Sabha Meira Kumar, whose decency and gentility were shamefully abused by a belligerent Bharatiya Janata Party, still averred that it would be wrong to expel unruly Opposition members without an all-party consensus on doing so.

Though Speakers of the Lok Sabha Sumitra Mahajan and Om Birla have proved more willing to suspend members – Mr. Birla essentially demurred the Lok Sabha of all opposition while storming several Bills through the 2023 winter session – they have usually preferred adjournment to expulsion.



Shashi Tharoor

the fourth-term Congress Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram and the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs. He is the award-winning author of 26 books and the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award, the Crossword Lifetime Achievement Award, and other distinctions

It is sad that our national politics has witnessed such a breakdown in the relationship of trust that, in any democracy, ought to exist between the government and the Opposition. Both sides are equally guilty: the present ruling party was just as bad when it was in Opposition. The very BJP politicians who had argued the case for disruption – who had used sophistry to justify obstructing the work of Parliament for years in the cause of the higher principle of accountability – suddenly decided that on this issue, where you stand depends on where you sit. Now that they are sitting on the Treasury benches, disruption is wasteful and condemnable. The Opposition, once their victims, will have none of it. Those of us who attended missionary schools learned the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The new golden rule of Indian politics has become: do unto them what they did unto you.

The diminishing of the Parliament is deeply damaging to India's democracy

A second factor is, undoubtedly, the acrimony that now prevails between the government and the Opposition. Traditionally, a sense of civility has always reigned in the politics: Atal Bihari Vajpayee loved telling the stories of Jawaharlal Nehru's courtesy to him as a young firebrand Opposition leader, Rajiv Gandhi contriving to get him medical attention in the United States, and, most famously, P.V. Narasimha Rao sending him to Geneva as the head of the Indian delegation to a United Nations meeting on Kashmir.

Today, such episodes are inconceivable. Each side sees itself as the embodiment of righteous virtue, and the others of irredeemable evil. To the ruling party, the Opposition is "anti-national"; the Opposition in turn imagine themselves as doughty outnumbered Pandavas facing the might (and the unfair means) of the Kauravas in power. Democracy requires both sides to accept, as a presumption, the good faith of the other; on all sides of our political divides, we must believe that those on the other side also have the best interests of the nation at heart, and that our disagreements are only over how to achieve them. But in Indian politics today, government and Opposition see each other as enemies, not mere adversaries. Common ground then becomes hard to find.

It is sad that our national politics has witnessed such a breakdown in the relationship of trust that, in any democracy, ought to exist between the government and the Opposition. Both sides are equally guilty: the present ruling party was just as bad when it was in Opposition. The very BJP politicians who had argued the case for disruption – who had used sophistry to justify obstructing the work of Parliament for years in the cause of the higher principle of accountability – suddenly decided that on this issue, where you stand depends on where you sit. Now that they are sitting on the Treasury benches, disruption is wasteful and condemnable. The Opposition, once their victims, will have none of it. Those of us who attended missionary schools learned the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The new golden rule of Indian politics has become: do unto them what they did unto you.

The representative in today's Parliament  
Third, arguably, is the public's own diminished expectations from parliamentarians. Gone are the days when skilled debaters and orators held sway on the floor of the legislature, winning public adulation (in those pre-television days) from admiring audiences of their speeches alone. A Ram Manohar Lohia, a Nath Pai, a George Fernandes, a Madhu Limaye, a Piloo Modi, or a Minoo Masani acquired political importance and

status, out of all proportion to the size of their parties, because of accounts of their verbal duels with a Nehru or an Indira Gandhi. Today there are no equivalents: while the occasional reasoned or impassioned speech enjoys a brief virality on YouTube or WhatsApp, these are few and far between, and the opportunities to deliver them are rarer still. Instead, there is a clear disconnect between electability and parliamentary performance.

People are elected or re-elected for reasons other than their ability to skewer a Minister in Question Hour or tear a government proposal apart through reasoned argument. The quality and the character of political representation has a direct correlation to the quality and the character of floor debates as well. When MPs are corralled by their Whips into breaking all the rules they are sworn to uphold, to troop into the well of the House and disrupt the proceedings through shouting and sloganeering rather than effective preparation and forensic skill, they are being judged by their leaders on qualities other than effective parliamentarianism. The talent that should be exhibited on the floor of the House is now paraded in television studios instead. The public in turn no longer judges their representatives by their performance in Parliament but by the constituent services they render and the local political weight they command. Most of the names I mentioned earlier would not find it easy to be re-elected in today's environment.

## Disruption and contempt

Parliamentary standards have been in free fall for a generation. No one is elected or defeated at the polls because of their performance in Parliament. Most MPs have limited interest in legislation and prefer to disrupt the proceedings rather than debate the principles. Meanwhile, the BJP government refuses to reach out to the Opposition and is content to ride roughshod over it to pass its Bills. Its contempt for the legislature is barely concealed. Unlike Jawaharlal Nehru, who attended Parliament daily, Prime Minister Narendra Modi barely deigns to grace the House with his presence. In the last few years, the government has been increasingly treating Parliament as a noticeboard for the announcement of its decisions and a rubber stamp for legislating them, rather than as a consultative body in a deliberative democracy.

The diminishing of Parliament in our political life is deeply damaging to our democracy. Sadly, its custodians are allowing it to be robbed of all value, to the point where the public will not miss it when it is gone. But when it is gone, what will remain of our democracy?

# Tackling delimitation by reversing population control

Recently, the Chief Ministers of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, N. Chandrababu Naidu and M.K. Stalin, respectively, were quite peeved about the question of the proposed delimitation exercise and the possibility, subsequently, of the loss of parliamentary seats. This is very likely as the two States, along with the other southern States, are ahead of the rest of India in terms of fertility transition – implying a reduced share of the population when compared with the northern region. What is galling to people in general, and not necessarily just the politicians in south India, is that success in "family planning" will surely reduce the number of seats of the less populated States in Parliament.

"The state government (Andhra Pradesh) is thinking of enacting a law that would make only those with more than two children eligible to contest local body elections," Mr. Naidu had said. Earlier, Andhra Pradesh had passed a piece of legislation barring people with more than two children from contesting local polls. Mr. Naidu said, "We have repealed that law, and we are now considering reversing it.... Government may provide more benefits to families with more children."

Mr. Stalin's response was, "Today, as there is a scenario of decreasing Lok Sabha constituencies, it raises the question why should we restrict ourselves to having fewer children? Mr. Stalin added in jest, "Why not aim for 16 children?"

## The example of China

The question that arises in the light of the reactions and the responses of the Chief Ministers is: would it be possible to arrest fertility decline and, moreover, reverse it by attempting to increase it? It is evident that the attainment of low fertility in the course of fertility transition is hardly reversible by intervention, but in the natural course of events, there might be a minor



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M.A. Kalam

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It is too simplistic a solution that is being put forth by some politicians in the southern States

reversal as suggested by experience worldwide. Despite this understanding, there are attempts being made in some countries to reverse the fertility trend through incentivisation, but to no effect. China's one-child policy was one of the desperate measures to realise population control. The consequences confronting the Chinese state on varied fronts include problems in the marriage market, a dependency burden and, above all, extreme low fertility beyond the scope for reversal.

Quick and forced regulatory measures to restrict reproduction have never paid dividends beyond restricting population counts. In fact, an emphasis on limiting population counts without caring for its composition that sustains the population may well be considered unplanned. China's case is an example wherein the state is facing numerous crises at this point over the familial transitions underway and the consequential burden of social security provisioning on the state.

An imbalanced population composition reached by intruding into the natural course of transition will pose problems that would only be remedied through promoting migration. Efforts at incentivising reproduction and adoption of a pro-natal population policy may not be an alternative as seen in countries such as Japan and South Korea. Hence, the response of the southern States to the emerging threat may well be considered premature and ineffective in the long run.

## Varied population counts

The course of fertility decline in India's States does show signs of a convergence across space and characteristics but a population momentum keeps the demographic divide wider between regions. Given this circumstance, population counts between provinces may not be the appropriate criterion to have political

representation that will defy the federal structure of our nation. One person one vote may well be ideal but the difference in numbers of political representation in one region will be skewed beyond proportions. Unless these counts are weighed with some characteristics in terms of appropriating political representation, it will be unfair, for example, to a region that ushered in development with population control. This brings in a recognition of demographic divide apparent with education, coupled with the number of children being the criteria for shaping political outcomes.

## Impact on women

Encouraging women to have more children may be easier said than done. In the current circumstances, a woman's personal loss in engaging in reproduction is much greater than imagined given the state's approach in facilitating the same. When the state celebrates the fertility decline and its dividend has benefited the larger cause, its implication in a woman's life has been less than expected. Therefore, thinking about fertility reversal needs to be preceded by measures of guaranteeing the state's social support for the additional children on the one hand and compensation for women's engagement in reproduction on the other.

Reversing fertility could well be ideal in terms of maintaining a sustainable population but the regional population imbalance can perhaps be addressed through migration in immediate terms. What needs to be answered is the ensuing disadvantage of a lower population count and political representation that can only be resolved provided the count gets an equivalence in valuation in terms of capability characteristics. Therefore, the ultimate solution lies not in reversing fertility but in revisiting count-based political representation in the delimitation exercise.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The state of Manipur

How far Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh's expression of 'regret' and urge to 'make a new beginning' would solve the long-pending issues in his State are anybody's guess. In fact, his inability to do anything so far, in a positive sense, demands that there should be nothing less than his resignation from office. A more concerning matter is the Prime Minister. In the beginning, the Congress's demand that Mr. Modi visit

Manipur was treated as a ritualistic anti-Modi slogan. But this has now changed maybe after the old saying, 'repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth'.

P.R.K. Raja,  
Pandalam, Kerala

### Manmohan Singh

There have been many letters in this column paying tributes to former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. While Dr. Singh was very successful as a Finance Minister, he cannot be

awarded full marks as Prime Minister as it is under his stewardship that there were many scams. Sadder still was his closing his eyes to all the misdeeds. Impartial and dispassionate critics see him as a 100% Finance Minister and a 50% Prime Minister.

B.S. Jayaraman,  
Coimbatore

The unwarranted spat between the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress over Dr. Singh

must not be stoked further as it would be an insult to the memory of the departed leader who always kept the interests of the nation above all else. Dr. Singh is ever alive in every Indian's heart. He has etched his name with his simplicity, statesmanship, constructive work, implementation of welfare measures and, above all, economic reforms which transformed the Indian economy.

Gregory Fernandes,  
Mumbai

### Going to school barefoot

The feature, 'Barefoot trek on raw road to education' (Online - 'Spotlight', December 27, 2024), was a good read. It was on the plight of the children in Kidagari, an interior tribal village in Andhra Pradesh, walking through forests in a hilly region without footwear. But how can the villagers not care about snake bites or multiple dangers from other creatures? Every parent will look at the

safety of his child, no matter how poor or even how remote and treacherous the place. It is puzzling how the villagers or the system can afford to spend money on good uniforms, backpacks and study materials, but ignore basic safety by not providing any footwear.

Amar Singh,  
Mumbai

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



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The projected increase in India's tobacco exports

**8** In per cent. The country's tobacco exports will likely cross ₹13,000 crore this year. India is the second largest producer of tobacco in the world after China. It is also the fourth largest producer of Flue-Cured Virginia (FCV) tobacco worldwide after China, Brazil and Zimbabwe. **PH**

The gross GST collection in the month of December

**1.77** In lakh crore. The gross GST collection rose 7.3% year-on-year in December. The central GST collection stood at ₹32,836 crore, State GST at ₹40,499 crore, integrated IGT at ₹47,783 crore and cess at ₹11,471 crore. GST from domestic transactions grew 8.4%. **PH**

Death toll from mob killings in Bangladesh in 2024

**128** Mob killings in Bangladesh surged after the August revolution last year that toppled the rule of ex-leader Sheikh Hasina. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a leading Bangladeshi human rights organisation, said it had recorded at least 128 people killed by mobs in 2024. **AP**

Number of accident cases reported in Bengaluru in 2024

**4,784** The Bengaluru traffic police said its ongoing efforts have led to a 1.26% reduction in fatal accidents and a 1.09% drop in deaths caused by mishaps in 2024 compared to the previous year. Non-fatal accidents saw a sharper decline of 4.57%. **PH**

The increase in migrants crossing the Channel to the U.K.

**25** In per cent. The number of irregular migrants arriving in Britain on small boats soared in 2024, data showed on Wednesday, piling pressure on Prime Minister Keir Starmer to stem the Channel crossings. 36,816 people were detected in the Channel last year. **AP**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## The race for fighters: the IAF's dilemma

China has already fielded two fifth generation fighter jets becoming the only country other than the U.S. to have more than one fifth gen fighter. In comparison, the Indian Air Force is at 31 fighter squadrons, desperately awaiting new inductions and with no fifth gen fighter in the line-up for at least a decade

FULL CONTEXT

Dinakar Peri

In the last two weeks, taking the world by surprise, China unveiled a series of high technology platforms establishing its technological supremacy. These include two stealth fighter jets, the launch of an amphibious naval ship, a new "comprehensive" scientific research ship for global deep-sea exploration, a supersonic civil jet prototype and a new bullet train dubbed the world's fastest. The timing couldn't have been starker, highlighting the widening technological gap with the Indian Air Force (IAF) which is struggling to maintain its fighter squadron strength as modernisation is plagued by delayed deliveries.

Chinese military modernisation

Last week, videos emerged on social media of two stealth fighter jets in tail-less configuration. One of them a massive jet with delta-wing design, featuring three engines hinting at a likely long range, flying over Chengdu in Sichuan province went viral on social media 'X'. Videos of the second smaller jet featuring a smaller twin-engine design with swept wings emerged a day later. Reports suggest that the larger jet was designed by Chengdu Aircraft Corporation while the smaller jet is from the rival Shenyang Aircraft Corporation. However, there has been no official comments from China or from their state media so far on the developments.

The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) of China has already fielded two fifth generation fighter jets, the medium J-35 and the heavy J-20, becoming the only country other than the U.S. to have more than one fifth gen fighter. With the two new jets, dubbed by many commentators as sixth gen fighters which is debatable, China has, undoubtedly, taken giant strides in the race.

The recently released report to the U.S. Congress on the military and security developments involving the PRC for 2024 noted that the PLAAF and PLAN (Navy) Aviation together constitute the largest aviation force in the Indo-Pacific region. "The PLAAF is rapidly approaching technology typical of U.S. standards," it noted. The PLAAF and PLAN Aviation continue to field greater numbers of fourth-generation aircraft (now more than 1,300 of 1,900 total fighters, not including trainers) and probably will become a majority fourth-generation force in the next several years, the report added. In addition, the J-35 and J-20 are being added at a phenomenal rate and flight testing of the latest jets indicate a fairly advanced state, and that they have been under development for sometime.

The IAF's modernisation plan

The IAF is at 31 fighter squadrons as against the sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons, desperately awaiting new inductions and with no fifth gen fighter in the line-up for at least a decade, the only outlier among major countries.

Recent reports state that Pakistan has approved the procurement of 40 J-35s from China.

In an uncanny coincidence, very recently the Defence Ministry has appointed a committee led by the Defence Secretary to look into the overall capability development of the IAF. India has an ambitious plan lined up for the acquisition of over 500 fighter jets, a bulk of them to be indigenously designed and manufactured, majority of them for the



Need to catch up: Chinese ground crew members inspect a J-20 stealth fighter in Chengdu, in southwest China's Sichuan province in 2011. **AP**

IAF. However, these are at various stages of development and manufacturing and their timely deliveries are critical. Of these, the LCA variants will constitute the bulk. There are 83 LCA-Mk1As on order but their deliveries have been delayed as the F-404 engines by General Electric (GE) have been delayed. A deal for 97 additional Mk1As is under discussion. The LCA-Mk2, fifth generation fighter the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) and the Twin Engine Deck Based Fighter (TED-BF) for the Navy all have very ambitious development timelines but given the complexity and track record, it has to be seen how soon they are ready and available for induction.

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) is working on the indigenous development of LCA-Mk2 aircraft and the AMCA, the Defence Ministry informed the Parliamentary standing committee on defence as per a report tabled earlier this month. "The deliveries for LCA-Mk2 and AMCA are expected to commence only into the next decade once the development cycle is successfully completed."

It must be noted that of the current 31 squadrons, the phase out of two MIG-21 squadrons has been extended due to the delayed deliveries of LCA-Mk1A. The Jaguars, Mirage-2000s and MIG-29s will begin going out by the end of the decade. For instance, by 2027-28, the first of the MIG-29s, inducted in the late 1980s, will start going out and by early 2040s, when most of these types will be phased out, some of the early lot of SU-30s will also start going out. The IAF has in all contracted 272 Su-30s, and a deal to procure 12 additional Su-30MKIs to replace the ones lost in accidents has just been signed while a major Sukhoi upgrade programme is in the final stages of approval.

Another critical procurement programme that hasn't progressed for several years is the I14 Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA), a foreign jet intended to be manufactured in India with significant technology transfer. The Request For Information (RFI) for I14 MRFA was issued in April 2019 to global aircraft manufacturers but has since made no progress with even the preliminary Acceptance of Necessity (AoN) from the Government yet to be received. Given the long timelines for the procurement process, and factoring in the time to set up facilities in India and for the jets to roll out, the MRFA is unlikely to be available in significant numbers till the middle of the next decade.

As reported by *The Hindu* recently, in the backdrop of the controversy in the procurement of 36 Rafale fighter jets, the government is looking at a procurement model that is transparent and non-controversial for the MRFA.

Underscoring this urgency, IAF Air Chief Marshal A. P. Singh said in October that the MRFA was "needed as of yesterday". The larger and more capable LCA-Mk2 is under development and is supposed to do its first flight this October, with December 2027 to be the end of research and development for LCA-Mk2. "If these timelines are met and the MRFA is signed parallelly we are OK. We are not badly off. But if these timelines are pushed, then we need to look at alternatives," the Air Chief had stated.

In October 2022, then IAF chief ACM V. R. Chaudhary conceded that even with the LCA-Mk1A, LCA-Mk2 and the MRFA "we will still be at 35-36 (squadrons) by middle of next decade."

It is pertinent to note that, barring the AMCA which will take sometime the LCA variants and the MRFA are all four gen plus fighters.

On the delay in the LCA-Mk1A, a

representative of the Ministry informed the House Panel that it "worries all of us". "LCA Mark 1 is dependent on GE-404 engines. The supply of GE-404 engines has been adjusted by GE for the last two years. Due to COVID, their supply chain has broken down. They have not been able to resume yet. They have promised that they will start giving GE engines from March this year, next year onwards, the supply would get stabilised," the representative submitted.

As soon as the engine problem is sorted out, we have planned to make 24 LCAs every year and then 30 every year, the representative stated. On the agreement between Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and GE for the licence manufacture of the F-414 engines in India the Ministry representative expressed confidence that it should get it signed in the "next three to four months."

Aero-engine troubles

An aero-engine is likely to remain the single major dependency and the country's Achilles heel for a very long time. Imported engines, directly or 'co-manufactured' will power all indigenous jets and helicopters till the end of this century at the current rate. The licence manufacturing for the F-414 engine or the new I10KN engine likely to be co-developed and co-produced with France for the AMCA-Mk2 will still mean that India would be dependent on them for the most critical parts.

It will essentially be between France and the U.S. - U.S. for a part of the fighter fleet and France for the remainder of the fighter fleet and for almost all of the helicopter segment as more indigenous platforms come in.

The country can't claim to be fully self-reliant till it can field an aero-engine that is completely designed and developed in-house.

THE GIST

China unveiled a series of high technology platforms establishing its technological supremacy. These include two stealth fighter jets, the launch of an amphibious naval ship, and a new "comprehensive" scientific research ship for global deep-sea exploration.

India has an ambitious plan lined up for the acquisition of over 500 fighter jets, a bulk of them to be indigenously designed and manufactured. However, these are at various stages of development and manufacturing and their timely deliveries are critical.

An aero-engine is likely to remain the single major dependency and the country's Achilles heel for a very long time.



## Youth at the forefront of climate litigation

**Y**outh-led climate litigation is revolutionising the global response to the climate crisis. By holding governments and corporations accountable, young people frame climate inaction as a human rights violation. They argue that the disproportionate impacts on younger generations demand bold, systemic solutions. This litigation emphasises the urgent need for climate action, pushing for transformative change to address the escalating emergency. It serves as a powerful tool for advocating for climate justice and protecting the rights of future generations.

### Major milestones

A landmark moment in youth-led climate litigation occurred with the *Held v. State of Montana* case in the U.S. In a historic decision, the Montana Supreme Court upheld a district court ruling in favour of 16 young plaintiffs who argued that Montana's fossil fuel policies violated their constitutional rights and failed to address the climate crisis. This 6-1 decision marked the first time a U.S. State Supreme Court affirmed young people's constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment in the context of climate change. The roots of the case trace back to August 2023, when district court judge Kathy Seeley ruled in favour of the plaintiffs, making *Held v. Montana* the first youth-led constitutional climate lawsuit in the U.S. to go to trial and secure a victory.

Judge Seeley underscored the direct link between greenhouse gas emissions and the worsening climate crisis, emphasising that each ton of emissions amplifies environmental harm. Her ruling broadened Montana's constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment by including the protection of the broader climate system. The Supreme Court upheld her findings, striking down laws restricting greenhouse gas



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considerations in fossil fuel permitting and blocking constitutional remedies for environmental harm. This decision mandates Montana to integrate climate and public health concerns into its energy policies, marking a governance shift. It underscores intergenerational equity and inspires youth-led efforts to shape climate policy.

Youth-led climate litigation is gaining traction globally. In Canada, *La Rose v. His Majesty King* case represents a significant step forward. In this lawsuit, young plaintiffs argue that Canada's insufficient climate policies violate their rights to life, liberty, and security under Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Canadian federal government recently announced it would not seek to dismiss the case, paving the way for an eight-week trial scheduled for October 2026 in Vancouver. The plaintiffs contend that current policies disproportionately harm children and youth. They advocate for a mandate requiring the government to implement a comprehensive, science-aligned climate recovery plan.

In the Netherlands, a court ruling compelled the government to adopt stricter emissions targets. Colombia's Supreme Court recognised the Amazon rainforest as a legal entity, mandating its protection for future generations. Germany's Constitutional Court required stronger climate policies to uphold youth rights.

India has seen its share of youth-driven climate litigation, most notably through a petition filed in March 2017 by nine-year-old Ridhima Pandey before the National Green Tribunal (NGT). Her petition sought measures including integrating climate change into environmental impact assessments, establishing a national greenhouse gas inventory, and creating carbon budgets for government projects.

In 2019, the NGT dismissed her case. However, her appeal to the

Supreme Court is pending, with the court appointing *amicus curiae* and requesting government inputs on carbon rules. Ms. Pandey's efforts have profoundly influenced India's climate discourse, showcasing the youth's role in demanding stronger policies and intergenerational equity.

### Transformative implications

Youth-driven legal battles are transforming climate policy, evolving from awareness campaigns led by figures like Greta Thunberg to courtroom advocacy demanding systemic change. These lawsuits emphasise the intersection of human rights and environmental sustainability, inspiring global movements and compelling governments to rethink inadequate climate strategies.

In India, the path to youth climate activism is complex, with increasing crackdowns on protests and shrinking spaces for public engagement. Despite this, youth groups persist, using digital platforms and aligning with movements led by farmers and tribal communities. This resilience underscores their commitment. As young activists challenge policies in courts, the outcomes of cases could shape the future of climate activism in India.

Protecting their advocacy rights is crucial to amplifying their voices and achieving climate justice. Youth-driven climate litigation is revolutionising the global climate movement, achieving landmark wins, and demanding government accountability. By stressing intergenerational equity and science-based policies, young activists push governments to prioritise bold and sustainable actions. These legal efforts underscore the crucial role of youth in shaping climate policy and safeguarding the planet's future.

By leveraging the law, young people are driving transformative change, ensuring a livable world for generations to come, and inspiring a new wave of climate leadership and activism.

## Woman Minister on receiving end

The alleged remark of C.T. Ravi against Laxmi Hebbalkar reflects a larger mindset

### STATE OF PLAY

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**I**rony died a thousand deaths when the BJP's State president B.Y. Vijayendra said that men in his party were "not wearing bangles" to stay quiet in the face of "police high handedness" while responding to the arrest of MLC C.T. Ravi. The BJP legislator was arrested for allegedly using a derogatory and sexist word about Minister for Women and Child Development Laxmi Hebbalkar during the recently concluded session of the Legislature.

Karnataka has seen much wrangling between political leaders since Mr. Ravi allegedly used a slur in the Legislative Council hall against Ms. Hebbalkar on December 19. This incident occurred after the council was adjourned following a fracas over Union Minister Amit Shah's remarks on B.R. Ambedkar. But, the members had stayed on and continued their loud arguments. With the House not in session at that point, there is no "official record" of the alleged slur used, but the video clip has been freely floating around on social media platforms.

Mr. Ravi initially claimed that he had said "frustrate" and the Minister misheard him. Ms. Hebbalkar, however, said that the word, besides being abusive, trivialised her hard work in building a political career.

Mr. Ravi was booked under Sections 75 (sexual harassment) and 79 (word, gesture, or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and arrested soon after. He has alleged that he was harassed in police custody, at the

behest of Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar. But he was released the following day after approaching the Karnataka High Court. Observing that the police *prima facie* failed to follow the procedure in arresting the MLC, the court directed the police to release him immediately.

Since the offences charged against him attract imprisonment of less than seven years, the police were obliged to issue a notice to him under Section 35 of the BNS for appearing for questioning before arresting him in a "tearing hurry", the court said.

Following this, a triumphant Mr. Ravi made it a point to address more than one press conference, sporting a bandage on his head for injuries he allegedly sustained while he was being taken in a police van. Many angry BJP men, including Mr. Vijayendra, rallied behind Mr. Ravi unconditionally, giving rest to their faction feeds.

No doubt the Congress government did not cover itself in glory in handling the situation. For one, as the court pointed out, there were procedural lapses. An impression was created that the Home Minister lacked control over the situation as police acted swiftly. Questions have also been raised on the issue of jurisdiction, given that it occurred within the House and the role of the Chairperson in addressing the episode. While a CID

inquiry by the State police is now under way, the Opposition has demanded a judicial probe claiming a "plot to kill" Mr. Ravi.

However, what has lost focus under a mountain of questions on procedure and whataboutery ("But aren't men in all parties the same?" etc.) is the core issue of the alleged abuse of the lone woman Minister in Karnataka's Cabinet and one among the only 10 elected women Members of the Legislative Assembly. Casual sexism, cutting across party barriers, is indeed not uncommon in the House or the course of poll campaigns, but that should not make it "normal" or acceptable. Mr. Ravi had in an earlier instance, talking about political opportunism, used the word "nitya samangali" (a term used to refer to those in Devadasi tradition) and incurred the wrath of a few women members including Ms. Hebbalkar.

The incident raises two questions. Could such remarks have been made in a House with a better gender balance? And why do such incidents not amount to sexual harassment in the workplace?

Given the situation in Karnataka, where new political high dramas unfold daily, and are magnified by private news channels, all issues live in tense but fleeting lives. Already, the Ms. Hebbalkar case is fading into the background, with the Opposition now busy mounting pressure on the ruling Congress for a Central Bureau of Investigation inquiry into the suicide of a contractor, allegedly owing to pressure to pay money by the close aide of a Minister. However, one can be sure it is a matter of time before a case similar to that of Ms. Hebbalkar turns up again, like a bad penny.

## School dropout rates go from bad to worse in Bihar and Assam

Dropout rates in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Haryana are also concerning

### DATA POINT

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**T**here has been a marked improvement in the share of students continuing education into higher grades in 2024 compared to 2019, across India, without dropping out of school. Overall, of every 100 girls who started schooling, over 80 completed their secondary education without dropping out in 2024 compared to just 73.5 in 2019. Among boys, the corresponding numbers were 77.2 and 72.4 in 2024 and 2019 respectively, showing an increase, though to a lesser degree.

However, despite this improvement at an all-India level, certain major States such as Karnataka and Rajasthan have recorded significant spikes in students dropping out of upper primary and secondary schools. In Bihar and Assam — States where the dropout rates were already concerning in 2019 — the rates have slipped further in 2024.

For instance, in Karnataka, of the 100 girls who started schooling only 76.5 completed secondary education without dropping out in 2024 compared to 79.3 in 2019. Similarly, for boys, the ratio declined to 70.7 from 73.6. In Bihar, the ratio slipped from bad to worse in the same period. Of the 100 girls who started schooling only 40.3 completed secondary education without dropping out in 2024 compared to 51.6 of them in 2019. Similarly, for boys, the ratio declined to 38.8 from 51.2.

**Table 1** shows the number of students out of every 100 who completed upper primary and secondary education in 2024 and 2019. The data is provided for all major States across both genders. In direct contrast to States such as Bihar and Assam, where the situation went from bad to worse, in States such as Kerala and Tamil Na-

du, the figures improved from good to excellent.

For instance, in Kerala, of the 100 boys who started schooling, 99.6 completed upper primary in 2019, which improved further to 100 in 2024. The number remained at 100 among girls for both years. Similarly, of the 100 boys who started schooling, 88.3 completed secondary education in 2019, which improved to 95.7 in 2024. The corresponding numbers among girls were 93.2 and 97.5.

Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, of the 100 boys who started schooling, 99 completed upper primary in 2019, which improved to 100 in 2024. Among girls, the number improved from 97.5 to 100. In secondary schooling, among boys, the number improved from 81.3 to 89.2, and among girls, it improved from 89.4 to 95.6.

While the absolute increase or decrease in the share of school students who pass on to higher grades without getting dropped out is one facet of the story, analysing the degree of increase or decrease brings out further nuances. To arrive at the degree of increase or decrease, the States were ranked as shown in **Table 2**.

For instance, in 2019, of the 100 girls who started schooling in Maharashtra, 83.5 completed secondary education, a figure similar to that of Uttarakhand that year. In 2024, Maharashtra's figures improved to 90.5, however, Uttarakhand's numbers increased even further to 92.8. While both States improved, the degree of rise was steeper for Uttarakhand.

Because of this, in **Table 2**, Uttarakhand's rankings improved from 11th to 4th (for secondary girls) while Maharashtra's rankings improved only from 12th to 7th. States such as Gujarat have remained stagnant at the bottom of the ranking table in both years. Haryana has recorded massive drops in its rankings. The State was part of the top 10 list in all school levels across genders in 2019 and moved out of the list in 2024.

## Falling attendance

The figures in the tables are The Hindu's calculations based on data sourced from UJISE+

**Table 1:** Table shows the number of students out of every 100 who completed upper primary and secondary education in 2024 ('24) and 2019 ('19). Upper primary: Class VI to VIII; Secondary: Class IX and X  
■ In Kerala, of the 100 boys who started schooling, 99.6 completed upper primary in 2019, which improved further to 100 in 2024

State	Upper primary				Secondary			
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Kerala	99.6	100	100	100	88.3	95.7	93.2	97.5
HP	99.6	99.3	99.2	99.6	90.7	93.5	92.5	95.6
Tamil Nadu	99	100	97.5	100	81.3	89.2	89.4	95.6
Punjab	95.7	96.9	95.8	97.8	82.7	90	86.2	92.8
Uttarakhand	92.2	97.1	93.1	98.1	79.9	88.5	83.6	92.8
Goa	97.7	98	97.4	98.1	85.4	87.8	91.2	92.3
Maharashtra	97.1	99.3	96.3	99.5	83.4	88.3	83.5	90.5
Telangana	95.3	99.9	95.2	100	79.9	86.6	83.6	90.5
Delhi	96.7	99.4	99.2	99.4	82.6	87.8	85.5	90.3
Andhra	96.7	98.4	99.1	99.2	81.2	84.2	83.9	88.6
Odisha	92.2	97.8	91.1	98.3	80.4	83.7	83.9	87
UP	87.3	95.2	81.7	93.5	71.8	85.4	66.1	86.2
Tripura	91.4	94.7	93.9	96.1	62	84	64.2	86
West Bengal	92.4	100	97.1	100	73	78.5	77.5	85.8
Haryana	96.3	93	97.7	95.6	82.6	77.3	84	84.2
J&K	87.8	94.9	86.1	95.4	69.9	80.8	68.4	82.8
Chhattisgarh	88.9	91.8	90.2	94.2	64.7	71.6	74.6	81.6
Nagaland	82	88.8	86	90.6	56.3	76.6	63.5	79.5
Manipur	89	91.6	92.1	92.6	76.1	76	78.9	77.6
Mizoram	88.2	89.6	90.6	91.7	74.4	80.5	77.4	
MP	91.3	91.8	90.2	92.8	65.7	72.2	66.2	77.3
Sikkim	92.2	90.8	94.8	94.3	65.9	69.8	73.5	77.1
Rajasthan	91.2	84.8	90.8	86.6	78.6	72.6	78	76.9
Gujarat	91.5	96.3	89	95	65.7	73	67.8	76.7
Karnataka	100	95.2	99.5	96.1	73.6	70.7	79.3	76.5
Jharkhand	83.1	89.5	85.7	90.8	61	74.3	63.3	75.7
Arunachal	79.2	87.1	79.9	88.4	42.3	56.7	44.9	59.2
Assam	93.4	82.6	96.1	88.7	52.6	57.4	64.6	63.7
Meghalaya	70.7	77.8	76.5	82.1	49.8	54.6	58.2	61
Bihar	78.6	65	81.1	65.4	51.2	38.8	51.6	40.3
INDIA	91.1	92.7	90.6	93	72.4	77.2	73.5	80.4

■ In Bihar, of the 100 girls who started schooling, only 40.3 completed secondary education in 2024 compared to 51.6 of them in 2019

**Table 2:** The table ranks the States across each column based on the figures given in table 1. For instance, Karnataka was ranked number 1 in the first column as all the 100 boys who started schooling completed upper primary education in 2019

State	Upper primary				Secondary			
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Karnataka	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
HP	3	6	3	5	1	2	2	2
Tamil Nadu	4	1	7	1	8	4	4	2
Punjab	10	12	12	12	5	3	5	4
Uttarakhand	14	11	16	10	11	5	11	4
Goa	8	9	8	10	3	8	3	6
Maharashtra	9	6	11	6	4	6	12	7
Telangana	11	4	13	1	11	9	10	7
Delhi	5	5	3	7	6	7	6	9
Andhra	5	8	5	8	9	11	8	10
Odisha	16	10	18	9	10	13	8	11
UP	26	14	27	20	18	10	23	12
Tripura	18	17	15	13	25	12	25	13
West Bengal	13	1	9	1	17	15	17	14
Haryana	7	18	6	15	6	16	7	15
J&K	24	16	24	16	19	14	20	16
Chhattisgarh	22	19	21	19	23	24	18	17
Nagaland	27	25	25	25	27	17	26	18
Manipur	31	31	37	22	15	18	15	19
Mizoram	33	23	30	23	14	19	13	20
MP	10	19	21	21	22	23	22	21
Sikkim	14	22	14	18	20	26	19	22
Rajasthan	30	27	19	28	13	22	16	23
Gujarat	17	13	23	17	21	21	21	24
Karnataka	1	15	2	16	16	25	14	25
Jharkhand	28	24	26	24	26	20	27	26
Arunachal	28	26	29	27	30	27	30	27
Assam	12	28	10	26	24	28	24	28
Meghalaya	30	29	30	29	29	29	29	29
Bihar	29	30	28	30	28	30	29	30

■ In the first column, Meghalaya is ranked last as 39th of the 100 boys who started schooling, only 78.6 completed upper primary in 2019, the least among all States

## FROM THE ARCHIVES The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 2, 1975

## Move to delink jobs from degrees runs into difficulties

New Delhi, Jan. 1: A proposal mooted by the Union Education Ministry to delink jobs from degrees is running into difficulties. A preliminary sounding of various Economic Ministries has shown that none of them is in favour of employing persons who do not hold degrees even for class III posts.

The proposal is by no means a new one, and over 15 years ago, it was suggested by a committee headed by Mr. A. Ramaswami Mudaliar that a degree should not be considered a pre-requisite for certain kinds of jobs under the Government. But the Government has not accepted this suggestion and for most of the posts under both the Central and State Governments, a university degree is considered a must.

Suddenly the Education Ministry has come to think that the mad rush to colleges and universities could be reduced only if a degree was not insisted upon for certain types of jobs. Even here, the sponsors of the proposal in the Ministry are motivated only by a desire to restrict admission into higher institutes of learning rather than to throw open jobs which can be held by persons with lower educational qualifications to non-degree holders.

At a recent meeting of the Central Advisory Board of Education, considerable concern was expressed over the disillusionment that has set in among the educated youth because of the large-scale unemployment among them. The Education Minister made an announcement that shortly a committee would be set up to consider the question of delinking jobs from degrees.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 2, 1925

## The capital of Norway.

Leaflet (Oxford), Midnight, Jan. 1: The British Government has been officially notified by the Norwegian Government that Christiania from today reverts to its ancient name of Oslo.

In a leading article on the subject the Times says: "In this country all of us heartily desire that our relations with Oslo may be as friendly as our relations with Christiania have been for generations. We wish the capital of Norway continuation and expansion of the progress and prosperity which she has enjoyed and deserved."



Opinion

THURSDAY, JANUARY 2, 2025



● BIOTECH BOOM

Union minister Jitendra Singh

“2025 will witness India assuming critical role in the global biotechnology revolution. India is not only a leader in biotechnology but is now at the centre of a global biotech boom, which will foster innovation, create jobs, and strengthen environmental commitments”

No cause for alarm

Slower loan growth should help lower liabilities and boost household savings

THE NET FINANCIAL liabilities of India's households went up to ₹18.79 lakh crore in FY24 or 6.4% of gross domestic product (GDP). To be sure, this is a fairly substantial jump over the levels seen in the previous year when the liabilities were ₹15.96 lakh crore or 5.9% of GDP. An analysis by CareEdge had shown that to be the highest levels in many years and significantly higher than the pre-pandemic average of 3.4%. By that yardstick, the 6.4% of GDP for FY24 appears to be somewhat high. However, there is no reason for alarm. Given the proliferation of lenders — banks, fintechs, and non-banking financial companies — over the past decade, credit has been growing at a brisk pace in the last few years. Indeed, bank credit was growing at 15–16% before it slowed to the current levels of 11–12%. As a CRISIL analysis shows, households have been borrowing at a faster pace than they have been saving since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lenders have been disbursing both secured loans such as mortgages and unsecured loans including against credit cards. For instance, in the FY20-24 period, housing loans from banks saw a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 19%, faster than the pre-pandemic CAGR of 15.5% between FY09 and FY19. Personal loans from banks have grown at a CAGR of 18.2%, notably faster than the 15.1% CAGR reported in the pre-pandemic decade. Again, credit card debt grew at a CAGR of 21% in the FY20-24 period, far higher than the CAGR of about 12% in the decade of FY09-19. While mortgages form a big chunk of consumer loans, a substantial portion has been borrowed for consumption — staples, discretionary, education, and health. A part of this could turn into bad loans. However, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has moved to curb unsecured consumer lending, believing it was getting out of hand in the absence of real-time data on customers. Among the regulator's concerns was the fact that some individuals were taking two or three loans simultaneously without the lenders being aware of this. In November 2023, the RBI clamped down on unsecured credit. Lending norms were tightened with the risk weights for some unsecured retail loans raised from 100% to 125%, and the risk weights for credit card loans hiked from 125% to 150%.

This is one reason why household leverage might well plateau by the end of the current fiscal. That would, in turn, improve net financial savings. It is a fact that the substantial increase in financial liabilities impacted net household financial savings in FY24, pulling it down to 5.3% of GDP. While this was an improvement over the 5% of GDP in the previous year, economists estimated it to be a five-decade low. In that sense, there is room for improvement. At the same time, the preliminary estimates from the RBI show that the flows to gross financial assets at 11.6% of GDP improved from 10.9% in FY23, which is above average and therefore encouraging. In the current year too, flows into mutual funds have been strong, insurance premium collections are holding up, deposits are growing at 10–11%, and small savings too are growing. While the data for the current fiscal is not available, the weaker personal credit lending should help lower liabilities and boost savings. That's important because household savings bankroll a large proportion of the country's investment.

SEBI PROPOSAL SEEKS TO STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN REGULATORY CONCERNS AND INTERESTS OF STAKEHOLDERS

The future of algo trading

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing partner, Finsec Law Advisors



LAST MONTH, The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) proposed significant changes to its framework governing algo trading. To recap quickly, algorithmic trading, or algo trading, refers to any trading activity that automates trades, and does not require manual intervention to place any orders, or monitor prices.

There are two ways in which one can carry out algo trading. The straightforward method is to use the algorithms provided by the stock broker. The other route is through application programme interface (API), which enable electronic systems to connect with each other. Think of it as a data pipe which carries your algorithm. APIs enable the transmission of information, and as a result, a third party can create a code that will execute itself on the broker's platform.

In the context of algo trading, third parties provide their algo on say, platform X, which is connected to the broker's platform or through an API. Thus, orders placed by the client on platform X get passed on to the broker. Now, while a broker can identify that an order is coming in through an API, it cannot verify that the order is an algo order.

In 2021, concerned with the rise of unregulated algos, Sebi proposed to treat all API orders as algo orders. This was a flawed departure from its mission to encourage innovative and digital solutions in the securities market, as the regulator's proposal would have saddled connectivity between brokers and other sophisticated players linked to them for non-algo purposes. It appears that the proposal has been scrapped, and after extensive consultations with the industry, a more practical approach has been proposed. With respect to API orders, Sebi has suggested that an order per second (OPS) threshold be specified, and that all APIs

orders above such threshold would be treated as algo orders.

Second, Sebi has proposed to bring "algo providers" (APs) within the regulatory ambit. These would be agents of stockbrokers, similar to the present "authorised person" or the erstwhile sub-broker concept. APs would also have to register with the stock exchange and get their algos approved by the exchange. This would ensure that the broker is responsible for customer grievances, and the redress mechanism deployed by Sebi would be available to AP clients. Individuals who design their own algos would also have to get them approved by the stock exchanges through their broker.

The regulator has also sought to categorise algos into white box and black box algos. White box algos, also known as execution algos, are those which execute orders based on fully transparent algorithms, where the logic, decision-making processes, and underlying rules are accessible and understandable to users and replicable. Black box algos are those whose logic is not known to the user and is not replicable. For providing black box algos, one would be required to register as a research analyst, and for each algo a research report would have to be maintained. In case of any change in the algo logic, it would have to be registered afresh,

along with a new report.

The proposed framework places significant responsibilities on stockbrokers. They would have to put systems in place to detect, identify, and categorise all orders above the specified OPS threshold as algo orders. They would also have to ensure that they can distinguish between algo and non-algo orders. Further, brokers would no longer be permitted to offer open APIs, to ensure identification and traceability of the vendor and end user.

Whether such restrictions are required in view of measures like the OPS threshold may require more thought. APIs have uses beyond algo trading. The proposed circular should not stand in the way of such uses.

The stock exchanges would also have to do a fair bit of work. First, they must define the roles and responsibilities of brokers and empowered vendors, and lay down the criteria and process of vendor empanelment. A turnaround time must be specified for registration of algos, including a fast-track registration for some such as white box algos. Further, the exchanges would have to deploy additional resources. They would be required to conduct post-trade monitoring of algo orders and trades, and put in place a standard operating procedure for algo testing. Further, they must have the ability to use a kill switch to stop

A turnaround time must be specified to register algos, including a fast-track registration for some such as white box algos

malfunctioning algos. They would also have to supervise/inspect that stockbrokers have the ability to distinguish between algo and non-algo orders, as well as issue detailed operational modalities on the roles and responsibilities of stockbrokers and APs, including risk management systems for API orders.

The present proposal thus seems to be more carefully thought out, and seeks to adopt an approach that strikes a balance between the interests of stakeholders and Sebi's concerns. In another positive move, in its last board meeting of 2024, Sebi's board granted approval for the recognition of a "Fast Risk and Return Verification Agency" (FRRVA), which shall carry out the verification of risk-return metrics inter alia for algo trading.

There are still some points which may require rethinking as algo trading picks up, such as Sebi's earlier question of whether an algo should be a facility provided by a research analyst, investment adviser, or a separate class of regulated entities altogether. With the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI), roles, responsibilities, risks, and liabilities are getting redefined.

However, there are few items that may require consideration soon, if not now. For instance, algos may be designed by AI. Risks that may arise due to such instances must also be deliberated upon, along with the roles and responsibilities of the elements involved. While there may never be one right answer, and regulation of something as innovative as algos or AI-based algos is bound to create some unnecessary bureaucracy, it is important for the regulator to at least have a grip on something that could have systemic impact on the markets.

Co-authored with **Parker Kara** and **Pragna Garg**, respectively senior associates and associate, Finsec Law Advisors

Cutting through the hype on AI, RTO, and DEI

FROM A QUICK glance at 2024's top business headlines, you'd think all companies were pushing return-to-office (RTO) policies, embracing artificial intelligence (AI), and banishing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programmes. But as we head into 2025, let's remember that headlines don't always reflect reality.

Start with RTO mandates. The media loves a scary-bait-to-the-office headline. From the point of view of clicks, a strict five-day-a-week policy is gold. Even better? If that policy applies to liberal tech dwellers. Full points if it's a company that once promised to work remotely forever, like X when it was still Twitter.

These headlines gain attention because they play to some readers' anxieties — and others' Schadenfreude. But the reality is that most companies have accepted hybrid work. Even Elon Musk had to back off his declarations of full RTO at X, shortly after his initial, well-publicised demands, he conceded there'd be exceptions. He also shuttered some of the company's offices, meaning that all staff in those locations had to go fully remote.

I expect this duality to ramp up in 2025, with more companies loudly announcing returns to the office even as the majority quietly shrink their office footprints or continue to embrace hybrid arrangements.

On to generative AI. Since ChatGPT burst onto the scene two years ago, we've seen endless speculation about what such technology could do and how workers might use it. In 2024, 75% of employees used generative AI at work, according to a survey by EY; that's much higher than the 49% who said, in 2023, that they anticipated using it in the months to come.

But if the last two years have been a "bullet train", for AI, as my Bloomberg Opinion colleague Parny Olson wrote recently, we may be heading for a "slowdown at the station". That slowdown could presage the next, more realistic phase in the "hype cycle", a phrase coined by Gartner to describe technological change. First, a new technology triggers a surge in "inflated expectations", which is followed by a "trough of disillusionment" as the tech's limitations become apparent. Gradually, people figure out how the thing can actually be used, and people's expectations settle somewhere in between. We may be heading there with text-based generative AI in 2025.

But if the new year brings more measured coverage of AI, I expect the opposite is true of DEI. In the last couple of years, right-wing activists have made a punching bag of it. And I don't think President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House is going to convince them to hold their fire.

But the reality is messier than the DEI-doomer headlines suggest. Yes, some very large companies, intimidated by activist shareholders and legal threats, have announced changes to diversity programmes. But despite the backlash, many companies remain convinced that it is still important to do the core work associated with DEI programmes: recruit from the largest possible talent pool; assess workers accurately and fairly; without implicit bias; and foster an environment free of overt racial prejudice, gender hostility or sexual harassment. (Not least because such discrimination remains illegal and generates a far larger number of lawsuits than any "reverse discrimination" claims.)

Others will integrate data-driven DEI practices into core managerial functions — an approach that could actually yield better results for women and minorities. For example, rather than demanding every finalist pool contain at least one "diverse" candidate (a backlash-sparking practice that has not resulted in more diverse hiring), HR could insist that managers hire according to clear, objective, consistent criteria — including a concrete definition of "culture fit". An insurance company that followed this more rigorous approach ended up hiring 46% more minority applicants, according to scholarship by Joan C Williams.

We might be done with DEI as an acronym. But the practice, whatever we call it, will evolve to fit a new era. Evolving is something that we all have to do — but we can't do it skillfully unless we can cut through the hype.



SARAH G CARMICHAEL

Bloomberg

Virtual companions, real consequences

ROHIT KUMAR SINGH

Former secretary, Department of consumer affairs, & member, National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission

THE HEARTBREAKING STORY of Sewell Setzer III, a 14-year-old boy in the US who took his own life after forming an emotional attachment to an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot on Character.AI, has sparked debates about the ethical and legal responsibilities of AI developers. In the Indian context, this case raises profound questions about how our legal system should respond to similar tragedies involving AI.

**AI's role in mental health: A double-edged sword**

AI-powered chatbots are increasingly being used as companions, often designed to simulate human interaction and provide emotional support. While such systems can be beneficial for individuals seeking companionship or mental health assistance, they also pose significant risks, particularly when interacting with vulnerable populations like teenagers.

In Sewell's case, his mother believes that his obsession with an AI chatbot based on a fictional character from *Game of Thrones* contributed to his mental decline. The chatbot responded in ways that may have deepened his emotional distress rather than alleviating it. This tragic incident highlights the potential dangers of emotionally intelligent AI systems that are not equipped to handle complex human emotions responsibly.

**India's legal landscape: A lack of specific regulation**

In India, the legal framework surrounding AI is still evolving. Currently, there are no specific laws governing the use of AI in emotionally sensitive contexts.

However, existing laws such as the Information Technology Act (IT Act), 2000, and the Consumer Protection Act could potentially be invoked in cases where harm is caused by AI-based applications.

Under the IT Act, intermediaries (which could include platforms hosting AI chatbots) are granted certain protections from liability as long as they do not knowingly allow harmful content or interactions. However, this protection becomes murky when dealing with AI systems that can engage in personalised and emotionally charged conversations. If an AI chatbot were found to have contributed to a user's mental distress or suicide, could the platform be held liable? The answer is far from clear.

**Negligence and duty of care: Can developers be held accountable?**

In India, negligence is typically defined as a breach of duty that results in harm to another person. To establish negligence, it must be proven that the defendant owed a duty of care to the plaintiff; the defendant breached that duty; the breach caused harm or injury.

In the case of AI chatbots, one could argue that developers owe a duty of care to users who may form emotional attachments to these systems. If the chatbot's responses exacerbate a user's mental health issues or fail to direct them toward professional help when needed, this could potentially be seen as a breach of duty.

However, proving causality between an AI interaction and a tragic outcome like suicide is legally complex. In India's current legal environment, it would be difficult to hold developers directly responsible unless there was clear evidence that they had knowledge of the risks and failed to take appropriate action.

**The need for regulatory safeguards**

India must work on specific regulations governing AI systems' ethical use in sensitive areas like mental health. Potential regulations could include:

**• Transparency safeguards:** Developers could be required to implement safeguards in chatbots that detect signs of distress or suicidal ideation, and direct users toward professional help.

**• Ethical guidelines:** Just as doctors and therapists are bound by ethical guidelines when dealing with patients, developers creating emotionally intelligent AI systems should follow ethical standards designed to protect users from harm.

**Comparing international approaches: Lessons for us**

The US, where Sewell's tragedy occurred, is also grappling with how best to regulate AI systems. There are calls for

stricter oversight and clearer guidelines on how emotionally intelligent chatbots should interact with users. In *Moffatt vs Air Canada*, the British Columbia Civil Resolution Tribunal found Air Canada liable for misinformation given to a consumer by an AI chatbot on its website, and awarded damages. India can learn from global examples by proactively introducing regulations that ensure AI systems prioritise user safety — especially when interacting with vulnerable populations like children and teenagers. This could include requiring platforms hosting AI chatbots to conduct regular audits and risk assessments, mandating that algorithms include built-in mechanisms for detecting harmful behaviour.

**Call for collective responsibility**

While regulatory frameworks are essential, addressing tragedies like Sewell Setzer III's requires a collective effort from all stakeholders. Parents need to monitor their children's online interactions closely, especially when using emotionally intelligent AI systems. Educators and mental health professionals must raise awareness about the potential risks posed by these technologies.

As we continue integrating AI into our lives in increasingly intimate ways, it is imperative that we establish legal frameworks and ethical guidelines that safeguard users — particularly those who are most vulnerable — from unintended consequences. The tragic death of Sewell Setzer III serves as a sobering reminder of the power technology holds over our lives — and the urgent need for accountability in its development and deployment.

—RV Baskaran, Chennai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stagflation fears

The slowdown in the capex of India Inc is a direct consequence of the lack of demand. If this trend continues, it could lead to stagflation. The collections of direct taxes will have to be carefully monitored. Money supply has increased with all kinds of schemes being offered by the ruling political parties to remain in power. Without growth, this is a recipe for

stagflation and the condition of rural microfinance companies is already showing signs of stress. Small and medium-sized enterprises are facing difficulties in finding labour because of free rationality. It does not look like the government is too concerned about the structural problems; and once stagflation hits the economy it can rock the nation in unimaginable ways. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Climate financing

Apropos of "Here's why there's hope for climate financing" (FE, January 1), the COP29 summit at Baku ended on a disappointing note without any consensus on mobilising funds to support climate mitigation activities of developing countries. India dubbed the so-called agreement an "optical illusion". Smaller nations are squeezed between resource crunch and

fighting climate risks and greenhouse gas emissions that have been contributed largely by developed countries. Developing countries seek the proposed finance for climate mitigation to be provided in the form of grants and not loans. Besides, the terms of the finance proposed to raise \$300 billion annually are ambiguous. —RV Baskaran, Chennai

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