

THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani

Kejriwal's letter to RSS ploy to put BJP on mat

The election to the legislative assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, scheduled to be held in February, has started gaining national attention not because it is one of the most crucial elections of the country — seeing as the government there wields very little power compared with those in the big states of India — but because of the games the main players in Delhi's politics play ahead of the polls.

While two of the three main political parties in the state, the Aam Aadmi Party and the Congress, are part of the INDIA bloc at the national level that is aligned against the BJP and the government it heads at the Centre, they fight a bitter battle against each other in Delhi as well as in several other states. The BJP, the principal Opposition party, is leaving no stone unturned to ensure that the AAP does not win a fourth consecutive term. In fact, AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal has been alleging that the BJP is on a mission to get the names of the supporters of his party deleted from the voters' list.

Now, Mr Kejriwal has escalated his complaint against the BJP by writing a letter to the RSS chief asking if the organisation that heads the Sangh Parishad approves of the "wrong actions" the BJP engages in. Large scale efforts are being made to cut into the votes of the poor and dalits from the eastern region, and of slum-dwellers, he has told the RSS chief, and has wanted to know if the RSS believes it to be the right thing to do.

By complaining to the RSS leadership about the alleged mischief played by the BJP, Mr Kejriwal has succeeded in exposing the Sangh Parishad before the voters and also set the agenda for the election debate.

By complaining to the RSS leadership about the alleged mischief played by the BJP, Mr Kejriwal is successfully exposing the Sangh stance before the voters.

Delhi elections have been throwing up results that follow a certain pattern which is that voters here are not to stand solidly behind the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections but choose to turn to the AAP when it comes to running the government in the National Capital Territory. Thus, too, by anointing the RSS as the grand-uncle of the Hindutva Parishad and complaining to it about the delinquent nephew who is out to spoil the family function, Mr Kejriwal has almost won the first round.

As a government that can potentially face anti-incumbency, the former Delhi CM would want to consolidate his party's vote bank by setting the topic of the debate himself and forcing his adversary to respond to him. It is a ploy that the BJP has successfully employed in almost every election, but this time Mr Kejriwal has stolen a march over his rival.



India must rethink strategy at borders to contain China



Abhijit Bhattacharyya

With the dawn of 2025, amid the rising instability in our neighbourhood and beyond, India should take a fresh look at its political handling of the situation in our border states. August 1947 saw multiple birth pangs to our east and west, followed by the massacre of civilian populations. The end of the killings could not halt the simmering thoughts of revenge, which got embedded in the psyche of both Hindus and Muslims across the subcontinent, jeopardising the survival of minorities in several areas amid chronic confrontation. When the natural, seamless geography became the line of physical demarcation, separating the composite demography evolved over centuries, it gave birth to sub-human hatred, hostility and feelings of revenge.

What lay in the pages of history is resurfacing as scary reality in pockets of South Asia today, as India faces one of the most challenging times of the revenge of geography, an outcome of 1947's Partition. India's land border, as is well known, has always been a soft target for outsiders. Continental theorist Halford Mackinder had perceptively observed, "In the British Empire there's but one land frontier: the Northwest Frontier of India". Mackinder's was an astute observation, but today it can be expanded further, and include the whole of the northern and eastern borders of India. The efforts to fence the Pakistan and Bangladesh frontiers is laudable, but it loses effectiveness due to the non-fencing of Myanmar and Nepal borders. The country can't be protected by guarding two frontiers and two others unguarded.

Otherwise, the inevitable revenge of physical geography will be back to hit the political geography hard,

through myopic local politician-instigated restless and reckless demography, leading to more future political crises of mass killing. One may just look at India's neighbourhood of the earlier smaller, friendly states. Does the present scenario inspire mutual trust and confidence as in the past? All of them have faced political coups or upheavals, and the forced entry of the Communist Party of China, openly or by the backdoor, in a sub-Himalayan zone which was never its area of geopolitical interest. A country of India's size, or any country with some position and location features, can't ignore reality of geography. Society, the polity, economy, sociology, history, culture, civilisation, traditions — all are geography-guided, geography-influenced and geography-fused.

Today, the west-nighbour of India's northern landlocked neighbour Nepal has inexorably shifted its vision to the Pacific Ocean, despite being an integral part of South Asia's intertwined dynamics. Nepal joining CPC dictator Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative is the ultimate red line for India. All the more because the 1,750-km India-Nepal open land border constituted the worst nightmare as a number of hostile elements from China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal are bound to penetrate India's hinterland with ease. New Delhi has understandable concerns about the vulnerability of the Sikkim Corridor or the so-called "Chicken's Neck". But will an enemy only exploit the well-known Chicken's Neck to target the non-fencing of India's land border? Or will he make use of other easier routes to exploit the vulnerability of the vast open space spanning 1,750 km? Won't they follow Sun Tzu's Art of War of "surprise, deception, mobility"?

To our west, India's immediate neighbour has its poli-

One must consider the strange phenomenon that almost every Indian state bordering Nepal and Tibet (occupied by the Chinese Communists in 1950), has been internally partitioned and broken into new states

stan to be the easiest of targets. It just has to play the waiting game effectively. This is why the Indian government, the political system and the people in general need to do a major rethink on our border strategy: on the division of existing states and the creation of new border states, particularly in the northeastern region. Key threats to India's national security originate from the internal disturbances triggered by political disunity, putting the whole system into disarray by deflection from the "real issues".

Strangely, Indians haven't learnt the lessons of the 1947 Partition. One must consider the strange phenomenon that almost every Indian state bordering Nepal and Tibet (occupied by the Chinese Communists in 1950), has been internally partitioned and broken into new states. The state of Jammu and Kashmir became two Union territories; Punjab was broken into three states; Uttar Pradesh was split into two, as was Bihar; and the single state of Assam was carved into five states.

The creation of smaller states may serve short-term political interests, but has anyone calculated the devastating strategic dimension of partitioning states which border China, Nepal and erstwhile East Pakistan? Won't it only help neighbours expand their reach into the sub-Himalayan terrain to expand their zone of influence across South Asia? Does such partitioning create stability or sow the seeds of enduring political hostility? Does it help India build a stable polity or enable China the opportunity to sow seeds of perpetual internal conflict and disharmony?

India must conduct a long-term cost-benefit analysis of the geographical parceling of border states due to internal bickering, hatred and hostility, enabling hostile powers to fish in troubled waters and destabilise the polity and destroy its economy. The matter is urgent, there's no time to lose.

Further to the east, varied ethnic groups whose differences with each other have given an opportunity to hostile external forces to exploit divisions and sow mischief. This kind of behaviour by the Han-dominated CPC is unlikely to cease anytime in the foreseeable future. The turbulence of the polity in India's Northeast has deepened its penetration of the South Asian land mass.

Going south, towards the great Indian Ocean, the transgression and severity of some island nation is getting harder to preserve. The naval dragon is reluctant to allow port, big or small, to further in India's vicinity without being gobbled up under the ambit of the CPC's Belt and Road Initiative. For this and other reasons, the CPC finds Hindu-

stan to be the easiest of targets. It just has to play the waiting game effectively. This is why the Indian government, the political system and the people in general need to do a major rethink on our border strategy: on the division of existing states and the creation of new border states, particularly in the northeastern region. Key threats to India's national security originate from the internal disturbances triggered by political disunity, putting the whole system into disarray by deflection from the "real issues".

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The writer is an alumnus of the National Defence College, New Delhi. The views expressed here are personal.

LETTERS WHAT'S THE SECRET?

Chief minister of Manipur N. Biren Singh seems to have come out of his stupor and apologised. It has taken him a good 19 months to acknowledge his shortcomings. But the question arises; why now? Is there something we yet don't know that has caused the CM to apologise? This puts the Prime Minister in an awkward position as his silence on the issue will be questioned again. The man should have been sacked a long time ago to pave the way for peace in the region.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

LET THEM WEAR SHIRTS

SOME HINDU organisations in Kerala are reportedly divided over the suggestion on allowing men entering temples in the state wearing shirts, as most temples in the state have a strict ban on this practice for years. But, one wonders if wearing a particular set of clothes brings about any change in the devotion quotient of the person. Also, it is wrong to say that our choice of clothing reflects our belief in the almighty. Since most temples hold that devotees should be entering the premises wearing decent clothes, one also wonders who decides the ideal outfit for the devotee. In some temples it is a practice for men who remove their shirts to cover their body with a towel or shawl. So, when some kind of clothing is allowed, why can't it be a proper shirt?

R. Sivakumar
Chennai

RESTORE BOOK POST

THE COMMUNICATION ministry has recently stopped the India book post service. The stopping of this service will hit small publishers, particularly in rural areas, the hardest. The above services were very useful for small publishers who used this platform to promote their books. In addition to this, many libraries in India used this service. They will now have to use costly methods for ordering new books. There is already a lack of the reading habit in India. Stopping this service will affect this adversely. The ministry should, therefore, review this move.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

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Shobha Sengupta

Changing avatar of reading, writing & selling books, art in social media age

Over two decades ago, I started a bookstore and art gallery in Gurgaon, when peacocks landed on verandas and goats with tinkling bells passed in nearby mustard fields. I vaguely envisioned quiet folks would be my readers and not disturb my own reading. Little did I realise I had set up an ocean of life, people and ideas.

Within a year, I learnt to break out of my crabby shell. I understood that in order to survive, I had to talk. Otherwise, how would I sell anything? It was communication that gave my business.

So, from reader and a gawping appreciator of art I couldn't ever afford myself, I turned into a salesperson. I enjoyed the transition into confidence and visibility, and found that my neighbours were gradually becoming a community of sorts. My first readers educated me and chided me on my lack of stock and together we evolved into solidity and substance.

In a few years, the store expanded, and people would bump into friends and books/art shopping would become a social event. I was witness to interesting interactions, and learnt much about my readers, whom I learnt to appreciate further. Everyone I knew knew each other.

Then 2011 was upon us. The Internet exploded. There was Flipkart and then Kindle. Pirated, free PDFs of the latest books were downloaded. I was gleefully shown these by customers. I was scolded for not being competitive in pricing (what about

MRP. I wailed. I was even told by some to get a Kindle myself because it was so convenient! I was thoroughly confused. Had everyone forgotten I was a plain, mouldy bookseller?

Large bookstores chains had not jolted my equanimity as much as these "alarmist" developments. My dreams of expansion had ended, and I decided to consolidate. One store was enough, and I gave up the other. Thankfully, there were still many beautiful readers who swore undying loyalty to the printed page and who couldn't live without the fragrance of the physical book. So, I soldiered on, albeit somewhat faintly, expanding my art by tailoring my stock of books according to the needs of people in the times of the Internet.

These were only heralds of the galloping age of technology. The social media, unheard of a few years ago, became a trendsetter. There was so much to read and so much distraction!

All these past years, I had been told by my community that they would not read any Indian writing, no matter how hard I tried to persuade them otherwise. Chetan Bhagat and a few others had done some damage to the perception — but interestingly, elsewhere, they sold more copies than writers with literary aspirations did.

Now, with the social media's advent, I entered a new phase in my existence as a bookstore owner. Facebook was a babel ensnare, but then arrived Twitter and Instagram. I meandered into everything gradually, and in wonderment. What was

happening to this ever expanding yet contracting world?

Then suddenly, a boom. Indian writing was mushrooming at a fantastic pace. In Gurgaon, where I was so proud to lead readers into the world of books, everyone had become a writer instead. What had just happened? I was bemused. Friends wanted me to display their books — and now that they were writing, many certainly didn't feel the need to read, and would not tend to look at the sparkling array of books on display. Besides, as an editor and book critic, I found any kind of honest feedback on their books backfiring, and what popularity I had gained over the years was now beginning to slide downhill. Why was I recommending Anna Karenina and not their books, and why was I not displaying their books prominently? Well, what sort of a bookseller was I?

There were many artists too in this ever-growing Gurgaon. Couldn't I host them? What I thought I was: the Tate Gallery? I was in a quandary, and was beginning to lose friends who had stopped reading because they were writing or painting. Fortunately, paranoid entrepreneurship forces me to be nimble and adaptable, and I learnt to shapeshift, and humbly so.

Now, we host book launches and art fairs with aplomb, and I have grown to love every aspiring debut writer and artist, waits for it. We sell more books during book launches and more art during art fairs than we sell on regular days. We have a

book club for our serious readers. And here comes the twist: literally, every society complex in Gurgaon has a book club (probably reading on Kindle, or listening to an accented audible as book sales have not grown exponentially).

This mental exercise is now coupled with drinking, walking or cooking, etc. Some folks have decided that curling up with a book is a waste of time.

Most authors and artists are now permanently on social media, spending more time promoting their books and art than they did in writing or creating them. Well, why not? If Vincent Van Gogh had done some promotional marketing, he probably wouldn't have died in poverty. And he would have certainly sold more than one piece of his eight hundred!

Alongside writers and artists, bookstores and art galleries now believe in digital marketing and content creation. We proudly tout our popularity, instead of being the silent refuge of the thinking person. What should be today's slogan in the age of Descartes? "I think, therefore, I am"? "I am on display, therefore I am"? So now, booksellers are delving into event management and splashing their triumphs all over the social media. If you did it, then you jolly well flaunt it: that is the new mantra!

The writer runs the Quill and Canvas bookstore-art gallery in Gurgaon



Show of strength: NCP chief Sharad Pawar addressing party workers at the Y.B. Chavan Centre in Mumbai on July 5, 2023, days after a group of party MLAs led by Ajit Pawar joined the Mahayuti government. EMMANUEL YOGINI

The tick-tock of the Pawar family clock

A 2023 split in the Nationalist Congress Party, one of Maharashtra's regional powerhouses helmed by Sharad Pawar, who has been in politics for about 60 years, has altered the course of the State's politics. With his nephew Ajit gaining political ground and the third generation of Pawars learning the ropes, **Vinaya Deshpande Pandit** gauges how the battle for succession has impacted the family itself and the State as a whole

Sahab is definitely hurt that importance was given to personal political ambitions over the family," says Vitthal Maniar, 86, sitting in his office in a crowded lane of Nana Perh in Maharashtra's Pune. *Sahab* is Maniar's college friend and NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar, who turned 84 on December 12, 2024. Maniar had fought and lost a college election against Sharad, but gained a lifelong friend. The families are so close that Ajit Pawar, 65, Sharad's nephew, calls him *Kaka* (father's brother).

Maniar is referring to the "personal political ambitions" of Ajit, who is now holding the post of Deputy Chief Minister for the sixth time. In mid-2023, Ajit had split from the centrist Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), co-founded by Sharad in 1999, taking along with him a majority of its MLAs. He then joined hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, partners in the ruling Mahayuti alliance.

Since its inception, the NCP has never formed a government on its own, though it has almost always been part of the ruling alliance in the State. It has been one of the strongest regional forces, an umbrella under which sugar barons and regional satraps from resource-rich western Maharashtra gather. Sharad has been Chief Minister four times and his family has businesses in sugar, other agro-industries, realty, and the media.

Today, the Pawar empire is in flux, with six members of the family in active politics and the third generation keen to prove its mettle. While the ongoing tussle between uncle and nephew has drawn national attention, at the heart of the family disruption is the question of who will inherit Sharad's six-decade-old political legacy.

At the polls

Ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha poll, Ajit's faction was given the NCP's name and 'clock' symbol. Sharad's group, NCP (SP), was treated as a faction and allotted the symbol of 'a man blowing a trumpet' (*tutari vajavara maanus* in Marathi). While the matter is sub judice, it was a blow to the patriarch. Days after his trusted aides left him, reporters asked Sharad who was with him. He promptly raised his own hand and smiled.

In the Assembly election to 288 seats in November 2024, the NCP won 41 out of the 56 seats it contested, while the NCP (SP) secured only 10 out of the 86 seats it contested. For the first time in his political career, Sharad, who has never lost an election he has contested, did not address media-persons the day the results were declared.

The next day, he said at a press conference that the results were "unexpected", but he would



Whatever happens, the fact is that we are a family, and we will continue to be a family

SUNETRA PAWAR
Rajya Sabha member and Ajit Pawar's wife

not resign from politics. "That is a call that my colleagues and I will take. There was clear polarisation of votes in this election," he said in Karad, where he goes every year to pay tribute to his political mentor and the first Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Yashwantrao Chavan, on his death anniversary. "People say the use of money during this election was unprecedented," he said.

"Though he will not fight any polls, that man can never retire from politics. He eats, drinks, and breathes politics. He loves going among people. It works as a tonic for him," his daughter Supriya Sule, 55, four-time MP from Baramati, had said at *The Hindu's* 'Poll Arena', a political conclave held days before the Assembly election, vouching for her father's love for public life.

Pawar power

Sharad was one of 10 children and born in Baramati, which became his political and business stronghold. Here, among sugarcane farmers, wheat growers, and grape exporters, amid lush green fields of village landscapes and city pockets, he established sugar cooperatives, research and educational institutes, and cultural centres. Today, Baramati's Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation has over 400 companies.

Here, people talk fondly of the octogenarian, but there is a hushed discussion about Ajit's

work. "The people of the State have decided — *Tai* (Supriya Sule) for the Centre and *Dada* (Ajit) for the State," says a person on condition of anonymity.

"Sharad flexed his muscles against an established politician in the 1960s, an unthinkable act then," says Satish Khomne, 72, who has been the NCP (SP) chief's political supporter since the 1970s. "He brought foreign associations for horticulture development and irrigation; he brought companies for investment. He showed Baramati what development meant. He was the one who brought in Ajit. But we know even today, *Sahab* has an eye on Baramati," he says.

A former Union Agriculture Minister and Defence Minister, and a leader with multi-party reach, Sharad is a pillar of the INDIA bloc, a grouping of 30-odd parties that was formed to fight the BJP in the Lok Sabha election. His supporters say he holds the power to bring together unlikely leaders. "His friendships with political opponents and adversaries are legendary.... His networking skills are formidable and those skills are much needed when politics takes on a bitter partisan flavour, as it does every now and then," Congress leader Sonia Gandhi had said of Sharad during his 75th birthday celebrations in 2015.

Sharad institutionalised women's reservation in local self-government bodies in Maharashtra. It was during his tenure as Defence Minister that



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BARAMATI RESIDENT

women were inducted into non-medical roles in the Army. However, he has also been associated with several alleged scams and controversies, both as a Minister and cricketing body head.

Congress leader K.V. Thomas had in 2014 called him a "backstabber" for revolting against Sonia in 1999. So had Shiv Sena leader Anant Geete in 2021. It was only poetic justice, say critics, that his own nephew betrayed him to join hands with the BJP. Many likened Ajit's move to his uncle's in 1978, when Sharad rebelled and toppled Vasantdada Patil's government to become the youngest Chief Minister at 38 years.

In 2019, when Ajit joined hands with the BJP for the first time, Shalini Patil, the wife of Vasantdada, had said, "The way Sharad behaved with Vasantrao, he must have got a similar experience from his family when Ajit aligned with the BJP."

A matter of succession

In the Lok Sabha poll, Ajit's wife, Sunetra Pawar, contested against his cousin Sule in Baramati. Shrinivas Pawar, Ajit's elder brother, who heads the Sharayu Group of companies in Mumbai, which deals in agri-business, automobile dealerships, security solutions, among others, led the public expression of the family's displeasure.

During the election campaigning, Ajit appealed to Baramati's electors to vote for a "Pawar", in an obvious reference against his cousin 'Sule' and in favour of his wife. Sharad had hit back saying, "There is nothing wrong in seeking votes for Pawar. There is the original Pawar and the one coming from outside." Finally, Sule won.

"I do feel bad that I have to contest against a family member. Whatever happens, the fact is that we were a family, we are a family, and we will continue to be a family," Sunetra had said.

During the election, the other Pawars had campaigned for Sule. She maintained that this was a battle of ideologies and she would contest on the basis of her work for the constituency.

Ajit later termed his wife contesting against Sule a "mistake" and appealed to Sharad not to field a family member against him as a candidate in Baramati in the Assembly election. Sharad did just that and fielded Yugendra Pawar, 32, Shrinivas's son, who lost by over 1 lakh votes to his uncle. Ajit was back as MLA for the eighth time.

During the Assembly election, the rest of the family actively campaigned against Ajit, with Sharad's politically reclusive wife Pratibha, referred to as *Kaki*, also hitting the ground in favour of Yugendra. In a lasting image, Pratibha, along with Sule's daughter, Revati, in her 20s, was seen standing in front of a banner that read: "*Mhatara jithe jaaty, chagbhala hotay* (Wherever the old man goes, it changes the winds)."

During his election campaign, Yugendra had said of his uncle Ajit: "Today, he has left Pawar *Sahab*, his ideology, and has taken the party with him. But people love Pawar *Sahab*."

The ascent of Ajit

Things were different even during Deepavali, which at least 50 members of the Pawar clan usually celebrate together in Baramati. This time, the festival came during peak election campaigning. For the first time, the family had two separate celebrations in Baramati, one at Govindnagar, where Sharad and most of the family assembled; the other at Katwadi, where Ajit celebrated and met people at a 'Janata darbar'.

A few months before the Lok Sabha election, Ajit while addressing NCP office-bearers in Mumbai said old people should sit at home and let the next generation handle affairs. Within months, Sharad's NCP (SP) had contested 10 seats in the Lok Sabha poll and won eight. Fortunes were reversed in the Assembly election, though the NCP (SP)'s vote share was larger than the NCP's.

Nareesh Arora, who heads Design Boxed, a poll campaign management company, says it was a challenge managing Ajit's image. "One perception was that he was arrogant, rude. That needed to be changed. He is actually a very jovial person, but never connected with people that way. So, we designed a campaign around this," he says.

The party organised the Jan Samman Yatra, which boosted the morale of NCP workers and put Ajit in the midst of his electorate. "He was always seen as someone who sat in the Mantiralya (State Secretariat) and got work done. The yatra got him to mix with people. People liked that he cracked jokes and smiled. This was different from the image of the person who worked from early morning, got agitated with officials who didn't deliver, and rebuked them in public," says Arora.

Kiran Gujar, who micromanned Ajit's campaign, had said during the election, speaking through a pile of papers, local manifestos, and booth management sheets in Baramati: "There are over 1.5 lakh rural voters and 1 lakh urban voters in Baramati. There are 386 booths in 117 villages. We have 11,760 booth *karyakartas* (workers) who are actively working in this election."

Surrounded by party workers asking for directions, Gujar had said the biggest plus was that *Dada's* work spoke for itself.

On December 12, Ajit, Sunetra, and senior NCP colleagues visited Sharad's Delhi residence to wish him on his 84th birthday. They were greeted by Sule, who almost hugged Sunetra and lovingly kissed her nephew Parth. At the time, the Mahayuti government had not been able to decide on a Cabinet almost 20 days after a decisive mandate. Soon, Ajit was given the post of Deputy CM.

Several leaders close to the Pawar family members say it will be difficult for them to bury their differences anytime soon. "It does not look like Sharad will support the BJP," says a leader. However, another leader says, "The Pawars are like water. You can try to hit water with a stick, but you will not be able to divide it."



NCP leaders and cousins Supriya Sule and Ajit Pawar in Mumbai, months before the party split in 2023. EMMANUEL YOGINI



Force of ideas

The Islamic State must not be allowed to regain foothold in West Asia

The truck attack in the French Quarter of New Orleans, on New Year's Day, killing at least 15 people and wounding 30, suggests that the threat of low-tech, lone wolf attacks has not gone away. The attacker, identified as 42-year-old Shamsud-Din Jabbar, an American citizen who had served in the military, was killed in a shoot-out. Police found an Islamic State (IS) flag and explosives in his truck. Just hours earlier, Jabbar had posted videos on social media, indicating that he was inspired by the IS. In recent months, the IS, a terrorist organisation founded in Iraq and Syria, and now present across geographies, has released propaganda videos asking its "soldiers" to strike during celebrations in western cities in the holiday season. A few hours after the New Orleans attack, a Tesla Cybertruck exploded in front of the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas, killing at least one person and injuring several. Police later said Jabbar, the suspected New Orleans attacker, did not act alone, and are investigating any potential link between the truck attack and the cybertruck explosion.

The IS, which lost its physical Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, has been trying to revive its lost fortunes. The terror group survived as an insurgency, shifted its centre of operations to Afghanistan (Islamic State-Khorasan), where it carries out attacks, targeting the country's Shia minority, and opened new networks in Africa. When the IS was at its peak in 2014-15, it had successfully globalised terror — any sympathiser could hold the IS flag, declare loyalty to the 'Caliph' and unleash attacks against the "infidels". World cities, from Dhaka to Orlando and Istanbul to Belgium, witnessed dozens of IS-inspired attacks. These have ebbed, partly due to the destruction of the IS 'caliphate' and partly due to enhanced security measures and deradicalisation programmes. But now that Syria is in transition following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime, the IS is trying to rebuild itself. Kurdish fighters in Syria's east, who played a pivotal role in defeating the Islamists in 2015-16, say IS militants have looted government weapons' depots and are preparing for a comeback. The New Orleans attack should serve as a warning signal for the U.S. The IS should not be allowed to regain a foothold in conflict-ridden West Asia. Besides, the U.S. should also get to the roots of the radicalisation of American citizens and counter it. Organisations such as the IS should be fought with both force and ideas.

Cost and benefit

India cannot hand over Sheikh Hasina to the unelected Yunus government

Amidst signs that New Delhi and Dhaka are trying to resolve other issues that have marred their ties in the last few months, the issue of Bangladesh's demand that India extradite Sheikh Hasina remains intractable, with neither side budging. In December, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misra was able to convey during his Dhaka visit, that India remains a friend. He also reaffirmed the continuity in ties in trade, energy, infrastructure and connectivity; the two sides appear to have calmed the situation at the border as well. Finally, the government indicated to a parliamentary committee that while Ms. Hasina remains in Delhi as India's guest, it had no truck with her political pronouncements and messages targeting Mr. Yunus. The situation seemed to shift last week, as Bangladesh sent New Delhi a "note verbale" or diplomatic missive demanding Ms. Hasina's extradition to face trial for cases that include corruption, and a Dhaka-based International Crimes Tribunal charge that she had perpetrated "crimes against humanity" in ordering a police crackdown on student protesters. The India-Bangladesh extradition treaty of 2013, amended in 2016, sets out the course of procedures quite clearly, which needs to be pursued through a more formal representation from Bangladesh to India. The note verbale appears to be meant only to assuage domestic political constituencies, while India's External Affairs Ministry's response — not rejecting it outright — seems to be a non-escalatory way of dealing with the situation.

While the legalities of the request can be the subject of protracted negotiations, it is important to ensure that the issue does not hold India-Bangladesh relations hostage. The Yunus government must understand that the history of India's relationship with Ms. Hasina and her family is forged in the sacrifices made in both countries for the liberation of Bangladesh. The assassination of her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and members of her family in 1975, and her first exile in India, strengthened the bond. It is futile to expect that India would simply hand Ms. Hasina over, when she has sought refuge here, and no amount of coercive pressure could force an Indian government to comply. The decision to shelter the Dalai Lama in 1959, for example, has not wavered despite Chinese pressure. Furthermore, bringing Ms. Hasina to account is not the mandate of the interim regime, and should be pursued by a government duly elected by the Bangladeshi people. In Delhi, there must be a recognition that the actions of Ms. Hasina's government have scarred the nation. The fact that she is making political statements with ease from Indian soil is likely to embitter ties and New Delhi must conduct a full cost-benefit analysis of how helpful these statements are. Given the consequences of a tense border and geopolitical turmoil, both countries must learn to deal with the issue diplomatically — in a separate silo from other aspects of their important relationship.

Remembering the impactful legacy of wise leadership

The passing of Manmohan Singh should be an occasion for evaluating the lasting legacy of the work initiated in the 1991 economic reforms, by him as the Finance Minister, and his team of high-calibre economists, Ministers and professionals (Montek Singh Ahluwalia, C. Rangarajan, P. Chidambaram, Shankar Acharya, and many others), and continued during his term as Prime Minister. Much has already been written on the animal spirits released by the 1991 economic reforms. But the period 2004-14, and the decade that followed, stand in such contrast that it is worth investigating them using verifiable government data — not views that reflect the observer's ideological predilections.

Five outcomes stand out, affecting citizens' lives, and which laid the foundations of a hastened pace of structural change that could have led India to become a high-income/high-human development index country by the 2040s.

Appropriate macroeconomic policies

First, the savings rate had begun to rise ever since the demographic dividend set in in the early 1980s. The rise in savings/GDP ratio — and corresponding growth in the investment to GDP rate — was the basis for the ensuing rise in the GDP growth rate. Thus, by 2003-04, the savings rate had risen to 23% of GDP and investment to 24% of GDP. However, appropriate macroeconomic policies enabled this to be translated into raising the investment to GDP from 24% to 38% over the next six years. This was the highest ever that India had achieved — nearing, though still below, Chinese investment rates. The resulting growth averaged 8.5% per annum over 2004-05 to 2008-09 (under the Indian Progressive Alliance I). Although helped by a booming international economy, export growth (15%-18% per annum) could not have been maintained without real effective exchange rates being maintained at stable levels.

Despite the global economic crisis of 2008-09, GDP growth dipped for a few quarters before recovering quickly, because of a well-designed fiscal/monetary policy stimulus so that the 2009-14 period also saw 7.5% p.a. Thus, the overall growth rate over 2004-14 averaged 7.8% p.a., which was unprecedented in India's history.

Second, the growth encompassed all sectors — the unorganised and organised. Not surprisingly, aggregate demand was sustained, as all growth engines were firing (public and private investment, final consumption, exports, and government). Hence, non-farm jobs grew at a rate of 7.5 million p.a., which itself was unprecedented. Except agriculture (where workers fell, a good thing), all sectors generated jobs. Construction jobs grew from 26 million in 2004 to 51 million in 2012 (or nearly doubled); manufacturing jobs increased by 8 million, especially, but not only in the labour-intensive sectors (that account for half of all manufacturing



Santosh Mehrotra

led divisions in the Planning Commission (2006-14), authored the 11th and 12th Plans, and was professor of economics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

employment) from 52 million to 60 million; as did jobs in modern services (telecom, sale/distribution of cars, financial intermediation/banking, insurance and pensions, airlines, railways, and health and education). Structural change in the economy, slow for half a century, really gathered momentum.

Third, until 2004-05, non-farm jobs had grown so slowly that although migration from farm to non-farm occurred, never did the absolute number of workers in agriculture fall. But, for the first time in India's post-independence history, the absolute number of workers on farms actually fell after 2004, as non-farm job growth was high. This had the effect of tightening the labour market in rural areas over the entire period till 2014, helped by the government emerging as employer of last resort through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005.

Fourth, the combined effect of non-farm jobs and tightening rural labour market was to raise real wages, which rose all the way till 2015. This was true for casual wage work as well as regular/salaried work. Finally, as real wages rose, private final consumption expenditure continued to rise, especially of simple consumer goods. For the first time in India's history, the absolute number of poor fell — which had never occurred from 1950. The incidence of poverty fell from 1973-74, but the absolute number of poor remained very sticky (due to population growth) till 2004-05. Between 2004-05 and 2011-12, the number of people who rose above the poverty line was 138 million — an achievement of staggering, almost Chinese, proportions.

Poorly designed and badly implemented Goods and Services Tax was another shock that MSMEs and the unorganised sector were unprepared for. For the next nine quarters, GDP growth rates fell. Finally, the unnecessary national, very strict lockdown led to the Indian economy contracting by 5.8% in FY21 when the global economy only contracted during COVID-19 by 3.1%.

Second, overall unemployment jumped from 2.2% in 2011-12 to a 45-year high of 6.1% in 2017-18 (NSSO). The number of those jobless tripled from one crore in 2011-12 to three crore in 2017-18. It rose again by at least 70 lakh by 2022. Jobs had grown by 75 lakh per year in industry and

services between 2004 and 2013, and only 29 lakh per year between 2013 and 2019. This is a 61% drop in jobs as the population of India grew by 10%. Youth unemployment is still double, from 6% in 2011-12 to 11% in 2022-23. The unemployment rate for graduates and postgraduates is about 33% — one in three looking unsuccessfully for a job. This is why engineers are becoming coolies and doctoral degree holders are applying for railway peon jobs.

Third, the process of structural change that had gathered momentum has been reversed, forcing India's youth back into farming. For 15 years (2004-19), the number of agricultural workers declined by 6.7 crore between 2004-05 and 2017-18. This entire progress has been fully reversed between 2020 and 2024 — with eight crore workers added to agriculture. Never in world history, perhaps, has such a regressive reverse migration occurred.

This is happening because manufacturing (especially unorganised) took the brunt of job losses. 'Make in India' failed. The share of manufacturing in the economy fell since 2015, falling from a consistent 17% of GVA for the previous 25 years, and hitting an all-time low of 13% in 2022. Assembling expensive IP phones using imported parts from China hardly generates jobs. Reviving labour intensive industries such as garments, textiles, furniture, leather goods and processed food does. These are precisely the industries that lost jobs — and also exports. The number of workers in manufacturing was 600 lakh in 2012; it fell to 567 lakh by 2019, the last year before COVID-19. By 2022, it had barely gone up to 629 lakh, in 2022, despite all the talk about 'Make in India'.

Distress and unpaid work

The Modi government has neglected exports. Merchandise exports grew four times, from \$77 billion in 2004 to \$323 billion in 2014. Between 2014 and 2022 they grew only one-and-a-half times to \$454 billion. With less production for global markets, there were fewer jobs.

Fourth, wage growth has also suffered. The share of regular salaried workers in total employment, which was 23.8% in 2019 before COVID-19, fell to 20.9%. Unpaid family workers, whose numbers had fallen from 11.4 crore in 2004 to 8.5 crore in 2012, and then by 2017 to 6.2 crore, have risen sharply to 10.4 crore by 2023. This showed that distress has driven these family members (mostly children and women) into work to support the family. But they are unpaid. This makes the unemployment rate look better than before, clearly misleading. Gold-based loans, and defaults on them, are rising daily today.

These reversals have put the earlier achievements under grave threat, and now give legitimate rise to concerns whether India will realise its demographic dividend before 2040. The growing inequality and constrained aggregate demand now may be putting paid to the prospects of India becoming 'Viksit Bharat'.

After 2015, not one of the life-changing transformations in the lives of ordinary Indians was sustained

Reflections as the world grows more 'polarised'

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election prompted contemplation of a "divided" United States in terms of politics and society, bolstered by waves of fake news amid a post-truth era. In his book *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (2019), academic Nolan McCarty explores the social, economic, and geographic factors that contribute to polarisation in America, walking readers through both what is known and unknown about the causes, evolution, and ramifications of the nation's growing political conflicts.

America has recently appeared to be defined by profound political, cultural, and societal divides as Mr. Trump won a second term in 2024. And along with nine other words, "polarization" was chosen as the 2024 word of the year by Merriam-Webster, the U.S.'s premier dictionary.

The term "polarization" — defined as "division into two sharply distinct opposites; especially, a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but have become concentrated at opposing extremes" — has become widely used in the media and in public discourse, and has become a significant aspect of modern life. While MSNBC perceived the 2024 presidential election as having left America "more polarized than ever", and Fox News reports that "[Vice-President-elect J.D.] Vance's debate answer on immigration crisis shows voter polarization", Forbes has cautioned that "cultural polarization is becoming a pressing challenge" in workplaces. Indeed, in October, Merriam-Webster stated that new terms such as "far left" and "far right," as well as "MAGA" — the abbreviation for Mr. Trump's divisive "Make America Great Again" movement — would be included in its dictionary in 2024. Vice-President Kamala Harris warned of fascism under Mr. Trump during the heated election, while Mr. Trump used derogatory language and said his



Atanu Biswas

Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

opponent was running on "destruction". The election was so divisive that many Americans believed that the other candidate posed an existential threat to the U.S. when they cast their ballots.

About eight out of 10 Harris supporters were very or somewhat concerned that Mr. Trump's beliefs, but not Harris', were too radical, while roughly seven out of 10 Trump supporters felt the same way about Ms. Harris, but not Mr. Trump, according to AP VoteCast, a poll of over 1,20,000 people.

The usage of the word is one aspect that is not polarised. According to Peter Sokolowski, editor at large for Merriam-Webster, "it's something that actually everyone agrees on" to put it in a slightly sardonic way. However, "polarization" has more than only political meanings. The controversy over Taylor Swift's use of a private jet and the Drake-Kendrick Lamar feud (they are rappers) are perceived to be polarising.

"Polarization" refers to beyond America also. Globally, centrist policies are being destroyed. Maybe Emmanuel Macron, the centrist French leader, or Olaf Scholz, the centre-left German leader, can better attest as to what it means if society is increasingly polarised. The insanity of the "other side" — in our politics, at work, or at home — confounds us. Even the "us vs. them" rift may frequently be trembling a political society such as ours.

A germination that began much earlier

However, to believe that polarisation is as recent as Mr. Trump's presidency or that Trump or Trump-like individuals are to blame for today's polarised world would be a grave mistake. The seeds were sown a long time ago. Although it is evident from the current political environment that extreme viewpoints are growing in popularity, McCarty contended that these divisions have been developing for several

decades and are firmly anchored in the way politics and society are structured.

For instance, American culture has seen significant transformation in recent decades, from changing social group relationships and language and behavioural standards to the rising importance of a college degree. In fact, the 1950s-60s civil rights struggles influenced the partisan culture conflicts of today. And decades before the parties' split on these issues, opinions regarding civil rights were already associated with a variety of other culture war beliefs — much earlier than previous scholarship realised. However, since the 1970s, income and wealth disparities have increased dramatically, which has exacerbated existing polarisation.

In the modern context

In recent years, there has been a notable technological revolution. Thus, "polarization" in the modern world can also be viewed through the prism of the shifting global order brought about by social media, the Internet, and artificial intelligence. Yes, Professor Chris Bail critically investigated the underlying causes of political tribalism on social media in his book, *Breaking the Social Media Prism* (2021). It raises an interesting question: do our social media networks impact people's political views? Or do people's political views shape our networks?

Prof. Bail's research highlights how today's political polarisation is exacerbated by the widening gap between social media and in-person encounters. His analogy of social media as a prism refracting, rather than mirroring, perfectly captures how it can skew how people see themselves and other people. And the AI genie also continues to transform social media and our way of life. The "us vs. them" drift grows as society, politics, and culture descend further into the rabbit hole, rendering the world more and more polarised.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Delimitation and States

The concept of reverse fertility is intriguing, but it is essential to consider alternative approaches before embarking on such ventures. First, the delimitation commission should acknowledge the sense of injustice in using population size as the sole

criterion for parliamentary seats, especially when the southern States have effectively managed to reduce their fertility rates. Second, if reverse fertility measures are to be implemented, they should be based on thorough study and planning that are tailored to the population

dynamics of each State. Impulsive actions could lead to unintended consequences. Presenting well-researched reports to the delimitation commission, highlighting positive measures and efforts, is crucial.

Ravidas Gurupchand Rathod, Mumbai

Slow removal

That it has taken 40 years for the authorities to remove toxic waste from Bhopal, and only after the intervention of the higher judiciary, is shocking. There is grave irresponsibility in serious matters.

Mannattil Ravindranathan, Ottapalam, Palakkad, Kerala

Corrections & Clarifications

In a report, "T.M. Krishna honoured with 'Sangita Kalanidhi'" (January 2, 2025), the President of the Music Academy, M. Murali, was quoted as saying: "...The academy sessions have been specially curated for the first time in 20 years with an overarching theme 'Aesthetics and Synaesthetics: Reflections on Raga in Indian Art'. It should have been 49 years. COVID-19 emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, and not 2020, as mentioned in a report, "China shared COVID information without holding anything back" (World Page, January 1, 2025).

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Should voter ID be linked with Aadhaar to combat voter fraud?



S.Y. Quraishi
former
Chief Election
Commissioner
of India



R.S. Sharma
former
Chairman of the Telecom
Regulatory
Authority of
India and the
first Director
General of the
Unique
Identification
Authority of
India

PARLEY

In December 29, 2024, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accused each other of manipulating the Delhi electoral rolls in an attempt to win the Delhi Assembly elections, scheduled to be held in February. While the AAP has accused the BJP of submitting applications to the Election Commission of India (ECI) to get the names of voters removed from the list in its strongholds, the BJP has claimed that the AAP government is aiding Rohingya immigrants to settle in the capital so that it can secure their votes. Earlier, the Congress had accused the ECI of arbitrarily deleting or adding voters' names in electoral rolls before the Maharashtra Assembly elections. Should voter IDs be linked to Aadhaar to ensure transparency and put all these political claims and counterclaims to rest? S.Y. Quraishi and R.S. Sharma discuss this question in a conversation moderated by Sreeparna Chakrabarty. Edited excerpts:

If we link Aadhaar with voter IDs, would that help ensure that only one voter ID is issued for every citizen of the country?

S.Y. Quraishi: Yes, that was the original intention. In fact, when we were struggling with locating those with duplicate voter IDs and nearly every district in the country was using some kind of a de-duplication software (which can help identify and remove duplicate data from files or across multiple files), some of which were successful and some not so successful, that was when UIDAI (Unique Identification Authority of India) was created. Nandan Nilekani came to meet me to find out where we stand [on this]. That was when he had started experimenting with collecting biometrics in Goa. We decided that we would stop that exercise because the Aadhaar authority was going to do it anyway. We thought that we would merge the two once they completed the job. So, that was the beginning of the whole debate.

R.S. Sharma: Before I answer your question, let me explain that Aadhaar does two things. First, it assigns a unique identity number to every individual, which means that an individual cannot have more than one identity. Second, it provides a service of online real-time authentication of the person. Every database on every system does not need to have the kind of back-end technology that Aadhaar has because that would be too expensive. Aadhaar has been used to clean up a number of databases, such as the PAN (Permanent Account Number) database.



A voter in Amritsar, Punjab, PIN

Similarly, linking Aadhaar with voter IDs will ensure that one person is able to have only one voter ID.

Aadhaar is not a proof of citizenship (even non-residents who have lawfully entered India can get Aadhaar cards). Therefore, every person who has got an Aadhaar number is not necessarily a voter. That is a job for the ECI [to figure]. The authentication services of Aadhaar can also be used to ensure that there is no proxy voting taking place.

As you said, Aadhaar is not a proof of citizenship. So, will the ECI tackle this?

SYQ: Everyone knows that Aadhaar is not a proof of citizenship. Our idea was to only identify duplicates. If someone has a voter ID, citizenship has already been established through that. Through the linking of voter ID and Aadhaar, we will get to know that they are registered in different places, which can happen because of domestic migration or if you change your house within the same city.

What about security issues?

SYQ: We need Mr. Sharma's help to understand this. The voter ID card has only five details: your name, your father's name or spouse's name, your address, your age, and house number. All this is in the public domain anyway, so this is not private data which will get compromised because of the voter ID being linked with Aadhaar.

RSS: Well, Aadhaar does not contain any secret or sensitive information except biometrics, which are kept offline and which are never used



Linking voter ID with Aadhaar can solve one problem — it can eliminate duplication of votes. But Aadhaar cannot solve other issues because there are many which are beyond [the scope of] technology. Those are issues to do with human integrity, impartiality, and objectivity.

R.S. SHARMA

except for authentication. Aadhaar also has only four pieces of information: name, age, gender, and communication address. It has the mobile number and email address only if you want to share those. Aadhaar does not know which database it has been seeded with. Therefore, there is no question of any kind of compromise [of security] in any situation.

Activists had earlier flagged the issue of right to privacy. Your comments?

RSS: I don't think there is any connection between privacy and the linking of Aadhaar with voter IDs. How does the right to privacy, which is a fundamental right, get affected when we link Aadhaar with voter IDs? It is beyond my comprehension.

SYQ: I have a question in this regard for Mr. Sharma. You had said that one detail that Aadhaar has and an electoral card doesn't is a person's telephone number. Now, if that number goes into the hands of a politician, he can approach me. If it goes to a marketer, he will start sending me unsolicited messages. To that extent, is it invasion of privacy?

RSS: No, Sir. Because Aadhaar may have the telephone number. But [providing the] telephone number is optional. It is there to help the individual. It doesn't get embedded in the voter ID card. When you link the two, you link the Aadhaar number, not the email address or the mobile number.

Let's talk about the National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme. It was started in 2015 but after that, issues of missing voters' started surfacing in 2018.

SYQ: The problem of missing voters has been a perpetual one for the ECI. Voters can be missing for different reasons. The first is that they have chosen not to register even though we go door to door asking them to do so. Second, their name can get deleted by a computer error. It can

be deleted by a clerical mistake. It can also be deleted because of mischief by the administration. Whatever be the reason, a missing voter from the list is disenfranchised. That is the biggest issue.

Though the ECI has controlled all kinds of issues, the electoral roll is our soft underbelly, which means that it is vulnerable to attacks and mistakes and that it is something we should focus on now. That is why checking the electoral rolls regularly (to ensure that one's name is on the list) is a good idea.

So, can we say that in the current fraught political situation over electoral rolls, linking Aadhaar with voter IDs can ensure transparency?

SYQ: I would not entirely agree with what you just now said because deletion can still happen due to various reasons, as I said: human error, dishonesty, and deliberately too, because the officer has been given instructions by the top bosses to delete names because those are potentially hostile voters. This is happening and should be dealt with by the ECI. I can't advise them, but I can as a senior say that silence is not an option. If there is any doubt in the people's minds, they have to clear it. The people want to hear the ECI. Mr. Sharma is defending Aadhaar and I am defending voter IDs, but this has limited value because we are retired officers. Comments have to come from the people who are currently occupying top positions.

In the context of the Aadhaar discussion, to say that voter rolls cannot be manipulated is not true at all. There are serious allegations of voter fraud. If officers are dishonest, even booth capturing can happen. Earlier, it used to be the ballot paper; now, it could be the machine. There are allegations that (during an election), people closed the polls at 4:00 p.m. and then sat in the polling booth and pressed the button. The human element has become weaker and that is what needs to be handled.

RSS: Aadhaar cannot solve every problem under the sun. It can solve one problem — it can eliminate duplication of votes. But it cannot solve other issues because there are many which are beyond [the scope of] technology. Those are issues to do with human integrity, impartiality, and objectivity.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

Manmohan Singh: An easy boss with some mischievous humour

The former Prime Minister did not make much of his remarkable career and was willing to answer uncomfortable questions

Suhasini Haidar

There is a simple way of knowing what world leaders are like, which is to observe the demeanour of their staff. While sitting down for interviews with leaders, I have often been more struck by how nervous or ill-tempered their secretaries and advisers are than by the leaders themselves who, by and large, want to make a good impression. If those in the background are relaxed and smiling, it indicates that the leader is easy-going. If the staff are on their toes, shifting anxiously as the interview proceeds, it suggests that the leader is imperious. I once sat through a particularly difficult interview where the leader's press adviser sat right behind him, fixing me with a pleading stare, sweating profusely every time I asked a question that the boss may not have liked, and repeatedly trying to cut the interview short.

By that count, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who passed away last week, was an extremely easy boss. I seldom saw anyone in his office in New Delhi's South Block appear worried in his presence. In 2009, when Dr. Singh won a re-election after completing a full term from 2004 to 2009, a first at that time since Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, I was able to test my theory on a number of occasions. He granted me an interview on the campaign trail, to speak about his initiatives with the U.S. and Pakistan, charges of corruption against his government, and plans for the future. The 2009 win was particularly significant as he had come through a heart bypass just months before the election, and in his interview, he was clear that it would be his last election (he didn't contest in 2014). He also gave the television channel I was working for (CNN-IBN) access to the Prime Minister's home to interview his wife, Gursharan Kaur, and their daughters. Later, I also attended a children's day show where Dr. Singh interacted with 60 children, who posed largely unscripted questions to him. One of them asked, "Why do you wear a blue turban?" Another asked,

"How do you feel when you are called a weak Prime Minister?" One child was scathing about India's education system, saying "thousands of children are begging on the streets". Even when I asked Dr. Singh about being called a "puppet Prime Minister" with then-Congress president Sonia Gandhi holding the strings, he replied with unerring politeness, and with no interference from his advisers.

While his bearing was serious, Dr. Singh wasn't above some mischievous humour. At a formal lunch he hosted for a visiting dignitary, he was pressed repeatedly about raising India's climate change commitments. The guest proceeded to give him a lecture on all the new technology that the West was adopting, including in electric vehicles. Dr. Singh listened politely, and whispered something to an aide. When the convoy arrived to ferry the guest away, Dr. Singh handed him, not into the white Ambassador cars that were normally used, but into a tiny Reva, the earliest Indian electric vehicle, with a slightly sardonic smile. "Voh gussa pee jaate hain (He drinks up his anger)," Mrs. Kaur said when I asked her why he never seemed to lose his cool.

Dr. Singh had a remarkable career, but he didn't make too much of it. In fact, he suppressed any reporter's instinct for emotive copy. His family did the same, selling me in an interview that his favourite food was *lauki ka halwa* and *kadi chawal* (he was vegetarian) and that he hadn't been on a holiday in decades. Seeing the disappointment on my face at these slightly colourless responses for the profile I was working on, his daughter said, almost conspiratorially, that I should ask him to sing. She disclosed that he had sung to them as children, and had also composed songs for his grandchildren as lullabies. However, I never got my wish. When I asked him at the children's day event to perform his favourite song, he blushed and quickly turned to his wife, known for her *kirtan* singing, saying, "She is much better than me".

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

A grand beginning



On January 1, 2025, seers of the Sri Panchayati Atal Akhada made their first 'royal entry', also called Chavni Praves, for the Maha Kumbh Mela at Sangam in Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh. This marked the formal start of the Maha Kumbh, a religious pilgrimage that is celebrated four times over a course of 12 years. ANI

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 3, 1975

Many British companies seek govt. help

London, Jan. 2: The current financial crisis in Burma Oil Company, Britain's third largest oil group, harbingers sad tidings on the economic front and the Labour Government is earnestly trying to bail out the ailing oil giant with a loan equivalent to over Rs. 400 crores from the Bank of England.

The company is also one of Britain's oldest

The Hindu.

with its roots in the colonial past. This week it joins the large number of British companies forced to come to Government for financial help. The other include the British Leyland, the nation's largest exporter, Alfred Herbert, the country's biggest machine tool manufacturer, Ferranti, the electronics group, and Aston Martin, luxury car manufacturers, who collapsed earlier this week.

On the London stock exchange there is a lot of nervousness and the city is buzzing with all sorts of rumours. Shares, once regarded as the bluest of blue chips, have tumbled to their lowest. Dealings in these shares were suspended yesterday.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 3, 1925

Madras hunt Lattice bridge

Dec 31.: This popular venue was chosen for the last hunt of the year and once more provided a good morning's sport. The usual jog to Boag's corner where hounds were put into the casuarinas of the left of the rides. An oblique jack came out of the paddy into cover to meet them but did not stay to discuss matters and quickly made off westwards near the ride just in front of us.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of districts with high nitrate levels in groundwater

440 High nitrate levels have been found in the groundwater of 440 districts across India, with 20% of the samples collected exceeding the permissible nitrate concentration, the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) has said in its report. **PH**

The decrease in global insurance rates in the year 2024

0.9 In per cent. Global insurance premiums fell last year as the market became more competitive after years of rate rises, insurance broker Howden said. Insurers have raised rates in recent years in response wars, natural catastrophes, and inflationary pressures. **NEWS**

The growth in India's textile exports from April to October FY25

7 In per cent. India's textiles and apparel exports grew during the April-October period to \$21.35 billion. The outbound shipments from the sector stood at \$20 billion in the same period of the previous financial year. The Ready Made Garments category has the largest share in total exports. **PH**

The decline in India's sugar production from October to December

16 In per cent. Sugar production fell to \$5.40 lakh tonne in the first quarter of the ongoing current marketing year that started in October, mainly due to a decline in output from Maharashtra. Only 493 mills were operational as against 512 factories in the year-ago period. **PH**

Number of para-athletes to receive Arjuna Award

17 In per cent. Double Olympic-medalist Manu Bhaker and chess world champion D. Gukesh were among the four winners of the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna award. An unprecedented 17 para-athletes were named in the list of Arjuna awardees. **PH**

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Sivagiri row: what is the outrage about?

Why did Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's comments at the inaugural event of the 92nd Sivagiri pilgrimage cause controversy? Who are the Sivagiri seers and why do they command such influence in Kerala? Has the BJP been making overtures within the Ezhava community?

EXPLAINER

S.R.Praveen

The story so far:

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan used the inaugural event of the 92nd Sivagiri pilgrimage at Varkala on December 31, 2024, to slam what he saw as attempts to appropriate social reformer Sree Narayana Guru into the Sanatana Dharma fold. The CM also seconded Sivagiri Madhom president Swamy Sachithananda's opinion that the regressive practice of making men remove their shirts before entering temples should be abandoned.

What happened?

Mr. Vijayan sought to equate Sanatana Dharma to the principles of Varnashrama Dharma which forms the bedrock of caste divisions in society. In his opinion, the attempt to portray Sree Narayana Guru as a champion of Sanatana Dharma ran counter to the renaissance leader's humanist message and his work to eradicate casteist oppression. He said that Sanatana Dharma, which commands the patronage of the powers that be, has resulted in the continuing oppression of Dalits, backward classes and minorities in rural areas of north India. The Bharatiya Janata Party was quick to react with former Union Minister V. Muraleedharan accusing the CM of insulting Sanatana Dharma in a manner similar to Tamil Nadu Deputy CM Udhayanidhi Stalin. Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) President K.Sudhakaran in a way echoed the CM's words when he spoke at Sivagiri. He said that attempts to tie the Guru to Varnashrama Dharma have to be resisted. However, Opposition Leader V.D.Satheesan struck a discordant note, objecting to the CM's equating of Sanatana Dharma to Varnashrama Dharma. He accused the CM of attempting to give the patent of Sanatana Dharma, which is the collective tradition



Need for reform: Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan at an event as part of the 92nd Sivagiri pilgrimage season, at Varkala on December 31. **PH**

of all Indians, to the Sangh Parivar.

Why is Sivagiri Madhom important?

Sree Narayana Guru, who founded the Sivagiri Madhom over a century ago, is regarded as one of the foremost social reformers of Kerala, who played a key role in transforming a society steeped in casteism and untouchability into a progressive one with at least some levels of equality. In 1888, decades before temple entry movements and proclamations which allowed the oppressed castes entry into temples, Narayana Guru consecrated a Siva idol by the Aruvippuram river, in an effort to allow all castes to worship. When the consecration by a non-Brahmin led to opposition from various quarters, he explained that the idol was that of "Ezhava Siva, not a Brahmin Siva", referring to the Ezhavas, an oppressed

caste. Despite this statement which was meant as a counter to specific circumstances, Sree Narayana Guru propounded the wider and inclusive 'One Caste, One God, One Religion for mankind' philosophy. He established the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) in 1903 for the educational and social upliftment of oppressed castes. A decade later, he would disassociate from the SNDP Yogam, disappointed that the organisation was being reduced for the representation of just the Ezhavas. Sivagiri, established by the Guru, is now a major pilgrimage centre for Ezhavas.

Why are political parties eager to court the Sivagiri seers?

The Ezhava community, classified as an Other Backward Caste constituting 23% of Kerala's population, are considered as traditional voters of the Communist Party

of India (Marxist)-led LDF, with part of the votes going to the UDF. However, with the BJP's ascendancy in 2014, the Sangh Parivar has been making overtures to the community, and by extension to Sivagiri, as part of its larger strategy to make inroads into Kerala, which has remained electorally almost impenetrable to the BJP until recently. This has led to the Left as well as the Congress launching a counter-strategy to what they see as attempts to appropriate Narayana Guru and the Ezhava community into the larger Hindutva fold.

After the recent Lok Sabha elections, in which the LDF suffered a major defeat and the BJP made gains in left strongholds, the CPI(M) attributed the rightward drift in the backward-class Ezhava votes to the BJP as one of the major factors in its defeat. SNDP Yogam general secretary Vellappally Natesan stated that the Ezhava community had abandoned the LDF in the Lok Sabha elections in protest against the appeasement of minorities.

What is Sivagiri Madhom's stance?

The Sivagiri Madhom has always tried to maintain a considered, equidistant stance from all parties. At the annual Sivagiri pilgrimage, leaders of parties from across the political spectrum are accorded an opportunity to address the pilgrims. In recent years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi have addressed the pilgrims. Even as the SNDP Yogam hailed the consecration of the Ram temple, Swamy Sachithananda decided to stay away from the Ayodhya consecration ceremony. The Madhom leadership has used its influence to raise its voice against the "Brahmanical dominance" in priesthood in major temples, criticising the limiting of the post of priests in major temples to the Brahmin community. Aware of the political left of the community, the Madhom has held its cards close to its chest. This stand is not expected to change anytime soon.

THE GIST

The Kerala CM sought to equate Sanatana Dharma to the principles of Varnashrama Dharma which form the bedrock of caste divisions in society. In his opinion, the attempt to portray Sree Narayana Guru as a champion of Sanatana Dharma ran counter to the renaissance leader's humanist message.

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Why has Trump called the Panama treaty 'foolish'?

Has transit fees to cross the Panama canal increased? What are the treaties under which the canal was transferred to Panama by the U.S.? How has China responded?

Yanetta

The story so far:

In December 22, 2024, Donald Trump threatened to take back the Panama canal, calling the transfer treaty "foolish". He said, "Our Navy and Commerce have been treated in a very unfair and injudicious way...we will demand that the Panama canal be returned to us, in full, and without question." Panama's President José Raúl Mulino rejected Trump's threat, and said, "I want to express precisely that every square metre of the Panama canal and its adjacent area belong to Panama, and will continue to belong to Panama."

Why is Trump upset with Panama? The first and major reason for the U.S. President-elect's upset is the high transit fees applied on U.S. vessels by the ACP

(Panama Canal Authority). In 2023, Lakes Gatun and Alhajuela experienced severe drought affecting the shipping and navigation of the canal as it relies on these reservoirs to operate its locks. Therefore, the ACP reduced the number of slots for crossing ships by 36%. This led to the increase in transit fees. The second cause of worry has been the increased Chinese presence in the Panama canal. In 2017, Panama became the first Latin American country to sign a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreement, and ever since then, Chinese investment has increased significantly. Hutchison Ports PPC, a subsidiary of a Hong Kong-based company, operates two ports near the canal's entrances, igniting concerns over Chinese influence on logistical operations and surveillance over the U.S. Navy.

What is the U.S.-Panama treaty? The Panama canal is an artificial

80-kilometre canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, reducing cost, time and distance for international shipping. The canal is crucial for the global supply chain, and 6% of maritime world trade goes through it. The canal also symbolises U.S.'s technological prowess and economic power. It opened in 1914 after the U.S. finished construction, and was controlled by the U.S. until December 31, 1999.

The canal was handed over to Panama in 1999 under the Torrijos-Carter Treaties. The first, called the Panama Canal Treaty, cancelled the Panama Canal Zone and turned the canal over to the Panamanians on December 31, 1999. Under the second, the Permanent Neutrality Treaty, the canal was declared neutral and open to vessels of all nations. Under this treaty, the U.S. has the right to defend the neutrality of the canal and have priority passage in military emergencies.

What has been Panama's response?

Panama's President José Raúl Mulino has rejected Mr. Trump's accusations. He addressed the accusations by defending the transit rates and clarifying the concerns about external influence over canal operations. He stated that the transit rates are set according to international standards and decided by a procedure. He denied any involvement of external powers such as China or the European community while emphasising the importance of sovereignty for Panamanians. He responded to Mr. Trump's accusation of Chinese soldiers operating the canal, saying, "There is not a single Chinese soldier in the canal, and on the other hand, there will not be".

What next?

The concerns over fee hikes and operations logistics will likely be discussed diplomatically, despite Mr. Trump's threats. While the U.S. might attempt to influence Panama and pressure the latter with renegotiations, Panama will look for international support to reaffirm its sovereignty. China has also responded to the accusations. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that the Panama canal was a great creation for the Panamanian people and a neutral passageway.

Yanetta is a postgraduate student at Pondicherry University.

THE GIST

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IN THE LIMELIGHT

Finding the spirit of Bengaluru in Kannada cinema

Films from several decades have interpreted Bengaluru in different ways. However, with the emergence of the pan-India movement, stories set in Bengaluru have been few and far in Kannada cinema since the last decade

Vivek M.V.

In Ilaiyaraaja's melody 'Naguvu nayanu' from Mani Ratnam's debut *Pallavi Anu Pallavi*, we see visuals of the iconic landmarks of Bengaluru (then Bangalore). The lead pair in the 1983 Kannada film, essayed by Anil Kapoor and Kiran Vairale, stroll on the MG Road and spend their evening in Cubbon Park. Incidentally, Balu Mahendra, the cinematographer of *Pallavi Anu Pallavi*, had made his directorial debut with *Kokila* (1977), a film set in Bengaluru. The legendary filmmaker had a special love for the city, with several of his films having scenes showcasing a large boulder inside Cubbon Park.

For decades together, films have given the city an identity of a recreational hub for outsiders. Bengaluru's iconic places have inspired filmmakers to imagine stories and songs set in and around them.

In the early 1990s, the Vidhana Soudha – an architectural marvel that houses the state's secretariat and legislature – was a favourite destination for Bollywood songs. In *Coolie No.1* (1995), the song 'Main toh raste se ja raha tha' has Govinda and Karisma Kapoor dancing on the steps of the Vidhana Soudha. In *Vijaypath* (1994), Tabu and Ajay Devgn shake a leg in front of the stunning building. Even in a much more serious story like Utsav Gonwar's indie Kannada movie *Photo* – which talks about the migrant exodus during the pandemic – a 10-year-old from Raichur goes to Bengaluru to click a photo in front of the Vidhana Soudha.

Even Anjali Menon's hit *Bangalore Days* (2014) showcases Bengaluru as an exotic destination. The film, powered by an ensemble cast (Fahadh Faasil, Dulquer Salmaan, Nazriya Nazim, Nivin Pauly, and Parvathi Thiruvotthu), continues to resonate with the city's burgeoning population of Malayalis, who move to Bengaluru for employment opportunities and discover a home away from home.

The glamour and the underbelly However, a local, middle-class Bangalorean watching the film today might find *Bangalore Days* not so relatable, for he or she grew up in a different cultural ethnicity. In that sense, Roopa Rao's *Gantumootu* (2019) is a beautiful ode to the good old, laidback charm of the Bengaluru of the 90s. The coming-of-age story of a high-school teenager is a nostalgic trip to the city's quiet gems, such as the City Central Library and the BMTC bus stops that doubled up as meet-up spots for lovers.

Apart from *Gantumootu*, another film which had Bengaluru as an important character in its story was Pawan Kumar's *U Turn* (2016). Based on an incident that takes place on the Double Road flyover, the film addressed the perils of taking illegal U-turns to avoid one of the city's biggest problems: traffic.

Some evergreen songs adding the rapid growth of Bengaluru, but it's surprising how the city's evolution hasn't interested Kannada filmmakers to make relevant social dramas. In Nagathihalli Chandrasekhara's classic *America* (1997), the song 'Hegide nam desha' takes a dig at the city's traffic menace and compares the BDA site rates



Cubbon park in Bengaluru. SUDHAKARA JAIN

to something higher than the Empire State Building in the US.

The legendary S Siddalingaiah looked at Bengaluru from the point of view of a rural Kannadiga migrant. In *Mayur Muthanna* (1969), an honest villager (Dr. Rajkumar) moves to the city, and circumstances lead him to be a mayor of Bengaluru. His *Doorada Betta* (1973), starring Rajkumar again, shows a rural man's challenge of adjusting to the big and glamorous city. Even in the

director's *Baa Nanna Preethisu* (1992), the song 'Kempegowde' is the protagonist's conversation with the historical figure who founded the town, in which a line compares the city's growth to Hanuman's tail.

The idea of a rural Kannadiga getting lost in the city is seen even in the film *Luchava*, which was part of *Katha Sangama* (2019), an anthology. In the heart-warming film, a woman from a town in north Karnataka wanders on the

streets of Bengaluru without any clue how to get back home as she confuses Banaswadi with Basavanagudi. The film rings true as a South Bangalorean might feel alienated in a deserted Whitefield area, known for its less local population. In the 2000s, gullible rural men in Kannada films began to get caught in the web of the Bengaluru underworld, starting with Prem's blockbuster *Jogi* (2004). Here Shivraj Kumar plays an innocent villager who comes to Bengaluru to earn enough money to buy his mother a pair of gold bangles. However, a series of events lead to him become a feared don.

Suri's neo-noir films (*Jackie*, *Kaddipudi*) are set against Bengaluru's dark underbelly. He debuted with *Duniya* (2007), in which an innocent man in a stone quarry moves to the city to make money and build a memorial for his mother. Destiny lands him in Srirampura, once home to dreaded gangsters and organised crimes. For a while, Bengaluru's underworld history became a hot topic in Sandalwood, thanks mainly to Agni Sreedhar's three-part book *Dadagiriya Dinagalu* (My Days in Underworld: Rise of Bangalore Mafia). *Aa Dinagalu* (2007), based on Sreedhar's books, was a gripping reflection of Bengaluru in the 1980s when gangsters such as M.P. Jayaraj and Kotwal Ramachandra ruled the city's underworld. *Edgarike* (2012), based on Sreedhar's story of the same name, was another well-made gangster film. Helped by proper world-building, these films were a reflection of the city in that period.

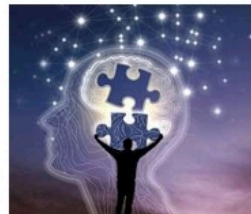
The need to capture the city again Kannada films today lack the spirit of Bengaluru. The topics of mass migration, start-up culture, and infrastructure issues can make for pertinent social dramas if only the filmmakers are capable of weaving engaging stories around them. The best attempt at that was *Chilli Chicken* (2023). The film was a compassionate take on migrant life in the city without insulting the locals.

Perhaps something changed in the Kannada film industry after the humungous success of Yogaraj Bhat's *Mungaru Male* (2006) and *Gaalipata* (2008). In both films, a Bengaluru-based protagonist (Ganesh) moves out of the city to a picturesque town to find love. In *Gaalipata*, the hero talks about being bored with the city's high-rise buildings, nightlife, and traffic and urges his friend to plan a trip to an exotic place. Both films spurred a series of visually appealing movies, proving how filmmakers had overlooked Bengaluru in their attempt to find never-before-seen locations across Karnataka.

In the era of pan-Indian movies and period dramas, a Bengaluru-centric film looks distant. Sindhu Sreenivasa Murthy's *Aachar & Co* (2023) was a welcome change. The gentle drama depicted the life of an orthodox family in Jayanagar in the 70s. In a hilarious scene, a girl refuses to marry a guy because he lives in Kamanahalli, which came under Bengaluru's outskirts back then. Today, Jayanagar to Kamanahalli is an hour away by vehicle, traffic permitting!

The ongoing tussle between Hindi and Kannada in Bengaluru can make an interesting idea for filmmakers wanting to show the city from today's perspective. It's an age-old conflict, described beautifully by one scene in *Professor Huchuraya* (1974), where the Kannada-speaking protagonist asks for what's written on a board in Bengaluru, and he gets replies in Malayalam, Telugu, and Tamil.

The cosmopolitan city has never had a single identity. The beauty of Bengaluru lies in many worlds, and a lot is yet to be explored on the big screen.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"I dropped the VCR this morning." "Dropped the VCR! Good grief! What did your father do? Read you the Riot Act?"

"Read the Riot Act? What does it mean?"

"When you read someone the Riot Act, you give that person a strong warning or scolding. For example, when the players came late for practice, the coach read them the Riot Act."

"My chemistry teacher does that all the time. Whenever we spill acid on the table, he reads us the Riot Act."

"Good for you. You should be careful when dealing with acid, you know. And tell you learn to be..."

"... look, if you're going to give me a lecture, give me one on 'until' and 'till'. Is there any difference between the two?"

"Well, many people think that 'till' is a contracted form of 'until'. It is not. They are two different words. Both 'till' and 'until' have the same meaning. One of the meanings of the two words is 'upto the time of'. I have been given time till next week to submit the assignment. I could also say..."

"... I have been given time until next week to submit the assignment."

"But when used in a negative construction, 'till' and 'until' mean 'before'. The package is not expected till this evening. Or, the package is not expected until this evening."

"So, what you're saying is that both words have the same meaning?"

"That's correct. They are often used interchangeably. But some people think that 'until' is a bit more formal than 'till'. And there are some who prefer to use 'until' at the beginning of a sentence and 'till' in the middle."

"Is it wrong to say, 'Till I saw her, I didn't know what love was'?"

"Aha! You've let the cat out of the bag. Who is the girl?"

"There is no girl. Tell me, is the sentence acceptable?"

"Of course, it's acceptable. Now, about this girl..."

"... there is no girl. How did the expression 'let the cat out of the bag' come into being?"

"Do you know what it means?"

"Of course, I do. It means to let out the secret. Sohan let the cat out of the bag when he said he was planning to buy a ring before meeting Radha this evening."

"Good example."

"Thanks. But how did the expression come into being?"

"It goes back to the medieval days when pigs were sold in open markets and fairs."

"We're not interested in pigs, but cats."

"I'm coming to that. Since the seller didn't like the pigs running around everywhere, he used to put each pig in a sack and tie it up. Sometimes, instead of a pig, he would put a big cat inside the sack or bag."

"And if the customer didn't check what was in the bag, he ended up buying a cat instead of a pig?"

"Exactly. When the customer opened the bag at home, the truth was revealed."

"The cat was out of the bag!"

Published in *The Hindu* on August 9, 1994.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Manu Bhaker, D. Gukesh, Harmanpreet Singh and Praveen Kumar have been named as recipients of this year's Khel Ratna Award. Here is a quiz on the award, and it's awardees

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

Here is a very simple one. The award officially goes by what name?

QUESTION 2

Now, the award is officially named after a former sportsperson (answer to Q1). What was it called before? In which year was it changed?

QUESTION 3

Who was the first recipient of the award, in 1991-92? In 2001, then aged 18, who became the youngest recipient of the award?

QUESTION 4

Khel Ratna Award is considered

as India's highest sporting honour. Which comes next?

QUESTION 5

Following an announcement, in August 2015, a PIL was filed in the Karnataka High Court by Paralympic athlete Girisha Nagarajegowda, who mentioned that his performance was ignored by the committee. He claimed to be a top contender for the award with 90 points, owing to his silver medal-winning act at the 2012 Summer Paralympics in the Men's High Jump F42 event. He wasn't awarded the medal, though. Who got it instead?

QUESTION 6

How many cricket players have received the award till now?



Visual question: Identify this awardee.

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

1. The Notre-Dame de Paris is an example of this style of architecture. **Ans: French Gothic**

2. Authorities commissioned restoration work on the Notre-Dame de Paris after this 1831 event. **Ans: Victor Hugo published *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame***

3. The term 'cathedral' comes from cathedra, a characteristically raised throne reserved for the _____. **Ans: Bishop**

4. Between the 14th century and 1766, the only clocks at the Notre-Dame de Paris were in the form of two _____. **Ans: Clepsydras**

5. Until November 1789, the Notre-Dame de Paris belonged to the Catholic Church, but this event moved its ownership to the state of France in that year. **Ans: French Revolution**

Visual: This mythological bird was associated with witches and ill omen. **Ans: Strix (or Le Stryge)**

Early Birds: Adya Upasana Routraj Siddhartha Viswanathan| Sonali Das| Anil Warriar| Tito Shildaditya

Word of the day

Fad: an interest followed with exaggerated zeal

Synonyms: craze, cult, furor, rage

Usage: To me, fashion is about being comfortable, not the latest craze or fad.

Pronunciation: newsth.livde/fadpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /fæd/

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



DECCAN HERALD

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An apology without accountability

It is not known what prompted Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh to issue an apology for "what happened in the state." He said he wanted to appeal "to all communities to forgive and forget our past mistakes and start life afresh by living together in a peaceful and prosperous Manipur." It may have been a New Year message without much meaning, and may be taken as too little, too late. There is no hint in it that Biren Singh has owned responsibility for what happened in the state in the last about two years. He said he wanted to express regret, but regret and remorse are different. An apology without remorse is a hollow gesture, especially when it is made from a public office. A person holding a public office is responsible for the acts of commission and omission in that office. It is not a personal, forgive-and-forget issue involving two individuals.

Biren Singh is a part of the problem in Manipur because he identified with the Meitei community whose conflict with the Kukis is at the root of the situation. He has made wrong and most unconvincing explanations about the issue. In politics, and in government, he has lost the support of his own legislators and coalition partners. In such a setting, an apology from him does not carry credibility. The annual report for 2024 issued by the Union Home Ministry last week also did not mention the situation in Manipur. It mentioned the despatch of forces and equipment, financial support, engagement with state officials, and Home Minister Amit Shah's visit to the state as measures taken to end the strife and conflict. These have not helped, and the situation has only gone from bad to worse over the months. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's failure to visit the state and the claim, made some months ago, that normalcy was being restored there by the state government with support from the Centre, would stand out as proof of the unconcern and misrepresentation of the situation at the highest level.

An apology would not undo the damage that has been done. Even after the apology, Biren Singh blamed past Congress governments for the present situation in Manipur. There were also incidents after that, including a militant attack in West Imphal. Manipur is now divided into two geographical, political, and psychological parts with no effective interaction between them. There is no trust left in the state government or the chief minister. If the apology should have any meaning, it should come with the acceptance of responsibility for what is apologised for, and action based on it. In a democracy, accountability is of utmost importance.

Missing marks cards leave careers in peril

In today's fast paced world, where time is the essence for young graduates eager to launch their careers or pursue higher education, it is alarming that universities fail to provide something as fundamental as an authenticated marks card in a timely manner. This is the predicament faced by many students across Karnataka, who, despite completing their degrees nearly two years ago, are waiting for their final validated academic certificates. The problem stems from the adoption of the Unified University College Management System (UUCMS) under the National Education Policy (NEP) which stipulates new security features for the marks cards. While UUCMS aims to integrate the functioning of all public universities in the state - from admission to assessment - the ambitious overhaul has left students stranded without their official documents.

Vice-chancellors of the affected universities attribute the delay to logistical issues, but the government's slow response to these hurdles is inexcusable, given the direct impact on the future of students. In the meantime, universities are only issuing transcripts of the marks which are not helpful without proper authentication. This lack of verified documents has left many graduates unable to apply for jobs, further studies or competitive examinations, thwarting their career and academic ambitions. The delays cause a lot more than minor inconvenience; they have the potential to derail entire career paths. Naturally, graduates who have been waiting for so long are left with the constant worry of lost time, missed opportunities, and an uncertain future. The absence of authenticated marks cards places an unnecessary barrier between them and the next phase of their lives.

The failure to issue marks cards is a glaring example of the inability of universities to fulfill basic administrative responsibilities, eroding their credibility. Repeated assurances from the authorities that the problem is being addressed have worn thin. What is urgently needed is a clear, actionable plan with concrete timelines for resolution. Graduates deserve to know when they will receive their authenticated marks cards, and universities must take steps to ensure that future students are not subjected to similar delays. Moreover, the ineffective communication from universities is a clear governance failure. Higher Education Minister M C Sudhakar, along with university authorities, must take full responsibility for this lapse. The minister must announce a deadline and ensure that universities give the matter top priority. As the Bombay High Court recently observed, the government has a constitutional duty to ensure quality education and services. Students have a right to timely and efficient services and it is high time Sudhakar demonstrated his commitment to resolving this issue. The time is ticking for these students, and every passing day further risks their future.

Delay in issuing authenticated marks cards has hit career prospects of many students in Karnataka

The states need only to ensure that their fiscal deficits are kept under 3% of the GSDP

SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG

In its annual report 'State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2024-25' published last month, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) grudgingly called the improvement in 'post pandemic state finances' commendable. Still, the RBI offered the states a long list of advice for attaining 'durable fiscal consolidation'. The first area of concern the RBI underlined is 'incipient stress in the sharp rise in expenditure on subsidies, driven by farm loan waivers, free/subsidised services (like electricity to agriculture and households, transport, gas cylinders) and cash transfers to farmers, youth and women'. Many state governments have launched new cash transfer schemes. Most free/subsidised schemes (freebies) also persisted.

What is the state of the states' finances? Is their fiscal consolidation under threat? Do they need a new fiscal consolidation roadmap? The RBI report confirms that states' aggregate fiscal deficit has been below 3% of the GDP in 14 of the 17 years since 2006-2007; of these 14, three times they were less than 2%. In 2015-2016, the states' fiscal deficit was 3.1% and in 2016-2017 it was 3.5%; still, these two were within the enhanced ceiling of 3.5%.

Only in 2020-2021, when the GDP contracted, tax revenues slumped and the Union government ran a fiscal deficit exceeding 9%, the states' fiscal deficit turned out to be 4.1%. The fact that the states have consistently managed to keep fiscal deficits well within the limit for so long is sufficient evidence of their ability to keep their fiscal house in order.

The RBI report further informs that states' expenditure on subsidies went up from Rs 1.87 trillion in 2018-2019 to Rs 4.44 trillion in 2022-2023, recording a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 24.07%. The states' total expenditures during this period grew from Rs 33.38 trillion to Rs 47.93 tril-

STATE OF SPENDING

Union govt, not states, must fix its finances

lion at a CAGR of 9.47%. The expenditure on subsidies grew two-and-a-half times.

The developmental and non-developmental expenditures, which include subsidies, recorded a lower CAGR of 8.83% and 8.94%, respectively, during this period. It is the remaining category of others (which includes transfers to local bodies and repayment of Union government loans) which recorded a higher CAGR of 15.23%. Surely, the states kept their subsidies within the larger expenditure leash.

The performance of individual states, however, differed. Some states recorded a very high CAGR, Tamil Nadu (58.85%) and Andhra Pradesh

rising only - 2.4% in 2021-2022, 2.5% in 2022-2023, and 2.8% in 2023-2024 (provisional estimates). While a lot can be said about the productivity of the states' capital expenditures, nominally, their performance on this front cannot be faulted.

Are states' debt too high for comfort?

The RBI is worried about the 'persistent high level of sub-national debt', which in its assessment 'calls for a credible roadmap of debt consolidation'. The states' debt consolidation has been going on for more than three decades with most of the battles waged successfully in the first decade.

The states' outstanding debt and liabilities to the GDP ratio was 28.9% in 2007. A laser-sharp focus on fiscal deficits in the next eight years brought this down to 21.7% in 2015. Thereafter, during the reign of the BJP government at the Centre and in many states, the ratio started rising and reached 26.6% in 2020. In the Covid-19 year of 2021, with nominal GDP contracting, the states' debt-to-GDP ratio peaked at 31%. With fiscal deficits under control, thereafter, there is a consistent downward trend bringing the debt-to-GDP ratio to 26.2% in 2023.

There is no need for drawing up any fresh roadmap of debt consolidation as the RBI has called for. The states need only to ensure that they keep their fiscal deficits lower than 3% of the GSDP. The debt-to-GDP ratio will take care of itself in due course.

For this, the states will have to avoid the temptation of an additional 0.5% fiscal deficit, allowed by the Union government for taking its interest-free capital expenditure loans. If some states want to take the benefit of these loans, they may forego other borrowings to that extent. It is more likely that most states will undertake new direct cash transfer schemes in times to come. They may do it if they limit new expenditures to either additional revenues or substitute other expenditures. The finances of India's states are in a good shape. It is the Union government's finances which need to get in shape.

(The writer is former Finance and Economic Affairs Secretary)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The quirky charm of Bengaluru

Uncovering the whimsical side of the city, one name at a time

NAJIB SHAH

Bangalore before it became Bengaluru was a lovely place. Tree lined, leisurely, gentle pace of life, salubrious weather - do not blame the change of name for the decline but the callousness with which we citizens have treated this beautiful place. Fortunately, the quaintness of the city in the form of the very many names it has given its localities, roads and establishments, continues.

Let me take you to Hope Farm Junction in Whitefield. There is no farm anywhere in the vicinity. It is a traffic junction where you can get stuck for absurd periods of time. You are reminded of Dante's 'all hope abandon ye who enter here'. Some persons with a perverse sense of humour seem to have named

this junction Hope Farm, indeed!

You go past a board that reads 'Mad about Buller'. You do a double take and look closely for guns and notice motorcycles - I wonder how many are aware that this was originally a needle manufacturing company which started making cycles with the trademark, 'Made like a Gun', which then began manufacturing motorcycles in 1932 and named them logically, 'I guess, Buller'. If this was imaginative naming, you came across a shop beyond Budigere named Cuckoo Cox Chicken Shop, which sells yes, you guessed right, chickens! Guess you can expect a meat shop named 'naar' or 'baa' meat shop! And then there is this restaurant in RT Nagar named Shadi ki Biryani, Nushu ka Nasha! (The Biryani of the Wedding, the Breakfast of the Bridegroom)

You come towards Ulsoor, and see a Meenae Avenue. To make matters meaner, Meenae Avenue is in Meenae Layout. Agentless being, a close friend of mine, used to stay there to disprove the fact that residents there are mean.

You see a tailor shop proudly displaying 'Alterations - A to Z'. While one can understand size 42 being reduced to 38, you wonder if this tailor who does the whole range can do the other way around. Then you see a shop selling 'Al Biryani'. All things have some to such a pass that even Bengaluru's favourite dish is now made by AI! You go closer and have a sigh of relief - the 'I's extension has with time (and by AI?) got obliterated. The shop is AI. Fair enough, who will like to name a biryani selling shop 728?

You go towards Banaswadi and come across a shop which simply says 'Carrom Board Repair Shop'. Does anyone really repair carrom boards? After avoiding without much success the potential potholes which dot our roads you make your way back and pray that some magnanimous businessman levels the roads like Enayyullah Meenaidid, apparently not bearing to watch the buffaloes suffer carrying loads-the bullock is named after him. You cannot argue with that. And you sigh, lucky buffaloes!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

China continues to assert dominance

In most matters relating to bilateral relations, China appears to hold the upper hand over India. Recent events have borne this out. Following the détente in the military confrontation on our northern borders, which India touted as a diplomatic victory, China has announced plans to build the world's largest dam on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra River. This move will have severe ecological, economic, and natural impacts on Assam and other states through which the river flows. While the dam may prevent

annual flooding in Assam, it also gives China the ability to control the river's flow, potentially causing floods and disruption at will. This is a form of river warfare. Either way, the dam will be a nuisance for India. China's latest provocation is the inclusion of large parts of Aksai Chin into a new district unit. Despite the supposed easing of tensions on our northern borders, India faces two new pressure points. It seems China holds all the cards. S Kamat, Mysuru

Apology not enough

Apologies After 19 months of violence, Manipur CM says 'sorry' (Dec 1), the article raises disturbing questions about the state of affairs in Manipur. It is disheartening that it took the Chief Minister a year of turmoil to finally address the people and seek apology. His appeal for the community to 'forgive and forget' is not only inappropriate but also ignores the profound grief experienced by thousands who have lost loved ones in the violence. This crisis required immediate and decisive action from the government; the CM's delayed apology does nothing to restore trust. Neha N, Bengaluru

Regret serves none

It is astonishing that the Chief Minister of Manipur has taken over a year

to express regret for the state's troubles. What purpose do these regrets serve when it is his responsibility to govern and ensure citizens' safety? Moreover, asking the PM to visit the state is futile, given the central government's conspicuous absence and failure to restore normalcy. V Padmanabhan, Bengaluru

Pedestrian safety

Apologies Pedestrian deaths drop by 19% in 2024, but challenges persist (Jan 2), while the reduction in pedestrian fatalities is welcome, it does not necessarily indicate improved infrastructure. Two critical areas require urgent attention: illegal parking and footpath encroachment. The authorities must enforce the law consistently and ensure pedestrian safety. H V K Bhatta, Bengaluru

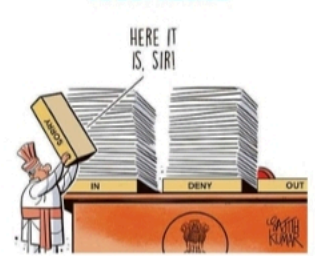
SPEAK OUT

The border is guarded by BSF, not TMC. They are sending goons and murderers across the border. This is an inside job by the BSF, supported by a blueprint from the central government. Without such a plan, these activities would not be possible... Mamata Banerjee, WB CM

Sometimes in life we blow things out of proportion because proportion is so dull.

Robert Breaud

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

H-1B warrants tact from Trump, Musk

They need to balance interests of their core MAGA base and demands for high-skilled immigration

SHIVANI PANDEY

The H-1B visa programme has long been a cornerstone of the US tech industry, enabling companies to access global talent and fuel innovation and growth. Established in 1990, it is a key pathway for US companies to hire skilled non-immigrant aliens as workers in specialty occupations, particularly in fields like technology, engineering, and healthcare. The programme has been instrumental in fuelling the growth of industries that rely on highly specialised talent, offering companies the ability to tap into a global workforce.

However, over the years, the programme has become a point of contention in the broader immigration debate. Critics argue that it is often exploited to bring in cheaper labour. Amid rising concerns about job loss for local Americans, Trump's re-election as the 46th President of the United States following a robust anti-immigration campaign, has rattled the H-1B programme, creating uncertainties about its future. But the dynamics at play are more complex than they first appear.

Eilon Musk, a close ally of Trump and the head of the newly formed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), exemplifies the dilemma that now confronts the Republican leadership. Although elected on an 'America First' and anti-immigration agenda, the Republicans are also increasingly aware of the crucial role high-skilled immigration plays in supporting and driving the US economy.

Trump's unexpected and decisive victory can be attributed to a highly effective electoral campaign and strategic public outreach. Central to his campaign were calls for curbing immigration and prioritising American citizens' interests, particularly tied to his 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) base. He denounced the H-1B visa programme, calling it 'bad for Americans'. He has also threatened large-scale deportations of illegal immigrants, positioning himself as a staunch advocate for stricter immigration enforcement.

Having secured his victory, Trump supporters now expect him to walk the talk, particularly on immigration. However, to their dismay, there has been a shift in Trump's stance on the H-1B visa programme. He has stated he has always been a 'believer' of the visas and emphasised the need for the US to attract 'smart people', though the president-elect has since clarified that he has not changed his original position. This shift can be attributed to three key factors. First, Trump's close ally, Elon Musk, has publicly defended the programme. As a leading figure in tech, Musk acknowledged how

(The writer is a PhD student at the University of Delaware)

A quest for equity: Carbon markets amid climate costs and trade wars

SINGHE SEBASTIAN, GOPAL K SARANGI,
AND SUKANYA DAS

The European Union (EU)'s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), integral to the EU Green Deal, represents a strategic shift in global geopolitics of climate change, having significant implications for India. CBAM aims to create a level playing field for EU industries but has sparked debates about its fairness and the disproportionate burden it places on developing countries like India. By aligning the cost of embedded greenhouse gas emissions in imported goods, CBAM imposes additional financial burdens on exporters from developing nations. A key question that demands reflection is whether the recently adopted Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, finalised at COP 29 held in Baku, offers new opportunities for developing countries to mitigate trade risks from CBAM while facilitating developing countries in their effort to decarbonise their industries in a just and cost-effective manner.

CBAM sits within the broader "Fit for 55" legislative package by the EU, which aims at enhancing the EU Emission Trading System (EU ETS) by holding both domestic producers and foreign exporters accountable for the carbon intensity of their goods. CBAM is proposed initially to be applied to carbon-intensive sectors such as cement, iron and steel, aluminium, fertilisers, electricity, and hydrogen and will fully phase in 2026 onwards. For developing countries, these regulations pose financial risks of additional costs on exports, potentially hindering their economic growth and industrial development. CBAM certificate prices, at present, are tied to the weekly average of EU ETS carbon prices, influenced by allowance availability, market demand, policy shifts, energy prices, and speculation.

Historically, the EU ETS has served as the primary driver of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) market during its inception stages by integrating these CDM credits into its compliance framework, thereby incentivising participation in international emissions reduction projects. Similarly, for CBAM to support global decarbonisation, a complementary mechanism under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement could facilitate demand by linking CBAM to verified international carbon credits under the 6.2 and 6.4 framework.

By linking CBAM with Article 6 credits, a balanced system could emerge where importers in the EU offset their CBAM obligations through projects in developing countries. Articles 6.2 and 6.4, both under the UNFCCC framework (though differently structured), offer avenues to generate high-quality credits with corresponding adjustments that avoid double counting. These mechanisms can be leveraged by importers as well as the exporting industries through bilateral agreements under Article 6.2 or by purchasing Article 6.4 credits backed by the UNFCCC. The accounting for such credits under CBAM involves linking their cost to the effective carbon price through alignment with EU ETS benchmarks. Importers calculate their obligations based on the emissions embedded in imported goods, with credits serving to

offset a portion of this obligation. For example, if an EU importer purchases 10,000 tons of steel with embedded emissions of one ton of CO₂ per ton, they must pay for 10,000 tons of CO₂ emissions under CBAM. At an EU ETS price of €80 per ton, the cost would be €800,000. However, the importer could offset part of this obligation by purchasing Article 6 credits from projects like renewable energy in India, which reduces emissions by 5,000 tons, thereby halving the payment to €400,000 while channelling climate finance into decarbonisation efforts. A potential cap on credit prices could be introduced to stabilise market dynamics, providing predictability for both importers and exporters while preventing excessive volatility in compliance costs.

Implications for India For India, the EU's CBAM presents significant challenges, as highlighted by the World Bank's Relative CBAM Exposure Index, which ranks India among the top five most exposed nations due to its high carbon emissions intensity and substantial export volumes to the EU. As per the study by CSE, at an estimated rate of €100 per tonne of CO₂ equivalent, CBAM would impose a tax burden of roughly 28% on CBAM-covered goods, equivalent to 0.05% of India's GDP in 2022-23. Indian exports, valued at around \$8 billion annually in sectors like iron, steel, and aluminium, could face a carbon tax of 20% to 35%, undermining their competitiveness in the EU market.

Instead of framing CBAM as an isolated regulatory tool, leveraging Article 6 credits could further aid India in transitioning to a low-carbon pathway while keeping economic growth in perspective, providing a more equitable solution. However, this requires a coordinated effort to ensure that revenues from carbon pricing and credits directly support sustainable growth in the host country. Over time, a balanced integration of CBAM and Article 6 could create a more inclusive global carbon market, reducing disparities and fostering trust between developed and developing nations.

The interconnectedness of CBAM and Article 6 credits highlights both the potential and the pitfalls of global climate policy. For developing countries like India, these mechanisms must be designed to address the inherent inequities in carbon budgets and provide practical pathways for sustainable growth. A modernised, cooperative framework—focused on equitable participation and mutual benefits—could transform CBAM from a challenge into an opportunity, ensuring that carbon costs are distributed fairly and that climate finance supports those who need it most.

(The writers are with the TERI School of Advanced Studies, New Delhi)

2025 is poised to be a year of groundbreaking space missions, from SpaceX's Starship programme to India's pioneering human spaceflight ambitions

MICHAEL ROSTON AND KATRINA MILLER

Our species called this latest 366-day journey around the sun "2024" and packed into it a ton of astronomical and spaceflight excitement. A solar eclipse crossed North America. Two robotic landers reached the lunar surface, largely intact. The most powerful rocket booster ever built was taught by a pair of mechanical arms nicknamed "chopsticks." A journey began to Jupiter's icy ocean moon Europa. And private astronauts conducted a daring spacewalk. Can this revolution around the sun we name "2025" compare? We'll let you be the judge of how enthusiastic to get about the events you can expect on the launchpads and in the night sky.

Through SpaceX, Elon Musk has dominated spaceflight around the planet in recent years. But the extraterrestrial ambitions of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos could present a challenge to Musk soon.

The space company started by Bezos, Blue Origin, has a powerful rocket called New Glenn that may at last get off the ground in 2025. Like SpaceX's Falcon 9, the booster stage is designed to be fully reusable so it can fly again and again and reduce the cost of launches. The rocket could launch national security satellites for the US military and spacecraft for NASA, including orbiters to Mars and moon landers, including the Artemis program. Another thing New Glenn will carry is satellites for Amazon, where Bezos is still executive chair. The company's Project Kuiper involves plans to build a mega constellation of satellites beaming Internet down from space, in competition with SpaceX's Starlink constellation. Amazon also plans to launch Kuiper satellites using rockets from many of Blue Origin's competitors, including United Launch Alliance, Ariane space of France and even SpaceX.

Rubin's first light

Astronomers atop a mountain in central Chile are wrapping up construction of the Vera C. Rubin Observatory, which might capture its first views of the night sky this year, as early as July 4. Formerly the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope, the observatory was renamed in 2020 to honour Vera Rubin, who died in 1986. Rubin's work persuaded astronomers of the existence of dark matter, which makes up a vast majority of mass in the universe, but no one knows what it is.

The name is fitting. With the largest digital camera in the world, scientists will use the Rubin Observatory to create a time-lapse motion picture of the Southern sky. Such images would help researchers understand the nature of dark matter, as well as dark energy, the unknown force pushing the cosmos apart. The trove of data will also help reveal the story of our galaxy's birth and catalogue asteroids and comets in our solar system, including those that could slam into Earth one day.

During the first administration of Donald Trump, US space policy refocused on lunar exploration. President Joe Biden's administration sustained that direction. But as Trump returns to the White House this month, the country's existing space plans could be upended by cancelling the expensive rocket NASA has been developing for



ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

Big rockets, a big telescope and big changes in space

more than a decade. Alternatively, Trump could more radically shift NASA's focus to sending people to Mars. Getting to the Red Planet is the primary goal of Musk, who has been advising the president-elect.

For all that potential uncertainty, a series of robotic space missions are planned to the moon early in the year. The first two, a pair of landers from the American company Firefly Aerospace and the Japanese company ispace, will launch on the same SpaceX rocket as soon as mid-January. The mission by Firefly will be the first trip of its Blue Ghost lander and will carry cargo paid for by NASA. The lunar trip by ispace will be the second attempt after the company's first lander crashed into the moon's surface in 2023.

Later in the year's first quarter, Intuitive Machines may try to put another robotic lander on the moon after the company's Odysseus lander reached the surface intact, but tilted over, in February. The company's second lander, named Athena, also will carry NASA-financed instruments, including a drill that will try to find samples of ice. Athena will share a Space Launch with Lunar Trailblazer, a NASA orbiter that will study water on the moon.

Vigils for Voyagers 1 and 2

Voyagers 1 and 2, twin spacecraft that inspired a generation of cosmic wonderers, were launched in 1977. After decades of exploring the outer solar system before charting the unknown frontier of interstellar space, the two spacecraft are showing

signs of age. Early in their journey, the pair swooped past Jupiter and Saturn, and Voyager 2 later visited Uranus and Neptune. But perhaps the mission's most iconic gift to the world was a photo taken of Earth, a tiny pixel against the expanse of space, leading famed astronomer Carl Sagan to coin the image "Pale Blue Dot."

In recent years, the robotic explorers have each blinked in and out of contact with NASA. Communication with Voyager 2 was purposefully shut down in 2019 for months, then lost by accident for a couple of weeks in 2023 before it was restored. Voyager 1, on the other hand, gave mission specialists a scare this year when it stopped sending data back to Earth. Instruments on both spacecraft have been shut down to conserve power. But NASA isn't giving up on them yet. When they are eventually reconnected in the space between the stars, it would be an apt resting place given how the duo has ventured where no other spacecraft had gone before.

India's orbital objective

India's space programme has landed a robot on the moon and put a spacecraft into orbit around Mars. The country's most immediate priorities are much closer to Earth, but that doesn't mean they are less ambitious. India is focusing on human spaceflight. A member of the nation's astronaut corps, Shubham Shukla, is to spend up to 14 days this spring aboard the International

Space Station during a commercial mission with the company Axiom Space.

Shukla and his fellow Indian astronauts are hoping to be the first to launch to low Earth orbit on its homegrown rockets. In December that an orbital vehicle from that program, known as Gaganyaan, was being prepared for a test launch with no astronauts aboard. A successful flight could lead the way to a crewed Indian astronaut launch as early as 2026.

SpaceX wowed the world in November during Flight 2 of Starship, the most powerful rocket ever built. Expect the company to try to repeat the stunning "chopsticks" catch of its massive Super Heavy booster. SpaceX may also attempt to catch the upper-stage Starship vehicle after it completes an orbit of Earth and returns to the launch site in South Texas for the first time. SpaceX said it was aiming for 25 launches of Starship in 2025 as it prepares the spacecraft to land astronauts on the moon under the company's contract with NASA.

Other new rockets and spacecraft may take flight in 2025. One is Neutron, a reusable rocket being developed by Rocket Lab, which was founded in New Zealand. The company routinely carries satellites to orbit around Earth and has a contract to launch a first flight of the new vehicle from a launch site in Virginia. Another is Dream Chaser, Sierra Space's spaceplane. After a delay in 2024, the company hopes it will carry cargo to the ISS for the first time this year. The New York Times

India's Braille literacy crisis

ANTHONY DSOUZA

Much of the information that sighted individuals take for granted is inaccessible to the visually impaired, significantly curtailing their autonomy. They depend on others to read train or flight timetables, navigate road/traffic signs, or identify potential dangers.

Inaccessibility: The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, mandates the creation of accessible environments in public buildings, transportation, and communication systems. This includes the requirement for accessible signage, audio announcements, and tactile guides. However, its implementation leaves a lot to be desired.

Recently, Lakshmi Hebbalikar, Minister of Women and Child Development, revealed that only 18 out of 47 sanctioned government buildings in Bengaluru had been made accessible to persons with disabilities.

Similarly, few restaurants in major cities across India offer Braille menus. Employment challenges: Although there are some job reservations for the differently-abled in the public sector, the private sector lags in inclusion. A lack of accessible workspaces discourages companies from hiring the visually impaired, viewing them as liabilities. This not only impacts their economic independence but also hampers their emotional well-being.

Leisure: The visually impaired face challenges in accessing leisure activities. According to the World Blind Union, more than 90% of all published material is not accessible to blind or partially sighted individuals. Similarly, only a fraction of online resources are accessible or user-friendly for them. Social stigma: Although blindness or visual impairment presents challenges, proper training and a supportive environment can enable visually impaired individuals to perform well in many professions. However, social prejudice often leads to their abilities being underestimated. In fact, the negative mindset of people is among the biggest challenges that the visually impaired face. With a little modification and with the help of assistive technologies, the visually impaired can use desktops and mobile phones with ease.

Social isolation: The lack of accessibility, employment opportunities, and societal acceptance contributes significantly to the social isolation of the visually impaired.

The invention of Braille in the 1820s revolutionised education and inclusion for the visually impaired. Ironically, despite hosting 20% of the world's visually impaired population, India has a Braille literacy rate of just 1%.

Every year on January 4, World Braille Day is observed to honour Louis Braille, who developed the Braille while studying at the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris.

According to the Centre for Sight, which runs over 85 eye care centres in India, in 2021, 285 million people worldwide were visually impaired, including those with low vision and total blindness. India is home to an estimated 15 million blind individuals—every third blind person in the world is Indian—making the low Braille literacy rate especially alarming.

Why is the Braille literacy rate so poor in India? Teaching Braille requires specialised educators, but there is a severe shortage of such teachers in India. Traditional methods of instruction are labour-intensive and cannot meet the growing demand. Braille, a tactile script, enables blind individuals to read and write across disciplines, including mathematics, music notation, and computer code. Without it, the visually impaired are deprived of fundamental literacy skills, limiting their employability, especially in rural areas where assistive technologies like text-to-speech devices are often unavailable.

Modern tools such as Non-Visual Desktop Access (NVDA), JAWS software, and apps like Annie have transformed learning for the visually impaired. However, these are expensive and beyond the reach of most rural families. Many parents in rural areas prefer to send their children with visual impairments to regular government schools, where specialised education is unavailable, further impeding their growth.

Increasing Braille literacy and accessibility is essential to support the 15 million visually impaired individuals in India. Addressing these issues needs collective action from government bodies, educational institutions, and society at large. The empowerment of the visually challenged is a shared responsibility. (The writer is an English lecturer)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

LN Mishra, 24 others hurt in bomb blast at rail line opening

Sansarpur, January 2

An abortive attempt of the life of Railway Minister L. N. Mishra was made today. A bomb thrown by an unidentified person, exploded with a deafening noise and blinding flames on the dais from where Mr. Mishra declared open the Sansarpur–Muzaffarpur broad-gauge line. Twenty-five persons were injured. Mr. Mishra was injured in the thigh by a flying splinter and his younger brother, Dr. Jagannath Mishra, Bihar Agriculture Minister, in the leg. Two persons were arrested on the spot.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2000

Seven cops hurt as mob tries to attack daily's office

Bangalore, Jan 2

The police today lathi-charged and teargassed a violent mob, which had gathered in front of an English daily's office here, protesting against an article which was carried by it on January 1. A tense situation prevailed for several hours today as hundreds of people belonging to the Muslim community gathered near the office of the New Indian Express on Queen's Road raising slogans against the article. Meanwhile, sporadic violence was reported from several parts of the City during the day.

OASIS RADHIKA D SHYAM

From worldly love to divine devotion

Ratnavalli the wife of Rambhola Dubey, was fortunate to have the undivided attention and adulation of her husband. Once while she was away at her parents' place, Rambhola could not bear her absence. He braved the stormy weather to meet her. With no boats available, he partly swam and partly sailed on a floating corpse to cross the Sarju river. Reaching very late at night, and nobody answering the door, he found a rope and climbed it to reach Ratnavalli's room. He thought she would be pleasantly surprised and pleased, but she was shocked and angry on knowing the details and extremities of his ordeals. She chided him saying, if only he was half as devoted to God as

he was to her body of flesh and blood, he would be redeemed. Heartbroken by her reaction Rambhola decided to renounce *grihastha* (householder's life) and *grihasti* his wife for good.

Saraswati Bai was the wife of Shrinivasa Nayak—a very wealthy jeweller and money lender, known for his miserliness. She was a pious and generous woman who tried in vain to influence him to loosen his purse strings. He felt spending or giving away money was a mark of disrespect to Goddess Lakshmi and refused to acknowledge the role of *daan-dakshina* as an integral part of *dharma*.

One day a poor Brahmin came to Shrinivasa's shop seeking monetary aid for performing his son's *Upanayana* (thread ceremony). He was asked to come back after six months. The Brahmin did as told, with a lot of hope. Shrinivasa denied him aid by giving a few worn-out coins. The Brahmin went begging. When he reached Saraswati Bai's house. Badly wanting to help the poor man, she decided to give him her diamond studded nose-ring that was given by her parents. Co-incidentally this man took this nose-ring to Shrinivasa's shop to sell it. He was angry on recognising his wife's ornament and stormed home to con-

front her. Terrified at facing him and the consequences, she thought of ending her life. Praying to and asking Lord Krishna for forgiveness, she reached for a small container of poison, only to find her nose-ring in it. This miracle transformed Shrinivasa Nayak. Rambhola was Tuladasi who went on to script *Ramcharitmanas* and *Hanuman Chalisa* besides many other spiritual gems. Shrinivasa Nayak composed around 475,000 devotional songs as *Parandara Dasa* and came to be known as the father of Carnatic music. The wives of these two literary saints were instrumental in their attaining heights of faith, fame and redemption.

Obesity: soft core of an epidemic of non-communicable diseases

Obesity is a chronic disease defined by excessive fat deposits that can impair an individual's health. Obesity increases risk of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. It also increases the risk of certain cancers and greatly influences quality of living factors, such as sleep and mobility

Anbarasu Mohanraj

At no point in the history of mankind has there been so much excess food on the table as there has been over the last few decades. Science and technology have led to massive increases in food production and preservation over the last 50-75 years. That has indeed helped in eliminating famines and improved the overall health of society.

However, this has created its own perils. Throughout history, our ancestors have been either wandering or physically active in some way right from our prime days. This has changed over the last few decades with man being cuffed to his chair. The average life expectancy of humans is at its peak, and the boomer generation is living into the eighties rather easily.

Excessive food on the table and the lack of mobility are taking their toll on humans. It is well and truly the age of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidemia, and obesity.

I see patients in their seventies coming up for heart surgery. Most of these patients are not overweight, but their children who accompany them to the hospital for consultations or for surgery are grossly obese.

It's quite peculiar, but common now to see patients with heart issues at both ends of the age spectrum. With increasing age expectancy, we see lot of very elderly patients. With non-communicable diseases increasing, we also see a number of young and middle-aged patients coming in with heart issues.



One in eight in the world is obese, and one in three is overweight, according to the WHO. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Obesity is a chronic, complex disease defined by excessive fat deposits that can impair the health of an individual.

Obesity increases the risk of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and affects bone health. It also increases the risk of certain cancers and influences quality of living factors, such as sleep and mobility.

The current incidence of obesity as per the World Health Organization across the globe is huge: one in eight in the world is obese, and one in three is overweight. Worldwide, adult obesity has doubled since 1990, and adolescent obesity has quadrupled: 37 million children under the age of five are overweight; over 390 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 years are overweight; and 160 million children and adolescents are obese.

So what do we mean by obesity? The diagnosis of obesity and obesity is based on body mass index (BMI) – weight(kg)/height²(m²). For adults, overweight is a BMI greater than 25 kg/m² and obesity means a BMI greater than 30 kg/m².

In 2000, a WHO expert group proposed the BMI criteria for overweight as 23-24.9 kg/m² and obesity as >25 kg/m² for individuals from the Asia-Pacific region as against the international criteria. So we need to take these values to define our level of obesity in India.

Childhood obesity Childhood obesity is a serious health hazard increasingly growing in India. Childhood obesity can lead to poor self-esteem and depression. Children who

are obese are prone to developing adulthood obesity and, consequently, developing diabetes, hypertension, and other complications early in life. India ranks second in the world in terms of being home to the highest number of obese children.

Causes of childhood obesity include too little activity and consuming too many calories from food and drinks, but genetic and hormonal factors too need to be evaluated. Regular intake of high-calorie food such as fast foods, baked foods, and fizzy drinks, are the common causes of childhood obesity. Although candies and desserts can also cause obesity, more and more evidence is pointing towards sugary drinks and sports drinks as the culprits.

The Indian picture Like any other nation, India is affected by the epidemic of obesity. The Indian incidence of obesity is around 13%, which is much higher than in other middle-income countries.

In addition to this issue, one other worrying aspect of the Indian population is normal weight obesity, meaning the population has a higher body fat despite a normal body mass index (BMI). Another variation of obesity in this population is sarcopenic obesity. These people have increased BMI or waist circumference along with sarcopenia (gross loss of muscle mass).

Waist circumference is a very important indicator of obesity, which is quite commonly ignored in our country. The incidence of increased waist circumference with normal weight is as

high as 65% in men and women. These individuals are called TOFI (Thin Outside and Fat Inside). TOFI individuals have a high fat deposition around their waist and have a high incidence of diabetes, hypertension, and heart diseases. An ideal waist circumference is 90 cm for men and 80 cm for women in this population.

Overweight and obesity cause 3.4 million deaths annually worldwide. India ranks third after China and the USA. There are economic burdens that can be attributed to overweight and obesity. Apart from the direct medical costs incurred by the country, the issue of overweight and obesity is also linked with indirect costs associated with the process of seeking medical healthcare, economic loss from premature mortality, absence from work, and negative influence on work productivity.

Obesity has a deleterious impact on the individual, family, society and country. One big challenge is that obesity can trigger mental health issues, including low self-esteem, mood disorders, motivational disorder, eating problems, issues with body image, and negatively impact interpersonal communication.

Addressing obesity

Mere weight loss alone results in a reduction in blood pressure, improves cholesterol levels, and reduces diabetes incidence, all in one shot without any pills.

Treating obesity with newer medicines is quite effective, but it is expensive and is not without adverse effects. Metabolic surgery, or bariatric surgery, is effective,

Obesity has a deleterious impact on the individual, family, society, and country. One challenge is that it can trigger mental health issues, including low self-esteem, motivational disorder, eating problems, and issues with body image

but the cost involved and the long-term nutritional aspects and protein supplements needed, have to be taken into account. Awareness, attention, advocacy and addressing the issue are the pillars in the campaign to prevent and treat obesity.

Adhering to a healthy diet and cautiously avoiding high carb items, and junk food are the needs of the hour. Regular physical activity and simple changes in lifestyle are a must.

A goal of 6,000-8,000 steps every day, which is easy to track on smart watches or mobiles, with mild weight training, is recommended. Simple remedies like totally avoiding lifts, walking short distances instead of using automobiles, and avoiding long periods of inactivity using mobile phones, and watching TV also help.

Organisations and companies can give employees walking targets. Checking weight and waist circumference regularly will by itself create motivation to address the issue.

(Dr. Anbarasu Mohanraj is Director & Clinical Lead, Cardiac Surgery, Kauvery Hospital, Vadapalani, Chennai. anbarasu.mohanraj@gmail.com)



Paracetamol poisoning quietly claims thousands of lives worldwide GETTY IMAGES

Over the counter, under the radar: can paracetamol become fatal?

C. Aravinda

The death of a woman in a Liverpool hospital, reportedly from paracetamol poisoning, has brought the issue out of the shadows. She received a dose far in excess of the recommended dose for her body weight. The truth is, annually, paracetamol poisoning quietly claims thousands of lives worldwide. In the USA alone, it accounts for more than 60,000 emergency hospital visits annually and over 500 deaths. The estimates are limited by a lack of available data from many countries, particularly in Asia, South America, and Africa. Despite its scale, paracetamol poisoning rarely enters public discourse, overshadowed by its reputation as a "safe" drug.

Paracetamol is widely used for pain and fever reduction. In the US and Japan, it is called acetaminophen, while most other countries, including India, use the name "paracetamol." How paracetamol works is not fully understood. It relieves pain by acting on the brain's central nervous system by inhibiting the production of prostaglandins, which are chemical messengers that amplify pain. Paracetamol targets the hypothalamus, the brain's heat-regulating centre for fever reduction.

Safety and risks

The maximum safe dose for an adult is up to 4 grams per day. For children, dosage depends on weight, with the safety threshold being 140 mg per

How paracetamol works is not fully understood. It relieves pain by acting on the central nervous system by inhibiting production of prostaglandins, which are messengers that amplify pain

kilogram of body weight. For example, a person weighing 70 kg should not exceed 10 grams in 24 hours. Exceeding these doses can result in severe abdominal pain due to impending liver failure. It has to be consumed in divided doses, with the maximum dose for adults in the range of 650 mg at a time and for children, 15 mg/kg of body weight.

Dangers of Overdose

When taken in excess, paracetamol becomes toxic. When you take paracetamol as a syrup or tablet, it is absorbed in the small intestine and then enters the bloodstream. It then travels to the liver, where most of it is safely processed. About 60% and 35% are converted into a harmless form called paracetamol glucuronide and paracetamol sulfate, respectively. The remaining 5-10% is turned into a toxic substance called N-acetyl-p-benzoquinone imine (NAPQI). Normally, the liver quickly neutralises NAPQI and removes it as paracetamol glutathione. In case of an overdose, the liver becomes overwhelmed, and NAPQI accumulates and damages liver cells, leading to liver cell death and liver failure. Paracetamol poisoning is insidious, and symptoms often appear after the damage has begun. As toxicity progresses jaundice, confusion, and organ failure may follow.

Treatment

The antidote for paracetamol poisoning is N-acetylcysteine (NAC), which replenishes the body's glutathione reserves and neutralises NAPQI. NAC is most effective when administered within eight hours of the overdose but can still provide benefits up to 24 hours later.

(Dr. C. Aravinda is an academic and public health physician. Views expressed are personal. aravindaajimsir10@hotmail.com)

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

January is cervical cancer awareness month

Ramya Kannan

QUESTION 1

According to the WHO, Cervical cancer is the — most common cancer in women, with around 660,000 new cases recorded in 2022. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 2

HPV, the Human Papilloma Virus that causes cervical cancer, also is known to cause other kinds of cancers. Name a couple.

QUESTION 3

Men can also be carriers of the HPV. True or false?

QUESTION 4

In 2009, a "demonstration pilot project" on the HPV vaccine — immunogenicity testing — was launched in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, but the trial was suspended due to the death of a few adolescent school girls after HPV vaccination. Later investigations delinked the virus as the causative factor. Name the agency that was involved.

QUESTION 5

The vaccines available to treat cervical cancer are therapeutic or preventive?



Visual question. Today there are self-collection kits to detect cervical cancer. Which was the most commonly used public health mode of testing in the past that reportedly took just a few minutes and was considered more effective than a pap smear? AP

Please send in your answers to
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subject 'Daily page'

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A fortnightly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



Row over AAP's cash transfer promises ahead of the Delhi election raises a question: Are these schemes effective welfare measures or born of a short-term transactional politics?

Quick-fix populism, no panacea

Cash transfers can only supplement social safety nets. They are no substitute for investment in structural reforms

Cash transfers can change lives

There is enough evidence of their positive impact, especially for women



HIMANSHU

THE IDEA OF cash transfers as part of larger social protection schemes is not new and has been used for different purposes in different countries. In most cases, this was meant to be a safety net for disadvantaged groups or to encourage better access and utilisation of health and educational services. In India, one of the oldest national cash transfer schemes is the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), which provides pensions to the elderly, widowed and disabled who are unable to participate in economic activities. But cash transfers have now become the new magic wand that can be used for any problem. For political parties, it is the go-to solution for anything from women empowerment to agrarian distress to unemployment to poverty alleviation. Whether these actually deliver on the issues at hand is hardly a consideration as long as they deliver on the political front. On this, incumbent governments, as well as opposition, seem convinced: This is the magic formula that delivers success. The assembly elections in October-November seem to have reconfirmed this unwavering belief in the power of cash transfers.

The success of incumbent parties in Maharashtra and Jharkhand appears to be the result of this cash-transfer schemes directed towards women. There are now more than 10 schemes that have either implemented or announced such schemes. In almost all cases, the schemes were initiated just before the elections and led to the incumbent government's return to power in the state legislative elections. While women may have emerged as the new political constituency, the idea of throwing cash at problems that are difficult to resolve has become an accepted principle. This was successfully used by states such as Telangana and Odisha to deal with agrarian distress. It was then adopted by the central government by expanding the scheme to all farmers in the run-up to the 2019 general elections as PM-KISAN. States have now tried using cash transfers as a solution to the unemployment problem with several of them promising or actually implementing schemes for the unemployed.

The temptation to use cash transfers as the one-size-fits-all solution for political parties is many. With universal access to financial services, these are easy-to-implement, tangible benefits for voters, directly delivered to beneficiaries. The success of the scheme is also due to the preference of beneficiaries for such cash transfers as they are fungible and unconditional. Most importantly, these bypass the notorious state and central bureaucrats and the local middlemen. In a way, these are the best way for politicians to con-

nect to their electorates directly.

While the ease of implementation and direct tangible benefit to voters is what makes it politically successful, there is no evidence of whether they actually deliver on the purpose for which they are designed. On women empowerment, a study by J-PAL on 20 cash transfer schemes in Latin America found the evidence inconclusive. The same is true for cash transfers to farmers. The limited evidence available from multiple sources suggests that farmers' income has declined in real terms after 2018-19. Farmers have increasingly been agitating for better and remunerative agricultural policies.

It may be too early to examine the impact of cash transfers in the short run. However, the issue is not the success of these individual schemes but the basic premise that cash transfers can resolve all problems. Such an approach trivialises the complexity of the issues at hand. Most reforms require policy interventions, which are unlikely to result in any tangible gain in the short run, and require consensus-building across stakeholders and carefully-designed interventions with active participation and investment from the government machinery. For governments with a short-time horizon between one election and the next, the effort is not worth the benefits that cash transfers deliver in the short run.

However, this is not to argue that all cash transfers are undesirable. Many, including the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), have been useful as essential social protection nets. Similarly, maternity-entitlement schemes or scholarships have helped households and communities to achieve better human-development outcomes. But in almost all cases, these are not substitutes for greater investments by the state in ensuring the availability and accessibility of essential services such as health, education and nutrition. Rather, these work as complementary incentives for households/communities to access these services.

On the contrary, it has led to a tendency towards competitive populism with political parties and governments vying with each other to increase the scale and scope of such transfers. One consequence of this has been the excessive fiscal strain on state and central government finances at the cost of essential spending on health, education, nutrition or basic infrastructure. While new cash transfers have been announced, spending on existing basic social protection such as the NSAP, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) or the maternity entitlement scheme remains frozen with decline in real terms. What is needed is a nuanced understanding of the role of cash transfers in supplementing and expanding the social safety nets rather than a quick-fix solution guaranteed to deliver political dividends. The costs of such profligacy in the long run are likely to be much more harmful than the short-term benefits they deliver.

The writer is associate professor, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, School of Social Sciences, JNU, New Delhi



JASMINE SHAH

ALL ELECTORAL BATTLES are a contest of ideas — about what exactly will improve the lives of voters, and who can credibly deliver them. In the run-up to the Delhi Assembly elections, the maximum buzz has been generated by the Mahila Samman Yojna, an unconditional cash transfer scheme to every woman above 18 years.

Last month, the Delhi Cabinet approved a monthly transfer of Rs 1,000 under this scheme, with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) promising to increase it to Rs 2,100, should it come back to power. Predictably, this announcement has reignited the debate on the role of subsidies and cash transfer schemes in India. Critics often label these transfers as unnecessary and populist freebies that will ruin the state economy. However, they ignore the substantial evidence of the transformational impact these can have in the lives of the aam aadmi — the lower and middle classes. Take, for instance, transfers to women.

India ranks poorly in most global indices of women empowerment. The 2023 Global Gender Gap report by the World Economic Forum ranked India at 129 out of 146 countries. India is among the few countries globally to see decreasing participation of women in the workforce in the first two decades of this century, despite stellar economic growth.

Cash and in-kind transfers to women directly allow them to tackle the multiple barriers they face in accessing education and job opportunities, besides living a life of dignity. The AAP government's free bus rides scheme for women, launched in 2019, is a testament to the lasting impact of such transfers. An independent 2023 study by researchers from Ashoka University evaluated Delhi's free bus rides scheme and found that it led to a 24 per cent increase in paid work and employment for women from marginalised sections of society and therefore most likely to gain from affordable public transport.

Over the past decade, the AAP government in Delhi has introduced multiple subsidies, including free electricity and free water schemes, targeted at the lower and middle classes, that have provided a crucial social safety net to these groups and allowed them to live a life of dignity. It has also boosted their purchasing power, which creates demand and keeps the wheels of the economy running. Fears that such transfers often end up being misspent have been thoroughly disproven. Evidence from 119 developing countries running uncondi-

tional cash assistance programs shows that recipients of these transfers increased their spending on nutrition, schooling and health. So, where does one draw the line? These transfers shouldn't happen at the cost of making adequate investments into building human capital or providing essential public services to all. Over the past decade, AAP's Delhi Model of governance stands out for having made unprecedented investments in health and education — around 40 per cent of the annual budget. As a result, Delhi arguably has the best government school system and public healthcare system for any Indian state today. In comparison, most Indian states spend little on their crumbling education and public health systems, even as they have introduced cash transfers.

The AAP government has also made lasting investments in infrastructure and provision of essential public services. In the past decade, the electricity distribution network of Delhi has seen a major overhaul, making it the leading Indian state providing 24x7 electricity. The length of the Delhi Metro has doubled from 200 km to 400 km, even as a record number of nearly 2,000 e-buses were inducted, making Delhi the leader in provision of green mobility. Over 10,000 kms of water pipelines and 4,500 kms of sewer pipelines were laid, bringing these amenities for the first time to Delhi's unauthorised colonies, which are home to a third of its population.

The other yardstick for determining the limit of direct transfers should be their implications on the state's finances. The Delhi Model stands out again by ensuring that, even as the AAP government made unprecedented investments in health, education, infrastructure and increasing expenditure on subsidies, Delhi's budget consistently remained in revenue surplus over the past decade and Delhi's overall debt-to-GDP ratio reduced from 7 per cent to 4 per cent — among the lowest for any Indian state. Throughout this period, Delhi has shown resilient economic performance with the lowest inflation, among the lowest unemployment rates in India and GDP growth at par with rest of India.

Critics of such transfers rarely blink at the true freebies. Over the last decade, Indian banks have written off nearly Rs 15 lakh crore of bad loans of rich corporates with seemingly few consequences for over 12,000 wilful defaulters. In 2019, the BJP-ruled Centre implemented the biggest corporate tax cut in Indian history, wiping off Rs 1 lakh crore in revenues annually and resulting in record profits for Indian corporates, even as real wages (inflation adjusted) for salaried workers in India have declined since 2012. One wonders whether the intensity of debates surrounding cash transfers to the poor are manufactured to shield from scrutiny this far more regressive subsidy that the Indian state offers.

The writer is an AAP leader and the author of the book The Delhi Model

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The pandemic demonstrated the urgency of working together on global health, but also how often countries fell short, prioritising national interests. The world's divides are likely to yawn wider in 2025. But an escalatory spiral must not be regarded as either desirable or inevitable."

— THE GUARDIAN

Questions after Christmas

Church leadership needs to listen to the people, heed their concerns and insecurities



ZERO HOUR
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

— Alexei Navalny, Russian opposition leader

IN MY TWO decades in public life, including three terms in Parliament, I have written columns on a range of subjects, but never one on the church in India. This is a first. It needed to be written. More silence on the subject would make me complicit.

A former Provincial (head of a province) of a large religious congregation told this columnist: "Bishops must continue to lead the Church on all spiritual issues. But it is time for the lay Catholics to unite and set the direction for the church in social and political spheres? It is time this is debated. It is time Christians from the grassroots (referred to by the Church as the laity) start openly asking direct questions of the few hundred bishops who comprise the key decision-making body of the Catholic Church in India."

More priests and nuns, usually bound by strict rules of discipline, have also begun to speak up. A nun, who is a leading educationist, told this columnist: "That the bishop's body gave the Prime Minister a platform during Christmas for a photo-op is unacceptable. I only saw videos of the PM in the media. Just platitudes, nothing on the real issues." She added: "They can choose to invite whoever they want, but why was not a single MP from among the 20 elected Christian MPs invited? Was that a tradition laid down by Mr Modi to grace the occasion?"

Spreading festive cheer is always welcome. But now, these are the hard questions that must be asked of the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi. Many Christmas have gone by, now answers have to be demanded.

(i) Why did you attempt to turn Christmas Day into "Good Governance Day"? (ii) Why are you weaponising the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) to specifically target institutions run by the Christian community? (iii) Why have you totally ignored the people of Manipur? (iv) Why are you encouraging and passing anti-conversion laws that violate Fundamental Rights under Article 14, 15 and 25 of the Constitution? Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan. (v) Why are you pushing the Waqf Bill and playing minority versus minority, espe-

cially in Kerala? (vi) Why don't you ever say a word condemning hate speeches and crude communal slurs? (vii) Why have attacks on institutions run by minorities been on the rise? (viii) Why are incidents of violence against Christians increasing? (ix) Why did India's National Human Rights Commission lose its United Nations accreditation twice since 2014? (x) Do you remember Father Stan Swamy? Sipper? Straw? Death?

This year, 20 Christian MPs were invited for dinner on December 3 by the Bishops' body. To put it more accurately, these were not Christian MPs but elected MPs who happened to be Christians. Many MPs insisted that the meeting had to go beyond breaking bread together. There needed to be an agenda. The Bishops' body then circulated, in writing, a nine-point agenda to the MPs. When news of what was discussed at the 90-minute meeting found its way into the media, the Bishops' body went into damage control mode and issued a public statement denying that any meeting had taken place. Too clever by half!

Truth be told, the meeting did take place. There was an agenda circulated as well. Some of the points raised by the MPs included: (i) Need to stop photo-ops. Christian leadership should take a stand to call out those who are not protecting the Constitution; (ii) Support the Muslim community, in principle, on the Waqf Bill, acknowledging that there may be some clauses in the Bill that are contentious in a state or two; (iii) Christian organisations being targeted and FCRA licenses being cancelled; (iv) Issues of reservation, interference in educational institutions and repeated attacks on places of worship and personnel.

One suggestion made by this columnist, who was present at that meeting, was the need to be proactive and focus on a positive narrative, rather than only be reactive to negative incidents and news. The focus could be the community's significant contribution to education, healthcare and social welfare. Here are just two among the many heartening facts by the MPs included: (i) Support the Muslim community, in principle, on the Waqf Bill, acknowledging that there may be some clauses in the Bill that are contentious in a state or two; (ii) Christian organisations being targeted and FCRA licenses being cancelled; (iv) Issues of reservation, interference in educational institutions and repeated attacks on places of worship and personnel.

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Internationally renowned Jesuit human rights and peace activist and writer Father Cedric Prakash, speaking to this columnist, does not mince his words: "The Church leadership in India seems to have missed the bus. Their hearts and ears are not listening to the cries of the millions suffering in the country — particularly the minorities. Even if they are aware of these ground realities, they seem to be totally frightened of the ruling regime to take a visible and vocal stand — just in case the powers bring out the skeletons in the cupboard. All this does not augur well for authentic Christian discipleship in today's India."

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Rajya Sabha)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PREJUDICE AT WORK

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Centre amends prison manual to address caste-based inequality' (IE, December 2). This is indeed a liberation for prisoners from caste-based bondage. The irony is that this injustice was being perpetuated by the state through its jail manuals. Model Prison Manual, 2016 and Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023, which now stand amended following the October 3 order by the Supreme Court. Did government officials tasked with developing model manuals lose sight of the fact that the Constitution prohibits caste-based discrimination. Or is it caste prejudice that prevailed over reason?

L.R.Murmu, New Delhi

A TALL LEADER

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Thank you, Doctor Sahib' (IE, January 2). Dr Manmohan Singh was an economics expert and a visionary leader. He faced ridicule from the Opposition but responded with poise and dignity. Dr Singh is ever alive in every Indian's heart. He has etched his name in every Indian's heart with his simplicity, statesmanship, constructive work, implementation of welfare measures and, above all, economic reforms which transformed the Indian economy. Unlike his successor, Singh engaged openly with the media. His words have proven prophetic. He wasn't an accidental PM but an accidental politician and it is difficult for any academic of his merit to withstand political turbulence. He was indeed a sterling example of what a PM in a democratic country should be like.

SS Paul, Nadia

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Sorry isn't enough' (IE, January 2). On May 3, 2023 peace in Manipur was shattered. The continued ethnic clashes seem to be the order of the day. The visit of the Opposition INDIA's delegation in July 2023 and three visits by the Leader of Opposition could not convince various communities in Manipur to cooperate and reach a peace deal. The present chief minister N Biren Singh has miserably failed to establish law and order. Instead of apologising, he should have quit to make way for a more effective leader. All militant groups must be disarmed, ceasefire imposed and the grievances of all ethnic groups resolved. The Prime Minister's visit to heal the Manipur wounds is overdue.

Subbash Vaid, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Sorry isn't enough' (IE, January 2). Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh's apology for the ethnic violence that has ravaged the state is too little, too late. Over 250 lives have been lost and thousands displaced. Singh's acknowledgment of the tragedy cannot erase his culpability. Under Singh's watch, Manipur spiralled into chaos. 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 take accountability. Allegations of bias against the Kuki-Zo community have further eroded trust in his leadership. Manipur needs a leadership overhaul. Singh must face the consequences of his failures.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

High credit card interest is not 'unfair trade practice', here's why

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 2

HIGH INTEREST rates on credit card loans cannot be challenged as an "unfair trade practice", the Supreme Court has ruled.

The court last month set aside a July 2008 order by the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC), which had capped the interest rate at 30% per annum.

The court also ruled that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is the only authority that can impose limits on interest rates.

CASE HISTORIES: The petitioners in *"Avan"* Punjab State Reserve Bank of India vs. Ors (2008), argued that banks were levying "unfair" rates of interest in the range of 36-49% per annum for delays or defaults on credit card payments.

This, they claimed, amounted to an unfair trade practice under the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 (which was replaced by a new CPA in 2019).

'LEAVE IT TO BANKS': The RBI submitted that it had directed banks to not levy excessive interest — however, it said, its policy was to leave the determination of the specific rates of interest to banks.

In May 2007, following complaints about excessive interest rates charged by banks, the RBI issued two directives, which stated that "though interest rates have been deregulated, rates... beyond a certain level may be seen to be usurious and can neither be sustainable nor be conforming to normal banking practice".

The directives did not specify the "certain level" — and instead advised banks to "lay out appropriate internal principles and procedures so that usurious interest, including processing and other charges, are not levied... on loans and advances".

'IT'S THE LAW': Respondent banks, including Citibank and HSBC, submitted that the interest charged by them was protected by the Banking Regulation Act, 1949 — and that only the RBI could prescribe a maximum rate.

Section 21A of the 1949 Act states that "a transaction between a banking company and its debtor shall not be re-opened by any court on the ground that the rate of interest charged by the banking company in respect of such transaction is excessive".

Section 35A gives RBI power to issue binding directions to banking companies in the public interest, in the interest of banking policy, in the interest of depositors or the banking company, or "to secure the proper management of any banking company".

Decision of the NCDRC

The Commission ruled against the banks, holding that they could be ordered to discon-

tinue an "unfair trade practice".

The definition of this term under the CPA includes the use of deceptive or unfair practices, "for the purpose of promoting the sale, use or supply of any goods or for the provision of any service". This, the NCDRC found, would cover the activities of banking companies.

The NCDRC noted that the credit card interest rate in the US "ranges from 18 per cent to 24 per cent", in Hong Kong, it is "24 per cent to 32 per cent", and "in the Philippines, Indonesia and Mexico... varies from 36 per cent to 50 per cent".

It ruled that "there is no justifiable ground for adopting the highest rate of interest prevailing in smaller economies", and "not even attempting to follow what is prevailing in developed countries".

The Commission also referred to the Supreme Court's decision in *Central Bank of*

India vs. Ravindra And Ors (2001) which stated "The power conferred by Sections 21 and 35A... is coupled with duty to act (by issuing directives)" and that "any interest charged and/or capitalised in violation of RBI directives... shall be disallowed and/or excluded from capital sum and be treated only as interest and dealt with accordingly".

The NCDRC found "there is no justifiable ground for not controlling the banks which exploit the borrowers by charging exorbitant rates of interest varying from 36 per cent to 49 per cent per annum...". It directed that "charging of interest at rates in excess of 30 per cent per annum... is an unfair trade practice".

The SC stayed this decision in 2009.

What Supreme Court said

Justices Bela M Trivedi and Satish Chandra Sharma held on December 20 that RBI alone can issue directions to banks to carry out their functions lawfully and fairly.

The court's duty is merely to ensure this authority is not abused — capping the interest rate, as the Commission had done, "is an encroachment upon the domain of the Reserve Bank of India", the SC held.

It also held that the Commission had effectively re-opened the transaction between the bank and the debtor, which is barred under Section 21A of the Banking Regulation Act.

"Once the terms of the credit card operations were known to the complainants and disclosed by the banking institutions before the issuance of the credit cards, the National Commission could not have scrutinised the terms or conditions, including the rate of interest," the SC held.

Banks had not "made any misrepresentation to deceive the credit card holders", and there was nothing to show how, without violating any RBI directives, charging inflated interest rates would amount to an unfair trade practice, the court said.

THIS WORD MEANS

FREESTYLE CHESS

A chess variant in which the pieces in the back rank are randomised at the start of the game

AMIT KAMATH
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 2

AT THE heart of the recent clash between FIDE, the global governing body of chess, and top grandmasters Magnus Carlsen and Hikaru Nakamura, is freestyle chess.

Carlsen and Nakamura last week accused FIDE of threatening grandmasters who wanted to play in the Freestyle Chess Grand Slam Tour. The two even said that they considered opting to play the freestyle tour over FIDE tournaments. FIDE denied these allegations, and things were resolved ahead of the recently concluded World Rapid and Blitz Championship.

Chess with a twist

Freestyle chess was popularised by the legendary grandmaster Bobby Fischer back in 1996. It is chess — but with a twist. In regular chess, positions of chess pieces on the back ranks are fixed: the rooks are stationed on the corners, the knights start on the b and g files, the bishops on the c and f files. Both kings are on d squares, while the queens start one square. In freestyle chess, however, the positions of these pieces are randomised at the start of the game.

This is meant to promote creativity among players, who have to navigate uncharted territory from the very first move of the game. The shuffling of chess pieces makes possible 960 different starting positions on the board.

Thus, the unique opening position in each game eliminates all the opening theories, which players like Fischer and Carlsen say make chess very "theoretical" and "bookish" in the first phase of the game. Players do not have the luxury to simply play out the first series of moves based on days and months of preparation

by their teams, or powerful computer chess engines.

That said, the pieces still retain their regular characteristics. Rooks move in straight lines, bishops cut across the board in sweeping diagonal movements, and the knights make sidle-like veering motions and retain the ability to hop over pieces.

Potential gamechanger

Over the years, freestyle chess has earned many names: Fischer Random Chess, Chess 9X and Chess 960. Over the last year, it has gained popularity even among the *crème de la crème* of the chess world.

The Freestyle Chess G.O.A.T. Challenge, a seven-day tournament co-organised by Carlsen (also the event's victor) and German tech investor Jan Henric Buettner, was hugely popular. It was the first major freestyle tournament with classical controls.

This year, the tournament has expanded to become a series of five chess events, which will be hosted in Wangles, Paris, New York, New Delhi, and Cape Town.

The first event will take place at the Schloss Weissenhaus in Wangles from February 7 to 14. Participants include Viswanathan Anand, Gukesh D, Fabiano Caruana, Nakamura, Nodirbek Abdusattorov, Alireza Firouzja, Levon Aronian, Vincent Keymer, and one player to be selected in the open qualification. And of course, Carlsen, the undisputed champion of the format.

He recently said in an interview to *Financial Times*: "We inherently believe this is a better game than what we've been playing in classical chess... A lot of people who are in gaming feel that having a new map for every game is tremendously exciting."

SUKALP SHARMA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 2

AIR INDIA rang in the new year by announcing the rollout of Wi-Fi Internet connectivity services on board domestic and international flights served by select aircraft in its fleet. This makes the airline the first in India to offer Internet connectivity on domestic flights.

Wi-Fi will be offered free of charge on domestic flights operated by the select aircraft for a limited introductory period. Over time, Air India plans to progressively offer the service on other aircraft in its fleet.

On-board internet services are fast becoming a standard offering, particularly among major full-service carriers (FSCs) globally. Air India, which returned to the Tata Group three years ago, has big ambitions to be counted among the world's foremost airlines.

Which Air India planes currently have the onboard Wi-Fi offering?

For now, Wi-Fi will be available on the airline's Airbus A350, Boeing 787-9, and select Airbus A321neo aircraft. The airline was already offering Internet connectivity on board international flights operated by these aircraft as part of an ongoing pilot programme.

Apart from the new A350 aircraft, which Air India started operating in 2024, the other aircraft are understood to be those of erstwhile Vistara, which merged with Air India in November. All these aircraft are equipped with special hardware required to offer Internet connectivity on board. Vistara had been offering Internet on select international flights prior to the merger.

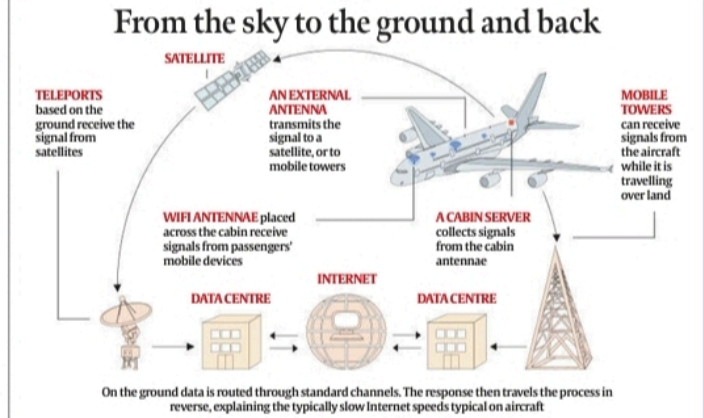
On board the Vistara aircraft, the service was facilitated by another Tata Group company — Nelco — in partnership with Panasonic Avionics Corporation. The same service is now being extended to select Air India's domestic flights, it is learnt.

Passengers will have to enable Wi-Fi on their devices, and select the 'Air India Wi-Fi' network to access the Internet. They will then be redirected to the Air India portal on the device's default browser, and will need to enter their details, including PNR and last name. The device will then be connected to Wi-Fi.

What are the technologies available to provide in-flight Internet connectivity?

In-flight connectivity systems primarily use two kinds of technologies — ground-based cellular towers, also known as air-to-ground (ATG) technology, and satellite-based connectivity. Both require special antennae and other equipment to be installed on the aircraft.

In the former, an antenna — usually placed around the plane's belly, picks up signals from the nearest tower on the ground, or ground receiver, to provide connectivity on board the aircraft.



CAN YOU MAKE CALLS FROM THE SKY?

WHILE technically possible, it depends on airlines and country-specific civil aviation regulations. Lufthansa has said that Internet telephony applications such as Skype, too, are "not allowed out of consideration for other passengers".

AIR INDIA has not said whether Internet-based voice calls will be allowed, but it is learnt that such calls are not permitted. Voice notes using instant messaging applications like WhatsApp can be sent.

Graphic: Romil

craft. In some senses, this is similar to how our devices access wireless Internet on the ground.

Unless the aircraft passes over a big body of water, deserted land, or sparsely populated areas without enough cellular towers, the connection should stay seamless and stable up to a certain altitude. That said, the availability of nearby towers on the ground is a fundamental limitation of this technology.

The other option, which is fast gaining popularity, is satellite-based connectivity. Put simply, Internet from ground stations is transmitted to aircraft through satellites, using antennae mounted on top of the aircraft's body. This form of connectivity offers wider coverage, and is particularly useful in providing connectivity when the aircraft is flying over regions without ground towers.

How does in-flight Wi-Fi work?

Multiple Wi-Fi antennae are located inside the aircraft cabin, which get signals from passengers' devices. From these in-cabin antennae, the signals are sent to an on-board server. Till this point, the process is the same for both ATG and satellite-based connectivity.

In the case of a satellite-based connectivity system, the signals are then transmitted through an antenna on top of the aircraft to a satellite, which relays them to a ground station or teleport. In response, signals are sent from the ground station to the satellite, which relays them to the aircraft. In ATG technology, the signals from the server on board the aircraft are transmitted directly to on-land cellular towers using the antenna underneath the aircraft. The towers then send with signals to the aircraft.

In-flight Wi-Fi is typically much slower than on the ground. But this is changing with newer technologies entering this market.

How expensive is this technology for airlines and passengers?

Airlines have to bear the initial cost of installing antennae on aircraft. Some airlines have been of the view that it would be easier for them to have the equipment installed on their new aircraft rather than taking planes out of service for retrofitting.

For Air India, which is anyway undertaking a mammoth \$400-million retrofit programme to spruce up its legacy narrow-body

fleet, it might make sense to equip its older planes with Internet connectivity equipment as part of that exercise. It is worth noting that the aircraft on which the airline is currently offering Wi-Fi are significantly newer than much of the carrier's legacy fleet, and came installed with the necessary equipment.

Globally, some airlines offering onboard Wi-Fi offer a small volume of free Internet before asking the customer to buy a data pack, which is usually not cheap. Some carriers provide limited or unlimited Internet to members of their loyalty programmes, and business class and first class passengers.

For the time being, Air India is offering the Internet free for a limited introductory period. The airline has not specified when it plans to make the service chargeable.

With the demand for in-flight Internet expected to grow, airlines are looking at it as a source of ancillary revenue. And since it is expensive for airlines to equip their planes to offer Internet connectivity, no-strings-attached complimentary Wi-Fi, particularly to economy class passengers, is unlikely to be a norm, at least in the near to medium term.

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Why Uttarakhand government is promoting the winter Char Dham circuit

AISWARYARAJ
DEHRADUN, DECEMBER 2

THE UTTARAKHAND government on December 8 inaugurated the winter Char Dham circuit, aimed at drawing tourists to the state in the off-season winter months.

Char Dham's winter seats

Nestled in the Garhwal Himalayas in Uttarakhand, are four revered Hindu shrines or dhams — Yamunotri, Kharsali, Kedarnath, and Badrinath — collectively known as Char Dham.

Each year, from May to November, lakhs of pilgrims visit these shrines. According to data from the Government of Uttarakhand, more than 48 lakh pilgrims and 5.4 lakh vehicles visited Char Dham this year, account-

ing for roughly 8.4% of Uttarakhand's annual domestic tourist footfall. The Char Dham Yatra (pilgrimage) thus drives the state's economy.

But during the winter months, heavy snowfall leaves these shrines inaccessible, and their gates are shut. In fact, during the cold months, the presiding deities of these temples are brought to shrines at lower altitudes. Mukhina in Uttarakhand district is the winter seat of Gangotri Dham; Kharsali, also in Uttarakashi, is the winter seat of Yamunotri Dham; Kedarnath's winter abode is the Omkareshwar temple in Ukhimath in Rudrapur district; and Badrinath's is at Pandukeshwar in Chamoli district.

The winter Char Dham circuit is being promoted by the Uttarakhand government with the aim of drawing pilgrims to these



visiting the Omkareshwar temple, 5,104 visiting Pandukeshwar, 3,114 visiting Mukhina, and 614 visiting the Kharsali temple.

Changing perceptions

According to the Uttarakhand tourism department, the Char Dham nets the state more than Rs 200 crore daily. However, this inflow is yet to take off during the winter season.

Sachin Kurve, the state's tourism secretary, said the winter Char Dham programme will help rectify this, and change the image of Uttarakhand as just a summer destination.

"Since Char Dham occupies most of the tourism prospects in the state, once the shrines close, people have a perception that winter is not an apt time to visit the state. However, with the launch of winter Char Dham, people can visit lesser-known desti-

nations in the vicinity of the four winter abodes," he said.

"When the entire North India is blanketed by smog in winters, we would like to tap into this crowd as we popularly call it 'sun tourism'. The winter Char Dham will rejuvenate tourism," Kurve added.

Some concerns

Environmentalists and activists say that the yatra needs proper management, and must be promoted keeping sustainability in mind.

"Looking at pilgrimage numbers as records is leading to unnecessary overcrowding, environmental degradation, and commercialisation of the sacred sites. The increased footfall is straining local infrastructure, degrading fragile ecosystems, and disrupting the sanctity of the holy places," Dehradun-based environmentalist Anoop

Nautiyal said.

"The Uttarakhand government's decision to initiate the winter Char Dham Yatra is a significant and positive move... [but] this decision comes with concerns that must be addressed with care and foresight. The primary concern is one of safety, security and public health given the terrain and harsh weather in the mountain areas of Uttarakhand," he told *The Indian Express*.

Ravi Chopra, the former chairman of the Supreme Court appointed High Powered Committee (HPC) on the Char Dham project, said that during winter, rare and threatened animals on the high mountain slopes and crests come down for food and water. "In the final report of the HPC to the SC, we had specifically made a mention that the traffic during winters can cause disturbance for wildlife like snow leopard and mountain sheep, as these are shy animals," Chopra said.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Save Priya

Priya's story reveals a harrowing struggle. Efforts must intensify to stop her execution and ensure repatriation

The story of Nimisha Priya, a nurse from Kerala, currently on death row in Yemen, has sparked widespread debate and concern. With her death sentence sanctioned by Yemen's President Rashad al-Alimi, the clock is ticking on securing her release. Her story is not an isolated case but an ordeal that many workers face in the Gulf and many other countries. This case is not only about the fate of one individual but also raises critical questions about justice, diplomacy and human rights. Nimisha Priya, a trained nurse, moved to Yemen to work in private hospitals and make a career. In 2015, she partnered with Yemeni national Talal Abdo Mahdi to set up a clinic in Sana'a. Yemen's laws necessitate local sponsorship for businesses and Mahdi played that role for Priya. However, this professional relationship spiralled into a nightmare. Mahdi manipulated ownership documents of the clinic, claimed he was her husband using forged and morphed photographs and seized control of her finances. She was harassed mentally and subjected to physical torture and imprisonment in her own home. In 2017, desperate to reclaim her passport and escape his clutches, Priya attempted to sedate Mahdi. Unfortunately, the sedatives proved fatal due to an overdose, leading to his death. The Yemeni judicial system found her guilty of murder, sentencing her a death sentence.

Efforts to appeal her conviction have been exhausted, with the Yemeni Supreme Court and President rejecting her pleas. While Mahdi's death is undeniably tragic, Priya only wanted to regain her life and runaway from coercion and cruelty. If she is executed then it would be travesty of justice and would mean penalising a victim. Priya's actions, though legally punishable, occurred in a context of desperation and fear for her safety and freedom. The Government of India must assist Nimisha Priya and her family in securing her release and repatriation. Her release hinges on a complex process involving Yemen's tribal justice system and the payment of blood money to Mahdi's family must be paid by the accused to get a pardon. High-level diplomatic discussions with Yemeni authorities and tribal leaders are essential to secure a waiver of the death penalty. Besides, mobilising public support to raise blood money can be a way out. Employing a dedicated legal team with expertise in Yemeni law and tribal negotiations is crucial to ensuring fairness and efficiency in the process. Highlighting Priya's case on global platforms as a human rights issue may garner international support and pressure Yemen to reconsider her sentence. Priya's case underscores the plight of expatriates caught in abusive circumstances. Her actions, while grave, were not premeditated but driven by self-preservation against a backdrop of systemic exploitation. Repatriating Priya to India would allow her a better trial. The Indian government and civil society must step up efforts to secure her release and ensure she receives a fair chance to rebuild her life.



Local folk singers (Baid Fakir) perform to entertain visitors and wishing them Happy New Year, in Bithum

PTI

Crowdfunding can transform science research funding

By connecting directly with the public, crowdfunding offers researchers an opportunity to explore bold ideas fueled by passion

The conventional research funding model, which is primarily dependent on government grants and institutional allocations, is currently under increasing scrutiny. Scientists and innovators frequently find themselves facing competition for a diminishing pool of resources as budgets tighten and priorities shift in numerous regions of the globe.

A novel paradigm is emerging, one that is influenced by the digital economy: crowdfunding for research. It is possible that this community-driven, decentralised approach could revolutionise the way we finance science. Government funding has been a cornerstone of scientific research across the globe, particularly in the domain of basic research. This funding plays a vital role in driving innovation, supporting the exploration of fundamental scientific principles, and fostering advancements that often serve as the foundation for applied research and technological development. Despite its critical importance, accessing government research grants presents significant challenges for scientists and institutions, making it a complex and often time-consuming endeavour. The exhaustive application process is one of the foremost difficulties in securing government funding. Researchers must navigate hectic administrative paperwork, including filling out detailed forms, providing extensive documentation, and adhering to strict procedural guidelines. This bureaucratic overhead often becomes a distraction, diverting researchers' time and energy away from their primary focus—scientific discovery. Writing and refining grant proposals, ensuring compliance with submission requirements, and coordinating with institutional administrators



consumes weeks or even months. This process can be overwhelming for many scientists, particularly those involved with teaching responsibilities or other professional commitments. Another challenge is the influence of governmental policy on funding priorities. The allocation of research funds is often tied to the strategic objectives of the ruling government. This means that researchers must tailor their proposals to align with themes or areas of focus deemed significant by policymakers. As a result, projects that do not align with government priorities may struggle to find financial support, even if they hold substantial scientific or societal value. Moreover, the eligibility criteria for government funding further restrict access. Typically, government grants are available only to individuals holding doctoral degrees and those affiliated with recognised academic or research institutions, and some agencies restrict people from private institutions.

Crowdfunding is emerging as a revolutionary alternative to

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Crowdfunding is emerging as a revolutionary alternative to



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

overcome these hurdles. Crowdfunding involves gathering financial support for a project or venture by soliciting small contributions from a large group of people, typically through online platforms. It offers a direct, democratic, and flexible solution, empowering researchers to pursue their ideas with fewer constraints while promoting passion-driven inquiry. Crowdfunding allows researchers to connect directly with the public, garnering financial support for projects that resonate with a broader audience. Platforms like Kickstarter, Indiegogo, FundRazr, GoFundMe, etc. have already successfully funded creative projects and their application in scientific research is growing. Crowdfunding science projects require researchers to dedicate considerable time and effort to campaign management, diverting resources away from their core research work.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)

Winter session stalemate: Urgent need for reform

There is a pressing need for parliamentary reforms to ensure discipline, decorum and efficiency as a lot of parliamentary time is simply wasted



KALYANI SHANKAR

The Parliament's productivity in the recent Winter Session was a record low, with only 52 per cent of scheduled work completed. Various factors, including disruptions and lack of quorum, contributed to the reduced output. The confrontation between the treasury benches and a belligerent Opposition continued throughout. The current performance highlights the challenges in maintaining productivity. The Opposition, in particular, wanted to discuss the Adani issue. Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi has been raising the issue in public. It is a matter of significant public interest due to its implications. Also, the Opposition asked Union Home Minister Amit Shah to apologize for his comments about Dr BR Ambedkar, a highly respected figure in Indian history. The government was not willing to be flexible. With a productivity of merely 40.03 per cent during the Winter session, the Lok Sabha passed four of the five bills it received. Rajya Sabha approved 3 bills. During this session, the Lok Sabha lost 65 hours and 15 minutes, the highest in 2024. Many requests for adjournment motions made in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha were not accepted. The 18th Lok Sabha is different in many respects. For the first time in a decade, we have a strong opposition with an official leader of Opposition (LOP). The bitterness between parties within and outside Parliament is increasing. Neither side is willing to accommodate. Discipline, decorum and dignity of Parliament are of paramount importance. The pressing need for parliamentary reforms is more evident than ever, and action is needed now.

Over Rs 97,87,50,000 of taxpayers' money was spent during the Winter Session. The cost of running a Parliament session is over Rs 2.5 lakh per minute, a considerable burden on the exchequer, which should prompt reevaluating our parliamentary practices. The Parliament's high cost and low productivity must be addressed sooner or later. House is often adjourned many times a day. In the last five decades, it has increased by over 100 times. This underlines the need to address the issue. For instance, Parliament saw protests from the ruling BJP-led NDA and the aggressive Opposition INDIA Bloc. BJP MPs accused the Congress party of "insulting" Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi's legacy instead of blaming each other. Other bills include the Mussaman Wakf (Repeal) Bill, the Bharatiya Vayusan Vidheyak, the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, the Bills of Lading Bill, the Carriage of Goods by Sea Bill, the Railways (Amendment) Bill, the Banking (Amendment) Bill, and the



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Oilfields (Regulation and Development) Amendment Bill. The government also introduced a controversial bill, 'One Nation, One Poll'. While the MPs are called lawmakers, Bills have been passed amidst the din and noise without proper discussion. The decreasing time available for parliamentary debates is detrimental to democracy. Protests, adjournments, and shorted sessions have lost nearly half of the sessions. Parliamentarians question the government, elicit information, and check it mainly through the Question Hour. Short Notice questions, calling attention, and adjournment motions all check the executive. But all these are relevant only when the House runs. More efforts need to be made to establish the success of a parliamentary system. Discipline, character, and a strong sense of public morality. The need for comprehensive and immediate parliamentary reforms is more evident than ever, and the time for action is now. All stakeholders, including political analysts and citizens, must understand the urgency of the system. All stakeholders, from

political parties to citizens interested in governance and parliamentary affairs, should feel this urgency. Economic reforms are imperative to ensure sustainable economic growth. The role of Parliament is linked with the new economic policy, which should lead to a drastic reduction in the role of the State. Professionalising floor management techniques is crucial to ensuring Parliament's efficient functioning. While we can legitimately be proud of the reasonably successful work of Parliament during the last five decades, Parliament must function in step with the needs of the changing times. We must proceed carefully and cautiously and evolve a national consensus on desirable changes. After all, Parliament is the communication link between the people and the government. The solution lies in adopting healthy parliamentary practices and maintaining decorum and discipline, which are crucial for dignified conduct in the Parliament. For this, both the government and the Opposition must cooperate.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AN EXCELLENT ARTICLE ON DR SINGH
Madam — I am writing to express my heartfelt appreciation for the excellent article titled "The Statesman and a Gentleman" published in your esteemed newspaper. The article captures the life, legacy and unparalleled contribution of Dr Manmohan Singh to India's economic and political landscape. The article is very informative and educative. I have found Dr V K Bahuguna extremely well-informed. His writings are excellent and deep.

R K Sharma | New Delhi

SIMPLIFY H-1B VISA PROCESS
Madam — The H-1B visa system, a vital link between international talent and US companies, has become a contentious issue in the global workplace. It offers opportunities for skilled professionals in fields like technology, medicine, and engineering but faces significant challenges such as intense competition, complex procedures, and unclear minimum wage thresholds. According to a 2024 report by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, only 85,000 of 387,000 applications were approved, with the lottery-based system often excluding highly qualified professionals. Companies like Infosys, TCS, and Google face talent shortages due to limited approvals, while startups struggle with high costs, ranging from \$35,000 to \$50,000 per application.

The lack of a minimum wage threshold further fosters unfair competition for U.S. workers. Tesla CEO Elon Musk has called for reforms, including a minimum wage of \$150,000 to ensure only highly skilled professionals qualify. He advocates simplifying and automating processes to enhance efficiency. Musk also suggests reducing fees to support startups and small businesses, aligning the system with its goal of advancing America's technological and industrial leadership. Reforming the H-1B visa system could boost U.S. innovation, productivity, and tax revenues while balancing competition

Farmers' protests disrupt daily lives



People at large are angrily fed up with the farmers' agitation that started with the 3 farm laws enacted by the parliament, which were touted to be the game changer to improve the economic health of farmers across the country. As usual, about every decision of the Union Govt. led by Narendra Modi since 2014, the political opposition with tacit anti-India international forces successfully built the narrative after their anti-CAA agitation faded out and the anti-

between local and foreign workers. With transparent and efficient procedures, the system could become a cornerstone of global collaboration and long-term growth, positioning the U.S. as a leading hub for global talent.

R K Jain | Barwani

ROHIT SHARMA NEEDS A BREAK

Madam — Australia is the champion in the 'Boxing Day' test at Melbourne when they have everything in their command. The will to win made all the difference and the Aussies did it professionally at MCG in the fourth test to take the lead 2-1 in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. While India lost by a margin of 184 runs by bowled out for a meagre 155 in their chase, the selectors must take a serious call at this juncture. It's once again the pathetic failure of Rohit Sharma, which has been highly disappointing and Kohli partnered him soon in the pavilion by recklessly fishing one well outside the off-stump. K L Rahul and N K Reddy can't always be among runs and get out by the beauty of deliveries. Yashasvi Jaiswal was

Hindu sentiment of the fundamentalist Khalistanis forces added up force in the agitation under the grab of farmers.

Though obviously the so-called farmers who are agitated are from Punjab and have been the recipient of the biggest cake from the state in the name of MSP, subsidies, loan waivers, free electricity etc., what they are demanding now is untenable. The Supreme Court which called for suspension of the farm laws without exercising its authority against the roadblocks is still deal towards the tragedy of commuters on the highway blocked by these anarchists supported by AAP, Congress and SAD politically just to vent their hatred towards the BJP and Modi. Only forcible evacuation of the highway is the very first thing that needs to be done, the SC and the CJ must order the use of force in public and national interest at the earliest.

Jai Prakash Gupta | Ambala

the lone fighter in the middle and his flunk 84 couldn't help the team when wickets were falling like ninespins at the other end. When Pat Cummins sets an example by his responsible all-round display for the Aussies, Rohit Sharma can't have any excuses for his dismal batting. Selectors would continue with Rohit for the final test at Sydney and if the stewardship doesn't go to change in the near future it will be construed as gross injustice for Jasprit Bumrah by denying him the captaincy at the right time. Time has ripened for Bumrah to take over and it's high time for Rohit to gently take a break from the test cricket format to make room for deserving young guns who are in the waiting for long to take pride by wearing the Indian hat. Maybe the Head Coach Gautam Gambhir might have felt that his fitness and form are much better than relying on Rohit and Kohli at this stage.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

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12 The EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
WHATEVER AFFECTS ONE DIRECTLY,
AFFECTS ALL INDIRECTLY
— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE HOTTEST YEAR

Met body's warning that 2025 could be another hot year should lead to guardrails. It's time political class takes ownership

THE JURY IS still out on whether climate change has reached a point of no return. But the India Meteorological Department's (IMD) announcement that in 2024, the world's most populous country experienced its hottest year since 1901 should be sobering for policymakers across the world. Globally, too, there is enough evidence that the year gone by was the hottest on record — though the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) has not yet issued an official declaration. The IMD and WMO have warned that 2025 could be another hot year. By all accounts, India is on track to meet its global climate goals. That, however, isn't the case for most countries, especially those in the West. Indian policymakers must, therefore, build several guardrails — frame heat action plans, build sea walls, improve disaster-management systems, spruce up weather-alert mechanisms, overhaul drainage systems, install irrigation systems to combat water scarcity and climate-proof agriculture.

As the planet gets hotter, the challenge will be to address people's vulnerabilities without compromising on their developmental needs. More than 30 per cent of the country's GDP is generated in sectors that are highly nature-dependent — agriculture, forestry, water and power utilities, and construction. A World Economic Forum study estimates that agriculture output is estimated to drop by 16 per cent in the next five years, shaving off more than 2.5 per cent of the GDP. Another report, last year, by the global construction consultancy CBRE, estimates that nearly 50 per cent of the country's infrastructure is at risk due to extreme weather events. The Reserve Bank of India has also recognised that global warming can upset financial stability and growth. Quantification of climate risks in the country has, however, been patchy, largely because of the fragmented nature of information and widespread variations in data collection metrics. In this context, the RBI's move, last year, to set up a repository, the Climate Risk Information System, is a timely step. The system's focus on local-level scenarios is particularly salient given that climate vulnerabilities vary every few kilometres in the country.

The political class has, however, rarely taken cues from the country's central bank, Met body, academia and civil society institutions. The toll taken by floods, landslides, sea-level rise, poor air and the loss of green lungs has rarely been at the centre of political conversation, even during the general election last year. That's why longstanding vulnerabilities of people to extreme rainfall, heat and cold have remained unaddressed. Every year, floods in rural and urban India expose a similar set of abdications: Outdated drainage systems that cannot take the stress of more than normal rainfall, planning that does not account for local hydrology and civic agencies whose role seems limited to organising relief and rescue. It's increasingly becoming clear that floods, droughts, cyclones and heatwaves cannot be dealt with on a short-term basis, or only to tide over emergencies.

YOUNG AND HOPELESS

BPSX exam row in Bihar points to a systemic distortion and lack of accountability that is taking a high toll across states

IN THE RUN-UP to the 2024 Lok Sabha election, countering the Opposition parties' pitch on the caste census, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that, for him, there are only four castes: Poor, farmers, women — and youth. The emphasis on youth, an underlining of their issues and concerns, could also be found in the manifestos of parties and leaders' speeches. However, in 2024, like many years before it, across states, the young were let down by leaders and parties who turned an unseeing eye to a recurring pattern — peer leaks and allegations of cheating and foul play leading to exam cancellations and students' protests, to no avail. The controversy over the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSX) preliminary examination held on December 13 is only the latest in a dismal series.

One of the centres in Patna saw a disruption — it was alleged that the question paper had been leaked. Soon after, reports of irregularities poured in from other centres, sparking students' protests. On December 19, the Commission decided to conduct a re-examination only for one centre. As the protests intensified, leaders like Prashant Kishor, founder of the state's fledgling Jan Suraj Party, along with several educators, put their weight behind the students' demands; BJP's Tejashwi Yadav asked the Commission to conduct fresh prelims across the state. The BPSX controversy, however, is just one more in a long list of such irregularities. The year 2024 saw the NEET-UG fracas, followed by the cancellation of the NET and NEET-PC exams. Exams conducted for state government recruitments in UP, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu faced similar controversies. The Centre introduced the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act (2024) to lay down guardrails.

But is it enough to pass a law? Ever since the uproar over the Vyapam scam in Madhya Pradesh in 2013 — its ghosts are still to be laid to rest — few political parties have made it a political or electoral issue. For the aspirants, many of whom belong to marginalised castes and classes, these exams are a way to achieve social mobility, against daunting odds. In a country of large economic disparities, and when job creation is not picking up in the private sector, they represent a possibility of empowerment for millions. Crammed into general compartments of trains and in overcrowded buses, they reach the exam centres armed only with their aspiration — between 2014 and 2022, for instance, only 0.33 per cent of the applicants got government jobs. The voices of the students in Bihar, and other states, must be heard and heeded. In a country of the young, one that is on the move, much is at stake.

D&D FOR ALL

Lesson from gaming history for critics of the game's new updates: Inclusive can be fun

HOW MUCH IS Hasbro? "went the X post by Elon Musk on December 28, including flashbacks in those who remember the 2017 tweet — "how much is it?". The 2017 tweet had led to his purchase, in 2022, of the microblogging website formerly known as Twitter. The X post was a response to outrage among fans of the table-top role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D), that its publisher, Wizards of the Coast (owned by Hasbro), made too many "woke" updates. These include replacing the term "race" with "species" to describe the beings in the D&D world, and a new rule that lets players stop a game if it's going in an uncomfortable direction.

The episode has brought on other flashbacks too, specifically about the 2014 "Gamergate" harassment campaign where women gamers and developers were bullied, abused and doxxed by those in the community who felt that feminist values were ruining games. It was one of the worst chapters in gaming history, but a decade on, things have changed for the better — not only are there more women, non-binary and transgender gamers now, who were among the worst attacked, games themselves have become more diverse, going beyond the traditional shooter and war games. Several, including bestselling ones like *The Last of Us: Part II*, which sold 10 million copies, have embedded values like empathy and friendship without, as Gamergate doomsayers had prophesied, cutting out the fun.

The lesson, then, is this — not only for those foretelling the ruin of D&D, but all who rail against "wokeism" wrecking favourite film franchises, books and toys: Change is not always bad. D&D, with its vast cast of characters and thrilling adventures, is a great builder of solidarities, but many of its "traditional" features, such as the fetishisation of female characters, can be alienating. And if community is one of the main attractions of the game, what's the harm in making it more inclusive and widening its embrace?



SUHAN PALSHIKAR

THE AGGRESSION SHOWN by the BJP recently, inside Parliament and outside it, marks both the nature and the limits of its dominance. Its detractors may take satisfaction from the fact that these developments indicate the BJP's irritation over the enhanced numbers of the Opposition. The BJP seems to be a permanently angry party. Even in its victories, it is acerbic and vindictive. So, after its lacklustre performance in the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP's response to the parliamentary opposition again raises the question: Is the BJP really a dominant party?

Dominance may be understood as a combination of electoral success, formation of broad social coalitions and minimal recourse to the politics of repression even while dictating the terms of political discourse. How far does the BJP qualify for being a dominant pole in this sense? The shadow of Congress dominance, and exaggerated projections of the BJP's smartness, tend to complicate any analysis of the BJP's dominance. The former makes it appear that any amount of electoral success by the BJP might still not match the dominance exercised by Congress during 1950-70. Perceptions of its smartness, on the other hand, lead one to believe that all past histories of dominance will be surpassed by the BJP.

Let us first look at electoral politics. The BJP has not only retained power for three parliamentary elections, it has also retained its vote share. The distance from its nearest competitor is huge — 15 percentage points. So, the minimal criterion of being a dominant player is easily fulfilled. But this all-India picture becomes complicated once we start looking at states. Over the past decade, in parliamentary elections, it has retained its hold over Gujarat, MP, Chhattisgarh and Assam. It has made significant gains in Odisha, Andhra and Telangana. But in 2024, the BJP faced setbacks in states that were on the verge of becoming its bastions — Karnataka, Maharashtra, Haryana, Rajasthan and UP — besides failing to expand in Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal. A few states continue to be out of bounds for the BJP after 10 years. These include Kerala (in terms of seats), Tamil Nadu, Punjab and practically the entire Northeast except Assam.

Moreover, its losses and limited successes in assemblies manifest an inconsistency in its dominance. Right after its handsome victory

Hard power

BJP's dominance is marked not just by its electoral upper hand but also by the long arm of the law and intolerance

in 2014, the BJP failed in Delhi and Bihar; lost Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh; had to steal MP, Karnataka and later, Maharashtra; it lost Himachal, Karnataka and recently, could not win Jharkhand. West Bengal, too, has remained beyond its grip so far.

The weakness of the BJP's dominance is more apparent in its voter pool. It has strengthened that pool since the 1990s, but not exactly diversified it. It continues to struggle to be a "dominant" party encompassing a cross-section of voters. The BJP appears dominant because under its Hinduia umbrella, it has attracted many from the backward castes and won sizeable support among Dalits and Adivasis. Its inability and unwillingness to cultivate the Muslim (and Christian) vote is a well-known limitation. Beyond this self-imposed limitation, the BJP's voter umbrella is rather weak in accommodating most marginalised sections of society.

While the party has expanded beyond the typical middle class, it is more acceptable among upper and middle castes and the rich/middle income voters than among Dalits, Adivasis and the poor. A study shows that the upper half of society, which has more access to caste-class privilege, tends to support the BJP more (Suhans Palshikar and Jyoti Mishra, *Studies in Indian Politics*, December 2023). It has been slightly more successful among urban constituencies than among rural. Even among women, while the BJP is about to neutralise the gender gap, it has yet to establish an advantage. The BJP's relationship with citizens on the peripheries is tenuous. Its electoral dominance, thus, is crafted through an umbrella of the so-called heartland and the so-called mainstream.

Finally, the BJP's politics has often been one of jharkhand, deep divisions and consequent lack of smooth institutional functioning. The adversarial relationship between the ruling party and the Opposition can be compared only with the worst and weakest phase of Congress dominance — 1972 to 76. The frequency and vehemence with which the BJP has to resort to repression and use of state machinery against political opponents indicates its ruthless resolve to craft dominance as also the chinks in its armour. If in the Sixties, the sheer scale of electoral victories would demoralise the Opposition, today the Opposition is

often physically tamed, caricatured through control of media and silenced through the use of presiding officers of the legislature.

The BJP's ability to set an agenda is predicated on the exercise of governmental coercion resulting in projecting all dissent as anti-national and browbeating any social segment that may engage in protests and agitations. Besides an electoral upper hand, the long arm of the law and the still longer arm of misinformation and innuendo sustain the BJP's pre-eminent position in competitive politics. This is not only because the BJP is weak in other respects but because in the BJP's imagination of dominance, a certain intolerance and impatience with those who disagree is inherent.

Overall, today's BJP is a case of truncated dominance. The limits to electoral successes, the narrowness of its voter umbrella and the compulsive resort to high-handed tactics coupled with suspicion of any dissent, point to a deficit in two qualities that shape robust dominance: Statesmanship and willingness on democratic accommodation. Instead, its dominance is woven through a maze of naked power, verbosity and chicanery.

The BJP may overcome some of the limitations in the electoral arena. But it is unlikely to easily overcome the limits imposed by its narrow Hinduia umbrella under which the socio-spatial peripheries or the less privileged sections will only have a cramped place. Having got into the habit of missing governmental power, it is equally unlikely that the BJP will make itself a more legitimate player in democratic politics. The awkward mutuality of BJP's sympathisers notwithstanding, the BJP appears far away from robust dominance.

This leads to at least two strange paradoxes. Because of its truncated dominance there is space for a strong constellation against it in competitive politics and yet, precisely for that reason, a strong united opposition is not likely to take shape completely. Secondly, its incomplete dominance compels it to indulge in shrill rhetoric, that same rhetoric easily offers itself as an agenda. Competitive politics in the phase of India's second dominant party system, therefore, will unfold through these two paradoxes.

The writer, based in Pune, taught Political Science



SABYN JAVERI

SOME CALL HER a Pakistani writer, some a Parsi one, but for me, Bapsi Sidhwa (1938-2024) remains a writer who transcends all borders. Her writing bridged the many layers of human experience beyond nationalities and religions. Born in pre-Partition Karachi, Sidhwa's writings merge history, identity, and the complexities of human experience with a depth and compassion that remain unparalleled. Through her novels, she created spaces where marginalised voices were heard, women's experiences explored, and where the traumatic pasts of nation-states could be understood through the lives of unforgettable characters. With her passing at the age of 86 in Texas, the literary world has lost a brilliant and fearless storyteller.

For me, and for countless other writers from the Sub-continent, Sidhwa's work was not just a form of storytelling — it was a revelation. As a young Pakistani woman, reading her novels ignited a desire to explore beyond state narratives and history textbooks, and to understand the world in a more nuanced way. Sidhwa's writing not only shaped my understanding of the world but also inspired me to give voice to the stories around me. I remember browsing the stacks at a second-hand book store in Karachi as a teenager, and amongst the rows of English language books by Western authors, coming across her name. It was a surprise to find a novel with characters like myself, with familiar settings and customs. It was a surprise to find a novel with characters like myself, with familiar settings and customs.

THE TRUTH OF HER FICTION

Bapsi Sidhwa made us see the world as it is and as it could be

In a way it made me feel that my story mattered — it gave me permission to transition from a passive reader to an active writer.

Reading *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), a novel that explores the devastation caused by the Partition, I realised how fiction can humanise history. The story narrated through the eyes of a young girl, showed the human cost of Partition, beyond its politicisation through nationalistic lenses. Sidhwa mined her own life to tell a personal story of families torn apart, personal betrayals, and the anguish of migration. Though many Urdu and Punjabi writers had written on this subject, it was through this book that I first understood the true scope of Partition's trauma. It was this humanism that made her writing stand out. In her own words, "Many historians have arrived at the truth. But often their narration is imbued with their own prejudice and can slant history to suit their or their own or their country's agenda. History in the hands of fiction writers like Tolstoy is often more authentic and vivid than history books."

The *Bride* (1983) remains another cornerstone in Sidhwa's exploration of women's lives within restrictive cultural and patriarchal systems. The novel takes readers into the heart of a young woman's forced marriage and her struggle to maintain her dignity and sense of self in the face of isolation and abuse. Unlike other novels with such themes, Sidhwa also imbued her characters

with a deep, quiet strength — something I began to understand more profoundly as I grew older.

Sidhwa brought her compassion and wit to her evocation of community lives as well. Through the satirical and heartwarming *The Crow Eaters* (1978), she portrayed the Parsis not just as a community but as a rich and integral part of the cultural fabric of South Asia. *An American Brat* (1993) explored the experience of a young Pakistani girl living in the US, caught between the cultural expectations of her family and the alienating freedoms of the West. Sidhwa's ability to portray the struggles of diaspora communities — of finding a sense of belonging when you straddle multiple identities — remains a key influence on my own writing journey as a global citizen.

Sidhwa's influence is felt not only in the South Asian literary community but across the globe. Her stories continue to remind us of the power of literature to connect, to heal, and to provoke. As she once said in an interview, "The role of a novelist, and by extension the novel, is to reveal the culture and complexities of a society in a manner that is engaging and entertaining." Sidhwa did exactly that — she made us see the world not only as it is but as it could be.

Javeri is a writer, translator and essayist from Pakistan. She teaches writing at New York University, Abu Dhabi

JANUARY 3, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

ASSEMBLY DISSOLVED

THE KARNATAKA ASSEMBLY was dissolved on January 2 by the Governor, A N Banerji on the advice of Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde who had also tendered his resignation. The Congress (I), the main opposition party in the state assembly, was against forming an alternative government preferring imposition of President's rule in the state.

10 KILLED IN ENCOUNTER

TEN ALLEGED EXTREMISTS and two policemen were killed in a 30-hour encounter in Kethi village of Aurangabad district, accord-

ing to the home commissioner N K Agrawal. Three police rifles and a large number of live cartridges were recovered from the extremists. Some police uniforms were also recovered from them. Agrawal said the arms were looted from Home Guard jawans in August.

MORE LIBERALISATION

FURTHER LIBERALISATION of industrial and import policies to achieve modernisation and higher productivity is being considered. Members of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council have been asked to suggest measures to give a new direction to the economy particularly aimed at realising higher

productivity as well as making rapid advances towards greater social justice. The measures are both for short-term and long-term.

LACKLUSTRE IFFI

FOR BETTER OR for worse, movie madness or at least the cinema-going habit is definitely on the wane with the pervasive video invasion. Even the craziest of film festival fans seem to have turned on a cold front at a time when the city is awaiting a long spell of celluloid extravaganza in the shape of the International Film Festival. So far, a little over 10 tickets have been sold for foreign retrospectives at Mavalankar Auditorium.



Flexible approach

Orderly rupee depreciation must be allowed

Last Friday, the rupee fell to an all-time low of 85.81 against the dollar during intraday trading. Since then, it has clawed back a little, but is holding in the vicinity of 85.7 to 85.8. This gradual slide in the past few weeks is a good sign. Such depreciation was long overdue, and it is welcome that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is now willing to allow it to happen. The financial markets should not be allowed to think that the RBI is maintaining any sort of unofficial peg to a particular dollar value. The central bank has itself insisted that it does not do that but only smoothens out volatility in the exchange rate. However, the size of its intervention in both the spot and the forward markets for the rupee has given rise to many questions. Financial markets can respond to such questions by launching speculative attacks on a currency — which usually ends with some of the central-bank reserves being transferred to their bank accounts and the currency sliding away. Thus, the rupee's very visible slide in recent weeks is an important signal in that it will induce speculators to look elsewhere.

The fact, however, is that the rupee weakened by less than 3 per cent last calendar year, which is considerably less than its peers. A small poll of market participants by this newspaper suggested that the general view was that the value of the rupee would decline further in coming months, driven in part by a further strengthening of the dollar due to slower monetary easing by the United States Federal Reserve. The rupee has a lot of catching up to do because its slide has been postponed when compared to its peer currencies and competitors. The effects on domestic liquidity of active management of the rupee are also beginning to be felt. A persistent liquidity deficit in the banking system caused short-term borrowing costs to rise this week to the highest they have been in more than three months, with some estimates putting the liquidity shortage at about ₹1.1 trillion.

It is unclear what may have caused the RBI to revise its view on rupee management. Domestic-growth challenges must have played a part. An overvalued rupee is a drag on export and on growth. At a time when it has become clear that increasing the value of exports is the key to restoring growth momentum to the broader economy, maintaining an overvalued currency can be dangerously counter-productive. In fact, recent work by a team of RBI economists has shown that historically, in India, allowing depreciation in the real effective exchange rate (Reer) has had a significant effect on the trade balance. As former chief economic advisor Arvind Subramanian and others have pointed out on these pages, the rupee's Reer since 2019 has stabilised at a much higher level.

Estimates suggest it is still overvalued by about 9 per cent. This must be brought back in line with real conditions if India is to regain competitiveness. Without liquidity in the banking system, with exporters fighting off an overvalued rupee, and with the threat of a speculative attack always hanging over the macro-economy, the task of reviving growth will become too difficult. A more flexible approach to the rupee's value is overdue. This will be critical because the promised policies of US President-elect Donald Trump might strengthen the dollar further, at least in the foreseeable future.

Hot button issue

The scale of climate challenge is increasing

News that the year 2024 was India's hottest since records began in 1901 come as no surprise, but policymakers urgently need to take notice. A granular look at the numbers shows that five years in the past 15 have been recorded as the hottest since the start of the 20th century. To be sure, India was not an outlier. The World Meteorological Organization has said that 2024 was globally the warmest on record, exceeding the Paris Agreement threshold of 1.5 degrees centigrade of warming above pre-industrial levels (1850-1900). Much, of course, has been said on the Western industrial economies' contribution to the stock of carbon in the atmosphere, which is causing global warming and these countries' perfidious abdication of responsibilities in aiding the developing world to create viable adaptation strategies. But at the heart of India's problem is the growing reliance on coal as a source of energy to power the growing needs of households and industry.

Though India takes pride in the fact that renewables-based energy (RE) accounts for 46.3 per cent of installed capacity, it, in fact, accounts for less than 10 per cent of actual generation. India remains heavily dependent on coal, which accounts for 77 per cent of energy generation, according to the government's statistics. This makes India the third-largest emitter of carbon dioxide, overtaking the European Union in 2023, although the country accounts for just 8 per cent of emission, significantly behind China (31.5 per cent) and the United States (13 per cent). The problems of integrating solar and wind power into national electricity grids are principally driven by the absence of viable storage capacity (given the variable nature of RE generation) and the age-old one of asymmetric power pricing, which makes buying RE complicated. At the same time, a somewhat misleading picture of India's forest cover suggests that the size of India's carbon sink may be exaggerated. The latest India State of the Forest Report (ISFR) says India's forest cover has increased and now covers about 25 per cent of the country. The report also said India had, as a result, achieved an additional carbon sink of 2.29 billion tonnes over 2005 levels, thereby meeting its Paris Agreement commitments seven years ahead of target. The problem here is that the government counts plantations as forests and such areas do not act as efficient carbon sinks because of the lack of carbon-absorbing undergrowth.

At the other end of the spectrum is growing urbanisation and industrialisation. Poorly planned urban expansion that relies on cutting trees and reducing green spaces and urban water bodies without balancing the mitigating effects of greenery and heat-resistant techniques is making India's cities unbearable in summer and creating a vicious cycle of greater demand for fossil-fuel powered cooling. The inefficient system of environmental controls on factory emission adds to the crisis. Though India's net-zero commitments are comfortably set in a distant year of 2070, each year breaks new heat records, impacting human and agricultural productivity. This urgently requires India's policymakers to reimagine the country's climate action more realistically. The fact that India's per capita carbon emission is less than half the global average should not be used to suggest that the climate crisis is not at its doorstep.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Three wishes for 2025

Industry must invest in technology and international sales, economic policy must focus on structural change and productivity, and politics on ideas

A New Year is a time to take stock. This next quarter-century can be India's if industry, economic policy, and politics make it so. Industry must invest in innovation and manufacturing at scale. Our economic policy must focus on long-run productivity growth and its root in structural change. And our political debate must be about ideas.

Indian industry must have the ambition to lead. Start with investment in innovation. I have written often here (email us for links) on this subject, so I will be brief: For Indian industry to lead, we have to be much more serious about innovation. Indian industry invests 0.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in in-house research and development (R&D), compared to a world average of 1.5 per cent. We spend ₹7 billion annually on industrial R&D, compared to ₹625 billion in the US, ₹335 billion in China, ₹30 billion in Japan, and ₹90 billion in Germany. We are the world's fifth-largest economy and manufacturer, but rank 21st in industrial R&D. Our 10 most successful non-financial firms have a very healthy profit by world standards but invest little in R&D: A mere 2 per cent of profit. By contrast, firms in the US, China, Japan, and Germany invest between 29 and 55 per cent of their profits in R&D. To put this in perspective, 25 individual firms — from Alphabet (\$40 billion) to BMW (\$7.6 billion) — invest more in R&D than all Indian firms combined. Together with R&D, we need to invest in world-scale manufacturing and international sales. Dr Manmohan Singh published a book based on his PhD thesis, which drew attention to our export pessimism. He argued, so presciently, that India needed to shift its focus from import substitution to export ambition. He was right in 1964; he is still right in 2025. Indian industry must see the world as our market, investing in capacity and developing markets in the world's largest countries.

Structural change must deliver long-run growth in productivity. Our aspiration is to be a developed economy by 2047, with a per capita GDP above \$14,000 in today's dollars. To grow five times from our current

\$2,700 demands a 2 per cent higher rate of growth, bringing it to 8.5 per cent. Consistent high growth needs the structural change that makes the economy more and more productive. A major source of long-run productivity growth is putting more people to work, and shifting them to higher-productivity occupations. Increasing female labour force participation from its current low rate and driving a shift in employment from agriculture to industry and modern services is the kind of structural change we need. But industry and services need to invest much more to attract the hundreds of millions who must shift out of agriculture. What policy change would drive this investment? The government has invested strongly in infrastructure, but industrial investment by firms has been lukewarm.

We can learn from our history. The Rao-Singh reforms of 1991 to 1993, and their progeny, led to a substantial inflection in growth. Scrapping industrial licensing meant the government stopped trying to play God in deciding which sectors industry should or should not invest in (the production-linked incentive scheme uses incentives instead of controls but attempts the same thing). Opening the economy to imports with lower tariffs meant Indian firms had to compete with the

best. Scrapping institutions like the Director General of Trade and Development (best known for neither T nor D) removed an obstacle to progress. Independent institutions were allowed to function and set the rules under which we all operated. A reduction in corporate and personal income taxes, between 1991 and 2018, enabled the legal accumulation of wealth by entrepreneurs. The goods and services tax (GST) reform of 2017 greatly facilitated the free movement of goods around the country, though the government still insists on helping us choose salty over sweet popcorn. In area after area related to industry, the government stepped back, allowing industry to step forward with an investment boom that lasted, with occasional blips, for 20 years.



INDIA'S WORLD?
NAUSHAD FORBES

Next steps in fiscal management

The Union Budget for 2025-26 will be presented in a few weeks. While various stakeholders have their own expectations, this column will focus primarily on the management of government finances, extending beyond just the upcoming Budget. Reports suggest that the Union government would aim to contain the fiscal deficit at 4.4 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025-26. This means it will achieve the medium-term target set after the pandemic, which will be a significant achievement and must be appreciated. However, the debate is what happens next. In the July Budget, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced that from 2026-27, the government would keep the fiscal deficit each year such that the central government debt remains on a declining path as a percentage of GDP.

More clarity will be needed in this context. Given that debt stock is at a higher level and needs to be reduced as quickly as possible, the government will be well-served to give more details about what the medium-term trajectory and the end goal will be. Just keeping the debt level on a declining path directionally may not be enough. Financial markets and other stakeholders will need a clear road map for debt reduction and the desired level of fiscal deficit to attain the target. The central government debt is projected to decline from 88.1 per cent of GDP in 2023-24 to 56.8 per cent in 2024-25, and will remain nearly 17 percentage points above the level recommended by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Review Committee in 2017. This writer had argued before the July 2024 Budget that the post-pandemic fiscal position be studied carefully, preferably by an expert group, to develop an appropriate fiscal strategy. Overall fiscal management may require a significant shift owing to fundamental changes in the economy — both glob-

al and Indian — after the pandemic. Besides, there are other points worth considering.

First, the Union government is supporting the Indian economy through higher capital spending, which increased from 1.67 per cent of GDP in 2019-20 to 3.4 per cent of GDP in the current year. While this increase has helped the economy recover from the pandemic shock, the government will at some point soon need to align its borrowing requirements with the financing capacity of the economy. The net household financial savings declined to 5.3 per cent of GDP in 2023-24. Although financial savings may recover to the longer-term average, they would largely be covered by public sector borrowing requirements. At present, the economy is not facing financing problems because the private corporate sector is not investing enough. This is not a desirable condition. Thus, the government needs to create room for the private sector to invest without substantially increasing external financing requirements.

Second, it will also be important for markets to know if states will be expected to follow the same framework. The total debt stock of states stood at 28.5 per cent of GDP in 2023-24, over 8 percentage points higher than the level suggested by the FRBM Review Committee. India's general government debt and budget deficit remain a significant source of vulnerability. Thus, having a clear road map will help increase confidence in financial markets.

Aside from the need to develop a broader fiscal strategy, some specific interventions will be expected in the coming months. The government is reviewing the Customs duty structure and the Income Tax Act. It would be interesting to see if these reviews will immediately translate into policy action. Going beyond the next Union Budget, the other major policy intervention to watch will be the impending

It is time to look beyond industry. We need reforms in education and tourism. Both sectors require the state to play a role, but a different one from what it does now. In school education, the role is to fund efforts by states to raise quality, build accountability at the local level, and enable schools to hire better principals and teachers. In higher education, it is to regulate much less, provide public institutions with far greater autonomy in selecting their boards, heads, and faculty, and encourage private institutions to experiment with new ways of teaching and research. Academic research must be funded in both private and public institutions on the basis of excellence defined by academic peers alone.

Tourism also needs reform. As the latest *Economist* says, India is being left behind in the current world tourism boom: Dubai, a single city, now attracts twice as many tourists as all of India. Marketing India effectively is a role for the government, as is making it easier for foreigners to enter. More and more countries are waiving visa requirements for Indians (Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka). If they are not afraid of being swamped by a country of 14 billion, why should we hold back for countries with a tiny fraction of our population? Land use regulations should permit many more hotels — including those that cater to the sandaled and not just the well-heeled. And we need far better air connectivity heading both West and East. We should free any airline, domestic or foreign, to increase direct connectivity to all major Indian destinations, regardless of bilateral air rights.

Politics of ideas, not insults: I wish for content in our political discourse, and for a press that values substance — one that ignores insults rather than blowing them up into "news". We need to hear what economic reform agenda the government has for the country in the next four and a half years. Is privatisation of public sector enterprises really on the cards, or only for Budget announcements? What is the Opposition's view of privatisation? For all its current glitches, do they really think that Air India was better run three years ago when it was starved of investment, management — and passengers. What about the implementation of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Act? It was intended to speed up the repurposing of distressed assets. Has it? The Airways and GoAir sculptures dotting our airports say no.

And maybe even some big questions. How will we create millions of jobs in industry and services? What is the government and the Opposition's vision of how public research and firm innovation must work in tandem to build a more innovative India? When will our much-delayed Census actually happen? How can we develop and grow our cities at the same time, as Ahmedabad says? Has it? The Airways and GoAir sculptures dotting our airports say no.

— that will lead to a developed India.

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REAL TERMS
RAJESH KUMAR

time with our family? Ikigai, a life philosophy rooted in Japanese culture, is often touted as the magic wand to these issues. But Mr Jayaraman cautions that it is not easy to implement Ikigai in our lives. And a few elements may be missing in the Ikigai formula too.

The second section is about "Getting in Touch With Ourselves". This is really about stopping and finding out where we are and what people who we care about are saying about us. Mr Jayaraman, a certified CEO coach, speaks about the importance of 360-degree feedback. He asks readers to tune into their values and principles. Taking pages from his own life, he tells us how he discovered his sweet spot: Helping others reach their potential.

The third and the most important section is about "An Approach to a Fuller Life". It is here that Mr Jayaraman tells us

about the FLAVOUR formula for a fuller life. What is FLAVOUR? — discern and influence family context; L — Make space for what you love; A — Tune into aspirations and make consistent choices; VO — strive to be of value by seeking/creating opportunity; U — invest in yourself; and R — cultivate healthy relationships.

Mr Jayaraman tells us what he has done to balance all these FLAVOUR elements in his own life. The book is full of quotes from the diverse set of Indian and international experts with whom he has spoken. In the last section, he

presents the life journey of Ravishankar Iyer (story-telling coach), Sangeta Shahane (entrepreneur/traveller), Soma Biswas (creative art therapist), Sucharita Mulherjee (flirtTech for financial inclusion), Sumet Mehta (educator) and Vineet Panchhi (hotelier-turned crusader).

You may have heard of them before but probably did not know how they decided to pivot their life at the midpoint, discovered their purpose and found joy and satisfaction in a new domain.

The book is written in an engaging style, without pontification or sermonising. The book is also multimedia in a sense: There are several QR codes that a reader can use to listen to experts sharing their views on the various topics covered in the book. Mr Jayaraman often goes back to his own career to demonstrate the tipping points he encountered.

If you're in your 40s or 50s and wondering if this is all life has to offer, pick up *Play to Potential*. As Deepak Jayaraman says, you should not just "work" to your potential, you should "play", the emphasis being on the word "play". You are playing when you enjoy what you are doing. The book is bound to give you fresh ideas to reinvent and reinvigorate your life.

The reviewer is an independent brand and executive coach and bestselling author of 11 books

The art of the career pivot



BOOK REVIEW
AMBI PARAMESWARAN

he completed his century. In his illustrious career, he scored 34 centuries and on 11 occasions he scored over 150 runs. My coachee did some thinking, and when I met him next, he told me he was ready for his next innings. He didn't say he would "play to his potential," but that's what he meant. He had a lot more game left in him and wasn't about to walk away.

Play to Potential — Lead a Full Life, Become the Best You by Deepak Jayaraman is a great read for anyone who is looking for a fresh perspective. Mr Jayaraman should know. He has been there and done that. An ITM, IIMA and London Business School graduate, he had a stellar career with KPMG, McKinsey and Egon Zehnder before deciding to take flight again. In 2016, he pivoted to become an independent executive coach working with entrepreneurs, managers and leaders who are looking for guidance.

As a passion project, he started his

podcast series "Play to Potential". Full disclosure: I appeared on his podcast a few years ago. The podcast is not just a conversation around life and career but it also delves into other dimensions that make each of us unique individuals. To help listeners delve into specific areas, Mr Jayaraman and his band of editors have created bite-sized segments that answer specific questions. The book *Play to Potential* is not just a book version of the podcast. It is a lot more. Mr Jayaraman has managed to mine the treasure trove of information available in the podcasts but has rearranged it for easy reading and assimilation.

The book has three sections. The first section, "The Long and Messy Middle", is about how many of us wonder where we are going when we reach the ages of 40 or 50. Is this treadmill just to consume us? How much more money do we need to accumulate before we can stop worrying about money? Are we spending enough

My coachee was taking me through the journey of his career and ended by saying that he was planning to get himself certified as an independent director so that when he retires he can look for ID positions in engineering companies (his domain of expertise). I stopped him in his tracks to tell him he is just about 52 years of age, so should he be thinking of retiring or should he take fresh guard to keep him charged up for the next ten-plus years. I told him about how Sunil Gavaskar was famous for taking fresh guard after

Expanding UPI access

More flexibility now for users of prepaid instruments

Ganesh Vallachi
Nagarajan M

Prepaid payment instruments (PPIs), such as mobile wallets and prepaid cards, have emerged as a critical enabler of cashless transactions, particularly in a country like India, where digital financial inclusion is a key policy goal. PPIs offer convenience, speed, and security for users by allowing transactions without directly linking to a traditional bank account. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI), on the other hand, has become the backbone of India's digital payments ecosystem, facilitating seamless and instant fund transfers.

However, until now, PPI users faced significant challenges due to the lack of interoperability with UPI. Transactions from PPIs could only be carried out through the mobile applications of their respective issuers, restricting users from accessing widely popular third-party UPI platforms like Google Pay or PhonePe. This created friction in the payment process, forcing users to juggle multiple apps and limiting the utility of their digital wallets. Such barriers not only reduced convenience but also hindered the broader adoption of digital payments.

In a significant move to bridge these two financial innovations, the RBI has announced revisions, allowing full-KYC PPIs to access UPI through third-party applications. This revision aims to remove these bottlenecks by enabling greater interoperability and convenience for PPI users, enhancing their ability to transact across platforms and driving further digital adoption.

REVISED INSTRUCTIONS

Onboarding for UPI: PPI issuers can now enable holders of only their full-KYC PPIs to make UPI payments by linking the PPIs to their UPI handle. While PPI issuers, acting as PSPs, still cannot onboard customers of other banks or PPIs, the revision now allows interoperability for full-KYC PPI wallets.

Third-party UPI access: PPI issuers may facilitate the discovery of their full-KYC PPIs on third-party UPI applications, such as Google Pay or PhonePe. These third-party platforms, in turn, can enable linking of such PPIs to their PSP handles. Authentication for such transactions will now rely on UPI credentials, simplifying the



INTEGRATION. With UPI ecosystem

process for users. These changes significantly enhance the utility and flexibility of PPIs, eliminating the bottlenecks of single-app reliance while fostering seamless integration into the broader UPI ecosystem.

WHO BENEFITS?

The revised provisions benefit multiple stakeholders by fostering greater convenience and accessibility for PPI holders, who can now use third-party UPI apps for seamless payments and a broader network of merchants and individuals. Merchants gain an expanded customer base and streamlined payment processes, while third-party UPI application providers see increased app usage and opportunities to monetise their value-added services. PPI issuers benefit from expanded reach and operational efficiency by leveraging third-party UPI platforms. Overall, the move enhances financial inclusion, enabling consumers who rely on PPIs to participate in the UPI ecosystem fully.

The RBI's decision to enable full-KYC PPIs to access UPI through third-party applications marks a critical milestone in India's digital payments journey. By breaking down barriers between PPIs and UPIs, the regulator has enhanced interoperability and catalysed the growth of a more inclusive digital payment ecosystem. This change empowers PPI holders, benefits merchants, and encourages innovation among third-party UPI providers.

As India continues to transition towards a less-cash economy, the RBI's move underscores the importance of creating a seamless, secure, and user-friendly digital payments framework that caters to the diverse needs of its population.

Vallachi is an Assistant Professor at the School of Management Studies, Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, and Nagarajan is a research scholar at Alagappa University. Views are personal



AMARJEET SINHA

I have been strongly advocating decentralised community action on the basis of evidence that is available, on its contribution to human development, lower multi-dimensional poverty, and higher incomes. A few friends suggested I must also point out what community action does not do well, to enable the adoption of the right priorities. Having seen the ill-consequences of decentralisation without accountability in the form of Bolero cars of Panchayat representatives, with the onset of MGNREGS funding, it is evident that decentralised community action has to be very well thought through. It is not a case of one-size-fits-all or all power without accountability.

The Nobel Prize winning economist, Elinor Ostrom, has studied and evolved a theory of practice on how communities come together for sustainable use of common pool resources. It is important to get community action right. We need to develop a theory of practice for decentralised community action in India. It is useful to list some of the challenges in decentralised community action and how programmes have addressed it for better outcomes. The key challenges are:

Accountability framework for elected local government leaders: There is a strong need for the countervailing presence of community organisations like women's collectives and self-help groups, primary dairy cooperatives, farmer producer companies, to hold the elected local governments accountable. Monopolistic authority of power becomes arbitrary and there is a need for strong Panchayat Raj institutions — Self-Help Groups Convergence framework. Reservation of seats for women and socially vulnerable groups in local governments has changed the character of participation at the local level.

Use of technology as a means: Technology is a great enabler. Even the convening of Gram Sabhas need not be top-down and arbitrary, given the actual human resource needed to organise a Gram Sabha. Technology enables development of a calendar of Gram Sabhas, their geo-tagging to look at numbers and participation, and actually ensuring full transparency, real-time, of the accounts and administration of panchayats. The Gram Panchayat Development Planning exercise through adoption of such technologies for organisation and monitoring has helped in better community ownership in

When do community programmes work?

WAY AHEAD. A decentralised model backed by technology and with a strong accountability framework is imperative



recent years. The top-down dictate of Gram Panchayats to organise Gram Sabhas on the same day is neither feasible (given staff shortages), nor desirable, as local governments must decide on their convenience.

Mission Antyodaya annual assessment: The Mission Antyodaya Survey was started in 2017 and is being improved each year. The Sustainable Development Goals, to which India is a signatory, has been localised into 208 data points. The women's collectives and the panchayat representatives together vet the data of Mission Antyodaya and post it on the website. Real-time data must be fully public to assess to real situation of a village. The Mission Antyodaya Survey had challenged the open defecation status in some villages and it helped in making interventions to improve the outcomes of sanitation programmes. The survey provides an understanding of the gaps and deficits in every panchayat, making it a useful tool for local action. If panchayats do not change on SDGs, the country won't.

It is possible to get community action right if we build a theory of practice that draws on evidence from the field

Resource persons for effectiveness: Recruitment of professionals is one activity where panchayats should have a limited role. The actual selection must be external and professional. Under the successful Shiksha Karmi Project in Rajasthan, local teacher volunteer candidate lists were forwarded by local governments, but the final selection after interview was done by local civil society organisations given the responsibility of capacity development.

Bihar made the mistake in 2005 when elected panchayat members selected panchayat teachers, often arbitrarily. Similarly, for selection as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), while names came from the community, the final selection was done by a team of professionals from related programmes of health and women and child. ASHAs have been remarkably successful in improving health outcomes and during pandemics like Covid. The Community Resource Persons in the Rural Livelihood Mission is similarly an outstanding example of women who have come out of poverty, becoming the CRPs to transform other women's lives and livelihoods.

Must be close to the community: This is best illustrated by the absence of decentralised community action in urban areas. Urban wards have high population, making community action impossible. That is why muscle power

and local chieftains take over provision of basic services in urban slums. The only way to fight it out is to create elected Hasti Samitis (like wards under Gram Panchayats in rural areas) that can hold the elected ward leaders accountable to the people. This change does not even require a constitutional amendment — it only needs a will for decentralised community action.

Untied and adequate funds for local action: Central and State governments should not spend a single rupee from their Budgets in the 29 sectors for rural and 18 sectors for urban in the 11th and 12th Schedules of the Indian Constitution, identified as sectors for local governments, without local governments approving such expenditures.

With Mission Antyodaya annual surveys providing the details of gaps and deficits, untied and adequate financing can be completely evidence based and priority drive. We need to honour local decentralised action rather than throttle by pre-ordained centralisation. It is possible to get community action right if we build a theory of practice that draws on evidence from the field. The time to act is now as local action alone will secure outcomes in human development that have been elusive; local convergence is the way to go.

The writer is a retired civil servant. Views are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 3, 2005

US equity fund buys 33.3 pc in Indiabulls arm for ₹87.6 cr

Farallon Capital, a San Francisco-based private equity fund, and its affiliates have acquired 33.3 per cent stake in Indiabulls Credit Services Ltd, the recently formed subsidiary of the broking firm, Indiabulls Financial Services Ltd, for ₹87.6 crore. With the new capital infusion from Farallon, Indiabulls Credit Services will have a capital base of over ₹130 crore.

'Spot audits' for US textile buyers begin as quotas go

Big US retailers such as Wal-Mart and JC Penney have started conducting 'spot audits' on their Indian suppliers to check instances of child labour and ensure that labour standards being used conform to stipulated norms. According to industry sources, these checks are, over and above, the mandatory social audits conducted annually by the bigger retailers on their supplier base.

Takeovers fail to sizzle, unlike rest of the market

The takeover market didn't quite boom in 2004. According to the statistics provided by SEBI, the value of 'open offers' made under the takeover regulations dropped by over 50 per cent to ₹1,200 crore in the calendar year 2004 (from January to November) from ₹2,600 crore in the previous year.

Tuhin A Sinha

The Centre launched the Startup India initiative on January 16, 2016. To support start-ups at various stages of their lifecycle, the government has introduced flagship schemes such as:

Fund of Funds for Startups: This initiative ensures that start-ups have access to capital for growth and scaling.

Startup India Seed Fund Scheme: Targeting early-stage start-ups, this scheme provides crucial seed funding.

Credit Guarantee Scheme for Startups: It offers financial security and helps start-ups secure credit.

Complementing these financial measures are initiatives like the States' Startup Ranking, National Startup Awards, and Innovation Week, which collectively aim to build a vibrant and inclusive start-up ecosystem.

The impact of these initiatives is evident. Over 16.6 lakh direct jobs have been created by

DPIT-recognised start-ups across more than 55 industries. These industries span beyond technology into areas like agriculture, healthcare and education, showcasing the diversity and potential of India's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Start-ups are not only transforming India's economic landscape but also contributing to gender inclusivity. Women now constitute nearly 64 per cent of the agricultural labour force, and targeted programmes aim to bring more women into leadership roles in entrepreneurship, thus bridging gender disparities.

HOLISTIC ECOSYSTEM

Building an ecosystem that supports entrepreneurs from every corner of the country has been a cornerstone of the Startup India initiative. Efforts to achieve this include:

Capacity building and hand-holding: Workshops under the States' Startup Ranking Framework and targeted sessions for incubators in non-metro



BUILD. Ecosystem for entrepreneurs

regions have equipped entrepreneurs with knowledge, mentorship, and tools to scale their ventures.

Outreach and awareness: Programmes aimed at increasing visibility and access to resources have been organised in collaboration with State and UT administrations.

Initiatives like start-up showcases allow budding entrepreneurs to pitch their ideas to investors, opening doors to funding and partnerships.

Ecosystem development events:

Flagship events like the Startup Mahakumbh bring together entrepreneurs, investors, and mentors from across the nation to foster collaboration. Similarly, ASCEND workshops in the North-East focus on nurturing local talent and innovation.

International linkages: With the institutionalisation of the Startup20 Engagement Group under India's G20 Presidency, start-ups gained access to global markets, resources, and collaborative opportunities.

Recommendations for enhancing the ecosystem include:

Strengthening regional ecosystems: Establish localised incubation hubs to provide targeted support in tier-2/3 cities.

Facilitating grassroots innovations: Empower rural entrepreneurs through specialised programmes and funding opportunities, fostering grassroots innovations.

The writer is National Spokesperson, BJP

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2603



EASY

ACROSS

- Push with finger (5)
- Ancient Egyptian wire rattle (7)
- Books, periodicals etc (7/6)
- System of beliefs (L: I believe) (5)
- Resolve knot (4)
- Vocalised (4)
- Parent's brother (5)
- Lack of likelihood (13)
- Sign the back (7)
- Person who accepts bet (5)

DOWN

- Mention the details of (13)
- Age, important date (3)
- Suture (6)
- Autographed (6)
- Dark part of a picture (6)
- Repay in kind (9)
- Matins (7-6)
- Seized for ransom (9)
- Hearsay (6)
- Draw blade across (6)
- Paint carefully, make likeness of (6)
- To weary, distress (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Push the papers in the cupboard (5)
- Must Sir be shaken? It got the Egyptians rattled! (7)
- Printed material daring me to treat it so (7/6)
- I believe it's Latin for a part of the service (5)
- Loosen nut to solve a problem (4)
- Was a tenor, and was an informer (4)
- He's related how North Carolina got involved in rubber (5)
- Unlikelihood of limbo: pity a rib has to get broken (13)
- To give it one's backing needs possible holding of gold (7)
- He accepts bet that could put Kate right (5)

DOWN

- Rail is up: react so as to enumerate it in detail (13)
- A period educationist rather awkwardly starts (3)
- Sew the least scrap of clothing (6)
- Communicated with the unhearing as one put one's name to it (6)
- Go after one cast by the Sun (6)
- Make a comeback later, a tie resulting from it (9)
- Soundly grieving, might repay the Right at matins (7-6)
- Child had a snooze with Stevenson's book (9)
- The whisper is, it's curious with your and my half (6)
- Predicament one gets into with a thin layer of butter (6)
- Show how it is to be put inside picture (6)
- Prove wearisome for one king to take in another (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2602

ACROSS 1. Curve 4. Squalid 8. Embracing 9. Owl 10. Initial 12. Rang 14. Termites 16. Twisted 20. Ink 21. Castigate 23. Garbage 24. Guess
DOWN 1. Credit scoring 2. Rabbit 3. Examiner 4. Sei 5. Urge 6. Loofah 7. Delightedness 11. Limit 13. Striding 15. Conker 16. Strake 19. Acta 22. She

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Powerful option

Power cable link can tap Lanka's wind energy potential

One of the points discussed during the recent visit of the Sri Lankan President, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, was the power transmission link between Sri Lanka and India. This is an old, long-discussed proposal, but the fact that this was taken up at the highest levels suggests that the project, which began in 2002, is one whose time has come. The international transmission link, estimated to cost about ₹10,000 crore today, was actually given up in 2011, after the Indian public sector transmission major, Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd, reviewed a study conducted by a company called Nexant with the support of USAID, and found it unviable.

But those were different times, when the imperatives were different. Back then the idea was to export electricity from the wind-rich Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka. In 2018, a study conducted by the US National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) found out that the transmission link could save Sri Lanka as much as \$180 million annually, from avoided local generation of high-cost power.

The situation has changed now, and with India's thirst for renewable energy and the island nation's ability to provide it. An ADB-funded fresh study in October 2022 by PriceWaterhouseCoopers has breathed life into the moribund project. It was inevitable that the project would be revived given that India is championing the One Sun, One World, One Grid initiative, whose intention is to build a global network so that at any point in time electricity from wherever sun shines can flow to where the sun does not. The project proponents want to build a HVDC line between Habarana in Sri Lanka and New Madurai in India, across a 120 km stretch of sea. While the project has been taken up at the highest political and diplomatic levels, experts are poring over multiple technical options for the project — mainly, how much of it should be undersea cables.

It is in India's interests to push for early completion of the transmission link. Sri Lanka has immense wind energy potential. A couple of decades back, an NREL study put the country's onshore wind potential at 45 GW. With today's improved technology and lower costs, where taller windmills can catch more winds, including those blowing at lesser speeds, Sri Lanka's wind potential is not less than 60 GW. Since the country is unlikely to need more than 10-15 GW, all the rest of it can be wheeled to India, providing green energy to Indian industries. While it is still early days to estimate how much wind power from Sri Lanka will cost, it is safe to say that it will be cheaper than Indian offshore wind power, to subsidise which the government has earmarked ₹6,853 crore. From India's recent experience with wind-solar hybrid, whose tariffs have settled at levels lower than standalone wind, a good guess is that when solar is brought into the equation, clean energy from Sri Lanka would be an attractive option for both countries. Economic reasons apart, the transmission link will keep Sri Lanka hooked to India, geopolitically too.

POCKET



"I tried booking a cab. Ten people responded with car loan offers!"

The importance of developing 'core' technologies

TECH SUPPORT. For lasers and semiconductor industries developing domestic core technologies is crucial for reducing import dependence



VIPIN SONDHI
THULASI RAMAN KH

The Raman effect was invented by Sir CV Raman, for which he won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1930. India has not won the Nobel Prize in Science since. The Raman effect laid the foundation for Raman spectroscopy which is widely used even today for commercial applications spanning food processing, healthcare, manufacturing, chemical and petro-chemical and beyond. It continues to be relevant for emerging fields like quantum technologies.

This was a 'core' invention, which enabled the development of cutting-edge commercial technologies for numerous sectors. India does not own any technology in this space. All specialised technology companies that manufacture 'Raman' spectrometers and their components are foreign owned.

'Core' technologies are foundations that serve as the backbone of multiple sectors. They directly enable products, processes or services and are critical for operational success.

India's academic and scientific institutions have been ahead in the development of many 'core' technologies over the decades, but did not have the wherewithal to commercialise it; and therefore the technologies remained within the academic or scientific institutions. Industry on its part, preferred to buy technology from abroad.

Conversations between academia, scientific institutions and industry did not take place. It is only in the last few years that the government — via the Principal Scientific Advisor's Office, DST etc. — the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and most premier institutes of higher education like the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore (IISc) and the Indian Institutes of

Technology (IITs) are making a serious effort to collaborate with one another with success.

For example, the IISc commenced research on the development of polysilicon technology as early as in the 1960s followed by several national laboratories. By the early 1990s, the technology was successfully transferred to industry. IISc had succeeded via a-vis other Indian national laboratories because it had collaborated at a very early stage with industry, and India was well ahead of most nations.

However, in the early 1990s the Indian plant manufacturing the silicon wafers lost its business case because of dumping from Russia. Later in 2000, a German manufacturer undercut prices significantly dealing a further blow. Unsurprisingly, China now has taken over the polysilicon market.

Polysilicon is a critical material used in the production of semi-conductors, solar panels etc., which are central to electronics and renewable energy. It is another example of 'core' technology; a technology that India developed early, but was unable to preserve and sustain.

To realise the dream of Viksit Bharat, it is imperative that India develop technologies that are 'core'. The government through its 'Make in India' and Atmanirbhar Bharat programmes is making a huge effort in developing technologies for the future — Semi-conductor and Chip manufacturing, AI and ML, Renewable Energy, Quantum Computing, EV and Battery Technology, Defence and Aerospace Technologies etc.

Further, the Ministry of Heavy Industries (MHI) through its 'Scheme on the Enhancement of

We are still dependant on imports for 'core' technologies which are essential to build most of the capital goods required for these future technological initiatives in India

Competitiveness in the Capital Goods Sector' is encouraging both start-ups and existing capital goods manufacturers to innovate, incubate and accelerate the development of technology within the country.

However, we are still dependant on other countries for the 'core' technologies which are essential to build most of the capital goods required for these future technological initiatives in India.

TWO AREAS

We explore two examples of 'core' technologies that India still needs.

Laser machines, for example, were commercialised in the early 1960s, when the Hughes Aircraft Company marketed the first laser.

They have since evolved into a multi-billion dollar industry and are indispensable for a wide range of applications like metal and non-metal cutting, welding etc. and in specialised fields like lithography and medical devices (laser eye surgery).

Lasers are imported or at best assembled by integrators in India. The integrators import the advanced or tech components like laser diodes, optics and the control systems.

Further, the domestic ecosystem for producing high quality laser components is still developing and competing with global manufacturers on cost and quality still remains elusive for Indian manufacturers. The cost of imports puts them out of the reach of MSMEs, who need them as much as anyone else.

India is investing tens of billions of dollars on the semiconductor technology ecosystem. For manufacturing and downstream packaging of the micro-chips and the integrated circuits, processes like etching, thin-film deposition and ion implantation are utilised, for which an atmosphere of vacuum is essential.

So vacuum technology is the pivotal enabler or a 'core' technology for the semiconductor industry, as it is for space exploration, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing and many other vital applications.

Vacuum technology provides the

ability to create, maintain and manipulate environments with reduced pressure or near-complete absence of matter (vacuum), which is a pre-requisite for multiple cutting-edge processes.

While India has developed significant expertise in vacuum technology — through ISRO, DRDO, BARC and IISc — high-end components for advanced vacuum pumps, turbo-molecular pumps and cryogenic pumps, critical sub-systems and materials are often imported, especially for niche applications. Vacuum technology will continue to be crucial in the fields of quantum computing and advanced electronics.

Therefore, if core technologies exist with us in India, we can create multiple breakthroughs in basic sciences and in advanced new technologies. For example, the 2017 Nobel Prize was awarded to three scientists for their decisive contributions to the LIGO detector and the observations of gravitational waves. The LIGO observatory supports laser interferometers in ultra high vacuum systems, further emphasising that both 'laser' and 'vacuum' are core technologies.

THE WAY FORWARD

Identifying and developing 'core' technologies like lasers and vacuum, is crucial for India to achieve atmanirbhar, economic growth and global competitiveness in strategic sectors of the future.

It is imperative to conduct a comprehensive 'core' technology audit, foster collaborative I&D ecosystems via industry-academia collaboration and Public-Private Partnerships, build advanced infrastructure by investing in testing and prototyping facilities, focus on dual-use technology, encourage patent filing, create technology clusters, engage in global technology alliances amongst other initiatives for a truly Viksit Bharat.

Sondhi is former MD & CEO, Ashok Leyland and JCB India, Raman, is Principal Research Scientist, Society for Innovation and Development, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore

Sailing between US Scylla, China Charybdis

Nations world over have to contend with the US' financial might and China's manufacturing muscle

TC Srinivasa Raghavan

In Greek mythology there is the cautionary tale of the two monsters, Scylla and Charybdis. The myth is based on the problems of negotiating the narrow rocky and very dangerous straits of Messina in Italy. Ships and sailors regularly sank or drowned there.

The myth is that while sailing through the strait you had to be very skilled in not getting close to shore. If you erred, either Scylla the monster on the shore would grab six sailors off your deck, or if you didn't, Charybdis the whirlpool would suck the whole ship in.

So the choice was between saving either the ship or the six sailors. Homer, in his epic *Odyssey*, sacrificed the sailors to save the ship.

I tell this story because a recent research paper from the American National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) discusses, without reference to the Greek myth, however, exactly the same problem with reference to the two economic giants, the US and China on the one hand and the rest of the world on the other.

Thus, the US controls the financial

world and China controls the manufacturing world. In this situation, how do smaller economies, even if they are quite large like India's, navigate between the two? The paper is called "A Theory of Economic Coercion and Fragmentation." It is by Christopher Clayton, Matteo Maggiori and Jesse Schreger who say that "Hegemonic powers, like the United States and China, exert influence on other countries by threatening the suspension or alteration of financial and trade relationships."

But, the authors say, if you try integrating with one of them, you only increase their power over you "because in equilibrium they make other relationships poor substitutes for those with a global hegemon."

HOBSON'S CHOICE

It's what is called Hobson's Choice where you have to choose between two options, you actually have only one. That is, there's no real choice.

So what constitutes a safe policy? The authors say that the smaller countries have to consider a trade off between what they gain by getting closer and their own economic security. Scylla and



US-CHINA. Economic rivals at rock

Charybdis. Or, as Homer asked: do you save the ship or the sailors (who are the equivalent sovereignty and your industries)?

It's a very tough choice but the authors have a recommendation: coordinated action by the smaller economies rather than uncoordinated, each man for himself policies in order to prevent the inefficient fragmentation of the world economy.

They have studied financial services "as tools of coercion" that have strong strategic complementarities. They also

say that power is "nonlinear" as it "increases disproportionately as the hegemon approaches controlling the entire supply of a sectoral input." American dollars and Chinese computer chips, for example.

The paper doesn't have anything startlingly new to suggest. It only says that you never know what it will do next. In short, all economies smaller than the US and China can only keep their fingers crossed. In this increasingly uncertain world, the only certainty is that they will succumb to either the US or China. Indeed, many would say they already have.

India did this by buying oil from Russia when the US embargoed Russia which invaded Ukraine. In the process, it annoyed the Biden administration so much that it's been non-stop harassment since then.

China isn't in that league yet but will get there, or somewhere near, in the next decade. In any case, its policies are influenced so much by domestic politics that you never know what it will do next.

In short, all economies smaller than the US and China can only keep their fingers crossed. In this increasingly uncertain world, the only certainty is that they will succumb to either the US or China. Indeed, many would say they already have.

LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehinduonline.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

GST rate card

This refers to the news report 'High GST rates on luxury goods counter-productive' (January 2). Given the growth and inflation pressures in the economy, a lower tax rate is critical for stimulating consumption and spurring economic activity.

Since the lines between necessities and luxuries are blurring, a rethink at the tax rates of all goods is imperative for consumer welfare. Movement of goods and services prices impacts demand, inflation,

interest rate and investment. The inflow of funds from domestic and external investors will be adversely affected. Hence the GST must be set at a rate which will facilitate investments and growth.

VSK Pillai
Chennai

Tap consumer base

This refers to 'High GST rate on luxury goods counter-productive' (January 2). The high GST rates prevailing in India should be viewed in the context of its growing

economy with a massive consumer base. Given that consumption expenditure drives 55-60 per cent of India's GDP, this presents an opportunity to broaden the tax base rather than over-burden goods across categories or rely on technicalities for modifying GST rates as observed during recent changes.

Most other countries have a single rate GST/VAT system, unlike India which has a complex multi-rate framework. Also its 28 per cent GST rate on

luxury goods is significantly higher than the global average. Instead of focusing solely on revenue augmentation, India should leverage its vast consumer base, implement structural reforms, and attract investments to drive sustainable growth and economic expansion.

Srinivasan Velamuri
Chennai

Revive RINL

The news about RINL revival plans is welcome. Loss-making PSUs must not be sold at a throw away price.

The divestment plan of Vizag Steel too met with resistance. Modernising and equipping the plant to compete with the potential private players is welcome, despite the costs involved.

Nehru called PSUs as the temples of modern India and they should not be seen only for their commercial benefits but for the social gains they offer. The government is responsible for the loss or profit PSUs make. Revival efforts are welcome.

Ag Rajmohan
Anaparthi