

THE ASIAN AGE

3 MARCH 2025

Ukraine's fate up in air as Trump berates Zelenskyy

In the biggest diplomatic blowout in the history of modern democracies, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy may have felt that he is being thrown to the wolves at his door. In a show of abuse and victim-blaming, US President Donald Trump seemed to take the avatar of a censorious school headmaster ticking off his favourite pupil.

At the end of a nasty session at The Oval office in the White House, Mr Zelenskyy was reduced to a supplicant craving for US support against the big bad wolf Russia. On the rebound, Mr Zelenskyy had a fruitful meeting with the British prime minister Keir Starmer outside 10 Downing Street where he was promised a loan, and the support he needed to keep the invader Vladimir Putin's troops at bay.

This play of the might of American power and exposition of the principle of 'America First' has had a long run in several dramas in just 40 days since Trump returned to power. No world leader has gone into a meeting with Trump with any great expectations of fairness beyond the initial show of bonhomie and expression by homilies.

Regardless of who provoked such a startling display of hostility, it was preposterous that the charade was played out on live television for so long. And who could have ordered the press corps in while such a crucial meeting to try and end a 3-year war was on at The Oval office except on the president's express orders? It seemed too much like a planned verbal attack on the Ukrainian President who has never hit it off with Trump.

The fracas inside the White House was ultimately blamed on the reporters for asking leading questions on security guarantees for Ukraine if it were to accept a ceasefire with Russia. The fracas inside the White House was ultimately blamed on the reporters for asking leading questions on security guarantees for Ukraine if it were to accept a ceasefire with Russia. The fracas inside the White House was ultimately blamed on the reporters for asking leading questions on security guarantees for Ukraine if it were to accept a ceasefire with Russia.

Zelenskyy bore the brunt of the assault as Trump played his natural role as the disruptive, overbearing leader who will stop at nothing to take an advantage in a deal from friend or foe. A beleaguered Ukrainian President may have had only minutes to offer in return for \$175 billion that the US has supported the invaded Ukraine to cope with war. That deal has gone south now that Zelenskyy is hoping against hope that he can bring Trump around by dangling minerals without an apology for not expressing sufficient gratitude to US and Trump.

The Trump era II is a throwback to imperial times when the monarchs would demand deference and expect gunpowder in their court with not a thought spared for the niceties of international diplomacy or the need to negotiate to bring about peace between warring nations. The problem is, 80 years after World War II ended, there is so much talk of World War III rather than finding ways to bring about the very peace that Trump said would be achieved in weeks of his comeback.

Europe cannot come up with the deep strike armaments or match the scale of US aid to support an ally. And yet nations are coming up with moral support and money as they know too well now that everything has changed since January 20 and that they must prepare to live with a new world order as Trump would be too happy to disrupt the current one. Zelenskyy is caught in an unenviable position between the invasion and war on one side and a reluctant main ally on the other.

Get ready for a long, hot summer

With the summer officially beginning on March 1, India will endure a tough time for the next 90-odd days with peak demand for power and water leading to shortages. Climate change, deforestation and over-cultivation of cities are leading to rising temperatures, making summers unbearable without electricity-powered cooling systems.

The government is anticipating a record peak power demand of 270 gigawatts (GW) this summer, as against previous summer's peak demand of around 250 GW. Similarly, several states of the peninsula in India — especially the central highland and Deccan plateau — which are dependent on rain-fed rivers will face acute water shortages.

Though the Central and state governments have been taking measures to meet the power and water demand, they are at best short term and do not address the real problem in a sustainable manner.

For instance, the governments are confident of meeting the power demand by making power plants function at maximum capacities. However, 75 per cent of India's power is generated by coal-fired plants, which worsen climate change and increase temperatures. Similarly, the government pumps out groundwater to meet the higher water demand, without taking any steps to recharge groundwater in the rainy season, letting water to drain into the sea. Either of them is not sustainable.

An analysis of data from the National Load Dispatch Centre shows that power demand peaks steadily between 6:30 pm and 11:30 pm, presumably because of lighting and air-conditioning needs from commercial and household segments. One way of managing power demand could be implementing a daylight-saving model in the country. An early start of the day and early going to bed would save several thousands of megawatts of power.

The Centre should grant additional funds to states to encourage builders to opt for green housing concepts through incentives like waiving permit fee or open space restrictions.

Similarly, the government should help the states in implementing the Master Plan For Artificial Recharge to Groundwater 2013 prepared by Central Ground Water Board, which recommended various ways of recharging groundwater through institutional mechanisms.

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Kishwar Desai

London Diary

Can Britain gain at Trump's expense? Don't fly! Ride the Eurostar to Paris

After the showdown between Presidents Trump and Zelenskyy (with US Vice-President Vance playing a side role as a comedian, a performer who has probably faced many such outbursts in his life. He was not going to crumble when faced with bombast. A live performer has to think on his feet and he had to somehow get out of there with his dignity intact. Many would have been reminded of the David and Goliath story.

If we were to take a comic viewpoint (remember the anti-hero created by Charlie Chaplin) — sympathy always goes to the underdog, Zelenskyy may have come without a suit — but his ordinary visage made him the common man the world can identify with. So "Charlie" Zelenskyy goes to the White House might make a really funny film if matters were not so serious. So he gets kicked out of the White House — cut to being welcomed by Sir Keir Starmer at 10 Downing Street, in the next scene.

Already it is becoming a case of America versus the Rest of the World over the very issue of Ukraine. One worries that MAGA will soon stand for Make America Groan Again. Such an aspirational country is now being reduced to one where

leaders can only have ill-tempered discussions about land grab — whether it is Canada, or Panama or Gaza, or minerals in Ukraine. And yet every cloud has a silver lining. Perhaps the meeting with Nato and the EU allies taking place this week in London will create a brave new balance of power.

As the US cedes the ethical leadership space — it could be the UK that leads the world out of this mess, with Sir Keir Starmer, a marked contrast with a cool persona, at the helm.

The Wallace Collection is a treasure house of great paintings with Turner, Fra Angelico and Velazquez plus many other great artists. It was a private collection over four generations put together by the Marquess of Hertford and donated to Sir Richard Wallace, one of the descendants.

Sir Grayson Perry (a Turner Prize winning artist who is famous for cross dressing in woman's clothes) was asked to prepare an exhibition, 'Delusions of Grandeur', by the Wallace Collection staff. He has put together his own art pieces alongside selected works taken from the existing collection.

But he faced a challenge in the curation as he said he did not love much of what he saw in the old collection. So, even inventive, he altered his own persona by taking on the fictional identity of an artist Shirley

Smith — complete with a fancy dress and make-up. To make "Shirley" more contemporary — he said she had woken up in Hertford House after a mental health crisis and found a deep connection with the entire Wallace Collection.

In fact, there was a Shirley Smith who died in 1930, so it was not difficult for Grayson Perry to recreate her. Talk about 'channelling'! The show opens on March 28. "Shirley Smith" (alias Sir Grayson Perry) will turn up as a guide now and then. There will be around fifty classic paintings from the collection of five thousand on display.

So, every time I get stuck with my writing — maybe I should channel the spirit of Jane Austen, or even Shakespeare! Interesting idea!

One of the great pleasures of London is to be able to arrive at Kings Cross St Pancras railway station and get on the Eurostar for a smooth, no-hassle ride to Paris while a good catering service looks after you. Flying is becoming more and more difficult with security queues and the need to go an hour or more in advance, and thus the trains are smooth and comfortable.

Now the rail trip can take you further into Europe if you wish to combine your London holiday with a memorable ride on the Eurostar. No need to put on your safety belts.

Shakespeare still remains, after five centuries, the favourite playwright for the British artists in the West End and beyond. But are there some similarities we see today — with Richard II thinking he is born to rule even though he is ruining the country with his policies? Hmmmm...

Richard II is playing at the Bridge Theatre, at London Bridge — with the lead role played by Jonathan Bailey, last seen in *Bridgerton*. But are there some similarities we see today — with Richard II thinking he is born to rule even though he is ruining the country with his policies? Hmmmm...

Kishwar Desai is an award winning author and columnist. She is also the Chair of the Partition Museums in Amritsar and Delhi.

Subhani



Making things isn't just about making money



Sanjaya Baru

Sanjayavacha

In Oliver Stone's movie *Wall Street*, capturing the reckless 1980s' spirit of 'greed is good', money in a booming stock market and through financial innovation and worse, at a time when American manufacturing was being badgered by imports from Europe and Japan, the working-class father Carl Fox has a question for his get-rich-quick son Bud.

"Stop going for the easy buck", the father warns, "and start producing something with your life. Create, instead of living off the buying and selling of others".

Young Bud has little time for such fatherly admonition. "What I see is a jealous old machinist who can't stand the fact that his son has become more successful than he has!" Not to be covered down by his son's youthful arrogance, father Carl replies: "What you see is a guy who never measured a man's success by the size of his wallet!"

"That's because you never had the guts to go out into the world and stake your own claim!" retorts Bud. After a long pause, the father speaks in a tone of wounded regret: "Boy, if that's the way you feel, I must have done a really lousy job as a father."

Last week two highly regarded business leaders put pen to paper to warn the scions of Indian business families that far too many of them were busy merely managing money rather than making something with that money. Uday Kotak, the banker, was the first to speak his mind. Warning that what John Maynard Keynes called, the "animal spirits of enterprise" were not visible in the next generation of business persons, Kotak is concerned that well-educated young people

born, so to speak, with a gold spoon in their mouth, seemed content managing their financial inheritance rather than producing something with it. "I would love to see this generation be hungry for success and build operational businesses," Kotak wrote, worrying about a tendency among younger members of business families to "take the easy way" of managing family offices and investments. Few are into building world-class businesses.

Even as Kotak's remarks created a buzz in board rooms, Harsh Goenka of the RPG Group launched yet another missile. Stop criticising N.R. Narayana Murthy of Infosys and S.N. Subrahmanyan of L&T for suggesting that Indians should work longer hours and start doing at least half the work they still do, admonished Goenka.

These young millionaires and billionaires are driving fancy cars and holidaying in exotic places "would never survive even a week of their grueling schedules. Instead of rolling up their sleeves and sweating it out in the trenches of business and industry, they are busy trading, speculating and running family offices."

Goenka reminded the brats how an earlier generation of business families expected their children to begin work at the bottom of the manufacturing pyramid, managing people, managing supplies, creating products and selling them. Not just to go for a working lunch with an investment manager to look at spreadsheets and then flying off for the weekend to some hot spot or watering hole.

The Kotak-Goenka put down is should draw attention to a larger malaise that is not just confined to the wealthy young. Even middle-class young people who get a degree in engineering have, for several generations now, gone on to seek a degree in management or finance and sat at desks managing money rather than work on the shop floor managing production.

The ingrained caste and class divisions of our society at large also defined success in business. Dirigisme hands on the shop floor was not the route to managerial success. When Japan's Suzuki arrived in India and made managers in offices wear the same grey outfits that foremen on the shop floor wore, eyebrows were raised among the hot political and industrial centres like Singapore and Dubai, to mention London and Zurich, has also seduced the wealthy away from managing to new management of funds. Indeed, after the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) permitted online board meetings and with improved connectivity Indian CEOs find they can run their businesses at home living overseas.

The social and cultural gap between manager and worker has been reinforced by the ability of multinational corporations that ran their overseas business from their home country. Today even Indian business persons are able to run their Indian business from overseas. And, if it's only about managing money, then who needs anything more than a laptop and a mobile phone.

The writer is an author, a former newspaper editor and advisor to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

LETTERS LAW NEEDS TEETH

It is a matter of crying shame that in spite of snowfall and avalanche alerts since Feb. 24, labourers working on a stretch of the road to Badrinath Dham had not been evacuated on time. Four days went by but no action was taken to bring those labourers to a safer place. As a result, some labourers were killed and many went missing when the avalanche hit on Feb. 28. This indicates a total apathy towards the safety of labourers. Now, who will be accountable for playing with so many lives? India needs stringent labour laws and their strict implementation.

Sujit De Kolkata

DANGEROUS AXIS

THE RECENT standoff between Presidents Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a cause for concern regarding the future of US assistance to Ukraine. While Kyiv battles Russian aggression, a withdrawal from American support would be catastrophic. Will Europe step in to fill the gap, or will Ukraine's opposition collapse without strong US support? The stakes are higher than for Ukraine alone, posing a threat to global democratic stability.

Anshu Bharti Begusarai

LEAVE ANIMALS OUT

IT IS VERY SAD that our politicians bring the innocent blameless animals into their asinine fights. The CM of Uttar Pradesh Adityanath spoke of the pigs and vultures as if they were the worst creatures in the living world. Nature has designed each animal and bird with a specific purpose in mind and to think of a tiger as better than a pig and a vulture as lower than a cuckoo are so ridiculous. This concept of high and low is found only in human beings; never in the animal kingdom. Vultures and pigs have an important part to play in the food cycle. Great concerns have been expressed by scientists and ecologists about the dwindling number of vultures and the CM would be surprised to know that pork is the most consumed meat in the world.

Anthony Henriques Mumbai

₹500 for the best letter of the week goes to R. Narayanan (Feb. 26). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

the hindu businessline

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Growth niggles

Economy on track, but global headwinds a bother

To paraphrase or possibly distort Mark Twain, reports of the economy being in dire straits are perhaps exaggerated. The second advance estimates of growth for FY25 point to an economy that is growing below potential, but not in crisis. The IMF has affirmed India's macroeconomic stability by projecting 6.5 per cent growth in FY26, with retail inflation projected to be under control.



A major feature of the data released late last week is the projection of a vast improvement in demand conditions over the second half of FY25. There has been considerable worry in recent months over feeble demand conditions, particularly in urban India. The recent repo rate cut, tax concessions in the Budget and relaxation by the RBI of curbs on lending to Non-Banking Financial Companies and microfinance are aimed at boosting demand. Now, GDP growth is expected to jump from an average of 6.1 per cent in the first three quarters to 7.6 per cent in the fourth quarter to arrive at an FY25 growth rate of 6.5 per cent. This will be achieved by a spurt in private consumption growth from 6.8 per cent in the first three quarters to 9.9 per cent in the fourth. Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran has referred to the Mahakumbh giving the economy a consumption-led boost. The question is whether this anticipated turnaround sparks off a revival of private investment. An important variable is the unstable external economic environment.

The second advance estimates have revised nominal growth upwards for FY25 from 9.7 per cent to 9.9 per cent and real growth from 6.4 per cent to 6.5 per cent. This would lower the fiscal deficit ratio and create elbow room to lift public spending. Government spending is up just 3.8 per cent this fiscal, against 8.1 per cent in FY24. The growth estimates for FY23 and FY24 have been revised upwards from 7 per cent to 7.6 per cent, and 8.2 per cent to 9.2 per cent, respectively — perhaps on account of a deflator adjustment. As a post-Covid feature, agriculture has held up with a projected growth of 4.6 per cent for this fiscal, while manufacturing sputters along at 4.3 per cent. Services growth has been stable at just over 7 per cent, in keeping with the trend. The sectoral composition of growth raises concerns over transferring the workforce from low productivity rural occupations to better jobs.

A dip in capital formation growth from 8.8 per cent in FY24 to 6.1 per cent this fiscal is expected to reverse in FY26; the general elections this fiscal would have stayed investment decisions. Corporate earnings data do not provide major clues in this regard. A Bank of Baroda analysis of Q3 results of nearly 1,900 companies points to a deceleration in both sales and profits growth — but it would seem far-fetched to draw either dismal or sanguine conclusions. Finally, the script for fiscal and monetary policy is to act in tandem to boost income, savings and investment. However, India's growth remains subject to global headwinds whipped up across the Atlantic.

POCKET

RAVINKANTH



LINE & LENGTH

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

Why does India always do the opposite of what the rest of the world is doing? There are altogether too many examples now to be ignored as random aberrations.

Regardless of whether it's politics, economics, sociology or international relations, India nearly always does the opposite. Not just that. It insists it is right.

Take the latest and most egregious example. Just when the others are rolling back welfare schemes or reforming them, India is expanding them, never mind reforming the existing ones. The political consensus here is the opposite of what it is elsewhere, never mind the fiscal consequences.

In exactly the same way, when others liberalise their financial, product and labour markets, we do the opposite. As so many market experts have repeatedly said our markets are amongst the least liberalised.

When others follow a low tariffs regime in international trade, we follow a high tariffs one. And vice versa. When others look to join large trade groups we prefer bilateral ones.

At the WTO in the late 1980s and early 1990s we were refusing to sign the services agreement when others were. We signed in the end on unfavourable terms.

Where others look to increase the scale of factory output is, we start making production units smaller. We give them fancy names but the effect is always the same: low productivity and efficiency.

RULES, NOT COMPLIED

When others make as few rules possible to govern economic activity, we make hundreds. When others follow those few rules, we do it only in the breach. We call these compliances that are never complied with fully.

Or take resource allocation. When others were leaving it to the forces of supply and demand, we chose centrally directed allocation via the Five-Year plans. Now when the rest of the world is talking of industrial policy, we are sitting back and leaving resource allocation to chance.

And tax policy. Other countries tax everyone. In India only a million out of a population of 1,400 million people file returns. Not just that. Over half file zero

returns. Other countries have just one VAT or GST rate. We have six. Their rates are reasonable and understandable. Ours are neither.

India used to use environmentally friendly packaging like jute or paper when the others were using plastics. Now they are giving up plastics and we have taken to it in a massive way. The same thing has happened with handicrafts also.

It is possible to go on with these examples. But the point is clear: we are contra-minded in the extreme. And this tendency isn't confined to the economy.

We are contra-minded in the extreme. And this tendency isn't confined to the economy. It can be seen in foreign policy, public administration, technology, you name it



India's obsession with being contrarian

In politics, economics and foreign policy, India believes in doing things differently.

Most often, it has hurt us

It can be seen in foreign policy, public administration, technology, you name it. We revel in doing it differently, never mind that it mostly doesn't work.

Take, quite randomly, our nuclear policy. When the rest of the world was signing the non-proliferation treaty, we, quite rightly, refused to sign it. We also refused to sign the comprehensive test ban treaty when all others were signing it. These were two of the very few decisions that have worked well for us.

GOVT WORK PRIVILEGED

And public administration. In other countries the lower bureaucracy tends to be honest. Here it's the other way round. In other countries people don't want to work for the government. But here we have made government service highly lucrative and profitable. We need a lot more babus but don't have them. That makes for longer service time per person who needs the service and therefore greater scope for bribery as speed money.

Or the justice system. Others believe in speedy disposal of litigation. We believe in the opposite. It's not deliberate. It just is. That's how the system is set up. Then we have our Constitution. Everyone swears by it but it's been amended over 110 times. In contrast, the US Constitution has been amended only 33 times, the Australian Constitution eight times, the Irish Constitution 33 times and France about 30 amendments.

Or even language. When others, like even France, Japan and China, accept English as a necessary tool and skill of commerce, we say no, let it be Hindi. Why, we even drive on the left. Only 77 others, tiny British colonial vestiges, do it. The rest, 178, drive on the right. One must, in the end, ask if this preference for difference does any harm. In most cases, no. But in some, yes it does make a difference. Wisdom lies in being able to tell one from the other. We are different there as well. We aren't able to.

Patent filing: India takes promising strides

China is still the global leader; India must further improve its R&D spend and patent processing efficiency

S Saranya Devi
S Rajamohan

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) recently released its annual report highlighting global trends in intellectual property (IP) filings for 2023. With 3.55 million patent applications filed worldwide, marking a 2.7 per cent increase over 2022 (wipo.int), China has emerged as a dominant force in the IP landscape.

China retained its position as the global leader, accounting for the highest number of filings across patents (1.64 million), trademarks (7.4 million), and industrial designs (882,809). This surge reflects its robust investment in technology-driven sectors like electrical machinery, telecommunications, digital communication, and computer technology and so on.

The US followed as the second-largest contributor, with 5,18,791 patent applications and 8,49,951 trademark filings, demonstrating its strong foothold in medical technology, semiconductors, and biotechnology. Japan ranked third globally in patents, with 4,14,479 filings, while also excelling in advanced materials technology.

INDIA RISING India made notable strides in 2023, filing 64,510 patent applications and ranking

Global rankings in intellectual property filings

Patents, trademarks, and industrial designs

Total filings (Resident + Abroad)

Country of origin	Patent		Trademark		Industrial design	
	Number of classes	Global rank	Number of classes	Global rank	Number of classes	Global rank
China	16,42,582	1	74,17,473	1	8,82,809	1
US	5,18,791	2	8,49,951	2	69,076	2
Japan	4,14,479	3	3,49,693	10	34,589	9
Germany	1,33,148	5	4,41,310	5	64,986	3
UK	48,297	8	3,56,863	9	45,370	8
Russian Federation	23,247	13	5,43,682	3	8,289	13
India	64,510	6	4,96,326	4	26,966	10

Source: Retrieved from <https://www.wipo.int/ipdocs/statistics/country-profiles/india.pdf>

sixth globally. A significant increase of 8,734 filings compared to 2022, which underscores the country's growing emphasis on innovation and technological development. India also secured the fourth spot in trademark filings (4,96,326) and tenth in industrial design filings (26,966).

"India's rise in intellectual property filings reflects its emerging ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurship," said an official from the Indian Patent Office. The growth spans diverse sectors, including IT methods for management, chemical engineering, food chemistry, and environmental technology and so on.

WIPO's report attributed the global growth in patent filings to increased applications from key countries.

GLOBAL TRENDS

China led the charge with 57,830 additional filings compared to 2022, followed by South Korea (+15,628), the US (+12,682), Japan (+9,040), and India (+8,734). While resident filings rose by 4.9 per cent, non-resident filings saw a slight decline of 2.2 per cent (wipo.int).

Key technological fields such as electrical machinery, digital communication, and IT methods for management accounted for a significant portion of filings.

Emerging areas like micro-structural and nano-technology also showed promise. While China's dominance in IP filings continues to grow, developed nations like Germany and the UK hold competitive positions, particularly in industrial designs and high-tech sectors. Germany ranked third globally in industrial design filings (64,986), reflecting its focus on advanced manufacturing and surface technology.

India's challenge lies in leveraging its IP growth to enhance global competitiveness. Experts suggest strengthening research and development (R&D) initiatives, improving patent processing efficiency, and fostering collaboration between academia and industry.

The report underscores the critical role of intellectual property in driving innovation and economic growth worldwide.

As countries like India continue to climb the ranks, the global IP landscape is set to become more diverse and competitive. For innovators, securing patents, trademarks, and industrial designs remains a cornerstone of staying ahead in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy.

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BELOW THE LINE



Ajay Seth, Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs

Ajay Seth as Finance Secy?

The corridors of power are rife with speculation — Ajay Seth, the sharp-witted Secretary of Economic Affairs, is the frontrunner to be designated as the next Finance Secretary. Normally, the senior-most secretary in the Finance Ministry assumes the coveted title. A 1987 batch IAS officer from the Karnataka cadre, Seth's expertise in economic affairs makes him a natural

choice. With major fiscal decisions looming, all eyes are now on North Block for the final word.

Quiet send-off

It's not too often that a top regulator exits without so much as a bouquet, a speech, or even a lukewarm round of applause. But Madhabi Puri Buch, India's first woman SEBI chief, wrapped up her tenure with... well, a ghost farewell. Employees reportedly sighed in relief as she left the building — except that she didn't even visit the office on her last day! In a corporate world where even underperforming CEOs get golden parachutes and grand farewells, this is a rare sight. No cake, no farewell mug with "Best Boss Ever" printed on it. Just a quiet departure, almost like she left a WhatsApp group chat. But as a no-nonsense performer, she was not aiming at popularity, anyway.

Political twist in TN

Tamil Nadu has been dogged by workers' unrest in Sriperumbudur, a thriving automobile and electronics industries cluster. Heading the workers' cause is CPI(M)-affiliated CITU. A little bird suspects that CITU has become active in the State and is espousing the cause of workers more vigorously since CPI(M) is planning to quit the DMK-led L.N.D.J. Alliance. With actor Vijay floating his party to contest the 2026 State assembly elections, CPI(M) could switch over to his side with a few other parties such as VCK and, perhaps, the Congress. A little bird says probably, the CPI(M) is feeling the pulse of the people in the State.

Stealth rebalancing?
Home Minister Amit Shah's

assurance that Tamil Nadu and other southern States won't lose a single seat in the upcoming delimitation exercise may sound comforting, but the real game is in the numbers.

While seats may not be slashed, the potential increase in northern States could dilute the South's political weight. The equation is simple: No seat loss doesn't mean no power loss.

A different pitch

Employees of the financial system's core players — the Asset Reconstruction Companies (ARCs) — displayed their competitive spirit on the Turf (at the Andheri Sport Complex, Mumbai) by participating in the maiden Inter ARC Cricket Championship, which was put together by the Association of ARCs in India. Usually, these employees vigorously

compete with each other from the comfort of their office to buy bad loans from lenders. But on February 28, it was a different ballgame for 11 ARCs. The theme of the championship was "Spot it. Treat it. Beat it" for raising awareness about breast cancer.

Sage advice

The Drug Controller General of India has some very sage advice for the pharmaceutical industry. Urging industry to be driven by quality and not just profitability, he told a gathering of top representatives of the pharmaceutical industry gathered in Mumbai, to follow "Saraswati", and that "Laxmi" would follow — in other words, to stick with quality research and content, as the profits would follow in turn.

Our Bureau

Busting myths with flair

Understanding the game of investing

BOOK REVIEW.

Ganesh A

Devina Mehra's bold take on the world of investing comes as a breath of fresh air. She does not shy away from challenging the status quo on 'investing'. And she does it with a lot of flair!

Her book *Money, Myths and Mantras* is a testament to that. The writing is engaging and democratic, making complex financial jargons easily understandable to a wide range of audience.

The book facilitates reader comprehension, with each chapter structured in the form of standalone essays. But don't let the textbook structure of the book fool you. It is as enjoyable as it can get.

The author's core mantra seems to be 'Data is Supreme!'. She takes utmost care to ensure that her claims are backed up by cold, hard data. She brings in this catchy acronym called SCARS (Single Country, Single Currency, Single Asset Risk). She speaks about the importance of spreading your bets across the globe. She argues that limiting investments to domestic markets — such as India — can expose investors to unnecessary risks tied to single-country volatility.

Instead, she recommends allocating 20-30 per cent of one's portfolio to global markets. This strategy allows investors to tap into opportunities across different economies and industries while reducing dependence on any one market.

EXIT STRATEGY

The book spends a good amount of time and provides valuable insights on when and how to exit your investments. While most investment gurus out there are centred around buying, this book gets away from the norm and dares to answer uncomfortable questions on selling.

How intrigued would you be if someone challenges the greats of investing? Mehra isn't afraid to challenge the strategies of Warren Buffett and Ray Dalio and uses data to show why blindly following their approaches might not work out for everyone. This contrarian perspective is refreshing in a field where many investors tend to reverberate established figures without questioning whether their methods are suitable for different market conditions or individual goals. Mehra encourages readers



Title: Money, Myths and Mantras: The Ultimate Investment Guide
Author: Devina Mehra
Publisher: Penguin
Price: ₹399

and investors to think critically and develop strategies tailored to their unique circumstances.

In the book's take on risk management, the author emphasises that it is important to avoid big and disastrous mistakes in investing, while accepting that some mistakes are inevitable. The book provides guidance on how to minimise risks and to learn from common investment mistakes.

Her conservative approach during uncertain times reflects this commitment to risk management. She advises caution when markets are overheated or valuations appear stretched.

In a nutshell Mehra's displays her ability to balance short-term tactical decisions with long-term strategic thinking, and hence, not focusing exclusively on a single timeframe.

In summary, her book provides unique insights and displays her deep understanding of financial markets and human behaviour. Her emphasis on global diversification through the SCARS framework, reliance on data-driven decision-making, willingness to challenge conventional wisdom, and focus on risk management makes her stand out. Whether you're an experienced investor or just starting out, Mehra's perspectives offer valuable lessons for navigating today's complex financial landscape with confidence and clarity.

If you're tired of the same old investing advice, give *Money, Myths and Mantras* a shot. It's like a slap in the face to wake you up from your investing snooze. Her writing style is engaging, and she breaks down complex stuff into bite-sized pieces. This book has got something for everyone. It's not just about making money; it's about understanding the game and playing accordingly.

The reviewer is Founder, beyondMF

Runtime norms for entrepreneurs

A guidebook that bridges the gap between technical brilliance and business acumen

BOOK REVIEW.

B Narayanaswamy

At the core, management is all about people; and business is all about money. Unfortunately, neither of these subjects form a part of the tech curriculum.

In *Brick by Brick*, Manish Vij offers a practical guidebook for bridging this gap between technical brilliance and business acumen. It's a remarkable book and draws from his extensive experience as a serial entrepreneur and investor in digital marketing, e-commerce, and adTech companies.

The book addresses the full range of the existential questions an entrepreneur tussles within the journey from start-up to scale-up and success. Starting from where to register the company (in India or abroad?) to the full bundle of building teams, dealing with VCs, the occasional legal attacks and all the other slings and arrows that an entrepreneur is heir to.

There are 16 chapters, comprising stories from the author's entrepreneurial journey. There is an 'actionable insights' summary at the end of each chapter. These are in fact the book. The stories are illustrations that support these. It's a good resource to have nearby, amidst the relentless action and the late-night self-doubt moments while one builds and scales a start-up.

ENTREPRENEURIAL DILEMMAS Vij deals with quandaries and dilemmas that all entrepreneurs struggle with. For instance, 'Relationship with co-founders'.

In his case a fraught moment arises after an exit event when they had successfully sold an earlier venture.

Success brings with it a change in perspective — and this is invariably different for each one in the founding team. Thus starts the beginnings of divergence.

The 'actionable insights' — and there are some 40 of them drizzled across the book — are quite a sophisticated set: illuminating and in-depth, and consistently so. T

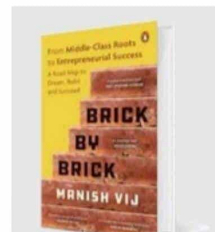
hey run the gamut from the abstract ('Take risks, not chances') to the practical ('...it's equally important that founders do some reference on the investors', 'Limit the founding team to two or three at most').

There are some things he just mentions in passing in the narration that are actually quite profound. For instance, there is a tale to WPP that they consciously frame as a 'Joint Venture' in all their communications — to 'avoid landing up with an employee mindset'. This is next-level brilliant perspective and really belongs in the Insights list.

It's not an accident that these are titled 'actionable insights' and not, say, 'Lessons Learnt'. Vij is certainly reflective. But he is not philosophical or given to excursions of intellectual wandering. The dust jacket talks about his driving in the glaciers of Iceland, and travels in Antarctica. He clearly has a bias for action: to take that calculated risk without endless dithering and then act aptly and fast.

SAIDING NO TO GOOGLE

Vij also brings a remarkable level of clarity and self-awareness. For instance when Google (Google!) dangles a job. There are moments in any entrepreneurial journey when a job in a large company looks like the very definition of employment-heaven. In Vij's case it's just a few months into a new venture, and there is Google with an offer of a fat salary, stock units, and



Title: Brick by Brick: From Middle-Class Roots to Entrepreneurial Success - A Road map to Dream, Build and Succeed
Author: Manish Vij
Publisher: Penguin Random House
Price: ₹599

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Manish Vij is a distinguished serial entrepreneur in the internet and digital industry. As Managing Partner of Smile Group, he has been instrumental in establishing successful ventures in digital media, e-commerce, and gaming

prospects of high growth. A strong temptation. The chapter makes for some interesting reading. Vij finally says 'No' to Google and is candid while discussing this episode. Long story short, his co-founder Harish requests Vij's dad to

help. Vij Sr. puts it to him that he can always find a job if this start-up fails; but to build and scale a start-up one more time will not be easy. And 'age is also on your side'.

The age is very much on his side. I reckon he is in his 40s. The narrative covers a span of some 20-odd years and four start-ups, a couple of acquisitions, global expansion, three exits, more than one instance where the company is facing closure. And one instance where it fails and is shut down — his very first venture, KabadiBazaar.com, that he started while still in college.

LUCK FACTOR

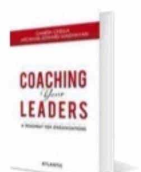
Besides age, there is luck too, as Vij himself notes in the epilogue. There is an excellent discussion on this, although the author labels it 'serendipity'. Indeed, one can argue that he was lucky to have faced his first failure at KabadiBazaar.com so early in the journey.

The focus is on Vij the entrepreneur, and there are just a few glimmers of Manish the man. The epilogue does touch upon the personal aspects like Luck and Faith, but one would have liked to see more glimpses of the inner demons and the emotions and the stresses and struggles that he bore on the way to eventual success. And how to bounce back from the emotional troughs. The book needs an Index. This is a book that one would reach out to often for reading and reflection — and an Index is crucial.

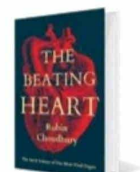
These are minor quibbles. It's a great book, and Obi-Wan Vij has some great insights to share.

The reviewer is a specialist in consumer behaviour and strategy. He was successively President, then Consultant in data science at Ipsos Research, then Delhi, after their acquisition of India Research where he was one of the co-founders

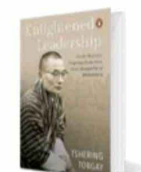
NEW READS.



Title: Coaching Your Leaders: A Roadmap For Organisations
Authors: Ganesh Chella, Archana Edward Madhavan
Publisher: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors
This book serves as the essential bridge between this promise and real-world outcomes



Title: The Beating Heart: The Art and Science of Our Most Vital Organ
Author: Robin Choudhury
Publisher: Apollo
Choudhury explores how the heart has been represented over time and across cultures



Title: Enlightened Leadership
Author: Tshering Tobgay
Publisher: Penguin Random House SEA
This book offers invaluable insights into leadership that combines ancient wisdom and modern best practices

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 3, 2005

Anomalies in fringe benefit tax will be removed

The Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, today assured trade and industry at a FICCI conference that the Government had no intention to levy the proposed Fringe Benefit Tax (FBT) for any legitimate business expenses such as business communication, knowledge enhancement and sales marketing.

Tata Motors hopes to be No 1 with Rs 1-lakh car

Asserting that Tata Motors is "close to developing" its ambitious Rs 1-lakh car, the Tata Group Chairman, Mr Ratan Tata, expressed confidence that the "people's car" could help it become the number one car maker in the country. Asked whether such a low-priced car could help it surpass Maruti Udyog to become number one car maker, Mr Tata told PTI at the Geneva Motor Show, "If we're able to provide a low-price car, which is successful, yes, our volumes would surely exceed those that exist today".

AI Express may also fly on domestic routes

Air India Express, the low cost arm of Air India, could also start operating on domestic skies. The AI management is looking at the option of the AI Express doing the domestic leg of its operations that are at present carried out by Indian Airlines.

Short take

Pharma's next frontier: Life-changing innovations

Rajeev Sibbal

As the pharma and healthcare industries embrace innovations such as AI, how do we ensure these innovations deliver real, tangible value to the communities they aim to serve?

With global precision medicine market set to grow to \$50.2 billion by 2028, personalised medicine is no longer a distant vision. By leveraging genomic data, lifestyle information, and environmental factors, tailored therapies are gaining prominence for the treatment of complex conditions such as cancer and rare genetic disorders. These advancements promise better health outcomes but also present the challenge

of affordability. So the focus has to extend beyond innovation to include strategies for cost reduction and insurance coverage expansion. This is where the necessity for evidence-based digital therapeutics arises. It can combine the precision and intelligence of AI with clinically validated, patient-centric interventions, supported by clinical experts and Medical Internet of Things (MIoT) to provide comprehensive cardiac care and recovery solutions.

AI's potential in drug discovery is particularly promising, simulations created by Generative AI can refine clinical protocols, predict patient outcomes and identify potential risks by using predictive modelling, even before

actual trials are conducted. This accelerated pace facilitates faster go-to-market for life-saving drugs and reduced the costs, enabling more affordable treatments. AI is also influencing healthcare delivery through wearable devices like continuous glucose monitors, that provides real-time disease management insights.

While the potential of digital transformation in pharma is immense, however it is essential to balance innovation with societal needs. India faces a significant \$6 billion healthcare funding gap annually to achieve universal health coverage.

Collaborative efforts between pharmaceutical companies and governments are essential to address this

shortfall. Additionally, investing in early diagnosis programs and enhancing public health infrastructure are vital steps toward closing this gap.

Transitioning from legacy systems to cloud-based platforms is crucial for pharmaceutical companies to streamline operations, enhance data sharing, and improve decision-making. The healthcare cloud computing market, expected to grow from \$53.8 billion in 2024 to \$120.6 billion by 2029, will be driven by the adoption of electronic health records, telehealth, and mobile health solutions. This shift necessitates robust cybersecurity to protect sensitive data and maintain patient trust.

Sibbal is President - India Region Formulations, Lupin

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2643



EASY

ACROSS

01. Old street worker (4-7).
08. Bitter plant, basis of absinthe (8)
09. Happy (4)
10. Triangular-sectioned glass (5)
13. Hefty volume (4)
16. Foot part (4)
17. Lose energy, become dispirited (4)
18. Surrounded by (4)
20. Escapade; picture of scenery (5)
24. Dog, cur (4)
25. Right-hand man (8)
26. One thing tied by woman of the house (5-6)

DOWN

02. They are put on by the affected (4)
03. Might (5)
04. Russian, Greek church paintings (5)
05. Inebriated (5)
06. Lovers (11)
07. Making publicly known (11)
11. Removes creases (5)
12. Mediterranean island (5)
14. Leave out (4)
15. Persian fairy (4)
19. Dull, gloomy (5)
21. Board game (5)
22. One setting running speed (5)
23. Portent (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. 50-amp flame-producer for old man in the street (4-7)
08. Bitter stuff; change order, and it could damage furniture (8)
09. Happy the eye for a pretty face? (4)
10. Triangular glass showing schoolmaster returning in afternoon (5)
13. Mine the dedication of this volume (4)
16. To which one obediently comes to lean over (4)
17. Will you be archaic, and droop? (4)
18. Surrounded by a large number in assistance (4)
24. Scrape right out of the picture (5)
26. The party keeps going with this wretched creature inside (4)
25. Sidekick supplied by layer and small church fellow (8)
26. One of those maternal ties (5-6)

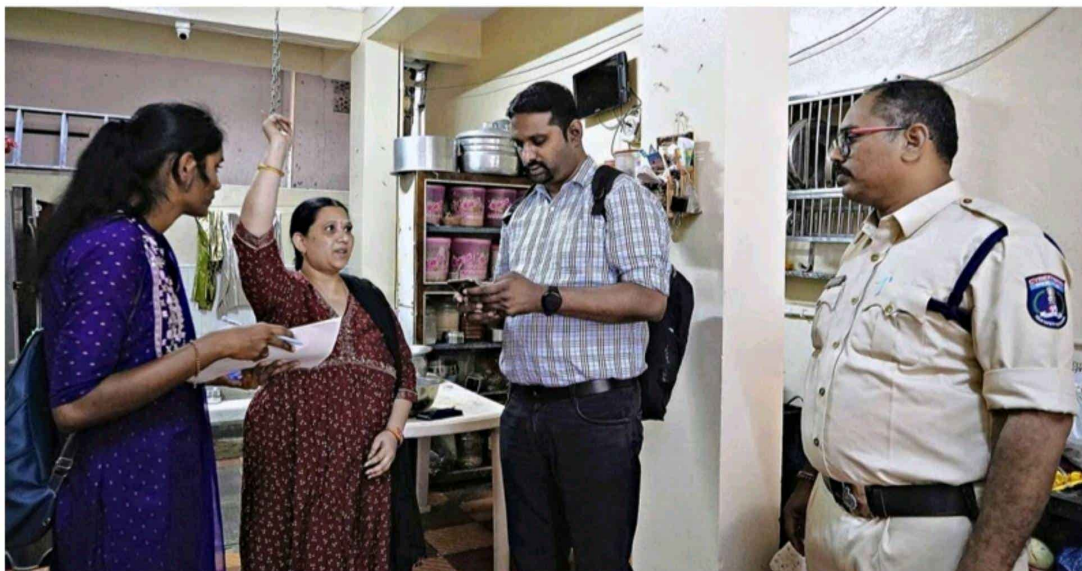
DOWN

02. Ventilates such as are put on by those affected (4)
03. Electricity might! (5)
04. Is about to swindle pictures from the Orthodox church (5)
05. Is it mean to be so tipsy? (5)
06. They hold each other dear — like soft centres? (11)
07. Giving one a puff, I'd invest rag wildly (11)
11. In which one was clapped — for one's bad performance! (5)
12. Being semi-animal, the Terriers come to the island (5)
14. I'm given come-uppance in the Old Testament, so don't put it in (4)
15. Proper industry will reveal it around the prefix (4)
19. Medical man with listener one finds very dull (5)
21. It involves moves on board that may lead to mating (5)
22. Capar about to be the one setting the running (5)
23. Ring people sign (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2642

ACROSS 1. Conflict 4. Espy 8. Roc 9. Save 10. Tea 11. Fireman 12. Rural 13. Established 17. Flash 18. Loiters 20. One 21. Seven 22. Tie 23. Days 24. Arrogant
DOWN 1. Carafe 2. Nice 3. Colon 5. Set free 6. Yearly 7. Depression 9. Sympathise 14. Shapey 15. Afford 16. Ascent 18. Liver 19. Extra

TELANGANA



Police and volunteers conducting a safety audit at a hostel as part of 'Project Safe Stay' to regulate the largely unchecked paying guest/hostel accommodations in Hyderabad. SIDHANT THAKUR

Hostile hostels and prison-like PGs: women under siege

In Hyderabad, safety and privacy in hostels/ paying guest accommodations remains a mirage for young women as they constantly battle fear and unease — prying neighbours and male stalkers to spy cameras. The promise of security at home fades as harassment, negligence and indifference become routine. **Lavpreet Kaur** goes behind the city's boomtown image to discover a vulnerable reality

For 26-year-old M. Shalini, the choice between working from home and the office is not just about convenience; it is also about safety. After a hectic Monday at her office housed in a gleaming corporate tower in Hyderabad's Gachibowli, she dreads the next day at her paying guest (PG) accommodation, where unease lurks behind every door and window.

At home, privacy is a luxury, and she is reduced to walking on eggshells. "We feel conscious even about opening our windows," she says. "Whenever I work from home, I avoid stepping into the corridor or interacting with anyone. The men from the PG across the street stare, pass lewd comments, and even peer through cracks in the window glass. It is unsettling. I feel much safer at the office."

The unease doesn't end indoors. Outside, a more insidious threat follows her. For the past six months, a young man from the neighbourhood has been stalking her — tracking her routine, watching her even in daylight. When she reported the matter to the hostel management, their response was cold and dismissive: "This is none of our concern."

A software professional at a multinational company, Shalini has spent the past year and a half in Indra Nagar, Gachibowli, an area packed with PGs and hostels but lacking in security. Her five-storey building houses over 100 women, but there is no one to turn to for safety concerns. "Recently, a supervisor was hired, but his role is limited to managing food, electricity and plumbing issues."

After repeated demands from residents, a common night watchman was assigned — one for four to five PGs. "He locks the main doors and then goes off to sleep. If there is an emergency, we cannot rely on him. It takes him forever to respond," says Shalini, one of hundreds of women navigating daily anxieties in spaces meant to offer safety.

Hyderabad, India's booming IT hub, is drawing young professionals from across the country, with women forming a significant part of this workforce. But as PGs and hostels multiply to accommodate them, safety concerns, poor regulation, and exploitative living conditions are on the rise. For many women living away from home for the first time, professional ambition comes with an unsettling trade-off — the constant negotiation of personal safety.

HITEC City, spanning Madhapur, Gachibowli, Kondapur and Kukatpally, is a hub of IT giants, startups financial firms and elite institutions, fuelling a booming PG and hostel network. Yet, beneath the sleek skyline and rapid growth lies a quieter, unsettling reality.

K. Sakshi, 23, a healthtech professional living in a PG on Babukhan Lane of Gachibowli, knows it too well. Glancing at the dimly lit street, she says, "When I return from work late at night, there are always men standing around. Walking alone feels unsafe. The lack of security only makes it worse."

As the night deepens, the narrow road lined with PGs and small eateries becomes an unspoken gathering spot. Men linger on sidewalks, their eyes tracking the women walking past. Some try to strike up conversations, while others



Only 20% of actual incidents are ever reported to the Internal Complaints Committee. Victims know the accused will be informed almost immediately. That alone makes them think twice. What if speaking up only makes things worse?

ADA VARGHESE, Student, IITL

simply stare. "Nothing overtly threatening has happened, but the unease is constant. And somehow, we have just accepted that this is how we must feel in our own neighbourhood," she rues.

To create the illusion of male presence, some women living alone resort to tactics like leaving large men's shoes outside their doors — small, silent attempts at self-protection.

The numbers paint a grim picture. Telangana saw a 4.78% rise in crimes against women in 2024, continuing a five-year trend of increasing violence at an average rate of 7.70% per year.

Rape cases surged by nearly 29%, kidnappings and abductions by 26.92%, and murders by 13.15%. Cases of outraging modesty went up by 8.71%, while incidents of abetment to suicide climbed by 4.41%.

In the same year, She Teams — a division of Telangana Police for enhanced safety and security of women — received 10,862 complaints of harassment in public places.

Yet, these figures barely scratch the surface. Many cases go unreported, buried under fear, societal pressure and institutional indifference, suggest officials.

Troubling trend

The new year brought anything but hope for students at CMR Engineering College in Hyderabad. Instead of fresh beginnings, they woke to outrage, fear and mass protests. Reason? A shocking breach of privacy — mess workers had been spying on women in hostel washrooms, even recording their videos.

For months, students had raised complaints, expecting swift action. Instead, they were met with silence, inaction and even blame. "Rather than confronting the perpetrators, the wardens tried to suppress the matter, shifting blame onto the victims. As the truth unravelled, it became clear this wasn't just negligence — the principal, director and chairman had pressured wardens to bury the case, fearing damage to the institution's reputation," said Inspector A. Satyanarayana of Medchal Police.

Emboldened by this cover-up, the accused continued their voyeurism without fear of consequence.

Just as the outrage from one crime had barely begun to settle, another incident rocked Hyderabad. An engineering student, returning to her private hostel in Ibrahimpatnam after Sankranti

celebrations, was sexually assaulted inside her own room. The perpetrator? The hostel owner's driver, who took advantage of her solitude and violated the very space meant to be her sanctuary.

These incidents are not isolated but part of a wider, systemic failure across Telangana, where accountability is rare and women's safety is dismissed as an "added cost". Meanwhile, technology has made exploitation easier than ever. A mini wireless Wi-Fi spy camera, for example, a bestseller on an e-commerce site, is available for just ₹599 — cheaper than a decent meal — and can be delivered to your doorstep in 24 to 48 hours. It records "exceptional 1920 x 1080P HD" videos, which can be viewed live from anywhere, according to the description on the platform.

The bitter irony? The very money that institutions refuse to spend on protecting women is being used to violate them.

Cracking down on illegal PGs

On a bright Saturday afternoon in February, volunteers gathered in the narrow lanes of Gowlidoddi, a bustling hub near Hyderabad's Financial District. The streets buzzed with life, PG accommodations lined up one after another, their bright signboards standing out against a sea of concrete and iron gates.

Gowlidoddi is one of the many pockets of Hyderabad's IT corridor housing thousands of young professionals and students. But over half of the hostels and PGs here run without a proper licence, and nearly all lack essential security measures.

This alarming discovery came to light during a safety audit under 'Project Safe Stay', a joint initiative by the Cyberabad police and the Society for Cyberabad Security.

The Council (SCSC) to regulate these largely unchecked establishments. "Without oversight, these hostels run unchecked, raising serious concerns about resident safety," says Cyberabad Women and Child Safety Wing DCP Srujana Ram, who is leading the project.

That afternoon, teams of auditors, including police constables, SCSC representatives and student volunteers, fanned out, knocking on hostel doors. Officers questioned PG owners and checked for valid licences, while volunteers inspected security infrastructure.

One volunteer climbed dimly lit staircases to ensure CCTV cameras were functioning and met the mandatory 90-day backup requirement. Others checked the height of compound walls, legal documents and first-aid kits — basic necessities often missing. Residents voiced frustration over unsafe conditions, pointing to poorly lit entryways, lack of emergency contacts and harassment incidents ignored by the management.

Each audit culminated in a 70-question survey assessing 10 key safety parameters. The collected data will generate a public rating system, assigning each hostel a score out of 10 based on safety

compliance. These ratings will be displayed on the Cyberabad police website and SCSC portal, helping new residents make informed choices.

"This system will be a wake-up call for hostel owners," says Cyberabad Commissioner of Police Avinash Mohanty. A follow-up meeting will present the audit findings, giving owners a deadline to rectify violations, he explains. Those failing to comply will face strict action.

Launched earlier this year, the initiative aims to cover over 1,500 hostels under the Cyberabad commissionerate, with audits conducted in a new area every weekend. However, officials admit there is no formal data on how many PGs and private hostels operate in Hyderabad, leaving many safety risks still unaccounted for.

Bringing order to PG boom

The growing lack of accountability in Hyderabad's private accommodations has sparked urgent calls for reform. Hyderabad District Women Protection Officer Akkeshwar Rao insists that these establishments must be brought under the Women and Child Welfare Department to enforce safety regulations. Without formal oversight, he warns, thousands of women will remain vulnerable to exploitation, harassment and violence.

"The first and most crucial step is mandatory registration. Every PG and private hostel must have a valid licence and those operating illegally should be shut down immediately," Rao asserts. He admits that his department often steps in only after an incident has already occurred — when the damage is done. This reactive approach, he stresses, must change. Strict enforcement and continuous monitoring are the only way forward.

But the scale of the problem is overwhelming. Medchal and Malkajgiri Child Development Project Officer Roja Eragoti points out that even if officials want to conduct regular inspections, the sheer number of PGs and hostels, combined with limited manpower and resources, makes that nearly impossible.

Adding to the problem is a widespread lack of awareness. Many women in these accommodations endure harassment in silence, unaware of their rights or how to seek help. "Failure to act early is a major factor behind the rising suicide attempts in private hostels. Many tragedies could have been prevented with timely intervention," Eragoti says.

For the thousands of women living in these spaces, the demand is clear: safety cannot be an afterthought. They seek CCTV cameras that actually work, wardens who listen and act, security guards who are accessible and trained for emergencies, and infrastructure designed with safety in mind. Controlled entry points, emergency alert systems and a structured process to escalate concerns are no longer optional — they are essential.

Counterproductive reforms

At the English and Foreign Languages University in eastern Hyderabad, female students live with an unshakable fear — one that lingers in empty corridors, deserted campus stretches and the silence that follows every reported case of harassment or assault.

That fear became a reality in October 2023 when a student was allegedly ambushed and sexually assaulted, just hours after students had protested for the reconstitution of the Sensitisation, Prevention, and Redressal of Sexual Harassment (SPARSH) committee. The attack took place despite the presence of security guards and CCTV cameras, forcing students to ask: what does 'security' really mean if it fails them when they need it most?

"The administration may cite the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) as proof of its commitment to student safety, but for many, it is just a formality," says S. Vani, 25, a student.

Survivors hesitate to come forward, fearing retaliation or further harassment. "Only 20% of actual incidents are ever reported to the ICC," chimes in Ada Varghese, 25, another student. "Victims know the accused will be informed almost immediately. That alone makes them think twice. What if speaking up only makes things worse," she wonders.

By regulation, the ICC must include faculty, non-teaching staff, students and an external NGO representative. Victims are required to file a written complaint within three months, after which the accused is given 10 days to respond. The inquiry is supposed to conclude within 90 days, as per University Grants Commission norms. But these procedures, students agree, often discourage them from reporting cases.

Trisha Singh, 25, another student of the university stresses the need for better training, not just in handling cases but in supporting survivors with empathy and sensitivity. "Following procedural steps isn't enough. Students need to feel safe enough to voice their concerns without fear of backlash," she says.

For many, the larger issue of campus safety remains unresolved. "Blocking off certain areas or installing dysfunctional cameras isn't a solution. We shouldn't have to question our safety in our own university. It is a problem that can't be ignored any longer," adds Varghese.

(Some names have been changed on request)



A row of PG accommodations in Gowlidoddi, a bustling hub near Hyderabad's Financial District that houses thousands of young professionals and students in Hyderabad. SIDHANT THAKUR



BIHAR



The wife and children of late chowkidar Jhamindra Rai, in their home in Gopalganj district, Bihar.
SAROJ SHARMA

Bihar's village guards caught between the police and the liquor mafia

Ever since prohibition was enforced in Bihar in April 2016 over two dozen village *chowkidars*, who prevent and detect crime, have been killed, allegedly by criminals involved in the illegal manufacturing and trade of illicit liquor in the State. **Amarnath Tewary** reports on the *dafadars*' struggle while doing their duty and living in fear

Jhamindra Rai was knifed to death on December 3, 2024, when he had gone to celebrate a wedding function in a nearby village, Sonwalla, in Bihar's Gopalganj district. Jhamindra, then 52, would do the night patrol in his village Bangra, reporting anything untoward to the police.

His son Raj Kumar Rai, one of four children, and a few others from the wedding party found his mutilated body near a temple beside a levee in the village under Baikunthpur police station. Jhamindra Rai had joined the village *chowkidar* service in 1997 and his family believe he was killed by the illicit liquor mafia.

Raj Kumar and his brothers often make trips to Gopalganj town, 60 km away, to pursue the case in the local court or to submit documents the government needs.

Whenever a report of a hooch tragedy comes to the Bihar police, they first call up village guards (called *chowkidars* or *dafadars*) for information. The liquor mafia, involved in the illegal trade of the illicit brew, hold them responsible for 'leaking' information to the police.

Over two dozen of them have been killed since prohibition was enforced in Bihar in April 2016, according to Sant Singh, the secretary of the Bihar Rajya Dafadar Chowkidar Panchayat Sangh, an informal organisation that looks after the needs of the guards.

Before his death, Jhamindra had informed the local police about two people from Sonwalla being involved in the illegal trade of *desi* (country-made) liquor. The men had been arrested and sent to jail.

They came out of the jail and a few days later killed our father so that their illegal liquor trade could continue to flourish, Jhamindra's sons say. Raj Kumar has named Surendra Rai and his son Vikesh Kumar along with three or four unknown others in the police complaint.

Both were arrested again and sent back to jail but, "We still fear leaving the house as they can do anything to us," Raj Kumar says. At the Gopalganj civil court on February 25, the date of the hearing, he is alert: "Even here, the men of the accused are everywhere."

In the courtyard of their home is a photograph of Jhamindra in uniform with a saying about karma being all-pervasive. "We have not received any money from the government," says Lalita Devi, his wife. "My daughter (Anita Kumar) and youngest son (Arjun Yadav) are unmarried. Now how will I be able to marry them off?" She is hoping Arjun will get a compensatory government job, as he has passed class 12 and holds a diploma from an industrial training institute.

Caught between threats

In 1990, the Bihar government had created 29,000 posts for village guards to watch the periphery and streets, and gathering intelligence to prevent crime. They were to assist the panchayats and law-enforcement agencies in their work. Right now, only about 20,000 guards are on the rolls, says Sant Singh.

The *chowkidars*' deaths have often gone unnoticed by the government and by people as well. When something happens to *chowkidars*, no one comes to the support of their family

SANT SINGH
Secretary, Bihar Rajya Dafadar Chowkidar Panchayat Sangh

"The *chowkidars*' deaths have often gone unnoticed by the government and by people as well," he says, on the sidelines of the organisation's meeting in Patna's Gandhi Maidan on February 20. "Village *chowkidars* are trapped between the police and liquor mafia. If we give the police information, the powerful liquor mafia attacks us; if we don't, police officers threaten to suspend us."

Even as Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar reiterates every now and then that prohibition will not be lifted in the State, other *chowkidars* at the Patna meeting say it's an open secret that liquor of every brand is home delivered across Bihar.

Away from Patna, Bihar's capital city, Mamta Devi, 40, lives in a single-storey home in Jagatpura-Mathia village under Barharia police station in Siwan district. Her husband Nagendra Prasad, a *chowkidar*, was killed on April 30, 2021, allegedly by those involved in illegal liquor trade in his village. He too was knifed and his body found at a temple.

"He had joined duty as the village *chowkidar* in 2011," says Mamta, who remembers faintly being married about 18 years ago. She has four school-going children — two daughters and two sons. Now, Mamta works as an agricultural labourer to provide for her family of five. "No case was filed as there was no male member to support me," she says, a reflection of both the system and of society.

She travels about 5 km twice a week to the local Barharia police station to get a follow-up about a compensatory job. "I have only been given assurances for nearly four years now," she says wiping her tears with one corner of her faded blue sari *pallao*, the other corner used to tie up her mobile phone. On it, she shows her husband's photo.

Her parents live in Deoria district of the neighbouring State of Uttar Pradesh. "Now, no one comes to see me. Everyone has their own family problems. I've to look after myself and my children on my own but it is very, very difficult for a middle-aged widow," she says. "I've heard even

death has a heart, but this world is full of heartless people."

Death by vehicles

In December 2024, members of the Bihar Rajya Dafadar Chowkidar Panchayat Sangh staged a protest in Patna. Their claim was that they were risking their lives by helping the police, but the police were helping the local liquor mafia. "When something happens to *chowkidars*, no one comes to the support of their family," Sant Singh complains.

A retired senior police officer from the Bihar police says implementing the law has been difficult. "Hundreds of policemen have been arrested for selling seized liquor from the police station itself," he says.

Several times, the *chowkidars* are killed by vehicles fleeing with alcohol. Ram Nath Yadav, who was 59 when he died, was a *chowkidar* of Jiyay village under the madassal police station of Siwan district. On February 29, 2020, "The

police got an input that a car with illicit liquor was coming from Haryana. It was chased down by the police and the speeding car crushed my father to death. It was registered as an 'accidental death'," says Ram Nath's son, Pankaj Yadav, 23.

A year later, Pankaj got his father's job, but with a mother, three brothers, and a sister to support, he says it is difficult to manage on a monthly salary of ₹26,000. The salary of a *chowkidar* in Bihar depends on the person's education. The basic pay scale for a person who has passed all his school exams ranges from ₹5,200-20,200, which escalates based on education and experience, Sant Singh clarifies.

Two people were arrested in the case, but Pan-

kaj is fearful. "The liquor mafia has a deadly network, and they can get me killed anywhere, anytime," he says, before setting off on his night duty assignment.

Dharmendra Kumar Rai of Mangalpur village, under Baikunthpur police station of Gopalganj district was mowed down by a van laden with liquor on August 18, 2024, at Khurampur chowk, some 15 km away from where he lived. The policemen, along with Dharmendra, then 33, were searching vehicles for liquor, and the fleeing van rammed into him. Again, the case was registered as one of accidental death. No one was arrested. His *bade papa* (father's older brother), Vidya Rai, 67, says, "We survive only because of farming, or else life would have been different."

Law and liquor

The Bihar Rajya Dafadar Chowkidar Panchayat Sangh maintains a list of village guards allegedly murdered by the illicit liquor mafia. It has names from across the State, including Begusarai in the north, Sheohar in the east, Nalanda in the south-east, Aurangabad in the west, Siwan in the north-west and Banka in the south-east.

Police records say that over 10,000 litres of illegal liquor, both *desi* and Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) are seized daily in dry Bihar since June 2023 to date. "Over 72,000 FIRs have been lodged and over 1.4 lakh persons have been arrested, while over 17,000 vehicles loaded with liquor have been seized so far in the State ever since prohibition was enforced," a senior police officer in Patna says.

The police have constituted 180 anti-liquor task force teams and 25 sniffer dog squads, deployed drones and speedboats, installed CCTV cameras and scanners at borders and checkpoints across Bihar. The liquor is mostly smuggled in from the States with which Bihar has a common border: Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh, but also from Chhattisgarh, Assam, Punjab, and Haryana. The whole of Bihar's northern boundary borders Nepal, and police say liquor is smuggled from here too.

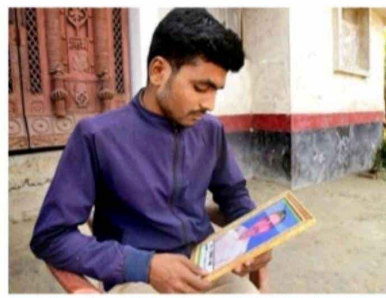
Some *chowkidars* like Neeraj Kishore, 22, of Dubauli village under Panapur police station in Saran district, have fared better. Kishore got a compensatory job and ₹8.25 lakh under Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) provisions. His father, Ram Kishore Manjhi, was knifed to death allegedly by the liquor mafia in April 2021.

"We are unarmed, and have only a bamboo stick to defend ourselves," he says.

Whether in court or in the village, people who have filed cases against alleged liquor traders are often threatened, says Anil Kumar Manjhi, 35, whose brother was killed in 2021. "Eight people have been named in the case but I am often pressured to 'compromise' on the case. Sometimes they name dire consequences. I'll not take the case back though," he asserts.

Senior police officers at the Patna headquarters did not wish to go on record for this story.

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Neeraj Kishore, who lost his father in Saran district in 2021; (right) Mamta Devi, who lost her husband in Siwan district the same year. SAROJ SHARMA



MONEYWISE



Testing times: Stronger U.S. dollar led to a cool-off in metal prices. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Gold, silver lack lustre

PRECIOUS METALS

B. Krishnakumar

Precious metals continued to move higher in February with Comex gold scaling past the psychological \$2,900 mark. Gold prices marched into uncharted territory driven by the economic uncertainty triggered by U.S. import tariff plans.

The price of Comex silver, however, did not share the same enthusiasm and is yet to cross its life-time highs.

Under dollar's shadow

However, the strengthening of the U.S. dollar led to a cool-off in precious metals prices in the past few days.

After touching a new life-time high of \$2,974 a few days ago, Comex gold cooled off recently and settled at \$2,848.5 an ounce by the end of February, representing a modest gain of 0.48%. Comex silver closed 2.38% lower at \$31.49 an ounce by the end of February.

Better local trends

The performance of precious metals in the domestic market was relatively better, helped by the sustained weakness in the value of Indian rupee.

MCX gold gained 2.42% to settle at ₹84,219 per 10-grams at the end of February. MCX silver closed 0.91% lower at ₹94,328 per kilogram.

Comex gold price turned a bit weak in the past few days and this weakness is likely to persist in the short-term. After this anticipated cool-off, the price is expected to resume its long-term uptrend.

New target

As highlighted in the recent updates, the next major target for Comex gold is \$3,050-\$3,100. The positive outlook for gold would be under threat only if the price closes below \$2,740-\$2,760 range.

Comex silver continues to be a relative under performer in comparison to gold.

The short-term outlook is not too positive for silver and the price could drop between \$29.8 and \$30.5. A move above \$33.6 would indicate the resumption of the long-term uptrend. Until this breakout happens, expect silver price to either remain range bound or drift to lower levels.

Mirroring the sentiment in the global markets, the MCX gold price, too, managed to hit record highs a few days ago. The price has however been consolidating in a range in the past three days. A breakout above ₹86,800 would impart momentum to the uptrend and help gold price reach the next target of ₹88,500-₹89,500 range. Until this breakout happens, expect domestic gold price to remain subdued. The immediate support cum target zone for MCX gold is ₹80,900-₹81,500.

MCX silver price too ruled firm in the first half of February and the price also hit the target zone of ₹1,00,500-₹1,05,500 mentioned last month. The short-term outlook for silver is negative and the price could drift lower to ₹89,500-₹90,500 zone. Expect weakness to persist unless the price moves above ₹97,500.

To summarise, the precious metal price is likely to remain subdued in the short-term. The long-term trend still remains positive.

(The author is a Chennai-based analyst/trader. The views and opinion featured in this column are based on the analysis of short-term price movements in gold and silver futures at COMEX & Multi Commodity Exchange of India. This is not meant to be a trading or investment advice.)

Send queries on personal finance and investing to the moneywise@thehindu.co.in. Our experts in personal finance will respond to queries, but will not give specific recommendations for investment in a particular mutual fund, share or fixed deposit.



Your household budget: aspects to take note of

Though households have been doing it for ages, certain aspects tend to get overlooked: periodic assessment of net worth, contingency planning and monitoring debt servicing ratio are vital

MAINTAINING VIGIL

Joydeep Sen

There is focus on and attention around the Union Budget.

While it is relevant, what impacts you more is your own budget. It is useful to have a discussion around your household budget – it may point to details you might be missing.

It starts with the heads of income. Receipts from various sources have to be listed and this becomes total income. On the expense side, there are some amounts that have to be compulsorily spent, called mandatory expenses. Loan equated monthly expenses (EMIs) and provident fund contributions are examples of such expenses.

Others are necessary for daily life. Finally comes the discretionary expenses – ones not essential to daily living and can be cut in case there is need for a control on total amount spent. Total expenses, when reduced from total income, gives the savings.

The income of a household or individual has to be adequate to meet current expenses as well as provide savings to create assets that will help meet future expenses. If the current expenses are controlled, then it contributes to securing the financial future of the household. Judicious financial management requires a defined level of savings should be targeted to meet future financial

If there is an area where the budget target is consistently missed, then the planning by the individual/household is off track and that needs to be quickly corrected

goals. A budget helps a household plan its income and expenses so that the income available is utilised in an optimum manner to meet current and future needs. Once incomes and expenses are identified, it will be easy to assess where the problem lies, if the savings are inadequate.

Focus should be on managing expenses to enhance savings.

Monitoring budget

Recording actual income and expenses shows the real situation and has a vital role to play in financial decision making. The actual figures compared with the budget plan will give an idea of how robust the budget planning was.

Monitoring of the budget has to be done continuously and after looking at the difference between budget and actual, action needs to be taken in the form of correcting the budget figures going ahead.

If there is an area where there is a constant missing of the budget target then the planning is off track and that needs to be corrected. For example, if there is a provision of ₹5,000 a month for con-

The amount of savings consistently achieved has to be seen in light of future financial goals. A target may be set for raising savings rate by a specified percentage

veyance and average conveyance expense comes to say ₹8,000 for consecutive months, then it is either the budget figure that has to be changed or the individual has to change the mode of conveyance to reduce cost.

The amount of savings consistently achieved has to be seen in light of future financial goals. For example, a family saving ₹20,000 a month may require savings of ₹40,000 per month to match future goals. A target of raising savings rate by a specified percentage might be set.

Personal balance sheet
Preparing a personal balance sheet and net-worth computation gives a perspective on where you stand. A balance sheet shows the financial position of the individual or household in the form of assets and liabilities on a particular date.

Assessment of the financial well-being of a household/individual can be made by calculating the net worth which is assets minus liabilities.

Higher the number, better is the financial position. Net worth should be calcu-

lated periodically.

Contingency planning is another important aspect. Contingencies could be sudden medical expenses or if something were to happen to the only earning member of the family. Separation (divorce) is another risk that families face. An emergency fund needs to be the first goal towards which a household or individual should save, as a protection against the possibility of loss or reduction of income. The fund should be adequate to meet the expenses for say six months, in the event the regular income is not available. Insurance is important but also important to note for protection, you need term insurance.

To conclude, savings ratio is the percentage of income an individual/household is able to save. If your income is ₹100 and you are saving ₹20, your savings ratio is 20%.

Obviously, the higher the better. There is a counter argument as well, that you need to enjoy your present and not just save for future. There is another relevant ratio here, that is debt servicing ratio.

If your net-of-tax income is ₹100 and you spend ₹40 in servicing EMIs, then debt-service ratio is 40%. You have to strike a balance between being prudent and managing a savings ratio of 20 to 40% or enjoying your present well and getting into a debt trap of EMIs later.

(Joydeep Sen is a corporate trainer on financial markets and an author.)

Creating 2 portfolios is crucial

THINKINVESTOR

It is optimal for an investor to create core as well as satellite portfolios, accumulating wealth for life goals while taking advantage of short term gains from fluctuations occurring in the market

Venkatesh Bangaruswamy

There are two aspects to investing – the objective to accumulate wealth to achieve life goals and to generate short-term gains riding the market fluctuations. The first objective is achieved by creating goal-based portfolios, also called core portfolios. The second can be achieved by creating a trading portfolio or the satellite portfolio. Here, we discuss why you should simultaneously consider creating both portfolios. We also discuss the optimal investment allocation to both portfolios.

Moderating biases

Suppose you invest only to achieve life goals. You observe the stock market shows high volatility, frequently moving up sharply only to dip later. Your extended family and friends generate handsome gains trading in the market. You are, however, contented 'investing for the long term'. After a while you are likely to regret not having traded like your extended family and friends to earn short-term gains.

Now, consider an alternative route. Here, you aggressively trade in the market, trying to capture short-term market fluctuations. You are bound to have share of losses. If your market timing is not consistently good, you could lose a significant part of your capital. In this world, you may regret not building wealth for the long term.

When you create only core portfolios, you are said to suffer from a behavioural bias called hypervolatility.

That is, you are concerned about the long-term wealth at the expense of short-term returns. When you create only a satellite portfolio, you are said to suffer from myopia; your concern is short-term returns at the expense of building long-term wealth. It is optimal to create both portfolios. That way, you can moderate hypervolatility and myopia. This is especially true when markets are volatile as is the case now.

Conclusion

Some individuals prefer to concentrate on the long term while others like to trade aggressively to capture short-term gains. So, the allocation preference for the two portfolios may vary across individuals. That said, an optimal split would be 70% core, 30% satellite, with a leeway of five percentage points. So, not more than 35% of your total investments in a year should be in satellite portfolio, with 30% being optimal. If you generate significant gains in satellite portfolio, you can move some of the gains to your core portfolios. It is, however, not optimal to move money from core to the satellite portfolio.

(The author offers training programmes for individuals to manage their personal investments)

Personal Loans

Rates and Charges		Loan amount ≤ 5 lakh Tenure 5 years	Loan amount > 5 lakh Tenure 5 years	(% of loan amount)
Name of Lender	Interest Rate (%)	EMI (Rs)	EMI (Rs)	Processing fee
HDFC Bank	10.85-24.00	10,834-14,384	2,167-2,877	Up to Rs 6,500
Tata Capital	11.99 onwards	11,120 onwards	2,224 onwards	Up to 4%
State Bank of India	11.45-14.85	10,984-11,856	2,197-2,731	Up to 1.50% (Max. Rs 15,000)
ICICI Bank	10.85-16.65	10,834-12,332	2,167-2,466	Up to 2%
Bank of Baroda	11.05-18.50	10,884-12,833	2,177-2,567	Up to 2% (Maximum Rs 10,000)
Axix Bank	11.10-22.00	10,896-13,809	2,179-2,762	Up to 2%
Kotak Mahindra Bank	10.99-16.99	10,869-12,424	2,174-2,485	Up to 5%
Bank of India	11.60-16.20	11,021-12,212	2,204-2,442	Up to 1% (Minimum Rs 250 and Maximum Rs 15,000)
Canara Bank	10.70-16.15	10,797-12,399	2,159-2,440	Up to 0.50% (Maximum Rs 2,500)
Punjab National Bank	11.15-17.70	10,909-12,615	2,182-2,523	Up to 1%
HSBC Bank	10.15-16.00	10,660-12,359	2,132-2,432	Up to 2%
Federal Bank	11.49 onwards	10,994 onwards	2,199 onwards	Up to 3%
Union Bank of India	11.10-15.20	10,896-11,948	2,179-2,390	Up to 1% (Maximum Rs 7,500)
Bajaj Finserv	10.00-11.00	10,624-16,485	2,125-2,297	Up to 3.93%
Punjab & Sind Bank	11.10-13.85	10,896-11,595	2,179-2,319	0.50%-1%
South Indian Bank	12.85-20.60	11,338-13,414	2,268-2,683	Up to 2%
UCO Bank	10.95-13.95	11,236-11,621	2,172-2,324	Up to 1% (Minimum Rs 750)
IDFC First Bank	10.99 onwards	10,869 onwards	2,174 onwards	2%
Bank of Maharashtra	9.75-14.55	10,562-11,777	2,112-2,355	1% (Max. Rs 10,000)
Karnataka Bank	13.72	11,562	2,312	Up to 2% (Min. Rs 2,500; Max. Rs 8,500)
IndusInd Bank	10.49 onwards	10,744 onwards	2,149 onwards	Up to 3.9%

Car Loans

Rates and Charges		Loan amount ≤ 5 lakh Tenure 5 years		(% of loan amount)
Name of Lender	Interest Rate (%)	EMI (Rs)		Processing fee
Union Bank of India	8.45-10.20	10,246-10,673		Up to Rs 1,000
Punjab National Bank	8.50-10.60	10,258-10,772		Up to 0.25% (Rs 1,000 - Rs 1,500)
Bank of Baroda	8.90-12.45	10,355-11,236		Up to Rs 750
State Bank of India	9.10-10.15	10,403-10,660		NIL
Bank of Maharashtra*	8.45-12.75	10,246-11,313		0.25% of loan amount (max. up to Rs 15,000)
Indian Overseas Bank**	8.40 - 12.00	10,234 - 11,122		0.50% (Rs 500 - Rs 5,000)
ICICI Bank	9.10 onwards	10,403 onwards		Up to 2%
HDFC Bank	9.20 onwards	10,428 onwards		Up to 1% (Rs 3,500 - Rs 9,000)
Karnataka Bank	9.17-11.65	10,420 - 11,034		Up to 0.60% (Rs 2500 - Rs 11,000)
Federal Bank	8.6 onwards	10,282 onwards		Rs 2,000 - Rs 4,500
Punjab and Sind Bank***	8.70-10.10	10,307-10,648		0.25% (Rs 1,000-15,000)
South Indian Bank	8.75 onwards	10,319 onwards		Rs 1,999
IDFC First Bank	9.99 onwards	10,623 onwards		Up to Rs 10,000
City Union Bank	14.45-14.95	11,751-11,882		1.25% (Min. Rs 750)

*0.25% interest rate concession for existing housing loan borrowers and corporate salary account holders.
**0.50% interest rate concession to borrowers with credit scores of 800 and above. Interest rate concession of 0.25% to borrowers having credit scores of 750-799.
***Conversion of up to 50% on processing fee for PSDA Awaaz Sahas.

*0.25% interest rate concession for existing housing loan borrowers and corporate salary account holders.
**0.50% interest rate concession to borrowers with credit scores of 850 and above. Interest rate concession of 0.25% to borrowers having credit scores of 750-799.
***Concession of up to 0.25% on processing fee for PNB Agra Urban Segments.
Rates and charges as on February 28

Source: Pnbascor.com

CACHE



GETTY IMAGES

Why have Cognizant and Infosys filed lawsuits against each other?

The case is a marker for the bitter rivalry between Indian IT majors often offering similar services and underlines the need for a rulebook for senior level executives transitioning between them. Previously, legal action was avoided out of respect, but now there is a need for clear guidelines

Poulomi Chatterjee

The story so far:

In August 2024, TriZetto, a Cognizant subsidiary and healthcare solutions provider, took Infosys to court, alleging that the IT major had stolen data from their proprietary software. Four months later, in January, Infosys denied allegations and filed a countersuit against Cognizant CEO Ravi Kumar S, former Infosys executive, for deliberately delaying the launch of its health platform, Helix. Infosys alleged that the U.S.-headquartered IT firm resorted to anticompetitive activities like poaching key personnel and imposing restrictive contractual barriers that stopped its clients from going to competitors and even declining training them on Infosys software. The Bengaluru-based IT giant claimed triple the damages it suffered, along with legal costs. The case spotlights a bitter rivalry between two major IT services providers that offer similar services, and underlines the need for a rulebook for senior-level executive transitions.

What is Cognizant's case against Infosys?

The lawsuit initially filed by Cognizant in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas, states that Infosys breached multiple Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) to illegally access their software applications - Facets and QNXT. The misappropriated data from these solutions was then allegedly leveraged by Infosys to build their own flagship healthcare software, Infosys Helix. Both these software solutions work on automating cumbersome administrative tasks for health insurance

companies, like processing claims, billing, and enrolling members. The complaint noted that Infosys had copied TriZetto's software, repackaging it while also developing software to extract confidential data from QNXT.

"When confronted, Infosys obfuscated to the maximum extent possible, asking TriZetto to simply trust, based on nothing, that there had been no wrongdoing. When TriZetto refused to take Infosys on its word and demanded an audit of Infosys' use of TriZetto's information, as explicitly permitted under the NDAs for any reason (much less rampant trade secret appropriation), Infosys refused to comply," Cognizant said. Executives frequently switching between IT majors are not uncommon, but tensions were building between Infosys and Cognizant for some time regarding this issue. For instance, there was the case of Rajesh Varrier, a former Infosys executive who served as EVP, Head of Global Services, and Infosys Americas. On September 2, 2024, Rajesh Varrier was appointed as the Global Head of Operations at Cognizant. Mr. Kumar, who held the positions of President and Deputy COO at Infosys, departed in October 2022 and assumed the top role at Cognizant, effective January 2023. This recent move has escalated the situation.

What has Infosys said?

Infosys' countersuit revealed its anger. It explained that Mr. Kumar had initially praised Infosys Helix during his time at Infosys, calling it a "challenger to traditional platforms." However, his enthusiasm for the product waned randomly early in 2022. Consequently, any support he had provided for the platform gradually diminished as he

stopped requesting the necessary resources. This ultimately delayed the project's completion by 18 months. Notably, the filing doesn't merely mention Mr. Kumar - there's also Shweta Arora, former SVP and Global Head of Domain Consulting Services at Infosys, who transitioned to Cognizant at the end of 2023, assuming the roles of SVP and Global Head of Consulting. Additionally, Ravi Kuchibhotla, a seasoned veteran from Infosys, now leads strategy at Cognizant.

"Kumar continued to ignore requests for additional engineering support for Infosys Helix in the spring of 2022, along with the assistance of Arora and Kuchibhotla, cancelling meetings to discuss the issue, even though the lack of staffing had resulted in a situation where the client is shaming us on the delays and concerns within Infosys that the client might cancel the contract due to these delays," the claim stated.

Cognizant's unscrupulous actions, as alleged in the lawsuit, have "artificially raised entry barriers," adversely impacting competition in the U.S. healthcare sector. This has resulted in increased costs for the general public, leading to higher health insurance premiums.

What's the history of non-compete litigation in the Indian IT sector?

Besides the complications surrounding the charges of data theft and unethical conduct, there's a recent precedent for non-compete cases involving Cognizant. Last year, Jatin Dalal, the former Chief Financial Officer of Nasdaq-listed IT firm Wipro, was sued by his former employer. Dalal, who had spent 21 years at Wipro, resigned in September 2023 and joined

Cognizant as their new CFO in a surprising announcement in December. The case was eventually settled, with Cognizant paying \$505,087 (approximately ₹4 crore) to resolve the dispute. Cognizant also confirmed that a similar settlement had been reached regarding a lawsuit between Wipro and former SVP Mohammad Haque.

Mr. Kumar has addressed questions related to Infosys' countersuit. While acknowledging that leadership changes are a natural part of attrition and restructuring, Mr. Kumar dismissed the gossip about instability at Cognizant.

Although similar cases in the U.S. tend to drag on, companies operating in the U.S. prefer to wage these battles there, considering the substantial damages parties are often awarded. "It pops up repeatedly in these lawsuits simply because its U.S.-based and a resolution is faster to achieve there as courts move faster," Pareekh Jain, CEO and lead analyst at EIRITrend explained.

Do transitions need a better process?

Over the last few years, there has been a noticeable increase in executives moving between major Indian IT companies, with competitors actively recruiting even non-executive employees. Previously, legal action was avoided out of respect, but now there is a need for clear guidelines on what is permissible. Establishing a cooling period, which was once common, is essential. Typically, CXOs had anti-compete clauses in their contracts lasting six-12 months, but these are often disregarded.

Some individuals even join other firms without formal agreements. This case could potentially establish a precedent for similar situations, Mr. Jain noted.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

He was crestfallen when he failed

Going through two rounds of interview, a mandatory assignment and a test is no picnic

S. Upendran

"Hi! Nice to see you again. When did you get back from Singapore?"
"A couple of days ago."
"So, how was the trip? Did the students enjoy it?"

"We all had a good time. Managed to see a few places and do some shopping. But I'm happy to be back."

"I'm sure, you are! Looking after 15 students couldn't have been a picnic."
"Picnic? What are you talking about? We didn't go on any picnic."

"I didn't say you and your students went on a picnic. I said looking after them couldn't have been a picnic. Meaning, taking care of them must have been hard work."

"You're right, it certainly wasn't a picnic. It required a great deal of effort. Kids today can be so demanding, and so very unpleasant at times."

"That's true! My great grandmother had a dozen kids. Bringing them up couldn't have been a picnic."

"I'm sure it wasn't. I thought of quitting my job and starting my own school. Talked to a few people about it, and they said that running a school was no picnic."

"I was in Bengaluru last week. Driving in that city is no picnic."

"I think most people would agree with you on that! The good thing about the place is that you won't get a challan for overspeeding."

"That's true! By the way, the word 'overspeeding' is an Indianism. Native speakers of English do not use the word. They merely say 'speeding' and not 'overspeeding'. In the U.S. and the U.K., when you're caught exceeding the speed limit, you're given a ticket for 'speeding' - and not 'overspeeding'."

"I see. The policeman gave Vinita a challan for speeding. How does that sound?"

"Good example. Speeding is a common problem on all our highways."

"It most certainly is. By the way, did your cousin's daughter get through the entrance test?"
"Surprisingly, she did not! Needless to say, she's crestfallen."

"Crestfallen? Does it mean disappointed?"
"Yes, that's one of the meanings of the word. 'Crestfallen' also suggests that you're disappointed or shocked with the outcome because it's totally unexpected."

"In other words, your cousin's daughter was expecting to get through the entrance test."

"That's right! She's never failed a test." "How about this example? When the children were told that the birthday party had been cancelled, they were crestfallen."

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THE DAILY QUIZ

Test yourself on various Indian languages

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

How many languages are recognised as per the Constitution of India under the Eighth Schedule and which language has a country's name in it?

QUESTION 2

What is common to Bodo, Dogri, Kashmiri, Maithili, Santali and Sindhi that are part of the recognised languages?

QUESTION 3

Apart from the four south Indian languages, which other two languages have the 'Classical' status?

QUESTION 4

Which language has the second-highest number of native speakers after Hindi?

QUESTION 5

In which language was Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas set to have been written?

QUESTION 6

Thanks to consonant-vowel combination forming a unique character, which Indian language has a whopping 247 characters in the traditional classification?

QUESTION 7

Why has Meghalaya's Kongthong village fascinated linguists?



Visual question:

Name this Englishman who deciphered the Brahmi script, considered the ancestor of most modern Indian scripts, in 1837 by studying Ashokan inscriptions?

Questions and Answers to the February 28 edition of the daily quiz:

1. This American scientist drafted the famous "Hiroshima Appeal". **Ans: Linus Pauling. He won the Nobel prizes for both Chemistry and Peace**

2. The theme of National Science Day this year. **Ans: Empowering Indian Youth for Global Leadership in Science and Innovation for Viksit Bharat**

3. This American TV show follows doctors and staff coping with war through humour and camaraderie. **Ans: M*A*S*H**

4. In 2013, Benedict XVI resigned as Pope, becoming the first to resign since this Pope in 1415. **Ans: Gregory XII**

5. This Prime Minister was assassinated in Stockholm in 1986. **Ans: Olof Palme**

Visual: Michael Jackson won these many Grammys at the 26th Grammy Awards for this album. **Ans: Eight awards; Thriller**
Early Birds: Tamal Biswas| Erfanally Oosmany| Sonali Das| Dodo Jayaditya| Sumana Dutta

Word of the day

Enconce:

fix firmly

Synonym: settle

Usage: He enconced himself in front of the computer.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/enconcepron

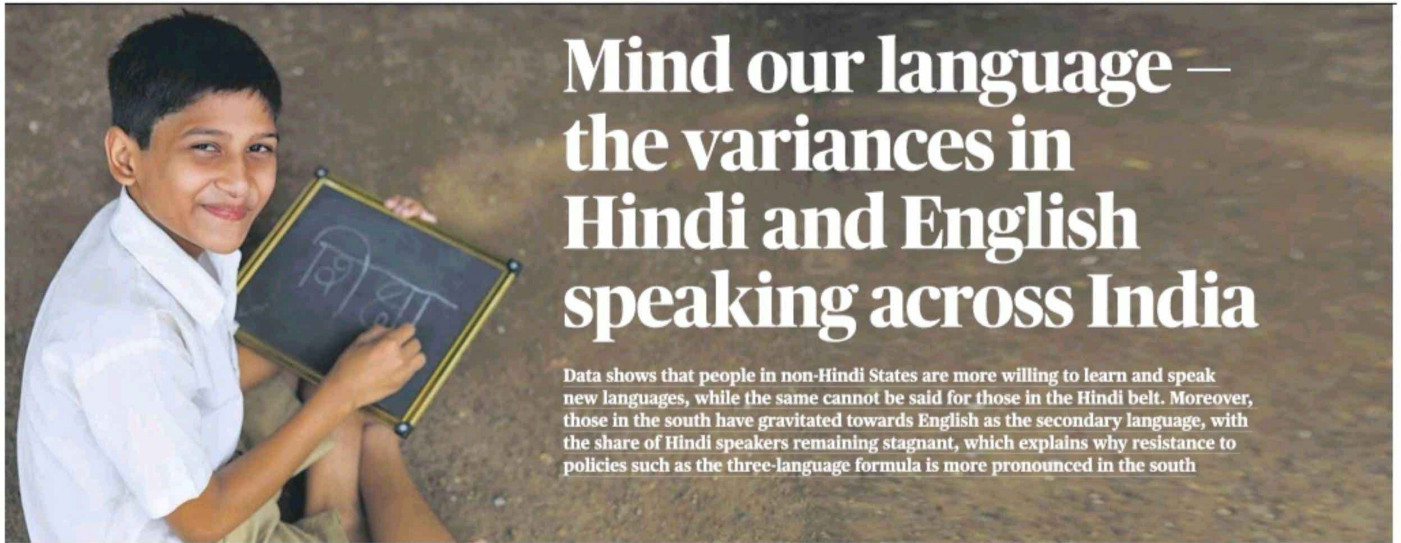
International Phonetic Alphabet: /en'skɒns/

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Mind our language — the variances in Hindi and English speaking across India

Data shows that people in non-Hindi States are more willing to learn and speak new languages, while the same cannot be said for those in the Hindi belt. Moreover, those in the south have gravitated towards English as the secondary language, with the share of Hindi speakers remaining stagnant, which explains why resistance to policies such as the three-language formula is more pronounced in the south

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The latest exchanges between Tamil Nadu and the Centre over Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) funds has reignited the long-standing language debate. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has reaffirmed the State's opposition to Hindi imposition and reiterated its commitment to the two-language policy. Meanwhile, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has dismissed these allegations. "Tamil is one of the oldest languages of our civilisation. But what is wrong if a student in Tamil Nadu will learn multilingual aspect in education? It can be Tamil, English and other Indian languages. There is no imposition of Hindi or any other language," he had said in February.

If we strip away the details, the core tension once again revolves around a question that has long gripped non-Hindi-belt States — especially those in the south — whether implementing the three-language formula indirectly imposes Hindi. An equally important question arises—regardless of whether the three-language formula amounts to an imposition—does data on development indices make a stronger case for English as the link language over Hindi?

Put differently, should native Hindi speakers be encouraged to learn English for broader access and mobility, or should non-Hindi speakers be asked to learn Hindi, for their supposed "benefit"?

Multilingualism among States

First, data indicates that non-Hindi speakers are generally more open to learning new languages, whereas Hindi speakers exhibit lower multilingualism. Chart 1 presents the share of monolinguals—individuals who speak only their native language (first language/mother tongue)—across select States. For instance, in 1991, 84.5% of native Tamil speakers in Tamil Nadu (those who speak Tamil as their first language in the state) were monolingual, a figure that dropped to 78% by 2011. Similarly, the share of native Odia speakers in Odisha who were monolingual declined from 86% to 74.5%. Similar trends can be observed among Marathi speakers in Maharashtra, Punjabi speakers in Punjab, Gujarati speakers in Gujarat, Telugu speakers in Andhra Pradesh, and other non-Hindi-speaking States, indicating a steady shift toward multilingualism.

In contrast, States where Hindi is the predominant first language already had a high share of monolinguals, and in many cases, this share increased over time. For instance, in 1991, 90.2% of Hindi speakers in undivided Bihar were monolingual. By 2011, in divided Bihar, this figure had risen to 95.2%. Similarly, in Rajasthan, the share of monolinguals among Hindi speakers increased from 93% in 1991 to 94.3% in 2011. A comparable trend can be observed among Hindi speakers in Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh as well.

Chart 2 presents the inverse of Chart 1, illustrating the share of native language speakers who are bi- or trilingual. Together, these charts reveal a clear pattern: non-Hindi speakers are generally more open to learning new languages, whereas native Hindi speakers show a lower tendency toward multilingualism.

In the south, a higher share of people opted for English as their additional language, with only a marginal increase in Hindi speakers. In contrast, in western and eastern States, the increase in English speakers was relatively modest

English as a choice

With this pattern established, Charts 3 and 4 examine the choice of second and third languages among multilinguals in each State. Chart 3 shows the share of English speakers among native language speakers in 1991 and 2011. For example, in Tamil Nadu, 13.5% of native Tamil speakers also spoke English in 1991, a figure that rose to 18.5% by 2011. In contrast, in Haryana, the share of native Hindi speakers who also spoke English declined from 17.5% to 14.6% over the same period.

A similar trend of declining or stagnating English proficiency can be observed across several Hindi-belt States, while non-Hindi-speaking States saw an increase in English speakers. Notably, the sharpest rise in English proficiency occurred in Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and Punjab, whereas the increase was more modest in States like Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Chart 4 shows the share of Hindi speakers among native language speakers in each State between 1991 and 2011. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, only 0.5% of native Tamil speakers also spoke Hindi in 1991, a figure that rose slightly to 1.3% in 2011. In Karnataka, the share of native Kannada speakers who also spoke Hindi remained stagnant at around 8.5% across both years.

In contrast, the share of native language speakers who also spoke Hindi saw a significant increase in Gujarat and Maharashtra. In Gujarat, the proportion of native Gujarati speakers who also spoke Hindi rose from 21.6% in 1991 to 39% in 2011. A similar trend was observed in Maharashtra, where the share of native Marathi speakers who also spoke Hindi grew from 35.7% to 43.5%.

Charts 3 and 4 establish another clear pattern: the choice of second and third languages varied significantly across non-Hindi-speaking States. In the southern States, a higher proportion of people opted for English as their additional language, with only a marginal increase in Hindi speakers. In contrast, in western and eastern States, the increase in English speakers was relatively modest, while the number of people acquiring Hindi grew significantly.

This divergence helps explain why resistance to Hindi is more pronounced in the southern States, while opposition remains more muted in other regions.

Hindi or English

This brings us back to the core utilitarian question: which language best equips citizens in their pursuit of better opportunities? A comparison of Human Development Index (HDI) scores across States and Union Territories reveals a clear trend—regions with a higher share of English speakers tend to have higher HDI scores (Chart 6), while States with a greater proportion of Hindi speakers generally exhibit lower HDI scores (Chart 5). This suggests a positive correlation between a higher standard of living and a greater prevalence of English proficiency.

Migration data further reinforces this pattern. Reports from the Economic Advisory Council to the PM and the Multiple Indicator Survey indicate that a significant number of people from Hindi-speaking States are moving to non-Hindi-speaking regions in search of better economic opportunities. This trend suggests that States with higher English proficiency and better development indicators are attracting more migrants — another factor which bats for English to be the link language and not Hindi.

CHART 1: The chart presents the share of monolinguals—individuals who speak only their native language (first language/mother tongue)—across select States. ● 1991 ● 2011

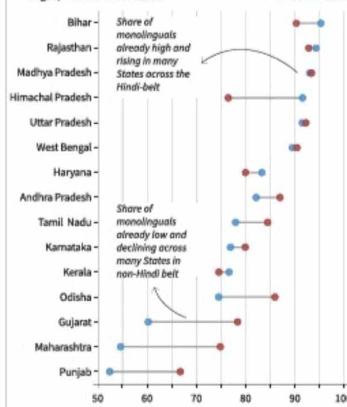


CHART 2: The chart presents the share of bi/trilinguals—individuals who speak at least one language other than their native language (first language/mother tongue)—across select States. ● 1991 ● 2011

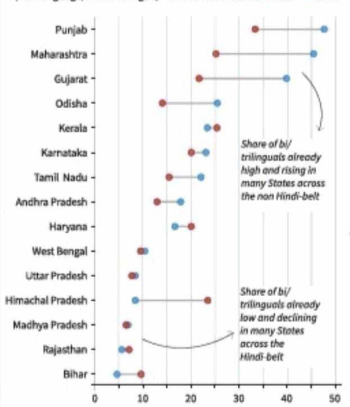


CHART 3: The chart shows the share of English speakers among native language speakers. ● 1991 ● 2011

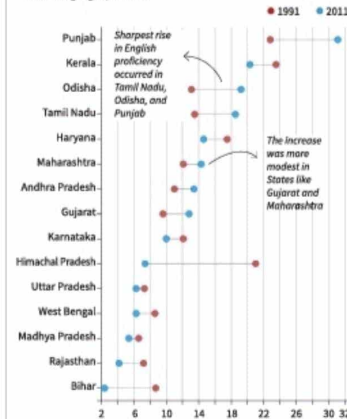
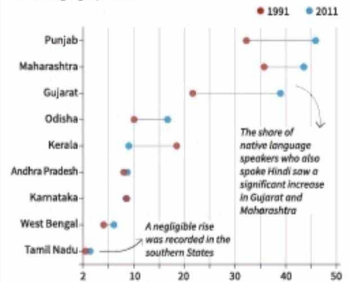


CHART 4: The chart shows the share of Hindi speakers among native language speakers. ● 1991 ● 2011



Note: In Charts 1, 2, 3, and 4, only speakers of the majority native language in each State were considered for analysis, excluding those who spoke other languages. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, the analysis focused solely on individuals who identified Tamil as their first language. These speakers accounted for 86.7% of the State's population in 1991 and 88.4% in 2011.

Source: Language census and the Global Data Lab

CHART 5: The chart plots the share of Hindi speakers in 2011 against the HDI scores in 2022. The bigger the dot, the higher the population in the State

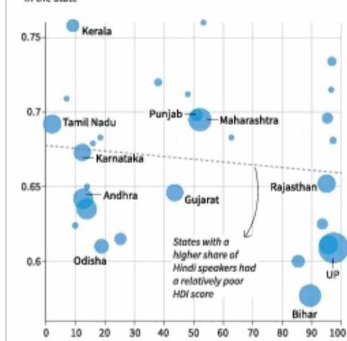
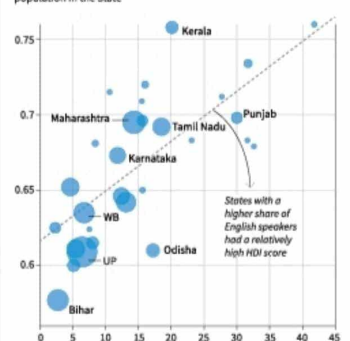


CHART 6: The chart plots the share of English speakers in 2011 against the HDI scores in 2022. The bigger the dot, the higher the population in the State



Centring care in India's economic policy

The Union Budget for 2025 allocated a record ₹4,49,028.68 crore to the Gender Budget (GB), marking a 37.3% increase from FY24 and accounting for 8.86% of the total Budget. This rise is primarily due to the inclusion of the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, which accounts for 24% of the GB, rather than being driven by substantial investments in care infrastructure or new gender-responsive schemes. Despite this increase, critical investments in care infrastructure remain absent, reinforcing the persistent invisibilisation of care work in India's economic planning. While the Economic Surveys of 2023-24 and 2024-25 highlight care infrastructure as central to women's empowerment, the current Budget misses the opportunity to make tangible investments to strengthen India's care economy in line with its socio-economic realities.

Globally, women spend an average of 17.8% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW), with women in the Global South bearing higher burdens. India is especially concerning, as Indian women shoulder 40% more of this burden than their counterparts in South Africa and China. The International Labour Organization reports that 53% of Indian women remain outside the labour force due to care responsibilities, compared to just 1.1% of men, underscoring entrenched inequalities. For poor and marginalised women, this burden is severe as women in low-income families often juggle 17-19 hours of daily tasks, balancing paid work with domestic duties, intensifying 'time poverty', and eroding their well-being.

Feminist economists from the Global South emphasise that unpaid work in these regions encompasses a broader range of tasks compared to the Global North, extending beyond household care giving to include



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Globally, women spend an average of 17.8% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, with women in the Global South bearing higher burdens

work on family farms, water and fuel collection, cleaning, and cooking. Limited access to essential infrastructure – such as water, clean energy, and sanitation – means women spend up to 73% of their time on these unpaid activities. For example, women spend nearly five hours daily collecting water, compared to 1.5 hours for men. Climate change exacerbates this burden, with water-related unpaid labour in India projected to reach \$1.4 billion by 2050 under a high-emissions scenario. This stems from low public investment in care infrastructure and entrenched social norms that assign care work to women.

Solutions ahead

The Economic Survey 2023-24 highlights that direct public investment equivalent to 2% of GDP could generate 11 million jobs while easing the care burden. Applying the expanded 'Three R framework' – Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, and Represent – can ensure policies are both contextually relevant and transformative. The first step is recognising the full spectrum of UCDW women perform. India's 2019 Time Use Survey marked a milestone in acknowledging this issue, revealing that women spend an average of seven hours daily on UCDW. Despite the policy benefits that these surveys carry, their costs can make implementation challenging. One solution is to integrate Time-use modules into existing household surveys.

The second step is reducing the UCDW burden through time-saving technologies and expanded access to affordable care infrastructure. The Centre has acknowledged gaps in access to essential services by extending the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) until 2028, aiming for 100% potable water coverage. However, funding delays and underutilisation hinder implementation. While the scheme's Budget declined by 4.5% from last year's Budget Estimates (BE), it saw a 195% jump

over Revised Estimates (RE), highlighting allocation-spending gaps. With less than half of villages having functional household tap connections, JJM requires stronger implementation and water sustainability measures.

Expanding childcare centres, eldercare support, and assistive technologies would ease women's care burden, and boost their workforce participation.

The third key step is redistributing care work – from the home to the State and within households. The newly announced ₹1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund, with ₹10,000 crore allocated for FY 2025-26, can be transformative. This will finance up to 25% of bankable projects, encouraging private and public sector participation in urban redevelopment, water, and sanitation initiatives. By leveraging this fund, India can scale up pilot care infrastructure models already under way through the Smart Cities Mission. Taking inspiration from Bogota's Care Blocks, which centralise care giving services to reduce women's unpaid work, this approach aligns with the fund's broader goal of sustainable urban development.

Finally, women's representation in decision-making and implementation is crucial for creating gender-transformative policies. Excluding women from this leaves them vulnerable to policies that fail to address their lived realities. In fact, involving women in decision-making processes enhances their effectiveness significantly, sometimes by six to seven times.

With the Centre's emphasis on Nari Shakti as a driver of economic growth, India has the opportunity to set a global example for a gender and care-sensitive economy. However, the current Budget falls short by not prioritising care as a central pillar. A more deliberate, well-funded strategy is necessary to ensure that care work is not treated as an afterthought but as a core component of inclusive growth.

A battle between fishing and mining

Kerala fishers protest offshore mining, fearing it will destroy marine ecosystems

STATE OF PLAY

Navamy Sudhish
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The coastal communities in Kerala are currently caught in a wave of unrest following the Centre's plans for offshore mining, which they believe will ravage the fragile marine ecosystem and bring an end to their traditional way of life. Strong opposition erupted when proceedings to auction offshore mineral blocks began after an amendment to the Offshore Areas Mineral (Development and Regulation) Act, 2002. As the Ministry of Mines issued a notice inviting tenders, fishers launched protests and demonstrations, and the Kerala Fisheries Coordination Committee was formed to resist the move. The coastal hartal on February 27 immobilised the sector for 24 hours, and fishers are now gearing up for a Parliament march on March 12.

The 2023 amendment to the Offshore Areas Mineral (Development and Regulation) Bill introduced reforms allowing private sector participation in offshore mining. This includes granting production leases and composite licences through competitive auctions.

Surveys conducted by the Geological Survey of India revealed 1,53,996 million tonnes of lime mud within the Exclusive Economic Zone off the Gujarat and Maharashtra coasts, 745 million tonnes of construction-grade sand off Kerala coast, 79 million tonnes of heavy mineral placers in the inner-shelf and mid-shelf off Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, as well as polymetallic ferromanganese (Fe-Mn)



nodules and crusts in the Andaman Sea and Lakshadweep Sea. Substantial reserves of construction-grade sand were found in Kerala at water depths between 22 and 45 meters, specifically in the offshore areas of Ponnani, Chavakkad, Kochi, Alappuzha, and Kollam.

At present, bids have been invited for 13 offshore areas under Tranche 1, including three blocks of lime mud off the Gujarat coast, three blocks of construction sand off the Kerala coast, and seven blocks of polymetallic nodules and crusts off the coast of Great Nicobar Island. The three blocks selected for mining off the Kerala coast are located in 'Kollam Parappur' also known as Quilon Bank, one of the richest fishing zones in the southwest coast. The fishing hub is frequented by mechanised vessels, mesh gill net boats, and fishers using hook and line from both Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Kollam Parappur is also a crucial habitat teeming with commercially valuable marine species.

Fishers believe that mining operations in the area will destroy marine habitats, deplete fish stocks, and render their most-productive fishing grounds irredeemable. They also worry that mining will increase existing fishing pressure and escalate conflicts between traditional fishers and the mechanised sector. If offshore mining destroys major

fishing grounds, such as Kollam Parappur, it will force vessels, including those from other States, to operate in coastal waters, leading to frictions and clashes.

The proposed mining site off the Kollam coast is also a biodiversity hotspot with high species richness, and essential for supporting marine life forms.

An ongoing study by the University of Kerala's Department of Aquatic Biology & Fisheries warns that mining operations can cause catastrophic damage to ecosystems, harming the livelihood of fishers. It observes that the exceptional diversity of solitary and soft corals in the Kollam region will be threatened by sand mining, as the extraction process will cause sediment plumes, increasing turbidity and impacting the composition of the water column. This means declining water quality, disruption of food webs, and deterioration of spawning grounds. Apart from this, there is the need to evaluate the economic costs associated with using freshwater to wash extracted sand.

While discussions continue about the absence of proper environmental impact studies and the consequences of offshore mining, the full extent of its potential impact is still unknown. As marine ecosystems lack defined boundaries, there is an inherent uncertainty surrounding the aftermath of extraction. The breakdown of ecosystems and habitats can take an all-new dimension by crossing expansive territories, resulting in unforeseen outcomes. A dip in production or the steady depletion of marine resources may also trigger a chain reaction, jeopardising everything from food security and the survival of coastal communities.

Women in South India, Delhi, Punjab have higher levels of obesity

High consumption of fried foods and aerated drinks is linked to rising obesity rates

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis
Kushal Varma J.V.

About a fourth of men and women in India were either 'overweight' or 'obese' in 2019-21, an increase of 4 percentage points from 2015-16, underscoring the rising health risk posed by obesity in the country. While the problem is prominent among women in most South Indian States, as well as in Delhi and Punjab, the rate of increase in obesity among men was faster. Moreover, less than a fifth of men and women in 2019-21 could be categorised as 'thin', a significant decline from the figures in 2015-16, according to data from the National Family Health Survey.

Last week, in his monthly radio address Mann Ki Baat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi cautioned against the rising obesity rates in India, particularly among children. He also advised people to reduce the intake of oil by 10% each month to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Increase in BMI

The average body mass index (BMI), which measures body fat relative to a person's weight and height, is considered as a metric of obesity.

While the average BMI for Indian males increased by 0.6 points from 21.8 in 2015-16 to 22.4 in 2019-21, the corresponding rise in BMI for women was 0.5 points from 21.9 to 22.4 in the same period.

Chart 1 shows the gender-wise change in overweight and obesity levels in India based on BMI figures. Any person with a BMI between 25.0 and 29.9 would be considered 'overweight' and an index above 30 would be considered 'obese'.

In 2015-16, 15.5% of women in India were overweight, and in 2019-21 these figures had risen to 17.6%. The rise in the share of men

categorised as overweight was higher than women in the same period. Between 2015-16 and 2019-21, the share of overweight men increased by three points from 15.9% to 18.9%. The share of obese women increased from 5.1% in 2015-16 to 6.4% in 2019-21, but the corresponding increase in obese men was by one point from 3% to 4%, during the same period.

Chart 2 shows the gender-wise change in mildly and moderately thin levels in India based on BMI figures. While a BMI between 17.0 and 18.4 is categorised as 'mildly thin', all figures under 17.0 are considered 'moderately/severely thin'. The share of mildly thin women reduced from 13.3% in 2015-16 to 11% in 2019-21 and among men the reduction was from 12.2% to 9.6% in the same period. The share of moderately/severely thin women decreased from 9.6% to 7.7% between 2015-16 and 2019-21. The same figures for men declined to 6.6% from 8% in the same period.

Chart 3 shows the State-wise change in obesity and overweight levels among women. While the largest increase in these levels was seen in Delhi and Punjab, obesity among women from many southern States – including Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana – were among the highest in the country.

Chart 4 shows the State-wise change in obesity and overweight levels among men. Again, Delhi features at the top of the list with the most obese and overweight men in the country. But so do men from the Southern States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka.

This rise in obesity corresponds with the continuing consumption of fried foods and aerated drinks among men and women. Over 40% of men and women recorded munching on fried foods in 2019-21. About 16% of women and 25% of men consumed aerated drinks during the same period.

Kushal Varma J.V. is Interning with The Hindu Data Team

Packing on the kilos

The data for the charts were sourced from the National Family Health Survey Reports (NFHS-4 and NFHS-5)

Chart 1: The chart shows the gender-wise change in overweight and obesity levels in India (in %)

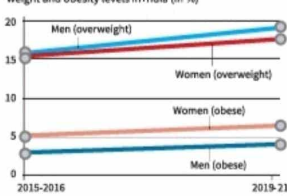


Chart 3: State-wise change in share of overweight/obese women between NFHS-4 (2015-16) and NFHS-5 (2019-21) (in %)

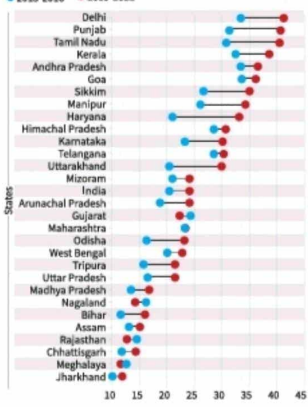


Chart 2: The chart shows the gender-wise change in mildly and moderately thin levels in India (in %)

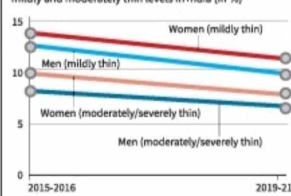
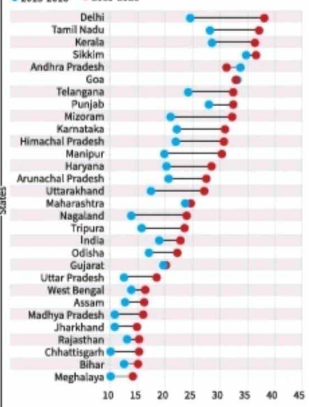


Chart 4: State-wise change in share of overweight/obese men between NFHS-4 (2015-16) and NFHS-5 (2019-21) (in %)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 3, 1975

WHO boost for Indian medicine

New Delhi, March 2: Traditional systems of medicine are likely to get a boost if a proposal now before the World Health Organisation goes through.

The reported success of the Chinese health care programme has made the WHO evince interest in traditional systems of medicine in various countries, and a group of experts has been busy during the past few months collecting information about Ayurveda and other systems.

This group is said to have come to the conclusion that these systems can be assigned a useful role in national health services. The findings are expected to come up before the WHO General Assembly session in May, and if the recommendations are accepted by member countries, WHO assistance will be forthcoming for schemes to utilise Indian systems of medicine in the rural health care programme.

The WHO group has been on a study tour in India to have an idea of the role played by the Vaidas and Hakims and the people's response. The group visited villages and small towns in Uttar Pradesh and had discussions with medical experts there. The experts have been convinced that practitioners of the Indian systems of medicine are playing a vital role in catering to the health needs not only in rural areas but also in towns, and the answer to the problem of rural medical care lies in deploying Vaidas and Hakims.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 3, 1925

Earthquake in America.

New York, March 2: One man was killed and two women seriously injured through being shaken off the platform of an elevated railway at New York during the earthquake shock yesterday evening. The tremor was felt but seen half a minute and two minutes over a wide area in Canada and the United States. It was the most intense shock registered in New York State since 1755. Many big subway buildings were shaken, but no damage has been reported anywhere.

New Hampshire villagers proceeded to the Church fearing that the end of the world had come.

The Ottawa Seismograph reports indicate that the epicentre of the disturbance was 400 miles East of Ottawa in the vicinity of Saguanay River, Quebec.



Toon trouble

The power to block content must be used sparingly

The order of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, directing the removal of a cartoon featuring the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, from a Tamil magazine's website, is unwarranted and may not fall under any of the permissible grounds for such removal. Vikatan Plus, an online-only magazine published by the Vikatan group, has decided to take legal steps to challenge the order. It had earlier defended the content at a hearing before an inter-departmental committee constituted under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. The Ministry's move against the cartoon goes against both freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The cartoon is a piece of trenchant political commentary, as depicted Mr. Modi shackled in chains in the presence of United States President Donald Trump. This is an apparent reference to criticism voiced in some quarters that Mr. Modi failed to protest against the ill-treatment of Indian illegal immigrants deported from the U.S. The Prime Minister's approach to a foreign policy issue cannot be immune to symbolic denunciation through a cartoon. It is even more concerning that the Vikatan website itself has been rendered inaccessible to some users, apparently based on undisclosed orders or informal instructions to web service providers.

While a formal order to take down content is provided for in law, it will be wholly untenable if the website was sought to be blocked without recourse to established procedure. The claim that the website has been inaccessible to some since February 15 has not been denied so far. Section 69A of the Information Technology Act empowers the government to block content on specified grounds, including in the interest of "friendly relations with foreign States or public order or for preventing incitement to the commission of a cognisable offence", but it is not known which of these grounds has been invoked, as the order is confidential. How an order passed in the exercise of a statutory power can be deemed a secret is inexplicable. Even in times like the present when taking offence is a national pastime as well as a reason for several Chief Ministers to unleash the police on their detractors, cartoons ought to enjoy greater immunity than the written word. In this case, it is doubtful if political criticism through a cartoon can be deemed to affect friendly ties with the U.S. or undermine public order. The Centre would do well to reverse the blocking order soon. The power to block content ought to be used sparingly, mainly to combat offensive content such as hate speech, incitement to violence and child pornography, but not in deference to a political demand and without regard to freedom of expression.

Long roots

Entrenched patriarchal biases must be erased from society, government

Institutions are serious about rooting out sexism, they must walk the talk. Instead of merely celebrating the entry of more women in the workforce, they have to provide an enabling atmosphere for those on the rolls. In a judgment last week, the Supreme Court of India showed its intent by declaring that with more and more women joining judicial service, it was time for the judiciary to be more cognisant of their well-being at the workplace. Reinstating two women judicial officers of Madhya Pradesh who had been sacked for "inefficiency", despite the fact that one of them had suffered a miscarriage, Justice B.V. Nagarathna said it was not enough to "find comfort solely in the growing number of female judicial officers if we are unable to secure for them a sensitive work environment." The judgment set aside the ouster of two civil judges, Sarita Choudhary and Aditi Kumar Sharma, terminating the termination orders "punitive, arbitrary and illegal." That Justice Nagarathna, one of two women judges in the Court, which has a sanctioned strength of 34, had to step in, is an indication of the long and difficult fight for gender equality, and the need for change in mindsets and reform. In several past verdicts too, the Court had drawn attention to gender stereotyping and discrimination against women.

In her judgment, Justice Nagarathna underscored the importance of having more women in the judiciary, and this holds true of other branches of the government such as the legislature and the executive. Greater representation of women will ensure better understanding of their needs and lead to better policies. The freedom from discrimination or equal protection of the laws during pregnancy and maternity are precious rights for the women workforce, she noted. Just as motherhood brings joy, a miscarriage has a deep psychological, physical and mental impact on women, and the onus is on policymakers to be aware of this and act accordingly. While gender cannot be an excuse for poor performance, it is incredible that the Court had to intervene to call out a wrong on a basic issue such as maternal rights. In doing so, the Court has also, yet again, reminded not only those in power but also the larger society, that age-old, entrenched patriarchal systems have no place in a country aspiring to emerge as a developed economy. If women are not provided a larger role in decision-making, their concerns will remain invisible to policy. To achieve that goal, education has to be accessible to girls in a non-discriminatory manner. At work, they must be assured of a safe and healthy environment as a basic right and guarantee.

In the rhetoric of partisan politics surrounding the three language formula, unsurprisingly, the most important stakeholder has been forgotten: the student.

First, it is the child who goes to a public (government) school, and no one else, who should be at the very centre of this debate. Students in public schools form about 55% of the school enrolment in Tamil Nadu. Children in private schools (largely from the upper class) increasingly rely on supplemental learning beyond school hours, i.e., coaching or tuition classes, which a public school student cannot afford. The critical question is this: is learning three (instead of two) languages essential to enable a child from a public school to compete with other more privileged candidates in the job market and become a productive, value-adding citizen?

Second, while the National Education Policy (NEP) is path-breaking on many accounts, there are a few provisions that ignore the ground realities of public education in India, especially at the primary and secondary levels. The three language formula is one such issue.

A problematic hypothesis

The NEP declares that the compulsory learning of three languages is intended to improve the cognitive ability of students, enable mobility for employment and promote national integration. This very hypothesis is a problematic one.

Language is a necessary tool for acquiring knowledge and for communication. However, with the breathtaking progress in technology, particularly Artificial Intelligence, language proficiency itself will gradually lose its significance as a tool for knowledge acquisition. You could post your query in any language, in say Google Gemini (even children in a public school will hopefully soon have access either through a smart classroom or a smartphone), and get an answer instantly.

In the years ahead, this access will only get cheaper and better. There is of course indisputable evidence linking language skills with cognitive abilities, but none which establishes that proficiency in more languages will proportionately improve cognitive abilities. In fact, research suggests quite the contrary — that a strong foundation in a child's mother tongue is essential before introducing additional language(s).

A third language will certainly enable better communication with the community that speaks that language. But that is a choice that most adults make as a part of the profession they choose. Tamil 'thambis' quickly learn Hindi when



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There is no academic merit in thrusting a third language on students; there could be a risk of raising a generation that is handicapped to compete nationally

they join the Indian Army and thrive famously. Tamilian salesmen speak flawless Marathi when they sell their wares in Maharashtra.

Third, the state of primary education is pathetic, nationally and in Tamil Nadu, as highlighted in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Survey 2024. Despite some good initiatives in recent times, 88% of class three students in Tamil Nadu still lack basic literacy proficiency.

The challenge is even greater with the second language, English. Many top-scoring students, even from English-medium public schools, struggle to adapt when transitioning to English-medium instruction in college, particularly in professional courses, because in the school, they are taught in Tamil, not in English.

Focus on teaching and learning

The response to the shocking state of quality in primary (and carried forward to secondary and higher secondary) education is to massively improve teaching quality and learning outcomes, and not to add one more language. There is a finite time available at school to 'cover' all subjects. With acquisition of knowledge getting easier and quicker through technology, education should increasingly focus on developing attributes such as curiosity, critical thinking and creativity, which are critical to success in the 21st century. There is a need to provide more time and space in the curriculum for inculcating these traits, rather than thrusting a third language. Within this finite time, it is important to enable deeper learning than wider learning.

Fourth, it is not clear how public schools would be able to find adequate and competent teachers for a third language, even assuming that every parent chooses Hindi and not a variety of other languages. There is every reason to fear the quality of teachers leading to inferior learning. Despite Tamil Nadu having one of the highest per-child education budgets in the country, 80%-90% of the budget is spent on teacher salaries, while infrastructure suffers. The cost of having third language teachers could eat into the funds available for infrastructure.

Language is a great anchor of cultural values. National unity is indeed a foundational value, and the Constitution provides for the propagation of Hindi. While a common language is desirable, it would be the tail end of cultural initiatives to promote unity. A spirit of respect for other cultures and a shared sense of history should be an integral part of learning. A third language is neither the only nor a superior way to inculcate these values.

That said, education should lead to a choice of

gainful employment opportunities. So long as opportunities for public school students are available within the State, either from government, private enterprise or self employment (the case thus far), the need for a third language may not be critical. However, the system outcomes must facilitate wider choices for students from Tamil Nadu to compete for the best educational and employment opportunities, nationally and even globally.

So long as English continues to be an official language in examinations for central services, the defence services and the judiciary, students from Tamil Nadu should be able to compete at a national level, as they have done successfully for several decades. Better teaching/learning of English would improve their competitiveness in the world, which is increasingly looking for English-literate service providers.

The politics and the student

So, what is the way forward? There are two dimensions to this problem: politico-cultural and child development.

The right or wrong of the ruling party's politics on the issue is not the subject of this article. But it is important to acknowledge, from a child development perspective, that it is a two-front political battle, i.e., one, stopping Hindi 'imposition' on the State; and two, fighting to retain the robust status of English nationally. The second is a more challenging task.

The State's politics may not harm the future of students, as long as English continues as an official language at the Centre with equal force and usage.

However, if, nationally the landscape is likely to change with Hindi progressively replacing English (in spirit even if not in letter because of constitutional safeguards), the State's politics should factor this reality and seriously consider insulating the child's development from the crossfire of political battles.

Here is a possible approach that has the interests of the child in mind.

Since there is no academic merit in thrusting a third language on the child, particularly at the primary level, Hindi could be offered, as an option as a third language from middle public school. This could be started in schools in the district headquarters and progressively expanded to other schools, depending on demand, which, in turn, will depend on the momentum of Hindi replacing English at the national level.

A rigid political position could result in a generation of students that is handicapped to compete nationally. This issue should be a debate and a discussion, and not a war that destroys the future of the young.

Multiple bullies at work, out to create a 'multipolar world'

Why has U.S. President Donald Trump thrown a public tantrum and refused to deal with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy? It is time to remember what is at stake for Ukraine. Who better to tell it like it is than John Mearsheimer, Realist advocate of a multipolar world order, who has consistently accused the U.S.-led West of provoking Russia to war.

Exactly a week after Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Mearsheimer explained in a media interview that any peace deal with Mr. Putin would require Ukraine to give up not just some territory or hopes of North Atlantic Treaty Organization membership. It would be nothing short of its democracy. He told an interviewer that Mr. Putin "wants to install in Kyiv a pro-Russian government, a government that is attuned to Moscow's interests..." Ukraine that was a liberal democracy, he said, was "from a Russian perspective...an existential threat."

But would it not be imperialism, asked the interviewer, to tell Ukrainians that they cannot be a liberal democracy? Mearsheimer replied, "It's not imperialism; this is great-power politics. When you're a country like Ukraine and you live next door to a great power like Russia, you have to pay careful attention to what the Russians think, because if you take a stick and you poke them in the eye, they're going to retaliate."

'Democracy is not realistic'

Democracy simply is not realistic in a multipolar world, said Mearsheimer. "In an ideal world, it would be wonderful if the Ukrainians were free to choose their own political system and to choose their own foreign policy. But in the real world, that is not feasible."

Today, Mr. Trump is eager to give Mr. Putin the regime change he wants. He calls Mr. Zelenskyy a "dictator" with a "4% approval rating," and has suggested more than once that peace is possible only if Mr. Zelenskyy steps down.

What kind of Ukraine do Mr. Putin and Mr. Trump want? Look at the other nations that "live next door to a great power like Russia," and the answer is clear. Democratic protests in Belarus



Kavita Krishnan
is an activist and writer

A growing illiberal international project is posing the biggest threat to democracy, people and peace in the world

and Kazakhstan have been brutally suppressed with the help of the Russian military. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko declares, "It's better to have a dictatorship like in Belarus than a democracy like Ukraine." The Ukrainians obviously disagree.

It should be remembered that far from instigating Mr. Zelenskyy to stay and fight, former U.S. President Joe Biden had done all he could to force him to flee, hoping that it would appease Mr. Putin and avert a prolonged war.

In January 2022, Mr. Biden had declared that NATO would be divided in case of a "minor incursion", and Zelenskyy had to "remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations".

Mr. Biden had evacuated the U.S. embassy from Kyiv and said, days before the Russian invasion, that "it may be the wise choice for President Zelenskyy to leave Ukraine". After the invasion, Mr. Zelenskyy had to again tell the U.S. that he was looking for ammunition, and not a ride.

The wider border of this project

Ukraine is not the only country where Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin want a regime in their own image. U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance and Mr. Trump's oligarch aide Elon Musk urged Germans to vote for the far-right anti-immigrant AfD. Mr. Vance told the European Union (EU) in Munich that Mr. Trump wanted to liberate European people from their "internal threat" — immigrants and the liberal democratic leadership that let them into Europe.

For the past decade, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has declared making his country an "illiberal democracy" as his goal, and to turn the EU into an illiberal project. Since then, Mr. Putin has put his weight behind that project in every way. And Mr. Vance made it clear that Mr. Trump, "the new sheriff in town", wants the same: an EU aligned with Christian values, not universal human rights and democratic standards; an EU where member-nations will face no censure for passing Putin-style laws banning "gay propaganda".

Mr. Orbán has the distinction of refusing to

honour the International Criminal Court's warrants issued against Mr. Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu voted for Mr. Putin in the United Nations. Mr. Trump treats Gaza and Ukraine as pieces of real estate at the mercy of the genocidal bully next door. Mr. Trump has branded ethnic cleansing in Gaza with his name, turning it into an obscene AI-generated Nero's Feast. He turned peace talks in the Oval Office into reality TV where the most powerful man in the world and his henchmen and media bully an elected leader of an invaded and occupied nation.

The national bullies are acting in concert to create a "multipolar world" — a world safe for all bullies and bigots. It is high time we stopped imagining that multiple bullies make the playground safer, and that "multipolar" non-western tyrants are the lesser evil "regardless of the internal character" of the regimes involved.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has declared support for a multipolar world. Mr. Putin has always insisted that there are "two Wests", and that his quarrel is with the West of universal democratic principles and rules; an illiberal U.S., United Kingdom and EU are welcome to the multipolar world.

It is better late than never

It is the growing assertion of an illiberal international project (led by Mr. Trump, Mr. Putin, Mr. Netanyahu, and China's Xi Jinping, and including Narendra Modi, Mr. Orban and European fascists) that poses the greatest threat to democracy, people, peace, and the planet today. To insist that the rise of this new illiberal international is just the West versus the Rest "business as usual" is moral bankruptcy and suicidal folly — exactly as it is to quibble over the semantics of Mr. Modi's project of an illiberal Hindu-Uganda India.

It is better late than never to take on the illiberal international and defend universal human rights, democratic solidarity. A good start would be for Indians defending democracy to show solidarity with Ukraine defending itself from the Putin-Trump tyranny.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

At the White House

The manner in which U.S. President Donald Trump and U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance treated the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, at the White House meet is definitely a pointer to the fascist attitude and the arrogance of right-wing arm-twisters.

But Mr. Zelenskyy left like the proverbial David. Whether he is going to win the war or not for his people needs to be seen, but he has definitely won many a heart.

Tharicus S. Fernando,
Chennai

Mr. Trump's remarks

seemed to ignore the reality that Russia is the aggressor in this war. The consequences will extend beyond Kyiv. A Russian victory would embolden authoritarian regimes worldwide. In the end, this is not just about Ukraine. It is about the credibility of the democratic world in the

face of grave aggression.
S.S. Paul,
Chakdaha, Nadia, West Bengal

It was fatuous of Mr. Trump to have expected Mr. Zelenskyy to sign on the dotted line without offering any security guarantee. His arrogance was exposed by the use of the phrase of a

'third world war'. To arrange such a sensitive meeting in full media glare was the height of diplomatic stupidity.
S.V. Venkatakrishnan,
Bangalore

The absurd and acrimonious Trump-Vance-Zelenskyy

interaction is a new low in diplomacy. But the response, somewhat muted, by Europe, except Hungary, is positive. Who will be the (Trump) cat?
Ayyaseri Ravendranath,
Aranmula, Kerala

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

Euclid space telescope discovers new 'Einstein ring' in nearby galaxy

All Einstein rings have great scientific value, but Altieri's ring is extra special because it has been observed in a well-studied nearby galaxy, NGC 6505. Only five other gravitational lenses at similar distances have been found so far. Altieri's ring is composed of the distorted images of another galaxy 4.5 billion lightyears away

Smriti Mahajan

More than a century ago, Albert Einstein predicted that massive objects like large galaxies and clusters of galaxies act like giant lenses in space by bending light from distant objects.

As seen from an observer on the earth, a rare alignment of a background object with such a lens in the foreground can lead to a visual spectacle. Because of the lensing, the observer sees arc-like structures skirt the foreground lens. Sometimes these arcs are arranged in a circular pattern, which is called an Einstein ring.

Altieri's ring

Recently, the Euclid space mission of the European Space Agency (ESA) spotted an Einstein ring in the galaxy NGC 6505, just 590 million lightyears from the earth. This may sound like a long distance, but on the astronomical scale, the galaxy is veritably in our cosmic backyard.

An astronomer named Bruno Altieri first noticed this Einstein ring in September 2023 in a blurry image captured by Euclid, which ESA had launched only two months earlier.

The image was unfocused by design because in the initial days of the mission, scientists were taking data to test if all of Euclid's systems were functioning properly. Subsequent images of the galaxy yielded focused images, using which scientists confirmed the presence of the ring. It has since been nicknamed Altieri's ring in honour of the scientist who stumbled upon it.

A quirk of the light

Einstein predicted that light will not travel on a straight path when moving in the vicinity of massive objects. He argued that a large object distorts spacetime – the fabric of space and time around it – just like the curvature of a hammock is determined by the mass of the person sitting in it.

This idea forms the basis of Einstein's famous general theory of relativity, which the American physicist John Wheeler summed up perfectly in the following words: "matter tells spacetime how to curve, and curved spacetime tells matter how to move."

The massive object in the foreground, called a gravitational lens, distorts and amplifies the light coming from background sources in the same way a magnifying glass distorts the path of light scattered by a background object, like small lettering on a piece of paper.

That said, a gravitational lens is not as perfectly shaped as a magnifying glass and may produce multiple images of the background object. The number of images depends on the relative distance between the lens and the observer,



In the middle of this image, the fuzzy-looking bulb of light in a warm shade of yellow extends around a small bright spot, nestled within a thin light circle that appears to be drawn closely around it. The circle is an Einstein ring. ESA/EUCLID/EUCLID CONSORTIUM/NASA

between the lens and the background object, and the latter's alignment with the lens.

This quirky cosmic phenomenon is called strong gravitational lensing. The multiple images can appear in a variety of configurations around the lens and can assume slightly different shapes and sizes depending on the distribution of matter in it.

An Einstein ring is a special case of strong gravitational lensing. Astronomers discovered the first Einstein ring in 1998, more than 80 years after Einstein predicted their existence. An Einstein ring is created when a gravitational lens distorts light coming from a distant background object, like a star or a galaxy, in such a way that the multiple images created in the foreground form a circular pattern around the lens. This requires a near-perfect alignment between the distant object, the lens, and the observer.

A new set of eyes

All Einstein rings have great scientific value, but Altieri's ring is extra-special because scientists have observed it in a well studied nearby galaxy, NGC 6505. Scientists have found only five other gravitational lenses at similar distances so far. Altieri's ring is composed of the distorted images of another galaxy 4.5 billion lightyears away.

Since NGC 6505 has been known to astronomers since the 19th century, the

An Einstein ring is a case of strong gravitational lensing. Astronomers discovered the first ring in 1998, 80 years after Einstein predicted their existence

ring's discovery shows how turning new telescopes to old targets can still yield valuable new knowledge.

The study of Einstein rings can also provide new insights into the universe's expansion and provide opportunities to test the theory of general relativity and investigate distant objects that are otherwise obscured.

They can also help astronomers understand the nature of dark matter, a mysterious form of matter that comprises around 30% of the total mass-energy budget of the universe yet remains undetected because it doesn't interact with the normal matter of which you and I are made. The presence of dark matter can only be inferred from the gravitational effect it has on matter surrounding it – or by bending light around itself.

One of a kind, probably

Following the discovery of Altieri's ring in September 2023, Euclid scientists further investigated this system for more insights using other telescopes. This way, for example, data from the Keck Cosmic Web Imager (KCWI) obtained in March 2024

confirmed the lensed nature of the images.

Together with data from the archives of the Canada-France-Hawaii Telescope and the Dark Energy Spectroscopic Instrument, scientists also confirmed the total mass of stars and the distance to NGC 6505 and the lensed galaxy. They found that the latter is an old galaxy no longer forming stars.

While the discovery of Altieri's ring so early in Euclid's life is exciting for the mission, its scientists sounded caution in a paper published in *Astronomy & Astrophysics* on February 10: "... the exceptional nature of Altieri's lens means it is unlikely that Euclid will find another lens" closer than around 680 million light-years "with a ring as bright as that observed here."

Euclid began to scan the sky formally on February 14, 2024, and is expected to discover 100,000 new gravitational lenses in the universe. Its chances of discovering lenses so close to the earth, however, remain slim because of the smaller volume of the universe available to look in.

This said, the discovery of Altieri's ring highlights Euclid's potential and the role it can play in advancing our understanding of dark matter.

(Smriti Mahajan is an astronomer and science communicator promoting STEM education through astronomy. mahajan.smriti@gmail.com)

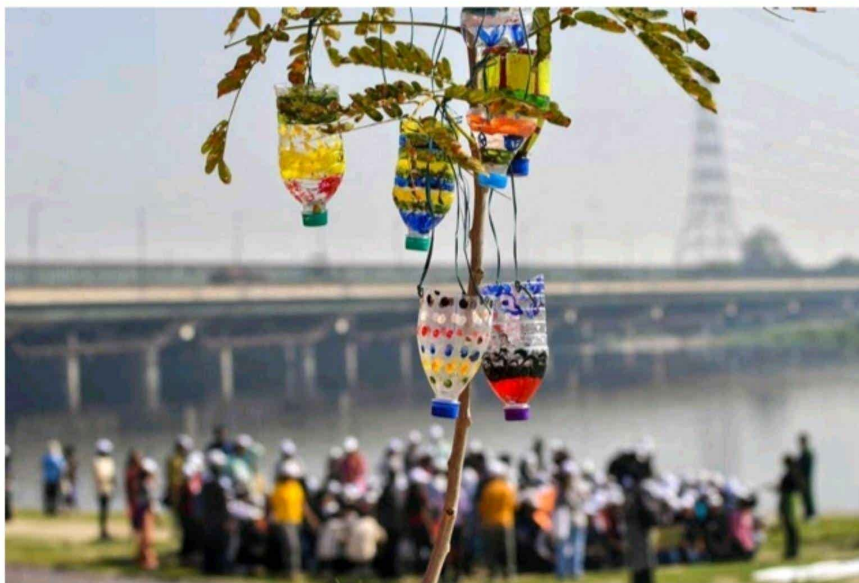
THE GIST

Recently the Euclid space mission spotted an Einstein ring in the galaxy NGC 6505. An astronomer named Bruno Altieri first noticed this Einstein ring in September 2023 in a blurry image captured by Euclid, which ESA had launched only two months earlier

Einstein predicted that light will not travel on a straight path in the vicinity of massive objects. A massive object in the foreground of a light source acts as a gravitational lens, distorting and amplifying light in the same way a magnifying glass distorts the path of light

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BIG SHOT



Reused plastic bottles hang from a tree during a "climate march" by volunteers on the banks of the Yamuna River to raise awareness about the need for a cleanup of the river and other environmental issues in New Delhi on March 2. PTI

WHAT IS IT?

Planetary parade: worlds on show

Vasudevan Mukundh

In a small window of time around February 28, people on the earth were in for a visual treat as seven planets, plus the moon, lined up in the night sky. These events are called planetary parades because the planets seem to line up, one behind the other, in the night sky in the order of their distance from the sun.

Depending on the number of planets involved, planetary parades can be common or rare. For example, a parade of three or four planets occurs once every few years, whereas a parade of seven or eight planets is very rare. The parade around February 28 was of the latter variety, involving seven planets: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune.

The closer planets were visible to the naked eye, but the farther ones, especially Uranus and Neptune, required telescopes to see.

The next such line-up is only expected in 2040,



Planetary parades are not particularly significant to scientists but they can create a visual spectacle. GETTY IMAGES

involving six planets.

Planetary parades are not particularly significant to scientists. The reason why they happen is simple: the planets of the solar system all orbit the sun in roughly the same plane, called the ecliptic plane. So as they move in their orbits, every once in a while some of them will be visible together from the earth. This wouldn't have been possible if the planets were moving around in different orbits.

(mukundh.v@thehindu.co.in)

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

THE IDEAS PAGE

In America first, an opening

Trump's threat of reciprocal tariffs could be a chance to transition from protectionism to a productivity-driven agri-export strategy

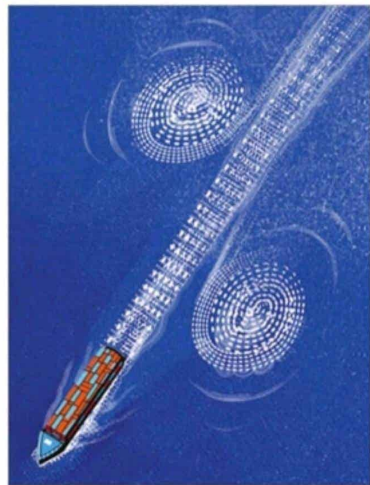


FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI,
HARSH WARDHAN AND
SULAKSHANA RAO

US PRESIDENT DONALD Trump's latest push for "reciprocal tariffs" is aimed at reducing trade deficits and aligns with his broader "America First" policy. In 2024, the US trade deficit had surged to \$918.4 billion, from \$784.9 billion in 2023. The largest deficit was recorded with China at \$295.4 billion, while India accounted for only \$45.7 billion. Trump has, however, frequently criticised India's high tariffs and trade barriers on American goods, referring to India as the "tariff king". During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent US visit, Trump reiterated that India would not be exempt from these proposed tariffs, which are designed to match the import tariffs that other countries impose on US goods.

We don't know yet whether these reciprocal tariffs will be on all goods or sector by sector or commodity by commodity. But it is better to prepare for the worst, and hope for the best. According to WTO data, India imposes significantly higher tariffs than the US, with a simple average rate of 17 percent on all goods, compared to about 3.1 percent imposed by the US (see graphics). The trade-weighted tariffs further highlight this gap — 12 percent in India vs. 2.2 percent in the US. However, the most striking difference is in the agriculture sector, where India's tariffs are notably higher — the simple average tariff being 39 percent, and trade-weighted average being 65 percent. In comparison, the US maintains relatively low agricultural tariffs with a simple average of 5 percent and a trade-weighted rate of 4 percent. Given this stark tariff disparity in agri-products, the proposed reciprocal tariffs could have a substantial impact on India's agricultural exports to the US — its largest trading partner.

The US is India's largest agri-export market, giving a trade surplus of \$3.46 billion in 2023-24. Key Indian exports include shrimp, basmati rice, processed foods, and honey, while the US exports to India include almonds, cotton, ethanol, and soybean oil. If Trump's tariff threats materialise, Indian agri-exports — especially duty-free items like shrimp — could become uncompetitive, while imports from the US may rise. This could shrink or even erase India's agri-trade surplus with the US. Thus, cool headed negotiations are important for India to maximise its gains by asking for market access of a number of agri-commodities where India has comparative advantage, and lowering duties on others where US may like to export to India. US interests are exporting whiskey, which attracts 150 per cent duty in India; walnuts and chicken legs: attracting 100 per cent duty; skimmed milk powder (SMP) attracting 60 per cent duty; wheat, soyabean, and maize, which attract 40 per cent, 45 per cent, and 50 per cent import duty in India, besides non-tariff barriers of GM crops in India.



and 50 per cent import duty in India, besides non-tariff barriers of GM crops in India.

While India has adopted Bt cotton, and its by-products such as GM cotton seed oil and cotton seed oil cake, which is used as feed, it continues to ban GM soy and maize, despite growing domestic demand for high-protein animal feed and ethanol production. This restrictive trade policy has frustrated the US, which remains a global leader in GM crop production with high yields.

The challenge for India is to strike a balance between protecting its farmers and keeping its most lucrative export market open. India and the US are already holding discussions for a broader trade agreement with the ambitious "Mission 500" which aims to boost bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030. There is much scope for increasing India's agri-exports to the US, provided India gets market access. Food preparations, butter, bovine meat cuts, all attract more than 20 per cent import duty in the US. These can be negotiated to lower levels provided India is also ready to lower its import duties. Our analysis shows that Indian agri-exports are quite competitive and its exports can increase provided export policy remains open. Many fruits and vegetables ranging from bananas to okra have export potential. But it will require streamlining their export value chains.

India has been open to selective concessions. For instance, in Washington apples (from 50 per cent to 15 per cent). A phased tariff reduction in food preparations (currently at 150 per cent), walnuts (100 per cent), cut chicken legs (100 per cent), and dairy products such as cheese and skimmed milk powder (30-60 per cent) should be implemented, particularly as US is keen on pushing these like walnuts. While tariffs on commodities like markets, cranberries, and blueberries can

India's agricultural trade can grow in an increasingly reciprocal global market if we negotiate smartly and prioritise our investments that make agriculture more competitive rather than leaning towards heavy subsidies as in the case of fertilisers and free power. Trump's tariff threats should be a wake-up call for India's agricultural policymakers. If handled wisely, it could be an opportunity to transition from tariff-heavy trade protectionism to a more resilient, productivity-driven export strategy — one that ensures long-term gains for Indian farmers and exporters alike.

be reduced immediately, products where domestic producers remain competitive, such as poultry (cut chicken legs), should undergo gradual tariff reductions.

Tariff concessions are like a band aid in the short-term. In the medium to long term, we need to set our house in order. First, R&D investments is one major action. Currently, central and state agricultural investments together remain below 0.5 per cent of agri-GDP; far lower than global comparisons. India must invest at least 1 per cent of its agri-GDP in R&D, ensuring that exports remain competitive rather than dependent on trade protection. Second, India must modernise its agri-value chains including expanding cold storage capacity, upgrading logistics infrastructure, and ensuring better quality certification and traceability. Key production clusters must be developed to agri-export hubs with the help of APEDA to boost India's agri-export potential in high-value horticultural commodities (banana, mango and mango pulp, pomegranates in markets like Russia, Korea, Japan, Australia).

India's agricultural trade can grow in an increasingly reciprocal global market if we negotiate smartly and prioritise our investments that make agriculture more competitive rather than leaning towards heavy subsidies as in the case of fertilisers and free power. Trump's tariff threats should be a wake-up call for India's agricultural policymakers. If handled wisely, it could be an opportunity to transition from tariff-heavy trade protectionism to a more resilient, productivity-driven export strategy — one that ensures long-term gains for Indian farmers and exporters alike.

Gulati is distinguished professor, Wardhan is fellow and Rao is senior fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Mr. Trump wants to redefine free speech with bans, bullying and fear. It's never been more necessary to speak up." — THE NEW YORK TIMES

In search of greener pastures

Migration can work for all if governments across countries collaborate with successful immigrants



OVER THE BARREL
BY VIKRAM S MEHTA

MEENAKSHI AHAMED'S BOOK *Indian Genius: The Meteoric Rise of Indians in America* is interesting, timely and important. The book is interesting because biographical sketches are "history without theory". It is timely because immigration is a hot-button subject in the West and with the arrival of two plane loads of deported Indians from America, some in handcuffs, it is also of relevance to India and ipso facto to every "source country". It is important because through the stories of these highly successful Indians, one can discern nuggets of experience that might help develop a "non-zero sum proposition" to make "migration (can) work for all", the title of an article written by Amy Pope, the Director General of the UN International Organisation for Migration, in the latest issue of the *Foreign Affairs*.

Ahamed profiles familiar names under four categories.

The "techies" include Kanwal Rekhi, founder of TIE, the India-US entrepreneurship club to foster startups; Vinod Khosla, the founder of Sun Microsystems and one of the most successful venture capitalists in Silicon Valley and "company men" like Shantanu Narayen (Adobe) and Satya Nadella (Microsoft); the "healers" or "the medicine men" that include the polymath doctor of alternative medicine and mindfulness and best selling author Deepak Chopra; the younger but comparably gifted doctors, writers and researchers. Siddhartha Mukherjee, Atul Gawande and Abraham Verghese; the "influencers" or those that have impacted public policy — the scholar, journalist and CNN anchor Fareed Zakaria; the lawyer Neal Katyal, former Governor and President Trump's Ambassador to the UN in his first term Nikki Haley, and "Gen Next" — a cluster of brilliant millennials who were born in America.

All the people profiled by Ahamed are supremely talented. They would have succeeded in any environment. But the accolades they have received did not fall like Manna from heaven. Their success is the result of familial support, education, hard work and an enabling environment. Fareed Zakaria talks of his mother as his rock of support in whatever he did which allowed him to explore options at will. Several point out that education provided them the confidence to circumvent the subtle and not-so-subtle barriers of caste, class, racial and religious prejudices that they faced in India and the US. For instance, Kanwal Rekhi narrates the insistence of investors to bring in a "White CEO" to manage the company he had founded. All confirm that Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hour work rule is the sine qua non for their "genius". And everyone acknowledges the debt of gratitude they owe to the enabling culture in the US that allowed them to realise their "genius".

None of these individuals came to America through the "Dunkin'" route. Notwithstanding that, their stories are

timely because migration is currently a front and centre subject of political debate. This is for numerically understandable reasons. Pope estimates that 5 per cent of America's workforce is undocumented and illegal; that 2.5 million people crossed the Mexican-US border in 2023, up from 5,00,000 in 2022; and Europe received 3,80,000 illegals in 2023 — the highest number in over a decade. In consequence, governments have tightened border controls and the rules related to visas and asylum. Peremptory deportation in military aircraft is, however, still a Trump exclusive.

The irony, as explained by Pope, is that the current force of anti-immigration sentiment is happening "at the same time that immigration is becoming more essential". She writes that "thirty of the largest economies in the world suffer from labour shortages and (that these) unfilled jobs cost an estimated \$1.3 trillion in lost GDP in 2023 alone". She lists several reasons for the imbalance between "legal migration and economic need" — the paucity of channels for legal access; the difficulty of accessing these channels; the spread of disinformation and criminal networks; the misalignment between labour market demand and visa issuance; the low priority accorded to "skills training to meet this demand" and the challenge of landing a job through "ethical, safe and legal pathways". Leaders in both "source" and "destination" countries, she recommends, should collaborate to remove these systemic blockers.

It is in this effort to remove such blockers that Ahamed's book acquires importance. Indian-Americans are the richest ethnic group in America with a per capita income of \$100,000 compared to \$75,000 for other Asians and \$53,600 for the rest. This is based on a poll done by Pew in 2018. Further, the American Association of Physicians has estimated that 10 per cent of US doctors are of Indian origin. These statistics and other data confirm that Indian-Americans across multiple domains are a valuable asset to the US and that they have enormous intellectual, financial, and human resources, global networks and social influence.

Ahamed's book brings to attention the role that this community can play in cracking the political conundrum of migration. Her narration suggests that the larger swathe of the Indian-Americans and not just those profiled would be willing to leverage their talent and personal experience to help remove the systemic blockers identified by Pope. The responses of those interviewed convey a subliminal awareness that had they confronted anti-immigrant sentiment that has engulfed the Western world they might have not got the breaks they did. Their talent would have been priced on the door but they may not have been allowed in.

The search for a better future is an integral human impulse. It cannot be stopped. This is not to suggest illegal migration should be condoned; simply that force is a blunt instrument for correcting the present imbalance. "Migration can work for all" if governments in "source" and "destination" countries collaborate with successful immigrants to develop a "non-zero sum" proposition for those looking for better pastures and those determined to protect their nativist turf.

The writer is chairman and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress

Giving cities their due

India's urban centres need to plan better to tackle pollution, climate change



AMITABH KANT AND RANVEER NAGAICH

EVERY WINTER, DELHI's air turns hazy, arid and at worst and unhealthy at best. Not just in the capital; pollution has become a national issue. Our cities are amongst the most polluted in the world. This is also not just about pollution. Indian cities struggle with climate change, poor infrastructure, and weak public services. By 2036, more than 600 million people will live in Indian cities — our cities are not ready for this growth. Roads are overcrowded, pollution is worsening and essential services like water and sanitation are failing. Our cities are becoming unsafe and unlivable.

Indian cities have immense potential but struggle to match global destinations like Bangkok, London, Dubai, and Singapore. Bangkok thrives on its efficient metro, vibrant street life, and tourist-friendly policies. London offers seamless public transport, green spaces, and cultural hubs. Dubai attracts business with world-class urban planning and investment incentives; Singapore leads in clean governance and smart city initiatives. To compete, Indian cities need bold urban reforms and world-class infrastructure.

Last year, Mumbai and Bengaluru witnessed flooding and waterlogging, disrupting everyday life and displacing thousands. New Delhi and the rest of North India endured a heatwave with temperatures touching close to 50 degrees Celsius. These led to several heat-related illnesses and fatalities. These are a few examples of why our cities must integrate climate-resilient planning. Putting in place green infrastructure like parks and green roofs can help al-

leviate heat levels while investing in modern drainage and flood management systems to mitigate the effects of heavy rainfall. Strengthening early warning systems and community preparedness can save lives. Indian cities face a severe pollution crisis which is threatening public health and economic growth. In addition to air pollution, water and waste management impact millions daily. Forty-two towns rank among the top 50 for air pollution, with nearly 50 per cent of 603 rivers polluted and less than one-fifth of waste treated. Vehicle emissions, industrial discharge and construction dust contribute to respiratory diseases and other health issues. The Clean Air Fund estimates that air pollution costs India almost \$95 billion annually in lost productivity and healthcare expenses.

Water pollution is also critical. Major rivers like the Yamuna and Ganga are heavily contaminated, making them unsafe for consumption and harmful for marine biodiversity. In Bengaluru, lakes have either dried up or become toxic while floods in Chennai have worsened groundwater contamination, leading to a cutoff of clean water supply for many communities. The lack of waste management, or mismanagement, adds to the pollution pressures. Overflowing landfills emit hazardous methane. Informal waste collection and lack of garbage disposal mechanisms allow pests and diseases to thrive. Our cities need comprehensive strategies to combat air, water, and waste pollution.

In India, a census town is a settlement

Join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/+4Bu7senHtpQdhODj1> that, while not officially designated as an urban area, exhibits all the characteristics of it.

According to the 2011 Census, census towns increased from 1,362 in 2001 to 3,894 in 2011, contributing to nearly one-third of the urban growth during that decade. While this proliferation indicates rapid urbanisation, it also presents significant challenges. Census towns continue to be governed as rural areas, lacking the capacity and resources to manage urban infrastructure and services. This governance mismatch leads to inadequate urban planning, insufficient public services, and haphazard development. Moreover, the absence of formal urban status means these towns do not receive appropriate funding from urban development schemes. Their delayed recognition and integration into formal urban governance structures impede their development and exacerbate regional disparities.

Transforming our cities will require an overhaul of planning, strengthened governance, and sustainable financing. With action on these fronts, India can develop livable, resilient, and economically vibrant cities that can become global attractions. The first step must be to notify these census towns as urban areas in their own right. States must take the lead.

In the 1960s, Singapore faced overcrowding, slums, traffic congestion, environmental pollution, floods, and water shortages. To address these issues, the government implemented a comprehensive urban development strategy focused on efficient land use, robust infrastructure, and sustainable

growth. Singapore's urbanisation journey offers valuable insights for India.

In the Urban Budget for 2025-26, the Indian government announced the establishment of a Rs 1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund. This fund will implement initiatives in areas such as Cities as Growth Hubs, Creative Redevelopment of Cities, and Water and Sanitation. Indian cities must be challenged to transform into world-class destinations by learning from Singapore's structured urbanisation. The Fund can incentivise cities to adopt long-term planning, invest in mass transit, and enhance sustainability. Singapore's success lies in affordable housing, green urban spaces, and efficient governance — lessons India must embrace. A city-level grand challenge to clean our cities can be one aspect of this Fund. Cities should be judged on how well they tackle air and water pollution. The parameters could include electrification of transport, controlling emissions, waste management practices, and construction management practices to control air pollution.

Our cities are grappling with overcrowding, pollution, and poor health, but these are not insurmountable challenges. The time for change is now, and the next decade will determine the fate of our cities. They can become smart, green, and livable or succumb to pollution, congestion, and insecurity.

Kant is India's G20 Sherpa and Nagaich is senior policy specialist, Office of G20 Sherpa. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WOMEN IN POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Gender just third-tier" (IE, February 28). Article 243D of our Constitution mentions women's reservation for Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). However, it has been argued that women representatives usually work as proxies for their politically ambitious husbands, who either have been *pradhans* in previous terms or harbouring ambitions to contest elections when the seat is not reserved for a woman candidate. PM Modi's call to 100,000 youth to join politics may be a way out to bring self-motivated women at all levels so that they can gain a share in power in real terms.

Devendra Awasthi, Lucknow

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Gender just third-tier" (IE, February 28). The Sarpanchati culture has always remained a core problem when it comes to women wielding actual power in Panchayats even after the introduction of reservation provisions by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992). This culture has deprived them of their dignity, autonomy, and voice in personal and professional affairs, reducing them to become faceless wives or daughters-in-law in public affairs, af-

fecting the quality of governance at the local level. Patriarchal norms, attitudes and practices, socio-economic barriers such as poverty, illiteracy, and lack of mobility, and maintaining a balance between domestic responsibilities and public roles for women without compromising their health and well-being are challenges that need to be addressed.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

AFGHAN CRICKET

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "No flash in the pan" (IE, February 28). Cricket has become so popular that it is being played in the streets as well as in beautiful stadiums of various countries. Even our parliamentarians exhibit their prowess in this game. Afghanistan has no programme to promote its cricket but the dedicated players have been carrying out their practices. Due to hard work and discipline, the Afghan team has risen to become a world-class team. Individually, Ibrahim Zardani, Rashid Khan perform to the required rhythm. Under the guidance of Ajay Jadhav and Jonathan Trott, their skills are being sharpened to fulfill international standards in all forms of cricket to become a formidable unit.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi



INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN
INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

DELIMITATION REFERENCE TERMS MUST BE SOUND TO DO JUSTICE TO THE SOUTH

A political hot potato is in the making much before the Centre takes a final call on the long-pending delimitation process. The scheduled redrawing of parliament constituency boundaries based on population is now at the heart of a raging political controversy in Tamil Nadu and the rest of South India after the state's CM called for an all-party meeting on March 5, claiming the exercise hangs over the southern states like the sword of Damocles. M K Stalin believes these are the BJP's machinations to run the country with the support of the increased number of MPs coming from the Hindi heartland and royally ignore states governed by opposition parties. The political storm Stalin kicked up ahead of next year's state elections fits perfectly with his anti-Hindi and anti-BJP tirade.

Home Minister Amit Shah's assertion that southern states would not see reduced parliamentary representation has not cut any ice with them. There is no clarity yet on the terms of reference. Will it be based on population or a pro-rata basis on existing Lok Sabha seats? There are no quick answers. Karnataka and Telangana have responded quickly to the call to unite against the Delhi move. Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah called Stalin's claim "not trustworthy". His Telangana counterpart, A Revanth Reddy, accused the BJP of using delimitation as a pretext to secure "permanent" power by increasing seats in "BIMARU" states while diminishing South's political significance.

In general, delimitation is directly proportional to size. It means states with larger populations get more representatives in parliament. Currently grappling with a population explosion, northern states may end up in that category, while southern states with effective population control may see reduced representation. India's population may reach 142 crore by 2026, and the delimitation process based on the new census may increase the Lok Sabha seat count of Tamil Nadu by a few. The back-of-the-envelope calculation shows Karnataka may see a minor increase while Kerala, with the slowest population growth, may lose a seat. Fears are that states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar could see a substantial 50 percent jump in their Lok Sabha seats, making South India increasingly insignificant in parliament. That would mean a slap in the face of the states that effectively implemented population control in the nation's interest.

STOCK MARKET DIP CLEANS EXCESSES OF LAST 2 YEARS

THE Indian equity markets have been 'imploding', falling 15 percent from their September 2024 peaks, eroding nearly ₹1 lakh crore of investors' wealth. Over the past five months, the unprecedented and persistent fall has clouded investor sentiments with fear and gloom. In the recent past—February-April 2020—we have seen the indices taking bigger hits of over 30%, but this time, the negative sentiments are more broad-based and hence more structural. FIIIs have been dumping Indian stocks for more lucrative destinations—the US, China, etc.—due to stretched valuations of Indian equities and lower profitability of Indian corporates, a sombre economic prospect in the medium term and given the uncertainties around Trump's economic policies. India's fiscal policies have not helped the markets either. The decision to increase the short-term and long-term capital gains tax rates last year has also made the Indian equities market less attractive for foreign portfolio investors. The reasons are many and fundamental in nature, so the bear grip is tighter this time.

While one cannot sit quietly seeing the value of their portfolio falling persistently, knee-jerk reactions by the investors or the government would be unwarranted. The government must resolve basic issues—making policies which boost the economy—instead of trying to tinker with the natural course of equity markets. If it can reverse its capital gains tax decisions of last year, it might inject some positivity into the market in the short term. Investors, on their part, can follow the basic lessons of investing and invest in quality stocks, now available at cheaper valuation, diversify portfolios across assets and geographies, stay away from small-cap stocks for now, and invest regularly instead of making large commitments at one go. The current bear run is not the end of the world for investors. Treat the current phase in the market as a clean-up of excesses built over the past two years during the market's one-way movement upwards. The theory of mean reversion—asset prices reverting to historical means or averages—is playing out in Indian equity markets, not for the first time. As and when clouds of global uncertainties disperse, and the conditions become more amenable for business and economic activities, equity investors will see the light at the end of the tunnel.

QUICK TAKE

REFORM DISCOURAGING ATTITUDES

THE Supreme Court recently ordered reinstating two women civil judges sacked for underperformance in Madhya Pradesh. Terming their dismissal grounds as punitive, the court noted many complaints weren't even related to judicial competence. Underlining the absence of women-centred perspectives, it observed: "...growing number of female judicial officers (isn't enough) if we (can't) secure for them a sensitive work environment and guidance." The lack of gender diversity in the judiciary is well-accepted. That's no reason for leniency, but creating amenable circumstances, including offering gender-sensitive infrastructure facilities, is paramount. Without a discerning mindset, it isn't easy to encourage women's entry into and retention in the judiciary.

LOMBO's new administration will soon complete six months in office. Predictably, it has not been a bed of roses. The government has tried to introduce changes, particularly to the entrenched political culture, streamline systems and reduce excessive spending. Nevertheless, the challenges remain daunting.

The left-leaning government presented its first budget on February 17, striking a tricky balance that meets the International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements while seeking to push a home-spun approach to solving the island's long-standing economic woes. On February 19, Fitch Ratings recognised the island's budget reflected the authorities' commitment to raising fiscal revenues as a share of its GDP—an approach that, if proven successful, may alleviate a long-standing weakness in the credit profile. While acknowledging risks to the fiscal outlook with the slow pace of fiscal consolidation weighing on prospects for debt reduction over the medium term, Fitch also noted the budget offered greater clarity over the administration's medium-term fiscal and economic reform agenda and consistency.

The government aims to increase revenue to 15.1 percent in 2025, from 11.4 percent in 2023, exceeding Fitch's assumption that the 15 percent threshold would be achievable only by 2026. The budget incorporates a 36.5 percent increase in revenue from taxes on external trade and a 13.1 percent from income taxes. While these revenue-based targets demonstrate its commitment to the IMF programme and gradual economic recovery, challenges remain before the fragile economy.

In the lead-up to the budget presentation, the general mood was both sceptical and sombre rather than hopeful, a silent acknowledgement of the absence of space to wriggle within the controlled fiscal climate with the IMF conditions posing an additional stranglehold. The administration lacked the space to develop its economic formula or to deliver on one of its key pre-election pledges: to renegotiate the IMF-backed debt restructuring programme achieved during President Ranil Wickremesinghe's presidency to offer a level of relief to the poor and middle classes. The administration is unable to withdraw from the deal without causing significant economic consequences that could be more severe than those experienced in 2022.

In its wake, following the third review on February 28, the IMF approved \$2.9 billion as part of the bailout to help the

The people reeling under tremendous economic pressures crave urgent measures to reduce their woes, which may not be possible in the medium term

HURTING ECONOMY, RISING ASPIRATIONS, LOOK FOR ANSWERS

DILRUKSHI
HANDUNNETTI



Award-winning journalist and lawyer, founder
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Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR)



MANOJ PRASAD

island's economic rebound. Nevertheless, the IMF-brokered deal remains anathema for most people, and a sense of disappointment prevails despite accepting the economic constraints as the collective reality.

As the euphoria of electing a new administration and a trusted presidency begins to wane with time, the government is entering a period of renewed scrutiny—which will intensify and find people's expression during the local authorities' elections in the coming months. Insiders claim the new dispensation is working with intent towards course correction, but the people reeling under tremendous economic pressures crave urgent measures to reduce their woes, which may not be possible in the medium term.

The people, meanwhile, are getting impatient as they struggle to make ends meet amid spiralling costs of living. Government insiders, however, call for patience, claiming the administration is formulating policies to strengthen programmes while trying to introduce a new political culture to increase public institutions' efficiency.

The government is cognisant of the political reality that catapulted them into office—economic and political bankruptcy in the run-up to the crucial presidential and parliamentary elections, the National People's Power (NPP) drummed up public support by effectively driving the point that the island's economic collapse was more about corruption and nepotism than systems. This also means the administra-

tion must now cater to public expectations around accountability, including acting against corrupt elements in previous administrations and going beyond a couple of indictments of Rajapaksa family members. Difficult as it may be, it is time for tangible changes to political structures.

However, the introduction of such changes may not be easy. For example, the promulgation of a new Constitution will require time. The public has continued to harbor hopes for a more inclusive presidency dismantled, but since 1986, despite vocal pledges to abolish it, each president has embraced the powerful executive presidency and has not desired to prune the excessive powers, let alone abolish it. It would also require dealing with the island's powerful Buddhist clergy and the military, wielding immense power over the Sri Lankan constituency.

To bring a political equation among ethnicities, the government will have to address war excesses, which may necessitate action against security personnel hailed in the South as war heroes. Another perspective would be to consider the political issues of the ethnic Tamils, who largely supported Dissanayake's NPP with the expectation of a new beginning, free from the influence of long-standing power politics that overlooked Tamil political goals. The severely constrained government may have continued with the IMF programme to ensure stability, but political reforms of inclusion and justice cannot be postponed if the administration is serious about structural reforms.

This also brings up the NPP's equation with neighbouring India, a critical player in geopolitics. Dissanayake's party has historically remained critical of what was termed "Indian expansionism". The incumbency has resisted calls to investigate military exercises during the protracted war in the North of Sri Lanka. Dissanayake grabbed headlines last month by pushing the cancellation of a 450 MW wind power project by the powerful Adani Group due to tariff and environmental concerns.

Many Sri Lankans are apprehensive about Indian investments, seeing them often as extensions of India's geostrategic interests while undermining Sri Lanka's sovereignty. India and Sri Lanka cannot afford an estranged relationship while following their growth trajectories and strategic interests. This calls for both Delhi and Colombo to address the underlying trust deficit.

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THE MANY MYSTERIES OF THE NAGA SADHUS

RENUKA NARAYANAN



FAITHLINE

I missed seeing the famous Naga Sadhus at the Mahakumbh, which was disappointing as I had so many questions I would have liked to ask. But I caught up with them indirectly and unexpectedly late last week and would like to share what I learnt since there's so much more to them than the seemingly bizarre aspects portrayed on social media.

It happened at a stunning photo exhibition on Naga Sadhus at the Travancore Palace in Delhi. The photographer is well-known photojournalist Bhandeep Singh, whose deep interest in this enigmatic aspect of Indian culture led him to the Kumbh. He kept going to the Kumbh for over 20 years and spent 25 days closely with the Naga Sadhus of the Juna Akhanda (Juna means 'ancient'). This happened through a chance introduction by a Delhi spiritual activist who had grown close to them. "A window opened, and I was suddenly in," said Bhandeep, of this rare opportunity.

Naga Sadhus are followers of one of the 10 akhadas or monastic orders founded by no less than Adi Shankara himself in the 8th century. They are celibate by choice, sleep on the ground and are proficient in yoga and martial exercises. They either shave their heads completely or grow long matted locks called 'jata', which are supposed to enhance their energies. Many of them wear only a loin-cloth or after reaching a particular stage of spiritual detachment, discard even that as the last relic of earthly lives.

They smear themselves with ash as it keeps the body warm in cold weather and is a proven antiseptic for scratches, wounds and insect bites. Deeper, vibhuti, as Lord Shiva's attribute, is believed to promote both physical and mental purity. The sanyasis say, "Chade khashi, mann have peak, alakh niranjan aspe say", meaning that when vibhuti is applied, your mind is purified, and you transcend the limits of human measurement. Niranjan, meaning spotless and blemish-free, is one of Shiva's many epithets. They carry trishulas and wear rudraksha mala to proclaim their adherence to Shiva. Bhandeep's show is called Bhaskang, meaning 'ash smeared', which holds these layers of meaning.

They eat sparingly; and there are even those who have subsisted for years on drinking nothing but tea and smoking chulums (opium pipes). But why do they smoke weed? They told Bhandeep it's because it helps them concentrate and cuts off world-

ly distractions. They take good care to appear in public only at the Kumbhs, where they have a historical right of way to show society that they are there for them. After that, they mysteriously disappear to isolated ashrams and forest hide-outs, travelling by night to avoid townsfolk.

The second and sad reason is a traumatic personal life. Tragedy, cruelty, the forlorn feeling of being abandoned, and the human heartbreak of 'Na main kisi ka, na koi mera', meaning 'I belong to nobody, and nobody belongs to me', leads some to take sanyas. In contrast to being orphaned and ill-treated, there is order, method, a regulated life and, above all, a strong sense of community and emotional security in the akhadas, once you are accepted. That sets your feet on the path of inner growth.

There is no looking back after that, for you leave your past behind and get trained to become a new person, anchored in God-awareness. It is especially healing when anchored in a compassionate and powerful concept like Shiva, whose all has kept believers spellbound for millennia.

The third reason is something that Bhandeep discovered and shared with me. In the rural North, men join the army or the police as respectable and secure professions. But there is a third category that gets even more respect—the genuine sanyasi. And so, some are drawn to sanyas, though the initial attraction transforms rapidly into an arduous personal journey of hardship, renunciation and soul growth.

Candidates are first put through hard labour and given the most tiring and unpleasant community tasks to test their commitment. If they pass and are accepted as initiates, they undergo 12 years of rigorous training and practice. Each initiate is given five gurus to oversee different aspects of his training. The fifth guru is the powerful 'mantra guru'. If one guru leaves the akhada or dies, the leader instantly appoints another. So, the initiate is never left unattended and may safely progress in his new life. Quite a system, is it not? Centuries-old, and still sticking.

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Ukraine's Catch-22

Ref: Peace fails to pieces as Trump and Zelenskyy spar (Mar 2). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed his impulsive impatience in the high-level meeting between the US and Ukraine, putting himself in a Catch-22 situation. He has to either agree to American terms for the exploration of rare minerals and work on developing the rundown economy of Ukraine, or get prepared to lose many more territories of his nation in the war against Russia.
Venkat Desikan, Chennai

Global concern

The recent standoff between Trump and Zelenskyy is a cause for concern. While Kyiv battles Russian aggression, a withdrawal of American support would be catastrophic. Will Europe step in to fill the gap, or will Ukraine's opposition coalition without strong US support remain a distant dream?
Anshu Bharti, Begusarai

Successful Mahakumbh

Ref: Surge of bhaktiyata unity at Prayagraj (Mar 2). The article highlights the success of the Mahakumbh, which witnessed a congregation of over 60 crore people across the world in 45 days without too many major disruptions, incidents, or accidents. It reinforced faith, redemption and cultural unity.
R Pichumani, Kumbakonam

Cleaning Prayagraj

After the unprecedented global gathering of more than 60 crore pilgrims near Sangam ghats for the Maha Kumbh mela after 144 years, the next part is cleaning the tonnes of garbage generated and dismantling Mahakumbh Nagar. It's a major task to clean 10,000 acres to maintain the sanctity of the ghats and Sangam.
Jayaprakash Reddy, Nalgonda

Congress politics

Ref: Bharat Thorax: Pride & prejudice (Mar 2). It is strange that a senior Congress leader like Shashi Tharoor has to wait for three years to meet Rahul Gandhi. Shashi came into politics later in life and is an erudite scholar who is not afraid to speak his mind. Tharoor has a closer view of happenings in Kerala and rightly praised the government for its policies.
Parthasarathy Mandadi, Tirupati

Children's safety

The surge in POCOs cases in Tamil Nadu reflects improved reporting, a positive shift towards confronting abuse. However, the government must address criticisms such as delayed trials and inadequate support for survivors. Enhanced preventive measures are also crucial to ensure a safer environment for children.
Deepa Pandey, Bhubaneswar



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A STRONG FOOTING

New Delhi, Brussels must seize momentum generated by EU President's India visit and firm up trade pacts

INTERMS of both its nature and timing, the European Union President Ursula von der Leyen's visit to India last week was a pivotal moment for bilateral relations as well as the larger dynamic among the world's major powers. Well before the disruption of the global order was begun by the election of Donald Trump as US president for the second time, von der Leyen had decided to put India at the top of destinations outside Europe in her own second term that began last summer. Having decided to give relations with Delhi a high priority, von der Leyen arrived in India with 22 of her 27 cabinet colleagues (or the College of Commissioners) for an intense, and broad-based round of consultations between the two governments at the highest level. The return of Trump to the White House and the crisis in trans-Atlantic relations marked by the US outreach to Russia at the expense of Ukraine and Europe provided an unprecedented geopolitical context for the rebooting of ties between India and Europe.

India was among the first countries to establish diplomatic ties with the Brussels-headquartered European Economic Community (the EU's predecessor) back in 1963. But the relations between the two never took off. As India drifted close to the Soviet Union during the Cold War and turned inward economically, there was little room for productive engagement between Delhi and Brussels. The early 1990s that saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and India's own economic reforms offered a more hopeful setting for the partnership between India and the more ambitious European Union that replaced the EEC. Delhi and Brussels unveiled a strategic partnership in 2004 and launched free trade talks in 2007. Although trade and economic cooperation expanded, a free trade treaty remained elusive and the talks were broken off in 2013 by the EU, and the strategic partnership remained only in name. The NDA government sought to revive political and economic partnership with the EU and renewed trade talks in 2022.

If the pressures on the global economic order and the renewed great power conflict put a new premium on India's EU partnership over the last few years, the Trump disruption in the historic US ties to Europe in the last few weeks added a new dimension of urgency. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and von der Leyen were fully cognisant of the new imperatives and set out an expansive agenda in the areas of economy, security, technology, and connectivity. None of it is more important than the ambition of concluding a free trade agreement within this year. Given the challenges of mounting trade deficits with China and the unpredictability of Trump's economic policies, Delhi and Brussels can no longer dither in upgrading their trade relations. The trade bureaucracies of the two sides have a reputation for being difficult interlocutors. Success in concluding an India-EU FTA would depend on the willingness of PM Modi and President von der Leyen to sustain pressure on their respective bureaucracies to bring the negotiations to an early conclusion. What is at stake is not merely bilateral trade relationship but the geopolitical standing of India and Europe in the rapidly changing structure of great power relations.

THE WOMAN'S HOUR

Women spend a disproportionate amount of time on unpaid chores. Its repercussions risk being both economic and social

THE TIME USE Survey 2024 (January-December), released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation last week, reiterates what has long been an open secret: Despite incremental changes, women spend more time in unpaid industry at home compared to men. In 2024, women spent 289 minutes a day on unpaid domestic services, 10 minutes less than in 2019, but still 201 minutes more than men. Women also spent 62 more minutes on unpaid caregiving, averaging 137 minutes every day, up from 134 minutes in 2019. In addition, women also spent about 140 minutes a day on caregiving, compared to 75 minutes for men, with 41 per cent of women and 21.4 per cent of men aged 15-59 years participating in caregiving activities.

This gendered division of labour has a cascading effect on women's long-term economic mobility and workplace equality. The extensive hours spent on household responsibilities leave women with limited time and energy to pursue paid work. It also limits their ability to acquire additional qualifications. They are more likely to work in low-paid, part-time or informal jobs, often with fewer benefits and job security. This structural inequality exacerbates wage gaps, with women earning significantly less than men for similar work. In its report, 'The Impact of care responsibilities of women's labour participation', published in October 2024, the ILO argued for investment in the country's care economy, particularly in early childhood care and education, given the fact that India has 53 per cent of women outside the labour force. Although women's participation has grown substantially — 41.7 per cent as per data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023-24 — they still account for a much smaller proportion of the total labour force. Men's labour force participation rate stands at around 78 per cent.

In a country spurred by dreams of Viksit Bharat and women-led development, the repercussions of this disparity risk being both economic and social. According to a study by Karmanaya Counsel, CII and Nikore Associates, published in March 2024, women perform over eight times the amount of unpaid work, valued at 15 per cent to 17 per cent of the GDP nationally. Inclusivity will have to begin with a re-imagining of the foundation of household dynamics. Far too often, even the minimum of work done by men around the house are lauded as largesse while women are put in their place for not being the "breadwinner". Dismantling this stereotype would be a good place to begin.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



SACHCHIDANAND SHUKLA

IN A WAY, the third quarter GDP number is released at a rather peculiar time in the year. One, it comes a good two months after the quarter has ended and two, any mystery with respect to the future — that is, any cues that could be extrapolated or trends that can be conjectured for the coming quarters — is taken away by the first advance estimate which gives a number for the whole fiscal year and is released in January, a good 50 days ahead of the release of third quarter numbers.

But given the context of the sharp slowdown in the second quarter and the global uncertainty post Donald Trump, the third quarter numbers can be looked at in conjunction with the second advance estimates of GDP to glean a few trends. Note that the second quarter growth of 5.4 per cent was shocking and significantly lower than the 8.1 per cent growth recorded in the second quarter of the previous year and marked a seven-quarter low, falling short of both market expectations of 6.5 per cent and the Reserve Bank of India's earlier estimate of 7 per cent.

So, the first and foremost question is — has the Indian economy turned the corner?

The answer from the set of numbers is yes. There is a rebound from the July-September quarter levels as growth has improved to 6.2 per cent from 5.6 per cent (revised upwards from 5.4 per cent). In comparison, growth in the third quarter of 2023-24 was 9.5 per cent. Even in Q4 terms, there is an improvement from 5.8 per cent in the second quarter to 6.2 per cent in the third quarter. But it must be noted that it remains far below the potential.

The second question is what is happening to consumption?

The state of consumption has clearly been one of the most keenly watched given its share in GDP and impact on driving the anticipated acceleration in capacity utilisation levels. Consumption improved to 6.9 per cent in the third quarter, up 100 bps from the previous quarter. In absolute terms, this number went from 10.1 per cent in the second quarter to 11.1 per cent in the third quarter.

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AAKASH JOSHI

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM is that the only way to stop a bully is to stand up to him. That advice is of little value when your tormentors are not kids but the most powerful man in the world and his understudy. The last 10 minutes of the 50-minute press conference at the White House may well go down in history as the beginning of the end of diplomacy as we know it, of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's self-styled image as the Great Resistor and perhaps even the conflict in Ukraine. In the current moment, though, it is also a warning about the dangers of confusing spectacle for transparency and the desire for "good television" over decency and statesmanship.

Things came to a head when Zelenskyy began questioning V-P J D Vance about Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 to underline that Putin could not be trusted with a ceasefire. His move backfired. Vance ticked off Zelenskyy asking: "Do you think that it's respectful to come to the Oval Office of the United States of America, and attack the administration trying to prevent the destruction of your country?"

Trump too jumped in, and his overbearing, rude remarks would make even detractors of the Ukrainian president feel some sympathy: "You're not winning. You're not winning this. You have a damn good chance of coming out okay, because of us... You have to be thankful, you don't have the cards." And then, the pithiest resistance from the American president: "This is going to be great television, I'll tell you that."

Press conferences by heads of state should be a formality. Tough questions are either answered in pre-determined diplomatic language or sidestepped. They are, in a word, boring. This is both by design and necessity.

The complexities, complexities and hard realities that underlie the foreign policy decisions of powers great and small are usually insulated from politics because they can be unpopular. Take Trump's refrain that Europe is not paying its share for its security and NATO. This championing of the "American taxpayer" may play well during polls, but it is ignores basic facts. That European powers have not spent as much on defence was engineered by the US post World War II. It also allowed America to remain the sole hard superpower in the West. Imagine for a moment what the world would look like if the EU had an army commensurate in size with its economy.

This, then, is the real danger of livestreaming diplomacy: It makes leaders play to the gallery when they should be acting for the people. Livestreaming, in the age of media saturation, likes and reposts, every moment becomes a popularity contest.

Democracy appears now to be becoming a pathological version of itself, at least in the land of its origin. Before playing the role of aggressor in Friday's press conference, Vance had earlier in the month made comments on the internal politics and "culture wars" of the US's allies in Europe.

Catering to the much as the military on the global stage is worrying. This is especially so in the era of a renewed great power competition with China. Beijing is not trying to export communism to the world as the Soviet Union once did. Both domestic



Turning the corner

The economy has recovered, but growth is underwhelming. Another rate cut could be in offing

up by Rs 3 lakh crore to its 28 lakh crore. With inflation cooling off, improved rural prospects and government's measures to spur consumption demand, consumption growth should continue to do well.

The other question marks are around the weakness in investments and government spending during the quarter. GFCF or capex growth rate continued to disappoint and fell to 5.7 per cent as against 5.8 per cent in the second quarter with the absolute spending being lower by almost Rs 30,000 crore. In a similar vein, government spending or GFCF was lower by Rs 25,000 crore, reflecting a deterioration sequentially.

Note that in the previous quarter, the slowdown was primarily driven by a decline in consumption and investment. Government spending also acted as a significant drag. The deceleration in consumption growth was largely attributed to weakening urban demand, reflected in various high-frequency indicators. A tempering of leveraged consumption was also evident with the growth of unsecured retail lending slowing due to RBI's regulatory restrictions on personal loans and credit cards. Moreover, soaring food inflation squeezed household disposable incomes, further dampening consumption. The lingering impact of slow hiring in sectors such as IT and IT-enabled services (IT/ITES) over the past few quarters compounded these challenges.

Investment growth also witnessed a moderation, as government capital expenditure (capex) spending tracked lower. Meanwhile, private investments remained subdued and high interest rates continued to weigh on business expansion and industrial activity.

From a sectoral perspective, agriculture grew at a roaring 5.6 per cent in the third quarter as against an already robust 4.1 per cent in the second quarter. Manufacturing grew at 5.6 per cent (3.3 per cent in the second quarter) and the trade, hotels, transport, communications segment also grew at a faster clip of 7.6

per cent vs 6.7 per cent in the second quarter. These sectors are large employers and hence their performance augurs well. An interesting thing is that the growth rates in services sub sectors of finance, real estate and professional services as well as in that of public administration and defence remain unchanged at 7.2 per cent and 8.8 per cent respectively.

Talking of the annual numbers and the second advance estimates, real GDP has been estimated to grow by 6.5 per cent in 2024-25, slightly higher than the 6.4 per cent number provided by the first advance estimates in January. It is a tad surprising that GDP has grown by 9.2 per cent in 2023-24 as per the second advance estimates — this is the highest in the previous 12 years except for 2021-22. Further, given that the nominal GDP numbers of 2023-24 and 2024-25 have been revised, the fiscal deficit numbers will undergo a revision too. Note, one will have to keep an eye on yet another set of numbers in May — the provisional GDP estimates — for greater clarity.

The other important set of numbers from the revised estimates for 2023-24 pertain to the savings and investment rates. The rate of gross saving for 2023-24 is estimated at 30.3 per cent as against 30.2 per cent for 2022-23. On the other hand, the rate of GCF to GDP is 31.4 per cent in 2023-24 as against 32.6 per cent in 2022-23 hinting at a slightly wider current account deficit than reported.

Going forward, improvement in sales volume of fast-moving consumer goods, growth in GST collections that have spurred strongly in January, and a bounce back in government expenditure augur well for growth. But given that the growth numbers seem underwhelming compared to the year ago numbers and also as compared to the potential growth rate, another rate cut of 25 basis points from the RBI is in play.

The writer is group chief economist, IIFT. Views are personal

WHEN THE BULLY WINS

Trump-Zelenskyy showdown underlines the dangers of livestreaming diplomacy

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Catering to the much as the military on the global stage is worrying. This is especially so in the era of a renewed great power competition with China. Beijing is not trying to export communism to the world as the Soviet Union once did. Both domestic

cally and globally, it is offering a new of social contract. In the former, it's about material prosperity and consumer choice at the cost of some political freedoms. Globally, it's about making deals, agnostic to ideology and domestic politics.

The humiliation of Zelenskyy is a lesson. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine three years ago, Ukraine's president has been more of a mascot and less a politician. He was propped up as so many others have been before him — the leaders of erstwhile South Vietnam, those fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, etc. — by Western powers in their bid to "contain" an ideological and strategic foe.

Like Trump, Zelenskyy's road to politics was paved through TV screens. Like Trump, he is a performer — essaying the role of "resistance leader" against an "authoritarian" and "expansionist" power. In the press conference, it was Zelenskyy who kept trying to get on the moral high horse he has ridden to meeting after meeting over the last three years. What he didn't realise is that his rhetoric — applauded across Western capitals till recently — is part of an old script. And for all their words of support, it is unlikely that European countries will go to war without America or even antagonise the latter too much.

Zelenskyy has been at the centre of a film scripted, directed and produced by the West. Trump is making a different movie, and this one isn't a multi-starrer. Sometimes, the bully wins and the best thing to do is pretend you like him.

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MARCH 3, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

BIHAR POLL VIOLENCE

THE FIRST PHASE of the assembly elections, which was by and large peaceful in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, was marred by violence at several polling booths in Bihar which left at least 20 persons dead and over 100 injured. All the 320 Assembly constituencies in Madhya Pradesh and parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra were covered in the first phase of the poll. The remaining constituencies in these three states will be covered on March 5. Polling was suspended in several booths following violent group clashes and attempts to snatch ballot boxes.

BANGLADESH TURMOIL

AT LEAST 100 Bangladesh opposition politicians and student leaders went into hiding as the police raided their homes, opposition sources said. Prominent leaders from the 15 and seven-party opposition alliances were among those fleeing as the military Government of General H M Ershad banned all public rallies, announced a referendum for March 21 and imposed a night curfew throughout the country. Sources said, however, that Hasina Wajed, chief of the 15-party alliance, and Khaleida Zia, who leads the seven-party committee, were still in their homes on the outskirts of Dhaka. General

Ershad in a nation-wide broadcast, accused the country's politicians of hindering his efforts to hold parliamentary elections scheduled for April 6 and of spreading anarchy.

TEXTILE POLICY

PM RAJIV Gandhi held out a promise of reviewing the textile policy to help it come out of the present crisis. Addressing an election meeting during the Lok Sabha elections, he had promised that steps would be taken to tackle the textile problem. Gandhi said already there had been a couple of meetings on the issue and it was felt that the entire policy would have to be thoroughly examined.

The repealed law on dramatic performances, flagged by the PM

APURVA VISHWANATH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 2

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi on Saturday asked why a colonial law that "allowed the arrest of people dancing in public places" had continued to exist even 75 years after independence. He was speaking of the government's efforts to repeal archaic and obsolete laws in recent years.

Which law was the PM referring to?

The PM's reference was to The Dramatic Performances Act, 1876, which gave the British government the power to "prohibit public dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious or obscene".

This law was among those enacted by the British to clamp down on the nascent Indian nationalist sentiment following the visit of the Prince of Wales, Albert Edward, to India from October 1875 to May 1876.

Other significant laws that were enacted during the 1870s included the draconian Vernacular Press Act, 1878, and the seditious law of 1870.

What were the provisions of the law?

Under the Act, "any play, pantomime or other drama performed or about to be performed in a public place" could be banned if the government was of the "opinion" that the play was "of a scandalous or defamatory nature", or was "likely to excite feelings of disaffection to the Government established by law", or "to deprave or corrupt persons present at the performance".

A Magistrate could warrant the search and seizure of "any house, room or place used, or is about to be used, for any performance prohibited under this Act".

As punishment, the law prescribed a jail term of up to three months and a fine of both.

What was the status of the law after Indian independence?

Parliament formally repealed the law with effect from January 2018 as part of the Narendra Modi government's exercise to weed out obsolete laws.

However, The Dramatic Performances Act had not been a "valid law" since at least 1956. On May 10, 1956, in a ruling titled *State v. Baboo Lal And Ors*, the Allahabad High Court ruled that the law was inconsistent



PM Modi referenced the Act at an event in New Delhi on Saturday. PMO via PTI

with the Constitution of India.

The law was also introduced in states such as Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Delhi and Tamil Nadu, and was later repealed. The Madras HC struck down the Tamil Nadu Dramatic Performances Act, 1954, in 2013.

How did Allahabad HC take up the law?

In June 1953, the Lucknow branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the oldest body of stage artists in India, had planned to stage a play based on Munshi

Prechand's short story 'Idgah' (1938).

The theatre group had applied for permission under the law. However, for reasons unknown, the magistrate in Lucknow cancelled the permission, prohibiting the play. The prohibitory order was served to the accused in the middle of the performance – which they ignored and continued with the performance.

The Allahabad High Court, instead of looking at this specific case, examined the constitutionality of the law. It referred to judgments where colonial statutes that were inconsistent with fundamental rights guaranteed by India's Constitution – from laws on preventive detention to those on censorship – had been struck down or modified.

"In our opinion, the Dramatic Performances Act is ultra vires of the Constitution of India because its procedural part imposes such restrictions on the right of freedom of speech and expression which cannot be covered by the saving clause in Article 19(2)," the Allahabad HC ruled.

The ruling noted the petitioner's contention that the case might have been "victimisation of persons who have a different political ideology than the ideology of the party in power".

Why did India persist with laws enacted by the Raj?

Article 372 of the Constitution ("Continuance in force of existing laws and their adaptation") states that "laws in force in the territory of India immediately before the commencement of this Constitution shall continue in force therein until altered or repealed or amended by a competent legislature or other competent authority".

However, colonial laws do not enjoy the presumption of constitutionality – which means that when a colonial law is challenged, the government must defend the law for it to be valid.

Other laws – those enacted by the Parliament of independent India – are deemed constitutional unless declared otherwise, which means that when challenged in court, the onus is on the petitioner to prove that the legislation violates the Constitution.

Successive governments, including the Narendra Modi government, have defended several colonial laws. Congress-led governments of the past have defended laws on preventive detention and unlawful associations.

The Modi government has retained the seditious law (Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code, 1860), a colonial statute, as 'Act' join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/Bu75enHfQdhiODg1>

endangering sovereignty, unity and integrity of India" in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (Section 152 of BNS). (In 2022, the Supreme Court stayed all trials in respect of charges framed under Section 124A IPC.)

The government has also defended the so-called marital rape exception, another colonial law, which is currently under challenge before the Supreme Court. Exception 2 of Section 375 IPC ("Rape") states that "Sexual intercourse... by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not rape". This provision has been retained as Exception 2 in Section 63 of the BNS, with the wife's age raised from 15 to 18.

And how did the govt repeal the law?

The repeal of obsolete laws has been a flagship project of the Modi government. Since 2014, it has repealed more than 2,000 such laws in several batches.

Obsolete laws, by definition, are laws which are no longer in use.

The Dramatic Performances Act, 1876, though declared unconstitutional by the High Court almost seven decades ago and no longer in use, was formally deleted by Parliament through The Repealing and Amending (Second) Act, 2017.

TEA LEAVES CAN PULL HEAVY METALS FROM WATER, FINDS NEW STUDY

TEA LEAVES effectively "pull" heavy metals from water, lowering the amounts of dangerous lead and cadmium that people may be drinking, a new study found.

"We're not suggesting that everyone starts using tea leaves as a water filter," the study's lead author Vinayak P Dravid of Northwestern University said in a press release. "Our work highlights the unrecognised potential for tea consumption to passively contribute to reduced heavy metal exposure in populations worldwide," he said.

Brewing Clean Water: The Metal-Remediating Benefits of Tea Preparation" was published in the journal *ACS Food Science & Technology* last month.

How this was done

The study found that heavy metals get "adsorbed" while tea is brewed. Put simply, heavy metal ions stick to the surface of tea leaves, and remain trapped there.

The researchers tested the extent of heavy metal adsorption using different types of tea, tea bags, and brewing methods. They created water solutions with known amounts of lead, chromium, copper, zinc and cadmium, and then steeped tea in them for different durations – from seconds to 24 hours.

The team then checked the water after steeping and found metal levels to be significantly lower than before.

What the study found

The researchers found that about 15% of lead can be removed from drinking water when brewing a typical cup of tea, even when lead concentrations are as high as 10 parts per million. A "typical cup" was set as one mug of water and one



Tea is the most consumed beverage in the world. Gettyimages

tea bag, brewed for three to five minutes.

However, a longer steeping time could adsorb even more metals. Teas brewed overnight could recover almost all the metal in the water.

Also, cellulose tea bags worked better at adsorbing heavy metals than cotton and nylon bags. Study author Benjamin Shinde theorised this was because cellulose has a higher surface area, helping the adsorption process.

It discovered that finely ground black tea leaves adsorbed slightly more metal than whole leaves. Shinde attributed this to the surface area, as well.

Why this matters

Tea today is the most consumed beverage in the world. This means that any water filtration properties can potentially have major impacts for public health. This could explain "why populations that drink more tea may have lower incidence rates of heart disease and stroke than populations that have lower tea consumption," Shinde said.

ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR



NEW RESEARCH

Making sense of GDP data

The Centre has released latest estimates of India's GDP, making significant revisions for past quarters and years. Why does govt make these revisions? What do these changes in estimates say about the economy?

UDIT MISRA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 2

THE INDIAN government on Friday released the latest estimates of the country's economic growth, which is measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The GDP is the market value of all goods and services produced within the geographical boundaries of India in a particular period – a quarter (three months) or a financial year (April to March). The numbers discussed here are "real" GDP numbers, which are derived after taking away the effect of prices from nominal GDP, which is calculated at current day prices.

The Indian economy's GDP growth in the second quarter (July, August and September) of the current financial year (FY25) had slumped to 5.4%. This had shocked most observers as it signalled a sharp deceleration in India's growth momentum.

On Friday, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation released three sets of GDP estimates.

■ **GDP for the third quarter (October to December) of the ongoing financial year.** This data would tell whether the slump in Q2 was a one-off or part of a trend.

■ **GDP forecast for the full year.** These are called the Second Advance Estimates (SAE) and are essentially a forecast of India's GDP by the time the financial year ends on March 31. The SAE were preceded by First Advance Estimates (FAE) that were released in January. The key thing to watch out here was whether the underlying growth momentum since the slump in Q2 was considered good enough to lift the overall GDP growth rate in the country. The FAE had pegged the GDP growth rate at 6.4%; in other words, India's GDP was expected to be 6.4% higher than the previous year.

■ **GDP estimates for the preceding two financial years.** These are called the First Revised Estimates (FRE) of FY24 and the Final Estimates of FY23.

Why so many revisions?

While the government releases GDP estimates for each quarter, it does so based on

Financial year	GDP GROWTH RATES (IN %)					
	1st Adv. Estimates	2nd Adv. Estimates	Provisional Estimates	1st Revised Estimates	Final Estimates	
FY25	6.4	6.5	NA	NA	NA	
FY24	7.3	7.6	8.2	9.2	NA	
FY23	7	7	7.2	7	7.6	
FY22	9.2	8.9	8.7	9.1	9.2	
FY21	-7.7	-8	-7.3	-6.6	-5.8	
FY20	5	5	4.2	4	3.9	

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

the initial set of data it has collected and uses some assumptions and calculations to arrive at the GDP estimate.

As time goes by, more and better quality data are available with the government, which updates or revises the GDP number for each quarter and, as a consequence, for each year. Typically, apart from quarterly GDP estimates, there are five rounds of GDP estimates for any particular year. These are:

- The FAE released in January of the relevant financial year.
- The SAE released in February of that year;
- The Provisional Estimates (PE) – this includes the data from Q4 or January to March quarter – in May;
- The FRE in February a year later; and
- The Final Estimates in February, two years later.

What are the GDP updates?

On the whole, the GDP updates were positive but the highlight was the kind of revisions that took place for past quarters and years.

As far as quarterly GDP is concerned, India's GDP in Q3 grew by 6.2% (over the same quarter last year) and MoSPI also revised the Q2 GDP growth rate from 5.4% to 5.6%.

For the previous financial year (2023-24), the GDP was revised sharply from 8.2% to 9.2%. The FAE for FY24 (which were released in January 2024) had pegged the GDP growth at 6.4%.

7.3%. As such, the growth rate has been revised up by 1.9 percentage points in a year's time.

Similarly, the GDP growth rate for 2022-23 or FY22 was revised up from 7% to 7.6%.

Do GDP estimates go through large revisions?

The table alongside shows the GDP revisions for each of the past six financial years to provide perspective to the rate of revisions that have been brought about this time.

FY21 – the year when India underwent a technical recession due to the Covid-induced nationwide lockdowns – saw substantial revisions in GDP estimates. This is understandable as data gathering and data quality also took a severe hit that year.

But for other years, the revisions are most often less significant. For instance, FY22 started off with an estimate of 9.2%, and after varying in a narrow band, ended up exactly where FAE pegged it.

In this context, the sharp upwards revision for the previous financial year stands out. A difference of 1 percentage point between the Provisional Estimates (released in last May) and the FRE released on Friday is even more than the difference in the Covid year (FY21).

What is the significance of the sharp upward GDP revision?

GDP data provide the bedrock of under-

standing for the Indian economy. Weaker GDP data point to weaker tax collection for governments and lower profits for corporate India. These, in turn, have implications of their own.

For instance, one of the biggest reasons why Indian stock markets are getting punished by foreign investors currently is the slump in corporate earnings.

At a macro level, before it was revised on Friday, the FY24 GDP data suggested that private consumption demand in India – that is the money spent by Indians in their individual capacity for everyday activities be it buying a car or a shampoo – had slumped. This private consumer demand is the biggest contributor or "engine" of India's GDP growth and, before FY23's revision, it was pegged at a growth rate of 4% in FY24. After revision, it is pegged at 5.6%.

In fact, even in the revision for FY23, the private consumer demand has seen a significant uptick.

On the face of it, these are substantial shifts in momentum and suggest that private consumption demand was not weakening as much as previously understood.

In fact, in the current financial year it is the private consumer demand which is pulling up the GDP growth rate – far more than other engines of GDP growth such as government's spending or the spending by the private sector towards new capacities such as factories.

In essence, the revisions upend the existing understanding of the internal dynamics of the Indian economy – what is holding back growth and what is propelling it.

What is the upshot?

There are three main takeaways: ■ Until last March, India's economy was doing much better than previously understood.

■ The slump in India's growth momentum in the current financial year is sharper than previously imagined. The deceleration in GDP growth rate now is from 9.2% to 6.5%.

■ Sharp revision of data undermines both the reading of the Indian economy and the credibility of the official estimates.

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Grandmaster Boris Spassky & Cold War era 'Match of the Century' he played

AMIT KAMATH
MUMBAI, MARCH 2

FORMER WORLD chess champion Boris Spassky passed away at the age of 88 on February 27.

He is perhaps best remembered for having played the legendary 'Match of the Century' against American Bobby Fischer in 1972, a chess battle in Reykjavik, Iceland, that pitted the two Cold War superpowers – the USSR and the US – against each other.

The match was built up as a clash of cultures and personalities. Fischer, the typical eccentric genius, was the poster-boy for American individualism while the suave and laid-back Spassky represented the might of the Soviet state-sponsored chess machinery.

While both grandmasters did not fit this billing in reality, the World Chess Championship of 1972 nonetheless remains one of the most important cultural moments of the Cold War, that defined both their legacies.

The context

The ideological and geopolitical rivalry between the US and the USSR during the Cold War played out in all fields, from Space exploration to arms development. Sports, in this case, was no exception.

Entering 1972, the Soviets enjoyed a 24-year monopoly on the world championship title. Spassky, who earned the title by defeating compatriot Tigran Petrosian in 1969, was the latest in a line of Soviet champions going back to 1948. This dominance was, in no small part, due to concerted efforts of the Soviet state which invested in chess like no other country at the time. Men were hand-picked and groomed to play at the highest level to show the world the intellectual superiority of the Soviets.

It is in this context that Bobby Fischer emerged as a perfect foil to the Soviets. Here was a lone gunslinger from the US, a country which did not boast of a great chess tradition of its own, taking on the might of the Soviet machine. That Fischer had long been critical of the Soviet style of allegedly settling for early draws only added further intrigue to the bat-



Boris Spassky (left) and Bobby Fischer during their final game in Reykjavik. AP

tle which captured the world's imagination.

The lead up

Till the last moment, it was unclear whether the match would even take place as Fischer kept everyone hanging. (He wanted more money.)

He nonetheless trained hard, like he was entering a boxing match. Fischer swam, cycled on a stationary bike, played sports like table tennis for aerobic fitness, and worked on increasing the strength of his grip. ("So my opponent can feel my might when I shake his hand").

Fischer landed in New York only three days before the first game, but was spooked by the paparazzi at the airport. It took a phone call from US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (and a hike in the prize money amount) for Fischer to finally board the flight to Reykjavik.

In contrast, Spassky had landed in Iceland's capital 12 days before the match without any fuss. This contrast between the two grandmasters became more pronounced as the match went on.

Spassky's grace

Fischer became insufferable after landing in Iceland. He showed up late for the first game, claiming to be caught in traffic. He then moaned about the cameras and the noise they were supposedly making. He lost after an uncharacteristic mistake.

Fischer forfeited the second game after being unable to convince the organisers to remove cameras from the playing hall. The third game, however, was shifted to a small room behind the hall to placate Fischer.

Spassky took Fischer's shenanigans with grace. As the reigning world champion, he could have simply walked away instead of

adjusting to his opponent's whims. But that isn't who he was. Grandmaster Garry Kasparov wrote after Spassky's passing: "Spassky always wanted to play, and he handled the situation with impressive dignity".

His grace was perhaps best exemplified at the end of Game 6, considered to be one of the greatest exhibitions of chess till date. After conceding defeat, Spassky stood up and applauded his rival along with the rest of the spectators. And as former world champion Vladimir Kramnik put it, he did so at a time "when people still did such things sincerely, there were no [social media] likes existing".

As Fischer started to show his strength on the board, however, the Soviet delegation began to raise a stink. A suspected mole was removed from the team, and absurd allegations were made about the chairs being wired to disrupt Spassky with electromagnetic fields. After a thorough investigation by the organisers – the chairs were even x-rayed – nothing was found.

Through all this, Spassky remained his calm self. He would eventually concede after game 21. His loss came at a price – Spassky was reportedly banned from flying outside the USSR for two years.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Nasty showdown

Onus on Europe to pacify Trump

AMERICAN President Donald Trump is not known for exercising restraint in word or deed. And he certainly pulled no punches during his showdown with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office on Friday. However, the Russians saw things in a different light. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova lauded Trump and his deputy JD Vance for displaying a 'miracle of restraint' by refraining from hitting 'scumbag' Zelenskyy. Even though Trump mercifully didn't go the whole hog, Russia has every reason to be ecstatic about the disastrous meeting. The US President blew his top when the Ukrainian leader held Vladimir Putin responsible for triggering the war in 2022. Springing to the Russian President's defence, Trump chided Zelenskyy for 'speaking badly about somebody else'. That left no room for doubt about which way the American wind was blowing.

The writing was on the wall last month when Trump called Zelenskyy a dictator and accused him of starting the Ukraine war. The latter had hit back by saying that the US President was 'living in a disinformation space' created by Russia. Now, US-Ukraine relations have hit a new low. The unsavoury development has prompted Europe to go into a huddle. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who greeted a visibly rattled Zelenskyy with a comforting hug in London on Saturday, is still hopeful that peace talks can be revived. Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron, who met Trump in Washington last week, are trying to convince him that a forced ceasefire that doesn't provide security guarantees to Ukraine would fail to deter Russia from launching another invasion.

The challenge for European leaders is to pacify the US President and stop him from rushing headlong into a deal skewed in Russia's favour. That looks like a tall order right now — Trump seems to be lapping up all the Russian praise coming his way and is in no mood to forgive an 'ungrateful' Zelenskyy.

War on drugs

Punjab's battle needs more than crackdowns

THE Punjab government has launched yet another ambitious war on drugs, aiming to eradicate the menace within three months. With 796 raids, 290 arrests and massive seizures, the crackdown has been swift and aggressive. However, such operations are not new. Punjab has long been battling drug trafficking due to its proximity to the Golden Crescent — a hub of heroin production encompassing Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. Will this time be any different? The Bhagwant Mann-led administration has coupled enforcement with a broader strategy, including deaddiction and rehabilitation. The focus on regulating private drug deaddiction centres and prescription drug sales is a step in the right direction. However, the success of this war depends on addressing the root causes — political complexity, porous borders and lack of economic alternatives for the youth. Punjab has seen such crackdowns before. In 2017, the then CM, Capt Amarinder Singh, promised to break the drug trade in four weeks. His government took several measures, including annual drug tests for government employees and the drug abuse prevention officer initiative. Yet, the drug crisis raged on. Before that, the Badal-led SAD government's fight against drugs, too, proved to be a sham.

The failure to dismantle large cartels means doubts about the effectiveness of the campaigns. The end-users, who are often poor addicts, remain easy targets for law enforcement while the 'big fish' stay elusive. If this pattern continues, the drug trade will persist under a different guise. Large drug consignments still enter Punjab despite heavy policing, pointing to deeper structural issues. Without a long-term vision, these crackdowns fail to bring lasting change.

A three-month deadline is unrealistic. Instead of quick fixes, Punjab needs structural reforms, stricter border controls, judicial efficiency and community-led solutions. Otherwise, this latest 'war on drugs' will be another political spectacle — one that fails to deliver a drug-free Punjab.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 1925

State of Indian finance

THE feature of the Financial Statement presented by the Finance Member to the Legislative Assembly that is necessarily the first to attract attention is that after several consecutive years of deficit, the Government of India has for two successive years had a realised surplus, and anticipates a surplus also in the ensuing year. Some idea of the change in the financial position of the government may be formed from the fact that in the five years from 1918-19 to 1922-23, the total amount of the deficit was no less than Rs 100 crore. Even in 1923-24, the revised estimate pointed to a deficit on ordinary account, though the deficit was in this case small, but the actual results disclosed a small surplus. The position was maintained in 1924-25, when the government was able to reduce the hated salt duty. The budget for the ensuing years shows further progress along the same line. As against a total estimated revenue of Rs 133.68 crore, the total estimated expenditure is Rs 130.44 crore. Of course, the whole of this is not true recurring surplus. As the Finance Member explains, Rs 2.27 crore of this surplus represents receipts of a non-recurring character. On the other hand, there is a non-recurring item of expenditure in the military budget to the tune of Rs 1.71 crore. Deducting the one from and adding the other to the anticipated surplus, the Finance Member concludes that 'in any case, Rs 2.68 crore of the surplus represents a true recurring surplus.' The surplus in the coming years is bound to be larger because, as he points out, there is 'the possibility of a continued reduction in military expenditure'.

We are in Zelenskyy's shoes now

With Trump and Putin virtually on the same side, India can no longer fall back on Moscow

SOUTH SIDE
NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

LATE last year, the White House Historical Association added an exhibit to its White House tour for tourists — a full-scale replica of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, located a block away. It includes a tour of spaces barred for the public in the real building, including the Oval Office. Adding the wax figures of President Donald Trump and Vice-President JD Vance arguing with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office before the media would complete the exhibit. The 'showdown', as the bare-knuckle scrap is now known, has shocked the entire world, signalling as it does the end of a world order that has prevailed since the end of World War II. The moment deserves to be memorialised.

Several 'nuanced' geopolitical arguments are being forwarded to explain the Trump-Vance attack on Zelenskyy. That Trump wants the war to end, but Zelenskyy wants to drag it out. That Trump's mediation — Zelenskyy is reluctant to sign off on it because it forces him to cede territory to Russia and half of Ukraine's mineral wealth to the US for all time — is a confidence-builder with Vladimir Putin that will prevent further Russian aggression in Europe. That Trump wants to pull Putin out of China's embrace so that the US and Russia can go back to being the two big boys in the West, while China can play in the East. But the jury is out on these interpretations. Some might argue that the Trump-Vance barage of Zelenskyy has diminished America.

What lessons can India take from this shape-shifting moment? So far, what is most evident is a sense of relief mixed with triumph that Prime Minister



CAUTIONARY TALE: Now abandoned by the US, Ukraine cuts a sorry figure. REUTERS

Narendra Modi's visit to Washington, at least in the two encounters with the media that the two leaders had together, went off without the treatment that Zelenskyy got. Self-congratulation is also aplenty about how the Indian foreign policy establishment was able to suss out Trump and return home with 'outcomes' on defence cooperation and trade. Zelenskyy is being ridiculed for going into the meeting 'entitled' and 'without preparation' to deal with a new President whose personal relationship with Putin has upended the trans-Atlantic consensus against Russia.

What did PM Modi do differently? Unlike Zelenskyy, who demanded a security backdrop from the US in return for agreeing to a peace agreement with Russia, Modi did not refuse to do anything that Trump wanted. India took back the undocumented Indian immigrants without a murmur. It also accepted that it was US procedure 'to shake them and fly them back in military aircraft. The government reduced some tariff lines before the PM embarked on his first meeting with Trump 2.0 and may 'rationalise' more in the run-up to the first draft of a trade agreement later this year. Delhi back-pedalled on the BRICS de-

Trump's casting of Ukraine as the aggressor and his formula for peace should serve as a warning.

dollarisation plan after Trump tore into it, despite Modi's advocacy of trade in local currencies at the Kazan summit in October 2024. Modi did not argue with Trump's criticism of Indian tariffs in front of the media. Only time will tell if the Indian side was successful in pushing its case behind closed doors.

For India, more important than PM Modi coming out unscathed from his meeting with Trump should be what Beijing has taken away from the Oval Office encounter. Trump has indicated in recent weeks that he is not as passionate

about protecting Taiwan as the Biden administration. He has demanded that Taiwan, which Beijing has not ruled out taking over militarily, must pay the US for its defence. He has accused the Taiwan chip-making industry of undermining US chip manufacturers. The treatment to Zelenskyy has raised concerns of an emboldened China making a grab for Taiwan.

Closer home are an unsettled border with China, Chinese militarisation along this border, its claims in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, and the recent experience with Chinese territory-slicing tactics. During Modi's visit, India and the US signed a defence cooperation deal in which 'the leaders committed to break new ground to support and sustain the overseas deployments of the US and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific, including enhanced logistics and intelligence-sharing, as well as arrangements to improve force mobility for joint humanitarian and disaster relief operations along with other exchanges and security cooperation engagements'. China, which is gauging Trump's actions for itself, has not reacted to this specific measure, but made a muted statement that 'bilateral cooperation

should not harm a third party'.

During Modi's visit, Trump, who has made no secret of his admiration for Chinese President Xi Jinping, said they used to be 'very close' and described China as 'a very important player in the world'. He also offered to make peace between India and China. Perhaps in India's only public rejection of a Trump idea, the Foreign Secretary batted away the offer politely later, saying it was a bilateral issue. Still, while thinking of India's vulnerabilities vis-à-vis China, Trump's casting of Ukraine as the aggressor, and his description of the parts of Ukraine occupied by Russia as Russian, and his formula for peace — surrender by the victim to the invader — should serve as a warning. We are all Zelenskyy now.

India must now deal with the reality of a world where the friendships and partnerships of old may no longer count. With Trump in the saddle, the US offers no consolation. With him and Putin virtually on the same side, India can no longer fall back on Moscow to exercise strategic autonomy. In its own neighbourhood, India is not just friendless today, it has China glowering at it with Pakistan by its side. At a time when the developing world is looking for a country that can stand up to Trump's trade and tariff wars, many wonder what India truly stands for. Leading members of the Global South such as Brazil and South Africa are chumming with Beijing than with Delhi.

Now abandoned by the US, Ukraine cuts a sorry figure. As former diplomat DB Venkatesh Varma has noted, Zelenskyy's case is a cautionary tale for those who are eager to do the role of a proxy. But history will not forget that he took on a determined enemy and a much bigger military, turning Russia's expected 'three-day' invasion plan into a grinding stalemate that is in its fourth year now. He also returned home a more popular leader after the Oval Office showdown than he was when he left for Washington.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Diplomacy and virtue do not make easy companions. — Iain Pears

Fashion hanging by a thread

NARAYANI GANESH

RIPPED jeans and faded T-shirts have been around as 'in' clothes for many years now. The boomers may view this strange trend in clothing as nothing short of disgusting. They ask, why wear beat-up clothes when you can wear new ones? The later generations view used clothes that may even be tattered or with holes and paint stains as being full of character and depth, perhaps even history. Popular music idols flaunt them, including Jungkook of the K-pop boy band BTS, so do Hollywood and Bollywood celebrities who may pay hefty prices to purchase these from designer stores. And, in turn, they further the trend as their fans emulate them. Thus, brand new clothes lines are supposed to look like battered or 'thinned' clothes, for that grunge look.

This reminds one of inverted snobbery that led intellectuals to smoke beedis rather than branded cigarettes; of fashionistas carrying middle-class cloth bags that had imprinted on them the name of the store (well, so do uber branded handbags that cost a bomb). The *Juicy* laundries of JNU unwittingly created a fashion trend among those also brimming with leftist ideologies. This leads one to ask, what is fashion, really? Well, from wearing painfully uncomfortable stiletto heels with narrow fitting to body-hugging claustrophobic clothes and pointed shoes that bite your toes, we've now come to uphold loose garments and comfort as key features of the grunge look. That's good.

This has translated to wearing sneakers with evening clothes — even as part of your wedding dress ensemble by some — so that you don't have to get tortured by footwear that squeezes your feet and throws you off balance. Usha Uthup went on to popularise wearing sneakers with heavy silk saris, and she adds colour to her saris by adorning them with bits of zari or even snips from her sari. MF Husain took this even further and did away with footwear altogether, preferring to go around barefoot.

It does take some elan to carry off wearing 'rage' — not everyone looks good in them. But it has certainly created a booming industry that thrives on producing, reselling and marketing what look like used and tattered clothes. The more thrashed or battered they look, the better their saleability.

A New York Times report says that Abe Lange, 'a vintage seller who specialises in ultra-distressed clothes', also makes a living off his used clothes that he rents out at steep prices. And there are tailors, including designers and stylists.

So you also have a Rajinikanth who thinks nothing of appearing in public without a wig, makeup or suits, just being what he is, showing off his bald pate and crumpled kurta-dhoti and chappals, with nary an eyebrow raised. Ripped or patched-up, faded, stained denims are no longer the preserve of the labour class; they are an integral part of the wardrobe of the rich and famous as well as those of young students. These are even celebrated and showcased twice a year in a 'Distressed Rest' that Legarbagge hosts with Lange in the US.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Congress' best bet in Kerala

Refer to 'Modi & the band of God in Kerala' (The Great Game); the incisive analysis highlights a crucial political opportunity for the Congress in the southern state. To counter both the BJP's rising vote share and the CPM's strategic missteps, the party must assign four-time MP Shashi Tharoor a key role. His broad appeal and intellectual stature could unify the Congress and energise voters more than the Gandhis' favourites such as KC Venugopal. Meanwhile, with the CPM prioritising opposition to the Congress over ideological consistency, the Left may inadvertently facilitate the BJP's expansion in Kerala, as seen in West Bengal and Tripura. By backing Tharoor, the Congress can fortify itself and stem the BJP's rise in the South.

CHANCHAL S. MANN, UTA

Recognise merit within party

Refer to 'Modi & the band of God in Kerala'; political parties must recognise merit within their ranks. Shashi Tharoor of the Congress has won four parliamentary elections consecutively, while Suresh Gopi won a seat for the BJP for the first time in Kerala. Both have proved their worth to their parties. We often rue that good people don't enter politics and when they do, their parties don't support them. For any party to be successful, it will have to establish a grassroots connect with the people of Kerala. Party politics should not mar the prospects of any candidate and they should get a fair chance to seek a mandate.

GURNOOR GREWAL, CHANDIGARH

Mutual funds good option

SEBI has said that nine out of 10 people turn their fingers while investing in stocks in the hope of better returns. One needs to have good knowledge of forward trade, short, long sale and other intricacies to become a good investor. At present, various open-ended mutual fund schemes are a good option. One is sure to gain around 20 per cent over a period of one or two years. Systematic Investment Plans (SIPs) are beneficial over long periods for small investors. Interested people should switch over from investing directly in stocks to mutual funds.

NPS SOHAL, CHANDIGARH

Combine farm subsidies

Apropos of 'Fertiliser crisis'; the current system of agricultural subsidies should be overhauled as it discourages diversification and is regressive, with a major share of the benefits going to rich farmers. Subsidies on power, water and fertilisers should be clubbed together into a single cash transfer payable per hectare of area cultivated. Subsidy should be reduced with an increase in area under cultivation by any landowner. Additional cash incentives could be announced to encourage cultivation of environment-friendly cash crops, like a top-up payment to encourage the cultivation of pulses, millets, oilseeds, horticultural products, etc. This would help in preventing further depletion of the water table and also reduce the power consumption and subsidy bills.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Ditched by the US

Donald Trump wants to recover \$350 billion that the US pumped into the Ukraine war by forcing Zelenskyy to sign an agreement on accessing mineral resources. Now, Zelenskyy is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Kyiv faces the harsh reality that many former US allies have earlier encountered. History is replete with examples of nations such as Afghanistan that repudiated their trust in Washington and were abandoned later. Henry Kissinger was right when he said that it was dangerous to be America's enemy, but fatal to be its friend.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWANA

Language row avoidable

Apropos of 'Now Tamil Nadu Governor versus CM Stalin on Hindi row'; the Governor has held the ruling dispensation's two-language formula responsible for a lack of job opportunities for the state's youth. TN Law Minister S Renghathi needs to realise that the Governor is a representative of the President, responsible for implementing provisions of the Constitution. He is very well within his rights to guide the state government. The CM must understand that Hindi is not just 'another language'.

VIJAYA SHARMA, BY MAIL



White House fracas holds a grim message

The explosive encounter between US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the White House is unprecedented. Nothing like this, in the full glare of TV cameras, has ever been witnessed between two heads of states, and certainly never involving the US President. Not even in November 1971, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imperiously snubbed President Richard Nixon—saying “If India pokes its nose in Pakistan, US will not keep its trap shut. India will be taught a lesson”—cancelled the India-US joint press conference at the White House and walked away with utmost dignity. In the latest meltdown, none of the three, including US Vice President JD Vance, have come out smelling of roses. Yet, as occupant of the world’s most powerful office, it is Trump who has taken the worst beating, with many berating him as a boor and bully.

With diplomacy trampled by Trump and Vance at the ‘meeting’, the unmistakable message of the treatment meted out to Zelenskyy is that the US will not countenance any opposition to the way it wants to end the war and claim Ukraine’s minerals and rare earths. Zelenskyy knew he was expected to sign the minerals-for-US-support deal on the dotted line, but he chose to grandstand before the cameras, and tutor Trump about peace and the consequences of making nice with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Knowing that he would have to sign the minerals agreement that Trump wants, Zelenskyy said that he was ready to do so “as the first step toward security guarantees”. In the aftermath, he received a rousing welcome in London, where Premier Keir Starmer assured Zelenskyy of the UK’s full support. It is doubtful whether a Europe pitted against the US, even as the Trump-Putin entente unravels, can make Zelenskyy hold out against ending the war.

In the last three years, Europe and the US pumped up Zelenskyy. He saw himself as a world statesman to whom all powers must defer because he was fighting Russia. He failed to note that the wide dispensation in the White House was different, with little regard for diplomatic niceties. Trump taunted Zelenskyy the moment he arrived for his casual war-hero attire of black sweatshirt, black slacks and combat boots. Zelenskyy should have sensed that he had got off on the wrong foot. He should have known that when Trump says he wants something done, he has no choice. Trump has to be anticipated, appeased, obeyed and shown more than due deference. Anything short of that could turn out to be disastrous, as Zelenskyy discovered. Whether and how Europe adapts to the demands and dictates implicit in the manner Trump and his team handled Zelenskyy could set the stage for the next such show.

Balance classroom, real life education

Recent research on the arithmetical abilities of children in the classroom and children selling vegetables in the market has shed useful light on the gap between formal and informal education. It may help in bridging the gap between the two forms of education, both of which are important. A study co-authored by Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo has shown that children in the market are good at calculating prices and returning the balance even when odd amounts are involved. The same working children were poor in arithmetic in the classroom. Even when they spent part of the day in the classroom and part of it in the market, they found it difficult to do the sums in the abstract form. They did the same arithmetic correctly in the market without paper and pencil. Conversely, non-working children who were good in the classroom could not do the sums outside, and in the market. What it shows is that learning is influenced by the method of learning, the environment, and perhaps the felt need to learn.

There are many studies on the numeracy and literacy deficiencies of children in school. Children, especially from weaker backgrounds, are often found unable to cope with the learning demands in the classroom. The Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) always talks about the inability of children of higher classes to do the calculations and text reading they are taught at lower classes. What it shows is the gap between abstract and practical arithmetic, between theory and life skills, a natural environment and a created space, and between a felt need and an exercise whose use the child is not fully aware of. The best education strategies would try to bridge the gap, take the classroom to the market and the market to the classroom.

In a wider sense, it reflects the gap between intuition and knowledge, participation and observation, and experience and concept that is at the heart of understanding. Every skill and gift has in it a dissociation between the two modes. Singing is an incomplete rendering of the music in the being, and all human knowledge is an approximation of experience. We understand the world through experience, and explanation comes later. The child in the market experiences the world in numbers. It is explained to the child in the classroom. Basically no child is taught an idea or skill by the teacher. The teacher only helps the child to discover what is within. In the market, the child discovers it herself. This is the basic idea of learning and human understanding, and it should guide teaching. The study underlines its truth.

Study by Nobel laureates provides invaluable insights into why we need both

FROM GRANDSTAND TO THE FRONTLINES

Rethinking wildlife conservation in India

Despite growing awareness, conservation efforts are being undermined by lack of action on the ground

SANJAY GUBBI

As another World Wildlife Day passes, it is an opportune moment to reflect on the past and assess the current state of wildlife conservation in India. Conservation efforts gained prominence only after the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act in 1972. From then until the mid-1980s, a handful of influential individuals—those with access to power and decision-making circles—led efforts to frame policies, designate protected areas, and safeguard habitats. Their dedication laid a strong foundation, bringing several species and ecosystems back from the brink of extinction.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, conservation expanded beyond this small circle, drawing in passionate individuals and grassroots organisations driven by their love for wildlife. This era saw numerous battles to protect habitats through government engagement, policy advocacy, and legal challenges. Some conservationists also turned their attention to the growing menace of illegal wildlife trade. While professional wildlife research institutions emerged during this period, many adopted a cautious stance—preferring to focus on scientific inquiry rather than direct intervention in conservation crises. They critiqued policies and lamented habitat loss but distanced themselves from the difficult, hands-on task of saving species in distress.

The mid-2010s marked another shift. With changing economic dynamics and the rise of social media, wildlife conservation became a fashionable pursuit, coinciding with the boom in safari tourism, wildlife photography, and eco-tourism. While increased public interest should have been a dilution of the core mission, conservation increasingly took on softer approaches—artwork, glamorous wildlife photography, social media posting, plastic cleanup drives, candlelight vigils, and online petitions—diverting focus from the critical task of protecting habitats and species.

A recent encounter exemplifies this trend. A young man, eager to introduce himself as a culture conservationist, proudly presented a small vulture-themed sticker, explaining that distributing these would raise awareness and help protect the species. While his intentions were noble, the reality is that India’s vulture population has been

decimated primarily by nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs administered to livestock and the depletion of carrion, their primary food source. Without addressing these threats, no amount of stickers will alter the grim fate of these critically endangered birds.

Today, conservation efforts are scattered across various activities, from urban outreach programmes to the installation of solar-powered pumps that draw water into forest lakes. While well-intentioned, some of these measures harm wildlife. For



instance, year-round artificial water sources disrupt the natural mortality patterns of species like elephants and tigers, whose populations are regulated by nature’s cycles. Similarly, there has been an explosion of bird and butterfly inventory groups. But if these groups do not actively work to protect habitats, their meticulous species lists will soon become relics of the past.

Habitat destruction and poaching remain the twin evils plaguing India’s wildlife. These, in turn, fuel human-wildlife conflict, exacerbating tensions between local communities and conservation efforts. Meanwhile, new threats loom—such as the large-scale introduction of invasive species or habitat manipulation—yet, few are willing to address these pressing concerns. Many non-governmental organisations prioritise maintaining a neutral stance, but neutrality in the face of destruction is complicity.

Take, for example, the escalating human-elephant conflict in the Western Ghats in Karnataka’s Hassan district. Once a peaceful elephant habitat, the region has been irrevocably altered by mini-hydel power projects and infrastructure expansion, displacing elephants and pushing them into unfamiliar territories such as Puttur and Sulya. A scientific study has unequivocally linked the rise in conflict to these so-called “green energy” projects. Yet, a prominent NGO working in the region chooses to overlook this inconvenient truth, opting instead to emphasise conservation efforts while sidestepping

the root cause—habitat destruction. Ironically, the same organisation once campaigned against capturing problem elephants but now turns a blind eye to their daily capture and electrocution, all while receiving funds under the pretext of protecting them. Is this a case of misplaced priorities or sheer convenience?

India ranks second only to Brazil in forest loss. If we fail to address this existential crisis, all other conservation efforts will amount to little more than spectatorship in the face of destruction. Wildlife conservation is not for the faint-hearted—it is fraught with complexities, opposition, and, at times, controversy. Failures are inevitable, but so too are victories. What matters is the relentless pursuit of the goal: protecting wildlife and their habitats.

Though well-intentioned, the young vulture enthusiast likely lacked proper guidance in prioritising critical conservation actions. Perhaps conservation leaders, directly or indirectly, steered him toward superficial activities—well-meaning but ineffective in bringing real change.

Today, more people instruct others on conservation—often without first-hand experience than there are individuals willing to fight on the frontlines. The economic beneficiaries of wildlife far outnumber those who battle tirelessly to protect biodiversity. Ecologists churn out research papers but disclaim responsibility for saving wildlife; organisations prioritise diplomacy over action; modern environmentalists are engrossed in soft campaigns with little tangible impact; governments are preoccupied with economic development, and all the while, India’s natural heritage continues to be decimated.

So, who will bell the cat?

We need a society—and a civil society movement—that understands wildlife conservation holistically and is deeply sensitive to the looming ecological disasters. If we fail to act now, we risk following the trajectory of some European nations, where wilderness has been all but lost. Future generations may only encounter near-domesticated species, travelling abroad to witness ecosystems that once thrived within our own borders. As more World Wildlife Days come and go, will we continue to observe the decline of our species from the safety of the grandstands? Or will we take the bold steps necessary to halt this tide of destruction?

It is time to dedicate committed individuals working alongside the government, some species and habitats have been saved. However, safeguarding these victories is crucial. But we must also confront our failures and recalibrate our approach before it is too late.

(The writer is a conservationist and author of *Leopard Diaries*)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Passing on the legacy of excellence

My granddaughter embarks on her IISc journey, and I recall my own experiences

K GNANAMURTHY

The Indian Institute of Science (IISc) is an institution that needs no introduction. It stands as a revered temple of knowledge, a beacon of excellence in the scientific community. Yet, my granddaughter Shwara, an undergraduate student at UCLA, was eager to learn more about it. During her visit to Bengaluru last year, she spent a day exploring the campus on Open Day, February 24.

As she walked through the various departments, she was impressed by the pioneering work being done in science. Her experience was so profound that she decided to pursue her post-graduation at IISc, turning down offers from esteemed institutions like Stanford, Princeton, and Cambridge, which were also closer to her home in the United States.

I was surprised and asked her why she chose IISc. She replied, “It’s as good as those institutions, plus I can be close to you and Granny.” And then she asked, “And you tell me *that*, why did you choose IISc?”

Holding back my tears, I reminisced about joining IISc more than half a century ago, not because I had a clear idea of what it would be, but because it provided a stipend of Rs 250 per month. I set off to the ‘temple of knowledge’ on my old Jawa motorcycle—after my mother had performed a puja. On the way, it broke down on the then desolate Nandurdi Road, and I repaired it myself, greasing and tearing my pants. Torn jeans may be a fashion these days, but were frowned upon back then. The journey was not without its challenges, but the experience was transformative.

On my first day at IISc, a lecturer dropped a piece of chalk and asked us what had happened. Our unanimous response was, “You dropped it, sir.” He corrected us, saying, “I simply opened my fingers, and it was attracted to the ground by gravity.” This simple yet profound lesson taught me that higher ed-

ucation is not just about memorising formulae or quoting literature, but about cultivating a passion for learning and exploring the depths of a subject.

As I reflected on my time at IISc, I realised that the institution had taught me valuable lessons about the importance of critical thinking, rigorous observation, and intellectual honesty. Never make a qualitative statement without proper reference; don’t ‘reverse plagiarise’ by passing off your ideas as those of somebody well known; and millions of consistent observations are not good enough to make generalisations—3-4 in a million can go beyond expectations in all observations. But gravitation never fails, and hence it is called a law.

The experience had a profound impact on my life, shaping me into the person I am today.

I asked my granddaughter, “What more do you want, Shwara, in an institute inspired by Swami Vivekananda and founded by Tata Jamsheji?” IISc continues to be a beacon of excellence in the scientific community. March 3 marks the birth anniversary of Jamsheji Tata, the founder of IISc.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fitness needs a scientific approach

Apropos ‘Counting steps: India’s long road to fitness’ (Mar 2), every time a new fitness trend emerges, people blindly follow it without fully understanding its implications. What works for one may not work for another, and could even be harmful. Moreover, many confuse fat loss with weight loss, ignoring the fundamental differences in

regimes for men and women. Fitness requires a personalised scientific approach, taking into account an individual’s body structure, lifestyle, medical condition, and history. Metabolic health and genetics play a significant role in fitness. A one-size-fits-all approach to fitness is ineffective. **N Sathya Reddy**, Bengaluru

A diplomatic disaster

The recent incident at Oval Office has shocked the world. Having invited another Head of State, Trump should have displayed more maturity, and patience. But within minutes, Donald Trump destroyed the hopes of peace-loving nations, showcasing his bravado. It was foolish of him to expect Zelenskyy to sign an agreement without offering any security guarantees. Trump’s arrogance

was exposed by the threat of a third world war. Despite being labelled a dictator, Zelenskyy acknowledged the US role in bringing peace, knowing that European countries stand solidly behind him. Holding such a sensitive meeting without sufficient honour is a diplomatic disaster. **S V Venkatakrishnan**, Bengaluru

Delimitation resurfaces

The delimitation issue has resur-

faced, while the long-delayed Census remains unaddressed. The Union Home Minister’s assurance that southern states will not lose seats lacks commitment, particularly regarding whether northern states will gain seats due to delimitation. **V Padmanabhan**, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to letters@deccanherald.com (only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender’s postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

This victory is the result of years of struggle... In the last 27 years of BJP’s exile, Delhi saw scam after scam either by the Congress or the AAP governments... This is the beginning of a new era for Delhi, and we need to fulfil PM Modi’s dream of ‘viksit’ Delhi...



Rekha Gupta, Delhi CM

Never trust a person that tries to sell you by how righteous they are. I’m telling you right now, it’s a scam.

Richie Norton

TO BE PRECISE

The Oval Office



IN PERSPECTIVE

Yuvaniidhi and the education paradox

Karnataka’s flagship unemployment allowance scheme may further strain already low university enrolments

NIRANJAN R

Karnataka stands as a progressive and technologically advanced state, outperforming the national average in several social, economic and industrial indicators. However, higher education in the state faces challenges such as dwindling student quality, low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and funding issues. The university density (number of universities per lakh eligible population aged 18-23) in Karnataka is 1.1, higher than Maharashtra (0.6), Telangana (0.8), Andhra Pradesh (0.9), Tamil Nadu (0.9), Kerala (0.8), and the national average of 0.8. With 43 universities, Karnataka boasts the highest number of universities in South India. In terms of college density, the state has 68 colleges per one lakh eligible population, the highest in the country and more than twice the national average of 30.

Despite having a high education infrastructure, Karnataka’s GER of 36.2 is relatively low compared to Telangana (40), Andhra Pradesh (36.5), Tamil Nadu (47) and Maharashtra (35.2). This indicates that the number of institutions alone may not significantly boost GER. Instead, the quality of institutions, advanced infrastructure and strong affirmative policy interventions are essential to augment GER.

In recent years, the Karnataka government’s flagship Yuvaniidhi scheme may further strain the already low GER. According to the Seva Sindhu portal, 2,57,700 students (51.17% boys and 48.82% girls) have registered for the scheme. These students are predominantly unemployed and have not enrolled in any post-graduation programmes. Belagavi leads in student registration with 28,674, followed by Kalaburagi (17,035), Raichur (16,082), Bengaluru Urban (15,174) and Vijayapura (14,576). The lowest registrations are recorded in Kodagu (1,580), Bengaluru Rural (2,944) and Ramnagara (3,276).

In contrast, admissions to PG programmes in the majority of universities, particularly in social sciences, basic sciences and commerce, are declining. According to Unified University and College Management System (UUCMS) data, the total admissions to PG programmes in all universities for the academic year 2024-25 amount to 2,57,367, which is less than the registrations for the Yuvaniidhi scheme. If this trend continues, it will have a catastrophic effect on GER in Karnataka. The state’s policy should aim to bring these students back into mainstream higher education and promote GER. The objective

of improving GER can be accomplished by limiting the Yuvaniidhi scheme duration to a maximum of one year instead of two years. Even after completing one year, if the student continues to be unemployed, they should be incentivised to enrol in a PG programme.

This policy will have a dual effect. First, in the initial year, the student will understand the real requirements of the job market and have the chance to take admissions to a PG programme, which will, in turn, enhance job prospects with additional skills and capabilities. Second, it promotes the improvement of GER in the state. The scheme will function both as an unemployment allowance programme and a GER promotional programme. The current two-year maximum duration of the scheme provides unemployment allowance but may not promote GER. After completing two years, if the students wish to return to academics, they may have lost their academic orientation.

Meanwhile, many state universities, particularly new and young ones, lack adequate infrastructure to provide quality education. In 2022-23, out of 19 conventional universities, only 10 received general grant-in-aid, in addition to salary and pension grants. Only four universities received grant-in-aid for asset creation. The award of general grant-in-aid declined further in 2023-24, with only four universities receiving it. Only one university received grant-in-aid for asset creation. In the previous budget for 2024-25, only four universities received grant-in-aid, and again, only one university received grant-in-aid for asset creation. This declining trend in grants hinders the quality of education, further worsening GER.

With the current university infrastructure, ranking state universities is a futile exercise of comparing unequals; instead, the ranking should be an indicator of the first among equals. Curtailing the Yuvaniidhi scheme tenure from a maximum of two years to one year will provide additional funds for the government to enhance the universities’ basic infrastructure and cater to increased enrolment. The forthcoming budget must make on the short-term pain of generously funding universities for the long-term gain of quality human capital.

In 1955, celebrated economist Milton Friedman submitted a memorandum to the Government of India during the second five-year plan, emphasising that expenditure on increasing the productive capacity of human beings is at least as important as industrial investment. A budget with enhanced investment in public universities and institutions will augment human capital, which has a long-term impact on society.

(The writer is assistant professor of economics, Vijayanagara Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Ballari)

Stagnant salaries, soaring costs: The job crunch



ANINDYO CHAKRAVARTY
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

RECENTLY, an acquaintance, who is a senior manager in a big firm, was complaining about GenZ recruits.

"They don't want to work for even Rs 25,000 per month," he exclaimed. "I started at just Rs 10,000."

"When was that?" I asked him.

"In 1994," he replied. "I didn't have the heart to tell him that Rs 10,000 back then is the same as Rs 70,000 today. I also didn't want to point to the fact that he probably got huge raises within the first five years. Whereas, freshers today can expect their salaries to rise at just 5-6 per cent per year."

It isn't my friend's fault that he cannot gauge the magnitude of the salary crisis for India's white-collar workers. Most of us do not think of inflation when we compare salaries across generations. That is because psychologically, we as consumers are only used to treat money in nominal terms.

So, if Rs 25,000 was a great starting salary 30 years ago,

we think it must be good today as well.

1, for instance, reached a salary of Rs 1,00,000 per month in 2004. That was five years into my job. In today's prices, that is equal to Rs 3,75,000. But, if I am interviewing a candidate with similar experience for a job, and they ask for Rs 1,50,000, I consider it too steep.

But we all know from our daily experience that Rs 25,000 doesn't buy you much in a big city. A single room in a decent part of any city will cost at least Rs 15,000. In Gurgaon, where I live, a room with a small kitchenette, costs much more.

That leaves a young employee with just Rs 10,000 for all their monthly expenses. Even better paid new joiners don't have more than Rs 25,000 to spend on themselves after they pay their rent and utility bills. Their daily conveyance alone would eat up Rs 3,000-5,000 out of that.

A single mid-level restaurant meal would cost Rs 300-500. Four outings with friends in a month can set them back by Rs 1,200-2,000. And, don't tell me that they shouldn't eat out. We all did when we were young — went to movies with friends, splurged on an occasional fancy meal, bought sneakers and jeans. That is what middle-class life has been about since the mid-1980s.

In fact, 20 years ago, people signed up for car loans



INFLATION EFFECT: The Rs 10,000 back in 1994 is the same as Rs 70,000 today, it took

as soon as they got a steady white-collar job. That is why passenger car sales grew at 15 per cent per year between 2001-02 and 2011-12. Since then, there's been a steady slowdown — car sales have grown at just 5 per cent per year, with most of the real increase taking place in multi-utility vehicles for the more affluent.

But it is not just the case of starting salaries. Even mid-rung white-collar employees with 10-15 years of experience are stuck with minimal pay hikes. Some are being asked to take pay cuts while others are simply being retrenched. A recent survey showed that 59 per cent of corporate employees

It is not just the case of starting salaries. Even mid-rung white-collar staffers with 10-15 years of experience are stuck with minimal pay hikes. Some are being asked to take pay cuts while others are simply being retrenched.

do not expect good increments, and people at the middle-management level are most likely to expect low salary hikes.

This is happening at a time when actual inflation faced by the urban middle class, who populate white-collar positions in India, has risen sharply. The official urban retail inflation figure, which looks at an average basket of goods and services, underestimates the real increase in costs because it covers the urban poor as well, whose consumption patterns are very different.

Take the cost of housing, for instance. Official urban retail inflation data says that housing costs have risen at an average of 4 per

cent per year over the past five years. A recent study in the top seven cities in India shows that rent for a standard two-BHK house has risen at 11 per cent per year in the same period. That's nearly three times compared to what official numbers show.

Housing accounts for 22 per cent of the total consumption expenditure basket for calculating urban retail inflation. In reality, for most families living in big cities, it is at least 30 per cent of their total costs. If we adjust the weight for housing and take into account the actual rise in rents, then the average retail inflation faced by such middle class in the past five years rises to 7.7 per cent from 5.7 per cent.

A recent study by Quesada Corp shows that between 2019 and 2023, salary hikes have averaged just 0.8 per cent in the engineering, manufacturing, process and infrastructure (EMPI) sector, while they averaged 5.4 per cent in the FMCG sector. Other studies show that salaries in the IT sector have been more or less stagnant for the past 10 years, or have grown at a meagre rate.

So, a middle-class mid-rung employee earning Rs 1,00,000 in 2018-19, living in a big city, would have earned about Rs 1,25,000 in 2023-24. If they spent 85 per cent of their salary or Rs 85,000 back then, the real inflation

faced by them would have taken their expenses to Rs 1,23,000 in 2023-24. So, if they were saving Rs 15,000 per month in 2018-19, five years later, they were saving virtually nothing. Earlier, they could have saved up to buy gadgets and durables for the home. Now, they simply can't.

This has had a huge impact on the demand for goods and services that the middle class has traditionally generated in India. The demand for all kinds of goods — soaps, shampoo, razor blades, readymade garments, footwear, refrigerators, passenger cars, etc — has either declined or is stagnant, after a brief spike in the middle of 2021, when the Covid lockdowns ended.

This is a major economic crisis that India's middle class faces today. Short-term solutions, like income tax breaks, cannot help resolve this. The government has been trying to nudge corporates into increasing wages — their profits have quadrupled in the past five years, while their wage bills have remained stagnant. But corporate profits are now shrinking. Big companies saw their profits grow by just 5 per cent in the latest quarter, while small listed companies saw a decline in profits. They are unlikely to give more to their white-collar employees.

Cricket diplomacy: Can ICC stand up for Afghan women?



C UDAY BHASKAR
DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR POLICY STUDIES

WHEN the Afghan cricket team defeated England at the ICC Champions Trophy match in Lahore on February 26 by eight runs in a nail-biting finish that went to the last over, cricket lovers the world over applauded this plucky team for their resilience and determination. Since they were admitted to the international cricketing fold in 2017, Afghanistan, with its war-ravaged history of the last five decades, has transmuted this game into a symbol of national identity, hope and unity.

This winning streak came to a disappointing end on February 28 when Afghanistan played Australia, the top dogs in the ICC, and put up a fighting score of 273, but the match was abandoned due to rain. The Aussies had already raced to 109 for the loss of one wicket in under 13 overs and the outcome was predictable.

But Afghanistan is now a high-calibre cricketing nation and even the Taliban, with its oppressive rule, is aware of

the team's popularity.

However, this spotlight on the Afghan cricket team at the ICC and their prowess also draws attention to a tragic tale — that of the Afghan women's cricket team. Their plight is a microcosm of the larger oppression and ensure that the Taliban, currently in power in Kabul since August 2021, has inflicted on the women of Afghanistan.

With the Taliban restricting education for girls, banning all kinds of sports for women and forbidding them from appearing in public spaces, the Afghan women cricketers had to flee the country to escape persecution. In a dramatic journey in late 2021, enabled by three intrepid Australian women — Mel Jones, Emma Staples and Catherine Orday — a total of 120 people were smuggled out of Afghanistan to Australia via Pakistan and Dubai.

An Afghan women's cricket team in exile has been formed in Melbourne and they are seeking both recognition and support from the ICC management, but this has proved elusive. As per the rules, to qualify for full membership of the ICC, a cricketing nation has to field both a men's and a women's team to receive funding and enjoy Test status.

Since the Taliban seized power in 2021, this condition regarding a women's team has not been met, but the ICC has chosen to accord the



TRAGIC TALE: The spotlight on the Afghan men's cricket team at the Champions Trophy draws attention to the fact that with the Taliban banning sports for girls, its women cricketers have fled the country, reports

ACB (Afghanistan Cricket Board) full membership with funding and has allowed it to participate in the current championship.

The ICC is aware of the plight of the Afghan women's team in exile and Chairman Jay Shah has noted: "We are committed to supporting cricket development through the Afghanistan Cricket Board while recognising the challenges facing Afghan women's cricket, including the concerns of players living in exile." He added: "Our focus is on constructive dialogue and viable solutions that safeguard the best interests of all Afghan cricketers."

The status of women in Afghanistan since the Taliban assumed power in 2021 has been steadily deteriorating. A UN official who prepared the country report described this period as

For a start, the ICC could provide funding that is due to the Afghan women's team in exile in Melbourne after consultation with the Afghanistan Cricket Board.

'three years' worth of countless decrees, directives and statements targeting women and girls, stripping them of their fundamental rights and enervating their autonomy".

This erosion of dignity and loss of self-esteem has precipitated a mental health crisis among young Afghan girls and women and the incidence of suicides has been increasing. Concurrently, early child-bearing and infant mortality has increased by almost 50 per cent since mid-2021.

Traditionally, Afghan women have enjoyed a high degree of access to education and work opportunities as also gender dignity within the framework of a conservative Muslim society. However, the imposition of a visibly misogynistic Taliban ideology has made half the population almost invisible,

for they cannot be seen in public spaces. The erasure of identity and self-esteem is frightening.

The UN Security Council passed an ambitious and lofty Resolution 1325 in October 2000, which demanded that all member states respect and comply with international law related to the rights and protection of women and girls. Afghanistan adopted a NAP (National Action Plan) in 2015 with normative goals to ensure gender equity and protection from sexual violence, but all of this has been jettisoned under the Taliban rule.

Past the enormity of 9/11 in September 2001, the US bombed Afghanistan back to the 'stone age' and sought to prise the Al Qaida leader Osama bin Laden from Taliban protection. The Taliban fled Kabul and a fledgling democracy was ushered into Afghanistan but it did not take roots.

Twenty years later, the US made a hasty and shambolic withdrawal from Kabul in August 2021 (reminiscent of the American withdrawal from Saigon in April 1975) and the Taliban came back to seize power in Kabul.

Clearly, using force to intimidate the Taliban, that is steeped in patriarchy and male dominance, to conform to a more gender-equitable form of governance is not a viable option. Sociological

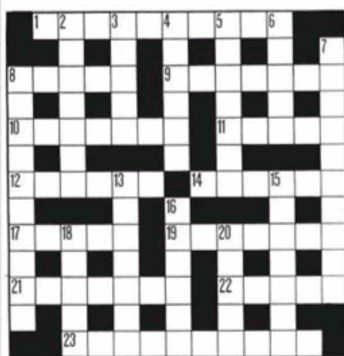
research related to peace, conflict resolution and women's security dwells on 'patriarchal bargaining' as a means to infuse a degree of malleability in an otherwise inflexible, gender-insensitive hierarchy. Academics and activists have been engaged in valuable research in this area and there is a strong case to evolve a political consensus based on these findings to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.

India has always had an empathetic relationship with the Afghan people even as that nation was plunged into war and devastation since the Soviet occupation of 1979. In recent months, Delhi has begun a tentative rapprochement with the Taliban and comfort at the official level will slowly evolve.

The ICC card provides an option to incentivise bargaining with the Taliban and quiet cricket diplomacy should be explored. For a start, the ICC could provide funding that is due to the women's team in exile in Melbourne after due consultation with the ACB and other steps can follow.

The unfortunate girls and women in Afghanistan who remain stoic and resolute despite the Taliban decrees must not be forgotten. Reach out to these sisters in your own manner and let them know that their plight has not been erased from the collective consciousness.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Physically fit (2,8)
- 8 Vehemently (5)
- 9 Vindication (7)
- 10 Galley with three banks of oars (7)
- 11 Warning of danger (5)
- 12 Bargain contentiously (6)
- 14 Use argument to persuade (6)
- 17 Sound broadcasting (5)
- 19 The largest living bird (7)
- 21 Set officially (7)
- 22 Provide accommodation for (3,2)
- 23 Ambitious (4-6)

Saturday's solution

Across: 1 Philip, 4 Campus, 9 Catch up, 10 Plane, 11 Liner, 12 Go-ahead, 13 Anything but, 18 Address, 20 Tot up, 22 Blues, 23 Inverse, 24 Esteem, 25 Unreal.

Down: 1 Fickle, 2 Let in, 3 Inherit, 5 Alpha, 6 Plateau, 7 Speedy, 8 Up against it, 14 No doubt, 15 Get even, 16 Rabble, 17 Appeal, 19 Ensnare, 21 Tense.

SU DO KU



EASY

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

3	7	9	5	8	2	6	4	1
4	5	1	9	3	6	8	7	2
6	2	8	7	4	1	3	9	5
5	3	4	8	2	7	1	6	9
2	9	7	6	1	4	5	3	8
8	1	6	3	5	9	4	2	7
9	8	3	2	6	5	7	1	4
7	4	5	1	9	3	2	8	6
1	6	2	4	7	8	9	5	3

CALENDAR

MARCH 3, 2025, MONDAY

■ Shikha Samrat	1946
■ Prithvi Shukla	12
■ Prithvi Pantale	20
■ Hiran	1446
■ Shikha Palsha Tithi 4, up to 6:03 pm	
■ Shikha Yoga up to 8:57 am	
■ Bhishma Yoga up to 5:25 am	
■ Adhvi Nakshatra up to 4:30 am	
■ Moon in Aries sign	
■ Gandmoola up to 4:30 am	

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	25	12
New Delhi	29	13
Amritsar	23	06
Bathinda	26	11
Jalandhar	23	10
Ludhiana	25	10
Bhiwani	27	12
Hisar	28	11
Sirsa	27	10
Dharamsala	15	05
Manali	09	0
Shimla	10	04
Srinagar	10	03
Jammu	23	10
Kargil	-01	-13
Leh	0	-14
Dehradun	22	09
Mussoorie	12	07

Synthetic data: Promise and hidden peril in academic research

NEIL TANNEN AND VICTOR LOBO

In the rapidly evolving landscape of artificial intelligence and data science, synthetic data has emerged as a groundbreaking tool in academic research. But what exactly is synthetic data? Simply put, it is artificially generated data designed to mimic real-world data, often used when actual data is difficult to obtain or privacy is a concern. For example, a dataset simulating medical records can help doctors train AI models without compromising patient confidentiality. While synthetic data appears to offer a solution to data accessibility and privacy challenges, its hidden risks threaten the accuracy, ethics, and credibility of academic research.

Synthetic data enables researchers to create datasets resembling real-world data using techniques like Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) and Variational Autoencoders (VAEs). It is increasingly employed across fields such as healthcare, political science, and economics, allowing

researchers to work without breaching privacy. However, beneath this seemingly risk-free innovation lies a host of problems that, if not carefully managed, could undermine the very foundations of academic research. One of the main advantages of synthetic data is its ability to protect privacy, especially in sensitive fields like healthcare. Researchers can use synthetic medical datasets to study diseases such as cancer or heart disease without revealing personal patient information. Institutions like the Mayo Clinic have even tested synthetic health records to train AI for diagnosing various conditions. Yet, as a 2023 report in *The Lancet Digital Health* reveals, synthetic data often fails to capture the full complexity of human biology. Without critical biological and environmental variations, AI models trained on synthetic data may overlook rare diseases or misclassify conditions, potentially leading to harmful medical decisions. While privacy is vital, prioritising it over data accuracy in medical research can endanger lives.

In political science, synthetic data has been used to forecast voter behaviour, but it carries its own set of pitfalls. A 2022 study in the *Journal of Political Science Methods* examined synthetic voter data used to predict US election outcomes. The models, based on past voting trends, failed to account for new political dynamics or shifts like the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, predictions were off by 16%, skewing forecasts in favour of traditional political parties and ignoring the rising influence of independent candidates. This example highlights the dangers of relying on synthetic data to draw conclusions from historically biased or incomplete datasets, as it risks reinforcing outdated ideas and producing inaccurate insights.

Beyond issues of bias and accuracy, synthetic data poses a serious threat to the reproducibility of academic research, a cornerstone of scientific integrity. A 2021 study in *Nature Machine Intelligence* found that nearly half of the 50 papers reviewed, which used synthetic data, couldn't be replicated because the data was either un-

available or generated using proprietary methods. This lack of transparency makes it impossible for other scholars to verify or replicate findings, eroding the credibility of such research. Clearer guidelines are needed to ensure that synthetic datasets and the methods used to create them are openly disclosed, enabling peer review and preserving scientific rigor.

Synthetic data is also increasingly used in economic research and policymaking, where it is used to model trends such as inflation or labour market dynamics. However, errors in these predictions can lead to misguided policies with real-world consequences. For instance, the Bank of England used synthetic labour market data to forecast a quick post-pandemic recovery, only to find that unemployment remained stubbornly high, especially in vulnerable sectors. This discrepancy arose because synthetic models failed to account for important variables, such as inflation and worker migration. As a result, policies based on these flawed models had serious

implications, underscoring the risks of over-reliance on synthetic data in public policy decisions.

Ethical concerns further complicate the use of synthetic data. Since the algorithms generating synthetic data are often proprietary and not transparent, questions about accountability and responsibility arise. Who verifies the accuracy of this data? Should journals require full disclosure of synthetic datasets used in research? And if research based on synthetic data leads to false conclusions, who is held accountable? These ethical dilemmas came to a head in 2023 when a researcher at a major European university fabricated synthetic climate change data to support a predetermined hypothesis. This scandal serves as a stark reminder of how synthetic data can be manipulated to advance misleading narratives, making academic fraud harder to detect.

Despite these challenges, synthetic data is not without merit. It holds great promise in areas where privacy and data scarcity are significant concerns. However, to prevent

misuse and protect the integrity of academic research, tighter regulations are essential. Institutions and funding bodies must create clear guidelines for using synthetic data, including transparency about how it is generated, requirements for reproducibility, and ethical oversight. Only then can synthetic data be used responsibly, ensuring it advances research rather than distorting it.

While synthetic data offers exciting potential for academic research, it must be handled with caution. From bias and ethical concerns to challenges in replicability and transparency, the risks are substantial. To unlock its full potential without compromising scientific integrity, researchers must use synthetic data responsibly, with full disclosure and rigorous validation. If done right, synthetic data can be a powerful tool for advancing knowledge; if misused, it risks distorting truth and misleading research.

(Neil Tannen is an assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, and Victor is Vice-Chancellor, St. Joseph's University, Bangalore)

The Canadian government has reinforced border operations to stop migrants going to the US, a major Trump complaint. But people are starting to flee the US for Canada

MARTINA STEVENS-GRIDNEFF

The pre-dawn call by United States border agents to their Canadian counterparts was shocking: A group of nine people, mostly children, were about to enter Canada on foot. Early morning on February 3, when the group was spotted, the border between Alberta and Montana was brutally uninviting, covered in snow, dark with a temperature of minus 17 degrees Fahrenheit.

Grainy night-vision images captured by Canadian border cameras showed two little girls in pink winterwear holding a woman's hand as they trudged through the snow. More children followed in a line. Another adult dragged two suitcases.

The quick intervention by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police crew that found the group was the result of a newly beefed-up border presence across the vast frontier between the US and Canada. At 5,525 miles, the border is the world's longest.

Until recently, the border had been described by both nations as "unguarded," a testament to their close friendship. But with the return of President Donald Trump to the White House, it has become a flashpoint in the relationship between the two neighbours.

Even before his inauguration, Trump accused Canada of allowing large numbers of migrants to enter the US without legal permission. He has made stopping that movement a key demand as he threatens to impose crippling tariffs on Canadian exports to the US.

After a one-month reprieve, Trump said those tariffs will now go into effect from March 5.

Canada has mobilised. It has deployed more staff and equipment along the border and tightened visa rules that critics say made Canada a steppingstone to enter the US illegally. The number of illegal crossings into the US from Canada was relatively low to begin with and has now plummeted, indicating that Canada's response to Trump's pressure is working.

But now a new dynamic is emerging at the border: Asylum-seekers are fleeing north to Canada as Trump has embarked on his plan for sweeping deportations.

On any given day, the Courts-Sweetgrass border crossing in Alberta is an orderly hum of trucks, trains and civilian vehicles. The communities on either side are close in every sense. In a half-hour drive on one of the two baseball diamonds in Coats, Alberta, and chances are it will land in Sweetgrass, Montana. The two countries' border authorities even share a building.

"There is close day-to-day communication," Ryan Harrison, an RCMP staff sergeant, who heads an integrated border enforcement team, said on a bitterly cold February morning as he drove along Border Road, a gravel lane snaking through plains that marks the border for several miles. "These are people we go for dinner with and attend their retirement parties."

But Trump's criticisms have upended the business-as-usual atmosphere at the border.

Trump has been particularly alarmed by a jump in the number of migrants entering the United States without legal permission over the past three years.



NFT

Why Canada is securing its border

The number of people apprehended last year crossing from Canada into the US illegally was nearly 24,000. (That pales in comparison to crossings from Mexico: Last year, more than 1.5 million people were apprehended at the US southern border, US government data show.)

Canada has directed 1.3 billion Canadian dollars (\$900 million) to enhance border security, adding two Black Hawk helicopters and 60 drones equipped with thermal cameras.

It also tightened requirements for temporary visas that some visitors used to arrive in Canada legally but then enter the US illegally.

The Canadian government said its recent measures have driven down the number of unauthorised crossings into the US: About 600 migrants were intercepted at the border in January, down from about 900 in January 2024, according to US data. "Whether or not some of the allegations about what is going on at the border are accurate or not, or credible or not, I don't have the luxury not to take it seriously," Marc Miller, Canada's immigration minister, said in an interview last week.

The opposite direction

Canada's focus on the border, against the backdrop of Trump's domestic crackdown on migrants, is why the nine people walking into Alberta on Feb. 3 raised alarms: It was unusual to see a group this large crossing on foot in the heart of winter. The presence of young children made it all the more troubling.

Canadian authorities said they have

been intercepting more people arriving from the United States, but because of the schedule Canada follows in releasing data, no numbers are yet available for the weeks since Trump's inauguration in January. But government news releases suggest the numbers are rising.

In Alberta, preliminary calculations show that up to 20 people have been apprehended crossing illegally so far this year, including children as young as 2.

By contrast, only seven people were apprehended crossing the border illegally in Alberta in all of 2024.

Of the nine migrants found in Alberta on February 3, seven, including three children aged 13, 10 and 7, were Venezuelans, the RCMP told *The New York Times*. The two others were children, 7 and 5 years old, from Colombia.

Harrison, who has worked at the border for two years, said, "It's the first time I've seen Venezuelans here." Venezuelans fleeing the oppressive government of President Nicolás Maduro have been offered protection across the world. Nearly eight million have fled in the past decade, according to the United Nations, an extraordinary number for a nation not at war.

Under the Biden administration, 600,000 Venezuelans already living in the US were granted temporary protection and allowed to live and work in the country. More were able to stay under smaller programmes. The Trump administration has ended all protections for Venezuelans, and most programs will expire in the coming months. The removal of Venezuelans has emerged as a priority in Trump's deportation push. Venezuelans described as criminals have been sent to the US facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, while others have been deported back to Venezuela.

The Venezuelan government has recently begun arresting not just political activists but also bystanders at protests, and it's unclear how it will treat returned migrants. As a result, Canada has a policy of not deporting Venezuelans.

Safe country?

Canadian border officials declined to discuss what they did with the group of nine migrants detained in Alberta, saying they were protecting their privacy.

But a spokesperson for US Customs and Border Protection confirmed that Canadian authorities had returned them to the United States, and they had been transferred to the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Their status is unknown.

Canada and the United States regularly return asylum-seekers crossing into each other's territory, on the premise that both countries are equally safe for asylum-seekers to lodge their claims and that they should do so in the first of the two countries in which they arrive. The policy is formally known as the Safe Third Country Agreement. But the Trump administration's deportation drive and changes to asylum policies call into question whether the US is still a safe country for asylum-seekers, experts and advocates say, and if Canada should continue sending people back over the border.

The New York Times

Unsafe acts, dying whispers

PRANATI A S

Since the Hema committee report was released to the public in August last year, discussions on the need for internal complaints committees to address sexual harassment in cinema, art, and theatre spaces have intensified.

Even before this, in 2017, when the #MeToo movement gained momentum, it empowered many women from various sectors to call out their tormentors, exposing the vulnerability of women in their workplaces. But what happens to these victims after they speak up?

While PoSH (prevention of sexual harassment) committees are mandatory in workplaces, concerns remain about women working in informal sectors like cinema and theatre. In September, the Karnataka State Women's Commission directed the Karnataka Film Chamber of Commerce to create an internal complaints committee to address sexual harassment in the Kannada film industry.

How different is theatre from cinema? It is an open secret that young girls and women are exploited in theatre spaces. Just as the casting couch is a reality in cinema, women in theatre also face exploitation and compromise to gain opportunities.

Theatre, after all, remains a stepping stone to cinema.

"Exploitation is present in theatre as much as it is in cinema," says Vijayamma, senior journalist, theatre critic, and women's rights activist.

There is always resistance when such issues are addressed. Even when the women's commission directed the KFCF to form a committee, endless debates followed, with some in the industry claiming it was unnecessary and boasting about the "sanctity" and "purity" of the film industry. If that were true, then why the reluctance?

"In spaces like theatre, where there is a lot of creative freedom and liberty, it is also important for women to feel safe. There is a small delta of temptation that can become something else. If it is not a wilful arrangement, women must have redressal systems within the creative framework. It is imperative—and a sign of maturity—as we go forward," says theatre artist and senior journalist Preethi Nagaraj.

Harassment and sexual misconduct take many forms—unwanted touching, vulgar jokes, sexual innuendos, and advances. Chitra Venkatraju, a well-known theatre artist, recalls an incident from a decade ago when a prominent film star with

a theatre background sent her vulgar messages. "I filed a police complaint against him. The cops told me an FIR wasn't necessary and that they would wait for him. He later apologised, but it didn't end there. It backfired. A word spread that I'm a problematic person," she shares.

In most sexual harassment cases and even rape cases, the victim is often further victimised. Many #MeToo cases have shown this—actors lost work because they spoke out against influential directors or stars. Many theatre practitioners say that women who speak out about harassment, women's rights, and feminism are often excluded from mainstream discussions and opportunities within the theatre community. "Although the #MeToo movement empowered some women, many remain silent out of fear of victim shaming," says theatre practitioner Rajani Garud.

Theatre director Sharanya Ramprakash shares, "There is no way to report the kind of abuse that happens in theatre spaces, and they remain within whisper networks."

She emphasises the need for a body to prevent such cases, and it must begin with theatres and troupes themselves constituting an IC; these must be local and regional.

Do theatre troupes have internal committees? How do they address these issues? "At a team level, some troupes address these concerns, but they find it difficult because there will always be someone who wouldn't want this to occur. And these may coincidentally be men who are running these theatre troupes," says Preethi.

In the absence of clear guidelines or, more importantly, a strong support system, theatre troupes struggle to address these issues. As Sharanya points out, cases often remain whispers until they die down.

Some theatre practitioners suggest forming think tanks to develop redressal mechanisms, human rights groups, or having the Karnataka Nataka Academy step in to form a committee.

Karnataka's theatre community is scattered across the state, including rural and remote areas, with many amateur and local organised groups. Exploitation can take different forms—amateur groups invite directors to direct plays or conduct workshops. Theatre spaces are intimate, with performers working closely and rehearsing for days. Directors also often travel with the troupe. Given these situations, how safe have these creative spaces been or will be going forward?

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1975

Dharia asked to resign

New Delhi, March 2
Mr. Mohan Dharia, Minister of State for Works and Housing, today resigned from the Council of Ministers on the advice of PM Indira Gandhi to PM. Mrs. Gandhi sent Mr. Dharia a letter this morning in which she reportedly said that in view of the public campaign by Mr. Dharia against the party, it would be improper for him to continue as a member of the Council of Ministers. She advised him to resign immediately. She mentioned Mr. Dharia's letter to Maharashtra PCC chief P. K. Sawant, which, she said was couched in rude language.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2000

Dalit victim of caning dies

Bangalore, March 2
A Dalit activist injured in the police lathicharge in a protest move against the move to revise the Constitution, organised by the Karnataka Dalita Sangharsha Samiti here today, died soon after hospitalisation. The police maintained that the reason for the death is yet to be ascertained. The deceased activist has been identified as Nagaraju (35), a resident of Kogilu village near Yelahanika. At least six others were injured during the lathicharge and they have been admitted to various hospitals.

OASIS | CHANDER GUPTA

The art of arguing

The sole profession where arguments are the basic tool is that of lawyers. Arguments, by contending lawyers, in the courtroom are part of the procedure for facilitating judges to arrive at a conclusion. However, there is no judge sitting to hear our arguments and to adjudicate when we argue in the social domain with each other. The dynamics of interpersonal arguments are different from legal arguments.

All of us are faced with the situations of arguments, some more and some less, in our daily lives. Instances of arguments between husband and wife are rife. We argue with an array of people with whom we have some annoyance or differences. Arguments arise when there is a clash of contrary perspectives, conflicting opinions, and different approaches. Arguments generally exacerbate tension and foment bitterness between the persons.



Woefully, there is no enabling course or curriculum designed to teach the art of arguing—neither for the lay public nor even for law students. It is ironic that even the best of law schools do not impart to their students training for developing practical skills of arguing.

A civilised argument should venture to convince with facts, logic, and empathy. Before starting an argument, we should first have clarity about the objective, facts, and claims. "Raise your words, not your voice." We should speak our mind without appearing to be arguing overtly.

The word 'argument' has a negative connotation. To be 'argumentative' is considered a negative trait in any person. An argumentative person just advances his or her arguments without bothering to listen to the other side. An argumentative person becomes more aggressive if the other person refuses to be convinced.

An argument should be made with

the purpose of convincing the other side, rather than with the motive of causing offence. Do not blame the other person if you are unable to convince. We have to reinforce our arguments rather than force them on others.

Arguing is an art that needs to be cultivated. Instead of proving the other person all wrong, the purpose of an argument should be to put across your viewpoint and perspective successfully. Arguments are not always a contest between right and wrong. A successful argument convincingly manages to press on its pleas with logic and facts. Dissemination of the art of arguing will stand the society in good stead.

[OUR TAKE]

Securing the growth path

GDP figures suggest India is doing well on growth. Synchronised monetary and fiscal policy interventions will help sustain the momentum

Last Friday's GDP numbers were best summarised by HSBC chief India economist Pranjal Bhandari in a research note, "a beautiful past, predictable present". The December quarter numbers ended up entirely in line with analyst estimates of 6.2% despite a 100 and 60 basis point upward revision in 2023-24 and 2022-23 annual numbers of 8.2% (to 9.2%) and 7% (to 7.6%), respectively. We will know in May whether the March quarter numbers meet the assumed 7.6% target required to take 2024-25 GDP growth to the estimated 6.5%.

Analysts expect next year's (2025-26) GDP growth to be in the ballpark of 6.5%. This is pretty much in line with India's potential growth rate. Of course, there are contingencies such as a normal monsoon and downsides such as the ongoing US-triggered volatility in the global economy, both real and financial.

Predictions and revisions aside, what's the larger policy takeaway from the GDP numbers?

Private consumption seems to have done well which suggests some sort of demand recovery. This is in keeping with initial evidence of a qualitative recovery in the labour markets too. Whether this will sustain and become broad-based enough to boost the capex cycle is the most important question going forward — especially because the government push to investment seems to have peaked out at the Centre and is likely being crowded out by populist revenue spending at the level of states. The revision in tax slabs which is expected to add a lakh crore rupees to disposable incomes should help here. To be sure, some of the sentiment and income boost from tax slabs changes could end up being neutralised by the ongoing bear phase in the equity markets which have seen a remarkable rise in participation from middle classes in the recent past. Then there is the concern about external volatility pitting constraints on RBI's appetite for monetary easing, which, given the sharp slowdown in growth between 2023-24 and 2024-25 appears more justifiable (and needed) than before.

What does one make of the overall situation? India has done well so far. Now, economic policy must preserve the relative comfort of the country being the world's fastest growing major economy and boost future growth. It will take reforms, focused bilateral trade deals (exports are absolutely essential to take us to a sustained high growth path), and synchronised policy interventions by the fiscal and monetary arms to achieve this. India has done well on the last under this government. It is time to ace the other two now.

NOAA downsizing is opportunity in crisis

The dismissal of hundreds of researchers and meteorologists at the US's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) should not shock, given how Donald Trump has championed climate denialism. So, more than what Trump will do next, the question those in the global community invested in averting catastrophic warming should ask is how best to prevent further unravelling of the climate consensus and safeguard mitigation efforts. This, of course, includes insulating climate science and research from US pullouts and active obstruction.

The NOAA firings can be a test case. The agency's depleted strength will dent climate monitoring and research globally. A chunk of ocean data in India's immediate periphery comes from NOAA, illustrating the serious implications for the subcontinent. There could also be the threat of a possible trimming of NOAA infrastructure — its extensive network of satellites, ships, and more than 4,000 buoys and floats complements its skilled staff. With NOAA's annual budget averaging \$6.7 billion between 2015 and 2023, Trump's "cost-cutting" axe could fall on this too.

Almost exclusive reliance on one country — without accounting for climate saboteurs getting sweeping powers — has led the world here. The need is to reimagine collaboration in climate research. New multilateral arrangements where the burden of action, including funding, and the responsibility of leadership are not vested with one country, or just a few, and instead are more broad-based must be urgently struck. The non-US West and the large developing economies must be the counterweight to Washington. This will also be an opportunity to reform and rejuvenate the UN climate framework and the larger UN ecosystem and reorient it towards genuine multilateralism.

[GRAND STRATEGY]
Happymon Jacob

Necessity guides new India-EU bonhomie

One of the reasons why India and Europe will grow closer in the days ahead is because much of the world they disagreed about no longer exists

The recently concluded visit of the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen — accompanied by 22 members of the 27-strong European Union (EU) College of Commissioners — to India was the first such visit to a non-European country since von der Leyen received the mandate after last year. The visit could potentially mark the beginning of a promising new era in India-Europe relations.

The visit took place against the backdrop of dramatic global developments and a fast-changing balance of power. The arrival of Donald Trump in the White House, and the near complete reversal in American foreign policy, has put the 80-year-old Euro-Atlantic alliance under immense and unprecedented stress. The new US administration has clearly stated, and Europe has equally clearly understood, that Washington won't pay for Europe's defence going forward. Europe is on its own. The Indian side too knows that its ability to count on the US for its defence and

security is, at best, doubtful and, at worst, misplaced. Trump has also infused a growing sense of angst in European minds — and to some extent in Indian minds too — about being sidelined from crucial great power conversations, which could have a more significant impact on Europe than India. Europe feels left out of the great power conversations particularly between the US and Russia; and India would feel uncomfortable if indeed China is invited to be part of those conversations. In this context, it is worth noting that the India-EU joint statement makes an explicit reference to Ukraine, emphasising "support for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine based on respect for international law, the principles of the UN Charter, and territorial integrity and sovereignty".

If India's dilemma during the Joe Biden administration was to carefully determine the extent of its partnership with the US in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China and other domains of security, its primary concern, going forward, would be to determine whether the US has any interest at all in these domains. Put more bluntly, India has every reason to be concerned about the potential decline of its global profile in a Trumpian world. For Europe, on the other hand, while its dilemma under the Biden administration was to structure the nature of the Trans-Atlantic partnership's involvement in, or withdrawal from, its worry today is about the very existence

of such a partnership. While Europe is more worried about falling multilateralism, India is more concerned about the shrinking space available for multipolarity in a Trumpian world.

Not too long ago, the EU and India were in some ways located on the opposite sides of a normative and geopolitical order in which the Europeans felt the need to moral-shame India and India found itself talking back. The two sides were talking at each other. But somewhat unexpectedly, both sides now find themselves sidelined, providing thereby a reason to engage with each other more openly, without the constraints of difficult history and scepticism. One of the reasons why India and Europe will grow closer in the days ahead is because much of the world they disagreed about no longer exists.

Therefore, if the two sides can keep aside their differences and engage in a realistic and purposeful dialogue, based on common interests, we might see the emergence of a major voice in the international system. India and Europe might still not agree on their respective visions for the world order, but their differences seem to pale in a world where the very presence of any order is doubtful.

A new partnership born out of crisis: India and the EU — both major consequential actors on the world stage — then, are looking for new strategic relevance and new strategic partners.



If the two sides engage in a realistic and purposeful dialogue, we might see the emergence of a major voice in the international system.

The EU chief's keynote speech which she delivered in a function organised by INDIA'S WORLD magazine was, in that sense, appropriately titled, "The Consequential Partnership: Reimagining and realigning EU-India ties for today's world". Von der Leyen told New Delhi's strategic community and the diplomatic corps in her speech. This world is fraught with danger. But I believe this modern version of great power competition is an opportunity for Europe and India to reimagine their partnership.

The two sides have finally set a deadline — end of 2025 — to complete the ambitious free trade agreement. While a definitive deadline is important, it won't be easy to meet given the several hurdles which need to be overcome before the two sides can sign it. Top on New Delhi's mind is the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) issue which has been a major stumbling

block. Reports indicate that the European side is considering some modifications to concede to Indian demands.

From norm promotion to security partnership: On a more practical note, the main content of the India-EU relationship is poised for a sea change in the years to come, from norm promotion to a security-defence partnership. In her keynote speech at the event, von der Leyen announced "that we are exploring a future Security and Defence Partnership with India in the mould of the partnerships we have with Japan and South Korea". This announcement is significant considering its potential to transform the regional security order in the Indo-Pacific, even if the US takes a back seat.

Happymon Jacob teaches India's foreign policy at INU and is the editor of INDIA'S WORLD magazine. The views expressed are personal

Learning from DeepSeek, honing India's AI strategy

The first two months of 2025 have been eventful in the world of Artificial Intelligence (AI). In January, the release of DeepSeek's R1 model shook the AI world. Then in February, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, along with French President Emmanuel Macron, co-chaired the Paris AI Action Summit where United States (US) Vice President JD Vance emphasised the geopolitical and security implications of the AI race. Finally, PM Modi's recent visit to the US saw the launch of the TRUST initiative for US-India cooperation on critical technologies such as AI.

What do these developments imply for India's quest for AI leadership? The discussion in India in the aftermath of the shake-up caused by DeepSeek has been ensuring the availability of AI chips and accelerating attempts to build a sovereign Large Language Model (LLM). The government has announced that India will be developing its own LLM within the next few months and that the National AI Mission has already made over 10,000 GPUs available to startups and researchers. India AI Mission also put out a call for proposals to build foundational AI models, including LLMs and Small-Language Models (SLMs).

While the quick movement on this front is laudable, these are not the only — or even the most important — action items to prioritise post DeepSeek's success. Sure enough, DeepSeek has demonstrated its ability as a competitor to ChatGPT and others at a much lower training cost than its American counterparts. This is an encouraging development for a country like India that champions frugal innovation.

But it doesn't mean that the first, or only, logical next step for India is to build its own LLM. DeepSeek's main contribution is that it has come up with a differentiated approach to training an LLM vis-à-vis its US and European counterparts. The lower training cost is a result of that research-backed innovative approach.

There are three major learnings for India's tech leaders and policymakers here. First, India should prioritise putting in place all the building blocks necessary to innovate in AI. For that, plugging some fundamental gaps in the India's AI ecosystem — top-tier AI talent, unique datasets and advanced research and development (R&D) — will be critical. India today doesn't have the top-tier AI talent that the US or China boast of. Most Indian-origin talent in AI is unfortunately still working in Silicon Valley. Aravind Srivastava of Perplexity AI is happy to contribute funds to those working in AI in India, but not willing to move back to India. That's the logical decision for him given Perplexity AI's leading position in the US. But it makes sense for India will need to find ways to plug this AI brain drain.

India also needs to build a clear strategy to leverage its data-rich tech ecosystem. While

India's tech platforms, including UPI, are generating large volumes of India-specific data, Indian AI startups have not been able to build atop these datasets yet. Many other such datasets unique to India remain locked within India. India will need ways to unlock this for domestic AI startups to build upon.

Similarly, India's AI R&D ecosystem will need a major boost. During PM Modi's US visit, a key partnership was announced between India's recently launched Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) and the US National Science Foundation. But India also needs to boost private and public funding of its AI research ecosystem domestically, including its recently established AI Centres of Excellence, to raise the likelihood of truly innovative AI developments (like DeepSeek) coming out of India.

India must focus on first putting together these key building blocks to achieve true innovations in AI. The outcome, then, of putting these building blocks in place could be in the form of a more efficiently trained LLM (like DeepSeek's R1) or something else altogether that is truly innovative. That will help India truly command respect in the global AI ecosystem.

Second, India must put its weight behind open source innovation in AI. There is a big debate raging globally about open source/open weight models versus closed source/closed weight models. Open source LLMs, like DeepSeek's R1, have clear advantages. They are currently locked in a battle with closed source LLMs such as ChatGPT.

Many companies, notably France's Mistral, the US Meta and now, China's DeepSeek, have put their weight behind open source. India must also. Open source advantages Indian startups and researchers attempting to compete in AI, whereas closed source AI ecosystems will further deepen India's dependence on foreign AI systems. India will find common cause with Europe and other countries in the Global South on this, as they would typically benefit from an open source AI ecosystem.

Third, India must shift its focus much more to building AI competitiveness for now, rather than being overly focused on shaping global AI safety rules. At the Paris AI Summit, Vance explicitly outlined the US worldview on AI: In the high-stakes competition with China for AI leadership, it simply wants to win. In such a highly charged global race for AI leadership, India should shift its focus to building a competitive niche in the AI race. This is not to say, that India shouldn't continue pursuing global compacts on AI safety and building domestic guardrails; it should, but without losing focus on building national competitiveness in AI.

Indian policymakers and tech leaders must realise that competitive director, Jenny Miller stated that 40,000 people in India alone suffered from heat strokes, resulting in the death of 700 people, in 2024. Clearly, the detrimental effects of rising temperatures are showing a consistent upward trend. Researchers studying the impact of the climate crisis on humans at Lancet Countdown have found that 10 out of the 15 parameters in the study are showing signs of disturbing distress.

Let me share a personal experience. On December 23 last year, I was in the beautiful Haridwar valley in Uttarakhand with my family. In the afternoon, there was a snowfall, which lasted for 10 hours. The roads were covered with a thick layer of fresh snow and traffic

[BENJAMIN NETANYAHU] PRIME MINISTER, ISRAEL

If Hamas thinks that it will be possible to continue the ceasefire, or to enjoy the conditions of phase one, without us receiving hostages, it is very mistaken

HT

[STRAIGHTFORWARD]
Shashi Shekhar

Health too will be a frontier in the climate-crisis fight

Doctors at the Gorakhpur All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) are a worried lot. The number of hydrova vaccine patients is increasing each passing day. This skin disease is caused by exposure to strong sun. Usually, it is reported from people living in the desert where the sun is harsh all year round. Gorakhpur is in the terai (Himalayan foothills) of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The signal is clear, human skin is progressively unable to bear the extreme heat of the sun.

The doctors at AIIMS Gorakhpur have extensively analysed patients' data for the days between April and August 2024. They found that between April and August 2024, there were 30 days when the day temperature crossed 40 degrees. However, the AIIMS data show that Gorakhpur and adjoining areas experienced temperatures above 40 degrees for just six days in 2021. This year's forecast suggests a record-breaking heatwave. Gorakhpur is not an exception in eastern UP that's reporting extreme conditions.

Skin disorders aren't the only ailments affecting the population. Vector-borne diseases are also breaking records due to rising temperatures. Reports suggest a spike in dengue. In 2023, there was a record number of infections. This year, more than five million people visited hospitals due to problems caused by vector-borne diseases.

Recently, Global Climate & Health Alliance's executive director, Jenny Miller stated that 40,000 people in India alone suffered from heat strokes, resulting in the death of 700 people, in 2024. Clearly, the detrimental effects of rising temperatures are showing a consistent upward trend. Researchers studying the impact of the climate crisis on humans at Lancet Countdown have found that 10 out of the 15 parameters in the study are showing signs of disturbing distress.

Let me share a personal experience. On December 23 last year, I was in the beautiful Haridwar valley in Uttarakhand with my family. In the afternoon, there was a snowfall, which lasted for 10 hours. The roads were covered with a thick layer of fresh snow and traffic

had to be suspended. Residents said early snowfall suggested ample snow in winter. However, the season was unusually warm. On January 26, the temperature in Delhi was 23.9 degrees. Delhi and the northern plains of India experience severe cold and fog conditions during this time.

In the south, Bengaluru had a similar climate shock. Temperatures touched 35 degrees in February, which is unheard of. The country's financial capital, Mumbai, too suffered from heat early this year. Temperatures rose to 38 degrees and warm winds created discomfort.

The climate crisis is also affecting the seas and oceans. Sea levels are rising across the globe. Glaciers are retreating and the seas are warming. Some fear that cities such as Mumbai, Karachi, Dhaka and many more coastal towns will see sea ingress in the coming decades. We shouldn't forget that close to 10% of the global population lives in places that are not even five metres above the high tide line in coastal areas. If the situation keeps deteriorating, close to 100 million people will have to relocate. The world is already feeling the stress of migration due to reasons other than the climate crisis.

What's the solution to this pressing problem?

Some of the steps taken to mitigate the menace have been partially successful. The decline in the water table in UP and Bihar has been arrested, in many places. It has been reversed.

We must set ambitious goals and strictly implement and monitor new schemes and plans. Many countries have bestowed legal personhood on rivers to conserve them. This means those who pollute the rivers are tried under the same legal clauses meant for bodily harm caused to humans. We need to be strict while dealing with the factors that cause environmental damage. Our politicians and civil society leaders must move in this direction with sincerity and purpose.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

A BREWING POLITICAL CONTROVERSY

A major political controversy is unfolding across South India over the proposed redrawing of Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies, commonly known as delimitation. The issue has sparked apprehension, particularly in southern states, due to its potential impact on political representation.

Delimitation aims to reshape parliamentary seats based on population figures. While northern states stand to gain more seats, southern states may see minimal changes or even a reduction. Tamil Nadu is expected to be among the most affected.

By 2026, India's population is projected to reach 1.42 billion. Under the proposed adjustments, Karnataka's Lok Sabha seats may increase from 28 to 36, Telangana's from 17 to 20, and Andhra Pradesh's from 25 to 28. Tamil Nadu may see a marginal increase

from 39 to 41, while Kerala, with the slowest population growth, could lose a seat, dropping from 20 to 19. Meanwhile, northern states like Uttar Pradesh could see their seats rise dramatically from 80 to 128, and Bihar from 40 to 70.

India has historically experienced uneven population growth, with different states at varying stages of demographic transition. While northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh have seen higher population growth—resulting in a likely increase in parliamentary representation—southern states (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and parts of western India have successfully implemented population control measures. However, this success now appears to be working against them in terms of political

representation.

The implementation of the 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies may further impact seat adjustments, adding another layer of concern for the southern states.

The Southern India has undergone a significant demographic shift, with declining fertility rates. Chief Ministers N Chandrababu Naidu (Andhra Pradesh) and M K Stalin (Tamil Nadu) have publicly voiced concerns over the long-term consequences of declining birth rates on political representation. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is a key demographic indicator, estimating the average number of children a woman will have during her reproductive years. A TFR of 2.1 is considered the replacement level, meaning the population remains stable. Any figure below this threshold

signals a declining population. India's TFR was recorded at 2.01 in 2022, dipping below the replacement level.

In 2015-16, it stood at 2.2, reflecting a gradual decline. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), most southern states now have TFRs well below 2.1, while only Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand still record fertility rates above the replacement level. Andhra Pradesh CM Chandrababu Naidu has frequently cited these figures in his arguments against the delimitation proposal. For decades, the southern states earned praise for successfully implementing family planning programs through women's education and sterilization campaigns. However, this very success now threatens to reduce their parliamentary representation.

The delimitation could lead to a significant shift in political power, as

the states with larger populations will gain more parliamentary seats at the expense of those with lower populations. The total number of Lok Sabha seats may increase from 543 to 753, with each constituency representing approximately 20 lakh people.

Despite Union Home Minister Amit Shah's assurances that no injustice will be done to southern states, concerns persist. The Indian Constitution mandates periodic readjustment of constituency boundaries under Articles 82 and 170 to ensure equal representation based on population. However, the southern leaders argue that the process disproportionately penalises the states that have successfully controlled population growth. With political stakes high and regional disparities deepening, delimitation is shaping up to be a contentious issue, particularly in South India. The debate is likely to intensify as the 2026 deadline approaches, making it a key focal point in India's evolving political landscape.



LETTERS

SLBC-type tragedy should not recur

Despite relentless operations day and night for almost a week by all kinds of rescue teams, the eight workers trapped in Sriisalam Left Bank Canal could not be saved as heavy water, slush and debris slowed down the deep approach into the collapsed part. The Telangana government made extensive efforts to save them, but to no avail. CM is to visit the accident place to personally assess the reasons that caused this unfortunate calamity. All kinds of financial and other assistance from the State and the Centre are to be extended to the bereaved family members.

N S K Prasad, Hyderabad

THE tragic incident at the SLBC tunnel is indeed heartbreaking. Despite the valiant rescue efforts undertaken by the emergency responders, the loss of eight precious lives is devastating and this tragic news (Hans India 2-3-25) has sent shockwaves throughout the State in particular. The unfortunate victims, who were trapped in the tunnel, had their lives cut short in an untimely manner. This incident not only leaves their families in a state of grief but also raises concerns about the safety measures in place at the tunnel.

Ganti Venkata Sudhir, Secunderabad

Kudos to young mountaineer from TG

THE grand success of nine-year-old Vihana Ram hail from Siddipet in Telangana in his Mount Kilimanjaro expedition tells the story of extensive support given by his parents and trainer coupled with his grit, fortitude and determination to achieve the feat under any circumstances. His immense faith after scaling Mount Pataals in Manali, Himachal Pradesh, pushed him to achieve the latest feat which saw him set a record as a young mountaineer. This not only sends a strong message but also a ray of hope to the youth of the country that nothing is impossible to attain if one has the ability and wherewithal to encounter any difficulties that come in their way.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad

US President roots for survival of fittest

At the end of the unprecedented showdown in the Oval Office US President Donald Trump light-heartedly remarked that this will make good television. His remark was spot on. Zelensky stood firm and did not cave in to Trump's strong-arm tactics. He held Trump and his deputy JD Vance to a draw in the shouting match. Signaling a shift in policy, Trump is siding with Russia and refuses to blame President Vladimir Putin for the invasion of Ukraine and killing tens of thousands of Ukrainians. The businessman that he is, Trump tries to gain access to the rare earth minerals in Ukraine to recover the military aid. Trump's stand on the Russia-Ukraine conflict reinforces the perception that he stops at nothing and acts to hasten the creation of a 'survival of the strongest' world.

G David Milton, Maruthanode, TN

THE US President Donald Trump was literally bullying Ukraine President Zelensky at the Oval office in White House. The USA is going to find some country, say China; to hit it below the belt for all it is doing to the world at large. Zelensky was asked to surrender his country's wealth to the US. This so-called superpower has been at this business all through its history. By spreading word that Russia is on an expansionist spree, the USA and the European countries brought NATO membership into the picture and talked Ukraine into the 'deal' which ultimately led to the Russian aggression on Ukraine, much to the glee of arms cartels.

Govardhana Mymedlu, Vijayawada

THE US-Ukraine Presidents spat on TV shocked the world. It seems that US wants to better its relations with Russia, and also wants Ukraine to supply minerals as a payback of the US war aid of \$119 billion. While the US is becoming dearer to Russia in this showdown, Europe is rallying behind Ukraine signalling a paradigm shift in the geopolitics of nations.

P R Ravinder, Hyderabad

THE recent standoff between Presidents Trump and Zelensky is a cause for concern regarding the future of US assistance to Ukraine. While Kyiv battles Russian aggression, a withdrawal from American support would be catastrophic. Will Europe step in to fill the gap, or will Ukraine's opposition collapse without strong US support? Will Europe step in to fill the gap left by Ukraine alone, posing a threat to global democratic stability.

Anshu Bharti, Begusarai, Bihar

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BENGALURU ONLINE

New home owners deprived of Gruha Jyoti Scheme

BENGALURU: The Karnataka government's 'Gruha Jyoti' scheme, which provides free electricity up to 200 units for every household, is not benefiting those who have recently constructed their homes or changed rental properties.

The scheme was implemented on July 1, 2023, based on the average electricity units consumed during the fiscal year 2022-23. Customers began receiving benefits from August 1, 2023. However, because the average electricity consumption was not updated after the scheme was launched, new customers with electricity connections are missing out on full benefits. It has been nearly a year since the scheme was introduced, and Energy Minister K.J. George had announced that the average electricity consumption would be revised after one year. Despite this, no updates have been made so far.

New customers, lacking a 'usage history', are being allotted a maximum of 58 units as free electricity—based on the average units consumed by all state customers—despite many using within the 200-unit limit.

Read more at

<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Entertaining Writ Petitions Under Article 226

Is availability of alternative remedies a bar?

G SRINIVASA RAO

One of the vexatious and recurring constitutional issues is that of the power of High Courts under Article 226 of the Constitution to entertain a writ petition (WP) when an alternative remedy is available for redressal of a grievance. While Article 226 itself has no inherent limitation in exercising its jurisdiction, but overtime a self-imposed restraint by the constitutional courts, obviously to prevent overburdening of the HC, has led to rejection of WPs even in some deserving cases, on the sole ground that alternative remedies are available.

Article 226, as it was enacted originally, conferred power upon the HC to entertain WPs for enforcing Fundamental Rights (FRs) and other rights while Article 32 could be invoked only for enforcement of FRs by the Supreme Court. The jurisdiction of HCs was enlarged to entertain WPs to redress wrongful actions of the executive, including protection of FRs. While the egregious 42nd Amendment, inter alia, restricted the power of HCs under Article 226 from entertaining WPs for which an alternate remedy was available under any statute or rules, the Parliament, however, had wisely restored Article 226 to its original position vide the 44th Amendment.

The SC had on numerous occasions expounded the law relating to the powers of HCs under Article 226. It is important to note the SC's repeated emphasis that the redressal by HCs would be a quick and inexpensive remedy thereby preventing long delays and

unnecessary harassment to the aggrieved petitioners. It is common knowledge that pursuit of justice through various levels of appellate forum is not only expensive but exceedingly time-consuming, often resulting in justice being delayed.

A study of the apex court judgments reveals an interesting evolution of law on this question. In one of the first cases after the commencement of the Constitution, the Supreme Court in Election Commission of India v Saka Venkata Subba Rao (AIR 1953 SC 210) observed that the Constitution makers having provided for FRs, considered it necessary to bestow writ jurisdiction upon all the High Courts as a means of providing quick and inexpensive remedy for the enforcement of such rights including the power to issue directions for any other purpose, placing them on par with the English courts in this regard.

In K.S. Rashid & Son Boro vs The Income Tax Investigation Committee (AIR 1954 SC 163), it was held that the remedy provided for in Article 226 of the Constitution is a discretionary remedy and the High Court has always the discretion to refuse to grant any writ if it is satisfied that the aggrieved party has an alternative remedy. However, the Constitution Bench in State of Uttar Pradesh v. Mohammad Nooh (AIR 1958 SC 86) repelling the objections of the State of UP—that the High Court ought not have entertained the writ petition as the respondent therein had recourse to alternate remedies—observed that ordinarily, the High Court would decline to interfere but where the jurisdiction acts wholly without jurisdiction, or violates the rules



While the High Courts have discretion to entertain a writ petition, the SC repeatedly emphasised that merely because an alternative remedy is available under the law, that by itself would not be a bar on adjudication and that no hard and fast rule could be laid down as regards entertaining the WPs as it depends on the facts and circumstances of each case

of natural justice and where the error, irregularity or illegality touching jurisdiction or procedure is patent and which offends the High Court's sense of fair play, it may issue the writ of certiorari to correct the error, even if an appeal remedy was available and recourse was not had to it or if recourse was had to it, was a nullity.

In A.V. Venkateswaram, Collector of Customs vs Ramchand Sobhraj Wadhwa (AIR 1961 SC 1506), another Constitution Bench held, while examining the question whether the High Court should have rejected the writ petition in limine because all the statutory remedies were not exhausted for redressal of the grievance, observed that while the HCs had discretion to entertain a writ petition, that discretion

must necessarily be dependent on material facts which govern the proper exercise of the discretion vested in the Court, and as such, it would neither be possible nor desirable to lay down inflexible rules which should be applied with rigidity in every case which comes up before the Court.

In the landmark judgment on this issue, in Calcutta Discount Co Ltd vs ITO (41 ITR 191), the Constitution Bench of the Apex Court held that the High Courts have power to issue in a fit case an order prohibiting an authority from acting without jurisdiction where such action of the authority is likely to subject a person to lengthy proceedings and unnecessary harassment. It was held that the existence of an alternative remedy is not always

a sufficient reason for refusing a party quick relief by a writ. It was further emphasised in no uncertain terms that when the Constitution confers on the High Courts the power to give relief, it becomes their duty to give such relief in fit cases and that the courts would be failing in their duty if relief is refused without adequate reasons.

In Hari Vishnu Kamath vs. Syed Ahmad Ishaque and Ors. (AIR 1955 233), the Apex Court held that a writ of certiorari could be issued to correct an error of law which must be manifest on the face of the record and what is an error apparent on the face of the record cannot be defined precisely or exhaustively, there being an element of indefiniteness inherent in its very nature, and it must be left to be determined judicially on the facts of each case.

In the case of Whirlpool Corporation v Registrar of Trade Marks (1998 8 SCC 1), the Apex Court, while once again reiterating that the power to issue prerogative writs under Article 226 of the Constitution is plenary in nature and not limited by any other provision of the Constitution, laid down that an alternative remedy would not operate as a bar in at least four contingencies, namely, for the enforcement of the Fundamental Rights—where principles of natural justice are violated, where an authority acts without jurisdiction and where the vices of an Act are challenged. It was further observed that the decisions to which reference is made above would even after a considerable passage of time continue to hold the field especially in a case where an authority acts without jurisdiction.

The next important contention is the issue of maintainability versus entertainability of the WPs. The Apex Court in Godrej Sara Lee Ltd vs Ex-ecutive and Taxation Officer (2023 SCC online 95) observed that availability of an alternative remedy does not operate as an absolute bar to the 'maintainability' of a writ petition and that the rule, which requires a party to pursue the alternative remedy provided by a statute, is a rule of policy, convenience and discretion rather than a rule of law. There is a clear distinction between 'entertainability' and 'maintainability'. The objection as to 'maintainability' goes to the root of the matter and if such objection were found to be of substance, writ petition would not be maintainable. However, the question of 'entertainability' being entirely discretionary, a writ petition despite being maintainable may not be entertained by for various reasons, but dismissal of a writ petition merely on the ground that the alternative remedy was not availed, without examining whether an exceptional case has been made out for such entertainability would not be just and proper.

To sum up, while the High Courts have discretion to entertain a writ petition, the SC repeatedly emphasised that merely because an alternative remedy is available under the law, that by itself would not be a bar on adjudication and that no hard and fast rule could be laid down as regards entertaining the WPs as it depends on the facts and circumstances of each case.

(Writer is retired Principal Commissioner of Income Tax)

BORIS SPASSKY: END OF A GREATERA

C CHANDRASEKHAR

THE passing away of Boris Spassky Ex-World Chess Champion closes the glorious chapter of chess history but also bids adieu to memories of bygone era of tense cold war. Spassky and Fischer names have become synonymous with cold war since they represented Soviet Communist bloc and American lead West group. These warring groups left no arena untouched, from sports to space their rivalry was more visible in every field. Even the language of English made amendments to accommodate their interests, while American called their space travellers 'Astronauts' Soviet called them 'Cosmonauts', such was the intensity of their rivalry.

Both camps, using Summer and Winter Olympics for their political propaganda mixing sports with politics thus killing the spirit of every game. But tensions of Cold war reached their pinnacle with the famous match between Boris Spassky of Russia and American Bobby Fischer organised at Reykjavik, in Iceland in 1972. Billed as match of the century where Fischer triumphed

tantrums against match organisers for favouring Russia. Even Fischer didn't attend the opening ceremony. The intervention of Henry Kissinger, then State Secretary brought him to Iceland to play against Russian World Champion.

It was loud-mouthed Fischer against a sober Spassky, Americans saw Fischer as a symbol of Capitalism and liberty and wish him to break the iron curtain of Communist soviet who were dominating chess without any challenge. Fischer didn't disappoint he won over Spassky in a great style. But what attracted the world was the humility of then World Champion Spassky when he lost the game 6 of the match, Spassky stood up and applauded his opponent, such a gesture was never witnessed in the history of World Chess.

This historic scene captured very efficiently in a movie 'Pawn sacrifice' directed by Edward Zwick in 2014. Spassky was not got such a fame when he defeated another Soviet Legend Tiger Petrosian in 1969 to become the world champion,



Spassky had come up in life in a hard way at the age of five he survived the seize of Leningrad by Germans and though orphaned it didn't deter the will to become champion. His moment of glory came knocking when he was crowned as world champion in 1969. Spassky with all his grace will be remembered as a chess genius who stood for his own values with a strong conviction. The chess world mourns his death as a loss of gentleness of the game

on, but he became a darling of the chess fans when he gracefully accepted the defeat in the hands of Fischer called him a better player than him much to the disappointment of his camp who

were searching the mysterious reasons for his defeat. Lifelong Boris maintained his dignity though he fell out with his Soviet counterpart, but he never denounced them publicly but calmly

changed his citizenship to France but in 2013 he reclaimed old Russian citizenship without any fuss.

His love for Fischer was absolute. He wrote to President Bush for clemency for Fischer and also asked President to arrest him and put him in same cell of Fischer so that they can play chess. At that time Bush administration has issued an arrest warrant against Fischer for defying State dictats.

His love story continued. Fischer and Spassky played a rematch in 1992 in Yugoslavia defying American sanctions, though his failing health didn't permit such gruelling battle but for the sake of his friend he played. Though Fischer known for his audacity declared their match as real-world championship, but Spassky never boasted about their match.

Vishwanath Anand called their match as playing modern tennis with wooden rackets and many Chess analysts concurred with Vishy but Spassky didn't retort because he was aware of the reality. Though their matches didn't have the qual-

ity of their yesteryears, but their match brought back the iconic duel like vintage cars racing past reliving old memories of their owners.

Spassky will be remembered for spectacular style of playing changing strategies to confuse the opponents, but it is his gentleness always floored his rivals. Both Spassky and Fischer saw the rise of cold war and its death, though both ditched their camps proving that ideologies and camps can't prison human minds. Spassky who came up in life in a hard way at the age of five he survived the seize of Leningrad by Germans and though orphaned it didn't deter the will to become champion. His moment of glory came knocking when he was crowned as world champion in 1969.

Spassky with all his grace will be remembered as chess genius who stood for his own values with a strong conviction. Hence, entire chess world mourns his death as a loss of gentleness of the game. But Legends like Spassky never die but they remain in the hearts of the people forever till chess is alive.

A clash of diplomacy and dignity

A dramatic Oval Office face-off between Trump and Zelensky, marked by sharp exchanges, underscores global political instability

In a high-stakes meeting that captured global attention, President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky clashed in a dramatic showdown at the White House. What began as cordial greetings quickly spiralled into an explosive exchange, leaving Zelensky visibly humiliated on the world stage—even as his defiant stance earned him renewed backing from European leaders. The encounter marked the first in-person meeting between Trump and Zelensky since Trump's return to power in January. Early on, smiles and handshakes gave way to heated words as US Vice President JD Vance pushed for a diplomatic resolution to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. Vance's remarks underscored a fundamental point: the need for serious diplomacy to end the war, while also implicitly contrasting Trump's previous approach with that of past administrations. However, as the dialogue unfolded, Zelensky's pointed references to the long history of inaction—citing the annexation of Crimea and subsequent military struggles—sparked a vehement rebuttal. In a sequence of rapid-fire exchanges, Trump dismissed Zelensky's critiques and reminded him of the overwhelming military support provided by the United States, arguing that without this aid, Ukraine's resistance could have crumbled in days. Despite the abrasive tone and what many saw as a public humiliation, Zelensky's resistance during the meeting resonated far beyond the confines of the Oval Office. While Trump's unconventional style and bombastic rhetoric further alienated many European policymakers, Zelensky's defiant posture emerged as a symbol of unwavering national resolve. European leaders, long critical of Trump's erratic diplomacy, viewed the exchange as evidence that Ukraine needed to assert its own dignity in the face of American grandstanding. Moreover, Trump's harsh social media post demanding Zelensky "come back when he is ready for peace"—served not only as a dramatic moment of political theatre but also as a catalyst for European unity in support of Ukraine. Zelensky's refusal to be cowed sends a powerful message to both his domestic audience and international supporters. The Zelensky US visit might strengthen Ukraine's negotiating position and ensure a more coordinated effort to counter Russian advances. Trump's return to a more unpredictable form of diplomacy has underscored deep-seated divisions within the international community. His blunt dismissals and confrontational tactics risk undermining the credibility of traditional US diplomatic channels, potentially destabilising long-established alliances. In contrast, Europe's reaction suggests a pivot towards a more measured, collective response that prioritises multilateral engagement over unilateral posturing. This divergence could reshape how global conflicts are addressed in the future, signalling a shift away from "big talk" and towards pragmatic, alliance-based strategies. The Oval Office showdown will likely be remembered as a defining moment in the ongoing Ukraine war and in the evolution of American foreign policy.



the exchange as evidence that Ukraine needed to assert its own dignity in the face of American grandstanding. Moreover, Trump's harsh social media post demanding Zelensky "come back when he is ready for peace"—served not only as a dramatic moment of political theatre but also as a catalyst for European unity in support of Ukraine. Zelensky's refusal to be cowed sends a powerful message to both his domestic audience and international supporters. The Zelensky US visit might strengthen Ukraine's negotiating position and ensure a more coordinated effort to counter Russian advances. Trump's return to a more unpredictable form of diplomacy has underscored deep-seated divisions within the international community. His blunt dismissals and confrontational tactics risk undermining the credibility of traditional US diplomatic channels, potentially destabilising long-established alliances. In contrast, Europe's reaction suggests a pivot towards a more measured, collective response that prioritises multilateral engagement over unilateral posturing. This divergence could reshape how global conflicts are addressed in the future, signalling a shift away from "big talk" and towards pragmatic, alliance-based strategies. The Oval Office showdown will likely be remembered as a defining moment in the ongoing Ukraine war and in the evolution of American foreign policy.

PICTALK



A farmer ploughs an agricultural land for paddy cultivation, in Nadiya

A new era for rural revival and inclusive growth

With a sharp focus on strengthening infrastructure and boosting holistic rural development, the UP budget underscores a visionary and inclusive agenda

The Budget presented by the BJP's double-engine government in Uttar Pradesh will go a long way in strengthening infrastructure and further boosting the holistic development of rural areas. The state government's mammoth budget of Rs 8,08,736 crore for the all-round development of the state reflects the inclusive and visionary approach of the government, taking full care of the poor, disadvantaged, youth, women empowerment and Annadatas. This budget is 9.8 per cent higher than last year's, indicating the government's pro-development agenda. Under the Prime Minister's vision of a developed India, special emphasis has been placed on rural areas. The mainstay of the economy of the state is the rural sector and the government has been continuously working towards ensuring that the benefits of the schemes reach the deprived sections of the society. Believing in the credo of self-reliance, the government has been focusing on fortifying the development arcs of villages to make them self-reliant as they will play an important role in creating a strong Uttar Pradesh. While over 96 lakh rural families have benefited under the State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM), on the other hand, financial transactions worth Rs 31,103 crore have been facilitated through 39,556 Banking Correspondent Sakhis. Until now, more than two lakh women have become "Lakshmi Didi", helping them become self-reliant. Uttar Pradesh is also the first state in the country to guarantee concrete houses to the poor.

Fulfilling Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', the state government has already constructed more than 3.6 million houses in resolution. Providing further impetus to the cause, a provision of Rs 4,882 crore has been made in the Budget for the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Rural). Also, an amount of Rs 1,200 crore has been proposed under the Mukhyamantri Awas Yojana (Rural). While the Prime Minister's empathetic leadership has ensured a roof over the heads of the poor, the state's economy has also been flourishing. The government's efforts have ensured the economic growth rate of the state has been recorded at 11.6 per cent, which is higher than the national GDP growth of 9.6 per cent. Once considered a 'BIMARU' state, the estimated gross domestic product (GSDP) of the state has now risen to Rs 27,51 lakh crore, doubling from 2017-18. In line with this momentum, Uttar Pradesh's economy is expected to reach Rs 30 lakh crore in the next fiscal, which will significantly contribute towards making the state a \$1 trillion economy. Along with the ramping up of infrastructure, Uttar Pradesh is now witnessing a revolution in the transportation sector. The North-South Corridor Plan will be implemented keeping in view road connectivity and highway expansion. Under this, Rs 200 crore has been provided for the widening and construction of roads. A budget of Rs 2,900 crore has been proposed for the widening of roads. Also, a provision of Rs 1,450 crore has been made



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THE STATE GOVERNMENT HAS ALREADY CONSTRUCTED MORE THAN 3.6 MILLION HOUSES IN RESOLUTION. PROVIDING FURTHER IMPETUS TO THE CAUSE, A PROVISION OF RS 4,882 CRORE HAS BEEN MADE IN THE BUDGET FOR THE PRADHAN MANTRI AWAS YOJANA (RURAL)

for the construction of bridges and railway overbridges to ease traffic congestion. The incredible growth has taken into account the need to further bolster youth empowerment and job creation. A budget of Rs 1,000 crore has been allocated under the Chief Minister's Youth Entrepreneur Development Scheme. Under the Swami Vivekananda Yuva Sashaktikaran Yojana, 49.86 lakh smartphones/tablets have been distributed to promote smart education. Free coaching is also being provided to the youth through the Abhyudaya Yojana. Renewable energy and artificial intelligence have been given special emphasis to ensure that youngsters do not fall behind. While the Artificial Intelligence City will be set up in Lucknow, plans are underway to set up a 500 MW solar power plant which will entail a cost of Rs 2,500 crore. Prime Minister Narendra Modi places special emphasis on ensuring the wellbeing of farmers and wants to ensure they do not fall behind in these changing times. In line with this, Annadatas have been placed at the top of the priority list in the mission of achieving the goal of 'Viksit Bharat'.

Under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana, Rs 79,500 crore have been distributed to farmers while Rs 496 crore have also been disbursed under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana. The state's sugarcane production capacity has also increased from 72 tonnes to 85 tonnes per hectare, boosting the income levels of farmers. The recently presented Budget will not only take the development of the state to new heights but will also transform rural India. From roads to digital infrastructure, farmers to industry, and women empowerment to a bright future for the youth, this Budget has been able to ensure that the needs of every section of society are taken care of. With the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and schemes aimed at boosting the rural economy and infrastructure, Uttar Pradesh is rapidly moving towards fulfilling the dream of a self-reliant India. I am confident that this Budget will realise the vision of 'growth and progress' of UP and propel the state towards the exalted status of the most developed state in the country. (The writer is Deputy Chief Minister of UP; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FINDING FUNDS FOR FREEBIES

Madam — Apropos of the article 'Finding money for freebies: BJP faces an uphill task' (March 1), the statistical analysis and approach towards the funding of freebies is very realistic and compels the new BJP government to salvage the economy of the Capital. It is really challenging to mobilise the whopping revenue expenditure of Rs 20,100 crores on the promised direct cash transfer of Rs 2500 per month to women, Rs 3150 crores on cash assistance to the pregnant women, Rs 2500 crores on LPG cylinder subsidy, and Rs 30000 crores on education. Central funding of Rs 55000 crore is imperative. These figures are staggering and more than half the revenue expenditure budget of the Delhi state government. Many of the beneficiaries may not be deserving and needy of the freebies, but it can't be debated now and one section of people is providing resources for the others. Since it is a double-engine government, the central funding is a certainty. However, the other state governments will expect the same level of funding from the Union government. However, the local municipal corporations must be asked for self-reliance and mobilise their own resources. There should be separate autonomous development authorities for Dwarka, Rohini and East Delhi. Earlier arrangements of separate MCDs for North, South and East Delhi were doing well and should be restored. The Delhi government should raise circle rates and stamp duties for properties as the market values have risen phenomenally. Liquor shops should be under government control without any licenses to private vendors and more taxes should be imposed on liquor consumption. New mandis, commercial, and industrial complexes should be constructed for raising additional resources.

Vinod Johri | Delhi
SEBI GETS NEW CHAIRMAN
Madam — Tuhin Kanta Pandey, the former Finance and Revenue Secretary, was appointed as the new chairman of the SEBI. The new appointment is crucial as the for-

Decriminalise Indian politics



It is with reference to the editorial 'Lawbreakers as Lawmakers.' It is time to eradicate the influence of criminality in Indian politics. The rising number of elected representatives with criminal backgrounds in Parliament and State Assemblies is a matter of deep concern to all law-abiding and right-minded citizens. The increasing trend is dangerous and has steadily been eating into the vitals of democratic polity along with the growing corruption of a humongous

nature. Good governance gets seriously undermined when, for instance, criminals, gangsters, or mafia dons become the political bosses of bureaucrats and subvert the system to serve their interests. In 2005 the Supreme Court ruled that a sitting MP or MLA will be disqualified from contesting the election if convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for two years or more by a court of law. The growing dependence of political parties on criminals for muscle power and electability must be stopped. It is high time all political parties came together and developed a consensus on keeping criminals—some with serious charges including kidnapping, rape, murder, graft corruption and crime against women—out of the system.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

US-Ukraine talks fail

Madam — The abrupt failure of US-Ukraine talks underscores a troubling loss in American diplomacy. Trump's insistence on securing indefinite rights to Ukraine's rare minerals in exchange for past aid—while rejecting Zelensky's request for security guarantees—was a blatant betrayal of trust. The talks' undiplomatic nature, with raised voices, Trump walking out and Zelensky skipping lunch, further damaged relations. This shift signals that US commitments are now transactional, undermining credibility and emboldening adversaries like Russia. Such treatment of a war-torn ally weakens global trust in the US, proving that administration changes do not necessarily maintain the nation's moral or strategic responsibilities or commitments. The fallout from this episode will have lasting consequences on international alliances and geopolitical stability.

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Breakthrough 'Bedi cooling turban' a glimmer of hope for brain stroke

This innovative device selectively cools the brain—bypassing the complications of whole-body hypothermia—and comes in handy in the treatment of brain stroke

At the recently concluded 71st Annual Conference of the Indian Association of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Sciences, Dr Harinder Singh Bedi, Director of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Sciences at Park Greenco Hospital in Mohali, presented a groundbreaking technique designed to protect the brain from oxygen deprivation during surgery. Nicknamed the 'Bedi Cooling Turban', this innovative method is a trailblazer in more ways than one.

It is well known that lowering the temperature of an injured organ can help reduce damage. However, the brain presents a unique challenge because whole-body cooling introduces its own set of complications, and in brain surgery, only the brain needs to be cooled. Even a brief period of oxygen deprivation can result in devastating consequences, such as a massive stroke.

Dr Bedi conceived the idea during intensive brainstorming sessions and set out to cool only the brain. Drawing on his vast experience, he designed a unique cooling



turban made of plastic tubes arranged in a coil. Once the patient is anaesthetised, the device is placed around the head and cold, sterile water is pumped through the coils using a specialised machine, cooling the brain while leaving the rest of the body unaffected. To date, this device has been successfully used in 48 cases to repair blockages in brain arteries, preserving brain function throughout. Dr Bedi refined his surgical skills in advanced cardiovascular techniques at Escorts Heart Institute and St Vincent

Hospital in Sydney, where he managed cases using whole-body cooling (hypothermia) to preserve organ function. At the conference, the technique received an enthusiastic response from 1,700 national and international expert delegates.

Dr Rajneesh Malhotra, Cardiac Director at Max Hospitals, expressed particular enthusiasm, suggesting that the technique be applied to more clinical cases to further safeguard patients' brain function. He noted that innovations like this empower Indian surgeons to tackle

cases that might otherwise seem hopeless.

Dr Bedi confirmed that he plans to patent the technique and publish his findings so that it can be adopted worldwide to benefit similar cases. In conclusion, Dr Harinder Singh Bedi's innovative 'Cooling Turban' technique represents a significant advancement in brain-protective strategies during cardiovascular and thoracic surgeries. By focusing cooling efforts solely on the brain, this breakthrough minimises the risks associated with whole-body hypothermia and opens new avenues for treating oxygen deprivation during surgery.

With successful application in 48 cases and enthusiastic endorsement from leading experts, this pioneering approach underscores the ingenuity of Indian medical innovation. Dr Bedi's commitment to patenting and sharing his findings promises to influence global surgical practices, ultimately saving countless lives and setting a new standard in patient care with excellence.

(The author is a columnist; views are personal)



GYAN BHADRA



FIRST COLUMN

DEALING WITH EXAM ANXIETY

Embracing positive thinking, smart study habits and relaxation can make exams a breeze



SAKSHI SETHI

Examinations are integral to the educational system and are designed to assess students' knowledge, understanding and skills. However, for many students, exams are a source of significant anxiety, leading to stress, reduced performance, and even physical or emotional distress. Overcoming exam anxiety requires a combination of psychological strategies, effective study techniques, and a supportive environment. By adopting a proactive approach, students can transform their exam experiences from overwhelming to manageable.

There is no denying that exam anxiety is real, but so is one's resilience. The anxiety can stem from various factors, including fear of failure, high expectations from parents or teachers, past negative experiences, or inadequate preparation. Symptoms of exam anxiety range from nervousness, restlessness and even difficulty concentrating to physical manifestations such as headaches, nausea and rapid heartbeat. Recognising these symptoms is the first step in overcoming exam-related stress. Dealing with exam stress can be a heavy load and can often make an individual feel lonely. A crucial aspect of managing exam anxiety is cultivating a positive attitude toward examinations. Students need to view exams as opportunities to demonstrate their learning rather than threats to their self-worth. A growth mindset can improve only through effort and practice and can significantly reduce anxiety. Use of positive affirmations such as "I am prepared" or "I can handle this challenge" can boost confidence. Additionally, normalising mistakes and failures as part of the learning process can help students overcome the fear of underperformance. One of the primary reasons for exam anxiety is inadequate preparation. Implementing effective study strategies can enhance confidence and performance. Creating a well-structured study schedule can help prevent last-minute cramming and ensure thorough coverage of subjects. Active



learning techniques, such as summarisation, mind mapping and teaching concepts to peers can also help retain information better. Practising with past exam papers and taking mock tests can familiarise students with the exam pattern, reducing uncertainty and nervousness. Relaxation techniques can significantly reduce exam-related stress and improve focus. Deep breathing exercises, mindfulness meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation can help calm the mind before and during exams. Engaging in physical activities such as yoga, stretching, or even a short walk can release tension and improve concentration. Ensuring adequate sleep, maintaining a balanced diet, and staying hydrated contribute to overall wellbeing, making students more resilient to stress. A supportive environment at home and school plays a vital role in alleviating exam anxiety. In today's competitive environment, it becomes important for parents to encourage their children rather than pressurise them with unrealistic expectations. Study groups and discussions with peers can provide moral support and motivation, making exam preparation a less isolating experience.

What plays the most vital role is on the day of the exam, where students, by following simple yet effective strategies, can stay calm and focused. Following strategies such as arriving early, taking deep breaths, and engaging in light stretching before entering the examination hall can help reduce nervousness. Managing time effectively by allocating specific minutes to each question can help prevent panic. If anxiety arises during the exam, taking a few moments to pause, taking deep breaths, and refocusing can help prevent stress from escalating. Exam anxiety is a common challenge faced by students, but it can be effectively managed through self-awareness, positive thinking, strategic preparation, relaxation techniques, and a supportive environment. Ultimately, overcoming exam anxiety is not just about securing good grades but also about developing resilience and lifelong learning skills.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Is Forest Rights Act driving deforestation?



B K SINGH

Despite its noble intent to secure the livelihoods of tribals, the Forest Rights Act has inadvertently opened the door to rampant deforestation and widespread encroachment

The law has been enacted to confer rights over the use of forest lands by individual tribal or forest dwellers under their occupation on the prescribed cutoff date. Besides the individual rights, there is also provision for community rights over certain forests for benefits of collection of usufructs like beedi leaves, minor forest produce, grazing, fishing etc. and rights can also be conferred to the communities for sustainable management of forest resources.

But the rights can be granted only when they are in actual possession of the forest land or have been enjoying the usufructs or sustainably managing the forest resources on or before 13-12-2005 for tribal and three generations (75 years) before this date for other traditional forest dwellers (OTFDs). Despite opposition from foresters, conservationists and environmentalists the law was enacted by the UPA government supported by left parties in 2005. This was followed by notifying the rules and the implementation from January 1, 2008.

Dipak Sarmah who succeeded me as the head of Karnataka Forest Department on my superannuation has observed on page 154 of his book titled, "Forests Of Karnataka - Why And How Of Where They Are", "Most of the benefits that had accrued in the forests since the 1980s by way of forest consolidation due to implementation of Forest (Conservation) Act appear to have been nullified as a result of the implementation of the Forest Rights Act. The ominous signs of fragmentation and loss of forests are already discernible in a number of states as evident from the biennial India State of Forest Reports published by the Forest Survey of India, Dehradun.

A clearer picture will emerge in about a decade or so, by which time we would come to realise the true impact of the Forest Rights Act on our forests. But it may be then too late to retrieve the losses. Foresters alone cannot prevent the unauthorised removal of trees and the destruction of forests. Villagers set fire to burn the wood and grab the land. Forests are perpetually subjected to encroachments with the support of local leaders. Even if police presence is ensured and the community's resistance is built while removing encroachments, the problem resurfaces and lands are again grabbed. Political leaders question the removal of cultivation when land is devoid of tree growth. Fresh plantations are damaged and the forest area is re-encroached. Practically all encroachments till 25th October 1980, when the Forest (Conservation) Act came into operation were already regularised by the Union Government.

The Act was operational from 2008 with the new cutoff date of 13-12-2005. It was only the vote bank; the OTFDs were brought in to benefit from the legislation though their encroachments till 25th October 1980 were regularised. It can be understood that OTFDs cannot have more than a generation-old encroachment on the new cutoff date, yet a floodgate of forest destruction was opened for them. Without having any consideration for the ecological security of the country, OTFDs went on a rampage, cleared the fresh tree growth, occupied lands and claimed rights. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the nodal agency for implementation took up several reviews to monitor the progress of the



FOREST AREAS GIVEN FOR THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF GRAM SABHAS HAVE BEEN DEVASTATED, DEGRADED AND FRAGMENTED. THERE ARE PATCHES OF BAMBOO FORESTS IN MEDHA LEKHA GRAM SABHA WHERE ALL BAMBOO CLUMPS WERE CLEARED IN ONE STROKE IN 2012

states, further diluting the provisions in 2012 to ignore the only scientific evidence of satellite imagery interpretation among the evidence to be relied on in support of the claim. The claims of the tribal community, who had only to prove the occupation as of December 2005 were easily acceptable initially, but that too is now two decades old. Left-leaning forces and NGOs fought for claim cases of individual forest rights (IFR), community forest rights (CFR) and rights to manage the forest resources sustainably. This has accelerated the deforestation. IFRs have already been granted to 2.2 million tribal and OTFDs, covering nearly 5 million ha of forest land. Several activists have written articles in newspapers and magazines showing a satisfactory performance over the grant of IFRs and suggesting the states focus their attention on CFRs and grant of forest rights for sustainable management to avail the provisions that have been neglected by the states so far. The estimates of the activists suggest that 30 million hectare forest lands comprising more than 40 per cent of the total forest area can be granted for CFRs and sustainable management.

They further argue that if this is done, it has the potential to secure the rights and livelihood of 200 million people including 90 million tribal. Local press in Hyderabad has recently brought out that seven lakh acres of forests have been occupied in 2022-23 and claims over four lakh acres for tribal were approved in Telangana before the 2023 Assembly election. State machineries have accepted the claims overlooking the reports of the concerned divisional forest officer, J Ramesh, Nature Friends

Environmental Development Society, Hyderabad, accused the state of pressurising officials for recognition of rights to ineligible individuals resulting in large-scale deforestation leading to the scam of unprecedented proportion.

There are reports from Rampachodavaram Forest division, Rajamundry (AP) that tribal department officials are granting rights in Papikonda National Park for money. A retired IFS M Padmanaba Reddy has filed a PIL for the scam. In February 2019, just before the Lok Sabha polls, states moved the Supreme Court to review its order of eviction of rejected IFR claims and allow them to re-verify. The court accepted it, but so far the states have not concluded and continue to accept the fresh claims. What signal does it send down the line?

The Act has provided unlimited time for filing claims and deforestation and bringing the land under plough can continue. No one has any concern about the ecological security of the country. It is to be understood that all rejected claimants are in occupation of the forest land, where they have already been successful in deforesting and clearing the area. More rejected claims are encouraged, and more deforestation takes place.

The only place where the CFRs and rights to manage the forests sustainably have been granted is the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. Section 3-1 (i) of FRA 2006 is relevant here, where rights can be granted to villages of Gram Sabha who have the experience of managing the area sustainably. Further the requirement of Section 4 (3) of the Act is also

essential for the grant of rights i.e. they should have the resource as on 13-12-2005 for tribal and 75 years before this date for OTFDs. Management rights have been granted in many Gram Sabhas of Gadchiroli overlooking both the provisions.

Activists are taking this example all over the country and pressing for a repeat of this. This has been frequently quoted example in articles and papers. What these authors have been hiding is the destruction of forests. Forest areas given for the sustainable management of Gram Sabhas have been devastated, degraded and fragmented.

There are patches of bamboo forests in Medha Lekha Gram Sabha where all bamboo clumps were cleared in one stroke in 2012. Forest officers were physically prevented from entering the area. Bamboo has not responded well to the clear felling. The fresh regeneration is bushy and does not yield any usable bamboo culm. It yielded certain culms every four years when it was managed by the Forest Department.

The management of Medha Lekha Gram Sabha has not been sustainable and the area has not yielded culms in 2016, 2020 and 2024. Taking a cue from Madha Lekha, other Gram Sabhas have also started clear felling and over-exploitation of the resource. Further, the revenue realised from the sale proceeds has not been ploughed back for fresh regeneration activities and the management has become completely unsustainable.

(The writer is Retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of Forest Force, Karnataka; views are personal)

The integral role of phygital in shaping India's rural economy

The emerging phygital model—merging the tangible strengths of traditional systems with the efficiency of digital innovation—is redefining growth

With over 1.4 billion inhabitants, India's economic landscape has evolved dramatically in recent years. Yet, while urban centres boom, the nation's rural heartland—home to around 90.8 million people as of 2022—continues to play a pivotal role in shaping the country's potential. Although initiatives like Digital India have ushered the country into a digital era with 806 million active internet users by February 2025, technology alone cannot resolve deep-seated infrastructural challenges. This is where the phygital model—a fusion of physical and digital elements—steps in to bridge the divide and ensure balanced growth.



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Phygital combines the tangible benefits of traditional systems with the efficiency of digital technology, creating a hybrid framework that enhances accessibility, empowers local businesses, and fosters inclusive growth. In rural regions, where infrastructural deficits and resource limitations persist, phygital strategies are not about replacing established

methods but rather integrating them with modern digital solutions. This approach is proving transformative across key sectors such as banking, commerce, agriculture, healthcare, and public services.

Driving Financial Inclusion For years, traditional banking models have struggled to serve India's vast rural expanses. High operational costs, challenging geography, and low financial literacy have hampered efforts to bring modern financial services to remote communities.

While FinTech has broadened access through digital banking, a fully digital approach can alienate those who lack familiarity with smartphones or online transactions. The phygital model addresses these gaps by merging digital con-

venience with physical touchpoints.

Systems like Aadhaar-enabled Payment Systems (AePS), micro-ATMs, and local banking correspondents empower rural residents to conduct transactions, access credit, and secure subsidies without the need for continuous internet connectivity. In many villages, Customer Service Points (CSPs) provide essential in-person support, guiding users as they gradually transition to digital financial solutions. Furthermore, partnerships between FinTech companies and local kirana stores or post offices have effectively transformed these outlets into mini banking hubs.

This integration allows people to withdraw cash, pay bills, and transfer money within their



locality, bypassing the need to travel long distances to bank branches and operating beyond standard banking hours. The result is a significant leap forward in achieving comprehensive financial inclusion.

Reinvigorating Rural Commerce E-commerce has revolutionised urban shopping by altering customer habits and payment methods, but rural

consumers still rely heavily on cash transactions. A completely digital model often fails to resonate with these communities. Instead, the phygital model has emerged as an effective alternative by combining the reach of online platforms with the trust of local, physical commerce. Local kirana stores are increasingly functioning as pick-up points for online orders, ensuring that digital transactions are accessible even to those without digital payment capabilities. Assisted commerce kiosks further support rural shoppers by helping them browse products, place orders, and make payments—often in cash—thereby bridging the gap between digital platforms and traditional retail.

Transforming Agriculture Agriculture remains the backbone of India's rural economy, providing livelihoods for more than 42 per cent of the population and contributing around 18.2 per cent to the nation's GDP. However, farmers have long contended with issues such as limited market access, dependence on intermediaries, and unpredictable weather. Phygital solutions are beginning to address these challenges by integrating digital tools with conventional agricultural practices. Platforms like eNAM enable farmers to compare prices and market their produce directly, thus reducing reliance on middlemen. At the same time, traditional mandi networks continue to play an essential role in the trading process.

By ensuring that digital marketplaces and physical trading hubs operate in tandem, the phygital approach provides farmers with a more balanced and effective route to market. **Enhancing Essential Services** Beyond commerce and agriculture, phygital innovations are making significant strides in healthcare and public service delivery. Rural communities have traditionally faced barriers to accessing quality healthcare. Now, telemedicine kiosks supported by trained health workers enable remote consultations with specialists, while mobile health units equipped with diagnostic tools bring medical care directly to remote areas.

(The writer is Managing Director and Founder of Roinet Solution; views are personal)