

## A lesson from the Democrats' 'woke' debacle

Donald Trump's return to the White House is an important lesson not just for Democrats, but political actors everywhere who are attempting to contain burgeoning right-of-centre politics and powerful demographics.

Mr. Trump won both the electoral college vote and the popular vote. This underlines that the anxiety of democracy's defenders over the erosion of the constitutional order is not the people's anxiety or even their preoccupation. The people do not have revision for dictatorial aspirations if they are enticed with a story promising them a better future and protection of interests.



Anando Bhakto  
Journalist covering politics and the Kashmir conflict

**Two countries, two campaigns**  
As Mr. Trump strengthened his commitment to bring back manufacturing jobs, there was reason to harbour hope. In his insistence to make the U.S. less interventionist and focus on fixing domestic issues such as "porous borders", which, he said, led to "criminals pouring in" and "absorbing job opportunities, there was protection of interest."

Democratic Party candidate Kamala Harris highlighted the machinations against democracy, but in making it her overriding theme, she renewed concerns about her being "woke", which in contemporary political lexicon indicates extravagant positions on DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion). Her message was repudiated.

In India, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's "mohabbat ki dukan" (shop of love) looks like an adaptation of America's woke culture, which frames the pro-democracy argument in a narrow term of merely opposing an autocrat. But for the poor, democracy is less about waging war against an autocrat to preserve institutions and the social fabric and more about immediate economic redress. The farmers' movement was a powerful exposition of dissent against an autocratic regime, but the poor did not desert the Prime Minister, given his government's

wide-scale distribution of economic incentives.

Ms. Harris and Mr. Gandhi's campaign relied too much on fighting for the liberal order. There was little reckoning that the reason why demagogues are able to sway voters is because their dishonest accounts have already rendered the liberal order as a dire threat for the majority, who are willing to be partners to upend it.

Mr. Trump pledged to upend an order beset by "fleeing jobs", "critical race theory", and "criminals pouring in" with the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement. Mr. Modi offered "Hindu reawakening". Anti-Trumpism in that backdrop was interpreted as hurrying towards catastrophe where outsiders augmented their interests at the expense of white Americans. Anti-Modism is interpreted as the Congress' unease with placing the priorities of Hindus on top.

A pragmatic course would be to engage the electorate with a more tempting narrative while avoiding collision on sensitive areas. In 2020, the Biden campaign had underlined that the election was not a "partisan moment" but an "American moment". The message went home to disillusioned Trump voters, unlike Ms. Harris' and Hillary Clinton's campaigns which focused only on anti-Trumpism. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal understands that calculus. In 2022, when asked about his party's goalpost, he remarked: "I don't want to defeat anyone, I want the country to win."

The attractive alternative vision for the country must emanate from people's expectations. Ms. Harris' campaign miscalculated what the people expected. For long she upheld several consuming obsessions of the Left including a single-payer health insurance system and ban on fracking. It lent Mr. Trump an effective arsenal: "Comrade Kamala" scare. His share of the Hispanic voters, many of whom have fled communist regimes,

jumped from 32% in 2020 to 46% in 2024, said Edison Research.

### The Congress' mistakes

In berating big businessmen every day, the Congress also miscalculates expectations, especially of India's aspirational class, no longer just the metropolitan and tier one population. India's youth share the conviction that for the country to grow, business people have a crucial role to play as wealth generators and job creators. They demand a coherent plan propelling India's growth.

The Congress offers none. Its doltish politics has been partly successful in Assembly elections. But the people are not content with relief; they want infatuation with a dream. MAGA induces it and Achhe Din induced it. The caste census does not. MAGA and Achhe Din (mythically) come for everybody. But the caste census will benefit only the Other Backward Classes. It hinders Congress' ability to reckon with diverse demographics. Also, given the party's unease with Mandal politics, its sudden fidelity for it appears insufferably convenient.

Today, the idea of a supremely assertive prime minister who can be trusted to place a positive spin to advance India's lofty global role has become a desideratum for most voters. But the Congress' over-reliance on regional parties, who deny it a frontal role and have hardly an effective geopolitical road map, reduces its appeal.

The Congress must exude the air of being in command and declare that it will partner with only those who accept its pre-eminent role and its vision on national security and India's international goalsposts, or else sit in Opposition. This would send a message that it does not have avarice for power but seeks power to secure the people's interest and India's interest. The allies will not disappear — they need it as it needs them. But before allies and the people believe in its leadership, the Congress has to exhibit leadership.

## Targeting a Dravidian icon

Tamil nationalists are trying to weaken Dravidian parties by targeting Periyar

### STATE OF PLAY

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Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, social reformer and founder of the Dravidar Kazhagam, remains the central point of political discourse in Tamil Nadu decades after his passing in 1973. It has become difficult to eliminate Periyar from the ideological spectrum — so much so that even one of Tamil cinema's biggest stars, C. Joseph Vijay, declared him one of the guiding lights of his fledgling party, Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam. The followers of Periyar insist that but for him and his reformist movement, Tamil Nadu would not have made strides in various fields.

However, in recent weeks, Seeman, the chief coordinator of Naam Tamilar Katchi, a Tamil nationalist party that polled over 8% of the votes in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, has made Periyar the main target of his attack. Mr. Seeman has selectively resurrected Periyar's long-forgotten comments against Tamil language, literature, and culture to portray him as "anti-Tamil".

Tamil nationalists seeking to replace the Dravidian movement have begun to blame Periyar and his ideology as the root cause of what they call the "evils ravaging Tamil society". They reject the term "Dravida" to collectively address the people of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, and are highly critical of Periyar's comments that "Tamil is a barbaric language." They often say that Periyar's so-called hatred for Tamil language and culture stems from his origin as a Kannada Naicker. They are in fact more vocal about their criticism of Periyar than

Brahmins, who were consigned to the margins in the wake of the emergence of the Dravidian movement.

Periyar was never consistent with his views. He reconsidered them according to the changing circumstances, with good intention. "His five decades of public life have seen several political storms and shifting stands. But through all this he has remained unwavering in his fierce determination to 'liberate' Tamilians from the shackles of superstition, religion and God," wrote the communist leader, Mythili Sivarman, in her article, "The Relevance of Periyar: Caste or Class Struggle", which is part of the book *Haunted by Fire: Essays on Caste, Class, Exploitation, and Emancipation*.

As an iconoclast, wedded to the idea of rationalism, Periyar rejected all ideas that were incompatible with science and denigrated human dignity. He launched scathing attacks against Tamil literary works, including the *Kambaramayanam*, *Silappathikaram*, and even the *Tirukkural*, idolised by his disciples C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, and others. He was furious when a Tamil scholar in Pachaiyappa's College justified the decision of Kovalan, the hero of *Silappathikaram*, to leave his wife Kannagi "because she was not attractive". Sivarman wrote, "Periyar... championed the cause of widow marriage, marriage based on consent, women's right to divorce to

property, abortion and birth control. He... exposed the male superiority inherent in the concepts of chastity like karpu and pathivirathi that apply to women."

Though Annadurai left Periyar to launch the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) as an antidote to the hardcore atheism preached by his mentor, Periyar's principles remained a guiding force for Dravidian parties. Both Annadurai and Karunanidhi were at one point highly critical of Periyar and lampooned him through their writings and cartoons, but they could not fully eschew his ideology.

Periyar believed that Tamil society could not be liberated without breaking the backbone of Brahminism, rooted in the concept of caste hierarchy by birth. The Bharatiya Janata Party could not make substantial progress in Tamil Nadu despite its campaign against Dravidian parties since humanism is the bedrock of Dravidianism. Mr. Seeman, who has an unmatched talent for stirring controversies, has targeted Periyar even though he was once his admirer. Tamil nationalists seem to think that they can weaken Dravidian parties only by undermining Periyar's principles.

Tamils have protected their language and culture from the onslaught of Sanskrit and from centuries of conquests by non-Tamil rulers. Tamil Nadu has had non-Tamil Chief Ministers. Tamil nationalists argue that the Dravidian movement has failed to ensure a place for Tamils and has allowed non-Tamils to dominate the public and political sphere. Such arguments are bound to be put forth since identity politics has occupied central stage in Indian politics. It remains to be seen whether people will take the 'Periyar versus Tamil nationalism' bait.

## The rise and rise of UPI digital payments

There has been a 10-fold increase in digital payments from 2018

### DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

Digital payments increased more than 3.5 times in value between 2018 and 2024 — from ₹772 lakh crore to ₹2,758 lakh crore. They grew in volume from 222 crore to more than 20,787 crore in the same period. In the last five years alone, digital payments in India increased by 1.6 times in value and 6.7 times in volume, as per the RBI's Payment System Report.

The payments landscape in India is mainly driven by the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), which consolidates multiple bank accounts into one mobile interface.

Chart 1 shows the comparison of UPI and other payment methods in digital transactions over the years. UPI's contribution to the digital payments ecosystem in terms of volume rose from 34% in 2019 to 83% in 2024. While the volume of transactions through UPI increased by 46 times between 2018 and 2024, from 375 crore to 17,221 crore in 2024, other methods of digital payments doubled to 3,566 crore. Overall, there was a 10-fold increase in digital payments to 20,787 crore from 2018.

Chart 2 shows UPI transaction volumes and values since 2019. While the volume surged from 1,078.75 crore in 2019 to 17,220.80 crore in 2024, values increased from ₹18.37 lakh crore to ₹246.83 lakh crore in the same period.

Charts 3 and 4 show the volume and value of UPI transactions Person-to-Person (P2P) and Person-to-Merchant (P2M). P2M transactions grew at a faster rate than P2P in terms of volume.

Charts 5 and 6 show the share of various digital payment methods in the volume and value of transactions in 2024. Though UPI accounted for over 80% of all digital transactions by volume, it constituted just 30% in terms of value.

### Payments revolution

Data for the charts was taken from the RBI's Payment System Report, December 2024

Digital payments increased more than 3.5 times in value between 2018 and 2024

UPI contribution to the digital payments ecosystem in terms of volume rose from 34% in 2019 to 83% in 2024

Chart 1: Comparison of UPI and other payment systems in digital transaction volume over the years (in crore)

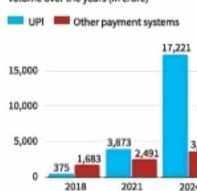


Chart 2: UPI transaction volumes and values since 2019

UPI payments volume (in crore)

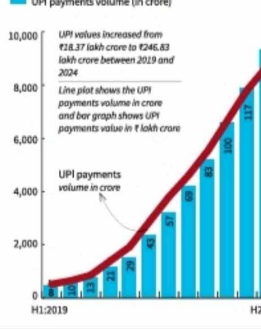


Chart 3: The chart shows the yearly total volume of UPI transactions (P2P vs P2M). P2M transactions grew at a faster rate than P2P in terms of volume.

Chart 4: Yearly total value of UPI transactions (P2P vs P2M)

P2P (₹ lakh crore)

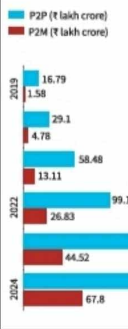


Chart 5: Share of transaction volume of various payment methods in total retail digital payments in 2024 (in %)

Payment method

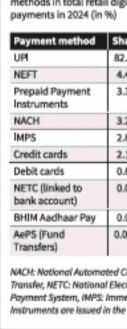
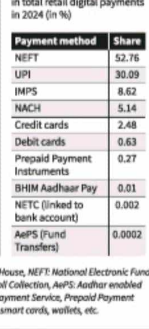


Chart 6: Share of the value of various payment methods in total retail digital payments in 2024 (in %)

Payment method



NACH: National Automated Clearing House; NEFT: National Electronic Fund Transfer; NETC: National Electronic Toll Collection; AePS: Aadhaar enabled Payment System; IMPS: Immediate Payment Service; Prepaid Payment Instruments are issued in the form of smart cards, wallets, etc.

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 6, 1975

## India and U.S. decide to ban illicit trade in antiques

New Delhi, Feb. 5: India and the U.S. have reached an agreement to give a boost to mutual co-operation for a number of programmes in the fields of education and culture. They have also decided that the two governments would soon enact legislation to curb illicit trade in antiquities.

The decisions were taken to-day at the end of the three-day meeting of the Indo-U.S. Sub-Commission on Education and Culture.

A joint communiqué issued to-day said that the meeting of the Sub-Commission was in preparation for the meeting of the Indo-U.S. Joint Commission on economic, scientific, technical and cultural cooperation to be held in Washington on February 13 and 14. The External Affairs Minister, Mr. Y.B. Chavan, and U.S. Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger, will lead their respective delegations.

The Sub-Commission is one of the three set up under the Indo-U.S. Joint Economic Commission during Dr. Kissinger's visit here last year.

Mr. G. Parthasarathy, former Vice-Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University, led the Indian delegation while Mr. Robert Goheen, Chairman of the Council of Foundations in New York, led his side.

The communiqué said the Sub Commission reviewed ways and means to exchange and strengthen co-operation in the educational and cultural fields. The discussions held in a "warm and cordial" atmosphere were marked by a "friendly and constructive spirit."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 6, 1925

## Gold imports from America

London, Feb. 5: Some indication that the gold stream may be beginning to flow back from America to Europe and elsewhere is afforded by the weekly bulletin letter of Messrs Samuel Montagu which shows that during the week the gold valued all in thousands of dollars at 50,314 has been announced as engaged for shipment from New York compared with 11,110 in the previous week. The former amount includes 17,989 for Australia, 17,775 for India, 5,000 for Berlin, 4,700 for Europe and Far East, 2,800 for Europe and 1,500 for Holland.



# What went wrong in DC's crowded skies



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**T**HE January 29 cold evening mid-air collision between a US army Black Hawk UH-60 chopper and an American Airlines Bombardier CRJ-700 regional jet outside of Reagan National Airport, Washington DC, which killed all aboard both the flying machines, has brought the question of flight safety back on the public platform.

While no conclusion can be arrived at before the completion and revelation of the accident inquiry report, it, nevertheless, is plausible to build a scenario to understand the nuances of flight safety, which is of universal applicability and relevance.

First, aviation is an inherently unforgiving world wherein only the champion lives to fly another day and the runner-up has no place whatsoever. Hence, even the slightest of an error by man or the tiniest of machine malfunction could be fatal. This makes an accident either avoidable or unavoidable. However, no mid-air collision normally can be termed

unavoidable because, prima facie, it's got to be avoidable unless proved otherwise.

Thus, the provisional verdict of the January 29 air accident over the Potomac river of Washington DC is that it was avoidable. How? Visualise the descent of the Bombardier passenger aircraft. Gliding down to the 5,204-foot runway 1533 at the approach speed of 140 km per hour under air traffic controller (ATC) guidance, the passenger craft was allegedly nudged into by an army helicopter at an altitude which is much above and beyond its designated and prescribed altitude. Consequently, both the vertical and horizontal separation of the two flying machines turned into a common fireball.

Indisputably, therefore, whereas the passenger aircraft was following the descent procedure through the ATC, the army craft had gone astray. What failed? Man or machine? Understandably, the US aviation, along with other non-American operators, is in a tizzy, owing to it being the US capital city airport, in the vicinity of the dwellings of rulers of the superpower.

Hereinafter, we need not go further into the realm of speculation but await the accident inquiry findings on the 'what, how, why' and other nitty-gritties of circumstances and factors leading to the mishap and future remedial actions. The moot point, nevertheless,



**CONGESTED:** The Reagan National Airport handles more than 800 flights every day. REUTERS

is the ambience of flight operations in and around Washington DC Reagan National Airport, which handles more than 800 flights per day, making it one of the busiest and most crowded US airfields.

One can argue that since the DC airport has three runways to handle the traffic what could be the problem? Precisely! Those three runways are the problem because none of them runs parallel to each other. All three intersect each other. It is like the Mumbai airport's 11,447-foot main runway 27-09 being cut through the middle by a shorter 9,810-foot 14-32 runway. Fortunately, the shorter Mumbai runway isn't yet as busy as the DC one owing to difficult flight manoeuvre from either side, for both take-off and touchdown for bigger

The three runways at the Washington DC airport are the problem because none of them runs parallel to each other. All three intersect each other.

and heavier aircraft. Else, life could be a nightmare for both air traffic control and opening flying crew in Mumbai. Hence, the Mumbai 27-09 (East-West axis) Thane Creek-to-Arabian Sea runway remains the mainstay of the metropolis airport.

Coming back to the DC Reagan airport, the mid-air collision has opened a Pandora's box as volcanic eruptions from various quarters have made things acutely embarrassing for the US government, led by an inexpressible and mercurial new President of the US (POTUS), Donald Trump.

True to his style, the POTUS has been disdainful towards the mishap. Taking a political potshot, he has blamed the 'diversity, equity, inclusion' policy of his predecessor. He has, thereby, given

covert technical failure even before deciphering the causes and consequences of man-machine-weather factors leading to the air disaster in the periphery of the airport.

Understandably, Captain Chesley Sullenberger — considered a national hero of the January 15, 2009 Airbus flight ditching at the Hudson river following a twin-engine failure after take-off from New York's La Guardia runway (wherein all of the 155 aboard survived) — hit back at the POTUS with three words: 'Not surprised, disgusted'.

Former Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, too, called the POTUS remark 'despicable'. Indeed, top VVIPs need to remember that even the most seasoned US pilots shuddered to state that 'everything, unfortunately lined up for this accident to happen' owing to the fact that Washington DC area alone has more than 80 airports and heliports within 30 miles of Reagan National Airport, including six military ones. Plus, more than 100 choppers routinely fly at low altitude near the airport along a river corridor which cuts through 'in and out' passenger planes scheduled take-off and touchdown funnel/corridor.

Choppers are strictly to be below 200 feet and, yet, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigators determined on February 2 itself that the passenger

plane was at 325 feet at the time of the impact, thereby flying well over its restricted designated height of 200 feet.

Nowonder, Mark Stephens, former pilot of Delta with 30 years of accident-free flying, also considers New York's La Guardia and Washington DC's Reagan airports as 'particularly dangerous'.

Further skeletons tumbled out of the US aviation cupboard to inform that there is a huge shortage of ATCs.

Also, the reality is that the TACAS (traffic alert and collision avoidance system) surely couldn't have been as effective as it should be because it doesn't provide solutions at low altitudes in aircraft landing for safety reasons. The system reduces the number of alerts it issues as a plane descends in order to avoid false alarms from other aircraft on the ground. The TACAS is taken over by the GPWS (ground proximity warning system) before touch-down. Don't forget, the mid-air collision happened to the descending passenger craft and the chopper should have hovered below the runway-approaching Bombardier with 60 aboard.

Thus, whatever the inquiry report, the fact is that it is an avoidable flight safety failure — mid-air disaster over water or technically called CFIT (controlled-flight into terrain), wherein the machine is under control, and, yet, human error causes it to crash into the terrain.

## Sowing discontent: Budget cuts threaten farm sustainability



**SAMPAT SINGH**  
FINANCE MINISTER, HARYANA

**T**HE allocation for various sections of agriculture in the 2025-26 Union Budget is a mixed bag. There are incremental improvements in credit access, research and specific crop-focused missions. But the overall reduction in budgetary allocation, capital expenditure and lack of focus on climate resilience and rural infrastructure raises serious concerns.

The success of government efforts will depend on effective fund utilisation, transparent implementation and timely interventions to address agricultural distress. Without addressing these issues, achieving sustainable growth in the farm sector may remain a challenge.

Farmers have been agitating for purchase at minimum support price (C2+50 per cent) since 2017, but the government has not made any allocation in the Budget for the legal guarantee of purchase and loan waiver.

This Budget will make farmers more indebted. The government has waived Rs 16

lakh crore of corporates' loans, but Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has not waived farmers' loans worth Rs 16,000 crore. The increase in the Kisan Credit Card credit limit will only result in increased debt for farmers. The government should have taken steps to reduce their indebtedness.

The Finance Minister spoke repeatedly about increasing the production of pulses in the country. We need to do this quickly. But I don't see this happening in the near future unless farmers are assured of remunerative prices for crops. They made the country self-sufficient in wheat and paddy production. But, in the absence of MSP for many other crops, their incomes have gone down, along with the water tables in Punjab and Haryana. This is a big disservice and will make farmers wary of sowing pulses.

The minister spoke of agriculture as the first engine of growth. In the northern region, Haryana and Punjab are the leading agrarian states and Himachal Pradesh and J&K major producers of fruits and vegetables. The hill states have good tourism potential, too. Unfortunately, all these sectors have been accorded a low priority. The minister has rejected all recommendations of the Agriculture Parliamentary Committee.

The PM-KISAN scheme allocation remains unchanged despite the rising input costs for farmers. With



**IDEAL:** Agriculture investment should be 10% of the total budget expenditure. REUTERS

inflation and the increasing cost of fertilisers, seeds and labour, the stagnation in the PM-KISAN support could reduce its real impact.

The agriculture sector employs more than 60 per cent of the working population and contributes 18 per cent to the country's GDP. The allocation for agriculture is Rs 1.71 lakh crore, which is only 3.37 per cent of the total budget of Rs 50.65 lakh crore.

If the farmers' income is to be doubled, the agriculture sector will have to grow at the rate of 12-14 per cent. To make India a developed country by 2047, the GDP should also grow at the rate of 8 per cent. Agriculture investment should be around 10 per cent of the total budget expenditure.

The cut in the allocation for fertilisers is likely to impact the fertiliser subsidy. This year, the allocation is

The increase in the Kisan Credit Card credit limit will result in increased debt for farmers.

Rs 1,56,502.44 crore as compared to the last financial year's revised estimates of Rs 1,83,093.29 crore.

The new initiatives like the National Mission on High-Yielding Seeds and the Mission for Cotton Productivity are promising, but there is no clear roadmap for fund allocation breakdown to ensure effective implementation of the schemes.

A mission for fruits and vegetables has also been planned. But in view of the earlier programme for tomato, onion and potato (TOP) — which was later expanded and termed Greens — not showing much results, it will be interesting to see whether this thrust helps achieve the desired results.

The Finance Minister allocated Rs 41,000 crore to J&K, which is down from Rs 42,277.74 crore from the

current financial year. This region requires far more for recovery and growth.

The Budget fails to address specific challenges faced by farmers in states like Punjab and Haryana, where crop diversification, water scarcity and increasing input costs remain pressing issues. The measures are seen as generic and not targeted enough at regions with distinct agricultural needs.

On May 12, 1994, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Delhi and Uttarakhand had signed a water-sharing agreement for the Yamuna river. It was intended to resolve disputes over water-sharing among the states. Three multipurpose dams — one at Remulka (HP) and the Lakshmi-Yamuna Multi-Purpose Dam Project (MPDP) and Kishau Dam in Uttarakhand — were to be constructed. The Centre had to contribute 90 per cent of the cost and the state governments the remaining 10 per cent. All three projects were cleared by the authorities concerned. Work was started, but it has now been stalled at all these dams for reasons best known to the Centre. The Finance Minister has said nothing about this.

The health sector in the Union Budget 2025 has several gaps. The Budget increases spending on tertiary care and physical medical infrastructure, but the PHCs, CHCs, civil hospitals and rural hos-

pitals remain underfunded, affecting preventive care and early disease detection. The Budget also aims to add 10,000 new medical seats, but the shortage of trained faculty and inadequate infrastructure in medical colleges remain major obstacles.

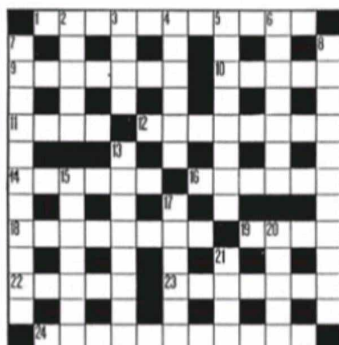
The Budget does not adequately cover the challenges faced by the education sector in teacher recruitment, infrastructure and research support. Rural schools lack basic facilities like toilets, drinking water and electricity.

It is surprising that even after 78 years of independence, the government has not been able to provide clean drinking water and has asked for three more years to provide it. The figure presented by the government of having provided tap water to 80 per cent of the rural population is not true.

The Budget also lacks innovative solutions to pressing economic issues. It primarily aims to woo the middle class and certain sections of voters of Bihar and Delhi, neglecting the needs of the common people.

It also fails to provide substantial support for job creation. The budgetary allocations for this are insufficient. Strong governance, monitoring and regulatory reforms are needed. Without addressing these concerns, India's vision of an inclusive and developed nation by 2047 may remain elusive.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



#### ACROSS

- 1 Of the required standard (2,2,7)
- 9 Deprive of courage (7)
- 10 A characteristic (5)
- 11 Punctious (4)
- 12 Small part (8)
- 14 Optimistic (6)
- 16 A Scottish dish (6)
- 18 Women's underwear (8)
- 19 Composer of Brandenburg Concertos (4)
- 22 Make suitable for upuse (5)
- 23 A culinary herb (7)
- 24 Start to work briskly (3,8)

#### Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Hobart, 4 At length, 9 Incite, 10 Jingoism, 12 Huff, 13 Bulky, 14 Clue, 17 Earth-shaking, 20 Here and there, 23 Need, 24 Askew, 25 Clap, 28 Pass over, 29 Domain, 30 Response, 31 Freely.

Down: 1 Heights, 2 Backfire, 3 Rite, 5 Thick-skinned, 6 Edgy, 7 Grisy, 8 Hamper, 11 Ruthlessness, 15 Check, 16 Unity, 18 Tebbale, 19 Weaponry, 21 Sniper, 22 Versus, 26 Polo, 27 Pour.

#### DOWN

- 2 Sudden overwhelming fear (5)
- 3 A dreaded person (4)
- 4 Small stone-fruit (6)
- 5 Absolute ruler (8)
- 6 Strong desire (7)
- 7 A dramatic advance (7,4)
- 8 Short distance (6,5)
- 13 Grand (8)
- 15 Serfdom (7)
- 17 The sensitive plant (6)
- 20 Besides (5)
- 21 Ask for (4)

### SU DO KU



EASY

### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

1	6	8	3	7	2	5	4	9
7	2	9	8	4	5	3	1	6
4	5	3	1	9	6	2	7	8
5	1	2	7	8	9	4	6	3
9	4	6	5	3	1	7	8	2
8	3	7	2	6	4	9	5	1
2	7	4	6	1	3	8	9	5
6	9	5	4	2	8	1	3	7
3	8	1	9	5	7	6	2	4

### CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 6, 2025, THURSDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Magh Shaka 17
- Magh Purnima 24
- Hijri 1446
- Shaka Paksha Tithi 9, up to 10.54 pm
- Brahme Yoga up to 6.42 pm
- Krishna Nakshatra up to 7.30 pm
- Moon in Taurus sign

### FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	22	08
New Delhi	25	09
Amritsar	19	07
Bathinda	22	05
Jalandhar	18	08
Ludhiana	20	09
Bhivani	21	08
Hisar	22	06
Sirsa	20	06
Dharamsala	18	06
Manali	15	01
Shimla	13	02
Srinagar	14	-02
Jammu	24	07
Kargil	-01	-13
Leh	0	-14
Dehradun	—	—
Mussoorie	17	03



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### Justice at last

Rogue cops deserve no leniency

THE wheels of justice have turned at a painfully slow pace for the families of Baldev Singh and Lakhwinder Singh, who were killed in a fake encounter in Amritsar in 1992. At long last, a special CBI court has paved the way for much-needed closure. Two former Punjab Police officers have been awarded life imprisonment for eliminating both youths, who were falsely branded as hardcore terrorists and framed in a murder case. 'Complete justice', however, has remained elusive: five of the accused died during the protracted trial, while two were acquitted. The horrifying truth came to light only after the CBI, acting on a Supreme Court order passed in 1995, took over the probe into large-scale cremation of unclaimed bodies by the state police. That was also the year when human rights crusader Jaswant Singh Khalsa, whose biopic (*Punjab '95*) is mired in a censorship row, 'vanished' off the face of the earth. A CBI investigation revealed that he was abducted, tortured and murdered by cops. Khalsa was targeted because he knew too much about the 'disappearance' of Sikh youths during the era of militancy in Punjab.

Those were nightmare times for the border state — the carte blanche given to the police to root out terrorism led to extra-judicial killings and other excesses. Terrorism was eventually eliminated, but not before thousands of innocent lives were lost. Many police officers have retired or died without getting their comeuppance.

The verdict in the Baldev-Lakhwinder case should serve as a cautionary tale for rogue cops not only in Punjab but also across the country. Fake encounters continue to be a scourge as trigger-happy law enforcers opt for short cuts and 'instant justice'. Commendably, courts are sending a clear message of zero tolerance; the political class and the police authorities themselves must follow suit. At stake is the credibility of the guardians of law and order — and also the sanctity of Article 21, which guarantees every citizen the right to life and personal liberty.

### Off the field

SC warns against political meddling in sports

THE Supreme Court's censure on Tuesday of the politicisation of sports administration in the country strikes at the heart of a festering problem. By directing the Centre to ensure the participation of the women's kabaddi team at the Senior Asian Championship in Iran, the court laid bare the tangled web of political and bureaucratic interference strangling Indian sports bodies. The Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India's disaffiliation from the International Kabaddi Federation is emblematic of this rot, leaving athletes in limbo despite their potential to bring home glory.

This isn't an isolated incident. The Wrestling Federation of India's (WFI) quiet return to the residence of former president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh — facing sexual harassment charges — exposes how entrenched political figures maintain a vice-like grip over sports federations. Singh's protégés continue to helm the WFI, underscoring how elections are mere formalities and serve to reinforce political influence rather than foster genuine leadership. Even the Supreme Court's intervention in the grave matter isn't new. In 2016, it had advised the BCCI to keep politicians at bay, yet the board remains tightly bound to political heavyweights like Jay Shah, son of Home Minister Amit Shah. The sad irony is that while politicians tout their contributions to sports through initiatives like *Khelo India*, their presence often hampers the democratic functioning of sports bodies and the autonomy of athletes.

Athletes deserve administrators who understand the demands of the field, not bureaucrats and politicians exploiting sports for clout. It's time for meaningful reform, ensuring that sports bodies are led by those with a genuine passion for athletics. The apex court's intervention must serve as a clarion call: let sports be for the sportspersons, not a political playground.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 1925

### The Lucknow pact

LALA Lajpat Rai has done well in issuing a letter to prominent Hindus all over the country with a number of questions, to which they are requested to send their replies not later than February 22. The questions are as important as they are pertinent and cover practically the whole range of subjects connected with the present controversy. We sincerely hope those to whom the letter has been addressed, whether in their individual capacity or as representatives of Hindu organisations, will make a point of sending a full and frank reply to them by the appointed date; and that similar efforts will be made by accredited Mussalman and Sikh leaders to ascertain Muslim and Sikh opinion on the subject. Only thus can the deliberations of the All-parties Conference be both fruitful in themselves and of lasting good to the country as a whole. We do agree with those who think that the Lucknow pact, so far as it provided for the representation of Mussalmans on the Provincial Legislative Councils by separate electorates, was a great blunder and that it has done incalculable mischief. This, however, is no reason for condemning the pact as a whole. A pact of some kind was absolutely essential at the time, if the national demand for self-government was to be formulated and put forward with any strength and effectiveness; and barring this one provision, there was nothing irretrievably bad in the Lucknow pact.



NAVDEEP SURI  
FORMER AMBASSADOR  
TO EGYPT AND UAE

AT first, the comments from US President Donald Trump sounded like a cross between random musings and disjointed ramblings. His desire to buy Greenland from the Danes, annex Canada as a great 51st state of America, reclaim the Panama Canal and rename the Gulf of Mexico, and his proclivity to deploy tariffs as an instrument of foreign policy weren't just bizarre. They harked back to the heyday of imperialism in the 19th century, to a time when foreign territories could be conquered, bought or sold without any reference to the local inhabitants and mercantile economies ruled the roost.

The reactions from shocked friends and neighbours about the hostile acquisition bids came in fast and furious, while friendly souls in Washington DC tried to figure out which part of which comment could possibly be interpreted as Version 2.0 of Trump's *The Art of the Deal*.

'Bizarre' has become the new byword in Washington. The President's February 4 remarks on Gaza as he stood alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the White House were par for the course. In the formal setting of a White House joint press briefing and while reading from a written text, Trump declared, "The US will take over the Gaza Strip and we'll do a job with it, too... we'll own it and be responsible... We're going to take over that piece, and we're going to develop it."

For good measure, he added that he saw it as a "long-term ownership position" and that "this was not a decision made

# Trump stirs the Gaza pot

'Bizarre' has become the new byword in Washington under Trump



VITAL QUESTION: Will the US support Israeli PM Netanyahu's ambition to annex the West Bank? REUTERS

lightly". As Netanyahu smirked with visible satisfaction, Trump went on to say that he expected Jordan and Egypt to take in some 2.3 million displaced Palestinians from Gaza and that he was confident of persuading King Abdullah II and President El-Sisi to do so, having previously hinted that US aid gave him the necessary leverage over them.

But this wasn't the usual case of random Trump musings. The intent had been telegraphed in comments over the past week. And it was taken seriously enough for a group of Arab foreign ministers, including those of Jordan and Egypt, to issue a joint statement from Cairo on February 1 that any plan that encouraged the "transfer or uprooting of Palestinians from their land" would threaten stability in the region, spread conflict and undermine prospects for peace.

The Saudi foreign office responded with a late-night response to Trump's comments, reaffirming Riyadh's "complete rejection of any infringement on the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, whether through Israeli settlement policies, annexation of Palestinian lands or attempts to displace the Palestinian people from their land."

As Netanyahu smirked with visible satisfaction, Trump said he expected Egypt and Jordan to take in some 2.3 million displaced Palestinians.

The statement added, "The duty of the international community today is to work to alleviate the severe human suffering that has been inflicted upon the Palestinian people, who will remain committed to their land and will not move from it."

Trump's comments have pushed Egypt into a tight situation, even though President El-Sisi has been a strong and consistent partner of the US. It was Egypt's initiative under then President Anwar Sadat that brought about the Camp David Accords in 1978 to end the state of

war and establish full diplomatic relations with Israel. But instead of reaping the peace dividend, Egypt has found itself in the unenviable position of being called in to clean up the mess after every Israel-Gaza conflict — in 2008, 2014, 2018 and since October 7, 2023. Over the past 15 months, Egyptian intelligence officials have worked closely and without fanfare with counterparts from Qatar, Israel and the US to work out the contours of the ongoing ceasefire and concurrent release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners. The threat that Egypt must take displaced Palestinians has caused a real worry that Trump's needless provocations not only threaten Egypt's nascent economic recovery but that inflamed passions may even affect the political stability of the largest country in the Middle East.

Jordan, another staunch ally of the US, finds itself in a similar quandary. As a result of the Nakba of 1948 and the 1967 war, the country has already received two large waves of Palestinian refugees, which, according to some estimates, amount to 50-60 per cent of its population of 11 million. The suave and erudite King Abdullah II will have a real challenge on his hands as he

meets President Trump in the White House on February 11.

Beyond these immediate concerns in Egypt, Jordan and the larger Arab world are a flood of questions that defy a rational explanation. Images of tens of thousands of Palestinians streaming towards their destroyed houses in northern Gaza following the ceasefire suggest that they intend to rebuild their lives in a place called home. Trump has suggested that he could bring in US troops to implement his plans if he has to.

Has the Trump administration considered the legality of a forced displacement of people? Is the displacement temporary or permanent? How would they force the Palestinians out against their wishes? Bomb them to extinction, a la Israel? Will the US also support Netanyahu's ambition to annex the West Bank? And has Trump looked at the possibility of getting drawn into another forever war despite his own promise to extract the US from such conflicts? How does that play with the isolationist preference of his MAGA supporters?

Trump is keen to deport illegal migrants and close his country's borders, but wants Egypt and Jordan to generously take in a couple of million. Who pays to resettle them? Who pays to create the Riviera of the Middle East that Trump has suddenly visualised in Gaza? Private capital and real-estate developers for a grand waterfront development, as Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner speculated? After all the pain and suffering endured by the Palestinians, is Gaza now reduced to a pure real-estate play?

At the Jaipur Literature Festival last week, the moral clarity of Gideon Levy and Nathan Thrall, the scholarship of Avi Shlaim, the empathy of Pankaj Mishra and the passionate articulation of Selma Dabbagh resonated with a well-read audience to produce just a tiny sliver of hope. With Trump's pronouncements of February 4, a shroud has again been cast on Palestinian aspirations.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The metaphor for Palestine is stronger than the Palestine of reality. —Mahmoud Darwish

## A salute to frontline villagers of Ladakh

MAJ GEN GG DWIVEDI (RETD)

THE Army installed a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj on the banks of Pangong Tso lake in eastern Ladakh over a month ago. Even as the event sparked a debate, it prompted me to take a walk down memory lane.

In the mid-1970s, as a young officer, I was in Ladakh for advanced mountain warfare training in the rugged, glaciated region. A few years later, I returned as part of the Special Forces, deployed at Lukung post on the western tip of Pangong Tso lake at an altitude of 14,300 feet. Lukung is one of the three border villages in the area; the others are Phobang and Unung. These habitats lie in the valley with large grazing grounds, crisscrossed by streamlets and overlooked by the lofty peaks of the Kamkoon range.

Phobang, which is nearest to the border, acted as a staging camp for our long-range patrols towards Togsitso-Hot Springs areas. There was a close bond between the Army and locals, especially the youth. We played volleyball and football. Devoid of basic amenities at that time, the life of villagers was extremely hard.

I left Lukung in the late 1970s with a heavy heart, hoping to come back. I did return as the Commanding Officer after over a decade. On completing the Siachen tenure, my battalion was deployed in the Chushul sector; Phobang was in the unit's area of responsibility. The number of hamlets had swelled, but the area remained underdeveloped. We undertook civic action programmes to improve the condition of the knee school and provide medical facilities to residents. The unit's ice hockey team honed its skills by playing with local players, who were outstanding. After a year, when the battalion de-inducted, the send-off was marked by heartfelt 'Juley' greetings. This is the Ladakhi word for hello, welcome, thank you or even goodbye.

Now, as an academic, I get to meet students from border areas where I served. This keeps me connected with locals. Konchok Stobgas, current head of Phobang village, runs a weaving centre and camping site at Lukung. The Indian government's Vibrant Villages Programme, although a belated response to the Chinese model villages (*Xiaokang*) project, is expected to be a boon for the natives of border areas.

While undertaking developmental projects, residents' inputs and sentiments must be given due consideration. The installation of Shivaji's statue led to discontent among locals as it was perceived to be an imposition. Instead, enshrining a local hero would have been a far more prudent move.

Villages like Phobang not only define India's geographic boundaries but also the spirit of the nation. Its residents have stood shoulder to shoulder with the Army by it during the 1962 Chinese aggression or the intrusions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in recent years. They often confront PLA soldiers in the disputed territory. The nation should express its gratitude to them through an outreach initiative, 'Juley Phobang', on the lines of the 'Juley Ladakh' programme of the Navy.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Rethink on nuclear expansion

Refer to 'Miles to go on the nuclear front', given the past missed deadlines, India's target of adding 92,000 MW of nuclear energy by 2047 seems unrealistic. The extension of the Gorakhpur plant's deadline from 2025 to 2032 exemplifies the exorbitant costs and sluggish execution of such projects. Moreover, nuclear power remains beset with safety risks, delays and reliance on imported uranium, with no budgetary allocation for Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). In contrast, renewables like solar, wind and hydropower provide cheaper, faster and safer options. Instead of chasing a mirage, India must prioritise renewable energy while developing nuclear power at a realistic pace.

CHANCHAL S. MANN, UNA

#### Improve implementation

Apropos of 'Miles to go on the nuclear front', the article rightly highlights the gap between nuclear energy goals and actual implementation. While nuclear power is essential for energy security, multiple challenges hinder its progress. High costs, regulatory delays and dependence on foreign technology slow down its advancement. India must focus on execution rather than just setting ambitious targets. SMRs offer a promising alternative, but they require government support and policy backing. Without addressing these core issues, achieving nuclear energy goals will remain a distant dream.

DHEERAJ THAKUR, SRIMAU

#### Need for comprehensive plan

Refer to 'Return of the natives', while the government's diplomatic approach to avoid a confrontation with the US is pragmatic, there's a need for a more comprehensive plan. India should not merely talk tough on illegal immigration, it must create an ecosystem that encourages legal migration and provide ways and means to those who wish to go abroad legally. At the same time, it must focus on addressing the drivers of illegal migration — economic disparity and lack of employment. The government's emphasis should be on rehabilitating deported nationals and ensuring that those sent back from the US don't repeat their mistake. A nationwide crackdown on agents involved in illegal immigration and a stronger focus on skill develop-

ment and job creation will go a long way in curbing this issue. Only with a holistic strategy can India avoid the stigma of being linked to nations with high illegal immigration rates.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

#### Human traffickers make hay

Apropos of 'Return of the natives', there are scores of challenges that illegal immigrants face apart from losing money. Some sell land, while others take hefty bank loans. Many become casualties to the harsh climatic conditions in foreign lands. Those who manage to reach their destination are forced to live in hell-like conditions, steeped in poverty with inadequate healthcare and ill-treatment at the hands of unscrupulous employers. They are considered a threat to local society in the migrant country. The only ones who gain are the human traffickers. They manage to amass huge sums of money by unethical means. The government must crack down on these unscrupulous elements who make innocent families suffer so much.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

#### Learn from US on deportation

With reference to 'Are you waiting for muhurt', SC asks Assam on sending back immigrants; the Supreme Court has rightly pulled up the state government for its failure to deport 63 Bangladeshi illegal immigrants and keeping them in detention centres indefinitely. On the other hand, the US started deporting illegal immigrants within days of the announcement in this regard. Illegal immigrants become a burden on the native population as they benefit from the government's welfare schemes and consume the nation's resources.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

#### No incentives for savings

Everybody has gone gaga over the tax rebates offered to the middle class in the Union Budget. But a major drawback that it failed to address is to give incentives to people who opt for savings under various schemes like the PPF, the CPE, post office schemes and the NPS. In the old times, it was rightly said, 'It's not how much you earn, it's what you save'.

NPS SOHAL, CHANDIGARH



# A GLOBAL SUMMIT ON AI AMID MALICIOUS ABUSES

THERE'S no question we are in an AI and data revolution era. Researchers are making a feverish pitch to come up with better models to churn huge data, address related risks and challenges. Artificial Intelligence, however, is not any new phenomenon; its roots go back to the mid-20th century. AI has continued to evolve. In the wake of machine learning and deep learning, the 21st century world is amazed at the latest innovations in AI research, such as: Virtual Assistants (Amazon Alexa, Apple Siri, Google Assistant), recommendations from OTT or music applications, image and speech recognition, autonomous vehicles, and diagnostic tools.

Five years ago, Generative AI models, such as DALL-E and ChatGPT, first showed their stunning capabilities in generating images and human-like text, respectively, sparking a scramble among tech companies the world over. These applications have been providing users efficiency, personalization, and experiences never before. Now, daring western models such as OpenAI, Chinese company DeepSeek's R1, which cost much cheaper, is topping popularity charts.

While AI is being integrated into businesses and public systems, policymakers have begun to take notice of concerns that AI may worsen overall inequality between genders and among nations, besides engendering a class/racial bias which will affect recruitments or immigrant processing. We have seen how deepfakes are flooding the net with fake videos, fake audio, fake text, and fake images. AI has made them much cheaper and much more realistic. GPT-4 can pen articles in a jiffy and the world may be flooded with fake news, views and discussions. People will be at a loss to distinguish between fakes and real ones.

That AI can also have a sinister influence on the human mind is discernible in the fact that there have been more than 3 billion search results for 'AI girlfriend' on Google. Lonely vulnerable people can be turned into addicts by companies by shaping their behaviors and opinions. AI is also powering defence sectors. Already, suicide drones are in use. Giving them autonomy to act on their own will have horrible consequences if errors or bugs take effect.

As such, there is a need to regulate misuse of AI and create safety standards and bolster fact-checking systems by governments. All concerns regarding data reliability, fundamental rights, tech isolationism, and equitable access will be deliberated upon by a host of global leaders, researchers, and innovators in Paris on February 10-11 for a responsible, sustainable AI development.

The Artificial Intelligence (AI) Action Summit co-chaired by India and France summit to pave way for global AI standards and promote ethical governance. It may be recalled that two key summits had taken place before. The AI Safety Summit in Britain in Bletchley Park in 2023 saw the signing of the Bletchley Declaration on AI Safety by 25 nations. Later, a Seoul summit gathered 16 top AI companies to make voluntary commitments to develop AI in a transparent manner.

The Paris summit will build on the strengths and pledges of these previous meets. Why in Paris? With the AI threatening to disrupt labour incomes and numbers, the West is playing catch-up as American and Chinese companies are racing to develop new applications and capabilities. India, too, is trailing. Prime Minister Modi will confer with other leaders on ways to provide access to independent, safe, and reliable AI for all. They will also deliberate on developing AI as inclusive and environmentally friendly as well. It is hoped that PM Modi will return with a gleam on best practices by governments in building a robust talent pool through industry and academic collaboration to build a large number of skilled force to spur the AI startup space.

## MEDLEY



## LETTERS

### Conduct Indian Science Congress

INDIAN Science Congress Association (ISCA) is a premier scientific organisation which started in the year 1914 in Kolkata. It meets annually in the first week of January. Even Nobel laureates attend and speak at the Congress. However, for the past two years, the central government has not been organising the annual conference of this institution. Many renowned scientists have resigned from their membership, frustrated by the increasing political influence and pseudo-scientific approach within the institution. For the current central government, cultural pride and national identity seem to hold more importance than science. However, science is the foundation of any nation's progress. Obstructing the functioning of a scientific institution that has existed for over a century is equivalent to jeopardizing the nation's future.

Dr Jitesh Mori, Kutch

### Budget: Tall claims about Viksit Bharat

THE much-hyped PM Dhanu Dhaanya Yojana is restricted to 100 districts in the country out of 700. It is a very exaggeration to say India would realise Viksit Bharat by 2047 as its present per capita income is \$3000, and to claim its developed country status, it must be \$24,000. As usual, the Budget completely ignored AP without mentioning SCS, Railway zone, steel plants and ports in spite of a significant number of MPs in Lok Sabha. It is also the same case with TG.

Pratap Reddy Y, Tiruvuru, NTR dist, AP

### Modi sends home immigrants in shackles

IN a show of his tough stance on "illegal immigration", US President Donald Trump has deported 104 immigrants of Indian origin to India by a military plane despite the "bromance" between Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi calling Trump "my dear friend" made no difference. The upcoming visit of Modi to the US for expanding defence, technology and trade ties could not persuade Trump to be more accommodative and cause no embarrassment to India. The deportees in shackles and handcuffs made very disheartening optics. This is no way to treat other human beings. The preference for a military plane over a charter or commercial flight was explicable in terms of Trump's description of "undocumented immigrants" as "aliens", "criminals" and "invaders".

G David Milton, Maruthanode, TN

THE deportation of 200-illegal migrants from USA to India is an internal matter of that country as there is no room for complaint. The USA has every right, just as all sovereign countries have, to defend themselves from illegal migration that is a drain on the exchequer. The USA opened its eyes rather belatedly as the illegal migrants have become a menace. Donald Trump has promised cleansing of the system that allowed lakhs of illegal migrants and started the work right away without wasting time. India is not a poor country like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal or Sri Lanka for its people to take the risk of illegal migration to the US. I think India too should effectively seal all international borders and start screening illegal migrants for deportation to their respective countries.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

### Bright sports talent comes to the fore

RE "Bhadrachalan bidda, 'Laddu' Sharma make Indian Cricket proud": Of late, boys and girls from small towns are hogging the headlines in cricket due to their brilliant performance at national and international cricket levels, thereby bringing their hidden talent latent in them to the fore. The brilliant all-round performance by Trisha enabling Indian women's team to lift the ICC women's U-19 world cup title in Kuala Lumpur and an equally splendid display with both bat and ball by Abhishek Sharma in the fifth T20I against England in Mumbai were not only incredible but also clearly evident from the way they are playing both at home and away - a testimony to their hard work coupled with brilliance.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad

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## BENGALURU ONLINE

### Contractors take holy dip at Sangam, pray for clearance of pending bills

BENGALURU: A group of contractors from Karnataka took a holy dip at the Sangam in Prayagraj during the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela, praying for the early clearance of pending bills by the Congress-led state government.

A video of the holy dip has also gone viral on social media. Sources indicate that the contractors, hailing from Bagalkot district in North Karnataka, sought divine intervention for the settlement of outstanding dues and the launch of new schemes to support their work. Their prayers concluded with chants of "Har Har Mahadev".

The video has caused embarrassment to the ruling Congress party in Karnataka. On January 13, the Karnataka Contractors' Association wrote to seven state ministers, demanding immediate clearance of pending payments. They alleged that payments were not being processed based on seniority and issued a seven-day ultimatum to the government. Since the Congress party assumed power in Karnataka in 2023, tensions have escalated between the government and contractors over unpaid bills.

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

# Keep your passion, career entwined

## TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

EACH calling has, in its own manner, produced outstanding and great persons. Everyone knows what a great scientist Einstein was, and how his work revolutionised the way the nature of the Universe is understood. Likewise, the human race will never forget the great contribution of Dr Denton Cooley, who performed the first ever heart transplant, opening a new and exciting chapter in the history of medicine. Similarly, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who rose to become the Vice President of India, was an outstanding teacher, who had earlier been the Vice Chancellor of the prestigious Andhra University. Mokshagundam Visweswarai, the renowned engineer from Karnataka state, who founded the University of Visveswaraya College of Engineering in Bengaluru, is remembered for his unforgettable contribution to protecting Hyderabad city from the floods of the Musi river through an ingenious system, as also for protecting Vishakhapatnam city from sea erosion, creating the biggest reservoir in Asia at that time.

The silver screen and television also provide opportunities for people, not only to display their creative abilities through acting, but also to act as means for steady and lucrative careers, or as handsome supplements to their normal incomes. There are many who not only became legends during their lives, but will also be remembered forever, for their extraordinary talent and contribution. Among them one remembers yesteryear Hindi movie actors, such as Ashok Kumar, Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Sanjeev Kumar, and actresses, such as Madhubala, Meena Kumari, Waheeda Rahman, Hema Malini and Madhuri Dixit. As also Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan, in the Hindi field, and Mahesh Babu, Allu Arjun, Samantha and Tamannah, in the Telugu celluloid world, in the present generation. Likewise, NTR, Nageswara Rao, Savitri, Anjali Devi, Sarada and Jayaprada achieved idol status, in earlier years, in the Telugu movie field. Even crooners found the movie field a route to fame, as well as a career with substantial income, with Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhonsle, K. L. Sehgal, Mohammed Rafi, Mukesh, Manna Day and Kishore Kumar in the Hindi movie field, and Ghantasala and P. Susela in the Telugu industry, being the most successful of those.

The medium of radio, in the earlier days, and the TV and other social media in the present context, also provide similar opportunities, although, perhaps, on a more modest level. One can never forget how the likes of Melville de Mellow and Luthika Ratnam read the English news on the radio, especially on important occasions. Or, in Telugu, Janamanchi Ramakrishna and Panyala Ranganatha Rao. I was such an ardent fan of de Mellow that when our group of IAS officer trainees visited the office of the (then) All India Radio, I got him to append his autograph on a one rupee note, because I had nothing else to get him to write upon! The arena

of games and sports, especially cricket in India, is another field which offers the mixture of enjoyment and substantial monetary attraction. Vijay Merchant, Lala Amarnadh, Wilson Jones and Ramanathan Krishnan, in earlier years, and M.S. Dhoni, Virat Kohli, Sachin Tendulkar, Hampi, Karanam Malleswari, and Viswanath Anand, to mention but a few, who have done so in more recent times

of games and sports, especially cricket in India, is another field which offers the mixture of enjoyment and substantial monetary attraction. Vijay Merchant, Lala Amarnadh, Wilson Jones and Ramanathan Krishnan, in earlier years, and M.S. Dhoni, Virat Kohli, Sachin Tendulkar, Hampi, Karanam Malleswari, and Viswanath Anand, to mention but a few, who have done so in more recent times. People remember, and respect, the memory of great persons, through the gesture of earmarking their birthdays to celebrate their lives and times. For example, 14 March, the birth anniversary of Albert Einstein, is observed as 'Genius Day', to celebrate his life and legacy. Likewise 5 September, the birth anniversary of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, is celebrated as the 'Teachers' Day', 15 September, the birth anniversary of Visweswarai, is celebrated as the 'Engineers Day' and,



3 December the birth anniversary of Dr Rajendra Prasad, as the 'Advocates Day'. Special days have also been set apart, in every year, to recall, and celebrate, the contributions made to society, by certain callings. 21 April, the day on which Sardar Patel the first Home Minister of independent India, and the architect of civil services in the country, addressed the first batch of officers of the Indian Administrative Service, at Metcalf House, in Delhi, where they were being trained, is celebrated as the Civil Services Day in India.

The first Monday of October is celebrated as the International Doctors Day in many countries, a practice initiated by the WHO and the international medical humanitarian organisation, Médecins Sans Frontières, or 'Doctors Without Borders', which offers medical humanitarian assistance to people based solely on need, irrespective of race, religion, gender, or political affiliation. On the day, doctors, conduct, seminars, exhibitions, presentations, and deliver lectures about the medical profession. Similarly, on 10 November, the International Accountants Day is celebrated, to commemorate the great work accountants do to make business thrive, support, economy and help people navigate the complexities of finance, the day on which in 1494, the Venetian mathematician Luca Bartolomeo de Pacioli published his critical work on everything about arithmetic, geometry, and proportion.

The World Architecture Day is celebrated by paying tribute to the field of architecture who have the ability to change the world that we live in with their amazing work. On the day, their work is recognised as well as the important role that architecture play. While it is celebrating day to architecture on different countries, it was created in 2005 by the international union of architects and celebrated on the first Monday of October, coinciding with the UN - Habitat Global Observance of the World Habitat Day. Since 1949, 7th December is observed as the Armed Forces Flag Day throughout the country to honour the martyrs and the men in uniform who valiantly fought & continue to fight on our borders to safeguard the country's honour. The three wings of the Armed Forces have also set apart specific days of a year for celebrations. Army Day is celebrated on 15 January every year in India, in recognition of Lieutenant General M. Cariappa (who later became a Field Marshal) taking over as the first Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army. Navy Day is celebrated on 4

December, every year to recognize the achievements of the Indian Navy and its role in the country. Likewise, Air Force Day, is celebrated on October 8, to commemorate the establishment of the Air Force in 1932. All people have their own strengths and weaknesses. The ability to get lost, even in the most similar surroundings, is one weakness I have suffered from, since childhood. I have often found it difficult to find our own house, in many of the colonies in which we lived. And, on several locations, I had to be literally forced out of the wrong car I had got into, while leaving for home from the office! This trait of mine once resulted in a hilarious incident.

I was in Bharat Darshan, as an officer trainee of the IAS, in the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA), Mussorie, in the year 1969. The Western Command of the Army had requested to accept our group for the customary Army attachment as, perhaps, preparations were on for the Bangladesh engagement in 1971. Our group, therefore, was split into several teams and I was one of a team which was attached to the 5th Grenadiers battalion at Jabalpur. One night, after dinner, the Commander of the battalion suggested that I should lead a route march. I was given a compass, and asked to proceed to a specified destination, by the shortest route.

After a little while, sensing the danger of my leading the column into the neighbouring Rajasthan state, the Commander called a halt, and himself took over the task of returning to the battalion headquarters!

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

out of eleven of which showed an increase in extreme FWI conditions in January. The researchers note that "while we have high confidence in the qualitative change, the likelihood and intensity of the FWI has increased due to the human-induced climate emergency, the precise numbers have a wide range of uncertainty due to the model performance."

"Without a faster transition away from planet-heating fossil fuels, California will continue to get hotter, drier and more flammable," Clair Barnes, a co-author of the report and researcher at Imperial College London, told to CBC News. The researchers also looked at changes to the timing of the dry season and found that the length of the dry season has increased by about 23 days since the global climate was 1.3°C cooler. This means that because of the burning of fossil fuels, the dry season and the Santa Ana Winds are increasingly overlapping—a recipe for more fire.

The group also found that the drought conditions leading up to the fires are now more likely to occur. Similarly, dry seasons are 2.4 times more likely to happen compared to preindustrial times. (<https://www.commondreams.org/>)



A researcher relied on the Fire Weather Index (FWI) — "a composite fire-risk index that accounts for longer-term drying conditions as well as wind and humidity driven conditions that can drive wildfire spread on a given day" — and found that "extreme" FWI conditions that drove the L.A. fires are expected to occur on average once every 17 years now that the globe is 1.3°C warmer relative to the preindustrial period. That is an increased likelihood of 35% and an increased intensity of about 6% compared to a 1.3°C cooler climate

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## Budget and the grouse over bias

It has been widely noted that the Union Budget 2025-26, presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, has a disproportionate, overwhelming focus on Bihar. The state received special attention in the form of allocations and proposals. A mahakana board is to be set up to boost the production, processing and marketing of fox nuts for Bihar, the main producer of mahakana in the country. A National Institute of Food Technology has been announced in the state to cater to the food processing needs of the eastern region. Financial support for strengthening the Western Kosi Canal in Mithilanchal and infrastructure development for greenfield airports, hotels etc has been announced as well. The capacity of IIT Patna is set to be expanded. The Finance Minister mentioned Bihar many times in her speech and for those who care for optics, even wore a sari with a Madhubani motif.

There are obvious political reasons behind the largesse. The government at the Centre depends crucially on the support of Nishu Kumar's Janata Dal (U), the BJP's partner in the ruling NDA. Bihar is slated to go to the polls in October this year, and the budgetary proposals for the state may be seen as electoral sops. Andhra Pradesh – where another BJP ally, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), is in power – also had enough to cheer about. There is criticism that such selective bonanzas would make the budget a political document rather than a financial plan for the country. Politics has always influenced budgets but too much of it would make it a partisan exercise.

While the budget has been criticised for the special attention it accorded to Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, there are complaints that it discriminated against states from the South which are ruled by non-BJP parties. All states except Andhra Pradesh have expressed displeasure over what they called a raw deal. Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah described the budget as "disappointing." The Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Kerala have said that their demands and needs were ignored. West Bengal, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh have voiced the same sentiment. It has been pointed out that the northern states received higher allocations and the better-performing southern states got less. No state is ever happy with what it gets and it is difficult to satisfy all. However, important national endeavours such as the budget should not leave an impression of being discriminatory. The resources are scarce. They should be distributed justly and fairly; politics should not be allowed to rule over economic considerations.

**Political compulsions should not undermine the budget's significance as a policy document**

## Liquor licences: Reform with caution

A committee headed by retired IAS officer KP Krishnan has proposed two key reforms in Karnataka's excise sector: lifting the 33-year-old freeze on new liquor licences for retail stores (CL-2) and bars/restaurants (CL-9), and hiking the fees for various liquor licences. According to the committee's interim report, these reforms could generate up to Rs 2,200 crore for the state. However, while the proposal might appear to be a pragmatic approach to address fiscal challenges, it demands careful evaluation to ensure that the potential benefits outweigh the risks of unintended social and economic consequences. The freeze, in force since 1992, has created an artificial scarcity, turning the existing 3,995 CL-2 and 3,637 CL-9 licences into highly coveted assets. These licences often change hands at exorbitant rates, frequently through under-the-table transactions, fostering a flourishing shadow market that deprives the state of legitimate revenue.

By lifting the ban, the government aims to dismantle this near-monopolistic system and bring transparency to the sector. Additionally, with the state's population growing significantly since 1992, the demand for liquor outlets has naturally surged, particularly in rural areas.

Currently, liquor is often purchased in bulk from nearby towns and then sold unofficially at inflated prices. This thriving unregulated bootlegging operation not only robs the state of revenue but fuels unmonitored consumption. However, the government must tread cautiously as an increase in the number of vendors could lead to a rise in liquor consumption, especially in villages where alcohol-related issues are already prevalent. Simultaneously, the issue of villagers resorting to more hazardous spurious liquor due to the unavailability of legal outlets must be taken into consideration. Moreover, smaller shops operating under existing CL-2 licences, many of which are struggling, may face heightened competition if new entrants flood the market. The Federation of Wine Merchants Association fears that this could destabilise small businesses and lead to economic distress for families dependent on them.

The government policy should not be driven solely by short-term financial gains and the broader social implications of such decisions must be carefully considered. This calls for a balanced approach – one that overrides the economic benefits against the potential rise in alcohol dependency, road accidents and public health issues. While the reforms could boost revenue, they must be implemented alongside robust measures to mitigate social harms, such as stricter enforcement of alcohol sale regulations, public awareness campaigns, and de-addiction programmes. The goal should be to create a transparent system that generates revenue without exacerbating social problems. A well-reasoned, thoughtful policy that prioritises the greater good of society over immediate financial gains is the need of the hour.

**Proposal aims to dismantle the shadow market but there are risks of social consequences**

Work in the later stages of life is increasingly recognised as important to the process of healthy ageing

ALLEN P UGARGOL AND  
SWETCHA POLADI

Population ageing is now a global phenomenon that is generating a great deal of interest in India. This phenomenon not only impacts the ability of societies to maintain productivity with an ageing workforce, known as the silver workforce, but also makes societies rethink the need and timing of retirement, consider the feasibility for older adults to re-enter the workforce and whether longer lives can be meaningful and healthy. The World Health Organisation defines healthy ageing as 'the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age'.

The emphasis of healthy ageing is more on functional mobility or the capacity to achieve what one wishes to achieve. Healthy ageing, therefore, underscores the need to be healthier and functional rather than living in ill health. Quite appropriately, the United Nations has declared the decade of 2021-2030 for healthy ageing, aimed at improving the lives of older adults.

In a rapidly ageing world where one in six people will be above the age of 60 years by 2030, it is imperative to discuss work, employment and ageing in today's context. According to the Longitudinal Ageing Study of India, the population of older adults in the country is expected to rise to 20% by 2050. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy notes that India's workforce aged 45 years and above grew from 37% in 2016-17 to 49.2% in 2022-23, indicative of the growing proportion of the silver workforce. As a measure of comparison, the average life expectancy at birth in India as of 2021 was 67.3 years but the healthy life expectancy was lower, at 58.1 years. While both these numbers have been improving consistently over the years,

the gap between them reflects the difference caused by chronic ageing and healthy ageing.

The days of expecting a predictable retirement following a linear career trajectory are now as good as going, if not gone. More and more older adults are extending their work lives, either out of compulsion or choice, well beyond the restrictive retirement age and this is a transformational shift.

Although health determines how long individuals can work, there are also associated emotional, personal, financial, and occupational factors. Work is also recognised as an important facilitator that shapes the ageing process. Focus is today being laid on the



cumulative and acute effects of work and working environments on the later life well-being of individuals.

**Work and well-being**

For the last few decades, the negative views of ageing outcomes have focused on weekly working hours, mandating a retirement age and other such public policy measures. However, what this has done is completely circumvent the focus on the positive outcomes of working in later life. Evidence informs that in terms of physical and mental health – physical activity, intellectual activity and other social engagements that are associated with work and volunteering roles can moderate physical and psychological changes as one ages.

Paid or unpaid employment at later ages is known to contribute to physical,

emotional and mental health and measures such as mandatory retirement are known to lead to certain negative health effects among both women and men. However, one needs to interpret this cautiously. It is not that work per se makes the workers unhealthy or keeps them healthy, but it is more the characteristics of the work environment and the work-task patterns that they are exposed to over time. In simple terms, if work is physically and/or mentally exhausting, it can result in a loss of health over time unless the specific work tasks change or alter over time.

Such changes in work tasks are known to positively buffer age-related cognitive decline over time and this is where flexibility in work, convenience and meaningful work transitions that involve novelty can be beneficial. Although there is mixed evidence on this front, what we know is that staying mentally, socially and physically active, which work can provide, is good for health.

India embodies a great deal of duality when it comes to older workers and their meaningful engagement. On the one hand, formal employment is known to entail decent work norms, employee protection measures, retirement benefits, pensions, etc. with mandatory retirement policies while on the other hand, informal employment offers considerably less or insufficient cover in terms of welfare benefits but does offer re-entry options to the labour force for older adults, albeit possibly precarious roles at lower wages. Working older adults are known to accrue benefits that include financial gain, self-esteem, companionship, social networks, purpose and fulfillment, health, improved cognition and well-being. In this context, it is imperative to explore work characteristics and work flexibility. This is a shift that could help ensure that the silver workforce is retained, supported, reskilled, and retooled to engage in work while the employer and the organisation also gain from the experience, commitment and a semblance of continuity that the older workers bring to a multi-generational workforce.

Allen P. Ugargol is professor and doctoral scholar, respectively, at the Centre for Public Policy, IIM Bangalore

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE Against all odds

I've seen firsthand how hard work and determination can transform lives

SHOBHA ANAND

There are several rags to riches stories of children of humble backgrounds making it big, in spite of a broken system.

Decades ago my mother, who was suffering from emphysema syndrome took it upon herself to teach her domestic help's three little children. Her Nepalese maid, the wife of a watchman working with the Karnataka Housing Board, was very ambitious where her kids were concerned. Aspiring for a bright future for them, she had enrolled them in an English medium school – one of the many that have mushroomed in residential localities. But neither she nor her husband had even a rudimentary knowledge of the language. She

could not afford to enrol her children for tuitions. This is where my mother stepped in.

My mother with her pleasant demeanour and patient turned out to be an excellent teacher and mentor to the kids. The children were also very diligent and enthusiastic about learning. Even during summer vacation, they used to plead with my mom to make time for them though she used to be occupied with her children and grandchildren visiting her.

The children studied very hard and did well in their Class 10 board exams. My parents guided them to a non-government organisation that awarded scholarship to deserving underprivileged students to pursue their academic goals. All three of her children did very well. The eldest completed her Masters degree in the science stream and is employed in a prestigious science institution in Bengaluru. The younger two are engineers. The youngest is with Deolite and worked onsite in Toronto for a couple of years. She has now bought a flat and stays there comfortably with her proud parents. It has been quite a journey for the parents – watchman's shed to an apartment.

The other case is more recent. I had called the carpenter for some minor repairs. He proudly showed me his iPhone 11 and told me his daughter in London gifted it to him. He told me his daughter and son in law are infotech engineers living in London. I started chatting with him so he showed me photos of the couple he based in London. He said his younger daughter is in India with Ernst & Young. She took a loan and modernised their house. He went on to add that his daughters were more than sons and could not understand why many are obsessed with a male child. He has no formal education. He told me his daughters ask him to stop working. He proudly added that his carpentry helped him in educating his daughters.

Hats off to such youngsters and their parents!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Governors must rise above partisan politics

This refers to 'SC expresses concern over pendency of Bills: TN Governor claims nothing pending' (Feb 5). It is a matter of great concern that the governors, expected to act as a bridge between the state and the Centre, tend to act as agents of the Union government in a state ruled by an opposition party. Further, one has to presume that there is some briefing by the Centre, when a governor is appointed, to see that the state government concerned is harassed, compelling people to vote for the BJP

### A collective failure

The widespread prevalence of manual scavenging in India is a stark reminder of systemic failure, with both the Centre and states culpable (Manual scavenging: when ban fails, Feb 5). Despite court interventions, including those by the SC, authorities continue to exploit loopholes in the law, drawing spurious distinctions between manual scavenging and hazardous cleaning. The enormity of the problem is alarming. This is a scathing indictment of the indifference and inhumanity of authorities. What's even more reprehensible is that the victims belong predominantly to the lowest rungs of society, mostly from the Scheduled Caste (SC) community. This reflects the societal attitude of looking down upon those from the SC community. Karnataka, particularly Bengaluru, accounts for a significant number

of deaths reported. The question remains: will a more humane system prevail in India? Despite the repeated assurances, authorities remain unaccountable, and the system of justice continues to fail. The lack of culpability and accountability is a troubling commentary on the state of our society.

H R Bapu Satyanarayana, Mysuru

### Revisit NAAC

The arrest of a Davangere University Professor by the CBI in the NAAC rating bribery case (Feb 4) may be just the tip of the iceberg. NAAC rankings often fail to reflect the quality of higher educational institutions. Established in 1994, NAAC may have outlived its utility. The central government should devise a new strategy for assessing HEIs, focusing on employability, entrepreneurial skills, and academia-

industry connections.

Anil P. Bengaluru

### Not so uniform

The stated aim of the UCC is to unify people regardless of caste, creed, or social status. However, exempting tribal communities from its scope has raised concerns that the UCC may target minorities. Many provisions directly assault women's sexual autonomy, enabling moral policing and vigilantism. In a nation professing *sabka saath, sabka vikas*, an invasive model that ignores Indian society's nuances and complexities sets a dangerous precedent.

S S Paul, Nadia (West Bengal)

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

## SPEAK OUT

...Last time, some channels showed that BJP would get 62 seats and AAP would get 8 seats, but exactly the opposite happened... Some exit polls that are coming now show that BJP is forming govt... but I feel that we need to wait... it won't be surprising if we break the record of last time...



Somnath Bharti, AAP MLA

I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book.

Groucho Marx

## TO BE PRECISE

US military plane carrying deported Indians lands in Punjab



## IN PERSPECTIVE

### Critical minerals: Goals and gaps

NCMM furthers India's mineral security agenda but can funding, tech adoption match intent?

RAKSHITH SHETTY

The Union government's National Critical Minerals Mission (NCMM), with a seven-year outlay of Rs 34,300 crore, is a step in the right direction in the country's quest for mineral security. By targeting the entire value chain – from exploration and mining to processing, recycling, and international collaboration – the NCMM seeks to mitigate supply chain vulnerabilities exacerbated by geopolitical tensions and China's dominance in critical minerals. While the mission's holistic framework aligns with India's climate commitments and industrial ambitions, its success hinges on addressing structural gaps in funding, technology, and private sector architecture.

The NCMM's architecture rests on seven pillars: enhancing domestic production, securing overseas assets, promoting recycling, strengthening trade partnerships, advancing R&D, developing human capital, and mobilising financing. Domestically, it aims to auction over 100 critical mineral blocks and undertake 1,200 exploration projects by 2031, leveraging agencies like the Geological Survey of India which has already initiated 368 projects since 2022. Internationally, the mission empowers entities like Khanij Bidesh India Ltd (KBIL) to acquire foreign assets, exemplified by its lithium exploration agreement in Argentina's Catamarca province. Recycling initiatives target 400 kilotonnes of materials through streamlining guidelines and incentive schemes, while R&D focuses on establishing three Centres of Excellence and filing 1,000 patents.

The mission's governance framework, led by an Empowered Committee under the Cabinet Secretary, integrates inter-ministerial coordination and international alliances such as the Mineral Security Partnership and Quad's clean energy supply chain principles. These efforts are bolstered by tariff breaks, including zero import duties on critical minerals to ease domestic availability. The NCMM addresses long-standing gaps in India's mineral policy. Historically, the sector suffered from under-exploration – only 10% of India's Obvious Geological Potential (OGP) has been explored, compared to 20-25% in advanced economies. By fast-tracking regulatory approvals and introducing Exploration Licences for private players, the mission could unlock resources like the 5.9 million tonnes of lithium reserves in Jammu & Kashmir. The emphasis on offshore mining, particularly for polymetallic nodules containing cobalt and nickel, diversifies supply sources beyond

land-based reserves. Internationally, India's participation in the MSP and partnerships with resource-rich nations like Australia and Chile mitigates over-reliance on China, which currently controls 58-67% of global processing for lithium, rare earth, and cobalt. KBIL's overseas ventures, though nascent, signal a strategic shift towards securing raw materials for renewables and EVs. Despite its scope, the NCMM's efficacy is constrained by three critical limitations: first, inadequate funding. Its Rs 34,300 crore outlay (\$3.96 billion) pales against global benchmarks. The US Inflation Reduction Act allocates \$369 billion for clean energy, while the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act mandates €2 billion for mineral projects. The allocation of Rs 34,300 crore over seven years, which translates to an annual spending of about Rs 4,900 crore (\$585 million), lags behind China's \$19.4 billion exploration investment in 2023 alone.

Second, India lacks advanced capabilities in extracting and processing minerals like lithium from clay deposits or recovering rare earths from waste. While the mission proposes R&D hubs, it omits concrete plans for technology transfer or collaboration with global leaders.

Third, the NCMM envisions 26 foreign mining projects by PSUs but offers limited incentives for private players. In contrast, countries like Canada and Japan provide tax rebates and risk-sharing mechanisms to attract private investors.

**China's dominance**  
As the world's largest mining nation, China has discovered 173 types of minerals, including 13 energy minerals, 59 metallic minerals, and 95 non-metallic minerals. China's dominance extends beyond reserves to include processing and refining, with control over 87% of rare earth processing, 58% of lithium refining, and 68% of silicon refining. Furthermore, China has strategically invested in overseas mining projects and built unparalleled midstream refining capabilities, raising supply chain vulnerabilities for countries including India, the US, and EU nations.

While the NCMM promotes recycling and stockpiling, it does not address intermediate processing – a domain where China controls 68% of silicon and 58% of lithium refining. Developing domestic refining capacities for battery-grade graphite or semiconductor-grade silicon must be prioritised to avoid bottlenecks.

The NCMM is a commendable first step towards securing India's mineral future. However, in its current form, it risks being outpaced by the scale of global competition and technological disruption. By recalibrating funding, incentivising private capital, and prioritising processing innovation, India can transition from a reactive importer to a resilient player in the critical minerals landscape.

(The writer is a research analyst at the Takshashila Institution)



# Uttarakhand's UCC: A template for India or a test case for courts?

**DATELINE**  
Lucknow

SANJAY PANDEY

Uttarakhand may have become the first state to implement the contentious Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in the country, but it certainly will not be the last one. Gujarat, another Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled state, has already formed a panel to assess the need for the same and draft a Bill in this regard. Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami recently launched the UCC Portal, unveiled the official notification, and released the rules in Dehradun. "It's not only a historic day for Uttarakhand but also for the country... The credit for initiating the UCC goes to the Devbhoomi (Uttarakhand)," he said at the

launch of the portal. "From this moment, we are implementing a uniform civil code... The rights of the women of all faiths will be the same... We have fulfilled the promise we had made," he added.

Dhami likened the implementation of the UCC in the state to the flow of the Ganga. "Just as the holy Ganga originates from the Uttarakhand and unifies the country, the UCC will also originate from this state and unify the country," Dhami had said a few days before the implementation of the UCC in the state.

He also said that his party had fulfilled an important promise it had made to the people of the state.

With the launch of the UCC portal, online registrations for marriages, divorces, live-in relationships and their dissolution, and inheritance have begun in the state.

According to reports, over 200 people had submitted applications so far on the portal under various categories since the UCC went live.

The UCC standardises laws governing marriages, divorces, maintenance, and inheritance. It makes marriage registrations mandatory, imposing a fine of Rs 25,000 for failing to do so. Those failing to get their marriage registered will not be eligible to receive any government benefits. It also provided for identical grounds for the husband and wife in cases of divorce and a ban on polygamy.

The UCC provided for a ban on *idat* (the waiting period a Muslim woman must observe before remarrying after divorce or her husband's death) and *halala* (where a divorced Muslim woman must marry another man, obtain a divorce, and observe *idat* before remarrying her first husband).

The UCC provides for equal rights for sons and daughters and also does not differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate children. Children through surrogacy or assisted reproductive technology would also be considered as biological children.

Some scheduled tribes living in the state have been kept out of the purview of the UCC.

While the state Chief Secretary, Radha Ratni, said that the UCC had been prepared after detailed deliberations and that it was a matter of pride for the state and claimed that it would have a positive effect on society, the Muslim clergy has strongly protested against the code, saying that it infringed on the religious rights of the community.

"It's a direct interference in the religious matters of the Muslims and an attempt to impose the Hindu laws on

the community," Muslim League Joint Secretary Maulana Kausar Hayat Khan said. He said that the UCC was against the Muslims in the country and that the government did not speak to the community members or leaders before enacting the same.

Another senior Muslim cleric and All India Muslim Jamaat National President Shahabuddin Rizvi said that the Muslims living in Uttarakhand were not 'bound' to abide by the UCC if it was against the *shariat* (Islamic laws).

Some political experts apprehend that the Muslim community may not be comfortable with the UCC and may not follow the same. They also apprehend that some provisions of the UCC may be challenged in the courts. "We may witness a legal battle over some provisions of the UCC as there are views that they may be in violation of the Constitution," said

a Uttarakhand-based political analyst. A Lucknow-based media analyst, J P Shukla, said that the UCC would usher in a much-needed social change. "The society has undergone tremendous changes in the past few decades; new social codes are the need of the hour," he said.

Shanu Raghuvanshi, a Bareilly-based social activist, said that the UCC would be a "game changer".

Nijam Pragat Shukla, a counsel with Legal Aid, said that the UCC "protected" the rights of the Muslim women. "It's not against any community. In fact, it will protect the rights of members of every community," he added.

With the BJP-ruled states likely to go for the UCC in the days to come and the opposition-ruled states shunning it, there is little chance of a consensus on the same.

DHNS

## A leftist movement in Sri Lanka that took power after an economic collapse is seizing a rare opportunity to rally more women into politics

MUJIB MASHAL AND PAMODI WARAVITA

I was a brief remark during a mundane session of parliament. But to Harini Amarasuriya, Sri Lanka's prime minister, it was the moment she realised that her country, wrecked not long ago by strongman leaders and their populist politics, had entered a potentially transformative moment for women.

A male colleague (and "not a very feminist" one, as Amarasuriya described him) stood up to say that the island nation could not get more women into the formal workforce unless it officially recognised the "care economy" — work caring for others. To Amarasuriya, it was "one of the biggest thrills" to hear language in government that had long been confined to activists or to largely forgotten gender departments. "I was like, 'OK, all those years of fighting with you have paid off,'" she said with a laugh during an interview in December at her office in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital.

Two years after Sri Lankans rose up and cast out a political dynasty whose profligacy had brought economic ruin, the country is in the midst of a once-in-a-lifetime reinvention.

Anger has steadied into a quieter resolve for wholesale change. Through a pair of national elections last year, for president and for parliament, the old elite that had governed for decades was decimated. A leftist movement has risen in its place, promising a more equal society. As the country's democracy rebounds, opportunities are opening for women.

Women were a driving force behind the protest movement that forced Sri Lanka's president to flee in July 2022. When the country all but ran out of cash and fuel, the burden fell disproportionately on women, who shoulder the domestic load. Their rage sent them into the streets. Now, women are at the centre of efforts to give the country lasting protections against the whims of strongmen. Women are also doing the slow and steady work of shaping a political culture that allows them equal space.

Women, who make up 56% of registered voters, were crucial to the electoral victories late last year by National People's Power, a small leftist outfit.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the party's leader, has spent his life in leftist politics. He appointed Amarasuriya, a sociologist and activist, as prime minister, the country's second-most powerful post. She is the first woman to hold such a high post in South Asia who was not the wife or daughter of a previous top leader.

In September, as she prepared to take office, Amarasuriya was nursing a cold when *New York Times* reporters visited her home, its walls covered in cat art. One of her four cats was giving her attitude, she said, faking a limp as she tried to feed her.

She was keeping an eye on the political debates in the United States, where she spent a year as an exchange student. "I guess I am one of those 'childless cat ladies,'" she said with a smile, referring to a dismissive comment by now-Vice President JD Vance that became a rallying cry for some American women.

Amarasuriya has long preached that a more equal society cannot be achieved without making governance more friendly to women, injecting what she calls "feminist sensitivity" into policymaking. The new government is taking up policy



Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya of Sri Lanka in her office in Colombo. FILE PHOTO/NT

## Protest to power: Sri Lankan women are driving change

debates on improving pay parity and making work environments better for women. It hopes to raise the rate of female participation in the formal workforce to about 50%, up from 33%.

The governing party is doubling down on its efforts to mobilise women politically to ensure that this moment is not fleeting.

It is "a change of the way you think about government, the way you think about power and authority," Amarasuriya said.

Some of the earliest actions have included ending the VIP culture around politics. Gone are the long motorcades, large security details and lavish mansions for ministers. The president has slashed his travelling entourage. The prime minister's compound, which under its previous occupant buzzed with the activity of over 100 staff members, now has a library-like quiet, as Amarasuriya works with a staff of just a dozen.

Outside the lobby leading to her office, as well as on her desk, are framed drawings that schoolchildren have been sending her. One showed Amarasuriya in a blue sari and her natural curls.

"Prime Minister Auntie," the writing on the drawing said. "May I Lord Buddha bless you."

The true test will be the economy. It is stabilising, bolstered by an uptick in tourism and reductions in government expenditures after decades of runaway spending. But it is not out of the woods yet.

Kaveesha Maduwanthi, 18, who works at a clothing factory, is among the many who hope that the country's new leaders can find a way to boost economic growth.

Maduwanthi earns about \$100 a month. Her husband, a mason, brings

home roughly the same amount if he gets steady work. She said that more than half of her salary went to baby formula for her daughter, who turned one in January. On top of that, she and her husband pay for the food and medicine of grandparents who babysit the girl while they work.

"We don't need the government providing us with food — we can somehow manage," she said. "What we need is a country where I have the space to make a little extra cash so I can invest in my daughter — maybe a pair of gold earrings for her first birthday."

Before the presidential election last year, National People's Power, the leftist party, spent about two years trying to mobilise women like Maduwanthi. Women, Amarasuriya and other party leaders argued at the time, were looking for someone to champion the issues they felt strongly about.

After female voters helped lift Dissanayake to victory in the presidential vote, the party won an absolute majority in parliament weeks later. In many districts, women won handily.

Amarasuriya, running in Colombo, broke a record for votes that had been held by Mahinda Rajapaksa, a former prime minister, president and war hero and the older brother of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the president who was ousted in 2022.

The ample victories by Amarasuriya and other women shattered a myth that female politicians could not win, she said. Her party raised money centrally and distributed it evenly to female and male candidates to overcome disadvantages that women face.

The number of women in parliament doubled. Still, the country has far to go —

women still make up just 10% of lawmakers. There are only two women among the 21 ministers in Dissanayake's Cabinet.

Amarasuriya and other female leaders said they were disappointed with those numbers. But the work of making the political culture gender-inclusive is not just about numbers, Amarasuriya said, but also a "constant process" to influence and sensitise policymaking and day-to-day governance.

The party says it is focused on entrenching its mobilisation of women to get more of them into leadership positions at lower levels of politics. The goal, it says, is to remove the pretext that there are not enough female leaders to be tapped for more prominent roles.

Across 13,000 of the 14,000 grama niladhari, the smallest units of Sri Lanka's local governance, the party has established women's committees, according to Saroja Savitri Paulraj, the women's affairs minister.

On a Sunday afternoon in a suburb of Colombo, a new committee was being inaugurated. The organisers had canvassed door to door, collected information and created WhatsApp groups. About 100 people trickled in and sat in plastic chairs in the courtyard of a house.

Samannalee Gunasinghe, the local member of parliament, took to the mic. "We used to be flower pots on the political stage," Gunasinghe said. "They would take our votes and throw us into the fire afterward, abandoning us with our children."

Now, she said, the women's committees have created a space "where we can shout together." The *New York Times*

## Overhauling India's tax system

NAVEEN KUMARA R

After nearly a decade of reforms in indirect taxes, the Indian government is now turning its attention to a major overhaul of the Income Tax Act, which has been in place since 1961.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that she would present the new tax bill next week. This ambitious reform aims to simplify the tax system, enhance transparency, and make compliance easier for both individuals and businesses. With a focus on reducing litigation and enhancing clarity, the new framework seeks to build trust and confidence among taxpayers. By offering significant relief to the middle class in the budget, the government aims to ensure a smooth and accessible transition to the new tax system. The first draft of the Direct Tax Bill is expected to be tabled later this week, marking the beginning of a new era in India's tax landscape.

The Income Tax Act has undergone more than 3,000 amendments over the years and currently comprises 298 sections, many of which include exemptions and deductions. While judicial rulings over time have provided a strong foundation for interpretation, the Act has become increasingly complex due to frequent changes and interconnections between various provisions. Furthermore, several sections remain outdated and do not reflect current economic realities. For instance, certain perquisites for salaried employees, originally meant to be taxed only for high earners, now apply to almost all employees earning over Rs 50,000 per month. The exemption for education allowance remains capped at a mere Rs 100 per month, making the provision obsolete.

A key reason for redrafting the Act is the high volume of disputes over tax demands. A recent CAG report revealed that nearly 70% of demands are under dispute, highlighting issues related to the law's language — particularly its clarity, precision, and accessibility. The government aims to make conscious efforts to draft a law that is both comprehensive and flawless. In this regard, the finance minister's directive to the drafting committee to ensure "clearer and simpler" language is highly relevant.

The recent Budget has proposed new slabs while keeping the old regime intact. The old regime, which had provisions for deductions for investments, now appears almost redundant. Under the proposed new slabs, taxpayers will pay significantly lower taxes without needing to claim any exemptions and deductions. It is evident that the government is moving towards a simpler tax regime with less emphasis on deductions and exemptions.

The *writer is an assistant professor at the Department of Commerce, Christ deemed to be university*

According to the finance minister, the government anticipates a revenue loss of approximately Rs 1 lakh crore due to the new tax rates. However, the rise in indirect tax collections, driven by increased consumption and higher disposable income in the hands of the public, is expected to offset this revenue loss. Moreover, at a time of slowing economic growth, the government's priority remains reviving the economy and putting the nation back on track.

Direct tax collections represented 6.64% of the gross domestic product in the 2023-24 financial year, reflecting a consistent year-on-year increase. This growth is directly linked to improved ease of compliance and streamlined procedures. Notably, advance tax and tax deducted at source (TDS) account for approximately 82% of total direct tax receipts. To further enhance efficiency, simplifying the TDS and advance tax payment processes is crucial. Tax return forms should be designed for simplicity, requiring only essential disclosures and minimal procedures. Moreover, facilitating the filing of returns via mobile apps, with robust data protection measures, will make compliance even more accessible.

The government must focus on simplifying the tax law and, at the same time, work on revenue neutrality since a major chunk emanates from direct taxes. Further, the government must strengthen the enforcement mechanism, leveraging technologies such as data analytics and artificial intelligence to prevent revenue leakage and tax evasion.

The concern is that a new tax code could merely be a "reshaped version of the old framework" if it only restructures existing provisions without substantive reforms. Renaming sections or restructuring chapters without resolving underlying issues of complexity and ambiguity would create a law that looks different but operates unchanged. The law should consolidate overlapping rules, eliminate outdated exemptions and planning to ensure a smooth transition. Despite its inherent challenges, drafting a new Direct Tax Code (DTC) provides India with a crucial opportunity to overhaul its tax framework, making it more efficient and aligned with current economic realities.

The *writer is an assistant professor at the Department of Commerce, Christ deemed to be university*

### OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 1975

Ouster move will fail, says Urs

Belgaum, February 5  
Chief Minister Devraj Urs today described as a "futile exercise" the efforts being made by certain elements in his party in the State to dislodge him from power. Quoting a Kannada proverb, "holeyalu hunase hannu toladante" (like washing tamarind in the river), he asserted that these efforts were bound to fail. Mr. Urs, who was addressing a rally of the District Congress workers here, took Congressmen to task for wasting their time in forming groups and cliques weaken the party's unity.

25 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 2000

Fresh confrontation brewing between President, PM

New Delhi, Feb 5  
With the controversy on the constitutional review having hardly subsided, a fresh confrontation appears to be developing between President K.R. Narayanan and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee over the Gujarat government's decision to lift the ban on its employees participating in RSS activities. The president is reported to have asked for a clarification from the government on the matter, the PM today defended the Gujarat government.

### OASIS | PRASANNA S HARIHAR

## Marvels within and without

There are a zillion of a variety of things around us. The trees blossom to bear flowers and fruits, while the animal kingdom is not far behind with its own varieties of species that in substance adds a zing to the flora and fauna. Rivers flow into the oceans merging to make infinite waters, seen by many in the form of waves, ripples, and bubbles. The outside world is indeed a marvel.

There are a trillion cells inside this human body. A million of them die and are immediately replaced by new cells. Many systems are at play inside the body and coordinate their activities to

keep this body in good shape. Even the act of inhalation and exhalation happens on its own and should be deemed as the first wonder of this world.

Everything inside the body happens on their own when we are in the pink of health, and even when we fall sick the repair work is mostly happening internally with some medicines to help. The inside world is a marvel.

As a human, neither do we contribute to the beauty of the outside world nor do we partake in the many activities inside our body, but we influence

through our behaviour the environment around and our many habits in the body upkeep. Our habits that direct our behaviour is the product of our mind's thoughts, perceptions, viewpoints, and interpretations combined with analysis and decision-making.

By sheer will to positively contribute to the society it gets translated through positive intent, thoughts, actions driving the results. We need that positivity to create positiveness. But the entire body including the mind is an inert entity. When we have a

clear understanding that what powers it is the "Consciousness" or "Chaitanya" within each one of us, we become aware that it is a higher power that is responsible for everything. It is ignorance that propels us to feel that we are responsible for everything around and within.

*Tatvamasi* — You are That, in essence is what one of us are, which should humble and destroy our ignorance, giving us clarity of our true nature. A little introspection clearly indicates that we are living in the game of the divine play, in the truest sense — neither a doer nor an enjoyer.





## A wake up call!

The mass deportation of illegal immigrants by the US exposes deep-rooted socio-economic challenges and an urgent need to rein in traffickers

The recent deportation of 205 illegal Indian immigrants from the United States marks a distressing event for India. The US government has long maintained a strict stance on immigration policies, particularly under the Trump administration that emphasises national security and economic stability. Illegal immigrants, including those who overstay visas or enter through unauthorised routes, are often at risk of deportation. Many of these individuals have entered the US using irregular means, commonly referred to as the 'donkey route,' spending lakhs of rupees to facilitate their passage. The crackdown on illegal immigrants is a part of broader immigration enforcement efforts in the US. The citizens from several countries including Mexico, Columbia are being mass deported. With the renewed emphasis on border security and legal pathways to residency, individuals without proper documentation are being repatriated to their home countries. For India, this mass deportation is a moment of embarrassment on multiple levels. First, it exposes the loopholes in India's migration system and the desperation of many to seek better livelihood abroad through illegal means. Punjab and many other states have been witnessing a surge in illegal attempts to move to US or European, reflecting socio-economic distress, lack of opportunities and the lure of a perceived better life in the West. Additionally, the incident damages India's global reputation, presenting it as a country that struggles to provide livelihood to its citizens. Moreover, it also reflects poorly on the State Governments in general and Punjab in particular, where unscrupulous agents and human traffickers continue to exploit vulnerable



individuals seeking a better future abroad. To avoid such situations in the future, the Indian government should work towards creating more legal pathways for skilled and unskilled workers to migrate. Agreements with countries like the US, Canada, and Australia for structured work visas can prevent people from taking illegal routes. There is a dire need for awareness campaigns to educate individuals about the dangers of illegal immigration. The Punjab NRI Affairs Minister has rightly urged people to acquire necessary skills and education before attempting to migrate. But it is about time to rein in fraudsters who fool gullible people in the name of migrating them to the US and Europe. Strict action, including severe penalties and dismantling of these networks is necessary to curb this menace at its root. The core issue driving illegal immigration is the lack of sufficient job opportunities in India. A robust economic strategy aimed at generating employment, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, will reduce the need for individuals to seek risky migration options. Besides, The Indian government should engage in active diplomacy with countries like the US to negotiate leniency or alternative pathways for Indians residing abroad illegally, especially those who have contributed significantly to their economy.

### PICTALK



Devotees immerse an idol of Goddess Saraswati in the Atrai river after 'Basant Panchami' in Dakshin Dinajpur

## The labyrinth of social media nutrition trends

From fitness trainers to influencers, everyone seems to have the 'ultimate' nutrition hack, leaving audiences overwhelmed and anxious about every bite they take

A quick scroll through social media reveals a chaotic world of conflicting nutritional advice. One reel vilifies carbs, another champion gluten-free living, and yet another insists on the life-altering power of soaked almonds blessed by Himalayan monks. It's a universe where everyone - fitness trainers, and fashion influencers - seems to be a certified nutritionist, armed with exclusive knowledge about what's harmful and what is crucial to live to 150. This constant influx of contradictory information creates a sense of overwhelm, leaving viewers unsure of where to turn to for reliable guidance. Coffee, once lauded as a metabolism booster, is now condemned as a gut-destroying cortisol spike. Eggs are alternately hailed as a perfect protein source and demonized for their cholesterol content. Dairy is both essential for bone health and the root of all inflammation. Ghee is evil and the enricher! This dietary confusion is further amplified by the ongoing debate between naturopathy and allopathy.



One side advocates for self-healing through turmeric, various morning concoctions to be taken empty-stomach, sunlight and avoidance of processed foods and the other champions the pills and supplements. Reels trap viewers between these camps, leaving them questioning every health decision. One moment, popping a pill seems like a capitalist scam; the next, viewers are googling "is vitamin deficiency reversible?" because, well, another reel. The ultimate transformation reel that often promotes a plant-based diet as the sole escape from the "horrors" of the modern food industry, citing concern about chemicals and hormones in meat and

dairy. However, another reel quickly counters this narrative, claiming even vegetables are laden with harmful substances. The result? A state of constant food paranoia, even with food choices scrutinized and mealtimes transformed into occasions of anxiety. The joy of eating is replaced by the fear of consuming the "wrong" thing. This fear-mongering around food choices can lead to disordered eating patterns and an unhealthy obsession with "clean-eating". The reality is that the human body is complex, and nutrition is not one-size-fits-all. A diet that works for a social media influencer (backed by a team of professionals and



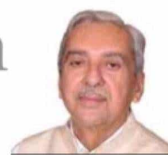
DEEBEA SALIM IRFAN

image-enhancing tools) may not be suitable for everyone. Individual needs, genetic predispositions, and lifestyle factors all play a role in determining optimal nutrition. Instead of blindly following a diet fad, it's vital to listen to your own body and consult qualified healthcare professionals or your family doctor before making drastic dietary changes. If a reel references a study without providing details, it needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Food should be nourishing and enjoyable, not a source of stress. While mindful eating is important, social media shouldn't dictate every dietary decision. One needs to trust one's gut (literally and figuratively), enjoy food in moderation, and perhaps consider muting influencers whose dramatic pronouncements create unnecessary anxiety. After all, balanced nutrition is about making informed choices based on credible information, not succumbing to the latest viral trend.

(The writer is a Dubai-based author, and organises literature festivals and workshops; views are personal)

# Rekindling Gandhian values in education

The erosion of Gandhian values—commitment, sacrifice and service — has led to a disconnect between education and its moral and social responsibilities



J S RAJPUT

Educational endeavours in India immediately after independence were initiated in a hurry to achieve too much in too little a time, and that too, under a severe paucity of human and materialistic resources. This has proved too costly in the long run to the nation, as it now suffers non-functional schools, absentee teachers and proxy teachers!

My interpretation would be that our teacher preparation institutions have either ignored, forgotten, or failed to appreciate the importance of the values that brought the entire nation together! It was the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that had generated commitment, dedication, sacrifice, caring for others and devoting entire life to the nation.

These are generally referred to as the Gandhian Values in public conversations. Unfortunately, the Gandhian values were neglected practically in every sector, as the generations managing the nation changed. The expectations from teachers and education have always been very high, they are supposed to set standards, norms, practices, morals, ethics and values. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of disappearing values did not spare the education systems and teachers.

Eminent educationist D. D. Kothari puts it: "The basic task of education - education at all levels - is to promote powers of mind, acquisition of special skills, and advancement of knowledge, but above all to generate in the young generation a sense of purposefulness and mission, dedication, confidence in themselves and faith in the country's future. To underscore the significance of moral education and promotion of an abiding sense of ethical values and social responsibility as integral element of education in any society, secular or otherwise." This sentence deserves to be read a couple of times, and more than that, should generate an intensive process of continuous 'Manan' and then interactive discussions; 'Chintan'. This needs a serious rethink, which could begin from schools and projected to institutions of higher learning



also. To bring this point into the current context of the 21st century, let me digress to return to a focal point. One outstanding person who envisioned post-independence education in India in its totality of the past and present, and simultaneously envisioned its future, Dr D.S. Kothari, was a great physicist, researcher and legendary educator.

His deep insight into spirituality and the Indian tradition of generating, transferring and utilising knowledge, and the inherent objective of utilizing it for people's welfare made him extraordinarily suitable for the task that he performed as the Chairperson of the National Commission on Education (1964-66). It is impossible not to be impressed by his articulation, pragmatism and vision. For India, his prescription for the future was also expressed in some of such orations in very simple yet meaningful terms: "STPG"! Yes, India and Indian education need to concentrate on 'Science, Technology, Production; and Gandhi!' It was certainly more than five decades ago when this approach stirred my thought process and inspired my keen desire to comprehend it in modern times, in a situation overwhelmed by western education, thought and culture. The Kothari prescription

THE TEACHER WHO ACKNOWLEDGES HIS RESPONSIBILITY AS THE CREATOR OF A UNITED, INTEGRATED AND COHESIVE FUTURE OF INDIA, NEEDS TO BE AWARE OF THE TREASURE OF THE GREAT INDIAN SCRIPTURES ALL OF WHICH ARE NOT NECESSARILY RELIGIOUS BUT ACT AS THE GUIDE FOR A 'CONTENTED, CONTRIBUTING AND CREATIVE' LIFE

meant deep familiarity with Indian tradition, culture, the intrigues it suffered, and an incisive analysis of Western knowledge systems, without any prejudice or pre-conceived admiration only! It may sound personal, but listening to Professor Kothari changed my reading interests and transformed my entire approach to educational change.

Unfortunately, the Gandhi part of the quartet -STPG- proposed by Dr Kothari never received the attention to the extent it deserved. This neglect of the Gandhian values is visible right from schools to universities, -exceptions apart! If one broadens the horizons, it would be obvious that its impact extends far and wide. In simpler terms, one may ask: did India ignore the basic purpose of education?

Within the education system, if one dwells deep into the implications, the focus will always be on the teachers. The ultimate goal of all of us -and our religions - is the same. It deserves to be repeated that practically every Indian teacher in a government school teaches multi-religious classes, and hence, he ought to be best equipped -and convinced - of the beauty of the diversity of various types and dimensions that nature has bestowed on Indians, including religious diversity.

The teacher who acknowledges his responsibility as the creator of a united, integrated and cohesive future of India, needs to be aware of the treasure of the great Indian scriptures all of which are not necessarily religious but act as the guide for a 'contented, contributing and creative' life. A teacher must be free from prior prejudices and biases. Those who are keen on this front could take guidance from an address that Mahatma Gandhi had delivered to the students and teachers of the Banaras Hindu University: "Early in my childhood I have felt the need of a scripture that would serve me as unflinching guide through the trials and temptations of life. Today the Gita is not only my Bible or my Koran; it is more than that - it is my mother." A large number of Institutions are engaged in in-depth research and serious studies on IKS - Indian Knowledge System. One expects that irrespective of misinterpretations of secularism these studies would not ignore the importance of ancient Indian scriptures and their contemporary relevance.

(Professor Rajput works in education social cohesion and religious unity. He is an Atal Fellow with the PMML, New Delhi)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Battling cancer and an unjust society



A woman who used to work in a beauty product company was asked to quit her job by her employer when her chemotherapy started. This shows the absence of effective labour laws in our country. In addition, the social security net for such a worker is almost invisible. A worker can fight against cancer. But

what she or he can do when the whole environment is afflicted with malignancy? High profit margins resulting in high cost for most of the medicines including life saving ones is another symptom of malignancy in our society. In such an environment, it is impossible for a common person to overcome even a treatable disease and a manageable crisis. This case highlights the lack of effective labour laws and social security for workers in our country. While one can fight cancer, battling an unsupportive system is far harder. Without systemic reforms, the real malignancy lies not just in illness but in a society that fails to protect its most vulnerable.

Sujit Dey | Kolkata

titles. As Praggnandhaa and Gukeesh is almost equivalent in their chess caliber, it is essential to appreciate both of them for knocking the kick in the final with the best of their efforts. Praggnandhaa deserves kudos and heartfelt congratulations for his prowess play, calmness and chess intuition practice, which he showed till the last minute, until he lifted the chess title to his name. India is building its chess excellence on the shoulders of these young teenagers, who are the chess masters already, and amazing the whole world with their terrific gaming ability, inspiring millions of the budding chess players all around the whole world.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

### SAVE TIGERS FROM POACHERS

Madam - Jim Corbett, Gangotri, and Rajaji National Park in Uttarakhand; Amangarh, Pilibhit, and Valmiki National Park in Uttar Pradesh; Balaghat and Pench Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh; along with the Western Ghats covering Goa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Kerala, are among the nine states where

approximately 1,800 tigers are currently at risk. On the international black market, tiger body parts, claws, and skins are being auctioned for millions, attracting poachers to these critical tiger habitats. The Indian Wildlife Institute has issued warnings for 24 tiger conservation projects, highlighting the urgency of protecting these endangered animals. Following resolutions passed at the 13-country tiger summit last year, India successfully doubled its tiger population by 2022, now hosting around 4,000 tigers—an extraordinary conservation achievement. Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have played a key role in this success, contributing to India's preservation of 73.7% of the world's tiger population. With tigers in protected forests becoming prime targets for illegal hunting and trafficking, it is crucial to strengthen patrolling in high-risk forest zones and implement stringent anti-poaching measures.

Dattaprasad Shirodkar | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



## Wait and watch

Global uncertainty demands caution on monetary policy

The six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is meeting this week for the final time this financial year. This is also its first meeting since Sanjay Malhotra assumed office as governor. Market participants will closely watch the outcome of the meeting on Friday, as it comes soon after the Union Budget. Several analysts believe this is the right time to begin the easing cycle, primarily for two reasons. First, growth in the Indian economy has slowed considerably. The First Advance Estimates of the statistics department for the current year shows the economy will grow by 6.4 per cent compared to 8.2 per cent in 2023-24. Second, given the government has done well on the fiscal front in terms of containing expenditure, it's time for the RBI to support growth with lower interest rates.

While there is merit in such arguments, it is worth remembering that growth is not the only objective of the RBI. The monetary policy's primary objective according to the law is "...to maintain price stability while keeping in mind the objective of growth". Thus, ensuring that the consumer price index-based inflation rate is durably aligned with the 4 per cent target is important. The inflation rate for December came at 5.2 per cent. While overall food prices have moderated, they remain elevated. An analysis by economists at Axis Bank showed that the proportion of food items with an inflation rate over 6 per cent increased to 33 per cent for the first time since October 2020. With the expected increase in capital expenditure in the last quarter, there could also be pressure on the core inflation rate. The December projection of the MPC showed the inflation rate will moderate to 4 per cent by the second quarter of 2025-26, which can increase space for policy accommodation.

However, the global environment has changed significantly since the last MPC meeting with increased risks to inflation outcomes. Trade tensions have increased markedly even as American President Donald Trump has delayed his decision to impose tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico. Meanwhile, China has retaliated against the imposition of a 10 per cent tariff. Mr Trump has indicated that the United States will impose tariff restrictions on imports from the European Union too. Trade tensions and higher tariffs could potentially disrupt supply chains, resulting in higher import prices for India. Besides, higher tariffs would push up the inflation rate in the US. According to one estimate, the imposition of a 25 per cent tariff on Canada and Mexico can push up the inflation rate in the US by over 1 percentage point. Tariffs on other countries and regions will only add to the problem and reverse the disinflation process. This would seriously complicate policy management for the US Federal Reserve.

The possibility of higher inflation and higher interest rates for a longer period will further strengthen the dollar, resulting in increased volatility in foreign-exchange markets. There would be pressure on the rupee, which is significantly overvalued. The RBI is allowing the rupee to depreciate — as should be the case — and will have to do so for some time in the given circumstances. However, rupee depreciation will affect import prices and influence inflation outcomes. Thus, given the uncertainty on the external front with implications for inflation outcomes, it will be prudent for the MPC to wait and watch at this stage. Meanwhile, the RBI should actively address the liquidity issue, which can create unnecessary friction in the system.

## 'Owning' Gaza

Mr Trump's plan defies international law

With his bizarre proposal for the United States to "take over" and "own" the Gaza Strip and turn it into the "Riviera of the Middle East" after the Palestinians were shifted to neighbouring countries, US President Donald Trump has demonstrated both a shocking political amorality and reprehensible ignorance of international law. This announcement disrupts the fragile ceasefire and hostage-release deal of January 19, partly negotiated by Mr Trump's own envoy before he took oath as President. Expectedly, the plan has been condemned by Hamas and its sponsor, Iran, and most West Asian administrations. Saudi Arabia has said it will not establish diplomatic ties with Israel without the creation of a Palestinian state, threatening US stability further.

The plan contradicts the US' own long settled position on the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine crisis. Mr Trump's plan and his enthusiastic endorsement by his Secretary of State Marco Rubio are at odds with the US state department's declaration of January 20, the day the new President was sworn in, that "the United States is strongly committed to the development of a secure, free, democratic, and stable Palestinian society and governance". Second, the 365-square km Gaza Strip, home to roughly 2 million Palestinians who were displaced by the creation of Israel, is not the US' to "own". It is Palestinian territory occupied till 2005 by Israel, which withdrew under international and domestic pressure. Since 2007, the enclave controlled by Hamas, which Western administrations have designated a terrorist group, has been blockaded by the Israeli Defence Forces, leaving Gazans trapped with few livelihood options.

After the Hamas October 7, 2023, including the kidnapping of 251 Israelis, Israel embarked on a policy of destruction with active US material and monetary support, which has created a severe humanitarian crisis in the enclave. Since Mr Trump says he does not propose to send US troops there, this ownership and development plan appears to be little more than an enabler for his "good friend" Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing coalition government to fulfil its stated aim of re-occupying a theoretically Palestinian-free Gaza. Since Arab nations have rejected Mr Trump's exhortations ahead of this announcement to absorb Palestinians from Gaza — most already host large numbers of refugees — the encouragement to further Israeli-imposed destruction is implicit in the plan. Offering business opportunities to global real estate majors to profit from urban redevelopment plans can be viewed as significant collateral gains.

Images of returning Palestinians laboriously seeking to rebuild their lives amid the destruction caused by concentrated Israeli bombardment via American-supplied bombs certainly live up to Mr Trump's description of post-bellum Gaza as a living hell. He says the US would be responsible for dismantling unexploded bombs and other weapons on the site. Any responsible leader, especially of the world's sole superpower, could have volunteered to do so without seeking to exercise ownership and development rights. In fact, a demonstration of genuine global leadership would have demanded that the US bring together a coalition of countries to rebuild Gaza and persuade Israelis to lift the blockade to enable Gazans to live in dignity, prosperity, and peace. That would go some way towards healing the deep divisions that Israel has wrought in the region. The route to converting Gaza into something resembling a Riviera demands realistic and ethical leadership, not cynical commercial solutions.

## Tax cuts: Welcome, but are they enough?

An income-tax cut instead of a corporate tax cut in 2019 would have done more for the economy



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

After a heavy focus on public capex in the last three-four years, the government has opted to add an income-tax cut to boost consumption and growth. Capex spending remains elevated but has plateaued. Of the budgeted capex, substantial allocations are for new projects in Bihar, given the upcoming state elections there. The rest is largely to complete projects already underway. The government now hopes that a substantial tax cut for the middle class will boost consumption and eventually help revive private investment.

What is proposed is a tax cut of around ₹1 trillion (0.3 per cent of gross domestic product), but for a relatively small population of about 47 million urban taxpayers. Assuming a propensity to consume of 0.8, the tax cut will have a lower multiplier effect than direct government spending. And if some of it spills over into higher demand for supply-constrained food items, which will also increase inflation and complicate monetary management.

My research at National Institute of Public Finance and Policy showed that corporate investment is primarily driven by capacity utilisation, competitiveness, and credit availability. Capex spending has a bigger effect on non-corporate investment — especially in housing and retail. Therefore, if the objective is to boost corporate investment, the shift from relying solely on capex spending to also include tax cuts to boost consumption and, thereby, enhance capacity utilisation is worth a try.

Despite record corporate profits in FY24 — with the profit-to-GDP ratio for Nifty 500 companies rising to 4.6 per cent, the highest since FY08 —

private investment has not picked up. These record profits have largely come from cutting labour costs rather than higher capacity utilisation through sales. Nominal sales of the corporate sector grew by just 6 per cent.

Ironically, the corporate tax cut of 2019 cost the government ₹7-8 trillion over the past five years. The corporate sector invested very little of its tax bonanza. In hindsight, a middle-class income tax cut in 2019 might have done more to boost the economy — and even corporate investment — than a corporate tax cut.

The Economic Survey also attributes low private investment to an over-regulated economy and advocates a trust-based regulatory system — "innocent unless proven guilty" rather than the other way around. The Budget proposes yet another committee to draft a deregulation plan — we could call it the Special Committee on Regulatory Efficiency (SCORE), given this government's fondness for catchy acronyms.

However, while a regulatory clean-up is needed, it will not bear quick results. To show seriousness, the Budget could have announced a few deregulatory measures immediately. The focus on understanding why private sector research & development (R&D) in India remains low is a welcome step. As I highlighted in my February 2024 column, "India's Research Riddle," India has one of the highest shares of public R&D spending as a percentage of GDP but one of the lowest for the private sector. I was pleased to see the 2024 Economic Survey examine this issue in detail, and the Budget introduce incentives to



IF TRUTH BE TOLD

AJAY CHHIBBER

## Customs duty tweaks amid Trump tariffs

Customs duties are import taxes that apply to most of India's \$820 billion imports for FY24. The 2025 Budget introduced key changes to Customs duty across electronics, automobiles, textiles, and the healthcare sector. While some duties were cut to boost local manufacturing and exports, others were raised to protect domestic industries. Many changes are part of India's broader trade strategy to adapt to global shifts. Let's look at the key Budget changes and how India prepares to stay afloat.

**Average tariff levels:** India's average import tariff stands at 17 per cent, while the trade-weighted rate is lower at 12 per cent, according to the World Trade Organization's 2024 report. The country's import duties include the Basic Customs Duty (BCD) and the Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess (AIDC). In the 2025 Budget, tariffs (BCD + AIDC) were reduced on fewer than 100 products and raised on just 10 out of 12,000 tariff lines, leaving India's overall tariff structure mostly unchanged.

**Tariff slabs:** The government announced a simplified tariff structure, reducing the number of tariff slabs to eight. However, this count only includes number of BCD slabs and does not factor in the total (BCD + AIDC) slabs, which would include the actual number. Even so, the count excludes textiles and agricultural products, meaning the total number of slabs is still much higher than officially stated.

**Duty tweaks to retain more revenue:** For many products, the government maintained overall import duties at the same level but shifted part of the BCD to the AIDC. For instance, the pre-Budget BCD on marble slabs was 40 per cent, which was split in the Budget to 20 per cent BCD and 20 per cent AIDC. Similar changes were made for granite, candles, footwear, solar cells, luxury cars, motorcycles, bicycles, yachts, electricity meters, and electronic toys parts. This shift allows the central government to retain more revenue, as BCD is shared

with states, whereas AIDC is not.

**Key tariff changes:** Let us look at key product-level tariff changes in the 2025 Budget. Most changes happened in the electronics sector. The duty on open-cell parts for LED and LCD TVs was removed to boost local display module manufacturing. To correct an inverted duty structure, the tariff on interactive flat panel displays was raised from 10 per cent to 20 per cent.

Tariffs on smartphone components, such as PCB assembly parts, camera modules, connectors, wired headsets, and USB cables, were cut from 2.5 per cent to zero. This may be a problem. Since components for export production are already duty-free, the government must ensure a stable five-year tariff policy to protect the fast-developing local manufacturing ecosystem. Duties are being cut on a few smartphone components in every Budget.

Duty was exempted on 63 machines used in the production of electric vehicle and mobile phone battery packs. The US has simply printed and pressed limited fabrics were increased, which may raise raw material costs for domestic manufacturers.

In the marine sector, the duty on frozen fish paste was cut from 30 per cent to 5 per cent, benefiting seafood processors and exporters. The shipbuilding and shipbreaking industries received a boost through duty exemptions on inputs. The healthcare sector benefited from duty cuts for 36 cancer and rare disease drugs, as well as 37 essential medicines, making critical treatments more affordable.

**Advantage US:** The Budget also cuts tariffs on several products, which will benefit US exports to India. Key products include Ethernet Switches (duty cuts from 20 per cent to 10 per cent), Harley-Davidson category motorcycles (from 50 per cent to 30 per cent), satellite ground installations (from 10 per cent to zero), synthetic flavouring essences (from 100 per cent to 20 per cent), and specific waste and scrap (from 5 per cent to zero).



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

encourage greater private sector R&D investment. Getting more value from public R&D spending, which sits in siloed public institutes with limited interactions with universities and the private sector, is also needed. The government's effort to set up an R&D fund is meant to encourage this interaction. In agriculture, broader reform is needed, but for now, focusing on boosting the production of commodities like fruit, vegetables, and pulses — where supply constraints have made the fight against inflation difficult — is welcome. Building infrastructure to boost tourism and tap into India's hugely underutilised tourism potential is also a positive shift. The focus on religious tourism will attract both international and local tourists and boost the economy. Medical tourism is another focus in the Budget, with visa relaxations as well as the development of 50 tourism sites in collaboration with state governments.

Also welcome is the calibrated reduction in import tariffs on some final products like motorcycles — which Donald Trump discussed in his first term — as well as intermediate products in key industries like smartphones, pharmaceuticals, and EV batteries. This should help correct the inverted duty structure that has hurt India's competitiveness. More reductions may follow to ward off a Trump tariff threat in February when the Prime Minister visits the US.

What is disappointing is the deficit spending. Given rising geopolitical fragmentation, India is neither spending enough nor allocating funds wisely. With pensions and wages consuming almost three-quarters of the defence budget, there is only a slight increase in capital outlays and equipment. As the Ukraine war shows, the nature of modern warfare has changed significantly — it's not bodies but modern equipment to be seen. For this, the factor reforms a broader restructuring, followed by budgetary decisions to support it.

Finally, most analysts are happy with the decline in the projected fiscal deficit to 4.4 per cent of GDP in FY26. But at that level, it is still well above any pre-Covid budget deficit of the Modi government. India's public debt is rising. India's GDP started rising after FY15, despite a period of favourable external factors, and currently sits at 84.3 per cent of GDP. Debt repayment and interest payments make up almost a quarter of the government spending, crowding out other spending, and there is limited headroom if another crisis hits. It's now time to bring the consolidated public debt level down to at least 70 per cent of GDP more rapidly than projected in the Budget. Aggressive divestment is the only way to be able to do that, with about ₹35-40 trillion of non-strategic assets that can be sold.

Middle-class tax relief is welcome and will be extremely popular. But whether what is proposed is sufficient to move the needle on India's growth trajectory remains to be seen. The factor reforms — especially labour laws and land acquisition — promised in the run-up to the general elections, working with states, are badly needed.

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## Most US exports do not face high tariffs

While Donald Trump has whittled down the Indian tariff of 150 per cent on Harley and 50 per cent on Harley-Davidson motorcycles, the actual tariff burden on the top 100 products, which make up three-fourths of US imports into India, is less than 5 per cent. A few examples:

Petroleum crude, the top American export to India (\$5.6 billion), is taxed at just 8.1 per cent. Cut and polished diamonds (\$3.09 billion) — duty-free, as they are mostly reimports. Coal (\$4.2 billion), large aircraft (\$1.94 billion), and liquefied natural gas (\$1.41 billion) all face a modest 2.5 per cent tariff. Aluminium scrap (\$0.89 billion) has zero duty. The figures in the brackets are US imports from India in FY2024.

US tariffs aimed at China backfired, shifting trade instead of reducing it. While US imports from China fell by \$82 billion (2017-2023), overall imports grew by \$763 billion, and China's global exports surged by \$1 trillion.

While Mr Trump criticises trade partners for running surpluses with the US, he overlooks a key reason — unlike other countries that must earn dollars to buy goods, the US can simply print them.

**Next steps:** As Prime Minister Narendra Modi prepares to meet President Trump next week, India should avoid any potential mini-trade deal. WTO rules stipulate that trade agreements with developed nations must cover substantial trade, making a limited deal legally inconsistent. We have already signed the US-India Economic Framework Agreement, and Mr Trump shows no appetite for cutting US tariffs. A balanced approach that considers all aspects of India-US ties is essential. Unlike China, India gives US digital firms near-unrestricted access, generating billions in ad revenue. Indian students contribute billions in tuition to US universities. Strategically, India remains the strongest counter-balance to China in the Indian Ocean Region.

The Budget has given signals that India is sensitive to the US needs and willing to walk the extra mile, but if need be, we should respond in equal measure as a sovereign nation.

The author is founder, Global Trade Research Initiative

## AAP inside out



## BOOK REVIEW

ADITI PHADNIS

The first edition of this book appeared in 2018. Between then and now, Mayank Gandhi, an activist dedicated to social transformation, justice and equity has fought politics, preferring to watch from the sidelines, the rise (or decline, depending on your persuasion) of a movement he helped create that became a caricature of itself, then a political party and then a monstrous leviathan. Although Shrey Shah, a lawyer who hopes to become an IAS officer one day by using the strengths of the system to pursue his way, is co-author, Mr Gandhi, his mentor, says "helped" him write the book. This, then, is

essentially Mr Gandhi's narrative. The book explains that after 2011, Mr Gandhi became a part of the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement and a member of its 24-person "core committee", which was officially the full extent of the movement in a formal organisational sense. Mr Gandhi also served as a member of the national executive of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) until 2015, besides acting as the party's head in Maharashtra. His unit was disbanded because of differences with the party chief Arvind Kejriwal. In 2015, he resigned from the party's national executive.

The original version of the book describes in detail how the transformation of AAP was mirrored in the transformation of its leaders. The current version brings it up to date, including references to the Swati Malhotra episode and the liquor excise scam. Not discussed in much detail, except to strengthen the belief of the authors that AAP is the only way. The book's worth reading just to revisit what AAP was and what it has become. Mr

Gandhi's conclusion: AAP was on a slippery slope when it decided to become a political outfit but it has slid further beyond redemption.

Although a lot of Mr Gandhi's assessment stems from his angst as an idealist who was betrayed by the organisation he helped found, it is a shrewd, objective, first-person account of the heyday of India Against Corruption (IAC), the fight for a Jan Lokpal and the persona of Anna Hazare, who comes across as capricious, stubborn and not especially astute, but a man with his heart in the right place. It was Mr Gandhi who brought Arvind Kejriwal and Anna Hazare together, navigating the minefield of egos, coeries and cabals, and colliding ambitions. Managing Anna Hazare, Mr Gandhi says, was "nerve-wracking." He has a hilarious description of one such incident: Mr Hazare, in Delhi for a consultation, got upset about something and locked himself in his room in his guest house in Mayur Vihar. Entreaties to open the door were ignored. Three hours passed. Fearing the worst, at risk to life and limb, a volunteer shined up the water pipes several times to reach the balcony of the room. He found Mr Hazare asleep. The next

morning, Mr Hazare emerged from his room as if nothing had happened.

The account of people's response to IAC lastiring and moving, Shailesh Sarkar, vice-president at Morgan Stanley in Hong Kong took "fast lane" to join Hazare's fast for a Jan Lokpal. A thief who had stolen some valuables from someone's purse was struck by remorse that he came to donate money for IAC. The whole country, it seemed, had rediscovered idealism.

But Mr Gandhi describes how the Kejriwal-Hazare relationship became increasingly transactional, eventually unravelling on the issue of forming a political party. The Jan Lokpal agitation had created tremendous public momentum for institutional reform. IAC had become bigger than its leaders. What should be done with it? The natural next step was to form a political party. But Mr Hazare and many others in IAC were

opposed to the idea. This was not the only problem. Democracy in leading the organisation would become the central point of tension.

And then there was the issue of power. AAP left Mr Hazare behind and pressed on with electoral participation. They lost more elections than they won. The party was comfortable with adulation, not so much with defeat. The Lok Sabha setback of 2014 was a

learning for AAP cadres. The 2015 Delhi Assembly election had led to the defeat of the Congress. But it did not establish AAP in power. Given the numbers, IAP and Congress collaborated, a

government could be formed. This was Mr Kejriwal's logic. Others, including Mr Gandhi, were horrified. AAP's raison d'être was opposition to both the Bharatiya Janata Party and Congress. How could the party countenance doing a deal with one? Mr Gandhi could see Mr Kejriwal's motivation:

With 28 seats in a 70-member house with the BJP getting 32 and the Congress down to eight, the temptation of forming the government was great. And Mr Kejriwal wanted that so badly. He became chief minister only to resign 49 days later. But even in that period, Mr Gandhi and Mr Kejriwal clashed on the issue of a government house for the chief minister. Every instinct told Mr Gandhi the slide had begun.

The bitter parting of ways between Mr Kejriwal and Shrey Shah and Prashant Bhushan has been documented publicly. But Mr Gandhi reveals the bloody entrails that the 2015 massacre left behind. Some men emerged as Mr Kejriwal's go-to men. Others like Arshi were asked to choose between Mr Kejriwal and the Yadav-Bhushan combine. Things reached such a pass that there were "bouncers everywhere" when the fateful March 28 meeting took place. The rest is history. Mr Kejriwal's transformation is akin to a Picture of Dorian Gray. Despite heartfelt belief in everything that IAC and AAP stood for, Mr Gandhi records his sense of disquiet and the way he tried to be an illuminating and well-written account of movements, parties and power.





## FIRST COLUMN

## BREAKING FREE FROM THE BLAME GAME

It's easy to point fingers when things go wrong, but true growth begins with self-reflection



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

We all are used to blaming others for our woes. There are some exceptions, mostly devotees of God. Why do we behave thus almost instinctively? There are two main reasons. One is doing so is easy. This way we don't have to take responsibility for our troubles, though this is the exact opposite of the 'Karmaphala Principle', which is "what we sow is what we reap." We are forever doing 'karmas' (acts) by our minds, speech and bodies. We may not think so, but it is true. When we have fearful thoughts, there are bodily manifestations like sweating, increased heartbeats, etc.

As regards speech, we know that when speak nicely we get rewarded. On the other hand, getting angry or abusing someone evokes similar responses. Bodily acts like working in an office brings us a salary. However, some acts do not bring immediate results or fruits; they do so in future, even in future lives. All our acts are duly recorded by the Divine Authority; they know exactly what we do. Nothing is hidden from them. This is God's arrangement under whose supervision they work.



(The Bhagavad-Geeta 9.10) The other reason is acceptance that we are really small and quite ignorant. We have made mistakes in the past. This hurts our ego. All others can and do make mistakes except us. The feeling of superiority, which we lull ourselves to nurture, gets dented. What harm do we cause ourselves when we don't take responsibility for our acts at least internally? We won't do anything about correcting our flaws.

They will continue to haunt us. Because we only can correct our faults; nobody else can. We have free will to decide what we do. And finding faults in others won't help, because they won't correct themselves just because we desire it. Therefore, whatever caused our troubles remain. Someone may point out that many times strangers cause us trouble like a drunk driver. Yes, it is true, but this happens because he only acted as a medium to cause us trouble, as it was destined according to the Karmaphala Principle. This is reality. The same is true about troubles given to us by natural forces. God has warned us that this will happen in this place of misery. (8.15) Then, we make enemies of people, who we blame.

These are mostly near and dear ones, with whom we associate. What do you think is the primary cause of family feuds? It is a blame game when something goes wrong. These are the people, who are crucial for our peace of mind. We don't please God either, because blaming others for what wrong we have done is against 'dharma'. This way we distance ourselves from the only entity, who can help us to correct our flaws, especially in our nature. God has promised to even get us out of all troubles if we develop God's consciousness. (18.58) But will we listen? What is the solution? Start with the realisation that we are fallible; we will make mistakes as we have done in the past. We must have, otherwise we won't be bound to the birth and death cycle.

The quality of humility is very important in this regard, as it is in all interpersonal relationships. Starting to do spiritual practices, which suit our nature will help greatly. Why? God comes into the picture. He begins to take an interest in us. This is what I have done, and believe me results are unbelievable. My Lord is micromanaging my life. Minor mistakes happen all the time leaving me astonished.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

## US sanctions: A bold move or another futile attempt



UTTAM GUPTA

The US has imposed a fresh round of sanctions on Russia's energy sector in a bid to cut its oil revenue. The crucial question remains: Will these measures be effective



On January 10, 2024, the outgoing Biden administration of the United States of America (USA) made public its latest round of sanctions on Russia aimed at cutting the latter's income from energy sales. These sanctions seek to target two large producers, as well as insurers, traders and more than 180 vessels carrying Russian oil. The US Office of Foreign Assets Control - the agency tasked with enforcement of the sanctions - has set a deadline of February 27, 2024, for the delivery of all crude cargoes that were loaded on sanctioned vessels before January 10, 2024. Besides, the European Union (EU) bloc countries are contemplating phase-out import of Russian Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG).

## Will these sanctions work?

Before that, we need to ask whether sanctions worked in the past. In a bid to punish Russia for its military action against Ukraine, in June 2022, leaders of G7 viz., the United States, Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Canada and Japan had vowed to explore the feasibility of measures to bar imports of Russian oil at a price above a certain level. In September 2022, their finance ministers (FMs) said, "We confirm our joint political intention to finalize and implement a comprehensive prohibition of services, which enable maritime transportation of Russian-origin crude oil and petroleum products globally. Providing those services would only be allowed if the oil and petroleum products are purchased at or below a price (the price cap) determined by the broad coalition of countries adhering to and implementing the price cap."

On December 5, 2022, they set the price ceiling at US\$60 per barrel. It was meant to weaken Russia financially by undermining its ability to generate revenue from the export of petroleum products while ensuring that supplies to them (read: G7/EU) are not impacted. There was an inherent contradiction in this approach. Russia is the third-largest producer of crude oil with over 12 per cent share in global crude production and the second-largest exporter. In the case of natural gas



DESPITE DEPENDING HEAVILY ON RUSSIA FOR THEIR ENERGY NEEDS, THE G7 COUNTRIES WANTED THOSE SUPPLIES SHOULD CONTINUE BUT THEY WOULDN'T PAY A PRICE MORE THAN WHAT THEY DEEMED FIT

(NG), it is the world's second-largest producer with a share of 10 per cent. In world export, its contribution is even higher at 25 per cent. When it comes to EU countries, their dependence on Russia is even higher, drawing 40 per cent of their NG supplies and 25 per cent of crude from it. Some countries in the bloc viz., Germany, Netherlands, and Poland source a much higher percentage of their requirements from Russia.

Despite depending heavily on Russia for their energy needs, the G7 countries wanted those supplies should continue but they wouldn't pay a price more than what they deemed fit. Curiously, that price would be determined by 'how much revenue they would wish Russia to earn from those sales' not by global demand-supply forces. One is reminded of the famous adage 'if wishes were horses, beggars would ride'. As expected, things didn't pan out as per their wish.

Even as the group members were busy forging a coalition and deliberating on 'what should be the cap', the imposition of sanctions led to disruption in supplies leading to a steep increase in the price of both crude oil and NG. The EU countries were forced to buy all their requirements at 'elevated' prices as during that period, the price cap wasn't in force. This led to a huge increase in their import bill. According to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, Russia received about 158 billion euros in revenue for the sale of oil, NG and coal from February to August 2022, more than half of which - some 85 billion euros worth - was from the EU. Russia's revenue increased even as overall export volumes dropped by 18 per cent compared with the corresponding period before the invasion of Ukraine. Put simply, Russia

earned more by selling fewer volumes. On December 5, 2022, the G7 bloc announced a ceiling price of US\$60 per barrel of crude. This achieved little in restricting Russia's earnings. As it is, fixing the cap at US\$60 per barrel is laughable considering that the cost of producing oil is substantially lower, in fact, a fraction of this number. Even if exports were made at this price (between December 2022 and June 2023), most of Russia's crude was selling at less than this price implying no violation, it would still be generating a lot of surpluses to keep its war machinery well-oiled. Since, July 2023, the price has been above the cap, courtesy of reduced availability of oil worldwide as a result of Saudi Arabia and Russia cutting production by one million barrels per day (mbd) and 0.3 mbps respectively over and above the cap agreed to in the meeting of OPEC+ in April 2023.

Russia has been able to benefit from this as well. For instance, according to S&P Global Platts, its key export grade crude sold at around US\$75 per barrel enabling it to garner oil income of US\$211 million a day during September 2023. The sanctions didn't work. The G7 wanted to enforce it by requiring buyers of Russian petroleum to make 'attestations' to providers of services including insurance, finance, brokering, and navigation to oil cargoes, saying they bought at or below the cap. What if the buyer gives a fudged document mentioning a price less than the cap? Still, the G7 countries can't take any action as per their agreement: 'services providers can't be held liable for false pricing information provided by buyers and sellers.'

It is also possible to circumvent the cap by setting the price as oil leaves a Russian port, not what's paid by a refinery in, say, India.

While the former can stay well within the \$60 per barrel level, transportation costs and margins of trading companies (albeit Russian-affiliated) in countries not participating in sanctions are inflated to yield the desired net back in Russian hands.

It is then no surprise that there are numerous instances of 'loading Russian oil at all ports within Russia' by vessels owned or insured by Western nations, with little sign of enforcement action initiated by the G7 authorities. Apart from this, there are unmet parallel fleets and insurance companies - under non-Western ownership - that are being used for handling, shipping, and insuring Russian oil.

In case of NG, on December 19, 2022, the EU energy ministers had agreed to a price cap linked to the existing price of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Since, LNG prices are prone to fluctuations, the NG price cap would also fluctuate. It goes against the very idea of a ceiling price.

Besides, even this so called cap could be suspended if the EU faces a gas supply shortage, or if the cap causes a drop in trading volumes, a jump in gas use and so on. So, it was a non-starter.

Meanwhile, Russia has cut off most of its pipeline gas deliveries to EU forcing the latter to import record volumes of LNG from none other than Russia in 2024. In this backdrop, for EU to now proclaim that it will phase-out import of Russian LNG is plain rhetoric.

Thus far, the US/EU have roared like a toothless tiger. The latest sanctions announced by Biden don't change its basic character. They need to get adjusted to the realities of global demand-supply for energy and not let military objectives to dictate terms.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

## Trump's economic gamble: High tariffs, tax cuts and the risks of protectionism

By imposing steep tariffs on imports, Trump aims to boost US manufacturing, but the move has sparked fierce debate, with many questioning its effectiveness

Donald Trump, the newly elected President of the United States, has once again made headlines with his bold economic statements. Known for his unpredictability during his previous tenure, Trump is doubling down on his protectionist trade policies and tax reforms. His proposals, particularly those related to tariffs, taxation, and environmental policies, have sparked widespread debate over their economic viability and long-term impact on the country.

**Tariff Wars and Protectionism:** Trump has long argued that the US suffers from an imbalance in trade due to high tariffs imposed by countries like China, India, and Brazil. To counter this, he proposes rais-



ASHWANI MAHAJAN

ing import duties on goods entering the US, with the aim of revitalising domestic industries and bringing back manufacturing jobs.

He contends that low import duties have driven American production overseas, causing job losses and reducing government revenue from

tariffs. To address these concerns, Trump has already announced tariff hikes on imports from Canada, Mexico, and China. However, these nations have retaliated with their own tariffs on US goods, sparking fears of an intensified trade war. Despite these risks, Trump remains firm on his stance that high tariffs will not only protect domestic industries but also help reduce reliance on imports.

**The Controversial Tax Plan:** One of Trump's most radical proposals is the complete abolition of income tax, which he suggests will be offset by increased import duties. The move aligns with his longstanding position of reducing tax burdens on wealthy Americans—a policy he also pursued in his previous tenure.

He further plans to reverse the income tax hikes imposed by former President Joe Biden on ultra-rich individuals. Trump's vision is to shift the tax burden onto foreign countries by raising tariffs while reducing domestic taxation. He argues that by doing so, disposable incomes will rise, leading to economic growth and prosperity. He frequently references the period from 1870 to 1913, a time when the US relied on tariff-based revenue and experienced significant economic expansion. However, modern economists caution that the global economy has evolved drastically since then, making a return to such a system risky and impractical.

**Encouraging Domestic Production:** Another key aspect of Trump's economic



policy is his call for American companies to relocate their manufacturing operations back to the US. He has warned businesses that failing to do so will subject them to high tariffs and taxes. In particular, he aims to boost production in pharmaceuticals, semiconduc-

tor manufacturing, and the steel industry. Trump argues that the decline of domestic industries, such as shipbuilding and defense manufacturing, is a direct consequence of outsourcing. By incentivising businesses to reshore their operations, he hopes to rebuild America's industrial strength and reduce dependency on foreign nations for critical goods.

**Environmental Rollbacks and Energy Policies:** In addition to his trade and tax policies, Trump has taken a firm stance against environmental regulations, which he believes have stifled economic growth. He has announced plans to dismantle wind and solar energy farms, claiming that they harm land value and hinder economic progress.

Furthermore, he intends to reverse restrictions on mining rare earth minerals, arguing that environmental concerns should not stand in the way of economic development. Trump believes that reducing support for green energy initiatives will benefit traditional industries such as coal and oil. However, critics argue that these moves will set America back in the global race for clean energy innovation and environmental sustainability.

**Retaliatory Measures:** Other

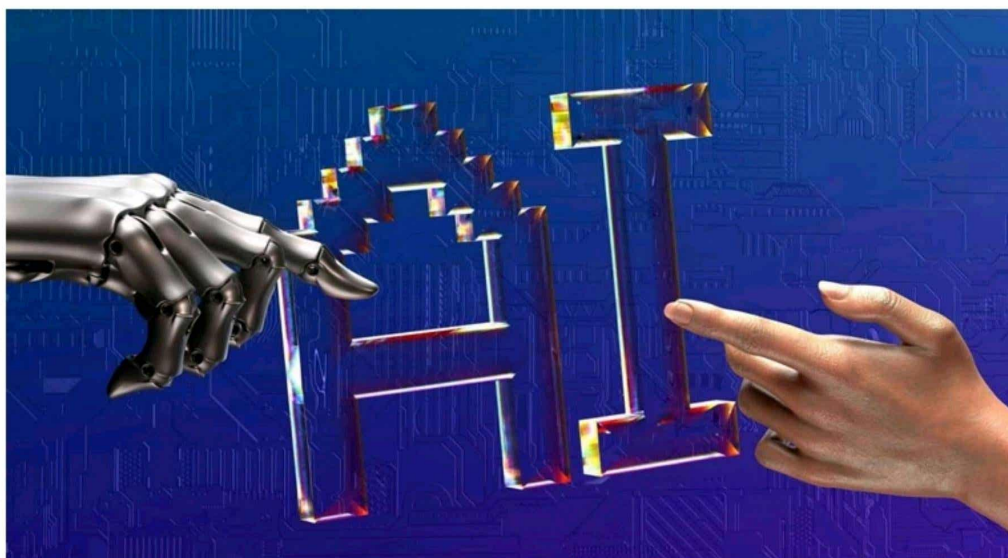
countries have already begun imposing counter-tariffs on American goods. For instance, Canada has responded with its own tariffs and urged its citizens to avoid US travel. If more countries follow suit, US exports could suffer significant losses.

**Environmental and Technological Setbacks:** Rolling back environmental protections and abandoning clean energy initiatives could make the US less competitive in the global economy. The growing market for EVs and renewable energy presents significant economic opportunities, which America may forfeit by shifting focus back to traditional industries.

(The author is Professor, PGDAV College, University of Delhi; views are personal)



# SCIENCE



Machines excel at things that are nearly impossible for most humans, including rapidly analysing large datasets and predicting complex patterns, yet struggle with tasks that children find easy, like understanding motives. Representative illustration. IGOR OHLAEV

## Question for the AI age: do machines and humans learn the same way?

The age of artificial intelligence promises to be a time in which scientists will learn a lot about human brain. Existing AI models are inspired mostly by the brains of animals. Human brain makes decisions stunningly fast using abstractions and generalisation whereas machines struggle to do this

T.V. Padma

**T**he dramatic surge of artificial intelligence (AI) has also made visible the machines humming underneath to make its applications possible.

From their origins in being able to separate data into different groups, AI today excels at too many tasks to count. Just in 2024, smartphones have started to be sold with AI models built into them, while five of the seven men who won the 2024 science Nobel Prizes did so for work in AI.

As it happens, the age of AI also promises to be a time in which scientists will learn a lot about the human brain as well. Existing AI models are inspired mostly by the brains of animals. Since these brains haven't been easy to study, scientists have been looking to AI models as a proxy.

### How do humans learn?

Machines excel at things that are nearly impossible for most humans, including rapidly analysing large datasets, predicting complex patterns, and learning to play chess like a grandmaster within a day. Yet neuroscientists say they also struggle with tasks that human children find easy, like understanding motives.

"The paradox of today's AI stems from the fact that the human brain has an evolutionary, biological origin and AI does not," Celeste Kidd, associate professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, said. "It is likely that [for] the type of intelligence that we have evolved for taking care of helpless offspring, we need to be able to read the intentions of a child that is running towards a cliff [or one] that's not yet able to feed themselves and say that they are hungry."

According to Arjun Ramakrishnan, assistant professor in the department of biological sciences and bioengineering at IIT-Kanpur, "At the heart of what drives learning in humans and animals" is a "dual focus on both meeting immediate biological needs and adapting to a constantly shifting environment."

"The need to secure resources and maintain balance in the face of an ever-changing environment," he added, "likely spurred the evolution of sophisticated neural mechanisms, driving not just simple responses to immediate needs but also complex learning and strategic decision-making abilities."

Learning is thus not just a process of acquiring static information but an ongoing, dynamic interaction between an organism and its environment.

"The brain, shaped by evolutionary pressures, must adapt not only to predictable stimuli but also to the unpredictability of environmental fluctuations," he added. "This complexity is reflected in the ability of humans and animals to sense and respond to rapid changes in the environment and social interactions, a key advantage for survival."

Learning is thus long-duration,

interactive, and includes feedback loops between the organism's internal state and external challenges.

### Humans' upper hand

According to biologists at the Heidelberg Laureate Forum, a meeting held in September 2024 in Germany, machines are not curious. "Unlike AI systems, children are naturally curious, exploring the world on their own while simultaneously learning within a social and cultural context," Kidd said at the forum. "Our curiosity is driven by knowing what we don't know."

According to Kidd, the information children discover when they seek it is of a different type than the data fed into AI systems.

"The single experience of a child with an apple is very different from Google Photos labelling an apple in an image. A child's experience with an apple is sensory. They're feeling the apple, they're seeing the apple, it's multi-dimensional. The data people are getting is much, much richer. And there are tonnes of correlations you can pick up on in order to leverage things like learning and generalisation."

The human brain and the body have been "trained" on such data over millennia.

Thus, human learning requires much less data to solve a problem with the same level of proficiency, according to Ashesh Dhawale, the DBT Wellcome Trust India Alliance Intermediate Fellow at the Centre for Neuroscience, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru.

For example, although the AlphaZero model developed by Google subsidiary DeepMind is better at chess than any human player, it reached this level of proficiency only after playing around 40 million games during its training, Dhawale said. "In contrast, it is estimated that humans need some tens of thousands of training games to reach grandmaster proficiency."

"One of the key advantages humans have over machines lies in the speed and efficiency of learning," Ramakrishnan said. "We can absorb new information rapidly, building on past experiences and knowledge in a flexible, adaptive way." This ability to continuously improve on prior lessons without extensive reprogramming gives humans a significant edge in dynamic environments where new information and challenges emerge constantly.

Humans are also remarkably good at "transfer learning." "We can apply knowledge and skills from one context to entirely different, unfamiliar scenarios with relative ease," Ramakrishnan said. This ability to generalise is still a significant challenge for machines and artificial networks, which are typically confined to narrow domains and struggle to adapt to new or unforeseen contexts without retraining.

The communication between neurons in the human brain takes the form of biochemical processes that operate more slowly than the channels between neurons in artificial neural networks,

according to Brigitte Röder, professor of biological psychology and neuropsychology at the University of Hamburg. Yet the human brain makes decisions stunningly fast using abstractions and generalisation whereas machines still struggle to do this.

Dhawale used the example of chess. "If you are proficient at chess, this ability will likely extend to other board games like checkers. This means humans can learn the structure underlying a task and generalise it to quickly solve new tasks—that is, they can learn to learn," he said.

Researchers are now attempting to bring this paradigm to machine learning, an approach called meta learning. It's not unlikely that machines will catch up here as well.

Humans also excel at motor-skill learning. "Somehow humans and animals are very efficient at learning how to move," according to Dhawale, "but we don't know exactly why this is the case."

Neural networks are great at navigating tasks involving discrete choices, but they stumble with movement. One reason is because being able to make a simple motion, such as reaching for a fruit on a table, requires a learning agent to optimise for many independent parameters varying continuously across many degrees of freedom.

Then there's energy efficiency.

According to Ramakrishnan, the human brain's low power consumption becomes readily apparent when recognising patterns, making decisions, and conducting social interactions. Machines can operate very fast, but their energy consumption is also much higher, especially when they process large datasets.

### Where machines excel

However, machines are more reliable.

Unlike machines, which are built for repeatability and can perform the same task again with consistent precision, humans contend with fatigue, emotional decision-making, and distractions.

"While we are designed to operate in volatile, ever-changing environments and our ability to explore and adapt is one of our greatest strengths, this flexibility often comes at the cost of consistency," Ramakrishnan said.

In contrast to the brain, neural network models are often trained to search exhaustively for solutions to complex tasks, Dhawale explained. This means they are more likely to discover new, better solutions to problems than humans can. At games like chess and Go, AI models have been known to develop moves that surprise even expert players.

"One could argue that the strategies used by humans to learn may be more efficient but can't discover the most optimal solutions because they are not designed to search exhaustively."

### From artificial to human

The differences between human and machine learning could elucidate where the neural network of each brain—artificial or biological—falls short.

"Neurons are often treated



A child with an apple is very different from Google Photos labelling an apple. A child's experience is sensory. They are feeling and seeing. The data people are getting is richer. There are tons of correlations you can use in order to leverage things like learning and generalisation

simply as point processes that communicate via electrical impulses, essentially operating in an on/off mode," Ramakrishnan said. "This reductionist approach has nonetheless allowed us to uncover fundamental principles that underlie complex cognitive behaviours."

At its core is the idea that feedback loops drive learning. Researchers used it to develop reinforcement learning, a training algorithm that has also been remarkably successful at explaining how organisms update their knowledge and adapt based on their experiences, according to Ramakrishnan.

The development of artificial neural networks has also expanded our understanding of how memories could be stored and accessed in the brain: as dynamic processes that can be activated and adjusted over time rather than remain preserved in particular areas.

Artificial neural networks with this ability can perform better. "The development of algorithms that handle short-term and long-term memory processes in artificial networks has provided us with a deeper understanding of how the brain may operate in these domains," Ramakrishnan said.

More broadly, AI models' successes in the real world have prompted

neuroscientists and cognitive scientists to revisit ideas of how the human brain learns. For some time since the mid-20th century, scientists assumed the brain represented information about the world in a symbolic manner and that its many abilities—perception, planning, reasoning, etc.—were achieved through symbolic operations.

Many early attempts at building AI models thus used approaches. One well-known application was expert systems, models capable of complex reasoning as a series of if-then problems.

On the other hand, contemporary neural networks operate connectionist models, named for the weighted connections between the nodes in a network. These models begin with a blank slate and use pattern recognition techniques to achieve their primary goals: say, to accurately predict the next word in an unfinished sentence.

"The question, therefore, is what type of AI—symbolic or connectionist—is the better model for human learning," Dhawale said.

"Despite the success of neural network AI models, I still think they learn in a very different way from how humans learn."

(T.V. Padma is a science journalist in New Delhi. t.v.padma.10@yahoo.co.in)



A city-sized rock hurtles towards the earth's surface, releasing shock waves. Representative illustration. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

## An asteroid might hit earth. How worried should we be?

Agence France-Presse

A colossal explosion in the sky, unleashing energy hundreds of times greater than the Hiroshima bomb. A blinding flash nearly as bright as the sun. Shockwaves powerful enough to flatten everything for leagues.

It may sound apocalyptic, but a newly detected asteroid nearly the size of a football field now has a greater than 1% chance of colliding with the earth in about eight years.

Such an impact has the potential for city-level devastation, depending on where it strikes.

Scientists aren't panicking yet, but they are watching closely.

Dubbed 2024 YR4, the asteroid was first spotted on December 27, 2024, by the El Sauce Observatory in Chile. Based on its brightness, astronomers estimate it is 40-90 m wide.

By New Year's Eve, it had landed on the desk of Kelly Fast, acting planetary defense officer at US space agency NASA, as an object of concern.

The risk assessment kept climbing, and on January 29, the International Asteroid Warning Network (IAWN), a global planetary defense collaboration, issued a memo.

According to the latest calculations from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, there is a 1.6% chance the asteroid will strike the earth on December 22, 2032.

If it does hit, possible impact sites include over the eastern Pacific Ocean, northern South America, the Atlantic Ocean, Africa, the Arabian Sea, and South Asia, the IAWN memo states.

2024 YR4 follows a highly elliptical, four-year orbit, swinging through the inner planets before shooting past Mars and out toward Jupiter.

**The 1908 Tunguska Event provides the most likely comparison. An asteroid or comet fragment exploded over Siberia, flattening some 80 million trees across 2,000 sq. km**

For now, it's zooming away from the earth. Its next close pass will not come until 2028.

"The odds are very good that not only will this not hit earth, but at some point in the next months to few years, that probability will go to zero," said Bruce Betts, chief scientist of The Planetary Society.

A similar scenario unfolded in 2004 with Apophis, an asteroid initially projected to have a 2.7% chance of striking Earth in 2029. Further observations ruled out an impact.

The most infamous asteroid impact occurred 66 million years ago, when a nine-kilometre-wide space rock triggered a global winter, wiping out the dinosaurs and 75% of all species.

By contrast, 2024 YR4 falls into the "city killer" category.

"If you put it over Paris or London or New York, you basically wipe out the whole city and some of the environs," said Betts.

The best modern comparison is the 1908 Tunguska Event, when an asteroid or comet fragment measuring 30-50 metres exploded over Siberia, flattening 80 million trees across 2,000 sq. km.

Like that impactor, 2024 YR4 would be expected to blow up in the sky, rather than leaving a crater on the ground.

For 2024 YR4, the explosion from an airburst would exceed 500-times the power of the Hiroshima bomb.

If it explodes over the ocean, the impact would be less concerning, unless it happens near a coastline triggering a tsunami. The good news, experts stress, is that we have plenty of time to prepare.

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



THURSDAY • FEBRUARY 6, 2025

## Building blocks

Schooling programmes need sustained support

**A** combination of higher budgetary outlays for school education and a realignment of schemes at the primary and secondary levels seems to be yielding some results. Of the Budgetary outlay of over ₹1.28 lakh crore for education in FY26 ₹78,572 crore is for school education and ₹50,077 crore for higher education. There can be no argument against improving competencies as well as enrolment ratios at the lower level as a precondition for better outcomes in higher education.



Accordingly, outlays for school education are up 16 per cent in FY26 over the revised estimates for this fiscal, against 7.7 per cent in the case of higher education. It is another matter that the spending this fiscal has been flat in education, with the budgeted targets being undershot. This should not recur, particularly as education moulds our demographic dividend — more precisely, the future of over 265 million children in school today. The slide in learning in the Covid years has just about been made up all-India with some variations across States. There should be no further setback on account of paucity of funds. If the FY26 allocation for schooling and literacy is fully used, it would result in an additional spend of over ₹10,000 crore over two years. It also appears from the results of the recently released Annual Status of Education Report 2024 that these outlays are working, particularly in some backward States.

For instance, the proportion of Class 5 children in government schools who can read a Class 2 level text fell from 44.2 per cent in 2018 to 38.5 per cent in 2022 and then recovered to 44.8 per cent in 2024, as per the report. States that have shown more than a 10-percentage point increase in this proportion (vis-à-vis pre-Covid) in government schools include Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu. At a lower level, that is Class 3, government schools have done better than private ones, with seven States, including Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Odisha, showing a 10 percentage point increase. But overall, the picture remains a sobering one, with 67.5 per cent of Class 8 students displaying improved reading abilities in government schools in 2024, against 69 per cent pre-pandemic. In arithmetic abilities too, the outcomes are better at the lower than the higher levels, with government schools leading the way. Primary schooling has improved, but the same cannot be said for the higher levels. Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Uttarakhand have outperformed the rest in arithmetic abilities.

The Economic Survey for FY25 observes that the emphasis on 'foundational literacy and numeracy' under the National Education Policy, which focuses on children up to Class 3, is paying off. The flagship programme here is NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) Bharat. An eclectic combination of teaching techniques which have worked in different States is being put to use, with NGOs being involved in the process. It is important for successes at the base to move up the pyramid.

## OTHER VOICES.

## The Guardian

Donald Trump's power grab: a coup veiled by chaos

Donald Trump is provoking a US constitutional crisis, claiming sweeping powers to override or bypass Congress's control over spending in a brazen attempt to centralise financial power in the executive branch. If he succeeds, Nobel laureate Paul Krugman warns, it would be a 21st-century coup — with power slipping from elected officials' hands. The real story hidden behind the president's trade war, he says, is the hijacking of government. And Mr Krugman's right. By usurping the authority to shut down government programmes at will Mr Trump could slash federal spending and taxes while pretending to balance the books. In reality, he'd be robbing the poor to enrich the wealthy. Mr Trump's philosophy is simple: let the uber-rich do whatever they want, with little or no oversight. (jacobson, reuters)



DeepSeek proves 'high fence' cannot hinder innovation

China's artificial intelligence (AI) company DeepSeek has launched its latest large model, DeepSeek-R1, which has achieved breakthroughs in several areas at an unexpectedly low cost. This is a positive development in the field of AI, but some sectors and individuals in the US have shown hostility and aggression toward DeepSeek. However, if the US attempts to block it with tariffs, export controls, or intellectual property claims, such actions would not only hinder the overall progress of AI technology but also be detrimental to the development of AI technology in the US itself. The emergence of DeepSeek proves that, under the guise of national security, attempts to suppress China's technological progress are ultimately doomed to failure. (jacobson, reuters)



ASHIMA GOYAL

**C**hange is a time for renewed vigour. But it is also important to build on major past lessons. Three such are especially relevant to guide the new Monetary Policy Committee in the current global turmoil. The first is the required level of the real repo rate, the second is the importance of keeping core liquidity in surplus and the third is how to react to exchange rate volatility.

## THE REAL REPO RATE

Salient changes in the last two months for the MPC to consider are headline inflation falling within the tolerance band and towards the target as expected. Market expectation for January is 4.6 per cent and 4 per cent for the year, so current as well as forward looking real repo rate is above 2 per cent. Such a real rate contributed to the current growth and investment slowdown, just as it did in the 2010s.

These episodes underline the interest sensitivity of Indian aggregate demand, which research also supports. Policy needs to internalise this. Corporate results have largely reflected the slowdown that set in after six months of high repo rates and tight liquidity. Real policy rates have been high for more than a year now. Their continuance is dangerous since monetary policy acts with a lag.

Fiscal consolidation has exceeded expectations. The underlying growth assumptions are also conservative. There is an emphasis on agriculture as the first growth engine with action proposed on vegetable supply chains. All this should provide comfort to the MPC.

It is argued that since the Budget provides stimulus the MPC need not do so. The Budget will trigger demand from different categories with continuing growth in capex, welfare transfers for non-income taxpayers and large tax cuts for lower rungs of middle-class taxpayers with high consumption propensities. But a falling fiscal deficit ratio implies net demand from the government is reducing. Monetary policy therefore has to stimulate aggregate demand. It has the space and one of the best instruments — the real interest rate that affects consumption and investment decisions. A real policy rate of around unity is essential for sustained recovery.

## LIQUIDITY INJECTION

It is also argued that liquidity is more important than rates and must be in surplus before a rate cut can be transmitted. But the RBI's recent liquidity injection despite continued dollar outflows shows they have the tools if the intent is there. In a neutral stance, they are free to inject as

required. Extended periods of tight durable liquidity over the past year raised short rates above the repo and aggravated the slowdown, although short term liquidity adjusted endogenously through the liquidity adjustment facility (LAF). But only banks can access the LAF window. In a regime of instant withdrawals, they are not comfortable lending when long term or core liquidity is in deficit. Moreover, our markets are still subject to large exogenous liquidity shocks from foreign flows, cash leakages or changes in government cash management.

Pending structural reform such as more inter-bank lending and liquidity windows for a far more diversified set of financial market participants, it may be good for the RBI to plan to keep durable liquidity in surplus.

## EXCHANGE RATE VOLATILITY

The main concern behind recent calls

**Pending structural reform such as more inter-bank lending and liquidity windows for a far more diversified set of financial market participants, it may be good for the RBI to plan to keep durable liquidity in surplus**

## Policy rate: To cut or not to cut

TIME FOR ACTION. Given the current growth and investment slowdown, at least a 25 bps cut would be in order



for a status quo in rates seems to be fear of global volatility. But it is important to smooth external shocks, not aggravate them by squeezing domestic demand as well. Trump's unpredictability should not be allowed to drive the Indian economy. The post pandemic period showed we have the degrees of freedom to set interest rates to suit our domestic cycle.

Analysts who were first asking the RBI to let the rupee go, now want to tie the repo rate to defend the rupee. But the MoU with the government has no mention of exchange rates. Under inflation targeting, the policy rate cannot be used for an interest rate defence.

In any case it does not work in Indian conditions where high growth attracts FPI more than high interest rates that squeeze growth. There were more inflows when our interest differential with the US was narrowest in 2023. It has widened with 1 per cent of Fed rate cuts in 2024.

So the MPC can and should do nothing about the exchange rate. The interest rate has to be set based on domestic inflation and growth profiles.

But the RBI has multiple instruments which it can and should use to reduce excess volatility and persistent real deviation of the exchange rate. Outflows can be used opportunistically to achieve the required depreciation, while reserves prevent over depreciation and are rebuilt during inflows. Some volatility is good for price discovery, to induce hedging and inoculate markets from fear of change.

Analysts were similarly worried during outflows and reserve depletion after the Ukraine war broke out. But

reserves were rebuilt. Outcomes were similar in many past periods of global risk-off.

One analysts' dilemma illustrates why this kind of intervention is essential. In advanced economies (AEs) the nominal exchange rate tends to revert to trend after overshooting, but in emerging markets fears of persistent depreciation set in leading to calls to raise interest rates.

A vicious cycle of falling growth and further outflows can set in. Research shows that it is EMs (emerging markets) with the buffers to craft independent policy that do well.

In AEs floats accompany inflation targeting and free the MPC from considering exchange rates. In EMs it is managed exchange rate flexibility and intervention that does so. Exchange rate adjustments driven entirely by external shocks can be too much, or in the wrong direction.

The argument that depreciation itself stimulated demand, so no rate cut is required, is also not correct in Indian conditions. Exports are largely competitive, with limited ability to pass on price increases, while dominant oil imports instantly become more expensive, so over time the result is inflation and real appreciation. Persistent real appreciation does hurt exports and has to be avoided.

It follows that at least a 25 basis point cut is required. Rate cuts are delayed and there is space for more cuts, but slow and steady is best in rocky times. Doing nothing is the worst choice.

The writer was a member of the previous MPC. This article builds on her comments as chair of the EGROW Shadow Monetary Policy Committee

## A closer look at rebate under Section 87A

Available up to a total income of ₹12 lakh, the rebate is essentially on the tax liability of up to ₹60,000 in absolute terms

## bl.explainer

Arun K Shanmugam

**W**ith Budget 2025 delivering a banger in the personal income tax space by increasing the rebate, resulting in no tax liability up to a total income of ₹12 lakh, the spotlight now is on the word rebate.

## What is a rebate under the Income Tax Act? Is it different from exemptions and deductions?

We will zoom out a little and start with the process of income computation, which involves two stages. First, determining the gross total income (GTI), which includes computing income from various sources such as house property, capital gains, interest, and business and profession, among others. Second, determining the total income (TI), which is derived by subtracting certain allowable expenditures and investments from the GTI. It is on this total income that tax is levied.

And it doesn't end there. Tax is simply based on the slab rates, which you would have memorised by now. A surcharge (if

applicable) is levied on the tax computed earlier. Health and Education Cess (HEC) at 4 per cent is then levied on the sum of tax and surcharge. The total tax liability is the sum of tax, surcharge, and HEC.

Now, let's see where exemptions, deductions, and rebates enter the fray. An exemption is one that is adjusted right at the stage of computing GTI (before Stage 1). Examples here are house rent allowance and agricultural income, which are exempted right at the source, so to say.

A deduction, on the other hand, is in the form of investment or expenditure made, which gets deducted against the GTI to arrive at the total income. Examples here are Sections 80C and 80D deductions, along with others, which are largely tax-saving investments or expenditures incurred during the financial year.

A rebate is, however, a discount applied directly to the final tax payable (before cess) and not an adjustment or deduction.

## What is the rebate under Section 87A? What changes were made to it in Budget 2025?



REBATE. A relief for taxpayer's stock

As per the present proposed Finance Bill 2025, the rebate under Section 87A is available up to a total income of ₹12 lakh, which essentially is a rebate on the tax liability of up to ₹60,000 in absolute terms, according to the new slabs and respective tax rates. Meaning, though according to the slab rates, the tax payable comes to ₹60,000 (or lower) for a total income of ₹12,00,000 (or lower), the rebate could be availed, bringing the tax liability to zero.

Earlier, the rebate was available only up to a total income of ₹7 lakh under the new tax regime and ₹5 lakh under the old tax regime.

## Which incomes are not included in Section 87A and why?

Budget 2025 proposes to include only income that is not taxed at special rates. Capital gains and income from lotteries are examples of income that will not be considered in the income computation for Section 87A.

## Does a taxpayer with income below ₹12 lakh have to file IT returns?

Yes, a tax return needs to be filed even if the income is below ₹12 lakh. Taxpayers are exempt from filing returns only if the basic exemption limit is not breached. This limit is ₹2.5 lakh for ordinary citizens (below 60 years of age), ₹3 lakh for senior citizens (ages 60 to 79), ₹5 lakh for super senior citizens (80 years or older) under the old tax regime, and ₹4 lakh for all individuals under the new tax regime. There are also other criteria, which, if met, require a return to be filed even if the total income does not exceed the basic exemption limit, such as: current account deposits with banking institutions exceeding ₹1 crore; electricity bill of more than ₹1 lakh; and expenditure on foreign travels exceeding ₹2 lakh.

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## Private investment lags

Apropos 'India Inc. sitting pretty on cash pile; balance rose 35% in last 2 years' (February 5), the government has been doing everything within its domain — from slashing corporate tax to implementing various PLI schemes — to making huge public investment. And this is in the expectation that private companies would be ploughing back their surpluses into the economy by way of investments to accelerate economic growth and generate employment.

However, India Inc. has chosen to sit on their cash piles, instead of investing in expansion, new ventures and projects that could have reaped

profits as well as created employment in the country. It is true that there have been hurdles like geopolitical situation, domestic consumption and demand issues, interest rates, etc. But the problems are not entirely insurmountable, given the huge size of the Indian market space and the fast growing middle classes.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Hyderabad

## Nuclear energy initiative

Apropos 'Nuclear cloud' (February 5), the country is far behind in generating power that meets the demand. The government has wasted a pretty long time in

promoting fossil fuels, allowing private players to reap benefits from mining coal and refining crude. The ₹20,000 crore allotted in the Budget for developing nuclear energy is far from adequate. Besides there is no elaboration on the safety aspects and responsibilities towards compensation in case of an accident.

AG Rajmohan

Anantapur, AP

## Protectionist Trump

This refers to 'How to push ahead with Trump' (February 5). Trump did not waste any time in slapping tariffs on Canada and Mexico. But he had a change of heart when America's two largest trading partners took steps

to appease his concerns about border security and drug trafficking, and pushed the pause button for 30 days. As far as India is concerned, so far it has tactfully negotiated Trump's protectionist storm by reducing peak tariffs from 150 to 70 per cent. This move seems to have averted immediate US trade retaliation and opened a window for trade negotiations. More so with the US imposing tariffs on China, there would be good opportunities for Indian companies in textiles, auto components and pharmaceuticals. But in general India needs to tread cautiously.

Bal Govind

Hosur

## Streamline data collection

US President Donald Trump is correct in deporting illegal immigrants. Over 200 Indians living illegally in the US have been deported. Any policy of a nation can have a great reach only if it has correct data on all parameters of growth. Population statistics is vital among them. India, which nurtures the dream of becoming a developed nation by 2047, should streamline collection of data for executing its socio-economic welfare policies effectively. India should emulate US and other developed nations in this regard.

S Ramakrishnaswamy

Chennai



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## Simplify assessment

Timely disposal of I-T appeals is a key demand

Gaurav Mehndiratta

The Finance Minister, in her Budget 2025-26 speech, announced that the new Income-Tax Bill will be laid before Parliament in the next one week, and that the text will be clear and direct. KPMG conducted a survey to understand industry's views and expectations from the simplification exercise (see graphic).

The survey results brought out some interesting expectations from taxpayers. When asked about top three areas that require attention, 84 per cent of the respondents mentioned simplification in the area of assessments/disputes as one of their top choices. The survey also shows that almost 99 per cent of the respondents want the government to introduce a mandatory timeline for disposal of pending appeals before the Appellate Commissioner level (CIT(A)). This feedback appears to be triggered by the huge pendency of cases before the CIT(A) forum. Per the recent report of the Standing Committee on Finance (December 2024), the disputed demands have been quantified at a whopping ₹31.36 lakh crore (\$385 billion), and therefore any mechanism to resolve and reduce litigation would be a win-win for the government as well as taxpayers.

Additionally, giving upfront clarity to taxpayers would certainly help bring down errors and litigation. More than 90 per cent of the respondents believe that a commentary akin to that of the OECD would be beneficial in providing clarity on positions.

On transfer pricing, which has also been a key area of litigation, the respondents felt that the transfer pricing safe harbour rules should be reoriented to make them more effective. The Finance Minister did announce a proposal to expand the scope of safe harbour rules, which may address this demand of the respondents.

### DIGITISATION OF SERVICES

With the objective of imparting greater transparency, efficiency and accountability, the government introduced faceless assessment and appeal mechanism. The survey results indicate that the respondents are supportive of this mode of interaction, with only less than 5 per cent wanting to go back to offline mode, which is a great news for the government. However, 60 per cent of the respondents do feel that they

### Survey findings

Which areas require the most attention/simplification out of the following?



Source: KPMG survey report, January 2025

would like to see further improvements in the faceless process.

On appeals, about 61 per cent feel that the first appellate process—that is, CIT(A)—be moved out of faceless mode.

While the government had rationalised certain TDS provisions in Budget 2024-25, about 64 per cent of the respondents believe that further simplification of TDS provisions is required. They wanted simplification with regard to allowing TDS credits and the addressing of the mandatory requirement of issuing TDS certificates in all cases.

This time around, the Finance Minister has taken a further step by easing some of the compliances for TDS and TCS provisions.

Interestingly, while one-third of the respondents are happy with the existing corporate tax rates, 58 per cent of the respondents want a further reduction.

The timeline for filing of belated/revised returns has also been an area of concern. Over a period of time, the government has reduced the timeline and currently the due date to file the same stands at December 31 after the end of the year. This leaves very little time, especially for corporates and those who have to comply with transfer pricing requirements, to address any errors or carry out delayed compliances. On this front, 82 per cent of the respondents believe that the timeline should be extended to March 31 of the relevant assessment year.

While the government has taken the first step by rationalising some of the provisions during the previous and the current Budgets, taxpayers should know that not all expectations on simplification of the Act can be brought in immediately, as the government will have to strike a balance between mobilising tax revenue and simplifying the Act.

Mehndiratta is Partner and Head (Aerospace and Defence) at KPMG in India. With inputs from chartered accountants Manan Aori and Sidhant Gayal



HIMADRI BHATTACHARYA

As always, the 2025-26 Budget also has multiple themes and highlights. However, understandably the direct tax concessions announced at the very end of the Budget speech have grabbed much of the attention.

Major equity market indices ended on a flat note on the day of the Budget.

### FISCAL CONSOLIDATION

The government has shown its resolve to pursue the path of fiscal consolidation. Thanks to the buoyancy in direct and indirect tax collection, the revised estimate of the fiscal deficit for 2024-25 stands lower at 4.8 per cent of GDP vis-à-vis the Budget estimate of 4.9 per cent. The other deficit parameters also indicate furtherance of fiscal prudence.

Interestingly, the Centre's establishment expenditure is the only major item on the expenditure side, whose revised estimate at ₹8,41,762 crore has exceeded its Budget Estimate.

The fiscal deficit for 2025-26 has been pegged at 4.4 per cent of the GDP, which is in line with the commitment made in this regard in the full Budget for 2024-25 last year. As regards income, the estimates for GST and corporation tax seem realistic. The estimate for personal income tax implying a growth of 14.4 per cent vis-à-vis the revised estimate for 2024-25 looks a bit ambitious, particularly in view of the tax concessions announced in the Budget that would entail a revenue loss of about ₹1 trillion.

However, the assumption of a conservative nominal GDP growth rate of 10.1 per cent underlying the Budget Estimates will provide some cushion to the government in 2025-26 in adhering to the Budget Estimates.

The revised estimate of capital expenditure in 2024-25 at ₹13,18,320 crore was lower than the Budget Estimate by about 12 per cent. So doubts have been raised if the Budget Estimate of ₹15,48,282 crore for 2025-26 could be achieved by the government. This is important, because revitalisation of the government's capital expenditure is critical for accelerating private investment.

### MIDDLE ORDER'S WISH LIST

Sharp fall in the equity market for over four months now, resulting in a 10-13 per cent drop in the major indices has left many retail investors, particularly the new entrants, deeply out-of-pocket and anguished.

The middle class, therefore, has one more wish to be fulfilled—a 25 basis point rate cut by the RBI at the conclusion of the next MPC meeting on



## Sober Budget, amidst middle class euphoria

**WISH LIST.** The middle class would also be expecting an MPC rate cut for its consumption, but RBI needs to factor in stubbornly high inflation

February 7, 2025, followed by a similar one in the next meeting in April—which, it is believed, would reverse the sagging trend of the equity market.

Even the cognoscenti have opined that the RBI should now do its bit to help the middle class by making sure that EMIs on consumer and home loans are reduced.

However, not many seem to be seriously concerned about how realistic it would be to expect the MPC to slash the policy rate now when the headline CPI inflation continues to be stubbornly above the target of 4 per cent.

### WOES OF SGBs

A relatively minor point emanating from the Budget is the government's decision to discontinue the issuance of sovereign gold bonds (SGBs), which commenced in 2015. The last issuance was in February, 2023, with the outstanding amount at ₹4.5 lakh crore as on March 31 of the same year.

The maturity amounts of SGBs, each with a tenor of 8 years and carrying a coupon of 2.75 per cent (subsequently reduced to 2.50 per cent), are indexed to the price of 24-carat gold, thereby giving the investors a similar rate of return

feature as in the case of physical gold. Since the price of gold has increased continuously since 2015, with the current level being about 3.25 times higher vis-à-vis 2015, the actual cost of issuance of SGBs was very high (12-13 per cent) compared to 6-8 per cent in the case of an 8-year G-Sec during the last decade or so.

Per the revised estimates for 2024-25, an amount of ₹18,500 crore was spent by the government for redemption of SGBs during the year. On the whole, SGBs turned out to be a costly experiment for the government. Contrary to the government's expectations, issuance of SGBs didn't make any impact on the quantum of physical gold imported into the country.

### RBI SURPLUS

Reliance on profit/surplus transfers from government-owned banks, financial institutions and RBI would continue in 2025-26. The budgeted amount under this head is ₹2.36 trillion vis-à-vis the revised estimate of ₹2.34 trillion for 2024-25. To give a perspective, the ratio of these transfers to the net tax receipts of the Central government which was 4.5 per cent in 2023-24 rose to a little over 9 per cent in 2024-25.

This was made possible by more than a two-fold increase in the RBI's surplus in 2023-24.

The Budget Estimate of the transfers for 2025-26 is also about 9 per cent of net tax receipts, implying thereby that the RBI's surplus for 2024-25 would be close to ₹2.30 trillion, to achieve which the contribution of exchange gain would likely be very significant.

While it is perfectly normal for the RBI to transfer most of its seigniorage income to the government, what is being witnessed for the last few years is relatively high earnings of the RBI arising out of its increasingly high volume of intervention operations in the domestic foreign exchange market. This phenomenon is at odds with what happens in central banks with comparable forex reserves. It does not augur well for the independence of the RBI.

### LONG-PENDING ISSUES

Among other things, this Budget can legitimately claim some accolades for addressing a few long-pending issues: One such is the proposal to introduce soon a new Bill to repeal and replace the Income Tax Act, 1961. This will be close to half of the present law, in terms of both chapters and words. The government intends to make it simple to understand for taxpayers and tax administration, leading to tax certainty and reduced litigation.

Over the last 10 years or so, the income tax machinery in India has witnessed significant improvements in terms of efficiency, integrity and openness, amply aided by technology. As is invariably the case, there are strong vested interests who want continuation of this law and the corrupt and arbitrary practices of the past.

It is good to see that the present government is willing to spend some political capital to draw the curtains on it.

The writer is a former central banker and a consultant to the IMF (Through The Billion Press)

thehindu**businessline.**

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

February 6, 2005

### G-7 says global growth 'robust'

The Group of Seven industrial nations said the outlook for global growth remains "robust" while promising individual steps to sustain the level of expansion. "Risks are balanced though global imbalances remain," finance ministers and central bankers from the US, Japan, Germany, France, the UK, Italy and Canada said in a statement after a meeting in London.

### Edu cess not applicable for imports under advance licences

The 2-per-cent education cess imposed in the 2004-05 Budget would not be applicable for imports cleared against advance licences, the Finance Ministry has clarified. The Revenue Department has, however, held that the cess would be payable on imports under the duty free replenishment certificate (DFRC) and export promotion capital goods (EPCG) schemes.

### Psychotropic drugs: FinMin asked to go slow on raids

To rescue millions of patients suffering due to the shortage of psychotropic drugs, the Health Ministry has written to the Finance Ministry, asking it to go slow on nabbing pharmacists stocking these life-saving medicines.

Anish Shah

Budget 2025-26 is another decisive step forward in our journey towards 'Viksit Bharat'.

By prioritising agriculture, manufacturing, MSMEs, exports, and ease of doing business—while keeping sustainability and digitisation as underlying themes—the Budget paves the way for continued progress.

Foremost, the emphasis on manufacturing is well-placed and much appreciated by the industry. The four pillars of Make in India—new processes, new infrastructure, new sectors, and a new mindset—have been redefining the country's manufacturing ecosystem. The Budget reinforces the government's commitment to further bolster this ecosystem.

The announcement to establish a National Manufacturing Mission by providing policy support, execution roadmaps, governance is looked forward to with anticipation. Additionally,

continued support for the MSME sector is welcome. The revised investment and turnover limits for MSME classification, enhanced credit availability with guaranteed cover, and customized credit cards for micro enterprises are notable announcements.

The emphasis on infrastructure development, ease of doing business, skilling and the rationalization of the customs tariff structure for industrial goods are significant positives.

The announcements on climate-proofing the agriculture sector and emphasizing self-reliance are well noted. The National Mission on High-Yielding Crops, along with initiatives for boosting the production of pulses, fruits and vegetables, can help ease inflation.

The new Agri Districts Programme, covering 100 districts with low productivity, moderate crop intensity, and below-average credit parameters, is another significant step.

Additionally, the enhancement of the loan limit under the Modified Interest



MSMEs: Far-reaching proposals welcome

Subvention Scheme from ₹3 lakh to ₹5 lakh for loans taken through the Kisan Credit Card (KCC) will further empower India's farm community and thereby strengthen rural resilience and financial inclusion.

The emphasis of the National Manufacturing Mission on Clean Tech manufacturing, particularly in solar PV cells, EV batteries, motors and controllers, electrolyzers, and wind turbines, will move us forward in that direction and

reduce our dependence on imports.

Further, the proposed amendments to the Atomic Energy Act and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act to encourage private sector participation in the Nuclear Energy Mission are encouraging.

It is commendable that the Union Budget 2025-26 continues to support women's empowerment, particularly through new schemes for first-time entrepreneurs.

The Budget announcements are expected to spur two key engines of growth—consumption and investment. Changes in the personal income tax structure will give a boost to demand, while the government's increased capital expenditure, although modest compared to previous years, will continue to add to the nation's productive capacity. The economic momentum is expected to catch up going ahead.

The writer is Immediate Past President, FICCI





## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## THE IDEA OF DELHI

That's what the city has voted for — and it has a national resonance far beyond the capital

**D**ELHI HAS VOTED and much will depend on what the voters have said. Because even though it may be less than a full state, Delhi is not just another city. It is a mini-India that is home to diverse aspirations and teeming dreams. Many come to Delhi to be and to become, in search of a better work and life for themselves and education for their children, and to be part of a larger story. The outcome of the electoral contest in this city will, therefore, not just decide the fate of the three main players in the field. It will also strike sparks and echoes across the country. Of course, the stakes are high for the incumbent AAP, its main challenger BJP and a Congress that has for a long spell been out of the reckoning.

For Arvind Kejriwal's AAP, born from an anti-corruption movement that played out in full view of the nation under the Delhi nightlights, its unusually rapid rise shaped by its high-visibility setting, a third term, or not, would be critical to its next steps as a party. Its first full tenure after the comprehensive win in 2015 framed the "Delhi model" of governance it sought to put an imprimatur on and carry beyond Delhi (it succeeded in Punjab, but not in Goa or Gujarat). It turned its attention to setting up mohalla clinics and renovating the government school, alongside bhatti-paani subsidies. But the second term saw a visible stalling and slowdown amid growing hostilities with the Centre led by the BJP. From its top leadership being sent to jail in the alleged excise policy scam, to accusations that public money was misused on refurbishing the CM's residence extravagantly, the AAP has had its back against the wall as it sought to guard the turf of an elected government from moves by the Centre's nominee, the L-G. On its success or failure in this election, then, will hinge its future trajectory as a party — and given that it is the only non-Congress party with governments in two states so far, the future contours of the national Opposition could also be rearranged by the AAP's tally. For the BJP, which returned to power at the Centre last year, but without a majority, a win in Delhi, where it has been out of power for 27 years, coming after its victory in Haryana and Maharashtra sweep, could rehabilitate its winning streak. That the Modi versus Kejriwal battle is a grudge match with larger consequences could also be gauged from the PM's reply to the motion of thanks on the President's address in Lok Sabha on Tuesday — he didn't take names but Kejriwal was clearly the target of pointed swipes in his speech.

But the outcome in this election will be important, most of all, for what it means for the idea of Delhi. The new government will face the challenge of easing the pressures and strains on it, and of making it more encompassing. India's capital city needs a plan that addresses and includes everyone who seeks to make it their own. A plan that makes the city more comfortable and hospitable, and at the same time, helps it move in step with the vaulting aspirations of those who live in it.

## PROTECT THE CEASEFIRE

Donald Trump's proposal to 'take over' Gaza threatens to derail the peace process entirely

**O**N THE EVE OF US President Donald Trump's inauguration, Israel and Hamas reached a fragile ceasefire agreement after months of negotiations. Both the incoming president and his predecessor, Joe Biden, were eager to take credit. Now, as the first of three phases on the proposed path to peace unfolds — with the exchange of many hostages and prisoners still awaited — Trump's proposal to "take over" Gaza threatens to derail the process entirely. During a joint press briefing with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House, Trump suggested that a US takeover would be a "long-term ownership position" that would bring "great stability" to the Middle East. It would also amount to the most radical upending of US policy. Trump has not ruled out deploying US troops in Gaza — an extraordinary stance for a president who has consistently criticised America's present involvement in Eastern Europe, and its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Reminiscent of the 1948 Nakba, when 700,000 Palestinians were displaced during and after the first Arab-Israeli war, Trump has framed his proposal as a "humanitarian" effort, claiming he wants to spur economic development, create jobs, and provide housing for Gaza's 1.8 million residents — who, in the meantime, should move to Egypt or Jordan. Both countries, however, have categorically rejected this idea, saying they will not accept Palestinian refugees. Any attempt to forcibly displace Gaza's population after 15 months of war would only fuel resentment and rebellion, and in the long run, lead to more instability.

At this critical juncture, preserving the ceasefire should be the priority. Hamas, which de facto governs Gaza, has condemned Trump's plan, calling it an alignment with Israel's far-right agenda. A forced relocation of Palestinians could trigger military action that may spill over into Lebanon, as seen last year, and other parts of the Middle East. Renewed conflict could again bring in Hezbollah and reignite the Israel-Iran proxy war, jeopardising regional stability. None of this augurs well for a two-state solution. Saudi Arabia has rejected Trump's proposal saying that it would not establish diplomatic relations with Israel — Washington's long-term objective, as envisaged in the 2020 Abraham Accords — without the establishment of a Palestinian state. Other countries that were a part of the Accords (UAE and Bahrain) will likely reconsider their commitments as well. The only party that stands to benefit from Trump's plan is Netanyahu's government, propped up by its far-right allies who continue to demand that Israel abandon the ceasefire. This week, as Israel and Hamas negotiate the second phase of their talks, the process must be insulated from proposals that threaten to derail it.

## WITH A SQUEAK

A study links growing rat populations in cities to rising temperatures, stokes spectres of an impending Ratmageddon

**A** N ASTEROID WITH A 1.3 per cent chance of hitting Earth in 2032. Sci-fi fears of an AI apocalypse. But for the real menace of these times, check under the sofa. Rats — lots and lots of rats. Think *The Birds*, not *Armageddon*. A group of researchers have used public rat sighting and inspection data from 16 cities — mostly in the US, but also including Toronto, Amsterdam and Tokyo — over a period of between seven and 17 years to see how the numbers had changed. The result: 11 of those cities saw significant increases in the rat population.

Human population density and loss of vegetation correlated positively with multiplying rodents. More food waste and more holes to scurry into make for a happy and healthy rat population. But the strongest correlation was found with rising temperatures amid global warming, an issue that's exacerbated in cities due to the urban heat island effect. When it's warmer, rats have lower mortality, can stay above ground and forage for longer, and are more fertile. The collective noun for these pesky home invaders is a "mischievous" of rats, and what mischief they can wreak, from carrying diseases to contaminating food and damaging infrastructure. That's not to mention, as the study says, the mental toll it takes on the people who have to put up with them.

But don't reach for the rat poison just yet. For one thing, the study found that trying to get rid of rats that are already there is much less effective than methods of making cities less hospitable to them. What is needed is modern waste management practices, building regulations, and more resources for public education and surveillance. There's a host of things that can and should be done at the municipal level, including in India: although there's no data from the country, the same conditions apply. In the meantime, hunker down, rodent-proof your houses and prepare for Ratmageddon. Not with a bang but with a squeak.



AMARTYA LAHIRI

THE UNITED STATES OF America has now embarked upon a path of muscular nationalism with its opening salvo being the unleashing of a trade war. The interesting bit is that the US went after its two biggest trading partners — Canada and Mexico — by announcing 25 per cent tariffs on all imports from these countries with a 10 per cent lower rate on energy imports from Canada. The tariffs were initially to go into effect on February 4 but have now been postponed by 30 days.

The US action raises a number of questions, the key ones being — why is the US doing it? What may be the effects of the tariffs? How might this end?

On the question of why, it is instructive to start by noting that President Donald Trump, who campaigned extensively during the recent presidential election on issues surrounding the trade and security threat to the US from China, has imposed a relatively minor 10 per cent additional tariffs on China. He has singled out Canada and Mexico — two of the US's biggest trading partners, jointly accounting for over 28 per cent of total imports — for the harshest and swiftest tariff assault.

The ostensible reason given for this is that it is intended to push Canada and Mexico to reduce the flow of illegal drugs and immigrants across their borders into the US. This reasoning is hard to buy since Canada has been included in the tariff net despite a minuscule share of illegal drugs and immigrants entering the US from Canada as compared to the flows across the US-Mexico border. Indeed, Canadian officials who were negotiating with their US counterparts have expressed frustration at the lack of clarity from the US side regarding the actions or markers that the US requires to withdraw the tariffs. There is a general recognition on all sides that the border control issue is just a smoke screen for justifying the tariffs.

The more likely reasons for the tariffs are President Trump's long-expressed love of tariffs as a marker of economic power; and

White House may relent on Canada and Mexico, but China trade war may be a longer affair

The revenue shortfall of the US federal government is where tariffs can play a role. Simple arithmetic reveals that at current levels of imports from these three countries — 25 per cent tariffs on Canadian and Mexican goods with a 10 per cent carveout for energy imports from Canada (which account for a quarter of Canada's exports to the USA) along with 10 per cent additional tariffs on imports from China — can raise upwards of \$320 billion annually. This is almost 70 per cent of the annual cost of extending the tax cuts. Trump has also threatened to impose tariffs on the European Union. At the EU's current US import share of 16 per cent, a 25 per cent tariff on the EU would net an additional \$160 billion annually. This would take the tariff loot up to \$480 billion dollars,

the federal government's desperation for additional revenues. While the deep protectionist zeal underlying the first reason will never go away, the motive behind the second may be more malleable. Why is that?

Corporate and personal income tax rates had been reduced under the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2018 during Trump's previous administration. These popularly known as the Trump tax cuts and they are scheduled to expire in 2025. A key goal of President Trump is to extend or make those tax cuts permanent. However, extending them will be expensive with the Congressional Budget Office estimating that it would add \$4.6 trillion over 10 years to the federal budget deficit, or \$460 billion annually. This would require the US Congress to pass a bill to raise the federal borrowing limit as well as approve the budget. Given the presence of a number of deficit hawks among Republican members of Congress, the passage of such a bill is far from guaranteed, notwithstanding the President's current popularity.

The revenue shortfall of the US federal government is where tariffs can play a role. The United States imports around \$4 trillion of goods annually, of which 15.6 per cent come from Mexico, 12.6 per cent from Canada while China accounts for 13.5 per cent, a collective import share of almost 42 per cent. Simple arithmetic reveals that at current levels of imports from these three countries — 25 per cent tariffs on Canadian and Mexican goods with a 10 per cent carveout for energy imports from Canada (which account for a quarter of Canada's exports to the USA) along with 10 per cent additional tariffs on imports from China — can raise upwards of \$320 billion annually. This is almost 70 per cent of the annual cost of extending the tax cuts. Trump has also threatened to impose tariffs on the European Union. At the EU's current US import share of 16 per cent, a 25 per cent tariff on the EU would net an additional \$160 billion annually. This would take the tariff loot up to \$480 billion dollars,

potentially financing the entire annual cost of extending the Trump tax cuts.

Where could all of this go wrong? First, the accounting assumes that the volume and price of imports into the US remains unchanged in response to the tariffs. That depends on how much of the tariffs get passed on to the consumers. If importers pass on some or all of the tariffs to consumers, then demand will fall and with it the tariff revenues that the government can collect. This decline in volume will likely become more significant over time as importers and exporters try to find alternative sources and destinations for their goods.

Second, given the extensive supply chain links in North America between the three countries, some of these tariffs will inevitably pass through to consumers which will cause US prices to rise. That may have political costs since one of the key issues in the 2024 election was the cost of living. With midterm elections due in 2026 and waver-thin Republican majorities in Congress, political opposition to the tariffs will likely emerge if they persist for a significant duration.

Third, countries subjected to tariffs typically retaliate with their own, as Canada has done and Mexico has threatened to do. This will end up being costly for US exporters since these two countries currently account for over 33 per cent of total US exports. This, too, will be politically difficult to sustain.

Given the above, the most likely scenario that may unfold is that Trump will keep the tariff threat alive during the next three to four months to project optimistic budget revenues that can "finance" the extension of the Trump tax cuts. Once Congress passes the budget bill, the administration will begin to look for off-ramps by pointing to symbolic concessions from Canada and Mexico. The China trade war though may be a longer affair.

The writer is Royal Bank Research Professor of Economics, University of British Columbia



MD TOUHID HOSSAIN

RELATIONS BETWEEN BANGLADESH and India have reached a critical juncture following the ouster of the Awami League regime in a student-led mass uprising in July-August 2024. It seems to me that the Indian establishment failed to anticipate the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government. It is, nevertheless, necessary to remind ourselves of the common interests and collaborative possibilities between our two nations. Professor Muhammad Yunus, the Chief Adviser and head of the interim government, and I are willing to work with due seriousness to build on the positive aspects of the bilateral relationship and pragmatically address areas of tension and misunderstanding.

Our position has been clear from the outset: We want a good working relationship with India based on mutual respect. We hope and expect that our counterparts in India will reciprocate our desire. The December visit of Foreign Secretary Vikram Misra to Dhaka was a step in the right direction. The history of collaboration between our nations goes back to the birth of Bangladesh, and its continuation will be beneficial to the people of both countries.

Beginning with the last decade of the 20th century, India has achieved remarkable feats, be it its vibrant technology sector with global influence or its economy, which is now the fifth-largest in the world. Bangladesh, too, has its areas of noteworthy achievements. Our garments exports are second only to China. Our contribution to UN peacekeeping outnumbers any other

## LET'S WORK TOGETHER

India and Bangladesh have much to gain from a positive bilateral engagement

country, providing essential services in hotspots throughout the world. Microcredit models developed here by Professor Yunus, Nobel Laureate, have influenced the creation and growth of a global industry, and been adapted on a massive scale in India.

A lot of noise has been created in India about the treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh. During the vacuum that existed between the fall of the previous regime on August 5, 2024, and the appointment of the interim government, the law and order situation in the country was not under complete control, and untoward incidents did take place. These particularly impacted people closely connected to the previous regime, most of them Muslims, but also including Hindus. On assuming power, the interim government took stern steps against the perpetrators of such crimes. Citizens throughout the country also stepped forward to courageously and successfully protect Hindu families and temples. Unfortunately, the Indian media and cyberspace have continued to create negative hype by publishing and repeating grossly exaggerated and often completely false allegations.

The interim government of Bangladesh is committed to the protection of the rights of every citizen irrespective of their faith, and the Hindus in Bangladesh are equal citizens with equal rights. We were pleased when an independent survey conducted by Voice of America found that nearly two-thirds of our population believed that the treatment of minorities had improved under the interim

government. We seek to be a model for communal harmony for South Asia and beyond. We invite Indian journalists to come and report on what is going on without any restrictions. The Indian public can learn the truth from their unbiased investigations.

The Interim Government has made sincere attempts to revive SAARC, the regional association that has been defunct for more than a decade. The Indian response so far has not been positive. We don't believe India has anything to fear from this effort. We know it will take a long time to realise the full potential of cooperation among South Asian nations. But a thousand-mile journey begins with a single step. As a first step, can't our leaders simply pose for a photograph together at the next global gathering to signal our long-term commitment to regional collaboration?

Despite challenges, we have seen some hopeful green shoots in the bilateral relationship, such as the recent exchange of fishermen and the signing of a trilateral agreement that will allow Bangladesh to access a small amount of clean hydroelectric energy from Nepal. Let's build on these positive steps to craft a partnership that benefits both of our peoples, the region and the global community. A good start would be stopping the practice of killing unarmed civilians at the border. Our peoples have too much to gain from positive and pragmatic engagement for us not to seize this opportunity.

The writer is foreign adviser to the interim government of Bangladesh



## FEBRUARY 6, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

## OFFICIALS EXPELLED

THE ESPIONAGE CASE has taken a dramatic turn with the expulsion of a Soviet national attached to the USSR embassy. This coincided with the expulsion of an official from the German Democratic Republic and another from the Polish embassy. Coomaraswami, the suspected kingpin, has reportedly named a Polish embassy attaché, Jan Haberk, to whom he passed secret documents. It could not, however, be confirmed whether Haberk or some other member of the embassy was deported.

## POLICE FIRING

FIVE PERSONS were killed and seven injured when the police fired on a 14,000-strong mob,

part of which turned violent, at Bhayander, about 55 km from Bombay. Trouble started when the Sangharsh Seva Samiti of Bhayander launched a rally in support of their demands. In several cases the police fired from close range and a majority of those receiving bullet injuries were hit in the head.

## MLAS DROPPED

THE NAMES OF the chief ministers of Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh figure in the lists of candidates which were cleared by the Congress Parliamentary Board for the coming Assembly elections. While retaining the chief ministers, the CPB-1 has dropped scores of sitting MLAs in these four states

including a large number of ministers and some dissidents.

## TRIPURA ATTACK

ARMED TRIBAL NATIONAL Volunteers extremists launched a fresh offensive in two villages in Tripura's West District, shooting down two CPI(M) supporters and injuring one, besides kidnapping three persons, including two student leaders, according to the police. The targets of the extremists, led by "Captain" Kamlu Debbarma, were the legislator Ruchir Debbarma, and Tribal Autonomous District Council member Budhan Debbarma. This was the second extremist attack on an MLA in Mandai, scene of the June 1980 disturbances.





## Not worth the risk

### India must address illegal immigration with empathy and urgency

The deportation of dozens of Indians, believed to be illegal immigrants in the United States, is neither surprising nor unprecedented. Over the past few years, the U.S. government has intensified its Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations to identify, detain, and deport individuals without proper documentation. For instance, between June and October 2024, the Department of Homeland Security reported that 1,60,000 individuals had been deported on 495 international repatriation flights to more than 145 countries, including India. However, the manner and timing should be cause for concern for New Delhi. To begin with, these deportations coincide with a major crackdown by ICE, spurred by Donald Trump's swearing-in as the U.S. President in January. He has made illegal immigration his "number one priority". India, which has one of the largest populations of illegal immigrants in the U.S., estimated at 7,25,000 undocumented individuals, will need to prepare for a significant increase in the number of returning migrants. Second, for the first time, the use of military flights signals that the U.S. does not intend to be challenged. This move drew protests from Colombian President Gustavo Petro, particularly after reports emerged of deported migrants being shackled. The U.S. Embassy in Delhi has also made it clear that this deportation is part of a broader initiative to tighten immigration laws and enforcement, reinforcing the message that illegal migration is not worth the risk. Further, the timing, just ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's U.S. visit, suggests that diplomatic efforts alone may not be enough to deter the Trump administration from pursuing such measures. This has the potential to become a bilateral flashpoint in India-U.S. relations.

Accepting its citizens, provided they are verifiably Indian and have entered other countries illegally, is undoubtedly the Indian government's responsibility. However, stricter controls must be enforced to prevent Indians from embarking on perilous journeys to cross into the U.S. via Mexico and Canada. The government must ensure that young people in States with high deportation rates (Gujarat, Punjab, and Haryana), understand that working illegally abroad is not a guaranteed path to success. Educational campaigns should highlight the dangers associated with illegal immigration. Importantly, the root causes must not be ignored. The central and State governments must address the underlying economic distress, deepening agricultural crises, social tensions, and employment shortages that push people to take such risks. Attention must be paid to those who deliberately travel to conflict zones in search of opportunities. While altering U.S. immigration policies may be difficult, the Indian government must address the reasons behind this large-scale migration with empathy and urgency.

## A tough call

The rupee's slide confounds monetary policymakers' task

The Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) will conclude its first policy review of 2025 on Friday, in significantly different circumstances from its December meet. For one, the key personnel have changed. The RBI has a new Governor, with former Revenue Secretary Sanjay Malhotra replacing Shaktikanta Das soon after the last review. Deputy Governor Michael Patra, an MPC member who was in charge of monetary policy, also retired last month. With the Centre yet to name his successor, navigating this review is going to be a tad tricky for the new central bank boss, with another deputy holding additional charge of monetary policy. Second, the rupee is in a free fall of sorts. After hitting 85 to the U.S. dollar on December 19, 2024, it slipped to 86 on January 13, 2025 and crossed 87 on February 3, partly due to the third factor at work. The strengthening dollar is driven by U.S. President Donald Trump's overdrive to 'Make America Great Again' with higher tariffs on major trade partners, and other disruptive economic plans such as exiting global tax accords, shutting aid flows, et al.

One thing has not changed — the clamour for an interest rate cut from industry and government honchos. In December, this noise was heightened after a sharp growth blip in the July-September quarter when GDP grew just 5.4%. Now, with 2024-25 GDP growth downgraded to just 6.4%, and the no marked uptick in economic metrics in the December-ending quarter, growth worries remain entrenched. In the interim, there has been some back and forth between North Block and Mint Street on the factors responsible for stumbling economic activity. The Finance Ministry sought to lay some of the blame for an urban demand slump on tight monetary policy. RBI officials, in the central bank's January bulletin, said the "one way" to spark a growth rebound and a virtuous cycle of fresh private investments, is to boost consumption through higher disposable incomes, especially for the urban middle class that has been pining for relief from food inflation. With the Budget delivering on this front with income tax cuts, the ball is back in the RBI's court. Inflation has been over 5% in the last five months, but may have eased closer to the RBI's 4% target in January. But a rate cut could also hurt the rupee further, and spur higher imported inflation. It is an unenviable situation for the new RBI chief to be in; he might be tempted to take a cue from Mr. Das who had surprised markets with a rate cut in the first review under his watch in 2019, reversing his predecessor's stance.

# A Budget that is mostly good but with one wrong move

The Union Budget has got many things right. Its projection of nominal GDP growth for 2025-26, at 10.1%, is reasonable and acceptable. The Economic Survey 2024-25 had indicated a real GDP growth in the range of 6.3%-6.8% for 2025-26. This provides some buffer if growth picks up more. The increase in the capital expenditure of the government in 2025-26 over the revised estimates of 2024-25 is estimated at ₹1.03 lakh crore. But the capital expenditures in 2025-26, at ₹11.2 lakh crore, are nearly the same as was indicated in the Budget of 2024-25 at ₹11.1 lakh crore.

The overarching aim of the Budget was to accelerate growth and push India towards a developed country status. The required rate of real growth to achieve this is estimated differently including a rate of 8% in the Economic Survey for 2024-25. In any case, the country needs a definite pickup in growth rate. The various measures indicated in the Budget are welcome. In fact, some of these could have been implemented even earlier. The concession given to the 'middle-class' in terms of income-tax is welcome as a relief. But its impact on demand depends on the marginal propensity to consume of the households who are expected to largely benefit from these concessions and their consumption basket.

### Gross tax revenues

Growth in the Government of India's gross tax revenues (GTR) have trended downwards in recent years. The buoyancy of GTR has fallen for three successive years from 1.4 in 2023-24 to 1.15 in 2024-25 (RE) and then to 1.07 in 2025-26 (BE). As a result, growth in the Government of India's GTR has kept falling from 13.5% in 2023-24 to 11.2% in 2024-25 (RE), and to 10.8% in 2025-26 (BE). Within the government's tax revenues, the growth rate of Goods and Services Tax (GST) has also fallen from 12.7% in 2023-24 to 10.9% in 2025-26 (BE).

In fact, the structure of the government's taxation has moved away from indirect to direct taxes. The share of direct taxes in the government's GTR has increased from 52% in



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Some of the measures indicated in the Budget could have been implemented even earlier; moving away from 'fiscal deficit' as an indicator is an incorrect step

2021-22 to 59% in 2025-26 (BE) which is a welcome development. Within direct taxes, however, it is personal income-tax which has performed better than corporate income-tax in terms of growth and buoyancy.

However, even in the case of personal income-tax there has been a fall in growth from 25.4% in 2023-24 to 20.3% in 2024-25 (RE) and 14.4% in 2025-26 (BE). This fall in growth in 2025-26 (BE) is partly due to the announced income-tax concessions. In the case of corporate income-tax, the growth in 2024-25 (RE) is quite low at 7.6%. This growth has been raised to 10.4% in 2025-26 (BE). On the whole, assumptions regarding the government's tax revenue growth in 2025-26 (BE) appear to be realistic.

In the case of non-tax revenues, the main contribution has been in the form of dividends from the Reserve Bank of India and public sector companies, which together accounted for about ₹3.25 lakh crore in 2025-26 — an increase of ₹35,715 crore over the revised estimates. Thus, the non-tax revenues have been raised from ₹5.3 lakh crore (RE) to ₹5.8 lakh crore in 2025-26 (BE).

### Level of government expenditure

Tax and non-tax revenues, non-debt capital receipts and fiscal deficit together determine the size of government expenditure. As discussed, a gross tax revenue growth at a lower level of 10.8% appears to be realistic. Given the commitment to fiscal consolidation, the size of government expenditure as a percentage of GDP had to be reduced from 14.6% in 2024-25 (RE) to 14.2% in 2025-26 (BE). Growth in total expenditure, at 7.6% in 2025-26 (BE), is lower than the budgeted nominal GDP growth at 10.1%.

In fact, this was so even in 2024-25 (RE), when the government's total expenditure growth was 6.1% as against the nominal GDP growth of 9.7% as per the first advanced estimates. However, there has been a steady improvement in the quality of government expenditure as the share of capital expenditure in total expenditure has been improving. In fact, this share has improved by 10% points over the period from 2020-21 to 2025-26 (BE). Given the contemporary context, the Government of India has to build up

large-scale Artificial Intelligence (AI) infrastructure in order to facilitate the adoption of emerging technologies. In this context, China has taken a clear lead. The United States has recently announced an investment of \$500 billion for AI infrastructure. In the field of AI, India's technology companies have failed to anticipate developments. India should have done what China did. Perhaps, India should push these companies for research and development, by offering some tax concessions, if necessary.

### A less transparent fiscal health indicator

One wrong measure introduced in the Budget is to move away from fiscal deficit as an indicator of fiscal prudence. Contrary to what is stated in the Budget document, we are moving from a transparent to a less transparent indicator. As per the glide path given in the Medium-Term Fiscal Policy Cum Fiscal Policy Strategy Statement of the 2024-25 Budget, the fiscal deficit was to be brought down to below 4.5% by 2025-26.

However, in the 2025-26 Budget, the practice of giving a glide path in terms of fiscal deficit is being discontinued. It has been stated that from now on, the focus will be on reducing the debt-GDP ratio annually. In the annexure statement titled 'Statements of Fiscal Policy as required under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003', alternative paths of the debt-GDP ratio with nominal GDP growth assumptions of 10.0%, 10.5% and 11.0% are given.

The glide paths are indicated in terms of alternative growth assumptions and alternative assumptions regarding mild, moderate, and high degrees of fiscal consolidation. This makes the whole exercise vague and non-transparent. It is better for fiscal discipline to indicate specific fiscal deficit target for different years and the corresponding debt-GDP ratios for those years. It should clearly be shown by what year the FRBM Act targets are to be achieved. A larger claim on the available investible resources by the government will make it difficult for private investment to pick up.

The views expressed are personal

# A green signal for India to assert its health leadership

The Union Budget 2025-26 lays a robust foundation for India to assert its leadership in global health care and innovation, with strategic announcements that bolster medical infrastructure, expand educational opportunities, and promote global collaboration.

With a ₹90,958 crore health-care allocation, the addition of 75,000 medical seats over the next five years, and investments in daycare cancer centres, India is poised to enhance both accessibility and quality of care. The country will add 10,000 medical seats in FY26 alone, underscoring its commitment to health-care excellence.

### India's health-care transformation

This Budget underscores India's remarkable journey of progress, from the 1980s when it grappled with limited medical infrastructure, to its current status as a global health-care leader. The transformation has been nothing short of extraordinary.

Recently, the writer had the privilege of presenting two key recommendations to Prime Minister Narendra Modi: first, establishing India as the global health-care destination, and second, addressing the global shortfall of health-care professionals. It has been a delight to see both these ideas in action through the 'Heal in India' and 'Heal by India' initiatives. With streamlined visa processes, enhanced hospital infrastructure,



**Dr. Prathap C. Reddy**  
is Founder and Chairman, Apollo Hospitals

The Budget has recognised the role of health care as a pillar of national growth and development

and robust public-private partnerships, India is poised to become the preferred medical destination for international patients.

Simultaneously, the country is addressing the global shortfall of health-care professionals by training and deploying more doctors, nurses, and paramedics abroad. This will ensure that Indian expertise supports health-care systems worldwide while creating new opportunities for our skilled professionals.

### Customs duty exemptions, tech outlook

Moreover, it is commendable that the growing burden of non-communicable diseases such as cancer has been acknowledged in this Budget. The establishment of 200 day-care cancer centres in district hospitals will bring specialised treatment closer to people, improving early diagnosis and better patient outcomes.

The customs duty exemption on 36 life-saving drugs, including those for cancer, rare diseases, and chronic conditions will lower the cost of treatments, in turn, benefiting thousands of patients across the country. Also, the addition of 13 new patient assistance programmes would also improve access to critical medications for patients, particularly those with chronic conditions.

The emphasis on Artificial Intelligence and digital health marks a pivotal moment for the future of India's health care. The new National Centres of Excellence will spearhead innovation

in diagnostics, treatment, and research, enabling India to develop cutting-edge solutions that enhance patient care.

The writer believes that the introduction of cutting-edge technologies to deliver quality health care has strengthened India's position as a global health-care player. Both private and public hospitals have played an integral role in this progress. Apollo was the first hospital to launch Proton therapy for advanced cancer care in this part of the world and continues to attract patients from countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom to name a few.

### Build on the momentum

This Budget clearly recognises the government's vision for — and demonstration of bold leadership in recognising — health care as a pillar of national growth and development. From a country that once struggled to provide basic medical care, we have evolved into a nation offering world-class treatment to millions. Through the synergy of Heal in India, Heal by India, and innovation-driven care, we are shaping a future where India's health-care system sets new global benchmarks.

It is our collective responsibility now to build on this momentum — by embracing technology, strengthening medical education, and ensuring that health care reaches every individual in need.

India is not just healing its own people; it is healing the world.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Deportation begins

It is clear that U.S. President Donald Trump means business when it comes to the subject of immigration (Page 1, "U.S. deports Indians as Trump tightens immigration rules", February 5). The "bromance" that India's leader has tried to portray with the American President and his use of other terms of familiarity such as 'Trump, my dear friend' have made no difference. The choice of using an American military plane has been explicit in terms of Mr. Trump's description of "undocumented immigrants" as "aliens", "criminals" and "invaders". The deportation of Indians should strengthen our resolve to make India a land of opportunity.

**G. David Milton,**  
Maruthanadco, Tamil Nadu

to the U.S. Primarily, it is an issue about mounting unemployment. Our economy has been portrayed as experiencing sustained and fast growth, but employment generation has not been commensurate with this 'economic growth'.

**Kesaraju Chandramouli,**  
Hyderabad

The use of U.S. military aircraft is probably aimed at demonstrating Mr. Trump's muscular image. India has allowed itself to be bracketed with countries such as Guatemala, Peru, Honduras and Ecuador without demur. What happened to India's much touted 'national pride' under a new virile dispensation?

**Manohar Alembath,**  
Kannur, Kerala

In the midst of this, imagine if millions of skilled Indian migrants, pivotal to the U.S. economy, chose to remigrate to India. This "brain rejoin" would result in a transformative leap for India. Armed with global expertise in technology,

health care, and finance, these professionals could supercharge India's growth fuelling innovation, entrepreneurship, and job creation. Their return would boost sectors such as Artificial Intelligence, biotech, and sustainable energy.

**Gopalswamy J.,**  
Chennai

Interestingly, there are media reports that there are an estimated 7,25,000 illegal Indian immigrants in the U.S. It is also said that most are from the northern Indian States, including Gujarat. But the big question is why is there this desperation to leave India?

**Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee,**  
Faridabad, Haryana

It is true that America has been considered a land of immigrants for years. But things have changed and there is a gradual vanishing of that vision. Issues of land, jobs and everyday requirements have become matters of grave concern necessitating a dampening of migration and asylum processes. The world is

politically and administratively divided into large and definite numbers of individual states, with each nation bound to take care of its citizens. Moving to other countries without legal procedures naturally attracts public opposition.

**P.R.K. Raja,**  
Pandalam, Kerala

**The optics**  
At a time when a large number of relatives are at the Kumbh looking for their loved ones, the move by the top leader of the land to have a holy dip there is insensitive. It is needless to say that the leader has sent out a not-so-subtle political message of his continuing strategy to consolidate the vote base that backs his party. Such a mix of politics and religion to influence voters' preference is anathema to our constitutional values.

**S.K. Choudhury,**  
Bengaluru

### Nursing, dress allowance

I write this letter as the State President (Jammu and Kashmir) of the All

India Registered Nurses Federation (AIRNF). The AIRNF has been working towards the welfare of nursing personnel across India. Recently, the AIRNF has highlighted the issue of the non-sanctioning of nursing and dress allowance to nursing personnel in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The AIRNF has been requesting the government to grant the nursing and dress allowance to nursing personnel in J&K, citing the example of the Union Territory of Ladakh, where such allowances have already been sanctioned.

The Principal Secretary, Health and Medical Education Department, Union Territory of Ladakh, has issued orders No.300-H&ME(UTL) of 2021 and No.301-H&ME(UTL) of 2021, sanctioning the payment of nursing allowance and dress allowance to nursing personnel in Ladakh. Nursing personnel in J&K demand equal treatment.

**Vishav Mohan Sharma,**  
Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir

### Chennai and safety

The incidents of women and girls being assaulted and molested in Chennai make one wonder whether the reputation of Chennai being a haven of peace, and earning an indubitable name for safety, where women can commute without any lurking fear, is under threat. When the political opposition was harping on the subject of safety, one was led to believe that it was attacking the DMK-ruled Tamil Nadu out of animus. But the problem does seem serious.

**Mani Natarajan,**  
Chennai

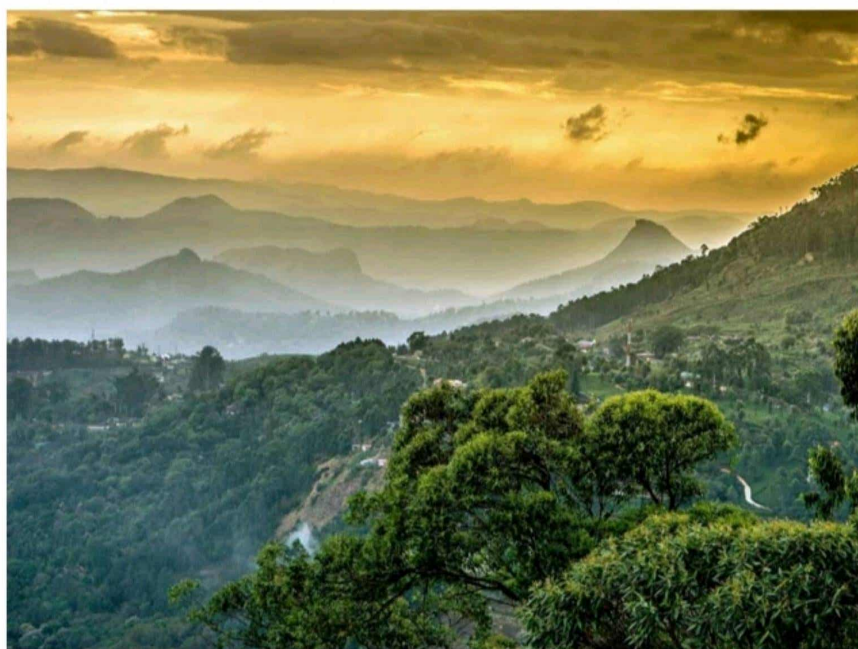
**The other chess star**  
Indian chess prodigy R. Praggnanandhaa's title win against compatriot and world champion D. Gukesh in the Tata Steel Masters tournament 2025 signals India's ascending trajectory in global chess. It is a fine example to show that age is not a barrier to excellence.

**R. Sivakumar,**  
Chennai

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BIBLIOGRAPHY



**Shifting landscapes:** What was once a symphony of chirping birds is now being gradually replaced by the relentless roar of heavy machinery in many places. GETTY IMAGES

# Western Ghats: a living archive of culture, memory, and resilience

Through old and contemporary works, writers have sought to capture the alarming changes sweeping through the Sahyadri; they serve as a wake-up call to save the ecosystem, scarred by encroachment, displacement of tribal people, and skewed policies, from further ruin

K.S. Swati

**T**he Western Ghats, also known as the Sahyadri, meaning benevolent mountains, stretches along the western coast of the Indian peninsula, spanning six States: Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. Known as one of the world's most biodiverse regions, the Western Ghats were once celebrated for their breathtaking natural beauty – cascading waterfalls, lush greenery, and a dazzling array of flora and fauna. Today, however, this idyllic landscape faces a stark transformation. Climate change, deforestation, the decline of traditional livelihoods, land encroachment, and the displacement of tribal communities have left the region in peril.

For years, writers in various regional languages have sought to capture and preserve the narrative of these alarming changes, believing in the transformative power of words. What was once a symphony of chirping birds is now being gradually replaced by the relentless roar of heavy machinery in many places.

The novella, *Chronicle of an Hour and a Half*, by Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari, which was shortlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature 2024, explores powerful themes such as the effects of rumours, mob mentality, social media – and nature, especially, relentless rain – hinting that something ominous awaits. Set against a fictional village in the foothills of the Western Ghats, the novella, which begins as a harmless exchange between two individuals, spirals

into chaos through social media. Within an hour, the community descends into mass hysteria. In the background, nature reflects the emotions of the community, mirroring the escalating tension and chaos.

The inter-personal relationship between humans and nature is poignantly highlighted in Kuvempu's *Malegalalli Madumagalalu* (1967), translated by Vanamala Viswanatha as *Bride of the Hills* (2024). Set in the Malnad region in the Western Ghats, where people are closely tied to the land, relying on its fertile soil, forests, and rivers for their livelihood, nature is revered not only for its practical role in sustenance but also for its spiritual significance, with rituals and local deities tied to agricultural cycles. Yet the novel reflects the growing tension between traditional harmony with nature and the pressures of modernisation and exploitation.

## An exploitative cycle

Development, coupled with human greed, makes the lives of tribal communities difficult. In *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* written by Narayan in Malayalam, which won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1998 and was translated into English by Catherine Thankamma in 2011, the theme of exploitation and marginalisation is vividly portrayed through the struggles of the Adivasi community. As industrial development, moneylenders, and land grabbers encroach on their ancestral territories, people are pushed into deeper poverty and displacement. The novel focuses on how outside forces often

exploit the land's natural resources, disregarding the community's cultural and spiritual connection to it.

In *Ringuan*, written in Marathi by Krushnat Khot, who won the Sahitya Academy Award in Marathi in 2023, and translated into English by Maya Pandit, the protagonist, uprooted from his village, returns home to rescue a buffalo. He reminisces about his childhood and the harmonious life he once lived. The book highlights important aspects of migration, struggles of displaced victims when large-scale development projects are carried out, and the persistent man-animal conflict.

## Loss of traditional occupations

Rampant quarrying, deforestation, illegal mining, and poorly planned construction projects have destabilised the fragile ecosystem. Through meticulous reporting, accounts from affected individuals, interviews, and a critical examination of policies, B. Viju's *Flood and Fury: Ecological Devastation in the Western Ghats* (2019) connects these activities to increased occurrences of landslides, floods, and soil erosion. The book delves into the historical and cultural significance of the Western Ghats while critiquing the apathy of governments, corporations, and society toward environmental conservation.

*The Nilgiri Hills – A Kaleidoscope of People, Culture and Nature* (2023) by Paul Hockings brings together stories and articles from writers, scholars, such as ecologists, filmmakers, local writers, etc to highlight various aspects of the Western Ghats. The book sheds light on

several topics such as ancient metallurgy, music, the making of honey, and the degradation of the ecosystem.

## Resistance and resilience

When livelihood, land, culture, and identity are at stake, resistance, and resilience are the only means of safeguarding them. In *Valli*, written by Sheela Tomy in Malayalam in 2019 and translated into English in 2022 by Jayashree Kalathil, we learn of a tribal community's deep connection to the forest, which sustains them both physically and spiritually. As outsiders encroach upon their land, Valli's family and others in the community resist, clinging to their heritage and traditions. At the same time, Valli grapples with her personal growth, relationships, and changing social dynamics. The novel highlights the strength and perseverance of the Adivasi people as they navigate the complexities of modern life while fighting to preserve their heritage and connection to the land.

Through old and contemporary works on the Western Ghats, authors have stressed that the Ghats are more than just a landscape – they are a living archive of culture, memory, and resilience. Yet, this fragile ecosystem is scarred by encroachment, where tribal people are uprooted, natural resources are destroyed, and policies fail to protect what matters most. To save the Ghats is to do more than preserve their beauty; it is to respect the land and the lives entwined with it, to stand against their erasure, and to recognise that in their survival lies something far greater than us.



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
S. Upendran

I had asked readers to send their favourite passage from a book. Here is one from Mr. Shahqur Rahman, Royapettah, Madras.

Father Forgets

W. Livingston Larned

Listen, son: I am saying this as you lie asleep, one little paw crumpled under your cheek and the blond curls stickily wet on your damp forehead. I have stolen into your room.

Just a few minutes ago, as I sat reading my paper in the library, a stifling wave of remorse swept over me. Guiltily I came to your bedside.

These are the things I was thinking, son: I had been cross to you. I scolded you as you were dressing for school because you gave your face merely a dab with a towel. I took you to task for not cleaning your shoes. I called out angrily when you threw some of your things on the floor.

At breakfast I found fault, too. You spilled things. And as you started off to play and I made for my train, you turned and waved a hand and called, "Good-bye, Daddy!" and I frowned, and said in reply, "Hold your shoulders back!"

Then I began all over again in the late afternoon. As I came up the road I spied you, down on your knees, playing marbles. There were holes in your stockings. I humiliated you before your boy friends by marching you ahead of me to the house.

Do you remember, later, when I was reading in the library, how you came in, timidly, with a sort of hurt look in your eyes? When I glanced up over my paper, impatient at the interruption, you hesitated at the door. "What is it you want?" I snapped.

You said nothing, but ran across in one tempestuous plunge, and threw your arms around my neck and kissed me, and your small arms tightened with an affection that God had set blooming in your heart and which even neglect could not wither. And then you were gone, pattering up the stairs.

Well, son, it was shortly afterwards that my paper slipped from my hands and a terrible sickening fear came over me.

What has habit been doing to me? The habit of finding fault, of reminding – this was my reward to you for being a boy. It was not that I did not love you: it was that I expected too much of youth.

And there was so much that was good and fine and true in your character. The little heart of yours was as big as the dawn itself over the wide hills. This was shown by your spontaneous impulse to rush in and kiss me good-night. Nothing else matters tonight, son. I have come to your bedside in the darkness, and I have knelt there, ashamed!

It is a feeble atonement. I know you would not understand these things if I told them to you during your waking hours. But tomorrow I will be a real daddy! I will keep saying as if it were ritual: "He is nothing but a boy – a little boy!"

I am afraid I have visualised you as a man. Yet as I see you now, son, crumpled and weary in your cot, I see that you are still a baby. Yesterday you were in your mother's arms, your head on her shoulder. I have asked too much, too much.

I like the passage. It brings out the feelings of a father vividly. By the way, what is the meaning of "practically"?

"Practically" means (a) in a practical manner. "Don't panic. Let us look at the problem calmly," said he practically. (b) almost, virtually. "She is practically unknown in this area."

Published in *The Hindu* on February 14, 1995

## Word of the day

**Recalcitrant:**

stubbornly resistant to authority or control

**Synonyms:** ungovernable, insubmissive, uncooperative

**Usage:** Her recalcitrant attitude towards the new rules made it difficult to work with her.

**Pronunciation:** bit.ly/recalcitrantpron

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /rɪkəlˈtɪrənt/

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

## THE DAILY QUIZ

### A quiz about the history of the right of women to vote

Vasudevan Mukunth

#### QUESTION 1

On this day in 1918, Great Britain passed the Representation of the People Act that allowed men over the age of 21 and women over the age of 30 to vote. What's the value of X?

#### QUESTION 2

Since 1833, the \_\_\_\_\_, the U.K.'s sole overseas territory in the Pacific Ocean, has given women the right to vote. Thus it's the territory that has continuously allowed women to vote for the longest duration in history.

#### QUESTION 3

Name the first place in India that gave women the right to vote, in 1920, although not the right to

stand in elections. It was governed as a princely state during the reign of the British Empire. Bonus: which princely state first granted both rights, to vote and run for office, to women?

#### QUESTION 4

During the December 2015 municipal elections in \_\_\_\_\_, the government allowed women to vote for the first time in its history. Women were also allowed to run for office and thus the country soon acquired its first women politicians. Fill in the blanks with the name of the country.

#### QUESTION 5

Name the world's first major country to grant both women and men the right to vote at the same time and on equal terms. This was achieved through the Local Administration Act 1897.



#### Visual Question:

This map of Switzerland shows its 26 cantons. Name the one shown in purple at a roughly 2 o'clock position, which was one of the last places in Europe to grant women the right to vote, in 1991. TOMCHEN1989 (CC BY-SA 3.0)

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

- \_\_\_\_\_ is the cause of about 22% of cancer deaths. **Ans: Tobacco use**
- This is a type of lymphoma in which cancer originates from a specific type of white blood cell called lymphocytes. **Ans: Hodgkin lymphoma**
- What is the term used to define the spread of cancer to other locations in the body? **Ans: Metastasis**
- This is a type of cancer that develops from the thin layer of tissue that covers many of the internal organs. **Ans: Mesothelioma**
- Which U.S. President declared a "war on cancer"? **Ans: Richard Nixon**
- Visual: For which type of cancer, this vaccine is provided? **Ans: Cervical cancer**
- Early Birds:** Viswanadha Rao Batchuj, Erfanally Oosmany | Sonali Das



THE INDIAN EXPRESS, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2025

# THE IDEAS PAGE

## Turning point, cutting edge

India is embracing the idea of shifting public money into private universities and firms which are nurturing innovation. This makes for greater bang for the taxpayer's buck



R A MASHEKAR, SUSAN THOMAS AND AJAY SHAH

FROM THE OUTSET, the dreamers for India had placed a high value upon science, technology, and scientific temper. The first phase of this was centred around the Indian state. Previously private organisations, such as Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) or Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), were brought under the fold of the government. And, for some time, this delivered good results, such as the nuclear test of 1974.

Gradually, we have started seeing the problem of innovation policy (or S&T policy, as it was called in earlier decades) in a more comprehensive, all-of-society way. What we really require is intellectual capabilities in people, in firms, and not just in standalone government organisations. Intellectual power in Indian firms is a precondition for a high GDP. This is where comprehensive national power comes from. It is not enough to have engineers in ISRO who put a craft on the moon. Those engineers should be in universities and private organisations so that this level of imagination, ambition and knowledge is applied pervasively in society.

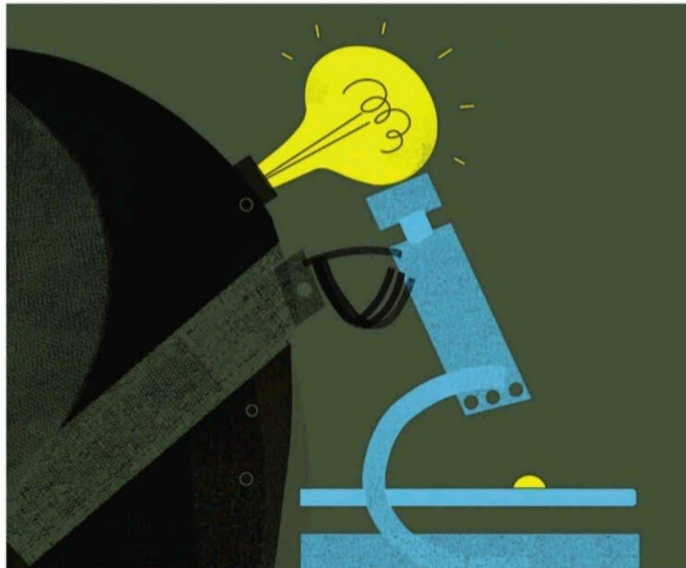
In France, defence research is funded by the government and happens in private defence firms. In the US, 80 per cent of NASA's budget is contracted out to private firms and universities. NASA does not make spacecraft: Private vendors do. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) plays a critical role in NASA's exploration of the solar system. It will come as a surprise to many to realise that JPL was created in a private university (Caltech) in 1936. From 1954 onwards, it has been the recipient of contracts and resources from NASA for its operational role in NASA's space exploration. The recent accomplishment of Deepseek in China shows how innovative energy comes about in a country. The (private) team that created Deepseek cut their teeth in computer science doing algorithmic trading.

Indians feel a sense of pride when their money is used in ISRO to place a craft on the moon. There will be higher levels of societal gains when knowledge resides in private organisations, and feeds into society.

In December 2024, the three of us wrote a paper on the foundations of science policy in India ([https://bit.ly/idea\\_MST\\_2024](https://bit.ly/idea_MST_2024)). We utilised knowledge from public economics to clarify the intellectual foundations of science policy. We suggested there were big gains in placing taxpayer resources into private firms and universities. And we utilised knowledge from public administration and law to sketch details of implementation, of how to do this contracting-out in the Indian context.

There is a natural connection between risk in research, and contracting out to private persons. Government can contract out the same research problem to multiple implementers who take different pathways. Some pathways would be poor, and the flow of money into them would be stopped. Such unfolding of risk is harder when laboratories and bureaucracies are built in government organisations.

When a private firm is working in an



CR Sasikumar

area (for example, an automobile component firm that's challenged to produce ball bearings of a superior spec), it will try to do the research well, because it also has a direct interest in the knowledge sought to be produced. Such a firm would bring knowledge from its normal operations into the contracted research; it would care deeply about the work and execute it well, and then the knowledge produced through the publicly funded research would spill over into its economic success.

Many in Indian science policy have, of course, been thinking on similar lines. The paradigm shift has been simmering for years. We are at a remarkable moment where the new paradigm is turning into action. An important new organisation, Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), will put out grants at about Rs 2,800 crore a year through new ways. It is likely to break new ground in getting public money to private organisations that will fund early stage research.

Paragraph 79 of the recent budget speech reads: "To implement private sector driven research, development and innovation initiative announced in the July budget, I am now allocating Rs 20,000 crore." This is an important milestone in the history of Indian science policy.

An article in the *Financial Times* on February 2 says that ISRO will buy launch vehicles made by private persons. Taxpayer money will go to private firms who will do cutting-edge engineering, and the knowledge will feed into civilian applications and global competitiveness.

In recent years, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) has worked on using public funding to get more GPUs into private hands, to deepen AI knowl-

When a private firm is working in an area (for example, an automobile component firm that's challenged to produce ball bearings of a superior spec), it will try to do the research well, because it also has a direct interest in the knowledge sought to be produced. Such a firm would bring knowledge from its normal operations into the contracted research; it would care deeply about the work and execute it well, and then the knowledge produced through the publicly-funded research would spill over into its economic success.

edge in India. In the olden days, taxpayer money would have gone into a government organisation (for example an IIT), and the equipment would have been used by state functionaries. Instead, MEITY has aligned with the new paradigm. They have procured 18,693 GPUs, which will be in operation at multiple private IT infrastructure firms. MEITY will give the use of these GPUs to researchers in Indian private organisations at the price of \$1 per hour. This is the philosophy of buy, not make.

Putting these four developments together, we may cautiously say that 2025 will shape up as an important turning point for Indian science policy. The Indian state is rising out of the concept of using public money to hire researchers who are civil servants, to the concept of delivering public money into private universities and firms where cutting-edge knowledge is produced. This is greater bang for the taxpayer's buck, as opposed to vertical government science organisations.

The broad idea of contracting out public resources for R&D to private persons is increasingly accepted. How would the implementation work? Research funding is not like ordinary purchasing of (say) pencils where contract performance can be readily tested and audited. As the old saying goes, "If there is no possibility of failure, it's not research." The puzzle now lies in developing these new ways. Our paper shows the elements of work required: Changes in legal texts; new versus existing organisations; strategic thinking in public finance; and project planning for the required reforms.

Mashekar is president, Pune International Centre, Thomas and Shah are co-founders at XKDR Forum

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Pakistan should reaffirm its support for the people of Kashmir. It should also keep the door open for India in case it decides to resolve the Kashmir question through dialogue."

— DAWN, PAKISTAN

## Let the money flow

Review of banking regulations is needed to boost liquidity in the economy



ADITYA PURI

INDIA'S GDP is expected to grow from \$3.7 trillion in 2023-24 to \$7 trillion in 2030-31, which will be fuelled by building on the strong foundation that has already been laid through sound fiscal and monetary policies and world-class physical and digital infrastructure.

Financing India's capex will require higher savings. The investment required for a \$7-trillion economy will be approximately \$2.5 trillion, which translates to an investment-to-GDP ratio of 34 per cent. Corporates and households are net savers with the government running deficits, limiting the amount of its investments.

The private sector has not been investing its surplus. The share of investment to operating cash flow for listed firms is down to 56 per cent in 2023-24 from a peak of 114 per cent in 2008-09. This could be consequent to a lack of confidence in future demand and the uncertainty caused by geopolitics.

With overseas flows muted, personal savings and investment, including overseas investments, will need to be incentivised. So, how can capital and financial intermediation efficiency be improved?

The large corporate sector is using its own surplus, equity markets, bond markets and bank credit, but MSMEs have not received their share of credit. In the last few years, banks have been incrementally getting 40 per cent or less of household savings as against 50 per cent a few years back, as consumers chase higher returns in pension fund schemes and MFs.

There are preemptions. In the last two years, banks have bought Rs 13 trillion of G-Secs against a deposit inflow of Rs 40 trillion, driven by the need to maintain liquidity coverage (LCR) and statutory liquidity ratios (SLR) as mandated by the RBI on a daily basis rather than weekly average. Banks maintain 115 per cent to avoid breach. Given the low supply of papers from manufacturing companies, which also qualify as assets for LCR, banks buy government bonds to meet LCR.

To maintain some cushion in LCR over the mandated levels, banks end up holding SLR securities of up to 26 per cent against the regulatory requirement of 18 per cent.

Banks are also required to maintain a cash reserve ratio (CRR) of 4 per cent of deposits. So, when one looks at the regulatory preemptions, they are close to 30 per cent of banks' deposits — 26 per cent on account of LCR and 4 per cent for CRR — reducing the lendable resources for banks, leading to higher lending rates.

Under the proposed LCR guidelines for digital deposits, banks would have to invest even more in liquid assets to meet LCR, which is estimated to be about 2-2.5 per cent of deposits.

But, do we need both LCR and SLR? Globally, only CR exists. Most parts of the world include CR, which earns no interest, as HQLA (High Quality Liquid Assets). The

volatility of deposits calculation and consequent investment of HQLA assets needs to be examined on a bank-specific basis. Basel only recommends, we need to examine.

More efficient cash management by the government has meant that the overall liquidity available to the banking system has decreased since its surplus is parked with the RBI. This is vital for liquidity management since variation in government surpluses leads to large swings in systemic liquidity.

Banks have a priority sector lending (PSL) requirement of 60 per cent plus (this is because on 40 per cent, we have "priority on priority"), a framework drafted ages back that needs to factor in changes in GDP composition and new priorities. We need to ensure PSL pricing reflects credit risk and not pressures to meet the target.

Also, we need to examine the move to cash-flow-based lending and risk-based pricing. Otherwise, large sections of the population will be outside organised finance. Having limits on clean lending or the rate of interest or higher risk weights will not solve the problem, but supervision with extensive use of tech, including AI, will. Strict action should be taken against outliers and not the system as a whole.

Credit growth lower than nominal GDP growth is a major concern, and an in-depth review covering markets, regulations, banks and priorities is needed. The review should cover the funding needs of market participants' liquidity.

Defending the rupee when the reason for weakness is the dollar's strength needs to be examined. This leads to the reduction of liquidity, an overvalued rupee and ineffective shorting-up of the currency.

The credit-to-deposit ratio calculation and its purpose should be examined. Banks need to raise both debt and equity from investors to fund growth, so they need to generate returns. They must be allowed to price for risk and processing costs.

Also, the investments in technology are huge. Technology spending by global banks (9 per cent) has outpaced revenue growth (4 per cent). Indian banks, too, are spending on building tech capabilities, with large banks reporting around 5 per cent share of tech in annual spends. Indian banks also have social responsibility costs that need to be recovered. There are a few examples: Not charging for UPI transactions, which account for a major share of bank volumes, the recovery of network costs and other reasonable bank charges. Since we are looking at international practices, a look at their charges would be a good start.

The government bond market in India is third in emerging markets and despite the inclusion in global indices, our share is at 3 per cent compared to Indonesia's 14.5 per cent. This makes a case for easing regulations.

The cash market looks to have adequate liquidity across the yield curve in the secondary market, but not enough in the derivatives market. For further development of the market, we need lower preemption for government securities. A nudge from regulators (RBI/FRD/SEBI) to large investors for greater use of derivatives along with cash instruments would help.

The writer, former CEO and managing director of HDFC Bank, is senior advisor to Carlyle's Asia private equity team

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### NOT ALL GOOD

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Learning with AI" (IE, February 5). As the use of AI is on the rise, it is important to keep in mind its uses and limitations. Its application in lesson planning, performance evaluation, and interactive learning for students has advantages. However, there are concerns about the reliability and validity of AI-generated information. With AI, students could learn faster and better. But we must be careful not to expand its use to analysis and problem-solving. Students should hone their creative skills independent of any technological intervention.

YG Choudhary, Pune

### CURBING MENACE

THIS REFERS TO the report, "First under Trump 2.0: US depots 205 'illegal' Indian migrants, flown back in military plane" (IE, February 5). The deportation of Indian migrants from the US, particularly through US military aircraft, highlights India's position in the global migration landscape and raises deeper concerns. It marks the uncomfortable truth that India, despite being one of the world's largest economies, has become a significant source of illegal migrants to the US. While the government's diplomatic approach to avoid confrontation with the US is pragmatic, a more comprehensive plan is needed. India must create an ecosystem that encourages and enables legal migration. It must also focus on addressing the drivers of illegal migration, such as rampant unemployment.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### NO EXCUSES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Seize the lull" (IE, February 5). Manipur is engulfed in the chaos created by extremists. CMN Biren Singh has failed to control the situation. But the people of the state deserve to live in harmony, as in other states of the country. Efforts at reconciliation must be accelerated to bridge the differences between Meiteis and Kukis. The state has no dearth of resources to carry this out. There is no excuse.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi



REKHA SHARMA

## Against his oath

Justice Shekhar Yadav's comments, refusal to step back, call for SC response

IT HAS BEEN almost two months since Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav of the Allahabad High Court made highly objectionable, communal and distasteful remarks against Muslims and in a tone and tenor not in keeping with the dignity of his office. He seems to have forgotten that judgeship is not a blank cheque. It comes with responsibility. A healthy judiciary interrogates itself and must realise that hate speech cannot be couched in nationalism.

Justice Hrishikesh Roy, who has recently retired from the Supreme Court, said in an interview (IE, February 1) that whenever such incidents happen, there are few options available with the institution — talking to the individual, holding back work, the in-house inquiry procedure or impeachment. While we await an institutional response in terms of any of the above options, Justice Yadav is holding his ground and refusing to walk his statements back.

one more thing... whether it is your personal law, our Hindu law, your Quran or whether it is our Gita, as I said we have addressed the ills (buraiyan) in our practices... kamayan thi, durast kar liye hai (the shortcomings have been addressed)... untouchability... sati, jaulhar... female foeticide... We have addressed all these issues... Then why are you not doing away with this law... that while your first wife is there... you can have three wives... without her consent... That is not acceptable."

Following his aforesaid statement, there was an uproar in Parliament that led to 55 Rajya Sabha MPs moving for the initiation of impeachment proceedings against him. His comments raised many an eyebrow in the judicial fraternity as well. On the institutional front, he was reportedly summoned by the Supreme Court collegium and was asked to tender a public apology for his remarks. The Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court also, at the instance of the Chief Justice of India, sought his comments on the speech. In response, Justice Yadav is reported to have maintained that he had not violated any principle of judicial conduct and that the judiciary, often unable to defend itself publicly, requires support from senior members of the fraternity.

It appears, then, that Justice Yadav is not

in the least remorseful over his statement and wants to brazen it out. One would have thought that after all the storm that his remarks had created he would have looked within. On the contrary, he wants the senior members of the judicial fraternity to come to his aid. In light of his stand, it is now up to the Supreme Court to take a call on his reported statement, every word of which was against the core values of the Constitution, founded on the principles of equality, justice, fraternity and secularism.

When he says that this country will function as per the wishes of the majority community, Justice Yadav is turning the Constitution on its head. He is clearly and unequivocally adding his voice to all those who are clamouring to make India a Hindu Rashtra. And, when he talks in terms of "we" and "they", "our Gita" and "their Quran", he is clearly othering Muslims. What Justice Yadav reportedly said at the VHP event was not only against the Constitution, it was also in violation of the oath of office that he took before assuming charge as a high court judge. He solemnly affirmed that he would bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India and would perform the duties of his office to the best of his abilities without fear or favour, affection or ill will.

Equality, liberty and fraternity are the

pillars of the Constitution — what was allegedly said was advocating the worst sort of tyranny.

For over a decade, we have been witnessing some right-wing politicians and so-called "gurus" giving clarion calls to make India a Hindu Rashtra. Unfortunately, this tendency seems to be spreading in the judiciary too — though, at present, at a minuscule level. Many believe that it was wholly inappropriate for Justice Yadav to have attended an event organised by VHP, which bears the tag of a Hindu organisation advocating a Hindu Rashtra. A judge is bound by the Constitution of India and when he does so, thereafter, as a judge, ceases to be a Hindu or Muslim or of any caste or creed. The Constitution of India becomes his religion, his faith. He must remember what Baron de Montesquieu said: "There is no tyranny crueler than that which is perpetuated under the shield of law and in the name of justice."

Justice Yadav's defiance and his refusal to step back is tantamount to throwing a challenge to the Supreme Court collegium. It is up to the Supreme Court to respond.

The writer is a former judge of the Delhi High Court



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

## Death toll from Sweden's worst mass shooting

**11** Sweden's worst mass shooting has left at least 11 people dead and five seriously wounded, including the gunman at an adult education centre. The gunman's motive hadn't been determined by early Wednesday as the Scandinavian nation reeled from an attack with such bloodshed. *AP*

## MPs elected to Aligarh Muslim University Court

**7** Seven MPs, including four BJP legislators, have been elected as members of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) Court, according to a notification issued on Wednesday. The MPs have been elected for a period of three years, until December 23, 2027, or "until the end of their term as a Member of Parliament," whichever comes first. *ANI*

## Number of AC electric buses to be added in Thane this year

**100** As many as 100 AC electric buses will be added to the fleet of the Thane Municipal Transport in April this year. The buses will be provided under the PM E-Bus Service scheme. Thane's population is increasing rapidly, and the city needs more buses, the release from local MP Nareish Mhaske's office said. *ANI*

## Voter turnout recorded in Milkipur Assembly bypolls

**65** in per cent. More than 65% of the total 3.70 lakh voters exercised their franchise in the bypolls to the Milkipur Assembly constituency of Uttar Pradesh on Wednesday, surpassing the turnout recorded in the 2022 Assembly polls. The voting began at 7 a.m. and continued till 5 p.m., officials said. *ANI*

## Russia, Ukraine exchange prisoners of war

**300** Russia and Ukraine each released 150 captured soldiers in their latest prisoner-of-war exchange, both sides said on Wednesday. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said some of those returned had been in Russian captivity for "more than two years". *AP*

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## What is the SC directive on sacred groves?

What are the implications of the December 18 order? What did *T.N. Godavarman v. Union of India* establish about the definition of 'forest land'? How are sacred groves traditionally conserved by communities?

## EXPLAINER

C.R. Bijoy

## The story so far:

In December 18, 2024, the Supreme Court directed the Forest Department of Rajasthan to map on the ground and via satellite every 'sacred grove' in detail. They were to be identified irrespective of their size and based "solely on their purpose and their cultural and ecological significance to the local community". After mapping, the court directed the department to classify them as 'forests' and notify them as 'community reserves' under the Wildlife Protection Act (WLP) 1972. Effectively, the decision would transfer the sacred groves from community protection to forest officialdom for the purposes of conservation. The move defies the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006, which by virtue of being enacted later overrides the WLP, and which the government had intended to do the reverse: i.e. recognise traditional and customary rights over all forest lands and transfer them back from the Forest Department to gram sabhas.

The sacred groves of Rajasthan, also known as 'orans', 'malvan', 'deo ghat', and 'baugh', number around 25,000 and cover about six lakh hectares of the State.

## What was the case about?

In *T.N. Godavarman v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court ordered that 'forest land' in Section 2 of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, "will not only include 'forest' as understood in the dictionary sense, but also any area recorded as forest in the government record irrespective of the ownership of the land". The court then directed State governments to constitute expert committees to identify areas that met this understanding of 'forest land'.

In 2004, the expert committee report of the Rajasthan government identified only those sacred groves that fulfilled the criteria of 'deemed forests' – that is, trees covering 5 hectares of land with at least 200 trees per hectare were classified as 'forests', while the remainder was not.

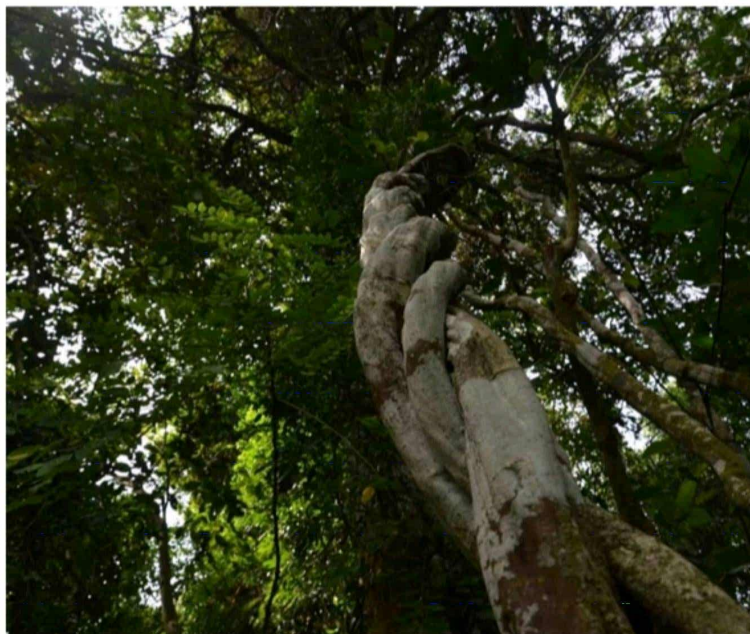
The Supreme Court's Central Empowered Committee (CEC) disagreed with this choice because it was inconsistent with the court's definition of 'forest land'. The CEC also said all such areas diverted for non-forestry purposes before 1980 could be exempted. The apex court agreed with the CEC and directed Rajasthan to implement the recommendations post-haste in 2018.

In early 2024, the Rajasthan government – responding to intercommunity applications seeking directions to implement this order – said that sacred groves were being identified and documented as 'forest lands'. Ironically, the Rajasthan Forest Policy 2023 omitted the detailed framework for the protection of sacred groves specified in its 2010 policy.

The present order came in response to a challenge to these positions at the Supreme Court.

## What do sacred groves mean to communities?

Sacred groves are community-regulated and conserved patches of forest land. They are created and managed traditionally by communities in various ways deeply rooted in their identity. The groves are kept inviolate through customary laws and taboos, many of which completely prohibit the extraction of any resources in any form, except for custodians to access medicinal plants. The grove's conservation ethos is strongly linked to piety and sanctity, enforced in



**Sacred heritage:** Sacred groves are community-regulated and conserved patches of forest land. THULASI NARAYAN

terms of the community's relationship with its spirits and gods.

India is estimated to have 1-40 lakh sacred groves of this nature – the highest in the world. They are called '*devara kadu*' in Karnataka, '*devban*' in Himachal Pradesh, '*kavu*' and '*sarpa kavu*' in Kerala, '*sarna*' in the Chota Nagpur Plateau region, '*devbani*' in Chhattisgarh, '*jahera*' or '*thakuramma*' in Odisha, '*devgudi*' by the Muria, the Madia, and the Gond adivasis of Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh, '*ki law lyngdoh*', '*ki law kyntang*' or '*ki law niam*' in Meghalaya, '*sabarkantha*', '*dahod*' or '*banaskantha*' in Gujarat, and so forth.

They are often associated with temples, monasteries, shrines, pilgrim sites, and/or burial grounds. These sites are thus also repositories of various herbal medicines and gathering points for local healers, as much as they are biodiversity hotspots. They are also, frequently, sources of perennial streams that support the growth of unique and endemic flora and fauna.

Local legends, myths, and beliefs surround sacred groves, and communities have transmitted them orally through several generations as a matter of conserving their cultural identities. Communities' relationships with their groves have also helped mitigate the effects of floods, landslides, and droughts on their lives while stabilising the soil and preventing erosion. Anthropologists have also documented the impact of sacred groves on their respective communities' mental and physical well-being.

## What are community reserves?

The WLP 2002 introduced the category of Protected Areas called 'community reserves', in addition to 'national parks' and 'sanctuaries'.

Community reserves are notified over community or private land where locals have volunteered to conserve habitats to protect 'fauna, flora, and traditional or

cultural conservation values and practices".

The community, or even the individual, is thus required to prevent any offences specified in the WLP, assist the authorities in arresting any offenders, report the "death of any wild animal," and prevent or extinguish any fires. The offences include damaging the boundary marks, teasing or molesting wild animals, littering in the community reserve, setting fires or allowing a fire to burn, and using any chemical substances that endanger wildlife.

Further, a land-use pattern within a community reserve cannot be changed without the approval of the reserve management committee and the State government. The Chief Wildlife Warden, under whose jurisdiction community reserves fall, effectively has overall control of the reserve and its management plan.

The Supreme Court's directions also obligate the State government to constitute a 'Community Reserve Management Committee' to conserve, maintain, and manage the reserve and to protect wildlife and habitats. This committee is to have at least five members nominated by the gram panchayat (or members of the gram sabha if there is no gram panchayat) and a representative of the Forest or Wildlife Department in whose jurisdiction the community reserve is located. If the reserve is on private land, the committee will consist of the land owner, a representative of the Forest or Wildlife Department, and a representative of the concerned Panchayat or tribal community.

The elected chairperson of the committee will be designated the reserve's 'Honorary Wildlife Warden'.

The court also recommended that the Union Environment Ministry identify and map sacred groves nationwide and formulate a policy for their governance

and management.

### How will the Forest Department's takeover clash with the FRA's provisions?

If sacred groves had fallen under the FRA's purview, they would have been part of 'community forest resources'. According to the FRA, a community forest resource is the "customary common forest land within the traditional or customary boundaries of the village... including reserved forests, protected forests and protected areas such as sanctuaries and national parks to which the community had traditional access". Thus, the gram sabhas would have been the statutory authority to protect, regenerate, conserve or manage community forest resources, along with the wildlife, flora, and biodiversity within. The gram sabhas would also have been responsible for preventing activities that harm their cultural and natural heritage.

To this end, the sabha would have to constitute its own Community Forest Resource Management Committees to develop and execute the managed plan approved by the gram sabha. And State governments would be duty-bound to support these plans.

All sacred groves in forest areas are currently subsets of community forest resources, which are in turn under the jurisdiction of gram sabhas, and not the Forest or the Wildlife department. All sacred groves outside forest land, if any, also come under the FRA's purview if a proposal to notify them as 'forest land' comes into being. In sum, notifying sacred groves as community reserves controlled by the Forest Department could conflict with the customs of communities, and with the community forest resources notified by the FRA, which complies with the customs by bringing them under its governance.

C.R. Bijoy examines natural resource conflicts and governance issues

## THE GIST

▼ The Supreme Court ordered the Rajasthan Forest Department to map and classify sacred groves as 'forests' and 'community reserves' under the Wildlife Protection Act.

▼ This order shifts control of sacred groves from community-based management to the Forest Department.

▼ The decision conflicts with the Forest Rights Act, which recognises community rights over forest resources.

▼ The shift in control from community protection to Forest Department management could undermine the traditional governance of these areas.



# 17 EXPLAINED

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2025

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to [explained@indianexpress.com](mailto:explained@indianexpress.com)

## What does Rajasthan's Bill against 'unlawful' religious conversions say

HAMZA KHAN  
JAIPUR, FEBRUARY 5

RAJASTHAN HEALTH Minister Gajendra Singh Khinvasar on Tuesday tabled a Bill in the state Legislative Assembly to stop "unlawful" religious conversions. Known as the Rajasthan Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Bill, it is expected to be passed during the ongoing Budget session after a debate.

The Bill, which states that marriages for the "sole purpose of unlawful conversion or vice-versa" will be declared void, is in line with similar legislation introduced in other states such as Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

### What does the Bill say?

In the Bill, unlawful conversion mainly refers to religious conversion through coercion, force, allurement or fraud, with allurement including cash, material benefits, employment, free education, etc.

The burden of proof — that a religious conversion did not take place through misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by any fraudulent means or marriage — lies on the person who has "caused" the conversion, according to the Bill. This is a reversal of the principle of assumption of innocence, which normally applies to the accused person in a criminal case.

The Bill empowers blood relatives to lodge an FIR in a suspected case. It says, "Any aggrieved person, his/her parents, brother, sister, or any other person who is related to him/her by blood, marriage or adoption may lodge a FIR".

It further states that those involved in unlawful conversion can be punished with one to five years in jail with a minimum fine of Rs 15,000. In case of an unlawful conversion targeting a minor, a woman or a person belonging to the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST), the punishment can be between two and 10 years with a fine of Rs 25,000.

For an unlawful mass conversion, the imprisonment would be three to 10 years with a minimum fine of Rs 50,000. Repeat offenders would face a punishment not exceeding double what is provided under the law for each subsequent offence.

All offences under the Bill are cognizable (where the police can make an arrest without a warrant) and non-bailable (where bail is not a matter of right and a magistrate determines if the accused is fit to be released on bail).

**What about those wanting to convert voluntarily?**  
Those converting voluntarily would undergo a seemingly exhaustive process. A prescribed declaration form should be filled

and submitted to the District Magistrate (DM) or the relevant authority 60 days in advance. Violations would invite up to three years imprisonment and a minimum fine of Rs 10,000.

Then, the "converter" or the person performing the ceremony would give a month's advance notice to the DM through a prescribed form. Violating this would invite up to five years imprisonment and a minimum fine of Rs 25,000.

Subsequently, an officer not below the rank of Additional DM will "get an enquiry conducted through police with regard to real intention, purpose and cause of the proposed religious conversion."

The converted person will then have to send a declaration in a prescribed form within 60 days of conversion to the DM. A copy of the declaration has to be displayed on the notice board of the DM's office till the

date of confirmation. Said declaration will include the convert's date of birth, permanent address, father's name, the religion before and after conversion, the date and place of conversion etc. The convert then has to appear before the DM within 21 days from the date of filing the declaration, to establish their identity and confirm the contents of the declaration.

### Why has the Bill been introduced?

The Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel Sharma-led government has cited the conversion of "guiltless persons" as a key reason behind the Bill.

According to the Bill's "Statement of Objects and Reasons," The Constitution confers on each individual the fundamental right to profess, practise and propagate his religion. However, the individual right to freedom of conscience and religion cannot be extended to construe a collective right to

proselytize; the right to religious freedom belongs equally to the person converting and the individual sought to be converted."

In an interview with *The Indian Express* last year, Rajasthan Law Minister Jagam Patel said the Bill was being introduced to prevent forcible conversions, especially those of vulnerable communities such as tribal people, and to check what the BJP calls "love jihad", among other things.

This is not the first time that such a Bill has been introduced in the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly. In 2006, during then Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje's first term, an anti-conversion Bill was brought in. However, after opposition from the Congress Party and others, the Bill was returned by then President Pratibha Patil.

During her second term (2013-2018), Raje pushed for an amended version of the Bill but the Centre returned it in 2017, claiming the Bill "deviated from national policy".

## EXPLAINED CLIMATE

### Why temperatures at North Pole reached 20° Celsius above average

ALIND CHAUHAN  
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 5

TEMPERATURES at the North Pole increased to more than 20 degrees Celsius above average on February 2, crossing the threshold to melt ice, during the depths of the polar winter (which is from November to February).

"This was a very extreme winter warming event. Probably not the most extreme ever observed, but still an upper edge of what can happen in the Arctic," Mikka Rantanen, a scientist at the Finnish Meteorological Institute, told *The Guardian*. Since 1979, the Arctic has warmed four times faster than the global average. This is a problem since the region acts as a refrigerator for the rest of the planet, keeping things cool. Severe consequences can take place if temperatures continue to soar at this rate, from a rise in sea levels to the disruption of global weather patterns.

### Why did the North Pole experience such high temperatures?

The unusually high temperatures at the North Pole were the product of a deep low-pressure system — a region where the atmospheric pressure is lower than that of surrounding locations — over Iceland. The system opened gates for the arrival of warmer air from lower latitudes, effectively bringing heat to the region.

Another factor was really hot sea surface temperatures in the north-east Atlantic, which further intensified the wind-driven warming. Absolute temperatures at the North Pole reached more than negative one degree Celsius on February 2.

### Why has the Arctic warmed faster than the global average?

The global temperatures have increased by around 1.3 degrees Celsius compared to the 1850-1900 baseline. The



Arctic has warmed four times faster than global average. Wikimedia Commons

Arctic, however, has warmed 3.8 times faster than the global average since the late 1970s, according to a 2022 study published in the journal *Communications Earth and Environment*.

There are multiple reasons for this. One of the most prominent factors is the albedo effect or how much sunlight a surface reflects. Sea ice keeps temperatures down in the polar regions, with its bright, white surface reflecting more sunlight to space than liquid water. But as the Arctic's ice cover is melting, more land or water is getting exposed to the Sun, and as a result, more heat is getting absorbed. This causes warming.

The lack of convection in the higher latitudes is another reason for the Arctic warming faster than other parts of the world. Convection occurs when air close to the ground is heated by the warm surface of the Earth. In the tropics, where more sunlight can reach the surface compared to the Arctic, strong convection takes place, causing warm air to rise. This vertical mixing distributes heat throughout the atmosphere.

That is not the case in the Arctic. Due to weak convection in the region, the extra warming from the greenhouse gases is not able to mix vertically and the heat remains concentrated near the surface.

## EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI ABBAS

ON TUESDAY, ahead of and during an extraordinary press conference that he addressed with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, United States President Donald Trump made some major policy announcements on the Middle East.

First, he said that Palestinians should leave Gaza — and that Jordan and Egypt should take them in. "They (Jordanians and Egyptians) say they're not going to accept, I say they will. 'Any number of' 'alternate' sites could be identified for displaced Gazans," why would they want to return [to Gaza]? The place has been hell," Trump said.

Second, he said that the US will "take over Gaza and... do a job with it too." America will "own" Gaza, and turn it into the "Riviera of the Middle East," he said. Last year, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner had spoken about Gaza's "very valuable" "waterfront property".

Third, he signed an executive order to bring back "maximum pressure" on Iran that his administration employed during his first term (2017-21), and re-designated the Yemeni Houthis a terrorist organisation.

**What are the takeaways from President Trump's proposals?**

■ The new proposal for Gaza (and Palestine) risks violating long-standing resolutions of the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly supporting Palestine's right of self-determination (which India has actively backed), and several peremptory norms of international law (jus cogens) including those that prohibit ethnic cleansing.

■ Trump's claim that Gazans do not want to return contradicts visible evidence on the ground — following the ceasefire, thousands have returned to North Gaza, even though Israeli bombardment has reduced the homes of many to rubble.

■ The proposal to identify "1, 2, 3, 4, or 8 or 12" alternative sites for Palestinians to live in peace while Gaza is turned into the "Riviera" amounts to the biggest displacement and scattering of the Palestinian population since the 1948 Nakba — and recalls the fate of European Jews before the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

■ The radical shift in Trump's vision for Palestine contrasts his own "Peace to Prosperity" plan of 2020, which presented a



US President Donald Trump with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the Oval Office of the White House on Tuesday. The New York Times

comprehensive pathway to a Palestinian state, albeit with severely limited sovereignty and unprecedented concessions to Israel by legitimising its illegal settlements in occupied territory and the annexation of more Palestinian land.

■ This new approach is more clearly transactional than before. Trump clarified that by "taking over" Gaza, he meant "a long term ownership position". This language is distinct from framings of sovereignty or occupation, and sounds closer to a real estate deal.

■ Trump expressly refused to clarify if the US had supported the two-state solution, saying it would be clear in the coming weeks.

■ Politically for Netanyahu, the new Trump plan is ideal — his ruling coalition is dependent on support from Bezalel Smotrich's Religious Zionism party, a vociferous advocate for settlement expansion.

■ Trump's statements, and Netanyahu's assertion that Israel still seeks the complete elimination of Hamas from Gaza complicates the post-ceasefire scenario infinitely. With negotiations over stage 2 of the ceasefire officially underway since February 4, statements by Trump and Netanyahu have created uncertainty over the sustainability of the Israel-Hamas agreement after the hostages are released.

**Why not Egypt and Jordan accept Palestinians?**

Both countries had pushed back fiercely the last two times Trump fleetingly voiced the idea.

**JORDAN:** Jordanian officials have now reiterated their Foreign Ministry's September 2024 statement that any Israeli attempt to displace Palestinians to Jordan would be considered "a declaration of war" and a breach of their 1994 peace treaty. Both countries have already amassed more troops at their border — and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have even created a new eastern division.

**EGYPT:** The political concern for Cairo is largely similar, apart from the fact that accepting Trump's ideas and actively participating in scuttling the Palestinian question will have unpredictable political consequences, both domestically and internationally.

For President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, whose politics was founded on fighting against the

muslim Brotherhood since the 2013 coup, these consequences might include fresh political fuel for a movement that he has fought hard to remove from Egypt.

**How will maximum pressure on Iran play out in the region?**  
Trump's actions and statements thus far have flowed against the political tide in the Middle East.

Arab leaders have long rejected the idea of Palestinian resettlement. The Foreign Ministers of Jordan, UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar jointly reiterated this four days ago. On Wednesday, the Saudi states and Iran have been on a positive trajectory. Consider:

■ Saudi-Iran bilateral trade resumed in April 2023, and the Iran-UAE Joint Economic Committee for multi-sectoral cooperation held its first session in Abu Dhabi in May 2024.

■ In November 2024, Fayyadh al-Ruwaili, Chief of General Staff of the Saudi military, visited Tehran in an unprecedented defence contact between the two countries.

■ Four Iranian naval vessels are currently docked at Port Khalid in Sharjah, a remarkable first in the history of the UAE and the Islamic Republic. These include the newest warships of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and pictures have shown IRGC officials being welcomed by Emirati government and military officials.

■ IRGC attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz had strained the UAE-Iran relationship for a decade, and the first Trump administration designated the IRGC "as a whole" as a foreign terrorist organisation in 2019.

Tehran on its part has long criticised Abu Dhabi for having normalised ties with Israel.

Collectively, these developments raise questions over the implications of fresh US sanctions on Iranian entities, and on the new economic and military bridges that Gulf Arab states are building with Iran. Also, Iran last week expressed willingness for talks on its nuclear program if the "West" is serious, and Iranian state media has lauded Trump's decision to end the foreign aid that Tehran believes helped Iranian dissidents and foreign-based opposition.

Bashir Ali Abbas is a Senior Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi

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## Story of NavIC: crucial indigenous SatNav system, hurdles in development path

JOHNSONTA  
BENGALURU, FEBRUARY 5

INDIA'S SPACE Agency on Sunday reported the partial failure of its NVS-02 navigation satellite due to the non-firing of its engines in space. This was the latest in a series of setbacks suffered by the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS), operationally referred to as the NavIC system.

The IRNSS was conceived in 1999 following the war in Kargil, during which India's military could not use the American Global Positioning System (GPS) in the conflict zone. (India and the US now cooperate in many fields, and Washington has approved the system.)

An indigenous seven-satellite constellation serving both defence and civilian needs was proposed to be put in place by 2016, and the first satellite, IRNSS 1A, was launched on July 1, 2013.

Eleven years later, however, only five of the 11 satellites launched in the Rs 2,250 crore NavIC program — including replace-

ments for failed satellites — are fully operational, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has said.

After IRNSS 1A in 2013, the IRNSS-1B, 1C, 1D, 1E, 1F, 1G, 1H, 1I, and 1J were launched between April 4, 2014 and January 29, 2025. After the launch of IRNSS-1G, the seventh in the series on April 28, 2016, ISRO had said "the successful launch... [of the satellite] signifies the completion of the IRNSS constellation".

**What went wrong with the satellites?**

Mid-2016 onward, there were reports of failures of the rubidium atomic clocks used in several navigation satellites, including ISRO's and the European Space Agency's (ESA's) Galileo Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS). There are three atomic clocks on each IRNSS satellite.

Then ISRO chairman A S Kiran Kumar announced in July 2016 that all the atomic clocks on IRNSS 1A had "stopped working", even though the "overall performance of our navigation system" had not been affected, and the "test of the satellite components [were] functioning perfectly". A replacement satellite, IRNSS 1H, with

modified clocks, would be launched in 2017, the space agency said.

An ISRO satellite navigation program official had said at the time that "six of the seven IRNSS satellites that were launched [until April 2016] are still working", but there were "inherent hardware related problems on the rubidium atomic clocks in some of these satellites". The clocks used in the Galileo system had developed similar problems, the official had said.

The atomic clocks on four other IRNSS satellites — 1C, 1D, 1E, and 1G — also developed problems subsequently. The engine failure on the IRNSS-1K (or NVS-02) launched last month, which has left it in a sub-optimal orbit around Earth, means that six of the 11 IRNSS satellites launched so far have been partial failures.

Also, the IRNSS-1H, launched on August 31, 2017 to replace the IRNSS-1A, did not reach the desired orbit after a heat shield protecting the satellite on board the PSLV-C39 rocket did not detach during the launch.

**So how many satellites in the NavIC system are operational currently?**

It is estimated that only four IRNSS satellites are fully operational currently — 1B, 1E, 1I (the replacement for 1A after the launch of 1H, the original replacement, failed), and 1J (the replacement for the partially failed 1G).

ISRO's 2023-24 annual report says that following the launch of NVS-01 on May 28, 2023, five NavIC satellites are operational — IRNSS-1B, 1C, 1E, 1F, and 1I, and NVS-01 (IRNSS-1J). However,

according to some estimates, 1C is only partially operational due to the presence of the old series of atomic clocks that were reported to be malfunctioning.

First-generation IRNSS satellites launched after July 2016 — that is, 1H and 1I — carried modified versions of the original clocks provided by a European supplier under a 64-million deal for an estimated 45 clocks.

1J, which is operational, and 1K, which reported an engine failure last month, belong to the next generation of IRNSS satellites, and are, on that account, called NVS-01 and NVS-02 respectively. These satellites

are equipped with a mix of indigenous and foreign clocks instead of the defective clocks used in the first generation satellites.

**Why is the IRNSS/NavIC system important for India?**

The NavIC satellites provide two types of services — Standard Positioning Service which is for general and commercial use, and Restricted Service which is meant for the defence forces — over the Indian landmass and neighbouring regions.

According to A S Ganeshan, a former director of ISRO's Satellite Navigation Program, the indigenous system provides positioning data "at all times with position accuracy better than 20 metres during all weather conditions, anywhere within India and a region extending about 1,500 km around India on dual frequencies in L5 and S-band". (Benefits of an Indian Navigation System, Science and Culture, 2017)

A primary reason to develop an indigenous satellite navigation system like the IRNSS despite the existence of global systems such as the GPS (US) and GLONASS (Russia), is the reliability that it offers in defence use.

"Since the first Global NSS systems (GPS and GLONASS) were primarily developed for military purposes, the military applications are one of the drivers for these systems... GPS offers encrypted Precise Positioning Service, which is available only to the US military and its allies. GNSS is used for different types of military applications such as military navigation and target acquisition," Ganeshan wrote.

For NavIC to become ubiquitous in the Indian subcontinent, ISRO will have to sell capabilities to general positioning service providers such as mobile phone and vehicle manufacturers, etc.

In December 2023, a few months after the successful launch and deployment of the NVS-01 (IRNSS-1J) satellite on May 29, 2023, the American mobile communications chipmaker Qualcomm reported an agreement to incorporate NavIC support in some of its chipsets.

The partial failure of NVS-02 (1K) notwithstanding, ISRO plans to launch three more second-generation NavIC satellites — NVS-03, 04, and 05 — "to augment NavIC base layer constellation with enhanced features for ensuring continuity of services".



