

Editorial



A call for chaos

The U.S. should push for a two-state solution, not displace an entire people

When the state of Israel was created in Palestine in 1948, more than 700,000 Palestinians, the land's original inhabitants, were displaced. Palestinians remain the largest forced mass expulsion in the Nakba (catastrophe). More Palestinians were expelled during the Six-Day War in 1967. Some moved to Gaza, others to the West Bank, while the majority fled to other countries, where they and their descendants are refugees. In successive peace talks, Israel has outrightly rejected their right to return to their homes, a fundamental right. Now, U.S. President Donald Trump wants to forcibly transfer the 2.3 million Palestinians out of Gaza, the Mediterranean enclave that has suffered relentless Israeli bombardment for 15 months. His plan involves relocating Palestinians to neighbouring Arab countries, taking over the 360 sq. km strip which he calls a "hellhole" and redeveloping it into the Riviera of the Middle East. At a press conference in Washington DC, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he also stated sending troops to Gaza "if necessary". The White House later claimed that he meant a temporary relocation of Palestinians. It also clarified that he had not committed to deploying U.S. troops but reaffirmed that his "out-of-the-box" proposal for Gaza was a serious one. However, Mr. Trump's plan has at least three fundamental problems.

First, Palestinians are not an imperial possession that Israel and the U.S. can bomb and relocate at will. They are a people with a national identity, whose collective history, present and future, is deeply tied to the Palestinian land. Despite relentless Israeli bombardment, the Palestinians of Gaza have refused to leave. Now, Mr. Trump is advocating what is essentially a call for ethnic cleansing, another Nakba. Second, Arab countries, including many of America's allies, have unequivocally rejected Mr. Trump's proposal. They understand that Palestinians who were forcefully removed never managed to return. Even authoritarian Arab rulers, regardless of their dependence on U.S. aid, must pay attention to the sentiments of their people, who overwhelmingly support Palestinian rights. Third, Mr. Trump's vision of rebuilding Gaza aligns closely with the Israeli far-right's agenda: resetting the land with Jewish settlers. This would further alienate an already desperate population and plant yet another time bomb in West Asia. Mr. Trump must abandon his calls for the ethnic cleansing and instead use America's influence to ensure a successful ceasefire in Gaza. The U.S. should be working toward a lasting, just solution — one that acknowledges Palestinian rights and upholds the principles of peace and stability in the region.

Crippling aid work

The fallout of U.S. foreign assistance freeze will be far-reaching

Insularity often stems from contempt, and the kind now being exhibited by U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration is no exception. Withdrawing from international commitments has become a defining feature of Mr. Trump's foreign policy, and the latest decision to freeze foreign assistance adds to the list of drastic moves, following the withdrawal from WHO and the Paris Accord. This decision will disrupt established global aid structures and have dire consequences for the millions who rely on U.S. assistance for survival. While the full impact is yet to unfold, it is clear to those in the development sector that a cascade of negative repercussions is imminent. On his first day in office, Mr. Trump imposed a 90-day freeze on foreign assistance, citing inefficiencies and ideological opposition to USAID. His administration argues that USAID misallocates funds and operates at odds with his policies. Elon Musk, head of the Department of Government Efficiency, went so far as to label USAID a viper's nest of radical-left Marxists who hate America. The official USAID website has been stripped of its content, but announced that all personnel would be placed on administrative leave, with only a few exceptions for mission-critical staff. The administration also ordered the rapid repatriation of overseas USAID personnel within 30 days.

USAID was established in 1961 as an independent agency under the Foreign Assistance Act, designed to provide global humanitarian and development aid. According to the U.S. government's official spending tracker (USASpending.gov), USAID was allocated \$44.2 billion in the 2024 budget. While this amounts to just 0.4% of the total U.S. federal budget, media reports indicate that it accounted for nearly 42% of all humanitarian aid tracked by the UN in 2024. USAID funds a range of programmes which include health care, food aid (including assistance to Gaza), and policy advocacy. The agency has maintained a strong presence in India since the 1960s, supporting initiatives in education, immunisation, HIV/TB prevention, polio eradication, and child health. Though direct financial aid to India has declined in recent years, USAID contributions still amounted to over \$150 million for the latest fiscal year. However, in many conflict-ridden regions, USAID remains a lifeline. Withdrawing from international aid efforts is more than a bureaucratic shift: it risks leaving millions without food, medical assistance and critical resources. The decision reflects an inward-looking approach that dismisses the interconnectedness of global affairs. As the U.S. retreats from its historical leadership in international development, the world will be left grappling with the consequences of this reckless policy shift.

The tragic mid-air collision on January 29, 2025 between a United States Army Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter and an American Airlines CRJ-700 flight while it was on the final approach path to Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Washington DC, killing 67 people, brings out several aspects of human factors that can result in a tragedy.

In this case, the first was having politicians jump the gun by blaming others, even before a formal investigation began and the bodies were yet to be recovered from the watery grave of the Potomac river. U.S. President Donald Trump was quick to blame former U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden for diluting U.S. air safety standards, forgetting that it was he who held the reins in the interim four-year period.

Pressures, opaque investigations in India

One saw the same kind of political one-upmanship just after the air accident at Mangaluru in May 2010 when the Minister of Civil Aviation, Praful Patel, declared that the airport conformed to all standards of ICAO Annex 14, volume I. Duffily, the court of inquiry committee that was headed by a retired Air Marshal of the Indian Air Force, glossed over all the blatant violations of the Airports Authority of India, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) and the airline, i.e., Air India Express, by blaming only the pilot. In all the air accident reports in India, one never gets detailed data from the digital flight data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder.

Unlike in India, where the truth is hidden and restrictions placed on all access to information on the accident, photographs or data on the state of infrastructure, it is open in the rest of the world where one can analyse data with vital clues that are available. There is a big lesson to be learnt from the air accident in the U.S. The radar track and the air traffic control audio tracks were openly available and one could analyse and disseminate the facts instead of having doctored data and reports that have been vetted by a bureaucracy who ensures that there is nothing incriminating against the government and its agencies is published in the final report.

Let us take what has been put out by media sources in the U.S. What is generally known is that the American Airlines flight was given a runway change by air traffic control to accommodate a departure. The change was accepted by the crew. The helicopter, PAT25 (or Priority Air Transport) had taken off from a base



Captain A. (Mohan) Ranganathan
is a former airline instructor pilot and aviation safety adviser. He is also a former member of the Civil Aviation Safety Advisory Council (CASAC), India

The Reagan accident in the U.S. highlights the several factors that can result in a tragedy; there is also the danger of investigation agencies getting side-tracked

nearby for a Proficiency training flight at night and had been informed about the passenger flight. The air traffic controller had asked the helicopter crew whether he had the passenger flight in sight. The pilot responded by saying he was visual with the plane and he was given clearance to maintain visual and pass behind the passenger flight. This is where the human factor plays a big part. The flight was at night. Other than the navigation lights and the rotating beacon, the helicopter pilot had no other clue to make out the type of aircraft he had visual sighting with. His only information was based on the flight number.

If one looks at the radar picture available to the public and the information from the air traffic tape recording, there was another flight which was behind the American Airlines flight, but approaching the main runway that the American flight was originally approaching before the American crew accepted a side step to a different runway.

The 'hurry syndrome'

Did the helicopter pilot wrongly identify this second flight to be the American flight when he reported visual to air traffic control? If one looks at the radar track of this second flight and the track being followed by the helicopter to "cross behind" (as instructed by air traffic control), it is quite likely that the helicopter crew had focused on the second flight rather than the American Airlines flight and were fixated on being behind the aircraft they had perhaps misidentified. As both the helicopter and the American Airlines flight were below 1,000 feet above ground level, the collision avoidance system would not have sounded as it would have been inhibited below 1,000 ft.

In aviation parlance, this is what one calls "Press-on-it", or the "hurry syndrome", where once you get fixated, all other inputs cannot influence your judgement. One needs a fresh and clear mind to be able to maintain situational awareness and spatial orientation. Fatigue and stress have a major role in these situations. The initial reports indicate there was only a single air traffic tower controller at Reagan handling the flights when, normally, two controllers are on duty.

Soon after the Reagan accident, the visual media in India went on overdrive, with graphic presentations of the Charkhi Dadri mid-air collision in India, near New Delhi, on November 12, 1996. In this accident, a Kazakhstan Airlines flight from Chimkent, Kazakhstan to Delhi

collided with a Saudi Arabian Airlines Boeing 747 flight from Delhi to Dhahran, killing 349 people. The pilot of the Kazakhstan flight was blamed for not complying with air traffic control clearance. What people are not aware of was a DGCA official who was in-charge of the investigation was removed from the investigation when he submitted his findings. It was another official who finalised the report. It is needless to say that the last nine minutes of the digital flight data recorder of the Saudia flight was a blank.

In the recent crash in South Korea, in December 2024, where a passenger flight landed with retracted wheels and crashed into an embankment housing the instrument landing system localiser antenna, South Korea, like India at the time of the Mangaluru crash, had not complied with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Annex 14, Volume I Standard that mandated that all structures in operational area shall be frangible (from January 1, 2010). Yet, ICAO gave them a clean chit during the audits conducted. The Korean jet's digital flight data recorder was also blank for the last four minutes.

Incidents in Bengaluru, Tiruchi

Let us not forget the case of two indigo flights, on January 7, 2022 — one bound for Kolkata, and the other for Bhubaneswar — that were departing from parallel runways at Bengaluru airport. The air traffic controllers had cleared planes for take-off. In the two runways at Bengaluru, one runway was to be used for take-offs and the other for landings simultaneously. It was a narrow escape for both planes.

Neither the airline nor the air traffic control reported the matter but the incident came to light during a safety audit. The lack of situational awareness and the lack of knowledge of the pilots on the functioning of the collision avoidance system were safety issues that were all swept under the carpet.

On October 2, 2024, an Air India Express flight from Tiruchirappalli to Sharjah experienced hydraulic failure in one system. It circled for close to three hours before landing. But the political class in Tamil Nadu and the media went to town making a hero out of the captain who had exhibited very poor judgement when he could have made an overweight landing immediately.

This is another example of people with no knowledge of aviation passing judgements and influencing investigation agencies. The mid-air tragedy should open the eyes of the travelling public and know that safety is being compromised for brownie points.

The saga of regulating India's thermal power emissions

On December 30, 2024, India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) issued a notification amending the Environment Protection Rules by pushing back the deadline for thermal plants to comply with sulphur dioxide (SO₂) emission norms by three years without any reasons being given. As it happens, the existing deadline for about 20 gigawatts (GW) of thermal plants, all located in close proximity to densely populated areas, was December 31, 2024. This is the latest of a series of a nearly decade-long saga that fans of Franz Kafka would find appealing.

The MoEFCC revised the emission norms for Indian thermal plants in December 2015 after public consultations, and all thermal plants were expected to comply with them by December 2017 despite it being a tight deadline.

This notification tightened the prevalent norms for particulate matter emissions and introduced norms for other emissions, including SO₂, for the first time. These norms were understood to be broadly on a par with existing practices in countries such as Australia, China and the United States.

The morphing of a debate

Indian coal generally has a lower sulphur content than other coal, which should have made it easier for Indian thermal plants to meet the SO₂ emission norms. But rather than focusing on the best ways to meet the norms — given Indian coal's characteristics — the debate morphed into the challenges around implementing the flue gas desulphurisation (FGD) technology for desulphurisation of high-sulphur coal. Despite the norms never mandating FGDs, the discussion became one about issues such as the scheduling of FGD installations given their long gestation periods and the likely costs of installing them.

In parallel, a different discourse questioning the SO₂ emission norms themselves also took



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Electricity consumers are likely to pay for installed but unused equipment, even as citizens living around thermal plants do not get the benefit of cleaner air

shape, often driven by different arms of the government. The Central Electricity Authority (CEA) published papers in 2020 and 2021, questioning the need for uniform norms across the country and proposing that its country-wide implementation be phased out till 2035. The CEA also commissioned a study from IIT Delhi in 2022 which concluded that the installation of FGDs does provide air quality benefits but argued for extending the timelines due to issues such as FGDs being expensive, their supply chain being inadequate, and their operation leading to increased coal consumption (and hence greenhouse gas emissions).

In 2024, NITI Aayog commissioned the CSIR-National Environmental Engineering Research Institute to conduct a study on this. This study concluded that SO₂ emission norms are not important to achieve good ambient air quality in India, and instead the focus should be on particulate emissions. There was also one strand of debate about secondary aerosol formation from SO₂ emissions as the reason for having norms for it even though Indian coal is relatively low sulphur. Thus, rather than debating these issues and building a consensus before notifying the first set of norms, it continues robustly nearly a decade after their notification.

Different deadlines

In the midst of these debates, the MoEFCC diluted some norms and also extended, multiple times, the deadlines for compliance, with the notification of December 2024 being the fourth in the series. As a result, there are different deadlines for thermal plants in different locations and for different types of emissions, with SO₂ emission deadlines being well after the deadline for other emissions.

Indeed, the final deadline for compliance with other emissions, which include particulate matter emissions that are considered important by all

government agencies, was December 31, 2024 with many plants having to comply from December 31 of 2022 and 2023. But it is not clear if various pollution control boards are verifying adherence to even these norms as there is no public source easily available that provides this information.

Consumer pays

Given the evolving timelines in the various notifications by the MoEFCC, many thermal plants have already tendered contracts to install FGDs — though not at a pace required to meet their deadlines before the latest notification. This was enabled by electricity regulators introducing regulations to pass on the costs of installing FGDs and other pollution control equipment to electricity consumers, irrespective of whether emission norms are met (so that it is not a burden on thermal plants).

As a result, though the earliest deadline for meeting SO₂ emission norms is now December 31, 2027, 22 GW of thermal plants have already installed FGDs. Additionally, 102 GW (nearly 50% of installed thermal capacity) is in advanced stages of setting up FGDs.

Given the new timelines for compliance, the chances are that plants with FGDs will not run them since this would increase the cost of generation and hence push them down the preferred list of generators. Thus, electricity consumers are likely to be paying for installed but unused equipment, even as citizens living around thermal plants do not get the benefit of cleaner air for at least three more years, if not longer.

Perhaps this modern variant of Birbal's *khichdi* will get cooked one day, but the institutional, environmental, health and financial costs of doing so are likely to end up being high. And, unlike the original fable, it is not even clear whether the right lessons would be learnt from this saga.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Deportation, human rights

I write this letter as a former Union Minister for Law and Justice. The heart-rending ordeal of Indian citizens deported to India on a U.S. military aircraft is the ultimate denunciation of American pretensions as the global defender of human rights and democracy. The reported chaining and handcuffing of helpless captives aboard the plane, completely restricting their movement and even their access to the washroom, must put to shame all those responsible for the infringement of our citizens'

right to dignity and privacy. The mental and physical torture of our citizens by the American authorities merits a firm and suitable response from the Indian government.

I would appeal to the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, to take up the matter at the highest level in the U.S. administration. Clearly, protecting the dignity and the basic human rights of Indian citizens is the first charge on the resources of the Indian state.

Ashwani Kumar,
New Delhi

It is unfortunate that the BJP government at the Centre has not only failed to condemn the inhuman treatment meted out to the Indians deported by the American government but has also gone on to defend the act. It was audacious that the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar stated yesterday in the Rajya Sabha casually that it is the practice of the American government — "the Standard Operating Procedure" provides for the use of restraints. One also wonders why the Prime Minister has maintained a

pronounced silence. Does it mean that he considers his friendship with Mr. Trump to be more important than the basic rights of Indians?

Tharicus S. Fernando,
Chennai

Trump and Gaza plan
The United States President, Donald Trump, is setting a dangerous precedent by proposing a

plan to take over the Gaza strip, as reported in *The Hindu* (February 6), Israel, with support from the U.S., demolished Gaza and has rendered millions of Palestinians homeless. Now, Mr. Trump is proposing to make them landless also. While he is after illegal immigrants in the U.S., on what grounds is he asking West Asian countries to

have Palestinians displaced by his own ally?

V. Ganapathy Subramanian,
Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu

Besides setting a dangerous precedent for international relations, Mr. Trump's proposal will upset the rules-based international order. A megalomaniac cannot rule roughshod over the rules-based system the civilised international community has in place.

Kurian Mathew,
Kochi, Kerala

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

Should India build a sovereign, foundational AI model?



Praneesh Prakash
co-founded the Centre for Internet and Society, and is currently an Associate Fellow at the Yale Law School Information Society Project

PARLEY

In 2023, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman's remarks in India on the cost of training foundational AI models – like the ones that power ChatGPT – sparked a debate on whether Indian firms should spend millions of dollars on the aim of that technology. The issue pits sovereignty and national pride against financial constraints. Is it necessary for sovereignty and business reasons for India to work towards a foundational model, as the IT Ministry's IndiaAI Mission has announced it will? Praneesh Prakash and Tanuj Bhojwani discuss the question in a discussion moderated by Aroon Deep. Edited excerpts:

Does India need to build a sovereign foundational AI model for its local needs?



Tanuj Bhojwani
was until recently the head of People + AI, and has worked extensively on IndiaStack projects like UPI and Aadhaar as a part of ISPIRT

Praneesh Prakash: I believe that India should be working on foundation models, but not for the purpose of sovereignty. It is important to have people who are able to build foundation models and also to have people who can build on top of foundation models to deploy and build applications. We need to have people in India who are able to apply themselves to every part of building AI.

Sovereignty is something that we should be concerned about from the perspective of things such as sanctions, which we have seen the U.S. apply over specific kinds of chips, especially those that are used for training AI models, and export controls over things like software or models. Those may be coming down the road.

But I do not think you need to be worried about that. As things stand, what we have are not just proprietary models which are closed, under licence, and cannot legally be used without the permission of the person who created that model. We also have a lot of open weights models and a few open source models, such as DeepSeek R1. And because we have these, for which you do not need permission and can deploy locally, we do not need to approach these from the perspective of national security and sovereignty and concerned about sanctions, and so on.

If there are sanctions tomorrow which are applied to the usage of any models produced in the U.S., Indians can just "fork" the code of many of the existing open source models, refashion those, and build on top of them.

As long as these models exist, are a state-of-the-art, and are competing well against proprietary models – and I believe we will soon come to a point where they will out-compete proprietary models – we do not need to be concerned about this from the perspective of sovereignty.



The DeepSeek page is seen on a smartphone. AP

Tanuj Bhojwani: I would say that for sovereignty we should do this, but if they really wanted to block you, they would start with chips, as Mr. Praneesh pointed out. Even if you had your own model, you need Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) to run it. DeepSeek uses Huawei's (Ascend HiSilicon) 910C chips – India cannot even put that up. We have no contract with manufacturers such as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Limited (TSMC) to produce chips of even a previous generation.

More than sovereignty, there is an element of pride here: we are ambitious people, and want our own model. We have done this in other areas; we have reached beyond, in GDP per capita terms, what our *aukai* (station) would be. Infosys co-founder Nandan (Nilekani)'s point and my point is this: do this if you see returns. Do this if anybody sees the returns on it, whether the pride is the return for the investment, make sure the investment is proportionate to that end.

Does the emergence of DeepSeek at low cost make this more attainable? Is it worth the expense?

TB: Even with DeepSeek, this remains a game of a few hundreds of millions of dollars. DeepSeek V3's training run cost \$5.6 million. But in cutting-edge research, there are a lot of failed attempts at that goal. So we are still talking about hundreds of millions of dollars in investments. Even if you produce a foundational model in India, there is still a lot to do – paying salaries and so on – before you can make money back on that investment.

The market is still majority U.S.-dominated. About 60% of the market cap of the entire globe is in the U.S. Even today, business-to-business



We should acknowledge that we have limited resources, and then we should think about what is the wisest way to spend them. Competing with a [ChatGPT] o3 or [DeepSeek] R1 may not be the best idea with the absolute quantum of resources we are talking about

TANUJ BHOJWANI

software-as-a-service founders in India are largely selling to the U.S. If we believe we will make an Indian model with local language content, you are capping yourself on the knee because the overall Indian enterprise market that will purchase AI is much smaller.

Spending \$200 a month to replace a human worker may be possible in the U.S., but in India, that is what the human worker is being paid in the first place.

To succeed here anyway, the government needs to create an institute that has autonomy and spending power. 90% of the spending will go to failed experiments. Our public procurement system is not geared for that kind of error tolerance.

PP: There is a lot we can do even in terms of software, in which India has been seen as a success. We need more focus on what is built on top of models – how we commercialise the AI models that are already in use. The enthusiasm among young developers is very much there, even if they are not always well-versed. Students nowadays in their first year are learning how to use six different development tools right from the very beginning.

We should also promote innovation based on constraints, as Alibaba and DeepSeek have shown.

TB: I think the real question to ask is not whether we should undertake the Herculean effort of building one foundational model, but to ask what are the investments we should be making such that the research environment, the innovation, private market investors, etc., all come together and orchestrate in a way to produce – somewhere out of a lab or out of a private player – a foundational large language model (LLM). The real questions we are not paying attention to are: Why does it not happen? What is wrong with our research? What is wrong with our R&D investments, the spending both by the private market and government?

The IndiaAI Mission under the IT Ministry has announced that it is making GPU clusters

available to startups and academia at subsidised rates. What is your take on this announcement and on government AI policy in general as an impetus to investment?

PP: The capital expenditure is a good sign. I think the government should look at other ways of promoting the responsible usage of these technologies, including amongst them doing careful studies of what kinds of regulations ought to be put and, very importantly, what kinds of regulations ought not to be put.

TB: This does bring down the cost of renting a GPU significantly downwards, but even then somewhere in all of this are the margins that we are paying to data centre operators, providers, etc., to do these things. It is my understanding that both DeepSeek and, of course, all the large labs definitely have dedicated contracts wherein they are buying, installing the GPUs and using them completely by themselves for training runs.

Even with its low training run bills, DeepSeek has over a critical threshold of captive GPUs – they are known to have at least one cluster of Nvidia H-100s, and a calculation doing the rounds puts their investments at \$1.3 billion. The Big Tech firms are investing \$80 billion a year on infrastructure.

We have resource constraints here; the budget for this is less than the cost of training Meta's Llama 4 model, and that budget then has to be spread out equitably and fairly among the whole country. The government is not taking that concentrated bet. We are taking very sparse resources that we have and we are further thinning it out.

The subsidy is still a very good thing if people are using it for the right purposes. AI for Bharat is trying to train IndicTrans2, and a text-to-speech system for Indian languages. And those are critical things we need, and you can get away with, say, 500 or 1000 GPUs for that task, and you can get very good results compared to the state-of-the-art. So I think that is really the message that we should acknowledge that we have limited resources, and then we should think about what is the wisest way to spend them. Competing with a [ChatGPT] o3 or [DeepSeek] R1 may not be the best idea with the absolute quantum of resources we are talking about.



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NOTEBOOK

What community mental health could mean for journalists

Journalists try and balance truth with sensitivity, ensuring stories are accurate, while considering their impact on readers and communities

Sunalini Mathew

Last week the NWMI (Network of Women in Media, India) held its annual meeting, which 189 women from across the country travelled to Guwahati to attend. One of the sessions was on navigating mental health. Pushpa Rokde, who works with the Hindi daily, *Prakhar Samachar*, was a panelist.

Pushpa reports from Bijapur, in Bastar, a left-wing-extremist-hit area in Chhattisgarh, part of the red corridor in India. Last month, a journalist from the area, Mukesh Chandrakar, who ran a YouTube channel, was killed, allegedly for exposing corruption in a road construction business.

I imagined Pushpa would talk about the challenges she suffers reporting from a Maoist-affected area. Instead, she said, "We need to consider what impact our story will have on the reader. How will it affect the community we are writing about?"

The *Hindu* has mental health guidelines, so we use language carefully. For instance, we treat suicide as an outcome of many different factors and do not refer to an attempt as a crime ('committed suicide'). Nor will we ever have a headline that screams that a child took their life after a fight with their mother. But Pushpa's talk went beyond the framing of guidelines, which is important of course because it is one small way of helping to change society's narrative around mental illness as some personal failing or 'mental weakness'.

"Why are we doing the story?" she asks us to consider. Caught up in the 'routine' filing of stories, we do not usually pause to ask this question. Or, something terrible has happened and we are so focused on getting various elements of the story out, that we may not have time to think about the 'why'.

Journalists do stories for many reasons. But as the book *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, tells us, journalism's first obligation is to the truth.

Telling the truth while being mindful of

its impact on readers and the communities we write about requires a balance. We must accurately depict events while avoiding over-the-top details. After all, a child of a family caught in a fire may someday read about how their parent died – we would not want to add to their sense of loss now or trauma even a decade later. This balancing act is usually taken care of at the editing table.

As an editor, I have an internal dialogue with myself: "What if this happened to me, and my child had to read about it – what parts would I not want him to read?" Or, "Do I want my community to be referred to as 'marginalised' – how would that make me feel about my situation?"

At an in-house workshop last year, where we delved into a long-form story on the Hathras stampede that took place in July 2024, the team attending said there were too many disturbing details of injuries a minor had suffered. They did not think it was necessary and felt we should have cut out certain graphic details at the editing stage. These internal checks and balances keep us on our toes, and we are now doubly conscious of carrying a trigger warning on any story that has violence or destruction.

Last week, I attended a workshop by Tanmay Goswami, who runs the "independent mental health storytelling platform" *Sanity*. Tanmay, a journalist, who writes from a lived experience lens, said one of the big themes of 2025 would be community mental health, which he calls "human touch at scale".

The media reaches crores of people. By asking ourselves a few questions, we can bring in this human touch. Questions like: How do we frame the narrative so that people are disturbed enough to seek answers, but not triggered into a freeze? But also, as Pushpa says: "If there has been an incident between Naxals and the police, we must speak to both sides, but also to the villagers caught in the crossfire, so every voice is heard."

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

A flight of fate



A C-17 wide-bodied aircraft of the U.S. Air Force, carrying around 100 Indian migrants deported from the U.S., lands at the Guru Ram Dass Jee International Airport in Amritsar on February 5. AFP

FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 7, 1975

President's call for wise use of wood resources

New Delhi, Feb. 6: The President, Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to-day called upon the rich and poor nations alike to pool their resources, experiences and talents to evolve a strategy for wise use of the world's wood resources. Mr. Ahmed was inaugurating here the third world consultation on wood-based panels, sponsored by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in collaboration with the Government of India.

Over 500 delegates from India and abroad, comprising scientists, technologists, administrators and industrialists, are attending the consultation, the first one to be held outside the developed world.

Mr. Ahmed said a unique merit of wood panel was that it was both a poor man's mainstay and a rich man's luxury. For a poor man, panel products constituted low-cost building material. To a rich man, they furnished attractive and costly material to satisfy his vanity.

He said panel products were an exception to the general phenomenon that a high rate of consumption would exhaust natural resources in course of time. Timber was a renewable resource which improved, if wisely used.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 7, 1925

Tagore's "letters from abroad"

London, Feb. 6: Wishing that the collection of Tagore's letters written during the America-European tour to Mr. Andrews, published in Madras, will be more accessible to the British public, *Manchester Guardian*, in a leader, expresses the opinion that apart from the charming style, they express generous and broad humanity full of insight into the underlying difficulty of Anglo-Indian relations that they fully deserve the consideration of statesman and the educated classes. Tagore pleads for mutual Anglo-Indian understanding.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Amount received by India in climate finance so far

1.16 In \$ billion. This includes \$146.52 million from the Global Environment Facility, \$803.9 million from the Green Climate Fund, and \$16.86 million from the Adaptation Fund. Funds are got through the financial mechanism of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. **PH**

Illegal Indian immigrants deported from U.S. since 2009

15,756 A total of 15,756 illegal Indian immigrants have been deported from the US since 2009, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said. The highest deportation was witnessed in 2019 with 2,042 illegal Indian immigrants being sent back. **PH**

Number of pending cases where the Central govt. is a party

7 lakh. The Central government is a party in nearly seven lakh cases pending across courts, with the Finance Ministry alone being one of the litigants in nearly two lakh cases. The Law Minister said as of December 31, 2024, a total of 406 POCSD (e-POCSD) courts, are functional across 30 States and UTs. **PH**

Number of public grievances redressed in 2024

28 In lakh. Over 28 lakh public grievances were redressed last year, Union Minister Jitendra Singh said on Thursday. These complaints were received on the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System — an online mechanism that allows citizens to raise public grievances. **PH**

Number of medical colleges served show-cause notices

18 The University Grants Commission has issued show-cause notices to 18 medical colleges for not complying with anti-ragging regulations. The defaulter colleges include two each in Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Puducherry. **PH**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Under the scanner: Adani's project in Sri Lanka

Why is Adani Green's power plant in northern Sri Lanka controversial? What are the environmental concerns linked to it? What did current President Anura Kumara Dissanayake promise before he was elected? Why did the Chairman of the Ceylon Electricity Board resign?

EXPLAINER

Meera Srinivasan

The story so far:

In January 24, news agency AFP reported that Sri Lanka revealed a 2024 power purchasing agreement signed with Adani Green Energy Limited. A Sri Lankan official told the agency that while the project itself had not been cancelled, the government has appointed a committee to review it. The Adani Group "categorically denied" cancellation of the project. The move drew attention, with many in Sri Lanka flagging President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's pre-poll pledge to cancel the "corrupt" project that has been mired in controversy from the time it was approved.

What is Dissanayake's position?

In its latest clarification, the Dissanayake government has said that there is no decision to cancel the project, but that it would renegotiate a lower rate of power purchase with the firm. Cabinet Spokesman Nalintha Jayatissa stated that the government is seeking a lower tariff that is below six cents per kilowatt-hour (kWh), instead of the formerly agreed rate of 8.26 cents per kWh.

The Minister's announcement stood out, since the Dissanayake government in October 2024 told the Supreme Court in an ongoing case, that it would reconsider the approval granted by the previous government to the Adani Group for the wind power project.

Furthermore, Mr. Dissanayake and his party have in the past underscored the need for a competitive bid. "We welcome foreign capital, including from the private sector. But all investments should come through a fair tender process," Mr. Dissanayake told *The Hindu* in September 2024. "If the government had gone for a fair tender process, we could have got it for half the price," he said in the interview.



Still raging: Former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa with Adani group Chairman Gautam Adani.

What is the project?

Adani Green Energy Limited is to build a wind power plant project in the Mannar and Poonerny towns in Sri Lanka's northern province, investing \$442 million. According to Sri Lankan authorities, the project is expected to add at least 350 MW to the island's national grid by 2025.

In October 2021, Adani Group chairman Gautam Adani visited Colombo and called on then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, weeks after his company sealed a deal with State-owned Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) to develop and run the strategic Colombo Port's Western Container Terminal, which is currently proceeding. At that time, officials of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) told media that the Group also "explored the possibility of investing in Sri Lanka's wind and renewable energy sector".

When was the project approved?

In March 2022, the CEB signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Adani Green for the wind energy project, but the development was kept under wraps. It was a report in the local *Sunday Times* that brought the move to light. Ever since, the project has remained in the spotlight, amid dramatic developments on the island. The Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration came under fierce attack from the Opposition, for "choosing" the Adani Group for the project without calling for competitive bids, and bypassing due process. The Group's "back door" entry into Sri Lanka's energy sector disrupted the country's competitive electricity generation system, the main opposition party Samagi Jana Balawegaya contended, accusing the government of "pampering" Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "notorious friends".

In June 2022, Chairman of the CEB M.M.C. Ferdinando resigned, days after he told a parliamentary panel that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had "pressured" Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to clear the Adani Group project. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka experienced a crushing financial meltdown, owing to an acute twin deficit problem. As a result, Mr. Gotabaya was dramatically ousted from office by a citizens' uprising, following which former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe took his place in July 2022, even as the crisis endured.

There was renewed thrust on bringing in foreign investment in to the country to rebuild its battered economy. In February 2023, Sri Lanka's Board of Investment approved a project to set up two wind power plants in northern Sri Lanka, with a \$442 million investment from Adani Green Energy Limited. The two wind power plants — 250 MW capacity in Mannar and 100 MW in Poonerny — were scheduled to be commissioned in two years, and the project would generate around 2,000 new jobs, the Board had announced. Despite U.S. short seller Hindenburg accusing the Adani Group of serious corruption in January that year, then Foreign Minister Ali Sabry told *The Hindu* that Colombo sees the Adani projects in Sri Lanka as a "government to government kind of deal" and was confident of their future. In May 2024, President Wickremesinghe's Cabinet cleared a proposal to purchase power at \$0.0826, or 8.26 cents, per kWh from Adani Green Energy.

Why are locals opposing the project?

Residents of Mannar have been raising concerns over the project's likely impact on a crucial bird corridor in the region and on the livelihoods of local fisherfolk. Environmentalists, too, are opposing the plant. The Central Asian Flyway, an important migration route for many waterbird species, runs through Mannar. Last year, multiple petitioners challenged the Adani wind power project. The next hearing of the case is scheduled in March.

THE GIST

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The Central Asian Flyway, an important migration route for many waterbird species, runs through Mannar.

On the appointment of ad-hoc judges to High Courts

What did the Supreme Court order? Have such appointments been made previously? What did the rule set in the *Lok Prahari* judgment state? What does Article 224-A mandate?

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

To address the growing backlog of criminal cases, the Supreme Court on January 30, allowed High Courts to appoint retired judges on an ad-hoc basis, provided they hear only criminal appeals as part of a Bench led by a sitting judge. A Bench of Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sanjay Khanna and Justices B.R. Gavai and Surya Kant relaxed a rule set in *Lok Prahari* Through its General Secretary S.N. Shukla IAS (Retd.) vs Union of India (2021), which had limited such appointments to High Courts where judicial vacancies exceeded 20% of the sanctioned strength.

How are ad-hoc judges appointed?

Article 224-A, introduced by the Constitution (Fifteenth Amendment) Act, 1963, allows the appointment of retired

judges to High Courts on an ad-hoc basis. Such appointments require the consent of both the retired judge and the President of India. These judges receive allowances as determined by the President's order and exercise the same jurisdiction, powers, and privileges as a sitting High Court judge. The detailed procedure for such appointments is outlined in the 1998 Memorandum of Procedure (MoP).

When are such appointments made?

In *Lok Prahari*, the Court identified specific circumstances that could warrant the appointment of ad-hoc judges in certain High Courts. At the time, nearly 40% of judicial positions across all High Courts were vacant. The Court also referred to Law Commission reports from 1979, 1988, and 2003, which advocated for the temporary appointment of retired judges as an effective measure to address the mounting backlog of cases. However,

the Supreme Court expressed concerns that Article 224A could result in "inaction in making recommendations" for regular judicial appointments. Consequently, the Court clarified that ad-hoc judges can only be appointed when recommendations for filling less than 20% of vacancies have not been made, after considering both the number of sitting judges and the pending proposals for judicial appointments.

The Court outlined several "trigger points" for such appointments, although the list is not exhaustive. These include — 1) if vacancies in a High Court exceed 20% of its sanctioned strength; 2) if cases in a specific category have been pending for more than five years; 3) if more than 10% of the High Court's cases are pending for over five years; 4) if the case disposal rate is lower than the rate at which new cases are filed (case clearance rate). The Court also recommended that each Chief Justice

form a panel of retired judges, along with soon-to-retire judges, for appointments.

What does the latest order say?

The CJI-led Bench noted that, as of January 25, there are 62 lakh pending cases across High Courts, according to data from the National Judicial Data Grid. Of these, over 18.2 lakh are criminal cases, while more than 44 lakh are civil cases. To tackle this growing pendency, the Court decided to set aside the condition laid down in *Lok Prahari*, which permitted the appointment of ad-hoc judges only when judicial vacancies exceeded 20% of the sanctioned strength.

It further ruled that ad-hoc judges can only hear criminal appeals. Additionally, the number of ad-hoc judges cannot exceed 10% of a High Court's sanctioned strength, meaning each High Court can have only 2 to 5 such appointments.

Have there been prior instances?

There have only been three documented instances of ad-hoc judicial appointments. In 1972, Justice Suraj Bhan was appointed to the Madhya Pradesh High Court shortly after his retirement to adjudicate election petitions. Justice P. Venugopal was similarly appointed to the Madras High Court in 1982. More recently, in 2007, Justice O.P. Srivastava was appointed to the Allahabad High Court to preside over the Ayodhya title suits.

THE GIST

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What ails India's massive diagnostics sector: putting labs under the lens

Industry experts estimate that there are around 300,000 labs across the country, and this number is growing. Within the healthcare sector, diagnostics accounts for around 9% of the industry, estimated to be worth ₹860 billion in the financial year 2024, and projected to grow to about ₹1,275 billion by the financial year 2028

The Hindu Bureau

Shankar Dhanu, 27, has been fighting a lone battle against the private diagnostics sector in Maharashtra for years now, but he is yet to make any headway. Six years ago, his sister, Sarika Bhonglat, lost her life following complications after a surgery. Shankar believes that the tests his sister underwent prior to the surgery were incorrect, and this led to the wrong treatment being given, causing her death. "The treatment that my sister was given was based on a lab report that was signed off by a technician and not a pathologist. It was this that led to incorrect treatment and complications and finally her death. How can a Class 12 graduate be allowed to sign off on medical imaging and diagnostic tests?" he asks.

Shankar's case is not unique and delves into the heart of what ails the diagnostics sector in India today – a shortage of trained personnel to meet the rapid burgeoning of medical laboratories/diagnostic facilities in the country.

While there are no exact figures available, industry experts estimate that there are around 300,000 labs across the country, and this number is growing. Within the healthcare sector, diagnostics accounts for around 9% of the industry, estimated to be worth ₹860 billion in the financial year 2024, and projected to grow to about ₹1,275 billion by the financial year 2028.

This staggeringly huge sector, however, remains under-regulated, fragmented, and biased towards urban areas.

The regulations

The Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act 2010 aims to bring all diagnostic centres and labs under its ambit, with their registration with respective State councils as clinical establishments. The Act also aims to provide guidance on the minimum standards of facilities and services that should be provided by diagnostic centres and labs.

To date, the Act has been adopted by 25 States – Sikkim, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Telangana, Uttarakhand, Assam, and Haryana – and all Union Territories, except Delhi. Some other States, including Kerala and Karnataka, have their own legislation to bring labs under the ambit of clinical establishments. However, implementation has, in many cases, not begun, or where it has, it often remains poor.

The fragmented nature of the sector
Given the low entry barriers and the lack of a strong regulatory environment, there are many standalone players in the sector, making it competitive, fragmented, and prone to varying standards.

Diagnostic centres in India can obtain accreditation voluntarily from organisations such as the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL).

N. Venkateswaran, CEO, NABL, in an email interview with *The Hindu* highlighted the challenges created by the fast-paced growth of the private sector. India, he noted, has a highly fragmented market with many small, unorganised labs, largely not accredited and following uneven quality standards. "This is in terms of resources to bring in advanced diagnostic technologies, a large variation in pricing even for routine tests, and inadequately skilled manpower," he said.

He said that while the emphasis is on the quality and accuracy of results, lab regulation needs attention. "There has to be more awareness about biomedical waste management to prevent outbreaks; maintaining better labs and hospital environments is in focus, but there is much more to be done to ensure reliable and accurate results."

The shortage of manpower

There is a significant shortage of full-time doctors and staff in the diagnostics industry. This situation makes it difficult for standalone diagnostic centres which may not be able to employ well-trained lab technicians and pathologists, affecting the quality of outcomes. Accredited labs must mandatorily employ a full-time lab technician/phlebotomist and a radiologist.

The Health Ministry's own research has indicated that India has the disadvantage of not having enough microbiologists and some places do not even have enough qualified doctors or technicians to operate a lab. There is also a lack of upgrading and training, as well as



geographical inequality in quality of services, the research said.

A top management official from a leading diagnostics chain based in North India points out: "The challenge lies in defining an unregulated lab. How do you define one? We do not have enough pathologists to run the number of labs there are in the country. This is where the problem comes in: some lab reports are issued with 'bought out' signatures from doctors, where signatures are obtained in exchange for money, but the lab has a licence obtained from local authorities and shows the presence of ghost employees and doctors."

This problem persists across most States. In Karnataka, the Karnataka Private Medical Establishments (KPME) Act governs healthcare facilities; however, the scope and enforcement of this Act in the laboratories and diagnostics sector is limited, particularly in areas like quality assurance and patient safety.

Many hospitals and doctors running clinics have side laboratories and sample collection centres. "These are 'technician-only' facilities that are not run or owned by qualified pathologists. With one pathologist connected to multiple laboratories, reports only have e-signatures of the pathologists. Although e-signatures are allowed, there is no rule on the number of laboratories a pathologist can be connected to," sources said.

Lack of proper regulations is an area of concern in Tamil Nadu as well, said V. Parthasarathy, general secretary, Tamil Nadu Government Medical Laboratory Technicians Association. He pointed out that an announcement made in the Assembly to constitute a State Council for Laboratory Technicians in 2009 is yet to be implemented. "We still have private laboratories run by unqualified persons," he said.

What does this mean for patients?

In 2019, Shankar tried to file an FIR with the Parada police station and raised his concerns with the Grahak Manch (consumer forum), but to no avail. He has now appealed at the Aurangabad Bench of the Bombay High Court against the doctors of a local hospital in Barshi, where he got his sister treated.

Doctors from the Maharashtra Association of Practising Pathologists and Microbiologists (MAPPM) indicate that this is not the only case – and their number is only rising. "A complex diagnosis requires a report from a pathologist. The machine doesn't give reports; it gives readings. A pathologist is required to analyse it," said Sandeep Yadav, president of MAPPM.

The issue affects doctors too: in November last year, a Maharashtra-based

There is a shortage of full-time doctors and staff in diagnostics. This makes it difficult for standalone centres that may not be able to employ well-trained lab technicians and pathologists, affecting the quality of outcomes

doctor, Rahul Mayur, filed a complaint of identity theft, stating that a diagnostic lab in Jalgaon was fraudulently using his name, degree, and signature to give fake reports to patients.

The Maharashtra Paramedical Council Act, 2011, has established a council to regulate paramedical personnel, including medical laboratory technicians. This Act and the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions (NCAHP) Act 2021 do not permit laboratory technicians to practice independently and issue reports without certification by a pathologist. However, Dr. Yadav said such fraudulent practices were common. He highlighted the issue of "ghost pathologists" at many labs and underscored: "everything done at a lab needs to be supervised by pathologists and not technicians."

The urban-rural divide

One of the other issues in India is the concentration of labs in the urban areas. As of the financial year 2023, only 24% of diagnostics revenue came from rural areas in India, though nearly 70% of the population in the country resides rurally. This is also mirrored in the government-private labs divide, with both doctors and patients pointing out that multiple gaps exist in government labs that make them a less favoured option.

For instance, in Telangana, a government doctor said lack of essential upgrades was a hindrance. Both Osmania and Gandhi hospitals – major State healthcare facilities in Hyderabad – urgently required improvements, the doctor said, further noting that limited operational hours at government laboratories restricted access. "Even after diagnosis, the unavailability of specialists at government hospitals discourages patients and forces them to seek private care," the doctor added.

The problem of varying standards and shortage of staff ails the government sector too.

Paramita Sarkar, a final-year MD pathology student from Medical College, Kolkata, said there was a huge workload – over 800 tests per day – but a serious staff shortage. "Three of us work in shifts in the labs, but that is not enough. We need more technicians and people who can run the testing machines to ensure

work gets done on time and faster." Tapas Pramanik, a medical officer at R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, also said that with many district hospitals lacking decent testing facilities, most tests come to city hospitals, increasing the workload.

The pricing problem

Pricing, as is always the issue when it comes to the private health sector, is of concern in diagnostics as well. A few government programmes and certain States are going some way towards addressing this. In January 2018, Telangana began the Telangana Diagnostics Programme or 'T-Diagnostics' initiative. As of October 2024, over 18.10 crore tests have been conducted benefiting 1.01 crore individuals, collectively resulting in an estimated saving of ₹1,100 crore in out-of-pocket expenses for patients. However, supply issues such as those of reagents are marring the programme, a lab technician said. In Kerala, the government has invested significantly in upgrading primary health centres to family health centres to provide a range of services, including basic laboratory investigations (at nominal rates) as part of its 'Aardram Mission'.

Issues faced by labs

While there are many issues in terms of regulation that still need to be streamlined and implemented, representatives from the diagnostics sector say they too, want change.

In Kerala for instance, lab representatives say the space and educational requirements under the Kerala State Clinical Establishments Act are unviable. "There are some 6,500 independent small and medium paramedical labs in the State and if one were to go by the minimum standards only about 1,000 will be able to function. We have sought relaxations in the clauses regarding space requirement," says Shareef Paloli, State General Secretary of Kerala Private Medical Technicians' Association, and head, Kerala Paramedical Coordination Committee.

The State government also does not recognise paramedical degrees/diplomas even from recognised institutions in other States, he says. A two-year MLT Diploma/BSc MLT or MSc MLT conducted by medical colleges or other government approved agencies is required. "We are cooperating with the government, but our request was that rather than render professionals who have studied outside the State jobless, the government could conduct a training programme/exam for them. The government has now agreed to this in principle," he says.

The space constraints are a problem in T.N. as well: in November 2024, the Health Department, brought in amendments to the Tamil Nadu Clinical Establishments (Regulations) Rules, 2018, stipulating minimum space for sample collection for clinical laboratories – 300 sq ft in rural areas and 500-700 sq ft in urban areas. P. Kalidasan, national president, Paramedical Laboratory Educational and Welfare Association, says there is no need for such specifications. "There are nearly 10,000 laboratories in the State. Of these, at least 80% are small-sized. Among them, 30% are in rural areas. Small labs cater to around 10 patients a day and mandating 300 sq feet area for clinical laboratories cannot be accepted. The focus should be on adherence to quality programmes," he said.

The sector is willing to have regulations to bring in standardisation: the Karnataka Chapter of the Indian Association of Pathologists and Microbiologists (KIAPM) is asking for the strengthening of the Karnataka Act. "The KPME Act must be expanded to include licensing criteria, accreditation mandates, and penalties for non-compliance. Mandatory 50% for sample collection, testing, and reporting should be put in place to minimise errors," said Aditya Agnihotri, KIAPM secretary.

KIAPM president Vijay Shankar S. said ensuring every lab is supervised by qualified pathologists and supported by trained technicians was vital. "Licensing should include a needs assessment to prevent over-saturation in certain areas while ensuring coverage in underserved regions," he said.

(Collated by Zubeda Hamid, with inputs from Maitri Porecha and Bindhu Shajan Perappadan in Delhi; Afshan Yasmeen in Bengaluru; C. Maya in Thiruvananthapuram; Siddharth Kumar Singh in Hyderabad; Snehal Mutha in Mumbai; Shrabana Chatterjee in Kolkata and Serena Josephine M. in Chennai)

THE GIST

India has a highly fragmented market with many small, unorganised labs, largely not accredited and following uneven quality standards

Some reports are issued with signatures obtained in exchange for money. The lab has a licence but the rolls indicate 'ghost employees and doctors'

Some States are addressing the price issue. Telangana has the T-Diagnostics initiative. Over 18.10 crore tests have been conducted. Kerala has its 'Aardram Mission' which provides basic laboratory tests at nominal rates

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PAPER WITH PASSION

A recipe for catastrophe

The ethnic cleansing of Gaza is not only a crime against humanity but also a geopolitical disaster in the making

Donald Trump's proposal to take over Gaza and forcefully relocate its Palestinian residents has been met with an overwhelming wave of international condemnation. Leaders across the globe, from the United Nations to key US allies such as Jordan and Egypt, have firmly rejected the plan, calling it an act of 'ethnic cleansing' that would destabilise the entire region. Apart from being a morally repugnant and inhumane suggestion, Trump's vision for Gaza is doomed to backfire, not only by igniting further unrest but also by damaging US alliances and deepening the ongoing conflict. Trump's idea of 'owning' Gaza and resettling its 2.3 million residents elsewhere is not a spontaneous thought. It echoes long-standing discussions within the Israeli far right, where forced Palestinian displacement has been promoted as a means to secure Israeli territorial ambitions. Trump's embrace of this agenda is unsurprising given his strong ties to Israel's far-right politicians and his past decisions that have systematically undermined Palestinian sovereignty, such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem and cutting aid to Palestinian refugees.

The response from regional allies has been unequivocally negative. Jordan's stability is crucial to US interests in the region, and forcing the country to absorb another wave of refugees could have disastrous consequences. Egypt, which shares a border with Gaza, has also dismissed the plan, with its government warning that forced displacement would violate peace agreements and threaten national security. Any attempt to push Palestinians into the Sinai Peninsula would risk dragging Egypt into direct conflict, further complicating an already volatile situation. Saudi Arabia, yet another trusted US friend who has been a key player in US diplomatic efforts in the West Asia, has issued a strong rebuke of the plan, emphasising that any forced transfer of Palestinians would violate international law. However, the biggest danger of Trump's plan is that it can spur terrorism globally. Trump's plan, if enacted, would only fuel more extremism and conflict. The displacement of millions of Palestinians would create a new humanitarian crisis, radicalising those affected and providing extremist groups with powerful narrative for recruitment. History has shown that forcibly uprooted populations do not disappear quietly—instead, they often turn to resistance, armed struggle, or insurgency. Furthermore, any US military involvement in enforcing such a plan would likely draw direct opposition from other world powers such as Russia and China, fuelling more tension across the world. Trump's motivations appear to be a combination of political opportunism and ideological alignment with Israel's most extreme factions. Why Trump is doing it? By introducing a radical and controversial proposal, he shifts attention away from his legal troubles and domestic political challenges. The ensuing chaos allows him to portray himself as a decisive leader taking bold action, even if the plan is utterly impractical and morally indefensible.

Budget 2025-26: A bold vision with glaring gaps

The Union Budget 2025-26, presented by Nirmala Sitharaman, has drawn mixed reactions, balancing ambitious reforms with pressing economic challenges

The Union Budget for 2025-26, presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, has sparked significant debate due to both its promising provisions and notable shortcomings. While the budget introduces key reforms such as tax relief for the middle class, incentives for manufacturing and infrastructure development, it falls short in addressing pressing concerns such as job creation, wage growth, inflation control, and rural distress. A deeper analysis reveals both its strengths and weaknesses.

Income Tax Reforms: One of the most widely appreciated aspects of the budget is the increase in the tax exemption limit from Rs 7 lakh to Rs 12 lakh, offering substantial relief to middle-class taxpayers. Additionally, the standard deduction has been raised to Rs 75,000, effectively reducing the tax burden for those earning up to Rs 12.75 lakh per annum. These reforms are expected to boost disposable income, encourage savings, and enhance consumer spending.

Manufacturing and Export Promotion: The budget emphasises the 'National Manufacturing Mission', which aims to establish India as a global manufacturing hub, reduce import dependency, and generate employment. Another significant reform is the increase in the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) limit in the insurance sector to 100 per cent, a move that is expected to attract global insurers and enhance capital inflows.

Infrastructure Development: A substantial portion of the budget is allocated to infrastructure projects, including regional air connectivity, highway expansion, and railway modernisation. These initiatives will not only strengthen India's transport network but also generate employment and spur economic activity.

Support for Startups and Small Businesses: Recognising the role of startups and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in economic growth, the budget introduces dedicated funds and tax exemptions to encourage entrepreneurship. These measures are expected to foster innovation, create jobs, and strengthen the country's business ecosystem.



Despite the budget's growth-oriented approach, several concerns need to be addressed. **Employment and Job Creation:** Although the economy has shown signs of recovery, job growth remains sluggish, particularly in the informal sector. The budget lacks a direct employment policy and does not offer substantial incentives for companies to hire more workers. The government needs to focus on manufacturing, MSMEs, and startups to create sustainable employment opportunities.

Agricultural Reforms and Rural Economy: The rural economy continues to struggle with rising distress and stagnant productivity. Despite widespread farmer protests demanding a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Price (MSP), the budget does not introduce any concrete measures to address these concerns. There is also no significant increase in allocations for employment schemes like MGNREGS, despite growing rural unemployment.

Inflation and Price Stability: With rising global oil prices and persistent supply chain disruptions, inflation remains a major concern. Higher inflation affects consumer demand and reduces the purchasing power of the middle and lower-income groups.

Fiscal Deficit and Debt Management: One of the biggest challenges in the budget is balancing fiscal deficit control while sustaining economic growth. Increased infrastructure spending has led to a higher fiscal deficit, raising concerns about long-term financial sustainability. High borrowing costs and rising interest payments could further strain public finances.

Revenue Generation and Taxation Issues: Achieving ambitious tax collection targets, particularly through GST, could be difficult amid global economic uncertainties. Additionally, privatisation plans have repeatedly fallen short of expectations. The absence of a clear roadmap for asset monetisation raises questions about the government's ability to manage debt repayment.

Social Sector Spending: Despite its emphasis on infrastructure and tax relief, the budget fails to allocate sufficient funds to critical sectors such as health and education. Healthcare spending remains below 3 per cent of GDP, which is inadequate to bridge existing gaps in public healthcare infrastructure. While digital learning initiatives have been introduced,

there is no significant push to improve rural schools or recruit more teachers. **Private Investment:** Encouraging private sector investment is essential for sustained economic growth. However, the budget does not introduce substantial policy measures to attract both domestic and foreign capital. **State Finances and Federalism:** Several states are facing financial distress and are demanding higher devolution of funds. Striking a balance between fiscal transfers and responsible financial management remains a major policy challenge for the central government. **Global Economic Slowdown:** With geopolitical tensions and ongoing supply chain disruptions, export-driven sectors face significant risks. Strengthening domestic demand and securing trade partnerships will be vital in navigating these external uncertainties. **Conclusion:** The Union Budget 2025-26 reflects a commitment to growth, fiscal stability, and economic resilience. However, it must address critical issues such as employment generation, rural distress, and social sector spending to ensure balanced and inclusive growth. (The writer is a senior political analyst; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

China challenges US tariffs



A day after the US imposed a 10 per cent import duty on China, China has finally knocked on the doors of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). But there seems to be no chance of getting justice from there. China has accused the US of making 'baseless and false allegations' about its role in the fentanyl trade to justify tariffs on Chinese products. China said in its complaint that these measures are 'discriminatory and protectionist' and violate trade rules. But

experts believe that the decision is unlikely to come in China's favour because the panel that settles trade disputes is still unable to work. WTO procedures will give the US and China 60 days to resolve their dispute through consultations, after which China has the right to request a decision by a panel of judges. But the final panel to settle trade disputes, known as the Appellate Body, is currently unable to function because the US has refused to approve the appointment of new judges to the body. So China should trap Trump in the same 60-day trap that he has created. China has done just that. It has announced additional import duties of 10 to 15 per cent on 8 items imported from the US. China should respond to the US by imposing these duties on all goods, just as Mexico and Canada had talked about imposing, the fear of which forced Trump to postpone his decision for a month.

Jang Bahadur Singh | Jamsheepur

GOVT ANNOUNCES AI CENTRE

Madam — Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's Budget 2024 emphasised the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in India's economic and technological growth. The government has taken significant steps to integrate AI across multiple sectors, aiming to position India as a global AI hub. One of the key announcements was the establishment of a Centre of Excellence for AI, which will drive research, innovation and industry collaboration. This initiative aligns with India's vision of leveraging AI for development in fields such as healthcare, agriculture and governance.

The budget also introduced a Fund of Funds to support AI startups, encouraging investment in AI-driven solutions. By providing financial backing, the government aims to foster entrepreneurship and strengthen India's AI ecosystem. With these initiatives, the government is reinforcing AI's role in shaping India's future, ensuring technological progress and economic growth in the coming years.

Anushka Bohra | Ujjain



Decorated camels at the Nagaur Cattle Fair, in Nagaur

The looming water crisis: A call for urgent action

Climate change, population growth, and mismanagement are straining global water resources, pushing communities toward scarcity and conflict

The specter of global conflict frequently looms over discussions about the future, and water is often identified as a likely catalyst. As an essential resource for life, agriculture and industry, water is under unprecedented strain due to rapid population growth and accelerating development. This crisis is no longer an abstract possibility but a stark reality requiring immediate attention.

Nations worldwide are actively seeking collective solutions to ensure water security, promote sustainable agricultural practices, and protect ecosystems. From wells and ponds to rivers and reservoirs, freshwater sources are depleting at an alarming rate, pushing the world closer to potential conflicts.



in escalating water disputes that transcend local communities, cities, and even national borders. Unlike oil, which has alternatives, water is irreplaceable. It is the foundation of life, and its depletion would be catastrophic. However, for decades, water security has been sidelined in favour of industrial expansion and urbanisation. Climate change, unpredictable rainfall, pollution, and inefficient water management have exacerbated the crisis. Issues such as soil erosion, sedimentation, and runoff further compound the problem, pushing the world closer to an ecological tipping point. Unchecked, this crisis will lead to ecosystem collapse, human suffering, and inevitable conflicts.

The Growing Crisis: A Global Threat
Relentless exploitation of natural resources, particularly water and soil, has triggered a cascade of adverse consequences. Humanity's relentless pursuit of energy and urban expansion is exhausting these vital resources faster than nature can replenish them. The results are evident

As one of the fastest urbanising nations, India is at the epicenter of the global water crisis. Poorly planned urban expansion has weakened the country's water security, placing it among the world's water-stressed nations. By 2025, India's per capita water availability is projected to drop to 1,341 cubic meters, and by 2050, it could decline further to 1,140 cubic meters—dangerously close to the threshold of water scarcity. Agriculture remains the largest consumer of water in India, accounting for 72 per cent of withdrawals, followed by municipalities (16 per cent) and industries (12 per cent). With a population exceeding 1.4 billion, more than 600 million Indians already face severe water shortages, affecting their livelihoods, health and overall wellbeing.

Solutions for a Sustainable Future
Ensuring India's water security demands a multi-pronged strategy. The adoption of modern techniques like drip irrigation, precision agriculture, and wastewater recycling can significantly reduce water wastage in agriculture and industries. Rainwater harvesting can help recharge groundwater and reduce dependence on rapidly depleting reserves. Efficient infrastructure for water distribution and storage is essential to minimise losses and address regional disparities. Community-led initiatives, grassroots awareness campaigns, and educational programs can foster a culture of conservation.

Water Conservation: A National Imperative
Water is fundamental to economic growth, improved living standards, and sustainability. Policymakers must adopt a holistic approach that integrates water management with energy and food security. Equitable access to clean water and sanitation is vital for national progress. At an individual level, small steps like fixing leaks, using water-efficient appliances, and supporting conservation efforts can create meaningful change. Public awareness campaigns can further mobilise citizens to embrace sustainable practices. (The writer is the CEO of Suez India; views are personal)



RASMI RANJAN RAY

CHINESE AI TOOL UNDER SCRUTINY
Madam — The Chinese open-source AI tool model, which was launched just a year earlier, has turned into a concerning AI tool for the whole world. Already three countries, which include Australia, Italy and Taiwan, have banned the services of this Chinese AI tool in their countries and many other nations, like France, Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands, have raised serious concerns over the data collection mechanism used by DeepSeek. There is no doubt of the fact that today there has been a global race for developing the improved AI tool on the lines of generative AI apps like OpenAI's ChatGPT. In such a milieu, when US firms are dominating this AI tool market with their services from different brand players, like Google's Gemini and Microsoft Copilot. How can one expect China to be cooking up something AI in its backyard to compete with the USA in this AI market area as well?

Today there is a global buzz for the AI tools, and it is a gigantic market potential, which is untapped yet. But some AI tools are actually keeping ethnicity aside for the sake of their personal profits. Since this tool is still unregulated, there exist possibly high chances of data security breach in the name of services. The way in which DeepSeek is parking all the data collected from the users of different countries in its local Chinese storage centres made this very Chinese tool come under the scrutiny radar of global regulators. Although the Department of Expenditure under the Finance Ministry of India has already advised its government officials to avoid using both ChatGPT and DeepSeek, posing a confidentiality concern to the government data. It is particularly important for all of us in general that we must not use too much of such AI tools. They pose a high data privacy and data security risk, as the governments around the whole world are already claiming, suspecting them. Our data security is on our hands.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai
Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

BUDGET 2025: ECHOES OF TRUMP'S ECONOMIC PLAYBOOK

The Budget bears striking similarities to Trump's economic strategies, particularly in trade and taxation



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman recently set a new record by presenting India's budget for the eighth consecutive term. This year's budget primarily aims to provide tax relief to the Indian middle class while boosting domestic consumption and investment. Additionally, it takes into account the evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly the policies of US President Donald Trump, who has returned to office. The Modi government's first full Union Budget in its third term has drawn comparisons to some of Trump's economic strategies. While the economic environments of India and the US differ significantly, echoes of Trump's first-term policies—especially in trade, taxation and economic positioning—are evident in several aspects of the budget.

Trump, in line with his campaign promises, has announced new tariffs on countries with whom the US has trade deficits, targeting China, Mexico and Canada. However, the latter two have been granted a temporary reprieve due to ongoing negotiations. India has been cautiously observing these developments, especially as Modi prepares for a visit to Washington later this month. This year's budget takes a strategic approach, addressing some key concerns regarding US exports to India while reinforcing India's domestic economic agenda. One of the most significant aspects of the budget is its focus on taxation and incentives for domestic industries. Trump's economic policies in the US emphasised corporate tax cuts and encouraging American companies to repatriate jobs and manufacturing.



Similarly, India's budget introduces corporate tax reforms and personal income tax reductions to create a more competitive domestic business environment. The aim is to attract multinational corporations to manufacture in India rather than outsourcing jobs overseas. The budget also underscores economic nationalism by promoting self-reliance through the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" initiative. This aligns with Trump's "America First" policy, emphasising domestic production, particularly in defence, technology and energy sectors, to reduce reliance on imports and generate employment. However, with Trump threatening tariffs on foreign companies that do not relocate manufacturing to the US, India's domestic industrial policies could face challenges. Additionally, the budget introduces tariffs and duties on select imported goods, aiming to shield domestic industries from external competition.

This protectionist approach mirrors Trump's trade strategies and represents India's broader ambition to establish itself as a global manufacturing hub to rival economic powerhouses like China and the US. Another notable parallel is the focus on infrastructure investment as a means of economic stimulation and job creation. Trump's administration prioritised infrastructure spending to spur growth and India's budget follows a similar path.

Significant funds have been allocated to highways, railways and ports, aiming to accelerate development and generate employment, particularly in rural areas. However, unlike Trump's isolationist trade stance, India remains committed to fostering strong international relations. The budget reflects a careful balancing act—pursuing economic self-reliance while maintaining global trade and diplomatic ties, especially with the US. While India's 2025-26 budget is not a direct replica of Trump's policies, it reflects global trends toward self-sufficiency and economic protectionism. The challenge ahead lies in leveraging these strategies effectively while navigating the complexities of a globalised economy.

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

Streamline currency and coinage system to reduce confusion

The circulation of coins in multiple sizes creates considerable confusion. Implementing a standardised approach to currency would improve efficiency



Presently there are three sizes each in coins of denominations of rupees one and two, creating big confusion amongst members of the public. One-rupee coin is in circulation in diameters of 20, 22 and 25 mm, while coins in denominations of rupees two in circulation are 23, 25 and 27 mm. Such nearing or same sizes of coins in denominations of rupees one and two cause big confusion. To remove all confusion, the central government should stop minting two-rupee coins at least for the time being. Practically only varying sizes of two-rupee coins create confusion.

The System should be that either coins or currency notes should only be issued in any of the denominations. Weights of coins in denominations of rupees 1, 2, 5, 10 and 20 respectively should be rationalised in round figures of 3, 4, 6, 8 and 10 gms respectively. The size of currency notes was changed after the year 1967 between the years 2016 to 2019 by a new currency note issued due to the demonetisation of old currency notes of rupees 500 and 1000 on 08.11.2016. Reserve Bank of India (RBI) should ensure that, currency-size if required to be changed, may be done in one go for notes of all denominations. With the printing of notes in denominations of rupees 1 and 10 already discontinued, the printing of rupees 20 notes should also be discontinued after coins of this denomination are now popular in circulation, thus paving the way for the new smaller-sized currency of rupees 50, 100, 200 and 500 but retaining colours of these notes same respectively in different denominations to avoid confusion amongst members of the public.

Plastic currency (then for ten-rupee notes) was stated to be issued long back by the then Union Minister of State for Finance Namo Narain Meena on 12.03.2013 in a written reply in Rajya Sabha, but it was never implemented. Plastic currency prevailing in several countries is found successful in increasing the lives of currency note manifolds. Fifty-rupee currency notes of plastic may be issued on an experimental basis. If the idea becomes successful, then currency notes of all other denominations can be issued in plastic currency. These steps will reduce the cost of currency circulation. Smaller packs of 100 coins



PLASTIC CURRENCY PREVAILING IN SEVERAL COUNTRIES IS FOUND SUCCESSFUL IN INCREASING THE LIVES OF CURRENCY NOTE MANIFOLDS. FIFTY-RUPEE CURRENCY NOTES OF PLASTIC MAY BE ISSUED ON AN EXPERIMENTAL BASIS

in each denomination should be always made available in plenty at all branches of various private and public sector banks and in all post offices for ease of normal public. Bigger packs can have twenty small packs of 100 coins each thus having a uniform bigger pack size of 2000 coins in each denomination rather than as at present in confusing pack sizes of 2000 and 2500 coins. It is observed that even bigger bank branches equipped with currency chests usually do not have coins of desired denominations.

Unwanted coins of rupee-two denominations are however always available, thus making gimmick popularity of two-rupee coins. Selling coin-bags of new coins and also new packs of currency at a pre-made price should be allowed to be sold. These are openly sold at a heavy premium depending on demand and supply. Re-introduced one-rupee note packs of 100 on 06.03.2015 never-ever reached at bank-counters for public distribution, but were always available right from 06.03.2015 at heavy premium with private dealers of new currency. Only very few were aware that one-rupee notes were re-issued on 06.03.2015 after being discontinued two decades back. Significantly, only one-rupee notes bear the signature of a secretary-rank officer of the central government, while notes in all other denominations bear the signature of the RBI governor.

One-rupee note was re-issued for the bureaucratic craze to sign these notes. Even though the printing of one-rupee notes has since been discontinued, enquiry should be initiated on the re-issue of these one-rupee notes on 06.03.2015 with existing print-stock held by RBI as souvenirs in attractive plastic-packs so that government rather than currency dealers may earn as premium on one-rupee notes.

The first silver-alloy commemorative coin with a face-value of rupees ten in independent India was made available for the general public at face-value right from the date of issue on 02.10.1969 on Gandhi's Birth Centenary. Metal value at that time in silver-alloy coins used to be about half the face value.

This practice continued for several years. But later the practice was changed to have a face-value much less than the prevailing metal value. For example, silver-alloy commemorative coins issued on 24.12.2018 to mark the birth-anniversary of late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had a face-value of just rupees 100 whereas the metal value of the coin even at the time of issue was multiple times the face value. It should be ensured that these coins may be issued at face-value by making it say rupees 1000 with metal-value being about half of the face value of the coin.

However, to prevent fake and duplicate coins, these high-value silver-alloy coins can be packed in tamper-proof plastic-packs with serial numbers. Commemorative coins whenever issued, should be in all commonly circulated denominations like rupees one, five, ten and twenty also so that the occasion may be commemorated by the masses also through the issue of commemorative coins. Official commemorative gold coins of five and ten gms with 80 per cent gold and 20 per cent silver in face values of rupees 5000 and 10000 respectively can also be issued in attractive tamper-proof plastic packs with serial numbers.

Only one (say costliest Proof category) coin-set with all denominations of coins issued on the occasion should be simultaneously released for afford coin-collectors at convenient distribution including all RBI offices, selected bank branches (private and public sector), all political counters right

from the date of issue rather through cumbersome procedure of advance-booking, with booking started much later after date of issue of commemorative coins with actual delivery of coin-sets still later at times after about a year. Information received under the RTI Act reveals that at times commemorative coin sets are booked only in some hundreds.

All such steps will tremendously increase the sale of commemorative coins and coin-sets thus generating appreciable revenue-earning since such high-value coins and coin-sets never come into circulation. First-ever sale counter for commemorative silver-alloy coins was opened on 20.01.2021 at the office of Security Printing and Minting Corporation of India Limited (SPML) at Jawahar Vajpayee Bhawan (Janpath - New Delhi) with some coin sets put on direct sale without any advance-booking. But just one sale-counter in a big country with a population of 140 crores is not enough. The sale of coin sets should also be through credit and debit cards. The sale of round-shaped silver or gold coins prepared in the private sector should then be banned to further prevent the manufacture of fake and duplicate coins. A Division Bench at Madurai of Madras High Court on 04.02.2021 had recommended considering printing a photo of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose on currency notes.

An altogether new series of currency notes should be issued in different denominations with a note of each denomination having a photo of one pre-independence hero who might have expired before independence to avoid political controversies. Likewise, photos of different dignitaries can be embossed on commonly-circulated coins of different denominations.

(The writer is an RTI activist; views are personal)

India's Constitution @75: A legacy of collective vision and political evolution

It has been 75 years since India adopted and accepted its Constitution, marking a historic milestone in its journey as an independent nation

The Constituent Assembly convened for the first time in December 1946, with Sachidananda Sinha serving as its interim chairman on December 9. Shortly after, Rajendra Prasad was elected as the permanent chairman on December 11, 1946.

The drafting process began on August 29, 1947, and the final document came into effect on January 26, 1950, marking India's transition into a sovereign, democratic republic. Upon its adoption, the Constitution replaced the Government of India Act, 1935, becoming the fundamental governing document of the nation. The Drafting Committee, formed on December 29, 1947, was chaired by Dr B R Ambedkar. Other members included N Gopalaswami Ayyangar, Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar, KM Munshi, Syed Muhammad Saadullah, N Madhava Rao, and TT Krishnamachari. The committee presented its draft on February 21, 1948, and after extensive deliberations, the Constitution was adopted on November 26, 1949. Dr Rajendra Prasad, as the President of the Constituent Assembly, signed the final document.

The members of the Constituent Assembly were elected by the Union and State Legislatures. Prominent leaders included Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Dr B R Ambedkar, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Syama Prasad Mukherjee, and others. The



K S RADHAKRISHNAN

Assembly also had representation from various communities: Scheduled Castes, Anglo-Indians, Parsis, Christians (except Anglo-Indians), and Gorkhas. Legal experts such as Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar, Benegal Narsing Rao, KM Munshi, and Ganesh Manlalankar played crucial roles. Women leaders, including Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Mehta, Durgabai Deshmukh,

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, also contributed significantly. The Structure and Drafting of the Constitution The Indian Constitution consists of 25 parts, 12 schedules, 106 amendments, 448 articles, and 117,369 words. Alongside the English version, an official Hindi translation exists.

Amendments and Political Influence: The Constitution has undergone significant changes over the years. A notable amendment took place during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's tenure. Through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, the words "Socialist" and "Secular" were inserted into the Preamble. This amendment remains a subject of debate, as the original Constitution did not contain these terms. The amendment, introduced by the Congress government, reflected the ideology of a specific political party rather than the original intent of the Constitution. A recent case regarding this amendment was under deliberation in the Supreme Court, with Justice Sanjiv Khanna commenting on socialism as a concept for collective welfare. However, the case was eventually dismissed.



The repeated amendments to the Constitution, often driven by political motives, have raised concerns about the distortion of its original framework. So far, the Constitution has been amended 105 times, with additional amendments proposed. This makes it the most extensively modified Constitution among democratic nations. In contrast, the United States, despite being a democracy for over 200 years, has only made 25 amendments to its Constitution, which remains significantly shorter and less complex.

A Constitution Borrowed from Many: Unlike countries such as Britain, Israel and New Zealand, which function without a written Constitution and rely on traditions, India's Constitutional

incorporates provisions from multiple sources, including Britain, Australia, Canada, the United States, France, and the Soviet Union. The legal expert BN Rau played a crucial role in compiling these provisions, yet his contributions are often overlooked. His research formed the foundation upon which Dr B R Ambedkar and the Drafting Committee built the Constitution.

The original manuscript of the Constitution holds historical significance. A replica of this document includes a unique signature in Tamil by MC Veerappan, a member of the Assembly from Thoothukudi. His signature, highlighted in preserved documents, serves as a reminder of the diverse voices that contributed to India's foundational legal text.

Politics and the Constitution It is essential to recognise that a Constitution is a foundational governance framework, separate from political parties. When political entities modify it to serve their interests, its original purpose is diluted.

A Constitution must ensure collective harmony, balanced by legislative and judicial oversight. The debate over secularism and socialism remains contentious. The Constitution's secular integrity should not be manipulated through selective amendments or political rhetoric. Instead of distorting its essence, efforts should focus on preserving its foundational principles for the benefit of all citizens.

(The writer is an advocate and political activist; views are personal)

THE ASIAN AGE

7 FEBRUARY 2025

Trump's plan to evict 2m to 'develop' Gaza outrageous

US President Donald Trump's suggestion that two million Palestinians in Gaza should be forced out of the Gaza Strip and resettled in neighbouring Arab countries is preposterous. Such shepherding of people out of their domain is totally against international law and is nothing but ethnic cleansing the world cannot even countenance.

The Gaza Strip is no land parcel though where Trump's idea springs from is made apparent by his background as a real estate mogul. His family business is now being run by his son-in-law Jared Kushner who might relish the prospect of building what Trump believes could be akin to the Riviera on Gaza's waterfront.

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Subhani



Trump's US 'weaponising' tariffs: All set to be losers



Indranil Banerjee

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LETTERS EXIT POLL LAUGHS

Every election brings in humour in the shape of exit polls. The Delhi election this week is no different. In every single election, we have several so-called psephologists who spout data based on surveys and hold forth on who will win and who will lose. And when the results come out way different from their predictions, these wonderful experts waste no time in tweaking their data. And we have some thespians among these worthies who dance in the news studios when they are right and sob uncontrollably when their predictions are far from reality. Their antics are matched only by astrologers.

C.K. Subramaniam
Navi Mumbai

DELHI DECIDES

THE ELECTION results in Delhi have set the nation talking. As the national capital, what happens in Delhi has far-reaching implications. However, what does this outcome hold for the ordinary Delhiite? Will the new government run on affordable housing, reliable public transport, and quality education? Or will it spend its time indulging in some grand projects to benefit a select few? Will the new government rise to the challenge, or will it succumb to the pressures of politics? Only time will tell.

Anshu Bhatti
Bengaluru, Bihar

AMERICA, BE KIND

LIFE IS unpredictable. Those who once believed they would never need the help of others can find themselves at the mercy of those whom they once despised and want no part of. This is true of individuals as well as nations. On an individual level, this has happened very often. A midnight emergency has the individual knocking at the door of their neighbour who was constantly being troubled and harassed by them. America at present seems to be all powerful, but things can change without any warning. In the movie 2012, something like an Ice Age was seen in America who begged Mexico which was warm to open its borders. While America has got every right to deport the illegals, it could be done with a little more humility and concern for the deportees.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

UGC guidelines need a relook

THE opposition to the new draft guidelines of the University Grants Commission (UGC) on the appointments of Vice-Chancellors in state non-BJP ruled states demanding its immediate withdrawal. A conclave of the ministers held in Bengaluru on Wednesday also objected to the imposition of the New Education Policy on states.

It is an unmistakable fact that the new draft guidelines are an affront to the ideas of federalism enshrined in the Constitution and even natural justice. The state universities are creatures of the state legislatures; their infrastructure is created using the money provided by the state budgets and are run on the grants provided by the state governments every year. They are the assets of the people of the states concerned.

The draft guidelines, however, seek to undermine the states' role in the running of the universities by unilaterally stripping them of their say in the selection process of Vice-Chancellors. The selection committee of three members will be nominated by the Chancellor, the UGC and the university, with no representation from the state government. The UGC guidelines say, making a mockery of the established procedure for no worthy reason.

The fact is that the UGC guidelines, a piece of subordinate legislation, get precedence over the state's laws on a subject which the Constitution frames part in the State List of the Constitution but was later moved to the Concurrent List. The government is misinterpreting its power for "the co-ordination and determination of standards in universities" to take over their administration even while regulation of the universities' remains on the State List.

The states are also concerned with one too many recommendations in the draft guidelines which do away with several established norms with respect to eligibility for university appointments. The UGC chairman is on record saying that the body will welcome all kinds of opinions on its proposals. The Union government must prevail over the UGC and ensure that the voice of dissent is given due consideration before it comes out with the final document.

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Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu

Prakash Mishra makes comeback from cast-off cop to CM's adviser

Prakash Mishra is back in the spotlight. The BJP-led Odisha government has appointed the retired IPS officer as an adviser to CM Mohan Charan Majhi — with Cabinet rank, no less. That's a big deal, not just for Mr Mishra but also for Odisha's political landscape.

Mr Mishra's career has been anything but ordinary. When the Narendra Modi government came to power in 2014, it replaced no time picking him as the director general of the CRPF, India's largest paramilitary force. After retirement, he continued to be in the Centre's good books, serving as IG of home guards, civil defence and fire services. Eventually, he joined the BJP, making his political leanings clear.

But Mr Mishra's story isn't just about his rise, it's also about the troubles he faced. His tenure as Odisha's DGP ended abruptly when then-chief minister Naveen Patraikidolhim him. However, he found his way back into the system through key roles in Delhi. He even came close to bagging one of the country's most coveted jobs — CBI director. Insiders believe he was the Modi government's top pick to replace Ranjit Sinha, but just as his name was gaining traction, an old foe resurfaced: Odisha's vigilance department.

In 2014, when Mr Mishra's name was in contention for the CBI top post, the Odisha government slapped a vigilance case on him, alleging financial irregularities from his tenure as CMD of

the State Police Housing and Welfare Corporation. Coincidence? Hardly. Many saw it as a strategic move by the Patraikidolhim government to block his appointment. The Odisha high court later threw out the case in 2015, calling out the state government for targeting him.

Now, a decade later, Mr Mishra's political leanings seem to be taking off in earnest. His appointment as CM's advisor is not just about administrative experience, it's a statement. The BJP is betting big on seasoned bureaucrats, and Mr Mishra's re-entry into Odisha's power circles signals a shift in the state's political dynamics. This time, he's not just the cop who took on the system — he's part of it.

WHEN BABUS HOLD THE REINS

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's recent admission raises an age-old question: Who really calls the shots in India's governance — the elected government or the bureaucratic circles? When she revealed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was keen on tax relief but bureaucratic processes slowed things down, it sounded less like a simple statement and more like an unintentional reality check.

Her exact words? "The PM was very clear that he wanted to do something... So, the more work that was needed, was needed for convincing the board..." Translation: The political leadership

may have grand ideas, but the babus decide when — or if — those ideas see the light of day.

Now, is this a helpless acknowledgment that babus continue to wield power across political dispensations? Or was this a veiled compliment to the bureaucracy for its due diligence — ensuring that nothing moves without being thoroughly scrutinised? Either way, the message is clear: No matter who's in power, the system works at its own pace. For taxpayers hoping for quicker relief, this is a classic case of "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is in process." This also hints at an uncomfortable reality — politicians can set the vision, but it's the bureaucrats who decide how fast (or slow) things move. So, next time a policy change feels like it's taking forever, don't just look at the political leadership — follow the paper trail.

HIMACHAL'S BOLD MOVE

Himachal Pradesh chief minister Sukhvir Singh Sukhu has stirred the pot with his decision to halt the induction of new IAS and IPS officers into the state cadre. His logic? With a population of 70 lakh, the existing 153 IAS officers should be more than enough. He's also eyeing a reduction in Indian Forest Service (IFS) officers. Sounds like a masterstroke. Well, not everyone is convinced. Opposition leader Jai Ram Thakur has already taken a swing, calling it a governance failure in the making. The argument against Mr Sukhu's

move is straightforward, fewer officers means an increased workload, slower decision-making, and potential administrative chaos. The bureaucracy, after all, is the backbone of governance, and trimming it down could create more bottlenecks than efficiencies.

But Mr Sukhu isn't just playing the numbers game. His move is part of a larger effort to cut costs and streamline administration. Reducing unnecessary government spending is a politically smart (and economically prudent) decision in an era where state finances are stretched thin. Instead of endlessly expanding the bureaucratic machinery, the government is signaling a shift towards efficiency over size.

The real question is: Will this actually lead to better governance, or will it backfire by overloading the existing cadre? India's babus aren't exactly known for their lightning-fast efficiency — so placing more responsibilities on fewer officers could just create another layer of delays. On the flip side, if done right, a leaner, more accountable bureaucracy could be a game-changer. For now, Mr Sukhu's move has set the stage for a high-stakes experiment.

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US decision on G20: message for ICJ, diplomacy test for India

EXPERT EXPLAINS

SIDHARTH RAIMEDHI

US SECRETARY of State Marco Rubio said on Thursday that he would not attend the G20 foreign ministers' meet in Johannesburg because South Africa is "doing very bad things". President Donald Trump has declared that "South Africa is confiscating land", and treating "certain classes of people VERY BADLY". Neither Trump nor Rubio have provided details. So what has provoked the attack on South Africa?

ICJ case against Israel

Rubio's post on X can be understood in the context of South Africa's ongoing genocide case against Israel at the International

Court of Justice (ICJ). As international support for the case has increased, so has the tension between South Africa (and its allies), and Israel and American public figures (such as Republican Senator Lindsey Graham) who have sought to undermine the ICJ.

On January 31, South Africa and Malaysia announced a campaign to protect the rulings of the ICJ and International Criminal Court (ICC) in the face of alleged "attempts by US Congress to tilt the ICC through the use of sanctions". A nine-nation "Hague Group" was formed under South Africa's leadership to defend the rights of Palestinians and to coordinate against violations of international law by Israel.

Targeting Hague courts

The first Trump administration (2017-21) imposed sweeping sanctions on the ICC and its officials — a decision that was reversed by the Joe Biden administration, which supported the ICC investigation into Russian war crimes in Ukraine. However, this support suffered after the ICC said it would seek arrest warrants against the leaders of both Israel and Hamas.

Soon after Trump's re-election, Israel's Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon said that the outcome "presents an opportunity to neutralise the cases against Israel in the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice...".

The ICC and ICJ are both international tribunals seated in The Hague, Netherlands. The ICC, established pursuant to the Rome Statute of 2002, has the jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for serious international crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The ICJ is an organ of the United Nations that hears disputes between states.

G20's uncertain future

Rubio's tweet, while aimed more at South Africa, the current president of G20, raises questions about the Trump administration's commitment to the multilateral organisation itself. The G20 foreign ministers' meeting is scheduled for February 20-21, and the Leaders' Summit for November 22-23.

During his first term, Trump pushed his "America First" policies strongly at G20,

which led to both contestations and isolation on many issues. He was successful in altering, in 2017, the emphasis of G20 from free trade to "reciprocal trade", aligning with his views on international trade and his imminent trade war against China.

With its more radical and aggressive agenda, it is not certain that Trump 2.0 will necessarily value the role of G20, and will work towards building relationships of co-operation and support within the grouping.

View from New Delhi

In recent years, India has conveyed that groupings such as the G20 may be more suitable than organisations such as the UN for solving complex global challenges.

India's own pivot towards leadership of the Global South has benefited significantly from the rising status of G20, and from India's own position within the grouping in recent years.

For India, the UN Security Council represents an outdated system based on the interests of the victors of World War II. The G20, on the other hand, gave emerging economies

a greater say in matters of global governance — it was tailor-made for a rising India.

Given US objectives relating to the Russia-Ukraine war and the rivalry with China, the Biden White House was fully supportive of New Delhi's G20 presidency in 2023, and of its leadership of the Global South. This enabled India to present itself as a uniquely positioned consensus-driving bridge between the Global North and Global South, with relationships of trust on both sides.

The policy priorities of Trump 2.0 appear markedly different from that of the Biden administration. This is where the acrimony between the US and South Africa could have unanticipated implications for the G20. In the worst-case scenario of the US either skipping G20 in South Africa or pulling out altogether, the grouping would be unquestionably weakened.

More worryingly, it could come under greater Russo-Chinese sway and influence. But Rubio's tweet could also be an opening US salvo meant to prepare the ground for subsequent negotiations and compromises. In this scenario, South Africa would be expected to show a more conciliatory approach in exchange for American goodwill. If so, the negative implications — both for G20 and for India's interests in it — would be less serious.

For India, there would be another concern. The Trump administration's ambivalence (if not antipathy) towards the Global South could complicate India's Global South-related diplomacy. India's bridging power remains salient when the US-led West perceives such a role favourably. But under a transactional leadership and administration, India's role and value as a leader of the Global South may not necessarily be apparent to the White House.

India's challenge will be to make the right choices as the US, its strategic partner, locks horns with its traditional friends in the Global South — with uncertain bargains and outcomes.

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EXPLAINED CLIMATE

HOW THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS INTENSIFYING MARINE HEATWAVES

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 6

THE MARINE heatwaves (MHWs) linked to the death of more than 30,000 fish off the coastal Western Australia in January were made up to 100 times more probable due to climate change, a new analysis said. The MHWs began in September 2024 and are still ongoing in the region.

The analysis was carried out by the non-profit Climate Central. It also said the severity of the MHWs is intensifying as sea surface temperatures (SST) in some areas touched 2 degrees Celsius over more average for this time of the year.

The current MHWs are the second-worst in Western Australia's recorded history. The region saw its most intense MHWs during the summer of 2010-11.

What are marine heatwaves?
A marine heatwave occurs when the surface temperature of a particular region of the sea rises to 3 or 4 degrees Celsius above the average temperature for at least five days. MHWs can last for weeks, months or even years, according to the US government agency National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

In the past few decades, MHWs have become longer-lasting, more frequent, and intense, according to a 2018 study, published in the journal *Nature*.

A 2021 report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) said MHWs had increased by 50% over the past decade, last longer and were more severe now.

Why have MHWs intensified?

The primary reason is the climate crisis. As global temperatures have soared to 1.3 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels, 90% of the extra heat has been absorbed by the ocean. This has in-



Marine heatwaves can lead to coral bleaching. Reuters

creased the global mean SST by close to 0.9 degrees Celsius since then, with a rise of around 0.6 degrees Celsius over the last four decades, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service.

That is why coastal Western Australia has been witnessing a spike in MHWs and their intensity.

The situation will likely worsen across the world. The 2018 study said the current number of MHWs was projected to increase on average by a factor of 16 for global warming of 1.5 degrees Celsius and by a factor of 23 for global warming of 2.0 degrees Celsius.

What is their impact?

MHWs can be devastating for marine life. For example, the 2010-11 MHWs in Western Australia caused large-scale fish kills — the sudden and unexpected death of aquatic animals over a short period within an area. It also destroyed kelp forests that usually grow in cooler waters and provide habitat and food for marine animals.

Instances of coral bleaching, which can make corals more vulnerable to life-threatening diseases, also heightened due to MHWs. Thousands of marine animals depend on coral reefs for survival and damage to corals could, in turn, threaten their existence.



AMITABH SINHA

IN THE last year or so, India has signalled a subtle but important shift in the way it views the climate crisis and how it wants to deal with it. The country has questioned the "excessive preoccupation" of the international climate regime to achieve a specific temperature goal and argued that for developing countries like itself, adaptation must take precedence over reducing emissions.

India has also emphasised that rapid economic growth is the best defence against climate change for developing countries. Therefore, restrictions that constrain economic growth, such as curbs on the use of coal to generate electricity, are unacceptable.

These arguments themselves are not new. However, they are being made emphatically and with far greater clarity than before. This indicates an attempt by India to create space for greater flexibility in exercising its options on climate actions. It also provides the intellectual framework for the choices the country wants to make in this regard.

Slow progress on mitigation

The shift in India's emphasis seems to be prompted by a reassessment of ground realities. The world is nowhere close to meeting its emissions reduction targets for 2030 or 2035 due to inaction largely on the part of the developed countries. In fact, global emissions are still on the rise.

There is, thus, very little incentive for a developing country such as India to allocate resources for mitigation efforts. Appreciable benefits of mitigation accrue only when the world as a whole reduces emissions by a significant amount. Also, these benefits are not witnessed immediately as global warming is caused not by the amount of greenhouse gases being emitted, but by their concentration in the atmosphere over time.

Adaptation, on the other hand, offers immediate and local benefits. Building up resilience against the impacts of climate



India needs to scale up its manufacturing and technology capabilities related to clean energy. This would help it become less dependent on foreign supply chains. Express

change can be a better utilisation of limited resources. To a large extent, resilience is often a factor of prosperity. This is why India has argued that development is the best shield against the climate crisis.

The Economic Survey for 2024-25, released last week, asserted that India must first strive to attain developed country parameters by 2047 using available resources, and only then focus on achieving the net zero goal by 2070. This is significant as it can liberate India from the dilemma of carrying out aggressive decarbonisation while pursuing rapid economic growth.

In a sense, the Economic Survey is recommending that India follow the Chinese example. China has successfully prioritised economic growth and industrialisation without bothering about its emissions, which have grown four times from the mid-1990s. This was also when the international climate regime was established. The rapid economic growth has not just brought prosperity but also allowed China to build capabilities that will enable it to decarbonise faster than probably anyone else. The country now has the largest deployment of renewable energy, and the biggest production and manufacturing base for clean energy resources and tech-

nologies. Its emissions have still not peaked. However, once they do, possibly in the next couple of years, and China decides to start reducing emissions, it can shift to cleaner sources of energy much faster than any other country has so far managed to do.

Climate action on back-burner

The recalibration of India's position comes at a time when the international attention on climate action has tapered off a bit, despite 2023 and 2024 setting back-to-back temperature records. Major events such as armed conflicts and technology wars have diverted the focus away from the climate crisis.

There has also been a growing frustration, especially among developing countries, with the inability of the international climate regime to deliver desired results. The measure financial package agreed to at the COP29 conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, last year has eroded the trust of developing countries in this international process. They do not see their concerns being addressed adequately. Developed countries have not fulfilled their responsibilities on emission reductions and have been extremely stingy in meeting their financial obligations as well.

US President Donald Trump's immediate

withdrawal from the Paris Agreement after assuming office in January 2025, and his decisions to produce more fossil fuels, have brought a certain inevitability to the climate crisis going out of control.

For India, this means less pressure on issues such as coal phase-down. When countries with greater responsibilities, resources and capabilities have made energy choices irrespective of their impact on the climate crisis, India cannot be blamed for exercising similar options in its national interest.

Unique trajectory

However, all this does not mean abandoning decarbonisation altogether. India's economic growth would still have to happen on low-carbon pathways, otherwise, there is the risk of being left out in the race to adopt clean energy and its related technologies. The pursuit of developed country parameters cannot be delinked from the clean energy transition. The two would reinforce each other and have to happen simultaneously.

Currently, India only seems to be asserting that the choices of low-carbon development, and the pace of energy transition, should be decided by itself and not dictated by others. While that is a fair and reasonable ask, it is more on India than the rest of the world to make this happen. For example, if manufacturing and technology capabilities related to clean energy are not scaled up significantly, India will continue to remain dependent on foreign supply chains. The country would also not be in a position to make independent choices on energy transition.

That is why the policy push to develop indigenous small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs), for example, is so critical. India has been rather slow in ramping up its nuclear energy capacities. The India-US civil nuclear deal and the special waiver at the Nuclear Suppliers Group should have enabled a rapid expansion of the nuclear power sector. That did not happen for a variety of reasons. Now, the SMRs offer a fresh opportunity to do so.

But nuclear power is only one part of the puzzle. Even if the ambitious target of 100 GW of nuclear energy by 2047 is met, it would form less than 10 per cent of India's total electricity installed capacity. Every other clean energy option — solar, wind, and hydrogen — would need to be pursued aggressively over the next two decades for India to succeed in its climate objectives.

Legacy of the Aga Khan IV, philanthropist and leader of the Nizari Ismailis

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 6

PRINCE KARIM al-Husseini, who was the Aga Khan IV, died in London on Tuesday. He was 88.

Considered to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali, the Aga Khan is the Imam of the Nizari Ismaili Shias, and holds near-divine status among the community.

Twelve, Seven, Five Shias

By the time of the Prophet's death in 632 CE, Islam had taken hold over much of Arabia. His demise sparked a battle of succession, and split the community.

Some argued that leadership should be awarded only to qualified individuals, while others insisted that it be passed solely through Muhammad's bloodline. The former group went on to become the Sunnis, while the latter became the Shias.

The two main branches of Islam differ fundamentally on matters of doctrine, law, ritual, and religious organisations. However,

neither branch is a monolith.

Among the Shias, for instance, there are three main denominations: the Twelvers, the Ismailis, and the Zaidis. All three trace the descent of Muhammad through a chain of Imams or religious teachers, but they differ in the specifics of what the line of descent comprises.

Twelver Shias, the largest of these denominations comprising 90% of the total Shia population, follow a line of 12 divinely-ordained Imams, with the 12th Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, believed to be alive and in occultation.

The Ismailis or Seven Shias concur with the Twelvers till the sixth Imam, after which the two lines split.

The Zaidis or Five Shias split from the other lines after the first four Imams.

Nizari Ismailis & the Aga Khan

Among the Ismailis, there are two more sub-sects — the Nizari Ismailis and the Dawoodi Bohras. The fundamental difference between the two communities is that while the Nizaris trace the Prophet's hereditary descent all the way to the Aga Khans, the Dawoodi Bohras recognise direct de-

scend only till the 18th Imam, and follow today a line of Dais who are representatives of the concealed Imam.

The title of Aga Khan was bestowed on Hasan Ali Shah, the 46th Imam of Nizari Ismailis by the Iranian king Fath-Ali Shah Qajar in the 19th century.

Today, the Nizari Ismailis are spread out across more than 30 countries, although most trace their origin to Persia or the Indian subcontinent. They are not a majority community in any location.

Following a deal with the Portuguese government in 2015, the Aga Khan IV declared Lisbon as the global seat of the Nizari Imamate.

'Imam of the Atomic Age'

Born in Geneva in 1936, Prince Karim was the eldest son of Prince Aly Khan and the grandson of Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, or the Aga Khan III. After growing up in Nairobi and Switzerland, he went to Harvard to get a degree in Islamic history.

Prince Karim's grandfather passed away in 1957. In his will, the Aga Khan III named

his grandson as his successor, bypassing both his sons.

He wrote: "In view of the fundamentally altered conditions in the world...including the discoveries of atomic science, I am convinced that it is in the best interests of the Nizari Ismaili community that I should be succeeded by a young man who has been brought up and developed during recent years and in the midst of the new age..."

And bring a modern outlook Prince Karim did.

The "Imam of the Atomic Age", as some of his followers like to call him, became a transcendent figure. As the British magazine *Time* wrote in its obituary: "Few people bridged so many divides — between the spiritual and the material; East and West; Muslim and Christian — as gracefully as he did."

Spiritual leader with taste

The Aga Khan was a man who appreciated the good things in life. He inhabited a world of luxury supercars and private jets, had a particular penchant for thorough-

bred horses, and even owned a private island in the Bahamas.

He moved with people from the highest echelons of society, and if not for his title, might have enjoyed global renown as a venture capitalist alone.

Yet, he was the spiritual leader of his flock, and a man who helped Nizari Ismailis navigate crisis after crisis in the 20th and 21st centuries. "From the end of the Cold War, the end of colonialism in Africa and communism in Central Asia, and the continuous turmoil in the Middle East, where militant Sunnis [...], brand the moderate Ismailis as apostates," *Time*'s obituary said. "An Imam is not expected to withdraw from everyday life," the Aga Khan once told *Vanity Fair*. "On the contrary, he's expected to protect his community and contribute to their quality of life."

Aga Khan, the philanthropist

The Aga Khan Development Network, the Aga Khan's main philanthropic organisation, deals primarily with healthcare, housing, education, and rural economic development. With an annual budget of over \$2 billion,

\$1 billion, it works in some 30 countries.

"The engagement of the Imam in development is guided by Islamic ethics, which bridge faith and society. It is on this premise that I established the Aga Khan Development Network," he said at a symposium in 2004.

Among the most prominent entities that are a part of this network — and perhaps a reason why many in India and especially Delhi, are familiar with the Aga Khan's name — is the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Seeking to "impart a more informed understanding of the diverse cultures of the Muslim world," the Trust works to promote artists and musicians, renovate and refurbish important monuments, and keep alive traditions of art and culture across the Islamic world.

According to its website, the Trust's largest cultural project to date has been the restoration and revitalisation of the Humayun's Tomb Complex, including its gardens and the neighbouring Humayun's area, along with the rehabilitation of Sunder Nursery in Delhi.

THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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



In budget 2025, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced unprecedented tax cuts for the middle class. To what extent will these help drive consumption and economic growth?

Tax cut will have multiplier effects

Increase in demand from urban middle class will encourage firms to commit to new projects



KRISHNAMURTHY SUBRAMANIAN

BUDGET 2025 HAS effectively put an extra Rs one lakh crore into the hands of India's urban middle class by cutting personal income tax (PIT). The question is: What will be the economic impact? Economists use the concept of the consumption multiplier to estimate how extra disposable income can spark multiple rounds of spending and growth. In simple terms, when people have more money, they spend more. The shops and businesses that receive this money then pay their employees and suppliers, who in turn spend more. This chain reaction can multiply the effect of the original amount many times over.

The multiplier hinges on two ideas: (i) The marginal propensity to save (MPS), which is the fraction of each additional rupee that people save; and (ii) the marginal propensity to consume (MPC), which equals the fraction they spend and tautologically equals (1 - MPS). The consumption multiplier equals $1/(1-MPC)$ and so $1/MPS$. To estimate MPS, we note that the debt taken by households, which is included in the net savings rate but not in the gross savings rate, may be used primarily for asset creation. So, to know the proportion of Rs 1 lakh crore that will be consumed, one minus the gross savings rate for the urban middle class represents the best proxy. The gross national savings rate, which is averaged across all Indian households, approximates to 30 per cent for the last decade. This implies a MPC of 0.7 across all households.

However, India's middle class has a higher MPC than wealthy households. The affluent may invest extra income in stocks and real estate, but middle-income earners channel much of any windfall into day-to-day consumption: upgrading phones, buying household items, and spending on education or healthcare. Using the reasonable estimate of 20 per cent as the MPS for urban middle-class households, we obtain a consumption multiplier of five.

The Rs 1 lakh crore tax foregone announced by the Finance Minister is a direct transfer to the middle class and therefore a Rs 1 lakh crore increase in their disposable income. Using the consumption multiplier of five, the PIT cut could generate up to Rs 5 lakh crore in additional consumption this year.

the economy can push households to save for precautionary purposes; (v) if firms cannot expand production, higher demand might mainly raise prices, not output to match the rising demand.

Currently, urban middle-class spending is lagging rural demand. The PIT cut targets this group precisely, which drives much of India's consumption of electronics, consumer durables, and entertainment. Many such goods and services are produced locally, so less money leaks abroad. With India's fiscal deficit under control and consumer confidence holding steady, urban middle-class families will feel comfortable spending now rather than hoarding cash. Tax cuts can sometimes crowd out private investment if the government must borrow more to offset the revenue loss. However, the PIT cut raises demand in the crucial urban middle class, thereby encouraging firms to commit to new projects. More hiring spurs higher incomes, further boosting consumer spending. Instead of crowding out, the well-targeted PIT cut is likely to crowd in private investment.

Real consumption in India stands at Rs 104 lakh crore, and real GDP at Rs 185 lakh crore. Thus, a Rs 5 lakh crore increase leads to consumption growth of 4.8 per cent (five divided by 104), and GDP growth of 2.7 per cent (five divided by 185). Even with a more cautious multiplier of 3.3 — assuming a MPS of 0.30 instead of 0.2 — the bump to consumption and GDP will be equal to 3.2 per cent and 1.8 per cent respectively. Combined with baseline forecasts of 7.2 per cent consumption growth and 6.3 per cent GDP growth, the overall increase is likely to be 10 per cent for consumption and eight per cent for GDP.

The RBI should complement this move by transitioning into easy monetary policy to enable private investment, which will stimulate output growth over several years. Despite the PIT cut, the central government has been fiscally sound, keeping the fiscal deficit at 4.4 per cent of GDP. In fact, as I had predicted last year following the budget, the actual fiscal deficit will be lower than 4.4 per cent of GDP this year too. So, the RBI's policy stance must lean on fostering private investment and growth now.

Some argue: If tax cuts can create so much new spending, why bother with capital outlays (capex)? The key difference lies in duration. A tax cut is primarily a near-term stimulus; once absorbed this year, it does not yield fresh gains. In contrast, building roads, railways and power infrastructure raises productivity for years, boosting long-term growth. The PIT cut offers a timely spark, but it does not replace the longer-term benefits that arise from public investment. So, I do not anticipate this as a change away from the Union government's economic policy of growth through a virtuous cycle triggered by investment.

The writer, former chief economic advisor, is executive director at the International Monetary Fund

Only a few will benefit

Fall in real earnings of majority cannot be compensated by concessions — most don't earn enough to be amongst the taxpayers



SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG

THERE HAD BEEN a massive build-up to do something to please the middle class in the 2025-26 budget, particularly the urban, salaried, tax-paying middle class. Not coincidentally, this has been one of the talking points in the Delhi assembly elections.

The government has announced the setting up of the Eighth Central Pay Commission, raising expectations of higher pay and allowances for central and state government employees. The unified pension scheme (UPS), guaranteeing a pension equivalent to 50 per cent of last year's pay and dearness allowance (DA) thereon, was notified on January 25.

In the latest budget, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman did one better. She made incomes up to Rs 12 lakh per annum income tax-free and incomes up to Rs 24 lakh subject to lower tax rates for all assesses filing tax returns in the new tax regime. This would mean foregoing income tax receipts of Rs 1 lakh crore.

Are these concessions good enough to woo India's 'middle class'? Will this succeed in turning around India's wobbly consumption growth story?

India's personal income tax structure had two big pain points. One, the tax-exemption threshold of Rs 2.5 lakh under the old scheme (Rs 3 lakh under the new scheme) was awfully low. Second, the maximum tax rate slab of 30 per cent kicked in at only Rs 10 lakh under the old scheme (Rs 15 lakh under the new scheme). This resulted in an exasperating income tax burden on the taxpayers. Sitharaman took out both the pain points.

The minimum threshold has been raised to Rs 2.5 lakh and the 30 per cent rate-slab now kicks in at Rs 24 lakh only. This much-needed tax reform, as claimed by the Finance Minister, reduces the tax burden of taxpayers with income between Rs 8 lakh to Rs 24 lakh and above by Rs 10,000 to Rs 1.10 lakh a year. On top of it, the Finance Minister completely exempted taxpayers with a total income of less than Rs 12 lakh by granting a rebate for the tax payable. Such taxpayers will have rebate benefits of Rs 20,000 to Rs 60,000. The combined benefits of the tax slab and rebate are claimed to range between Rs 30,000 to Rs 1.10 lakh.

So far, so good. The important associated questions are: What will be the actual benefit against what is claimed and how many people in the middle class bracket are likely to benefit?

The new slabs, rates and rebates are applicable only under the new regime. Anyone who gets assessed under the new scheme does not get the benefit of many concessions

and exemptions like interest paid on housing loans allowed as deduction from rental income or loss, medical insurance premium, etc. Therefore, only those taxpayers who claim concessions less than the reduced income tax liability will shift to the new tax regime. About three crore income tax assesses who currently opt for the old regime, not more than 50 lakh are likely to benefit from the tax bonanza announced. The extent of their benefit will also depend on the concessions/deductions they would be foregoing.

The Finance Minister's claim of making a sacrifice of Rs 1 lakh crore by offering income tax concessions is also highly exaggerated. This is evidenced by the fact that personal income taxes are estimated to yield the government Rs 14.38 lakh crore in revenue in 2025-26, which is 21.15 per cent higher than the 2024-25 budget estimate (against estimated growth of 11.20 per cent for gross tax revenues). Such high growth cannot happen when the government is making sacrifices. Moreover, by not making the new tax slabs applicable to the assesses under the old regime, the Finance Minister did a great disservice to the 2.5-3 crore middle-class taxpayers.

Fifty lakh income taxpayers likely to benefit from the relief provided in the budget do not make up India's middle class. Nor is the claimed tax relief of Rs 1 lakh crore (actual impact may not be more than Rs 25,000 crore) enough to significantly add to private final consumption expenditure of Rs 200.30 lakh crore in 2024-25.

The real consumption driver is the real incomes of the people. The story is pretty bad there.

The Economic Survey 2024-25 presented the trends in real earnings of India's labour class. Real earnings of regular wages/salaried workers, between 2017-18 and 2022-23, had reduced, for men, from Rs 12,665 per month to Rs 11,858 per month and, for women, from Rs 10,116 per month to Rs 8,855 per month. In the case of self-employed workers, it had declined from Rs 9,454 per month to Rs 8,591 per month for men and from Rs 4,348 per month to Rs 2,950 per month for women. For the unfortunate women self-employed workers, even nominal earnings had declined from Rs 5,935 per month to Rs 5,497 in this period.

The regular wage/salaried earning workers constitute approximately 20 per cent of India's 65-crore strong workers or about 12 to 13 crore workers. Their declining real earnings cannot be compensated by income-tax concessions for the simple reason that most of them don't earn enough to be amongst the taxpayers.

Certainly, the urban higher-income middle class taxpayers would feel better with the income-tax concessions announced. That, however, is only a small fraction of India's middle class. For the vast majority of Indian people, these concessions would have no impact on their consumption standards.

The writer is former Finance and Economic Affairs secretary

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The requirement that 2.2 million Palestinians be forcibly resettled in neighbouring Arab states amounts to unambiguous endorsement of a criminal atrocity — ethnic cleansing."

— THE GUARDIAN

The Centre's V-C

Proposed UGC guidelines seek to snuff out what little authority states have in higher education spaces



JOHN BRITTAS

THE NARENDRA MODI government never misses a chance to condemn the Emergency as a dark chapter in India's democracy. But it continues to rely on contentious legislation framed during that era, notably the 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976, which shifted education from the State List to the Concurrent List. The newly proposed UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment and Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2025, have sparked a debate, especially regarding the appointment of vice-chancellors (V-Cs). The proposed changes threaten federal principles, erode states' authority in higher education, and pave the way for excessive centralisation.

The draft Regulations propose a sweeping overhaul of the V-C appointment process for state universities, giving chancellors — in most cases, the governors — the right to constitute Search-and-Selection committees. This marks a stark departure from the existing framework, wherein state governments play a pivotal role in the selection process for state universities.

Under the draft, the committee will comprise three members: One nominee each from the chancellor/visitor, the UGC chairman, and the university's syndicate or senate. The committee will recommend a panel of three to five candidates, from which the chancellor or visitor, with sole discretion, will make the final appointment. It removes the requirement for V-Cs to have prior teaching or research experience, raising fears of politicisation.

The origins of the governor's role as chancellor of universities can be traced to the Wood's Despatch of 1854, which recommended that university chancellors be persons of high station with an interest in the cause of education. Post-independence, governors retained this, thanks to a political milieu where a single party held sway at national and state levels. However, the rise of multi-party politics created tensions. The inability of elected state governments to effectively supervise their universities has led to myriad administrative challenges. Complications arise when the governor/chancellor diverges from the advice of the Council of Ministers.

Justice V R Krishna Rao, in the landmark *Mam Ram vs Union of India* (1980) case, characterised the offices of the President and governors as "functional ephemerisms". Unfortunately, governors have been resisting such constraints and, sometimes, acting in ways that contradict the state executive.

The Justice R S Sarkaria Commission acknowledged criticism regarding the discretionary authority exercised by some governors in their capacity as chancellors. The Commission on Centre-State Relations, however, took an unequivocal stance on the matter. In its report of March 2010, it underscored the risks of governors serving as chancellors and assuming other statutory positions.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP ON GAZA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Protect the ceasefire' (IE, February 6). Trump's proposal appears to run counter to US public opinion, which polls have shown is overwhelmingly opposed to new entanglements in conflict zones following the lengthy interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some experts say that proposed actions could violate international law. Others describe his ideas as unworkable. Human rights advocates say it would amount to 'ethnic cleansing'. Any forced displacement of the Palestinian population of Gaza would constitute a serious violation of international law and would be an attack on the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians as well as a major obstacle to the two-state solution.

SS Paul, Nadia

RESPOND CAUTIOUSLY

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'seems they had hot food after ages, many felt betrayed by agents' (IE, February 6). The use of handcuffs and shackles during deportation is not the action of a civilised nation. That said, it is difficult to equate the cause of those who knowingly use

Several states have sought to curtail the governor's role in university governance through legislative amendments, but these attempts have had varying degrees of success. A striking illustration lies in the governor's assent to the Gujarat Universities Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2013, which effectively divested the governor of chancellorship powers. It was Narendra Modi as Chief Minister who brought in the legislation and the NDA government was instrumental in granting the assent. In contrast, similar moves by Kerala and other Opposition-ruled states have been obstructed, with governors either withholding assent or referring such bills to the President.

This writer attempted to introduce a Private Members' Bill, Rajagopal Sabha Bill, 2024 — The Constitution (Amendment) Bill, 2024 (Amendment of Article 158). It sought to restrict the governor's role strictly to constitutional functions, preventing them from assuming extra-constitutional roles such as chancellorships. It was denied introduction due to the numerical majority of the ruling coalition.

Recent Supreme Court judgments have conferred primacy to UGC regulations over state university laws, igniting fervent debates on the constitutional relationship between central regulations vis-à-vis state laws. At the heart of this discourse lies the concept of subordinate legislation/delegated legislation — a progeny of executive fiat — which refers to Rules, Regulations, or Orders promulgated by executive authorities under the powers conferred upon them by an Act of Parliament or State Legislature. Granting primacy to delegated legislation like UGC regulations over state enactments impinges upon federalism. While state laws are crafted by elected representatives, delegated legislation originates from executive bodies.

The draft Regulations also seek to institutionalise contractual employment in higher education by removing the 10 per cent cap, accelerating the contractualisation of teaching positions. They also permit Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to recruit up to 10 per cent professionals from industry and non-academic fields as professors of practice, fostering corporate influence in academia while creating a fragmented faculty structure. The trend mirrors ad-hoc recruitment policies, such as Agniveers in the military and lateral entry in civil services, undermining social justice.

What is the Centre's true contribution to the education sector? Even in crucial schemes such as UGC grants for teachers, it has progressively shifted the burden onto state governments — today, states bear nearly 76 per cent of the total expenditure on education.

The draft Regulations are an affront to federalism. The legislative assemblies of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have already passed resolutions calling for a withdrawal, other states will likely follow suit. At a time when India aspires to position itself as a global leader in education and research, the draft Regulations' emphasis on central control threatens to homogenise education, eroding diversity and stifling innovation at the state level.

India's federal structure is its cornerstone, enabling both unity and diversity. It is imperative for all stakeholders to oppose measures that threaten this delicate balance.

The writer is a Rajya Sabha MP from CPM. Inputs from Anesh Babu

AAP'S PRINCIPLES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The idea of Delhi' (IE, February 6). The question is whether, in public perception, the AAP has lived up to its promise of an alternative politics based on transparency and accountability. AAP triumphed over the BJP in two consecutive assembly elections and evolved the 'Delhi model' of governance, privileging education and healthcare in the budget and heavily subsidising utilities for the common citizen as a counter to the development-oriented 'Gujarat model'. Now, battered by charges of corruption and abuse of public funds, AAP's very survival is at stake. Win or lose, AAP would do well to recall the principles on which it was founded.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

thehindubusinessline.
FRIDAY - FEBRUARY 7, 2025

Off the hook

US withdrawal is a mortal blow to the global tax treaty

The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the OECD global tax deal might have undone over a decade of herculean efforts to arrest tax evasion and to give countries their legitimate right to tax profits arising in their jurisdiction. The movement against tax avoidance gained traction in 2015 with 140 countries, including India, adopting OECD's base erosion and profit shifting package. The global tax treaty of 2021 was yet another milestone, targeted at large digital multinational entities which duck taxes across jurisdictions owing to the difficulty in establishing their physical presence.

This treaty had two pillars. One, countries were given the right to tax the profit of digital multinational companies arising in their jurisdiction above a certain limit. Two, minimum corporate tax rate of 15 per cent was to be levied across jurisdictions on MNCs with a total revenue over €750 million. Apart from India, around 130 countries, including the US, Germany and France had backed this treaty and 55 countries have already taken steps to implement this. The memorandum issued by the Trump administration in the last week of January, stating that all commitments made by the Biden administration regarding the OECD global tax treaty have no authority or influence unless it gets Congressional approval, puts the future of this global treaty in jeopardy. It may not be entirely coincidental that most large digital MNCs such as Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet and Amazon are US companies.

While the Biden administration tried to dissuade these companies from evading taxes through subsidiaries in low-tax jurisdictions and to disclose their actual income to US revenue authorities, the Trump administration is going the other way, protecting these companies. The memorandum states that a list of countries which have already implemented laws which are "extraterritorial or disproportionately affect American companies" shall be drawn up. It asks the Treasury department to consider retaliatory steps against countries imposing taxes on US digital giants. In the face of such belligerence, many countries may rethink their plans to tax digital MNCs.

It was the US which had spearheaded the global tax treaty in 2021, coaxing all the large nations to agree on this tax. With the US now withdrawing from it, other countries which had joined reluctantly may now withdraw. The world may be going back to the era where tax havens and ultra-low tax jurisdictions, which help rich individuals and companies evade taxes, thrive. Thanks to OECD's BEPS agreement and similar conventions, these low-tax jurisdictions have been cooperating, even if in a limited way, with other countries and sharing information. With the US now willing to look the other way, money laundering and round-tripping could get a fillip. However, India should not let up efforts to combat tax evasion. It should forge alliances with countries for information sharing and implementing equitable taxation policies.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Trump's foreign policy: an alarming new order takes shape
Nothing about Donald Trump's notion that Gaza should come under US control makes sense according to established laws and norms of international relations. But the current White House regime despises the old way of doing things and intends to reshape the world so drastically that restoration of a pre-Trumpian order will be impossible. The absurd incoherence of Mr Trump's proposal that the US "take over" Gaza doesn't make it any less sinister. The requirement that 2.2 million Palestinians be forcibly resettled in neighbouring Arab states amounts to unambiguous endorsement of a criminal atrocity — ethnic cleansing. The idea that the land, having been requisitioned by the US government, will then be transformed into a Mediterranean "Yelara" is disturbing and grotesque in its detachment from reality.

讀賣新聞

THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN
Trump's tariffs have the world at his mercy
While pausing high tariffs on Canada and Mexico for a month, the United States has imposed a tariff on China as planned. U.S. President Donald Trump's high tariff policies have the world at his mercy. It is important for other countries to carefully assess Trump's true intentions and his actions and deal with his tariff policies to prevent his trade war from developing into a full-fledged one. On Feb. 1, Trump signed an executive order to impose a 25% tariff in principle on imports from Canada and Mexico, and an additional 10% tariff on imports from China. The tariffs were scheduled to be implemented on Feb. 4, but at the last minute, on Feb. 3, the situation suddenly changed, now, however.



GURVINDER KAUR

The Budget 2025-26 has set the stage for a major transformation in India's shipbuilding sector, aiming to make the country a global player. By addressing cost disadvantages and opening new growth opportunities, these initiatives are targeted towards boosting shipbuilding, creating jobs, and reviving India's maritime industry. India's shipping sector heavily depends on foreign-owned vessels, with only 8 per cent of cargo carried by Indian-flagged ships. The fleet is ageing, and high manufacturing costs make commercial shipbuilding costly. To address these challenges, the government has announced key policy reforms in the Budget under a revamped Shipping Financial Assistance Policy.

One major reform is the introduction of Credit Notes for shipbreaking in the Indian yards to encourage sustainable ship recycling and create demand for new ships. To further support the sector, the government is developing Shipbuilding Clusters. These hubs will bring together infrastructure, skilled workers, and new technologies, enabling India to scale up production and expand into building different types of ships.

The Budget has also extended the basic customs duty exemption on shipbuilding inputs for an additional 10 years. This will lower the input costs for the sector.

Another key decision is the inclusion of large ships in the Infrastructure Harmonized Master List. This policy will be game changer, allowing access to long-term financing and attracting private investment into the industry.

Additionally, the ₹25,000-crore Maritime Development Fund, backed by government and private investors, will expand financing options for the sector. All these measures will not only enhance the overall shipbuilding ecosystem but also trigger the revival of the private shipbuilding industry in India.

With policy support now in place, the coastal States must make efforts to capitalise on these opportunities. The Economic Survey 2024-25 has emphasised the need for state-led initiatives to address fundamental challenges in doing business (EoDB 2.0).

STATE REFORMS

Over the past decade, the Centre has introduced key reforms, simplifying taxation laws, streamlining labour regulations, and decriminalising business laws. Building on these efforts, coastal State governments must take proactive steps to enhance further the ease of doing business through deregulation.

Establishing single window clearance



India sets sail to become a global shipbuilding power

SAILING AHEAD. The Budget has announced key reforms on ship recycling, excise exemptions and financing options

systems, fast-track approvals, better shipyard connectivity, flexible labour hiring policies and speedy land allocation systems will boost investor confidence.

Setting up state-level shipbuilding investment boards and collaborations with global leaders like South Korea and Japan will help attract investments in greenfield shipyards for enabling efficient production of world-class ships. Notably, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh have already made significant strides in this direction, positioning themselves as leading destinations for shipbuilding investments.

Complementing the measures taken by the Union and the State governments, the shipyards should focus on aligning their productivity with global standards. As highlighted in the Economic Survey 2024-25, India's business enterprises contribute significantly less to the overall R&D expenditure in the country, than their global counterparts.

This gap is evident in the shipbuilding sector as well, where shipyards and firms in the ancillary industry must substantially increase their investment

Complementing the measures taken by the Union and the State governments, the shipyards should focus on aligning their productivity with global standards

in R&D across all levels of the value chain, viz., marine equipment, ship design, production technologies, and terminal facilities.

R&D THRUST

Prioritising R&D in core ship technologies such as high-capacity marine engines, gas turbines, shafting, gearboxes, propellers, intelligent monitoring systems and cargo handling systems, will reduce import dependence and improve cost and time efficiency. Shipyards should also invest in R&D for producing carbon-efficient ship designs across conventional and future vessels, including energy and goods carriers, cruise ships, deep sea exploration platforms and inland ships.

Shipbuilding combines capital- and labour-intensive processes, requiring both technological investments and a skilled workforce. The Centre has been making continuous efforts to improve the country's skilling landscape.

Building on the skill development initiatives taken in the July 2024 Budget, this Budget has announced the setting up of the National Centres of Excellence for Skilling with global partnerships. The shipbuilding industry should leverage these centres, alongside institutions such as the Centre for Excellence in Maritime and Shipbuilding, to ensure a steady supply of skilled workers.

Collaborations with leading shipbuilding nations for joint educational programmes, modernising naval architecture curriculum in universities, and introducing specialised

courses such as shipbuilding robotics and modular ship construction will address industry needs.

Moreover, school-level ship model-making contests, college-level ship design competitions, and tailored ITI courses will spark early interest and inspire young talent to pursue shipbuilding.

There is also a need to invest in technology to make blue-collar shipbuilding jobs of technicians and other skilled labourers more lucrative. These combined efforts in education, skill development and technology advancement will cultivate a new generation of skilled shipbuilders, driving India's shipbuilding sector forward.

As highlighted in the Economic Survey 2022-23, shipbuilding will be a key driver for achieving India's Viksit Bharat @2047 aspirations due to the sector's high employment and investment multipliers and strong reliance on MSMEs. Beyond driving economic growth, building an indigenous fleet will be crucial for ensuring national economic sovereignty and strengthening maritime security.

The Budget marks a significant step in this direction by setting India on course to becoming a leading shipbuilding nation.

The writer is an Indian Economic Service officer serving as Joint Director in the Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance. Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Govt of India

SEBI safeguards in algo trading for retail investors

Algo trading involves using computer programmes to automatically execute orders based on pre-defined rules

bl.explainer

Akhshata Gorde

To protect retail investors and ensure a level playing field with institutional players, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has introduced stricter rules for algo trading starting August 1. This allows retail traders to use SEBI's Direct Market Access (DMA) facility through brokers, which was previously available only to institutional investors

What is SEBI's direct market access facility?

The DMA facility was introduced in 2008, allowing brokers to offer clients direct access to the exchange trading system through the broker's infrastructure without manual intervention by them.

Otherwise, clients would have to contact brokers to give their buy/sell orders and it is only after manual orders by the broker that the order gets executed.

However, the DMA facility was restricted to institutional investors and

investment managers until now.

How does the SEBI rule providing direct market access to retail investors impact them?

Retail investors will enjoy immediate execution of trade orders, which is particularly essential for algo trading. For example, an algo could be based on a programme designed to detect an arbitrage opportunity between the cash and the futures market, and place orders on exchanges in real time. So, by automating the trade order process, DMA provides investors greater and quicker control over trading execution and strategies. DMA also helps reduce transaction costs and brokerage fees as the intermediary goes away.

What are the safeguards SEBI has put in place?

The new rules mandate brokers to only on-board algo providers registered with the bourses, and they must handle any investor complaints related to the algorithms. Brokers must also get approval from the exchanges for any algo they offer. Even an algo created by retail traders has to be registered with the exchanges if it exceeds a certain



SEBI. Protecting investors' interests

order-per-second threshold. All algo orders will also be tagged with a unique identifier by the exchanges to establish an audit trail. The regulator has also mandated full disclosures of the subscription charges and brokerage fees collected by algo providers from clients. These measures aim to protect retail investors from risks such as faulty algorithms, market manipulation, and operational failures.

What are brokers' responsibilities?

Brokers must enable two-factor authentication for all Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) — which are a set of rules and protocols that allow a trading algorithm to directly connect and access data from a stock

exchange or brokerage platform. They must approval for any changes or modifications to approved algo and must block open APIs. Brokers should only allow access through a special API key for each client and a fixed IP address they approve, to make sure they can track and identify both the algorithm provider and the investor. Brokers must also differentiate between algo and non-algo orders. As a result, brokers may face increased costs for technology, compliance, and handling algorithm-related failures or losses, said Feroze Azeem, deputy CEO at Anand Rathi Wealth.

What are the responsibilities of stock exchanges?

Exchanges will oversee algo trading, including registering algo traders and setting eligibility criteria for brokers to on-board algo providers. They will also establish a standard procedure for testing algo, defining rules for brokers and algo providers. Exchanges will monitor algo orders and have the authority to "kill" orders from specific algo IDs if needed. They may also expedite registration for certain algo by setting specific turnaround times.

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

Clamour for rate cut

This refers to the article 'New RBI Governor Sanjay Mahotra chairs his first MPC meeting, may cut repo rate' (January 6). The newly-appointed RBI Governor Sanjay Mahotra, chairing his first Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting starting Wednesday, may possibly have his task cut out. Will he oblige the Centre with a 25 bps rate cut? However, it may be pertinent to recall that the RBI had last cut the repo rate by 40 bps in May, 2020, and still remaining unchanged at 6.5 per cent since February 2023, under for-erem Governor Shaktikanta Das.

But, in all fairness, RBI must be given a free hand to deal with the current situation.

Kumar Gupta
Panchsala (Mysore)

Apropos 'Policy rate: Cut or not to cut' (February 6). Declining inflation, fiscal consolidation and RBI's open market operations to stabilise rupee set the stage for a rate cut.

The MPC has held rates for 11 consecutive meetings, with an eye on inflation. A 25 bps cut will not have a drastic impact on the economy. Though RBI's caution is understandable the time is ripe for a rate cut.

NR Nagarajan
Dwarak

Patchy progress

This refers to the edit 'Building blocks' (February 6). Overall, while the shared data indicates that the government's increased financial support in education is improving the learning outcome at the school level, it also invites two observations. It is dismaying that the allotted funds remained underutilised. This gap between good intentions and actual action should be bridged. An effective education chain requires all its links — primary, middle and higher secondary levels — to be equally strong because the strength of a chain is determined by its weakest link. The disappointing student

performance at the middle school level could offset the gains at the lower levels thus transferring the problem to the roots of the stem.

YS Choudhary
Pune

Farm focus

This refers to Agri sector sees Budget providing impetus to rural economy' (February 6). The FM in her budget speech touched Agriculture as the first point of focus, announced enhanced ceiling of KCC from ₹3 lakh to ₹5 lakh, increase in credit ceiling for Self Help Group, focus on 100 developing agri districts, focus on Atmanirbha in Pulses without a doubt, in the long run help in pushing rural prosperity

The extension of Jai Jeevan Mission 2028 would ensure water supply to rural India.

However, the non fund allocation under PM Dhan Danya Krishi Yojana covering 100 districts with low productivity and moderate crop intensity is quite surprising and is not in sync with the announcement made in the budget. The setting up of a new urea plant of 1.27 million tonnes of annual capacity at Namrup in Assam indicates that there won't be any reduction in the fertilizer subsidy which is burgeoning year by year and the Centre has no intention of enthralling the farmers in switching over to organic farming.

RV Baskaran
Chennai

Illegal migration

Govt must address all related aspects

The landing of a United States (US) military plane with over 100 illegal Indian immigrants in Amritsar on Wednesday was a clear statement by the American government. Reports that many of them were handcuffed and chained underscore the intentions of the US administration. US President Donald Trump had promised to deport illegal immigrants from the country during his presidential campaign and he is doing exactly that. The use of a military aircraft was perhaps to show the seriousness of the cause and pictures of handcuffed illegal immigrants will likely please Mr Trump's core constituency. Although the US, which attracts a large number of illegal immigrants from across developing and poor countries, regularly deports them, the use of military aircraft is not unusual because they are more expensive than normal commercial planes. They are being used to make a statement.

Given the incident and the fact that over 18,000 illegal Indian immigrants have been identified and would likely be deported, two immediate issues need attention. First, it is not clear why the plane was sent to Amritsar and not asked to land in Delhi. It would have made more sense if the central agencies in Delhi recorded statements of these immigrants. Second, while India has done well to accept such immigrants readily, it must object to the US administration regarding the treatment of Indian citizens during their return on military aircraft. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar informed Parliament on Thursday that there was no departure from the standard operating procedure on the part of the US. However, India is engaging with the US government to ensure that deportees are not mistreated in any manner. Since the deportation is going to be a long-drawn process, the Indian government must work with the US to ensure that it is completed smoothly. The government here should also be willing to support the operation logistically, if needed, for the safety of Indian citizens. This will also send a message that illegal immigration should be avoided. The Indian government can cooperate with foreign governments to bring such immigrants back.

The other big issue that needs adequate attention is that of illegal migration itself. India is witnessing significant outward migration. In a large and developing country like India, it is understandable that some citizens aspire to move and settle in developed nations, partly driven by the prospect of a better quality of life. There is also a large number of Indian students who go abroad for higher studies and stay back because of better opportunities in countries such as the US. There is a large number of Indians in Silicon Valley, for example, who are doing well. However, those being returned by the US are not people belonging to such categories. These people are perhaps even willing to risk their lives to reach the US. As reported, these were also citizens from relatively well-off states and seem to have paid a lot to get into the US. The only plausible cause could be a lack of opportunities in the country. Thus, India must focus on creating economic opportunities with rapid economic growth. It also needs to crack down heavily on networks that are facilitating Indian citizens to illegally get into other countries. Such systems not only put the lives of Indian citizens at risk but also strain bilateral relations with other countries.

Campaigning deadline

The silent period has become redundant

The Election Commission of India (ECI), as mandated by the Representation of the People Act, imposes a specific deadline on political campaigning ahead of any election it supervises. Under the rules, the duration of an election campaign is two weeks after the announcement of the final list of candidates and campaigning must stop 48 hours before voting ends. In the age of the internet and artificial intelligence, this timetable may have outlived its utility. The two-week campaign deadline is in place to address a logistical issue, which is to enable ECI personnel to track whether parties or candidates are bribing voters, appealing to them in the name of caste or religion, and using government resources for campaigning. But with election schedules announced way ahead, it is — and has been — easy for politicians to observe these three strictures in the breach anytime before the deadline. Then there are grey areas, such as whether events like the Union Budget should be rescheduled to adjust to poll timetables. The outlook here has been varied.

In 2012, the United Progressive Alliance government had accepted the Opposition demand to postpone the Budget on account of five Assembly elections — Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur, and Goa — that were due between mid-February and early March. The presentation of the Budget was shifted from its (then) usual timetable of the last day of February to March 16. In 2017, the National Democratic Alliance government declined to consider a similar Opposition demand, and the Supreme Court struck down public interest litigation (PIL) on grounds that there was no evidence that the Budget would influence the electorate, nor could the exercise be dependent on state polls, which occur frequently. As this example shows, campaigning principles are dependent on the forbearance and ethical perceptions of the parties concerned. Valid questions, however, may be raised over the utility of a 48-hour cooling-off period ahead of voting day when rallies and media appearances (including on the internet, radio, television, and print) are banned to ostensibly enable a free environment that allows voters to analyse their choices. Several countries observe a pre-poll silence period of 24-48 hours. Most polling exercises in these countries are, however, much smaller and mostly conducted in a day. In India, with its sprawling and challenging geography and ever expanding electorate, the exercise has become increasingly complex.

One trend is the frequency of prolonged phase-wise elections — in 2024, for instance, voting for the Lok Sabha covered seven phases and one and a half months, with some states having multiple phases — making local silent periods moot. This scheduling disproportionately benefits large national parties with deep pockets, enabling them to stay in campaign mode in different parts of the country even if the silent period is being observed in some parts. Second, the proliferation of social media, with seemingly independent political influencers, remains outside the purview of the ban and increasingly makes a mockery of it. Third, several parties publish prominent advertisements in influential media on polling day. It is unclear how this practice does not constitute campaigning. The increasing de facto breach of the silent period has all but nullified its efficacy. It may be more sensible to switch to the practice in the United States, where a silent period is considered a breach of free speech and direct campaigning is prohibited only around polling booths on voting day.

Budget's consumption bet

Income-tax cuts are a step in the right direction, but private sector's failure to step up capex could exacerbate macroeconomic challenges

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



The Union Budget for 2025-26 provides much-needed personal income tax relief to boost private consumption while maintaining fiscal discipline. This augurs well for macroeconomic stability and improved fiscal-monetary policy coordination at this critical juncture when the economy is slowing down.

The gross fiscal deficit (GFD) target for 2025-26 has been budgeted at 4.4 per cent, a tad better than the 4.5 per cent target set out in 2021. The Budget has now indicated a shift towards using the debt-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio as a fiscal anchor. The Statement of Fiscal Policy indicates the government's commitment to keeping the fiscal deficit in check from 2026-27 to 2030-31, ensuring that the debt-to-GDP ratio reaches 50 per cent (+1) by March 2031. The shift to a debt-GDP ratio as a fiscal anchor is a welcome move. It is also encouraging to note the government's intention to pursue further fiscal consolidation to reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio. This is needed to create fiscal space to deal with potential exogenous future shocks.

For the debt-to-GDP ratio, however, the primary balance is more relevant than the overall fiscal balance, as it removes the risk of unpredictability of interest payments in a volatile rate environment.

Since debt-GDP ratios under different scenarios

in the Budget have been estimated based on the reduction in the gross fiscal deficit, interest payments could turn out to be an unpredictable factor. If there is a sharp increase in interest rates, the projected debt-GDP ratios could go awry, unless higher interest payments are offset by reduced expenditure on other items. However, this may be challenging given the predominant share of committed liabilities. In other words, the projected debt-to-GDP trajectory relies on interest rates remaining broadly stable over the next six years.

Any marked increase in interest rates would remain a significant risk to the projected debt-GDP ratios and would need to be navigated deftly.

The Budget has rightly provided significant relief in personal income tax. With heightened global uncertainty and hardly any signs of a revival in the private capex cycle, it was extremely important to swiftly reinforce the driver of private consumption.

The push to household consumption through personal income tax relief, however, has come at the expense of the central government's own capital expenditure, which in 2024-25 (Revised Estimates or RE) fell significantly short of Budget Estimates (BE). As a result, despite an increase in capital expenditure to ₹12.2 trillion in 2025-26, compared to ₹10.2 trillion in 2024-25

(RE), it remains broadly unchanged from the ₹11.1 trillion in 2024-25 (BE). This was perhaps a key reason why the stock market response on Budget day was muted, despite the significant relief in personal income tax.

Corporate tax collections have continued to disappoint, with their share in total revenue receipts (including states' share) falling from a peak of 42.7 per cent in 2018-19 to 31.7 per cent in 2024-25 (RE) and 31.6 per cent in 2025-26 (BE). A significant reduction in corporate taxes in September 2019 has not paid off. Hopefully, with the expected impetus to private consumption, private capex cycle will pick up. The central government has done the heavy-lifting in pushing public sector capex in the last few years. It is now for the private corporate sector to step up capex — failure to do so could exacerbate macroeconomic challenges.

The Budget has proposed a six-year *atmanirbharta* (self-reliance) mission for pulses, with a special focus on tur, urad, and masoor. Pulses are one of the most volatile components of the food basket and often pose a significant challenge in managing food inflation. India is the largest producer and consumer of pulses. However, in the case of a shortfall in production, the price of pulses turns highly volatile. This is because varieties consumed in India are not widely produced elsewhere, except some varieties in countries like Myanmar, Canada, and Australia. Therefore, in the case of a supply shock, even imports are only a limited option for pulses. Hence, the proposed *atmanirbharta* mission in pulses is a significant measure. If India achieves self-sufficiency in pulses over the medium term, it should help manage food inflation more effectively.

The allocation for centrally-sponsored schemes (CSSs) is budgeted to rise sharply by 30.5 per cent in 2025-26 (BE), though the rise is muted at 7.6 per cent on a BE-to-BE basis. Such transfers, which fall under Article 282 of the Constitution, have long been a subject of huge controversy for two reasons.

First, funds under Article 282 are tied in the states as the states do not have the freedom to spend the resources as they deem fit. The design features of CSSs also lack sufficient flexibility for states to innovate and adapt. Secondly, the central government uses CSSs to intervene in areas that fall within the domain of the states. In contrast, Finance Commission transfers under Article 270 (distribution of taxes between the Centre and the states) are to be used by the states as they deem fit. It is, however, concerning that the ratio of tied transfer to untied transfers to states (including grants-in-aid under Article 275) will rise to 34.8 per cent in 2025-26, thus reversing the declining trend of last four years (to 29.6 per cent in 2024-25 from 49.3 per cent in 2020-21).

Overall, the Budget has done well in initiating measures to address the immediate challenge of slowing household consumption, while exercising fiscal prudence, which bodes well for macroeconomic stability.

The author is senior fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi

JANAK RAJ



Time for light-touch but useful regulation

There's no doubt that light-touch regulation and a reduction in red tape would help with both the ease of doing business and the ease of living. Replacing red tape with a "red carpet" for investors has been on the "to-do" list for some time. The recent Economic Survey had it as a central theme, elaborating on the need for the government to get out of the way.

The Union Budget tabled last week carried the theme forward by proposing a committee to explore ways to ease the regulatory burden on stakeholders in non-financial sectors. The committee, which is yet to be formed and there is little information on its members, is expected to present a road map within a year. That may or may not be a tall order but regulations in consumer-facing services need a review so that the user benefits.

Cap aggregators, for instance, must comply with rules and regulations that are clear and useful so that riders are not left high and dry. There's some competition coming from new-age electric ride-sharing players these days, but their presence is still limited. While an increase in the number of meaningful service providers may help the sector become more user-friendly, that could take time.

While the current fleet of vehicles under the aggregator platform, including two-wheelers, three-wheelers, and cabs, is estimated to be around 2.5 million in the country, state governments have their own maths on it. For example, 21 cab aggregators and more than 100,000 vehicles are registered under the Delhi gov-

ernment's Motor Vehicle Aggregator and Delivery Service Provider Scheme, as of last year. These cab aggregators also include those from e-commerce companies and delivery service providers, according to the state transport department. According to rules, any cab aggregator, delivery service provider and e-commerce entity with a fleet of more than 25 vehicles must register under the scheme (which has electrification goals) to get a licence. Non-compliance could result in penalties ranging from ₹5,000 to ₹10,000 per instance.

While the registration of vehicles under this scheme serves a purpose, many of the practical hurdles that a passenger faces every day fail to get the attention of the authorities. Surge pricing — a concept of variable fare that a cab operator charges depending on the time of day, destination and the volume of traffic — has been a subject of debate around the world. India is no exception, with the antitrust body, the Competition Commission of India (CCI), also doing its bit on this. Aggregators, however, have maintained that the algorithm used by their apps decides the price without any human intervention. The jury may still be out on that, but surge pricing is not the only problematic issue when dealing with cab aggregators. While hailing a cab, it is the absence of certainty and predictability that's most worrying — any regular user of this platform in any city in India may have felt this.

The time between clicking on the app to reserve a cab and getting into the vehicle can be harrowing, depending on the mood of the driver (the partner,

as these aggregators call them). The driver, typically considered a gig worker, decides which rides to cancel after they are confirmed by the app. No questions asked. They also have the liberty to remain silent, without reaching the pickup point or cancelling the ride. This category of driver partner often enjoys keeping the passenger on hold — again, no questions. Then there are other issues like refund, safety, cleanliness and talking while driving, but those can be kept for later.

Gig economy has been a focus area for the government ever since cab aggregators, e-commerce, and quick commerce became an integral part of our lives. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also announced steps in the Union Budget to make things better for gig workers by including them for healthcare benefits under PM Jan Arogya Yojana. Some clear guidelines and regulatory framework for the gig workers and the platforms that they work for could go a long way in addressing user grievances.

In a 2022 study of the cab aggregator ecosystem, the CCI had highlighted surge pricing, but had pointed out that the perception of "surge" was not necessarily adverse, given the convenience and other considerations that riders valued more. But it had advocated adoption of self-regulatory measures by cab aggregators to inculcate best practices and ensure a well-functioning ecosystem.

It's been more than a decade that cab aggregators, whether foreign-owned or backed by large funding from foreign investors, have been around in India. It's high time they implemented best practices in both letter and spirit. That should include paying drivers better and offering them a more flexible work schedule. Only then will users have a good ride.

NOT FOR PROFIT

NIVEDITA MOOKERJEE



The Raj below the salt



BOOK REVIEW

RANJANA BANERJI

You might imagine that the era of colonial India was well mapped, with little left to say. After all, we studied our downfall and resurgence in history books decades ago. If we have learnt any more since then, it is the terrible extent of the cruelty and barbarism of our colonial rulers.

Yet, as this book shows us, we would be wrong. By delving into the stories of those forgotten or not considered worthy enough, fascinating aspects of life in 18th and 19th century India are revealed.

It is appropriate that Devasis Chattopadhyay starts his quirky tome with the man he has named it after — Harry Hobbs. A piano tuner. Not the

setter of standards or the toast of British Indian society, nor indeed the signer of proclamations. Instead, a man of the people but with inside knowledge. Hobbs was an adventurer, going wherever pianos were, across the exotic Orient. Along the way, he became a man of the world, with eyes and ears for what worked and what didn't, who was important and who could be.

It is a revelation to me that so many of those who people Mr Chattopadhyay's book are not better known. Calcutta (now Kolkata) was India's most colonial city, a true imperial capital in a way that its successor Delhi could never be. The Bengali remains a contradiction here — on the one hand, quick to pick up European customs and mannerisms, and on the other, ready and eager to throw bombs, embrace anarchy, and celebrate death to the imperialist. Thus, one would have expected nothing new in the city. Bengal's famous novelist, Mani Shankar Mukherjee, author of *Chowringhee*, made into that famous film starring Uttam Kumar, knew Hobbs who regaled him with stories of Calcutta life.

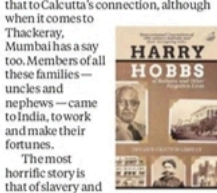
Mr Chattopadhyay's collection is eclectic. For instance, the supposed lover of Marie Antoinette, Antoine De L'Etang, was exiled to India apparently because of the dalliance. He made his way to Calcutta, where he met Julian Soubise, a Caribbean slave who was freed and brought up like a gentleman in England only to be turned out. Soubise taught riding and fencing, and De L'Etang became associated with his riding school. After Soubise's death, De L'Etang ran it. He wrote a few books on the breeding and lineage of horses in India. But De L'Etang's legacy was as the family he left behind. His beautiful

granddaughters, the Patties, all made important marriages. From one of these was the well-known author Virginia Woolf, and from another writer and amateur historian William Dalrymple. The complicated stories of India's connection to writers William Shakespeare, William Makepeace Thackeray are also here. I should correct that to Calcutta's connection, although when it comes to Thackeray, Mumbai has a say too. Members of all these families — uncles and nephews — came to India, to work and make their fortunes.

The most horrific story is that of slavery and indentured labour, and how one of the Princes — another illustrious family name, one of whom married into De L'Etang's family — played a role in continuing the tradition in India even though it was abolished in Britain. Mr Chattopadhyay weaves the story into that of the simple little cowrie shell, which became accepted currency in the slave trade. The plight of indentured labour, not slaves, not free, sent across the world to work in British colonies, is effectively told through the words of the slaves themselves.

A society's history is not just that of kings and conquerors, the vanquished and the victor. It is the people who make the story and efforts like Mr Chattopadhyay's open our eyes to the past in lively and engaging ways. Whether it's the detective Richard Reid or the hotelier Shirley Tremaine, these are names we ought to remember. In my working life as a journalist in Bombay (later Mumbai), journals were always stronger on local history and nostalgia. Kolkata has not made as strong enough case for its days as Calcutta, but a few well-known tales of Charles, Warren Hastings and Job Charnock, for instance.

This book fills some of those gaps.



HARRY HOBBS
AND OTHER FORGOTTEN LIVES: SOME UNUSUAL CAUSALITIES OF 19TH CENTURY KOLKATA AND THEIR INTRIGUING TALE
Devasis Chattopadhyay
Publisher: Nyog Books
Pages: 315
Price: ₹195

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The reviewer is an independent journalist who writes on the media, politics and social issues

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

LINES IN THE HOUSE

In Parliament, PM Modi underscored political battlelines that will span a year in which there will be a lull in electoral hostilities

OVER SIX MONTHS into his third term, in the immediate aftermath of a Union budget that is seen to be focused on easing the strain on the taxpaying middle classes, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Parliament framed two broad themes. In his reply to the motion of thanks on the President's address — in Lok Sabha Tuesday and in Rajya Sabha Thursday — PM Modi sought to connect the dots from today's poor to tomorrow's middle class, via the "neo middle class" — and said that they energise the India growth story. He described the many ways in which his government has empowered the poor — 25 crore, he said, have been lifted out of poverty in his tenure — and spoke of how SCs, STs and the "vanchit samudaya" or deprived sections were being given a leg-up to become stakeholders in "Viksit Bharat" through targeted programmes and schemes. In other words, politically decoded, his message was — don't look at the tax break as a shift from the government's pro-poor focus, but as an extension of it.

The second political message that could be read in his lines, and between them, was that the BJP still sees Congress as the main political opponent to be vanquished, and defines itself in opposition to it. This is worth noting because, on the ground, the strongest challenge to the Modi-BJP's dominance comes from regional parties, a different one in every state — not Congress. Despite the upward blip on the Lok Sabha scoreboard in June 2024, Congress has been unable to reverse the impression of an unchecked dwindling. That impression is also being increasingly weaponised against it by its INDIA allies, who are, one after the other, questioning its claim within the Opposition to primacy. PM Modi sketched several before-and-after scenarios — in each, Congress was the discredited ancient regime. While in the Lok Sabha speech he targeted the AAP too, without taking its name, in the Rajya Sabha speech, made a day after the voting in Delhi, he painted his own party and government as the anti-Congress. The Congress looks at "Family First", he said, while it is "Nation First" for the BJP. Congress world view is pessimistic — "doosre ki lakeer ka chhota karma (an attempt to self-aggrandise in zero sum games)" — while the BJP believes in "sabka saath sabka vikas (progress of all)". Congress is divisive on caste, promotes "jaatwad ka zahar" (the poison of casteism), its rhetoric masks its disrespect to Ambedkar, it is the party that presided over licence raj and clamped down on freedoms by imposing emergency, while the BJP gave constitutional status to the OBC Commission, unshackled the economy and takes forward the constitutional spirit, and so on.

In recent times, Congress has sought to mount the "social justice" plank by making the demand for a caste census central to its manifesto. By pointedly referring to "three MPs in one family", and with his rhetorical question on whether it would be possible if the family were SC or ST, PM Modi was attempting to undercut that Congress claim and strategy. His speeches underscored the battlelines that will span a year in which there will, otherwise, be a prolonged lull in hostilities — between the election in Delhi now and in Bihar at year-end.

SEA OF OPPORTUNITIES

By embracing and supporting athletic excellence, IIT-Madras sets a precedent for a more inclusive definition of achievement

IN ITS RECOGNITION of the fact that excellence cannot be confined to the classroom alone, the Sports Excellence Admission (SEA) scheme by IIT-Madras marks a transformative step. Launched in July-August 2024, with an investment of around Rs 25 crore and operational only in the Madras campus, 34 supernumerary seats are reserved for athletes who have won at least one medal in a national or international event in a sport recognised by federations under the Union sport ministry in the last four years, scored at least 75 per cent in their Class XII board exams and cleared the JEE (Advanced) test. It rewards athletic prowess with infrastructural support, as well as the opportunity to pursue higher education at one of the country's most coveted institutions.

In India, there has traditionally been a disconnect between academic dreams and athletic ambitions, with the focus largely being on the former. But sports requires a unique set of skills — discipline, perseverance, teamwork, and leadership — that can be equally invaluable in the world of innovation and technology. Providing athletes with specialised support offers them a chance to excel in their chosen sport and academic career. This can create a more diverse and rounded educational environment, where success is not solely defined by the ability to excel in a single domain but by a broader range of skills. These changes are also aligned with the global trend of holistic education. By embracing and supporting athletic excellence, IIT-Madras sets a precedent for other educational institutions across the country towards a more inclusive definition of achievement.

The fact that the origin of the scheme lies in tragedy — a series of student suicides on campus between September 2022 and April 2023 — also points at the larger malaise affecting higher education in India, where the barriers to too many of the opportunities too few and the stakes impossibly high. In recent years, IITs have consciously tried to address the lack of diversity, both in terms of gender and socio-economic backgrounds, through implementation of a supernumerary quota of 20 per cent for women in their undergraduate engineering programmes and open-door policies for aspirants to interact with faculty members, among others. Creating a culture of inclusivity and support will allow for better integration of diverse communities into these institutions and help dismantle stereotypes of a homogeneous, masculine STEM ecosystem. However, it is essential that these measures are complemented with other reforms, including mentorship, financial assistance for the marginalised, and counselling services. A diverse IIT campus will encourage creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking — the foundation upon which India's technological future should be built.

THANK GOD IT'S MONDAY

A new study suggests that evenings and weekends aren't the happiest times

IN CLASSROOMS ACROSS India and the world, repeated *ad infinitum* by teachers fond of clichés, a proverb adorned blackboards, walls and notice boards: "An idle mind," generations have been told, "is the devil's workshop." In 2025, researchers from University College London (UCL) have all but added a corollary. Apart from finding that "it is always better in the morning", the study suggests counterintuitively that most people are actually unhappier on the weekends than during weekdays.

The study, published in *BMJ Mental Health*, looked at responses from over 50,000 adults gathered between March 2020 and 2022 to find patterns in how mental health fluctuates over time and seasons. Broadly speaking (there is variation at the individual level), it appears that the idle mind is more prone to issues than a busy one. The morning, as the work day looms, isn't the cause of dread so much as evenings. In fact, what may appear to be the most insurmountable of problems in the evening can come into perspective after a good night's sleep. And the weekend comes with its own responsibilities.

The idle mind may not quite be the Airbairn for Mephistopheles as was once thought, but it turns out that that structures can sometimes be helpful, if only as a distraction. The weekday, for all the hassles of work, has a set pattern to it. The weekend demands more, and "relaxing" may just be a reminder of how empty life can seem — that mystical sense of ennui that inspired and depressed so many, from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Albert Camus. Perhaps the respondents in the UCL study had such a hard time with free time because it's so rare, today. In any case, people are unlikely to "thank god it's Monday".



SANJAYA BARU

IN THEIR ADDRESS on Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas, the day that commemorates Mahatma Gandhi's return to India from South Africa in 1915, successive Prime Ministers have said to the gathered audience of people of Indian origin (PIOs) overseas and non-resident Indians (NRIs) that they are Mother India's ambassadors. They represent Indian culture and civilisation, talent and enterprise. Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a Pravasi Bharatiya gathering in Bhubaneswar last month that overseas Indians are "Bharat's *raashtradrusht*".

The Indian emigrants who have been charged with entering the United States illegally and have been forced to return home, transported in US military aircraft, are ambassadors of a different kind. They remind the world not of Indian talent and enterprise, culture or civilisation but of the lack of opportunity, of discrimination of one kind or another and of the unease of living here that makes them undergo the hardship of illegal migration.

The leadership of the national movement took a dim view of the enforced export of Indian labour to European colonies, both due to their concern for human rights and individual freedom as well as their view that the plight of poorly paid Indian labour overseas was a blot on the face of Mother India. Under pressure from the nationalist leadership, the government of British India represented the imperial government in London in 1915: "Whatever may be the extent of the economic advantage arising from the emigration of indentured labour, the political aspect of the question is such that no one who has at heart the interest of British rule in India can afford to neglect it... For Indian politicians, moderate and extreme alike, consider that the existence of this system, which they do not hesitate to call by the name of slavery, brands their whole race in the eyes of the British Colonial Empire with the stigma of 'heletry'."

The status of today's illegal migrants is, in many respects, no different from that of the indentured labour of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The latter's great-grandchildren may now be feted in India as overseas representatives of Bharat mata, but there are many children of Bharat mata today who emigrate

Marginalised at home, deported from US, why some Indians undergo the hardship of illegal migration

illegally for reasons not very different from the ones that forced the poor of British India to be corralled into slavery.

Legal migrants are welcomed as fodder that fuels the development engines of the developed economies. They are welcomed because they bring with them either human or financial capital. Illegal migrants have only their wage labour to offer. Both have the capacity to contribute to the host economy, and both can potentially snatch away jobs from locals, and yet developed countries treat the legal and illegal very differently. Demographics play a role, as do social attitudes.

Illegal migrants are viewed with contempt both in the host and home countries. In the former, because they are not viewed as an asset but as a liability. In the latter, they are viewed as an object of shame because they represent the underside of a nation's development.

Media focus is at the moment on the number of illegal migrants identified by US authorities and the numbers being deported. Over the past five post-Covid years, the US Customs and Border Protection agency has detained as many as 170,000 Indian migrants attempting to enter the US illegally.

Interestingly, a large proportion of such illegal migrants are reportedly from the more developed states of Gujarat and Punjab. In both states, the sizeable presence overseas of Gujaratis and Punjabis is one factor that contributes both to the temptation to emigrate and the hope of eventual success, if they make it, networking through kinship links. However, it is also a fact that lack of adequate opportunities even in developed states has also contributed to the desperation of illegal emigrants.

The news of the enforced return of illegal migrants brings into sharp relief the dualism that characterises Indian emigration. India's talented and wealthy are being welcomed across the world and they are happy to leave home. India's depressed and desperate are, however, increasingly shunned. Donald Trump too makes this distinction. He has said that he would like to keep America's doors open to India's talented while shutting them to India's desperate.

On the one hand, the desperate are trying to emigrate illegally, on the other hand, an

increasing number of the wealthy are also leaving Indian shores in search of First World lives. Henley & Partners, a firm that describes itself as a "firm of global citizens" that assists clients to acquire foreign citizenship and residence "through investment", reports that 6,500 wealthy Indians opted for paid emigration in 2022 and 4,300 in 2024. Several developed economies are offering citizenship at a price and an increasing number of Indians are willing to pay that price.

Replying to a question in Parliament in August 2024, the Minister of State for External Affairs, Kirti Vardhan Singh, stated that a total of 2,25,260 Indians had "renounced their Indian citizenship" in 2022 and 2,16,219 in 2023. Taken together, a total of 18,80,559 Indians had given up their citizenship in the period 2011-23.

In the end, cross-border migration is a natural phenomenon made illegal only in the 20th century. Humans have moved through time in search of livelihood and opportunity. A large part of the "White American" population comprises Europe's poor and desperate and not the European elites. European elite migration to the US is a 20th century phenomenon that began in the inter-war period and increased after that. The shiploads that crossed the Atlantic were Europe's marginalised and desperate. The America that was open to such people, seeking a better and freer life, is now shutting its doors to the world's marginalised.

On returning home, how will these "illegal" migrants view the society that they left in desperation? What does life have in store for those who have been to the "land of opportunity" and then forced to return to a place that offered little opportunity? How will we respond to and reintegrate those who have been deported and sent back? The PIO and the NRI, the Rishi Sunaks, Satya Nadellas and Ajay Bangas, are received back home with much pride and fanfare. How will we receive the other pravasins?

Baru is an author and a former editor of The Financial Express. His forthcoming book examines the changing class background of emigrants from India



PAYAL MALIK AND HARISHANKAR THAYYIL JAGADEESH

A PAYMENTS ARCHITECTURE that is ubiquitous, confides to the user, reliable and used by millions, UPI is one of India's defining contributions to the 21st century. It has allowed India to bypass the dominance of card networks and moved digital payments ahead by decades.

Here, we argue that the policy discourse on problems created by the duopoly-like structure in the third-party app providers (TPAPs), such as Google Pay and PhonePe, and the attempts to reduce market share below 30 per cent, is misplaced. The imposition of arbitrary market-share cap to mimic a competitive outcome is counterproductive. These markets tend to become concentrated due to positive network externalities. There are other issues around UPI that need to be addressed — the biggest is personal data protection.

UPI shares significantly more data on the digital operating habits of consumers than traditional forms of transactions such as credit cards. Also, UPI does not have any data storage standards unlike traditional payment systems which have strict standards such as Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard. Finally, the data-sharing policies of TPAPs are not publicly available, limiting awareness of the data implications of the UPI ecosystem. This situation of maximal data collection and minimal standards is exacerbated by the number of parties involved in a UPI transaction, increasing the possibility of data leaks.

Privacy experts argue that the UPI ecosystem is able to sustain without fees simply by

SECURITY AT ITS CORE

Principles of data governance in UPI ecosystem should be adhered to

Privacy experts argue that the UPI ecosystem is able to sustain without fees simply by

virtue of being premised on data-collection and data-sharing. This means that if you are not paying, you are the product. While data collection in UPI is not as Orwellian as the behavioural data collection and monetisation by social-media firms, there are parallels. And perhaps, lessons to be learned. The true cost of the UPI duopoly is that the extracted data is entrenching the market position of data rich TPAPs. Data leveraging by TPAPs into adjacent markets may limit contestability in the broader financial products market, including insurance and micro loans. While business models based on data extraction are clearly a cause for concern, artificial market-share caps would not address this problem.

This discussion becomes crucial in the context of the recent Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules, 2025. TPAPs could fall within the ambit of significant data fiduciaries defined in the draft. The draft regulation emphasises the principle of data minimisation which specifies that only the data necessary for fulfilling the purpose, for which consent has been obtained, must be collected. When applied to the UPI ecosystem, this would entail determining the least amount of information using which UPI services can be rendered efficiently, safely and reliably. While the minimal data required can be freely shared among ecosystem participants, any further collection of user information should be based on informed, unambiguous and specific consent. These pre-competitive principles of data min-

imisation and purpose limitation can mitigate harms of data accumulation by large firms. It is important to note that Rule 5(1) of the Draft DPDP Rules 2025 permits the state and its instrumentalities to process personal data of a data principal for the provision or issuance of subsidies, benefits, services, etc. UPI would likely fall within the scope of the exemption to state instrumentalities. However, such exemption should be limited to the core infrastructure operated by NPCI TPAPs, who are private operators riding on the rails of the DP, need not be given such exemptions. If the Draft DPDP Rules 2025 are enacted and applied in a considered manner to the UPI ecosystem, it has the potential to create a high degree of transparency and protection of personal data, which can maintain and grow public trust in UPI and address the competition issue.

The joint communiqué by the G20 Troika (India, Brazil and South Africa) on DPI, AI and data for governance also calls for reducing asymmetries in digital economy, emphasises establishment of equitable principles for data governance to ensure privacy and security. Perhaps it is time for India to blaze the trail further in financial DPI and consolidate its position at the vanguard of innovation in financial inclusion by implementing these data governance principles.

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FEBRUARY 7, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

PRIESTLY MEDIATION

THE FIVE SIKH high priests are prepared to play the role of "mediators" between the government and Akalis to find a solution to the Punjab problem. The *Jathedar* of the Akal Takht, Giani Kirpal Singh, said that in case the government was "serious" about settling the issue, then all senior Akali leaders, now under detention in different jails, "must be released to create a congenial atmosphere".

RIOT INQUIRY

THE NEW BENCH of the Delhi High Court before which the writ petition of the People's Union for Civil Liberties and the People's

Union for Democratic Rights was posted found it difficult to order an inquiry into the November riots in Delhi as sought in the petition. Justice Yogeshwar Dayal said that the matter was essentially political. Justice B N Kirpal said, "These are delicate matters, would it be prudent for the court to interfere in this?"

OLD VS YOUNG

THE OLD GUARD in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has run into fiery deep trouble following the party's debacle in the Lok Sabha election. The younger leaders of the party are believed to have decided to ask the senior CPM leaders to quit key posts in the party's interests. The younger group is in fact

demanding that Jyoti Basu should quit as Chief Minister of West Bengal and take over as the general secretary of the state party.

TAX LOOPHOLE

THE DELHI MUNICIPAL Corporation will "levy" house tax but will not "collect" the tax from properties whose rateable value is less than Rs 1,000. The civic body found itself in a fix when it passed the ruling Congress-led party's resolution last year that properties whose rateable value is Rs 1,000 will be exempt from house tax because under Section 177 of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, the corporation is not empowered to exempt properties from levy of property tax.

Factors that bolster BJP comeback predictions

THE 2025 Delhi Assembly elections have garnered significant attention, with exit polls indicating a potential shift in the city's political landscape.

According to all exit polls, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is projected to secure an absolute majority in the 70-member assembly, marking a notable resurgence after its underwhelming performance in the previous general elections. This development suggests a possible decline for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), led by Arvind Kejriwal, which has governed Delhi for the past two terms.

The AAP, aware of the challenges it faced, was already anticipating a tough battle. Even if it manages to retain power, it is expected to do so with a slim majority. The party has argued that voters favoured another term for them but were hesitant

to openly express their support as they fear BJP might put them behind bars. However, pollsters have pointed out that Delhi voters are generally outspoken about their preferences, unlike in Punjab, where people tend to be more reserved in political discussions as they fear the government.

Exit polls attribute multiple factors to the projected BJP surge, including strong anti-incumbency sentiment, which has even cast doubt on the electoral prospects of Arvind Kejriwal himself. Additionally, the BJP's strategic campaigning and shifting voter sentiments appear to have played a crucial role. Notably, some Muslim voters and clerics have openly stated their support for the BJP over AAP this time, indicating a shift in the minority vote — traditionally a stronghold for AAP and Congress.

The AAP, which emerged from an anti-corruption movement in 2012, has been a dominant force in Delhi politics, winning consecutive terms in 2015 and 2020. However, the party faced significant challenges leading up to the 2025 elections. In September 2024, Arvind Kejriwal resigned as Chief Minister amid allegations related to a liquor policy case, leading to Atishi Marlena taking over the party's leadership. This leadership change, coupled with internal challenges, may have influenced public perception and voter confidence against AAP.

The Congress, which maintained its anti-Sanatani and anti-Modi rhetoric, struggled to mount an organised and well-structured campaign in the Delhi Assembly elections. The party's failure to adapt its messaging to voter concerns likely contributed to its weak

positioning.

AAP's anti-corruption stance took a hit due to the alleged liquor scam, which forced Kejriwal to step down. This controversy, along with governance concerns such as inadequate infrastructure development, may have led to voter apprehension. During the campaign, AAP attempted to deflect criticism by blaming neighboring Haryana for various issues, including allegations of attempts at genocide, but this strategy may not have resonated with voters.

On the other hand, the BJP strategically targeted AAP strongholds, particularly in North and Northwest Delhi, to expand its voter base. Initiatives such as distributing keys to flats for slum dwellers in the Wazirpur constituency likely strengthened its appeal. Additionally, traders in traditional

commercial hubs like Chandni Chowk expressed dissatisfaction with the AAP government's performance, further bolstering BJP's prospects. While exit polls suggest a significant victory for the BJP, the actual results, scheduled to be announced on Saturday will confirm the electorate's decision, a BJP win would signify a major shift in Delhi's political landscape, ending AAP's decade-long dominance and potentially altering policy directions in the capital.

Conversely, if AAP manages to retain power, it will underscore the party's resilience amid challenges. The Congress' performance will also be closely watched as it attempts to regain relevance in Delhi politics. With just 24 hours left until the results, all eyes remain on Delhi to see how the political narrative unfolds.

LETTERS

'Right moment' for PM's holy dip

UNLIKE most devotees, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chooses the "right moment" for his "divine connection". His holy dip in the Sangam could not have been timed better. This time too he, true to style, bathed himself in religious symbolism. The "Rudraksh" he held in his hands, the deep orange jersey he was clad in, the aarti he performed amid eth chanting of mantras said it all. He was not bothered about the allegation that it was a bid to sway the voters of Delhi if he could favour his party. Modi's way of seeking votes was not limited to rallies and road shows. Being in a holy place on the day of election is his best election campaign mode. But the problem is that it amounts to displaying piety and using it to influence the voters. Of all the right-wing politicians, Modi has perfected the art of tapping religious identity for political gain to perfection. No doubt, if the visuals are anything to go by, he looked at a perfect fusion of religion and politics. But how it benefits the mass of Indian humanity, and it is acceptable in a secular democracy cannot be left unasked.

G David Milton, Maruthanadu, TN

Kudos to Hyderabad innovator

THIS has reference to the News, "Techie Develops Garland Machine" (February 6, 2025). Kudos to our Bilkampet innovator Shyam Babu for designing a 10 kg garland making machine. It was only on Wednesday that our IT & Electronics Minister Ashwini Vaishnav said, "India has a high degree of creativity." Shyam Babu's machine can be operated both by battery and electric power. By keeping the flowers in the designated place, the machine automatically makes garlands. This in fact is a true innovation. We have abundant talent with us. Somehow, we fail to encourage them by giving them a free hand. As our IT Minister hopes, with our young entrepreneurs and our researchers India will become world leaders of the A 1 revolution.

Dr A B Sai Prasad, Bengaluru

Dollar dreams end in dismay, despair

GOING to the USA to earn high incomes, maintaining high standards of living was earlier definitely a green pasture for the educated elite, but this notion has to change at least now keeping in view the present political times in US. It is high time that the Indian students realise this and focus more on having education here itself. Honestly, sincere hard-work, quick accurate decision making and strong performances will certainly pay huge dividends within India itself. Merit pays here also. The recent happenings in the USA should be an eye opener to all to go to USA only with valid visas.

Katara Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

IT is exasperating to witness the mass extradition of Indian citizens by USA. They are termed as illegal immigrants. Those who went to US on student visa, do menial jobs, earn extra bucks for survival; they too may be termed illegal and deported back. The gross unemployment in home country is prompting the Indians to risk 'investing' in US dreams. Government must either financially support the migrants till they settle in US or must provide employment to youth in India to contain the exodus.

P R Ravinder, Hyderabad.

AI summit should address grave threats

REUSE Editorial "A global summit on AI amid malicious abuses" (February 6, 2025). Artificial Intelligence is no doubt an extraordinary phenomenon moving at a frenetic pace. AI having a sinister influence on the human mind is discernible, it can play havoc to shape the behaviour of people with detrimental effect. Keeping in view, Facebook's AI programme is designed to be part of their ambitions after AI has started to gain prominence. It is expected that the AI summit co-chaired by India and France to pave way for global AI standards will promote ethical governance by adopting the best practices alongside building a robust talent pool to spur AI startup pace.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad

Primary education in a state of neglect

ANNUAL Status of Education Report) report ANGO Pratham revealed incremental improvement in certain pockets of rural school education. We need transformational educational change. Primary school education has never been a priority for any government since independence. We made good strides rightly so in professional courses like IIT/NIT/ AIIMS but equal rigour lacks in school education. Education being state subject, they must work on high budget allocations for full strength of skilled teachers and infrastructure, washrooms for girls, library, playgrounds etc.

Buddha Jagdish Rao, Visakhapatnam

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Court advises warring lady officers to read 'One Minute Apology'

BENGALURU: The evidence hearing was held in the 5th ACMM Court in Bengaluru regarding the defamation case filed by IAS officer Rohini Sindhuri against IPS officer Roopa Moudgal. Rohini Sindhuri and Roopa Moudgal, who were present in the court, were advised to reach a compromise. Both of them are senior officers who have earned a good reputation. 'You should dedicate your time to the society. Instead of wasting time in court proceedings, think about whether a compromise is possible,' said Judge Vijay Kumar Jalla. He also advised the two officers to read the book One Minute Apology and adjourned the next hearing to February 12. The fight between IPS officer D Roopa, who had made serious allegations by sharing photos of Karnataka IAS officer Rohini Sindhuri on social media, had ended in the local court, the High Court and reached the Supreme Court. However, the fight between these two officers has not been resolved even in the Supreme Court.

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

UNION BUDGET 2025-26

A BOOST TO THE TEXTILE SECTOR

GIRIRAJ SINGH
(UNION MINISTER
FOR TEXTILES)

THE Indian apparel & textile industry with a size of about US \$ 176 billion contributes close to 2 per cent to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and accounts for about 11 per cent of the manufacturing output. The textile industry is also one of the largest sources of employment generation in the country, directly employing over 45 million textile workers. India is the sixth largest exporter of textiles and apparels and has a share of about 4 per cent of the global trade in this segment. The share of textile and apparel (T&A) including handicrafts in India's total merchandise exports is currently about 8 per cent. The sector has perfect alignment with government's key initiatives like Make in India, Skill India, Women Empowerment and Rural Youth Employment. The Budget announced an outlay of Rs 5,272 crore for the Ministry of Textiles for 2025-26. This was an increase of about 19 per cent over budget estimates of 2024-25 (Rs 4,417.03 crore), and is the highest in recent years.

The Budget for the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme for Textiles has been enhanced from Rs 45 crore (BE) in 2024-25 to Rs 1,148 crore this year. The PLI scheme for textiles is being implemented to enhance India's manufacturing capabilities and enhancing exports with an approved financial outlay of Rs 10,683 crore over a five-year period. It

covers sunrise sectors like the Manmade Fibre (MMF), MMF apparel and technical textiles segment, to enable these sectors to achieve size and scale, to become globally competitive.

Productivity Enhancement

THE Union Budget 2025-26 has announced a 'Mission for Cotton Productivity'. This 5-year mission will facilitate significant improvements in productivity and sustainability of cotton farming, and promote extra-long staple cotton varieties. This mission would be jointly implemented by Ministry of Agriculture & Family Welfare (MoA&FW) and Ministry of Textiles.

Duty Incentive

The National Technical Textiles Mission of the Ministry of Textiles focuses on (i) research, innovation and development; (ii) promotion and market development; (iii) education and skilling; and (iv) export promotion in technical textiles. The Budget has added two more types of shuttle-less looms to the list of fully exempted textile machinery. Duty on shuttle less loom (below 650 meters per minute) and Shuttle less loom Air Jet Looms (below 1000 meters per minute) for use in textile industry has been made nil from the existing 7.5%.

Protection For Domestic Sector

The Budget announcement to increase Basic Customs Duty rate on knitted fabrics covered by nine tariff lines from 10%



India is the sixth largest exporter of textiles and apparels and has a share of about 4 per cent of the global trade in this segment. The Budget announced an outlay of Rs 5,272 crore for the Ministry of Textiles for 2025-26. This was an increase of about 19 per cent over budget estimates of 2024-25 (Rs 4,417.03 crore), and is the highest in recent years. Efforts would be made to further energise the textiles sector to make India Atmanirbhar in the entire raw material value chain, tap more investments, augment its domestic market size and exports, and maintain and enhance its potential for ensuring large-scale livelihood opportunities. The PLI scheme for textiles is being implemented to enhance India's manufacturing capabilities and enhancing exports with an approved financial outlay of Rs 10,683 crore over a five-year period. It covers sunrise sectors like the Manmade Fibre (MMF), MMF apparel and technical textiles segment, to enable these sectors to achieve size and scale, to become globally competitive

or 20% to "20% or Rs115 per kg, whichever is higher" will fortify the domestic textile industry by curbing the influx of low-priced imports of knitted fabrics. This measure will encourage the use of domestically produced fabrics, boost capacity utilisation, and stimulate investments in local manufacturing.

Thrust to MSMEs

The budget has identified MSMEs as one of the engines for bringing about transformative reforms in the economy. This gains importance for the textile sector, given that a majority of India's textile and apparel production capacity is represented

by MSMEs, which account for over 80% of the sector. Provisions like revision in classification criteria for the MSMEs with significant enhancement of credit availability with guarantee cover would help them achieve higher efficiencies of scale, technological upgradation and better access to capital. With the revised classification, now more units will come under MSME.

Mega Events to Promote Sector

To further the above agenda, and to give a fillip to the Indian textile industry, a mega event - Bharat Tex 2025 - is being organised by 11 major textile

industry bodies and supported by the Ministry of Textiles. Bharat Tex 2025 would be one of the largest events of its kind in the world both in scale and scope, as it brings the entire textile industry value chain, from raw materials to finished products, and including accessories under one single roof. Built around the twin themes of resilient global value chains and textile sustainability - the event focuses on sustainability, innovation, and global collaboration.

The main event will be held from February 14-17, 2025 at the Bharat Mandapam and will cover the entire value chain of textiles from raw ma-

terials to finished products, while related exhibitions such as accessories, garment machinery, dyes and chemicals and handicrafts, will be held from February 12 to 15, 2025 at the India Expo Centre and Mart Greater Noida.

Conclusion

With the enabling policy support in place, efforts would be made to further energise the textiles sector to make India Atmanirbhar in the entire raw material value chain, tap more investments, augment its domestic market size and exports, and maintain and enhance its potential for ensuring large-scale livelihood opportunities.

What went wrong in Washington?

CRYSTAL ZHANG

ON Wednesday night (January 29, 2025) US time, a passenger jet and US Army helicopter collided at a low altitude near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, and crashed into the Potomac River. A total of 60 passengers - including US and Russian champion figure skaters - and four crew were on board the American Airlines flight AA5342 from Wichita, Kansas. Three military personnel were in the chopper, which was conducting a routine training flight. Authorities say no one on board either aircraft survived.

This crash comes just over a month after a passenger jet crashed in South Korea - possibly as a result of a bird strike - killing all but two of the 181 people on board. The two incidents have focused attention on aviation safety around the world.

In the case of the most recent tragedy in the US, technology exists that is designed to help pilots avoid midair collisions with other aircraft. It is known as the Traffic Collision Avoidance System - or TCAS.

So how does it work? And why might it have failed to prevent disaster in this case?

What is a TCAS?

A TCAS is an aircraft safety system that monitors the airspace around a plane for other aircraft equipped with transponders. These are devices that listen for and respond to incoming electronic signals. The system - also sometimes referred to as an ACAS (Airborne Collision Avoidance System) - operates independently of an external air traffic control system. Its purpose is to alert pilots immediately to nearby aircraft and potential midair collisions. Since the technology was developed in 1974, it has undergone a number of advances.

The first generation technology, known as TCAS I, monitors what's around an aircraft. It provides information on the bearing and altitude of any nearby aircraft. If there is a risk of collision, it generates what's known as a "Traffic Advisory" - or TA. When a TA is issued, the pilot is notified of the threat,



but must themselves determine the best evasive action to take.

The second generation technology, known as TCAS II, goes a step further: it provides a pilot with specific instructions on how to avoid a collision with a nearby aircraft or conflict with traffic, either by descending, climbing, turning or adjusting their speed.

These newer systems are also able to communicate with each other. This ensures the advice given to each aircraft is coordinated. Any aircraft used for commercial purposes must be equipped with a TCAS in accordance with inter-

national regulations under what's known as the Chicago Convention. There are specific provisions under the convention for noncommercial aircraft. Military helicopters are not subject to the provisions of the Chicago Convention (although they are subject to domestic laws and regulations). And there are reports the military helicopter did not have a TCAS system on board.

TCAS limitations at low altitudes

Regardless of whether the military helicopter involved in the crash was fitted with a TCAS, the technology still has limitations. In particu-

lar, it is inhibited at altitudes below roughly 300 metres.

The last recorded altitude of American Airlines flight AA5342 was roughly 90 metres. The last recorded altitude of the US military helicopter that collided with the plane was roughly 60 metres. It is not an accident that a TCAS is inhibited at low altitudes. In fact, this is part of the design of the technology. This is primarily because the system relies on radio altimeter data, which measures altitude and becomes less accurate near the ground. This could potentially result in unreliable collision-avoidance instructions. Another issue is that an aircraft at such a low altitude cannot descend any further to avoid a collision.

The site of several near misses

Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport is one of the busiest airports in the United States. Commercial, military and private aircraft share very limited airspace and corridors. It has been the site of sev-

eral near misses in recent years.

For example, in April 2024, a commercial plane pilot coming into land had to take evasive action to avoid a helicopter that was roughly 100 metres beneath it. In an incident report, the pilot said: We never received a warning of the traffic from (air traffic control) so we were unaware it was there.

Many people, including Democratic US senator Tim Kaine, pointed to this near miss as evidence of why a plan to allow more flights into Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport should not proceed. Kaine said on X: The near-miss crash at DCA yesterday is yet another example of why we can't keep cramming more flights to this airport. I've been warning about this for years - the system is overwhelmed and it's a threat to public safety. Despite this, the plan was approved the following month. All of this will undoubtedly be examined as part of the investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board into this disaster.

(Writer is Associate Professor, Aerospace Engineering & Aviation, RMIT University, Melbourne; Courtesy: <https://theconversation.com/>)

Opinion

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2025

Promise of a benign GST

FM's intent to lower the rates inspires confidence as it is expected to create a positive output effect

FINANCE MINISTER NIRMALA Sitharaman has indicated that the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council might not delay the much-awaited "rationalisation" of the rate slabs any longer, and stressed that what is in the offing is a "thorough review", particularly concerning the items of daily consumption. Importantly, she articulated that the intent of the exercise, which started three years ago, is to "have fewer and lower rates". This is indeed a welcome objective, and could give a consumption booster to the economy that is far bigger in magnitude and efficacy than the income tax (I-T) relief announced in the recent Budget.

A large part of the estimated 1.7 T giveaways of ₹1 lakh crore would be used by indebted households to repay loans. Also, the reliefs might not lead to any incremental consumption by the rich and super rich. A part of the funds forsaken by the exchequer may add to bank deposits as well. The flow of funds to the real economy from this process may not necessarily be prompt and spontaneous, as the banking sector would likely weigh the pros and cons for its own balance sheets. Also, while just 32 million taxpayers are the beneficiaries of the I-T concessions, reduction in GST rates is bound to impact almost the entire population. It would also help keep inflation in check and allow interest rates to reduce. The net result of all this could be a fillip to both consumption and investment demand, which the slowing economy is in dire need of.

The presumption that the way to boost GST revenues — which, after the initial year's under-performance, have just about approached the pre-GST level and tend to level off — is to raise the tax rates is faulty. True, a wide array of goods and services has seen reduction in tax rates after the launch of GST in July 2017, leading to a fall in the weighted average rate to a little over 11% at present from the so-called "revenue neutral rate" (RNR) of over 15% computed before the onset of the tax. However, it is illogical to resort to rate increases for revenue gains. The concept of a permanent RNR is erroneous in a world where innovations and technology constantly create new goods and services, and tax bases keep altering across the board, typically with a bias for widening.

The minister signalling a lowering of tax rates is especially good news, given that it comes in the backdrop of a reported move to make the GST cess an asserted "luxury and demerit" goods virtually a permanent feature, by merging them with the top tax slab effective April 1, 2026. Consumption of luxury items may be largely confined to the top of the income pyramid, but the demand for high-value items is also what millions of workers rely on for their jobs and income. A prohibitive tax on them would do no good for the economy. After all, the GST cess was meant for the specific purpose of finding resources for the revenue guarantee accorded to states for the initial five years of GST. That purpose no longer exists. The slab rejig must involve simplification of the structure by reducing the tax rates to two — a lower merit rate and a standard rate — with minimal exemptions. The average rate on a weighted basis ought to be below 10%. This would help improve revenue buoyancy and give an impetus to economic growth.

The US job market is weaker than it looks

THE RESILIENCE of the labour market over the past year has, in large part, been about strength in sectors such as education, health care, and government that are somewhat immune to economic cycles. Continued robust hiring there has contrasted with weakness in more cyclical industries including construction, manufacturing, and professional services. So long as that balance remains, we can muddle through without unemployment spiking, even if high interest rates and the prospect of a trade war keep some employers sitting on their hands.

The problem is that those less-cyclical parts of the labour market are also cooling off. Unless we get a pickup elsewhere, employment prospects for job seekers will weaken in 2025.

Out of the 2.2 million jobs added in the US in 2024, 1.4 million were in education, health care, or government. In the 2010s, a solid contribution from those industries was closer to 700,000 positions per year, half of last year's pace. These industries were laggards in the post-pandemic recovery, taking longer to normalise than food services or construction. Schools and hospitals weren't getting into bidding wars for workers the way airlines or restaurants were in 2021. Government employers took longer to disburse the funds they received as pandemic relief or under President Joe Biden's fiscal support programmes. In some cases, it has taken weakness elsewhere for workers to accept the lower pay but relative stability of positions in education and government.

But the data show that the pandemic adjustment is now drawing to a close. Job openings in private education and health services remain above 2019 levels, but they fell 20.7% year-over-year in 2024, according to the Job Openings and Labor Market Survey data released this week. Openings in government fell 12.4% from a year ago, and that was before the Trump administration took office and began looking to cut seemingly every job it can.

The dynamic in industries such as construction, manufacturing, and professional and business services is currently one of low hiring, and we're seeing the same situation take hold in education, health care, and government once job openings are filled. For federal and state governments, budgetary pressure and political shifts suggest an even more pronounced slowdown in 2025. This lagged labour market cooling is perhaps best seen in the quarterly Employment Cost Index report, where private sector wage growth is rapidly returning to pre-Covid levels while wage growth for government employees is much earlier in the cooling process.

There's a world in which a mix of interest rate cuts from the Federal Reserve and the new administration's pro-business policies encourage a labour market handoff from less-cyclical industries to more-cyclical industries. But that's not the situation we find ourselves in at the moment.

While the Fed has cut interest rates by 100 basis points since September, longer-term rates have risen. Residential construction and resale housing activity remains subdued. And while the business community has been hopeful about the impact of the Trump administration, there's so far not much visibility on the prospects for tax reform from Congress or deregulation. Instead, we've had an increase in tariffs on Chinese imports, and the threat of duties on goods from Mexico, Canada, and the European Union — something that will raise costs for many businesses. The one part of the economy that's booming is artificial intelligence, but its insatiable demand for semiconductors, data centres, and electricity hasn't yet translated into demand for many additional workers.

The bottom line is that as we progress through 2025, we're going to need "low hiring" industries to start turning around to prevent labour market conditions from getting worse. Lower interest rates from the Fed or pro-worker policies from Washington would be the best ways to accomplish this, but it may take a pickup in unemployment for those to become a priority again.



CONOR SEN

Bloomberg



TARIFF TROUBLES

GETTING TRAPPED IN A FREE TRADE AGREEMENT NEGOTIATION WOULD NOT SERVE INDIA'S INTERESTS

Grappling with America First

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP's America First trade policy has created turmoil across continents. Colombia, Canada, Mexico, and China have already faced the brunt of the muscular use of tariffs by the US for supposedly addressing illegal immigrants and illegal sales of fentanyl. President Trump has also threatened the European Union with high tariffs. What goals Trump will seek to achieve with his tariff threat and which country he will strike next remains uncertain.

While India has managed to stave off any immediate tariff threat, the signs appear to be ominous. In the past, Trump has accused the country of being a tariff abuser and currency manipulator — accusations which have been strongly denied by the Indian government. India should brace itself for being required to accommodate the economic interests of the US.

With the US accounting for almost 17% of India's merchandise exports and our overwhelming dependence on it for exports of information technology services, we are undoubtedly vulnerable to pressures from the US. On the trade front, what could be the demands made by the US on India? The 2024 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers (NTE report) brought out by the United States Trade Representative, which contains a laundry list of perceived grievances against its trading partners, provides some pointers.

First, the NTE report identifies high tariffs on the following products as constituting a significant barrier to trade in agricultural goods and processed foods: alcoholic beverages, almonds, apples, canned peaches, chocolate, citrus fruits, coffee, cookies, corn, dairy products, frozen French fries, grapes, pecans, potatoes, poultry, prepared foods used in fast-food restaurants, raisins, vegetable oils,

walnuts, etc. These products are likely to be on the US list of demands for lowering customs duties and easing import requirements.

Second, in the manufacturing sector, the NTE report makes a mention of India's high tariffs on motorcycle, automobiles, drug formulations, medical devices, and telecommunications equipment. Further, it has commented adversely on price controls for cardiac stents and import restrictions on laptops, tablets, and servers. President Trump could seek to prise open the Indian market for increasing the US exports for these products.

Third, with respect to services, India's prohibition on foreign investment in the inventory-based model of e-commerce retail, the government maintaining an "explicit sovereign guarantee on every Life Insurance Corporation policy", and the same giving it "an unfair competitive advantage" find adverse comments in the NTE report. The US has also raised concerns about the announcement by the National Payments Corporation of India to impose a market share limitation of 30% for foreign electronic payment service suppliers processing online payments made through India's Unified Payments Interface. There are several other market access-related concerns

of the US in various service sectors.

Fourth, it is hidden from one that an important objective of the US is to enhance the windfall profits of its producers of patented pharmaceutical products by seeking to dismantle India's generic medicine industry. This is to be done through tightening provisions beyond what has been mandated by the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights agreement at the World Trade Organization. In particular, the US is likely to demand an amendment to Section 3(d) of the Indian Patents Act, which has so far been effective in putting brakes on overpricing of patents and facilitating the timely entry of generics in the market. The NTE report has specifically articulated US concerns on Section 3(d).

Addressing the issues of deep economic interests to the US are likely to have far-reaching and adverse implications for India. Given the very high level of subsidies provided by the US to its farm sector, the livelihood of Indian farmers would be threatened if India lowers the customs duties on agriculture products with substantial domestic production. It would also have an adverse impact on the efforts of the government to diversify from cereal production to other agricultural products. Aatmanirbhar Bharat

As an integral part of any deal with the US, India must insist on securing reciprocal market access for its goods in the US market



ABHIJIT DAS

The writer is an international trade expert.

could take a hit on account of lowering tariffs on automobiles, or changing rules to accommodate US interests in various service sectors. Further, allowing inventory-based online retail would exacerbate the crisis confronting small and medium enterprises as well as kirana stores. Removing the price caps on cardiac stents and making changes to the Indian Patents Act to address American concerns would result in a gradual increase in the price of medicines and make affordable healthcare a fast-receding dream for large segments of the population.

How should India respond to US concerns? First and foremost, as in the case of India's response to Trump's tariffs on steel and aluminium in the past, it must not hesitate in imposing retaliatory tariffs in case the US again imposes illegal tariffs on India's exports. Second, India could indicate its willingness to address some issues of US interest, provided the adverse impact on its farmers and workers is minimised and healthcare of its citizens not jeopardised. As suggested by some analysts, certain aspects of the recent Budget appear to be a step in this direction. Third, as an integral part of any deal with the US, India must insist on securing reciprocal market access for its goods in the US market. Fourth, India could agree to enhance its defence purchases from the US, provided the terms and conditions are right. No doubt all this would constitute a transactional approach to trade issues in the bilateral context. However, getting trapped in a free trade agreement negotiation, where India would be required to comprehensively address issues of interest to the US in merchandise trade, services, government procurement, digital trade, genetically engineered products and intellectual property, would not serve its interests.

Views are personal

CICs: A need for stronger safeguards



SHRIRAM SUBRAMANIAN
Founder and MD, InGovern Research Services

Ensuring fair, error-free data is fundamental to build trust in our financial ecosystem, more importantly in credit information companies handling sensitive data

THE FINTECH and digital revolutions have transformed how Indians transfer money, and access financial products and services. Aadhaar-based KYC (know your customer), centralised credit information databases, Unified Payments Interface and Unified Lending Interface have enabled seamless money transfers and quick credit disbursements. However, as the industry expands, concerns regarding data misuse and identity theft have intensified. Additionally, errors in credit history can often go unnoticed, leading to significant consequences for consumers.

RBI's direction on credit information reporting

On January 6, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) issued a master direction on credit information reporting. The RBI observed that credit information companies (CICs) have been sharing credit information based on individual consent with entities that are not specified users, through agreements with such entities. Given the sensitivity of the information and the risk of misuse, CICs must implement appropriate mechanisms to ensure responsible data sharing. Among other measures, the RBI has mandated that:

CICs must establish robust due diligence and control mechanisms while sharing credit information with non-specified user entities.

The evaluation of such entities must include comprehensive scrutiny of available data to mitigate risks.

Currently, four CICs are registered with the RBI: CRIF High Mark; Equifax; Exper-

ian; and TransUnion CIBIL.

Importance of credit information & CICs' role

Credit information plays a crucial role in decision-making for individual and institutional credit data and decisions. Accurate, reliable, and secure credit data is essential for risk assessment, economic planning, and financial stability. CICs aggregate data from diverse sources — including banks, non-banking financial companies, and utility providers — to create detailed credit reports that influence loan approvals, interest rates, and even employment opportunities. However, increased reliance on such data also necessitates stringent credit data privacy measures. Financial reporting bureaus handle vast amounts of sensitive data, including individuals' loan histories, repayment behaviours, and credit scores. If compromised, this data can lead to identity theft, financial fraud, and reputational damage.

While India has introduced the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023, its enforcement mechanisms remain unclear compared to global standards like the General Data Protection Regulation. This regulatory gap exposes vulnerabilities in financial data handling, making CICs prime targets for cyberattacks. Data breaches not only compromise sensitive financial details but also erode public trust in the financial system.

Parliamentary concerns and regulatory action

Concerns about the reliability and accountability of credit scores maintained by the CICs have been raised in Parliament. More than 11 crore Indians accessed their credit scores on CIBIL as of August 2024, with a 70% growth in women tracking their scores. The RBI has emphasised the need for CICs to strengthen data privacy and reduce the reliance on a limited number of players in the market. The central bank has previously imposed penalties on CICs for non-compliance. In 2023, it fined TransUnion CIBIL ₹26 lakh for failing to maintain accurate and complete credit information. Similarly, in 2022, Equifax was fined ₹20 lakh for not adhering to data accuracy and consumer grievance redressal norms. CRIF High Mark paid a penalty of ₹15 lakhs in 2021 due to deficiencies in data protection and compliance measures. Such breaches highlight the necessity for stringent regulations to protect consumers from inaccurate credit data.

CICs have very high profit margins, and are held significantly by foreign parent companies. For example, TransUnion CIBIL had revenues of ₹1,430 crores and a profit after tax of ₹656 crores in FY23. Consequently, CICs must ensure high accountability, transparency, and data protection in line with the regulatory framework to justify their profitability and social responsibility.

Limited redress mechanisms for consumers

A significant challenge in India's financial data ecosystem is the lack of an efficient grievance redress mechanism for consumers facing credit report inaccuracies. Errors such as misreported defaults, outdated credit histories, and incorrect loan accounts are not uncommon. However, disputing and correcting such errors remain cumbersome, slow, and time-consuming. Many individuals are unaware of their rights regarding credit data and the procedures for rectifying discrepancies. Though the RBI has outlined a framework for compensation to customers for delayed update/rectification of credit information to address this issue, more can be done as suggested below:

The RBI must strengthen its oversight of CICs to ensure strict compliance with grievance redress norms.

Efficient, transparent, and time-bound processes for resolving disputes should be implemented to empower consumers.

Financial literacy initiatives should educate individuals on credit data rights and how to rectify inaccuracies.

Ensuring fair and error-free financial data is fundamental to building trust in India's financial ecosystem, and more importantly in credit information companies that handle sensitive data. As digital and financial landscapes evolve, prioritising robust data protection, regulatory oversight, and consumer redressal mechanisms will be crucial in safeguarding individual rights and strengthening the economy.

● Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Elusive employment

"Can the Budget provide jobs?" (FE, February 6) offers a detailed analysis. It is most unfortunate that while it insists on Aadhaar for every insignificant activity, the government is unable to furnish reliable, scientific data on employment. We only have access to that arrived at with approximate calculation. Either the government does not want us to know or is simply callous. It may also be the part of a

pro-rich policy to let the unemployed reserves swallow so that labour expenses are reduced to reap more profit. There is no report on the much-hyped incentivised apprenticeship plan launched last year. It only offers training, not job. Production should grow manifold, for which the market should revere with demand. People are also longing for viable employment for longer duration with meaningful wage and social security provisions. This may not happen with

the ease of closure and fixed term employment conditions under the labour code. The Budget is too far from providing jobs.

—AG Rajmohan, Anantapur

Demographic disaster?

Apreros ("Can the Budget provide jobs?" (FE, February 6), in trying to compensate for the neglect of the salaried middle class concerns, the Budget has ignored most other things including agriculture and growth.

Unemployment is India's biggest problem. Lack of jobs has enabled employers to underpay and overwork employees. When asked, government spokespersons only mention allocations, not their results. There is a grave danger of the demographic dividend turning into a demographic disaster if governments continue ignoring the unemployment problem.

—AG Rajmohan, Anantapur



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

What we really are matters more than what other people think of us.
Jawaharlal Nehru

Delhi elections: The focus is on BJP, AAP and pollsters

The exit polls for the Delhi assembly elections have thrown a bombshell across the political landscape, with a majority indicating a probable victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party over the ruling Aam Aadmi Party. As the counting day on February 8 approaches, the projections suggest a stark shift in the electorate's mood. However, there is a rider. Historically, exit polls may have served as an unrattified barometer for public sentiment. Still, many of these surveys have been off the mark including the 2020 elections and the 2024 Lok Sabha election, leaving a lingering scepticism over their accuracy.

Nonetheless, with multiple agencies pointing towards a decisive BJP lead in Delhi, questions are being raised about the AAP's predicament and the factors that seem to have propelled BJP's prospects. One major factor contributing to the BJP's rise in Delhi could be attributed to its successful national narrative, which often highlights themes of national security, development, and governance. In contrast, the AAP, while previously lauded for its innovative governance model and anti-corruption stance, seems to have struggled to sustain its momentum. AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal's focus on local issues and welfare schemes may not have resonated as effectively with voters disenchanted by the challenges of inflation and security concerns.

Further complicating AAP's standing is the resurgence of BJP as a formidable opposition that has redefined its approach in Delhi politics. The BJP's campaign has harnessed sentiments surrounding central governance, portraying itself as a party that can bring about

transformative change. The nationalistic fervour that the BJP brings into its campaigns may have found traction among a section of the electorate. Moreover, the BJP's organizational machinery has proved to be more agile. With the party adopting a grassroots approach, galvanizing workers, and effectively utilizing social media platforms, it has perhaps succeeded in re-engaging voters.

On the other hand, AAP leaders, like any other party that does not find favour with poll pundits, have expressed mistrust towards the veracity of these exit polls, emphasizing their focus on service delivery and governance. One cannot discount the fact that the halo over Arvind Kejriwal was fading, and AAP required a giant effort to keep the party aura intact. That was challenging given the developments and controversies that Delhi has witnessed in recent times. The party also cannot overlook the evident apathy among voters that perhaps reflects disillusionment with AAP's leadership. Issues surrounding governance, health, and education, once viewed as AAP's forte, now appear drowned against the pressing realities of Delhi's socio-political climate.

The Congress remains a silent player, seemingly yielding little influence in this election. With projections showing them failing to secure a single seat, it is evident that Congress has become irrelevant to the landscape. The Congress's lacklustre performance might have unintentionally aided the BJP by preventing votes from being siphoned off, further enabling a direct two-way contest.

As the election results loom, the crux lies in whether the BJP's projected success is a trope that will manifest on the day of counting, or whether the AAP can defy the odds once again. If the exit polls prove right, the Delhi election would deal a telling blow to the party. Kejriwal and his team will need critical introspection and a reassessment of political strategies, outreach programmes, and policy priorities.

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All eyes now on Delhi election results

The million-dollar question on minds of most Delhiites: Do they want to continue with the old dispensation or will they usher in the BJP?



RASHMI SEHGAL

The writer is an author and an independent journalist

The million-dollar question on the minds of Delhiites as they cast their votes yesterday was whether they want to continue with the old dispensation or usher in the BJP, which has not held power in this Union Territory for the past 23 years.

Over the last decade, Delhi voters have been content with the AAP at the helm while voting overwhelmingly for the Modi-led BJP in Lok Sabha elections.

However, the situation has shifted dramatically in the past month. The Centre announced the 8th Pay Commission, which promises a substantial salary hike for the large number of government employees residing in the capital. This was followed by the Budget announcement on February 1, offering major tax benefits for the middle class, a significant segment of Delhi's electorate.

Middle class criticism of AAP

The middle class has been vocal in its criticism of the AAP over crumbling infrastructure, accumulating garbage piles, and deteriorating road conditions. Many believe AAP has focused on the poor and Jhuggi dwellers while neglecting their needs. In contrast, the BJP has actively courted Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), markets, and traders — key elements of the vocal middle class — and has successfully garnered their support.

But these are not the only groups the saffron party has targeted. Delhi's 20 per cent Dalit vote bank, predominantly in Jhuggi clusters, has been a core constituency for the AAP. Yet, the BJP has managed to make inroads among the Jhuggi dwellers through extensive door-to-door campaigns.

The Prime Minister kicked off the BJP campaign in Delhi by inaugurating 1,675 newly constructed houses for Jhuggi residents and ended it on February 3 with a promise to provide a pucca house for every Jhuggi dweller.

Ironically, the BJP, once opposed to "revadis" (freebies), has dramatically changed its stance, promising to continue the free water and power subsidies initiated by AAP. Moreover, all three major contenders — AAP, Congress, and BJP —



have offered a plethora of freebies in their bid to woo voters.

The potential shift of two core AAP constituencies — the Dalit vote and the middle-class voter — has left former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal anxious. He needs their support to clinch this crucial election and is leaving no stone unturned to keep them within his fold.

In the final stretch of the campaign, Kejriwal has reminded his voters that his administration's freebies have saved them at least Rs 25,000 per month. He claims that under his continued leadership, this figure could rise to Rs 35,000 monthly. He also warns that these benefits would cease if the BJP gains power.

BJP campaign's highs and lows

The BJP's campaign has seen its share of highs and lows. Initially, they focused on the "Sheesh Mahal" and "Sharab Ghotla" scandals to underscore the AAP's alleged corruption. However, when this failed to resonate with the public, they pivoted to environmental issues, highlighting how a government that once promised to bring Delhi "at par with London and Paris" has failed to clean the pollution-ridden Yamuna. Air pollution was another failure the BJP highlighted.

Kejriwal admitted his party's failure to clean up the Yamuna but remained largely silent on air pollution, while other AAP leaders blamed changing weather conditions and stubble burning for the annual escalation.

Delhiites are vocal about their choices. A Karol Bagh shopkeeper remarked, "There is a strong sense of incumbency against AAP. They worked hard in the first five years but seem to have lost the plot afterwards." A Janakpuri teacher echoed this sentiment, questioning why Kejriwal did not address pollution issues earlier.

The city's environmental crisis is undeniable, but critics have questioned

why the Ministry of Environment and its minister, Bhupendra Yadav, have not tackled this issue more aggressively. River activist Rajender Singh has argued that environmental issues need holistic solutions rather than political blame games.

Kejriwal's moves to revitalize party

Seven months ago, AAP's morale was low. Kejriwal's release from jail in May 2024 saw him make strategic moves, including resigning as Chief Minister and vacating his "Sheesh Mahal." With limited resources and many colleagues still incarcerated, he embarked on padyatras and loud campaigns, revitalizing the party significantly.

A significant challenge for Kejriwal is retaining the Muslim vote, which constitutes 13 per cent of the population and has previously consolidated behind AAP despite Congress's efforts.

Congress has struggled to split both Muslim and Dalit votes. The party, rich in leaders but poor in grassroots workers, is banking on former Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit's legacy to win 10 to 12 seats — a prospect that appears bleak given their delayed entry into the campaign. Meanwhile, the RSS has conducted 50,000 drawing-room meetings across offices, malls, and educational institutions to rally support for the BJP. The propriety of holding such meetings in schools and colleges is questionable, but election frenzy has overshadowed such concerns.

Prof Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies notes that 17 per cent of voters remain undecided, a critical demographic that could sway the election either way.

Kejriwal once sought to create a viable, clean alternative to the entrenched political giants. Whether Delhi's cosmopolitan citizens choose to endorse an overbearing, dictatorial monolith on February 8 remains to be seen. — FFJ

Prof Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies notes that 17 per cent of voters remain undecided, a critical demographic that could sway the election either way

THE INBOX >>

Majority Colvenkars need to approve Colva CR22 move

Recently it was reported in the media that coastal panchayats (including Semabatin, Vanelim, Colva and Gandaulim in South) are pushing for a CR22 reig to CR2 to boost local tourism. To my knowledge there are local ministers, specific panchas (ex-panchans), select OCTs, land sharks, real estate developers waiting to capitalize on the same. There appears to be specific agents (including specific panchas, ex-panchans) of the latter who seem to be influencing Colva Panchayat decisions for ulterior motives. Not to mention water shortage is a real problem for Colva. If we can't manage the current state of "development" how is Colva going to manage even further mega development? We have seen how other areas given CR2-2 status are now being devastated and polluted in other parts of Goa. I ask that a proper proposal should be put to all people of Colva, who should give majority approval before any decision is taken to change to CR2-2.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

Expose culprits behind fires destroying plantations

A major fire reportedly broke out on a hillcock in Canca-Tivim on Tuesday afternoon, starting from dry grass set ablaze, creating thick smoke over a large area. The fire was brought under control by the fire personnel. However, another fire broke out and continued to spread, causing further damage to cashew and other plantations. The fire also presents a potential threat to wildlife in the nearby forests. Such fires of dry grass which then spread to plantations raise a pertinent question. Are these fires set on purpose to destroy plantations in order to make way to real estate development? It must be said that setting fire to any plantation is the easiest way to

India should take tough steps on border control

A United States military plane carrying deported Indian illegal immigrants from US has landed in Amritsar. The C-17 aircraft carrying 205 Indian nationals had departed from San Antonio, Texas, around 3 am IST on Tuesday. US President Donald Trump won the recent US presidential election on the plank of cracking down on illegal immigration, and has been vigorously pursuing this ever since he took office. Illegal immigrants are being deported by the plane, including, significantly, on military planes. The United States acted within days of Trump's order, yet the Indian government has made no serious efforts despite decades of public demand for the expulsion of Bangladeshi infiltrators.

SAGAR SHIRODKAR, Via email

clear the area for real estate development. The owner of the plantation may not have the necessary resources to grow the plantation over again and may decide to sell the land to real estate developers. The reason for every wildfire occurring in the state needs to be investigated. If not, the green cover will be depleted and be replaced by concrete jungles. Our forest cover and plantations need to be guarded against land sharks.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

Forest dept efforts needed to protect tigers from hunters

Jim Corbett, Gangotri, Rajaji National Park in Uttarakhand; Amangarh, Pilibhit, Valmiki National Park in Uttar Pradesh; Balaghat, Pench Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh; and the Western Ghats comprising Goa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Kerala are among the nine states where around 1,800 tigers are currently at risk. On the international market, tiger body parts, claws, and skins are being auctioned for millions, attracting poachers to these nine tiger projects. The Indian Wildlife Institute has issued

warnings for 24 tiger projects. These nine states are home to at least 1,800 tigers. Following resolutions passed at a 13-country tiger summit last year, India successfully doubled its tiger population by 2022. Currently, India hosts around 4,000 tigers. Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh play a key role in this success, with India alone preserving 73.7% of the world's tigers. This summer, forest departments will need to put extra effort into protecting tigers from hunters. The Wildlife Crime Bureau, functioning similarly to the CBI, has issued alerts to all tiger reserves in the country.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR, Mumbai

Penalise contractors for shoddy workmanship

Concerns have been raised over poor workmanship at government residential quarters in Goa. The government should impose penalty on contractors and accountability on engineers concerned for executing unsatisfactory and inferior work. The authorities must assess the actual level of satisfaction of the residents of the government quarters with regard to the quality of repairs/renovation and services being referred to by the maintenance agencies. In most of cases it's linked to contractors inefficiency and lethargy for inferior quality of works done. Later they claim invariable bills for bad jobs done. It seems that there is no audit for such bills even if there is no proper work orders and non-following of estimation report with irregularities by some contractors. Some of the contractors don't know the basic ethics of work and through political clout get orders. Most of the repair work is done poorly by the contractor, with cracks and falling of chunks of ceiling within short span. Most of the government quarters are in horrible conditions. Taxpayers money cannot be squandered in such a reckless manner.

KG VILPOD, Chorno

OPEN SPACE >>

Time for power dept to clear up unused electrical cables

The electricity department (ED) has taken a strong stand to remove the bunched cables from its electricity poles. The cables belong to operators of internet service providers and cable TVs who have been using the poles with and without permission and with and without paying the required fees to the ED. This was long due and necessary to spruce up Panaji city and other towns. The cables hinder the ED's maintenance work and could also result in untoward incidents. Now it is time for the ED to put its house in order by removing unused electrical cables and neatly tying up the loosely hanging cables and wires at the various places in the State. Hope the ED does the needful prior to the onset of monsoon since that is the time the cables get loosened due to wind and rain. The dangling and swinging cables (either live or otherwise) are dangerous to motorists while those fallen on the roads are hazardous to the pedestrians.

SRIDHAR D'TYER, Caranzalem