

Private-investment conundrum

Policy intervention will improve prospects

The Union government has increased capital expenditure after the pandemic-induced disruption. Aside from supporting demand during the recovery phase, the implicit assumption was that, at some point, the investment baton would be passed on to the private sector, which will sustain growth. The Union government's capital expenditure increased from 1.67 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019-20 to 3.4 per cent in 2024-25. Although the recovery from the pandemic was sharp — partly driven by statistical effects — revival in private investment has remained tepid. It is worth noting that the weakness in private investment goes back to pre-Covid days. The state of investment in the pre-pandemic years can be partly explained by what was termed the "twin balance sheet problem". Both corporate and bank balance sheets came under significant stress in the years after the global financial crisis. The problem has since been fully resolved and the balance sheets of both corporations and banks are in good shape. However, the private sector is still unwilling to invest in a big way.

India's gross fixed capital formation at constant prices is expected to be at 33.4 per cent of GDP this financial year. This will need to be pushed up to attain sustained higher growth. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in this respect, this week asked Indian companies not to be mere spectators. He argued they should seek global opportunities and accept challenges. The issue of private investment also came up frequently in Manthan, the annual thought leadership summit hosted by this newspaper last week. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman noted that the private sector should talk about what was stopping them from speeding up investment. Besides higher expenditure on improving infrastructure, the government is doing several things to facilitate investment. It has, for instance, removed over 42,000 compliances since 2014. Over 3,700 legal provisions have also been decriminalised, and the government is continuing to move in this direction. The prospects of a Deregulation Commission are being discussed. Since investment on the ground takes place in states, the commission, depending on its terms, will need to collaborate with states. High growth in the 2000s was, in a way, made possible by reforms in the 1990s.

Although some of the proposed measures can be classified as continuing efforts to improve the ease of doing business and will show results over time, there could be a variety of reasons why Indian firms are not investing in a big way. The data collected by the Reserve Bank of India shows capacity utilisation in manufacturing is at about 75 per cent, marginally higher than the longer-term average. It is typically the level at which firms start contemplating fresh investment to augment capacity. However, they may be reluctant because of at least two important reasons. First, the global economic environment has been uncertain for quite some time. The uncertainty only increased after the return of Donald Trump as American President. Second, there is significant overcapacity in China, which limits the prospects of increasing exports.

India's high-growth years in the 2000s, with increased investment, were also a period of high growth in exports. The share of exports in GDP, according to the data maintained by the World Bank, increased from about 15 per cent in 2003 to over 25 per cent in 2013. It fell to about 18.7 per cent in 2019. Although the share has recovered since, it remains significantly below the peak. The weakness in investment and overall growth can partly be explained by export performance. While the government is easing duties on this front, a lot more will need to be done.

Another trade hurdle

Quality control orders are hurting India

Conversations about trade, both globally and in India, are dominated by tariffs. India, after a period of increasing tariffs across the board, has signalled in recent months, including through the Union Budget, that import duties will now be lowered. The justification for this shift in policy is, correctly, that it will enable value addition within India and allow Indian producers to become part of global supply chains. However, economic openness and integration are not a function of tariffs alone. Regulations, restrictions, and quotas also play a role — these are generally called "non-tariff barriers" to trade. Policymakers in New Delhi must consider whether their approach to non-tariff barriers is contradicting the gains they will make from reduced tariffs.

In recent years, bureaucrats in New Delhi have discovered a new form of non-tariff barrier. This protectionist and statist measure is disguised under the so-called "quality control orders", or QCOs. As economist Arvind Subramanian and others have pointed out on these pages, the increasing use of QCOs amounts to an astonishing, and stealthy, assault on Indian trade and competitiveness. Though nominally meant to ensure that goods available in the Indian market meet local standards, in fact these orders are used as discretionary mechanisms to delay or divert shipments of imports. While about 800 such orders have already been issued, covering sectors from steel to leather, senior officials in the Union government have indicated that three times as many QCOs may be promulgated in the coming months. This would make life difficult for traders and producers. On some occasions, it is not clear what precise product line is being referred to in a QCO. On other occasions, orders cover entirely new and novel classifications, for example, of types of specialty steel. Producers or importers are often not sure that their shipment will arrive and will be cleared on time. This affects schedules and costs, and the exporters' ability to meet their contractual obligations.

The tacit reason for QCOs is to prevent substandard goods from China that many worry are flooding Indian markets. But the general application of such orders reveals that, like all such controls, they have escaped containment and become worse than the disease they are meant to cure. Bureaucratic incentives are unchanged since the worst excesses of the licence-permit-quota raj: More control and more discretion mean more power — and more lobbying, with all the negative consequences of such behaviour. Maximising efficiency requires such discretion to be eschewed in policymaking. Certainly, officials should not be able to create or identify arbitrarily narrow product categories and then create regulations that apply to them. No market economy can be created effectively under such conditions. It has also had a chilling effect on investment. Companies with a long and disaggregated supply chain are hesitant to set up shop in India and create jobs because they are unable to properly evaluate the real cost they would pay for their needed inputs. Labour-intensive sectors like readymade garments, in which Indian exporters underperform, have been particularly hit by QCOs — as Dr Subramanian and his co-authors have identified.

The government has clearly taken a high-level decision that economic openness is good for Indian manufacturing and trade. It is unfortunate that protectionism by stealth is being enforced by officials in apparent contradiction of the overall policy goal. The tyranny of QCOs must be addressed through political intervention.



Europe's powerful too against Russia

If European leaders want to follow through on their statements in support of Ukraine, they must seize the moment by seizing Russia's assets

It is now clear that US President Donald Trump's administration will betray Ukraine in its fight to resist Russian aggression. Mr Trump himself is either a victim of disinformation, or he is a willing participant in an effort to deceive Americans about the causes and consequences of the war.

Mr Trump's lies include claiming that Ukraine is equally to blame for the war; that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy doesn't "have the cards" to end the conflict on favourable terms; and that Ukraine could not have defended itself without US help. Yet the whole world knows that Russia launched an unprovoked invasion, and we all remember the initial weeks, when Ukrainians valiantly defended an 1,800-mile front line against a supposedly superior army, long before deliveries of Western artillery, armoured vehicles, and air-defence systems arrived.

The disgraceful scene in the Oval Office on February 28 highlighted Mr Trump's hostility toward Zelenskyy and fondness for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Is it just that Mr Trump loves authoritarian figures who have fulfilled his own ambitions? Or is it that Mr Putin has compromised on Mr Trump

(as was widely suspected during his first term)?

Whatever the case, Mr Trump rejects the very idea of the rule of law, because he subordinates it to political interest: The law should be used when it serves the President's interests, and ignored when it does not. Agreements between countries (even those he signed) can be broken at will. The United States, together with the United Kingdom and Russia, promised to defend Ukraine's territorial integrity 30 years ago, under the Budapest Memorandum, signed in December 1994. In exchange, Ukraine agreed to give up the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal, inherited from the Soviet Union. Russia violated the agreement when it invaded and illegally annexed Crimea in 2014, and now Ukraine has been betrayed by two of the agreement's parties.

Mr Trump's refusal to honour America's word is disgraceful. The Ukrainians upheld their end of the bargain, and they expected the US to do the same. These betrayals have deadly implications, and not only for Ukraine. For decades, Europe's own security has relied on Article 5 of the Nato treaty, according to which an attack on one member is an attack on all. Yet it is now obvious that



ANDREW KOSENKO & JOSEPH E STIGLITZ

Field reports on gender inclusion

All Indian airports have segregated body-scanning security checks for male and female passengers. In most countries, this segregation doesn't happen — everyone walks through the same scanner gateway, and if further body scanning is needed, there are women security personnel on hand to scan female passengers, done out in the open.

At Indian airports, individual body scanning is done for everyone, using a handheld scanner. In the case of women, presumably as a special gender-friendly courtesy, this is done in a curtained enclosure, and the curtain at the entrance has to be manually opened and closed thousands of times a day. This leads to seriously more physical exertion for women security personnel than for their male counterparts — especially, as women now form a large chunk of air travellers across big and small airports.

It is no surprise that they do not get paid more for this extra work. However, what is surprising is that no one in the organisation has addressed (or likely even noticed) such a big pain point and designed a new system — or even a new type of enclosure — to eliminate what is clearly non-value adding, efficiency-diminishing, negative labour, done only by women security personnel.

Given that the handheld scanners are held at a respectable distance from the body and do not require disrobing or even displacing *dupatta* or a *sari pallu*, the enclosure can be dispensed with, without outraging modesty. A less daring but equally effective solution would be to undertake the simple job of redesigning the enclosure to keep privacy but eliminate the curtain. This columnist has often asked lady security personnel why they have not demanded a change. The stock reply is that they have often complained to their male superiors, but no one sees it as important. If this were a profit & loss-affecting business problem or a problem affect-

ing men, it would have been solved by now.

Added to this gender-unfriendly behaviour is that women passengers wanting to avail themselves of the separate, less crowded Dig Yatra security queues at some airports are told by male security personnel, "Madam, aap ladies queue mein chale jayen, yahaan nahin." It's a bit like the way when toilets were labelled Male, Female, and Executive (meaning men).

These are good examples of how many gender-friendly initiatives, with good intentions but poor and/or archaic assumptions, fail to deliver.

For the longest time, Indian boards had none or maybe just one woman. Now, with laws mandating it, more attention is being paid to gender diversity, and the proportion of women is increasing, albeit slowly. After serving on many wonderful boards over the past few decades, it is a source of great delight to me to finally be on a large, listed company board where the majority of directors—including the chairperson and the managing director—are female professionals. This is the board of Cummins India, the Indian subsidiary of Cummins Inc, a Fortune 500 engineering company (ranked 129), which also has a female Chair and Chief Executive Officer.

Do meetings of this board feel any different? Not at all. We just do what needs to be done and function in just the same way as any other board of equivalent stature and composition would. The discussions or dynamics at board meetings, or even at lunchtime, are not noticeably different. Yet, when Jennifer Rumsey, the global Chair and CEO of Cummins Inc, visited India, I wore a sari to the "meet the Indian board" dinner and to a meeting with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar (his X handle features a picture of both of them). That one gesture spoke volumes and sent many mes-

sages! And to think my generation of women was once different about wearing sari to overseas meetings in the 80s and 90s!

An often asked question is how has the Indian boards scene changed after the new laws mandating women on boards? What has been disappointing is the new and booming category of business called "women directors training". There has never been an equivalent rush of "men directors training" in India before. Hopefully, we will see the rise of new initiatives aimed at helping build chairs and boards that are more inclusive in their functioning. The answer doesn't require reprogramming neurons, but lies in devising board processes that ensure that every one gets the space to participate and be listened to, without a struggle. It shifts the onus from the individual to the institution.

The good news, though, is that the nomination and remuneration committees and board search firms are working harder to identify competent women director candidates, and the pool is definitely widening. The bad news, however, is that the bar is set higher when evaluating women candidates. The good news is that the ranks of high-calibre women independent directors with proven track records are growing.

Talipete Chairperson is a phrase that now sits comfortably alongside chairman in many boardrooms, though it isn't always as gender-friendly as one would have thought. Years ago, a woman who was appointed executive chairman of a large public sector undertaking, when asked why she didn't call herself "Chairperson" explained that many of the troops in the company might think she hadn't got the real job but some watered-down version of it. The feminist cause was better served by calling herself Chairman and not Chairperson!

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Tuning into silence



BOOK REVIEW
ARUNDHITI DASGUPTA

Now in Vienna there's 10 pretty women. There is a shoulder where death comes to cry — Leonard Cohen, *Take this walk*

The beauty of words lies not in the meaning that they convey to others around and emotions within, but in their capacity to lift human consciousness into moments of such luminous clarity

that the ordinary appears sublime. Songs by Leonard Cohen bear that dexterity and so does this book by Pico Iyer.

Delicately written, with a rhythm and lyricism that resembles many of Mr Cohen's songs, *Learning From Silence* is about living a full, robust life with eyes wide open and all senses ablaze. It is about the companionships that give us strength and resolve; it is about love that glues up the cracks and mends the broken, and about the kindness of human beings that often goes unnoticed.

The world that Mr Iyer draws his readers into, is both personal and universal. His friendships reveal as much about him as do the cataclysmic events that circle his life. Everything leads him to question the meaning of existence, of power and sacrifice. The book helps

understand the meaning of suffering and joy and how the two are not as different as we may think them to be. He writes, "Fire illuminates a life quite brilliantly, but in that very blaze it threatens to bring down everything in its path."

The book takes readers into the selfless work of caregivers, of the body and the soul — all those who are moved to help another in need including monks, nuns and priests — and the inexhaustible happiness that this brings. The joy comes from the tiny acts of love and change that they can bring. In one instance, Mr Iyer writes about a conversation with the Dalai Lama. What is his biggest achievement? Not the Nobel Prize, says the Tibetan who has lived his entire life in exile, but the difference he thought he made when he could impart hope to a "dispossessed soul" he met in Soweto, Johannesburg.

Born out of more than a hundred retreats: To a small Benedictine hermitage (as the blurb tells us), the book steps into

the numerous lives that encircle the author's existence — the wilderness of California that gave the lie to permanence in the world, the home in Japan where his daily life draws upon his time at the hermitage, and his work that takes him to the most exotic destinations and puts him in a room with extremely interesting people.

All of this, the different parts of his life, come together in the silences that he craves and cherishes. It is, as he writes, "I am thrilled, in the wide-awake silence, to sense that all the scattered filaments inside of me come together in a singing whole." The book is a record, not only of such moments of epiphany but also the doubts that dog his journeys.

What is he, a man who has never been religious, doing with monks and nuns? Or as a friend wonders: What makes him, who has seemed so happy with his life, retreat from it? The questions that run like a parallel trail through the book help

readers draw deeper into the meaning of silence, and its absence. *Learning From Silence* reads like a book that has been in the making for a very long time. It carries the confidence of a writer who has revisited the words innumerable times to see if they measure up to the feelings and emotions that he seeks to convey. He is careful not to let his experiences overshadow the meaning he has found in them and vice versa. There are no glib answers here, he seems to be

telling the reader. When a friend asks if he believes in God (given the time spent in monasteries), he says that it doesn't matter. Belief and faith can be passed differently by different people — it does not bear the prescriptive burden of religion. Composed in five short chapters, the book is somewhat like a rolled-up scroll. It unravels in slow, circuitous whorls and is bursting with colour, symbols and fragrances. It revolves around silence, not as an escape from the world but more like an elixir that helps us draw infinite pleasure from the act of living.

Silence, in Mr Iyer's way of life, is a way to tune oneself to all the noise around us and still hear ourselves with sanity and clarity and it could, at times, be noisier than a family of woodpeckers marking their territories on the hollows of the trees.

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The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

WIDEN THE FRAME

Stalin fires first shot but delimitation should not be framed as North vs South or a show of report cards — that's the challenge

THE CURRENT FLARING of the debate on delimitation takes place in a fraught political context. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin has fired the first shot when the rumble of next year's election is already beginning to make itself heard. By all accounts, CM Stalin is laying claim to leadership of a push-back by the "South" against a BJP-led and "North"-dominated Centre, on all-India projects ranging from the entrance exam, NEET, to the National Education Policy and the three-language formula. On delimitation, a state-level all-party meeting called by him in Tamil Nadu has led to a resolution that asks the Centre to extend the 1971 Census-based delimitation framework for another 30 years beyond 2026, to ensure fair representation for states that have effectively controlled their population. Stalin's moves also coincide with a perceived BJP drive to spread into states of the South, having reiterated its dominance in the country's north in recent polls. They seek to stoke apprehensions, real and imagined, about Hindutva's homogenising ambitions. The political context, then, encourages the framing of the issue in warring spectres and tidy binaries — North vs South, an all-conquering, winner-takes-all BJP/Hindutva vs the rest, representation vs federalism. The reality is much more complicated. The issue is also too important to be left to short-term political interests and agendas of the moment.

The thing about spectres is that they seldom withstand a reality check. For instance, the North and South are internally differentiated. And the claims of a "better developed" South getting short shrift in comparison to a "less developed" North are reductive — they paper over many of the vital geographical, historical, political and policy factors that underlie the phenomenon of some states overtaking others. The BJP's bid to expand into the country's south also means a nuanced and leaving, and even softening, of its political project. Similarly, the pitting of representation against federalism deserves closer scrutiny. At one level, it borrows the majoritarian arguments that have become the common sense on other issues — for instance, the demand for a caste census, Congress leading the charge, has been raising its head. But what also needs to be kept in mind is this: Even as the Constitution's guarantee of political equality is shored up by the principle of one-person-one-vote, the constitutional letter and spirit also holds out protections for minorities (not necessarily defined by religion) and safeguards for federalism. That is, it also addresses predicaments in ways that don't go by a mechanical application of the majority principle alone.

Clearly, a solution needs to be found to the delimitation puzzle. In the past, the can has been kicked down the road. Stalin wants that to happen again. The challenge is to forge a new path, through deliberation and dialogue, which ensures that no one loses and everyone wins. For, it goes far beyond carving out new constituencies. Only one thing is certain: This is not something that should be resolved by an order imposed by the Centre from above. To endure, it will require a federalism that's collaborative and cooperative, not competitive. Every political party, every citizen, has a stake in this for it's about reinforcing the very bedrock of democracy — representation, in both number and spirit.

MOVEMENT TO PARTY

In Bangladesh, Jatiya Nagorik Party enters at a time when the dust hasn't settled, and people seek stable governance

FOLLOWING THE LIBERATION War in 1971, a secular nation-state based on linguistic nationalism was established in Bangladesh. It was, in many ways, a rejection of the religious nationalism that continues to define Pakistan. Since its inception, however, Bangladesh has navigated a dual identity where Bengali linguistic nationalism has coexisted, often uneasily, with the influence of orthodox Islam in its political culture. Since Sheikh Hasina's ouster in August 2024, the latter has been regaining prominence. A stark example of this was visible in an incident in January when a women's football match was cancelled after students from a religious school vandalised the venue. Earlier, in November, a mystic sect promoting religious inclusivity had to cancel their music festival after Islamist threats. Post-Hasina, emboldened Islamist groups have been returning to the mainstream after facing crackdowns for years. Against this backdrop and ahead of the elections expected to take place this year, the student-led movement that spearheaded the protests that led to Hasina's downfall has launched the Jatiya Nagorik Party or the National Citizens' Party (NCP).

The NCP's promise of a "second republic" reflects a determination to reshape Bangladesh's political framework. The immediate challenge for the country is safeguarding its democratic credentials, which hinge on free and fair elections. Hasina's Awami League has been isolated. However, the support that the interim government initially enjoyed has also begun to fade, as Muhammad Yunus now faces pressure to deliver tangible results. Since Hasina's ouster, Bangladesh has been gripped by political turbulence and economic hardship, along with a deteriorating law-and-order situation. The NCP is entering the political scene at a time when the dust hasn't fully settled, and the people seek a strong and stable governance.

The transformation from an anti-establishment movement into a mainstream force is never easy. The NCP has made a strong start, with its display of religious inclusivity at its rally, where recitations from both the Quran and Bhagavad Gita sought to deliver a message of unity — significant, given concerns over the security of Hindu minorities in post-Hasina Bangladesh. If it pursues multiculturalism and secularism, it could pose a formidable threat to the right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The true test for the NCP will be whether it can fight for a more just, inclusive, and democratic Bangladesh.

LOVE, ALTERED

Is a sonnet rewritten for the 1640s still Shakespeare — and still for lovers?

LOVE IS NOT love which alters when it alteration finds — but what if these lines themselves find alteration? William Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, which speaks of the "marriage of true minds" and love as an "ever-fixed mark", is dear to romantic hearts today. A generation after the poet's death, however, it was subject to cavalier treatment. Literally — think of the Cavaliers, the royalist faction that fought and ultimately lost to the Roundheads, or parliamentarians, in the English Civil War of the mid-17th century. It turns out that an unidentified person wrote a Cavalier version of Sonnet 116, in which "ever-fixed" love means unshakable loyalty to the king and the royalist cause.

This version of the poem was hiding in plain sight in a manuscript in Oxford's Bodleian Library — with even the initial lines altered, and no mention of Shakespeare in the 19th-century catalogue describing its contents — until it was discovered by a doctoral researcher. It was found amid a collection of royalist literature from the 1640s, rebelling against a puritan-dominated age when Christmas was banned and toasting the king was illegal. To anyone familiar with the original sonnet, it is a shocking genre shift: Stand aside, lovers, let's talk "heretics", "true scripture" and "flaming martyrs". From the grave, Shakespeare was dragged into fighting for the Cavalier cause even as a much-alive John Milton roared for the other side and wrote panegyrics to the parliamentary general and later dictator Oliver Cromwell.

The discovery sheds light on the reception of Shakespeare in the early days and speaks to the living nature of texts and the irrepressible inventiveness of propagandists. Is it still Shakespeare? In an era before intellectual property, an author could be more than himself. Whether it's still good poetry is quite another question.



SUHASH PALSHIKAR

THE DELIMITATION DEBATE has begun to make news and like most political controversies, it skirts the foundational issues. Exactly like some policy wizards of the Hindutva variety, chief ministers from the southern states have suddenly found virtue in large families and having multiple babies. Before the latest statements of the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, similar sentiments were expressed by the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, when he questioned the two-child policy to draw attention to the demographic imbalance that marks the North-South divide.

These remarks underscore the better performance of the states of South India both in terms of the human development index and economic parameters. The blatant attempt by the Centre and Hindutva votaries to push Hindi is another irritant that has re-ignited the "North-South" conflict. The possibility of the next delimitation exercise and the hanging sword of a mechanical application of the population criterion that will reduce the current strength of the South in the Lok Sabha have further fuelled tensions.

The irrationality of the "more children" plank apart, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister has made a specific plea — to freeze the current strength of each state in the Lok Sabha. In effect, this demand seeks to continue the earlier policy of avoidance. Since the mid-1970s, for the past half-century, India has allowed the ratio of population-to-representation to remain unreasonably high. Freezing the current strength of each state in the Lok Sabha may allow us to retain the current balance of numeric power among states. But it would also mean a huge distortion because in most of the states, every representative would continue to represent an impossible population of about 20 lakh.

Most parties would find the proposal of freezing the current arrangement more convenient but that may not solve the problem, only postpone it again.

For a genuine debate on the delimitation question, it is necessary to avoid two tempting traps. First, there is a temptation among politicians from the South and many intellectuals to set an alarm about the domination of North India over the South. It is true that often a certain North Indian imagination is circulated as the idea of the Indian nation. Join FREE: WhatsApp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRB6rGJKH6oBd0f>



MAMTA SINGHANIA

"TO SAY THAT we don't know with entire certainty where we are going is a proof of futility... The target is unreachable. We are surrounded by infinity" — Octavio Paz on Group 1890's debut

Himmat bhai's Garhi studio in Delhi, where I first met him 20 years ago, was a world of its own — filled with sculptures, drawings, and works in various stages of becoming, each holding the quiet hum of his process. The space reflected his way of thinking — alive, exploratory, and always in motion. His gaze was intense, broken only by the glint of mischief in his eyes, and his words moved between sharp clarity and abstract ideas, always circling back to art. There was an openness to his approach, an instinctive understanding that art was not about finality but about the act of making itself.

It was through working with him for his 2005 solo show at Anant Art that I came to understand the meticulous nature of his engagement with material — his deep consideration for every element, from the sculptures themselves to the pedestals that held them. His modernism was intuitive, not the orietal — what he once described as "a leap from the familiar to the unknown". His works carried that same spirit — his terracotta heads and bronze sculptures revealed an enduring fascination with form and texture, each surface bearing the weight of history and process.



Seize the delimitation

Let's expand the scope of democracy to incorporate federal interests over and above mere numbers

There is a temptation to see the issue from the prism of the BJP's dominance. While the BJP and Hindutva historically always saw the northern normative universe as constitutive of national identity and while they have always been uncomfortable with India's pluralism and in particular with Dravidian claims, it will be a mistake to posit the current delimitation debate within an anti-BJP framework. The BJP would be pulled internally in contrary directions. In particular, when the BJP is poised to expand in the South, it will not openly counter the claims of southern states. The recent statement by the Union Home Minister that states of the South will not lose any seats marks the limits of anti-BJPism on this issue.

In a draft paper for the Pune International Centre, Sanjeev Alam and I have argued that

tion, but that has nothing to do with the relative strength of the states in Parliament. Already, the Lok Sabha has a larger number of representatives coming from the states of North India. It is not clear whether any injustice to the "South" has happened on account of the numeric disadvantage it has in the Lok Sabha (and Rajya Sabha too). The North-South prism is only likely to persuade people and parties of the North to push for a delimitation that would give them an advantage. Such a counter-mobilisation in the North can make it impossible to arrive at any negotiated settlement.

The North-South prism presupposes that multi-state and all-India parties would be unable to take any stand on this issue — one is either a votary of the South or a supporter of the North. This will practically exclude both Congress and the BJP from any serious debate on the issue; their state units will be forced to take contrary positions making a compromise even more difficult.

Secondly, in the present party-political arena, there is a temptation to see the issue through the prism of the BJP's dominance. While the BJP and Hindutva historically always saw the northern normative universe as constitutive of national identity and while they have always been uncomfortable with India's pluralism and in particular with Dravidian claims, it will be a mistake to posit the current delimitation debate within an anti-BJP framework. The BJP would be pulled internally in contrary directions. In particular, when the BJP is poised to expand in the South, it will not openly counter the claims of southern states. The recent statement by the Union Home Minister that states of the South will not lose any seats marks the limits of anti-BJPism on this issue.

How, then, should we address the vexed issue? At one extreme, an argument may be made that if population is the basis of representation (at least in Lok Sabha), then, there is nothing wrong in a skewed strength of the states. This is the formalist democratic argument. Such an argument may also appear to have constitutional legitimacy, because this is how the Constitution would expect the delimitation process to unfold.

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India needs to transcend the formalist argument and employ democracy in a broader sense to inform the method for delimitation. Following the leads of Milan Vaishnav and Alistair McMillan, we argue that there are two routes to resolving the issue (not necessarily mutually exclusive). While the idea of reforming the Rajya Sabha is indeed useful, it would require a greater consensus and more wide-ranging amendments to the Constitution, whereas there is more merit in exploring the other possibility of expanding the Lok Sabha wherein the current strength of any state will not be adversely affected even as more populous states will get additional seats.

On the surface, it does look like a mere compromise, but in doing so, the representation debate can be taken a step further. The Constitution does mandate the application of the democratic principle as the basis of delimitation, but we need to pause and ask what that principle means. So far, a simplistic understanding has informed the debate and apprehensions around the issue, but given the ideological context of diversity in crafting the Indian nation-state and the later political ethos of consolidating democratic politics, it is necessary that being democratic must be understood as also being federal.

As a matter of fact, delimitation exercises already appreciated this in an implicit manner: Allocation of seats to states would begin by first allocating a minimum representation to "smaller" states to ensure that however small a state is in terms of size and/or population, it will at least have one member in the Lok Sabha. In doing so, the principle of state-based representation overrode the principle of population.

It would be a great step if leaders like CM Stalin seize the moment and expand the scope of democracy to incorporate federal interests over and above mere numbers. In other words, the proposal to expand the size of the Lok Sabha and to ensure that no state loses its current strength should be seen not only as a politically prudent step, but as a step to enrich the idea of democracy in the Indian context.

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AN UNFILTERED GAZE

For Himmat Shah, art was not about finality but about the act of creation itself

A defining aspect of Himmat bhai's artistic ethos was his deep love for clay, a material he believed held fundamental significance in the act of shaping the earth with one's hands. He often said everyone should work with it, that there was something essential in feeling the material transform through touch.

His impact on Indian art is undeniable. He was an artist's artist — admired not just for what he created, but for the way he thought and worked. During his book launch last year for *Himmat Shah: Ninety and After — Excursions of a Free Imagination*, his lively conversation with Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, filled with animated reminiscences, reflected his deep affection and respect for his contemporaries. The High Relief Mural at St. Xavier's Primary School, Ahmedabad (1968/1969) was a bold reimagining of public space at a time when monumental art was rarely seen outside of institutions. His drawings were not blueprints for his sculptures but an extension of his exploration of form and movement. The textures, the architectural elements, the way material carried both weight and movement — each piece reflected his engagement with form and surface, always searching for something beyond the tangible.

Himmat bhai was both a presence and an anchor for so many. Younger artists gravitated toward his studio, drawn to the way he saw the world — unfiltered, sharp, and en-

tirely his own. He never held back his thoughts, offering critiques with honesty but never malice. Even when he had little, there was always tea, sometimes samosas, and always conversation. He shared freely — his time, his ideas, his way of seeing — which made being around him an experience in itself. His laughter was full and unrestrained, and whenever something captured his imagination, he would exclaim, "kyo boat hai!" with sheer delight.

Even as time passed, his sense of wonder never dimmed. A plant, a texture, a line on a page — each thing revealed something new to him. "Adhbu", he would say, genuinely amazed, his joy never dulled by familiarity. His work was never about fitting into definitions, never bound by expectation. He created on his own terms, driven by curiosity and an insistence on discovery.

From him, I learned to approach artworks with an unfiltered gaze and to view each piece with a renewed perspective. Our conversations were always revealing — his pursuit of artistic excellence and his constant search for greatness in his work were relentless. These are the memories I will hold dear. His legacy is not just in what he made but in how he approached making. It is a privilege to have known him, to have seen his world up close, and to share that with others.

The writer is director, Anant Art Gallery

MARCH 7, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

POLL RESULTS

CONGRESS (I), WHICH routed its opponents in the Hindi belt, crashed to defeat in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Sikkim and barely secured a majority in Maharashtra as results poured in. At midnight, Congress (I) had been voted back to power in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Orissa and was well set to attain massive majorities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

MULTI-ENGINE

CONGRESS (I)'S CAREFULLY articulated thesis of a one-party state has been rejected by

the voter in this year's assembly elections. The theme that the states should be ruled by Congress (I) simply because it had been voted to power at the Centre was projected by the Prime Minister in his campaign speeches, mainly because Congress (I) got carried away with the massive vote it received in the Lok Sabha election.

JANATA SWEEP

RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE has done it. Under his charismatic leadership, the Janata Party has virtually swept the polls in Karnataka, humbling the Congress (I) juggernaut as it stands on the threshold of a total tally of

around 150 seats in the 224-member assembly. The Janata Party almost decimated the BJP, which had become a thorn in its flesh in its two-year rule.

NEW RECORD

WITH HIS VICTORY, Minister of State Sanjay Singh has shattered all previous records not only in Uttar Pradesh but perhaps in the whole country. Singh has retained the Amethi assembly seat, part of the Prime Minister's parliamentary constituency, by 1,22,352 votes. He polled 1,24,017 votes against a party 1,665 for his distant BJP rival, Dr B C Misra.

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



C R Sankaranarayanan

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin has opposed the 'three-language formula'.

Does it reflect genuine concerns over the Centre's Hindi push or is it the revival of a political spectre?

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A fig leaf for an imposition

That the third language being mooted is not Hindi does not fool anyone. Leaders' statements, government spending, highlight true intent



PALANIVEL THIAGA RAJAN

EDUCATION IS THE beating heart of Dravidian political philosophy. It is vital to the movement's core principles of self-respect, social justice, and equitable access. Given education's prior exclusivity, the first Justice Party government of the Madras Presidency sowed the seeds for universal education by legislating compulsory elementary education — for boys and girls — in 1920.

A compulsory two-language formula — our mother tongue, Tamil, and the global link language, English — in effect for decades, reflects these values. All parties that originated here have vociferously, and repeatedly aligned with this formula, and it has produced great results. With high literacy rates and a higher education enrolment ratio of 47 per cent (compared to the national average of 28.4 per cent) Tamil Nadu stands tall in India. Our educational, and consequent economic successes are documented and quantifiable. To be clear, this compulsory formula is only for the curriculum set by the State Board of Education, and in schools run by the state government. TN's commitment to educational choice is evident — even the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha maintains its headquarters in Chennai.

It is in this context that one must view the extra-constitutional demands imposed belatedly on TN by the Union government for the release of our state's allocation of the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan funds (approximately Rs 2,152 crore) in the FY 2024-2025 Union Budget approved by Parliament.

The threat, stated in public by the Union Minister of Education, is simple: Implement the NEP in full through legislation in TN's assembly (including the compulsory three-language formula) or the Centre will not release the Parliament-approved, pre-allocated funds.

Given the lack of a single example to show how this will improve outcomes, we see the threat as pure political extortion. Such an attempt to force the will of the Union government on TN's elected legislature is in flagrant violation of the Constitution.

In fact, adding a third language would impose costs — not only in staffing and logistics, but also by overloading students' learning capacity — with no evidence-based benefits to justify such curriculum dilution. In large parts of the country, even two languages have not been implemented adequately, for if they had been, we would have already had English as a link language and we would not be having this debate over 75 years after Independence.

There is also the justified fear that introduction of a third language corrodes the use of the native language, sometimes to the point of its practical demise. Hiding behind

the fig leaf of the idea that the third language being mooted is not Hindi does not fool anyone. A cursory look at the Home Minister's statements every Hindi Day, and the multi-fold spending on Hindi promotion, as opposed to other regional languages, will highlight the true intent.

The threat of a similar outcome in Tamil Nadu is a dagger to our hearts, because of our existential love for our mother, Tamil — the core of our identity as Tamilians, and the high expression of our glorious culture and history. Our love is not just manifest in our eagerness to preserve the world's oldest living language, but also in our urgency to keep it refreshed to suit the changing times. We have undertaken many efforts to ensure our language remains vibrant and ever-youthful, from hosting a Kanti Tamil Manadu (Conference on Tamil Computing) way back in 1999 (we ran its second iteration in 2024), and digitising ancient texts, to creating Tamil ILMs. Many of these efforts are undertaken by the Tamil Virtual Academy — an entity established by our leader, Kalaignar (M Karunanidhi), when he was chief minister — which functions as part of my current ministerial portfolio of Information Technology and Digital Services.

This threat is consistent with the Centre's unconstitutional approach of using any means as a weapon for its political agenda. Beyond the politicisation of fund allocation and adding politically self-serving last-minute conditions for the disbursement of funds, the most troubling examples include: Unprecedented use of Article 23(B) to constrain state borrowing beyond their respective FRBM-equivalent legislation; illegal, covert co-opting of bilateral and multilateral lending agencies to adopt lending conditions to non-BJP government-ruled states, and worst of all, the intentional appointment of obdurate governors to thwart the work of elected governments. As our Chief Minister has stated, the Tamil people can never be cowed down by such threats. History teaches lessons. Money alone cannot meaningfully alter employment or growth rates, if the prevailing social structures are not conducive to such improvements. For example, the bias towards Gujarat by the current government has resulted in the creation of Free Trade Zones like GIFT City and the allocation of mega projects have not resulted in any noticeable improvement in either employment or the quality of life for the average resident of Gujarat.

People of ancient cultures like the Tamils cannot be subjugated, nor their identity altered, by coercive actions. Previous attempts at Hindi imposition were catastrophic failures. In Tamil Nadu, January 25 is designated as Language Martyr's Day, when we pay our respects to those who lost their lives in the struggles to preserve Tamil and oppose language imposition. We will not surrender our linguistic rights now or ever, and thereby allow their ultimate sacrifices to have been in vain.

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The writer is Minister for Information Technology and Digital Services, Tamil Nadu

Protect language, don't politicise it

Chief Minister Stalin's attitude is a recipe for turning diversity into divisiveness



VINAY SAHASRABUDHE

TAMIL NADU CHIEF MINISTER M K Stalin's allegation that Hindi has eaten into smaller languages like Maithili, Santhali, etc, is false and a blatant attempt to pit one language group against the other. It's vote bank politics in the name of language. Note that no one from these smaller groups — but rather, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu — is expressing concern about their languages facing an existential threat. Stalin has a difficult election to face in about a year and an issue as emotive as language is a low-hanging fruit. However, while the argument being made is unwavering, the manner in which he has taken up the issue is highly irresponsible. Happily, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has made it clear that there is no question of imposing Hindi and the three-language formula only promotes learning an additional language, besides English and the mother tongue.

CM Stalin has also talked about a monolithic Hindi identity. However, no monolithic identity could really be officially established in India. Resilience and accommodation are fundamental features of Indian culture and straitjacketing is neither practicable nor desirable. But since Stalin has raked up this issue, it is pertinent to ask why linguistic groups feel threatened. There are at least four key factors behind the existential challenge that languages apparently face. These are linguistic colonialism and its sinister impact, changing ideas of social and cultural status, inertia on the part of language warriors and politics and policies about promoting or preventing the development of any language.

During the Mughal era, Urdu and Farsi made inroads into many Indian languages. The level of adulteration was so alarming that Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj had to personally monitor the creation of a Marathi Rajya Vyavahar Kosh, or a dictionary of Marathi administrative terms. With this initiative, he ensured that foreign languages do not have place of pride at the cost of indigenous languages. Later, British rule ensured the needless but all-pervading domination of English and prevented the development of several Indian languages as mediums of acquiring knowledge.

As English was the language of the ruling class, speaking it became a symbol of higher social status leading to an inferiority complex among those speaking their mother tongue.

Sadly, save for a few regional languages like Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam and some North Eastern languages, most other Indian language groups have inadvertently submitted to the "status-symbol phenomenon" and paved the way for linguistic adulteration. Many urban dwellers with their mother tongue being Hindi, Punjabi, Marathi or Kannada today are seeing more English terms colloquially. Ignorance of their rich linguistic traditions, many believe that our own languages are poor in vocabulary, and this is the most sinister impact of linguistic colonialism.

While give and take between languages is not entirely preventable and undesirable, the cause of a particular language is well-served only when the processes of coining new words and terms thoughtfully and utilising them keenly are carried out. The natural fusion of languages is not the same thing as needless adulteration. What makes way for linguistic adulteration is the popular mindset where using everything "foreign" is considered synonymous with enhanced social status. Hence, the delinking of languages from social status has to be given top priority by our mother tongues are to flourish.

Languages flourish only when they are used. A few years ago, Kazakh people demanded Hindi movies with Kazakh subtitles and not Russian ones. Similarly, a South Asian leader has expressed the desire to read the *Gita Rahasya* of Lokmanya Tilak provided it is made available in the language of their country and not in English. In this context, Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnis's move to ask officials to ensure that Marathi is given a place of prominence as a language of statecraft is welcome.

The third life-threatening factor for mother tongues is the inertia of their progeny. Many language warriors have not understood the importance of government efforts to provide medical and engineering education in mother tongues. If our languages have to compete with English and other global counterparts, they have to create meaningful terminologies for new and emerging technologies. Also, language warriors must understand that language is the vehicle of culture. When a language is threatened, the sustenance of the culture of the respective language-group becomes harder.

The antidote for the "politics of language" is a well-laid-down formal policy of language development. For holistic and sustained development of any language, governments and language groups will have to fight together on multiple fronts. From education to entertainment, from literature to libraries and from event management to election campaigns, an emphasis on using mother tongues/regional languages alone will help them to not just stand but also grow.

CM Stalin must understand that raking up anger in the name of language is much easier than actually taking up the cause of any language. He must remember that politicising language matters in a partisan manner in fact hampers the cause of the respective language. Such politicisation is a recipe for converting diversity into divisiveness.

The writer is a National Executive Committee member of the BJP

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Members of both parties have expressed worry about Mr. Trump's outrageous parroting of the Russian line on Ukraine. They are likely to be even more upset when Musk's cuts reach their states and when record-breaking measles outbreaks happen."

—THE NEW YORK TIMES

Well played, Steve Smith

He had the unique gift, like the best in cricket, to make his game tick in every format



SANDIP G

SOME FAREWELLS ARE festivals. When peers are penned on the departing legend, a river of tears is shed and statues erected. Some are merely mourned, for a career wasted, for a graph that never scaled its predestined peak, for the milestones left unachieved. Some are met with impassivity, with a sense of cosmic fatalism that everything that begins has to end. The emotions, or the lack thereof, that attended Steve Smith's one day international debut, swims in the third category. There was neither shock nor awe, but a chilling acceptance that it was inevitable in the broader scheme of stretching his Test career, where he is arguably the greatest batsman of his time.

The larger theme of his career remains strikingly similar in Tests and ODIs — a fascinating irony. He came as an outlier in Test cricket, with a bewilderingly unorthodox technique that was presumed to fall apart in tougher climates, that was not endowed to collect 10k runs and 36 hundreds, shimmering at the fifth spot in the all-time batting charts in red-ball cricket. The preconception when he burst forth — as a leg-spinner who could bat, well a little — was that his unconventional methods would wear seamlessly into the limited-overs fabric. But Smith has made an industry of making a mockery of suppositions, of bowlers, pundits and coaches. In neither format, though, was he touted to conquer greatness.

In ODIs, he became something of a semi-great. The body of work is impressive — 5,800 runs, 43.2 runs a game, a strike rate of 86.56, 12 hundreds, two-time World Cup champion. In another era, even a decade ago, these are numbers golden enough to grant access to the rarified space the regals of the game inhabited. But he played most of his cricket when the format itself was tussling with identity crisis, wondering whether it's a crunched five-day game or an elongated T20 version. It faced the classic confusion of a middle sibling.

Smith's plight was even more difficult, because his role was such that he had to bat in the past in a game that was leaving to the future. He embraced modernity, added deeper layers and gears into his batting, but with the phalanx of hitters around him, such as David Warner and Aaron Finch, Glenn Maxwell and Marcus Stoinis, he had to perform the anchoring duties of his career. He had the game to maraud — as he exhibited in his whirlwind hundreds against India in Sydney 2020 (105 off 66 balls, 104 off 64 balls).

Had Smith's attacking inclinations remained unshackled by roles and responsibilities, his career could have been per-

ceived differently. But a cricketer is often a product of his circumstances, of the team's nature, specifications, and the strengths and weaknesses of his teammates. In a different milieu, Sachin Tendulkar would have never opened, or M S Dhoni redefined the art of finishing.

Maybe, Smith was too gifted for his own good. He could enact roles his teammates could not. He performed what Warner and Maxwell could, but neither could duplicate Smith. Even if they sometimes functioned in the Smith role, their range was not as vast as Smith's. He had the unique gift, like the best, to make his fundamental game tick in every format. The contrast between Smith in Tests and ODIs was not as vivid as day and night. In the limited-overs versions, he would play some strokes more frequently than the others, pursue the aerial route more often and at times resort to the ramp and scoop. "I don't play different formats differently. The batting is a reaction to the bowling, the required run rate, the conditions and fields," he revealed in a [cricinfo.com.au](https://www.cricinfo.com.au/podcast) podcast.

He might not have been his white-ball teams' most important batsman, but he has ferried Australia to monumental achievements. A big-match player, he shares the greatest number of 50-plus scores (5) in World Cup knockouts with Sachin Tendulkar. India would painfully remember the sparkling 105 off 93 balls he reeled out at Sydney in the 2015 semi-final clash. Only Ricky Ponting (442) and Martin Guptill (346) have mustered more runs than him (345) in the World Cup knockouts. Among those who have batted at No 3, only five have averaged better.

But the thread of paradox continues, because unless you go fishing for Smith's greatness in ODI, you wouldn't comprehend it. At the edge of his dishevelled blond mop, you wouldn't spot the faint curves of a halo. He did not etch Smith moments in the game's pages; he didn't patent strokes. Even the twitches and shakes remained a novelty in Tests. The debates of function versus aesthetics he provoked, and his redefinition of beauty in batting, remain relevant to Test cricket.

Or, it could be that Smith, the Test cricketer, is so magnificent a spectacle that its radiance dims all other lights. It's like the understated short stories or poems of a masterful novelist. As good as the short-form works could be, the novel makes his name. Smith the Test cricketer would be immortal, the white-ball less so. The patterns spills into his captaincy numbers. For one of the finest leaders of this century, the Sandpaper gate incident apart, his numbers in white-ball remain humble (a win percentage of 53 and no big titles to show).

Or it could be that Smith did not love the white-ball formats less, but he loves the longer format more, where his farewell could be a festival and not viewed with the detachment that has marked his goodbye from 50-over cricket.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ABUSE OF POWER

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Crime and accountability' (IE, March 6). Sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh was subjected to brutal torture, resulting in his death. All Deshmukh did was raise his voice against extortion in a windmill energy project. The horrific evidence that surfaced in the form of pictures and videos catalysed Minister Dhananjay Munde's resignation under the pretext of ill health. The fact that the murder occurred merely five days after his appointment as the Food and Civil Supplies Minister is a grave and alarming disclosure. The underlying issue necessitates reforms to curb rampant lawlessness, which should include limiting the overreach of MPs and MLAs over law enforcement.

Shaswat Jena, Ghazibad

UNEQUAL GROWTH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Aiming high' (IE, March 6). While the editorial correctly asserts that India's path to sustainable growth requires extensive reforms by both the Centre and state governments, these must extend beyond purely economic measures and avoid an overreliance on per capita income as an indicator of progress, as it can mask significant income inequality, as evidenced by the Oxfam report which revealed that 73 per cent of wealth generated accrues to the top one per cent of the population in 2017. While the bottom 670 million saw only a one per cent increase, further, India risks falling into the middle-income trap due to a premature shift from agriculture to services, bypassing the crucial development

of a robust industrial and manufacturing sector, which is essential for sustained economic expansion.

Ashleen Rizvi, Lucknow

FREEZE, AGAIN

THIS REFERS TO the report, TN parties oppose delimitation (IE, March 6). The 84th Amendment froze the Lok Sabha seats till 2026 and for good reason. The Modi government would do well to take a leaf out of the Vajpayee government's book so that no state feels wronged or alienated. Pro-rata representation on the basis of population will be heavily skewed towards the states that have seen sustained population growth. The next 30 years will give sufficient time for the states in the Hindi belt to implement population control measures.

G David Milton, Marathachode

SENSIBLE STEP

THIS REFERS TO the article 'At a global crossroads' (IE, March 4). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's decision to set aside the unfortunate events at the Oval Office and to take a step in the direction of peace is sensible and diplomatic. Even though US President Donald Trump's belligerence during the meeting took diplomacy to a new low, he was correct about the Russia-Ukraine war. While there is no space for a breach of territorial integrity and sovereignty, the solution for lasting peace lies in addressing the cause of Ukraine's aspirations for NATO membership and Russia's concerns about the alliance's expansion.

Tushar Anand, Patna

THIS WORD MEANS

IFTAR

Breaking of the fast at dusk during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan

YASHEE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 6

MARCH 7 marks the first Friday of Ramadan (or Ramadan), the Islamic holy month. After spending dawn-to-dusk observing a *ruza*, or a ritual fast, Muslims around the world break their fast with *iftar* during Ramadan.

The word '*iftar*' is derived from an Arabic term which refers to the breaking of the fast.

What time of the day is it partaken?

Iftar or *iftari* is the evening meal eaten immediately before the evening *namaz* (also called the *Maghrib*) and comes at the end of the fasting day. *Iftar* is one of the two meals eaten by people who fast during Ramadan, the other being *sahri* (or *suhur*) that is eaten before dawn. There are no set rules for the food items that should be consumed during *iftar*, with people consuming whatever is locally available and popular.

However, the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have broken his fast with dates, and so they are a popular and recommended choice for many. The meal is often eaten with family, friends, and the larger community. Charity, or providing *iftar* for the needy, is another aspect of the meal.

What is the spiritual significance?

The process of fasting is intended to remind the faithful that everything one has is given by God. *Iftar* is the time to express gratitude to Allah for the sustenance provided, and reflect on all the other blessings one enjoys in life.

The fast, and breaking it with only one meal, is also meant to inculcate discipline and self-control, so that one is mindful of what one consumes and enjoys, and can find the strength within to observe all the



A vendor in Srinagar arranges traditional Kashmiri snacks consumed at *iftar*. PTI

tenets of Islam.

What is the social significance?

Iftar is often a community affair, with people eating together or sending food to each other and the needy. It is part of the shared experience of obeying the commands of Allah, promoting a feeling of kinship, of being part of a larger whole.

In 2023, *iftar* was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The UNESCO website says, "The evening prayer is followed by activities such as praying ceremonies, music, storytelling, games, preparing and serving traditional and local meals and marriage arrangements. For communities, it often takes the form of gatherings or meals, strengthening family and community ties and promoting charity, solidarity and social exchange. The ceremonies and rituals related to *iftar* are also practised by people who do not necessarily fast during the month of Ramadan. The knowledge and skills are typically transmitted within families through oral instruction, observation and participation, and children and youth are often entrusted with preparing components of traditional meals."

STUDY: GENE PRESENT IN MICE MAY HELP ARREST COGNITIVE DECLINE

RESEARCHERS HAVE found a gene in mice that rejuvenates female brains. Humans have the same gene. The discovery suggests a possible way to help both women and men avoid cognitive declines in old age. The study was published on Wednesday in *Science Advances*. The journal also published two other studies on women's brains, one on the effect of hormone therapy; another on how age at the onset of menopause shapes the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

Previous evidence suggests women's brains age more slowly than men's. To understand how, the researchers focused on the one factor that differentiates females and males: the X chromosome.

Females have two X chromosomes; males have one X and one Y chromosome. Early in pregnancy, one of the X chromosomes in females shuts down and its



genes go nearly silent. But while looking at the hippocampus, the brain's centre of memory and cognition, which deteriorates as one ages, the researchers found that the silent X chromosomes "woke up".

Their study was done in aging mice, but the researchers believe the finding is applicable to humans

because mice show the same age-related effects on brain functioning — with females performing better than males.

The researchers focused on a particular awakened gene, *Pip1*. When, using gene therapy, aging male mice were given a dose of *Pip1* in their hippocampus, they regained memory and cognition. And when the therapy was given to female mice, which were already making *Pip1*, their memories and cognition got even better.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

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JOHNSON TA
BENGALURU, MARCH 6

A PROGRAM to explore the creation of a secure 5G Open Radio Access Network (O-RAN) for India as part of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, initiatives for clean air and water and sanitation, and dozens of health projects will come to a halt in India following an order of the Trump administration (January 20 Executive Order titled 'Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid'). The order seeks to end foreign aid and all but disband the US Agency for International Development.

USAID has been a major contributor to health- and population-linked projects in India over the last two decades. In recent years, it has also focused on building systems in India as part of a partnership strategy drawn up in 2022 to counter China in the Indo-Pacific.

In 2022, USAID was fourth among providers of Official Development Assistance to India with a contribution of \$228 million after Japan (\$2.97 billion), European Union institutions (\$383.5 mn) and Germany (\$235 mn), according to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data.

USAID funding for India

Data on *foreignassistance.gov*, a joint website of USAID and the US Department of State that details US non-defence foreign assistance through governments and NGOs, show USAID disbursed \$2.8 bn in Official Development Assistance to India since 2001.

The largest aid packages came over 2022 and 2023 — \$228 mn and \$175 mn respectively. In 2024, \$151 mn had been disbursed to India until December 19, when the site was last updated.

A significant increase in USAID allocation to an economic support fund to India after the Covid-19 pandemic — \$148 mn in 2022 and \$81 mn in 2023 — was the main reason US aid to India reached all-time highs over the last three years.

These years were the first since the 2001-08 period when total annual disbursements to India exceeded \$100 mn. (The earlier peak of \$175 mn was reached in 2006.)

While the bulk of the annual USAID funding in 2001 and 2002 went to Food Aid and Commodity Assistance, the subsequent years saw a focus on the Health and Population category through allocations for polio eradication, maternal health, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis control programs.

Funding over last 3 years

2024: \$80 mn of the \$151 mn disbursed to India by USAID in 2024 went to the Health and Population category — with \$42.99 mn

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USAID's India projects under threat

HEALTH

Momentum 3B for Overcoming Entrenched Obstacles in Routine Immunization

GOAL: Strengthen immunisation programs, remove bottlenecks in planning, delivery, demand, uptake of immunisation services.
FUNDING: \$20,596,671
SCHEDULED END: June 2026

Reaching Impact, Saturation and Epidemic Control (RISE)

GOAL: Five-year PEPFAR-USAID-funded project to reduce new HIV infections, HIV-related morbidity & mortality.
FUNDING: \$7,163,483
SCHEDULED END: December 2025

Suwas: Support To Water and Sanitation in India

GOAL: Support sustainable sanitation and safe drinking water in pursuit of sustainable development goals.
FUNDING: \$4,050,001
SCHEDULED END: March 2026

ENVIRONMENT

Strengthening Landscape Management and Conservation

GOAL: Five-year program that supports Government of India, other stakeholders in protecting landscapes, improving biodiversity conservation.
FUNDING: \$2,695,142
SCHEDULED END: April 2028

Cleaner Air and Better Health

GOAL: Improve air quality and reduce air pollution exposure in selected Indian locations.
FUNDING: \$1,500,000
SCHEDULED END: October 2026

BASIC EDUCATION

Scaling up Early Learning
GOAL: Facilitate creation of reading rooms to improve basic education.
FUNDING: \$2,115,879
SCHEDULED END: September 2025

for basic health programs, including \$16 mn for Covid-19.

The next highest allocation was to maternal and child health and family planning

Udyam: Building Resilience of Women Micro-entrepreneurs

FUNDING: \$3,000,000
SCHEDULED END: November 2027

ENERGY

South Asia Regional Energy Partnership (SAREP)

GOAL: Improve access to affordable, secure, reliable and sustainable energy in South Asia.
FUNDING: \$5,196,278
SCHEDULED END: September 2028

BUSINESS

O-RAN Research Labs

GOAL: To explore creation of a tech platform for secure and trustworthy alternate 5G O-RAN; part of US efforts to facilitate "free and open Indo-Pacific".
FUNDING: \$3,300,000
SCHEDULED END: September 2025

GOVT & CIVIL SOCIETY

Central Tibetan Administration Capacity Building & Sustainability Initiative

GOAL: Strengthen Central Tibetan Administration for delivering services to Tibetans and achieving community self-reliance.
FUNDING: \$2,898,081
SCHEDULED END: August 2026

OTHER SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Development Partnership Activity for Indo Pacific Region

GOAL: Partnership between USAID and Indian development agencies to provide technical assistance to countries in the Indo-Pacific region in the areas of energy, natural resource management, digital technology, connectivity, trade and competitiveness.

FUNDING: \$1,676,960 (2024).
\$962,488 (2023). \$881,455 (2022)
SCHEDULED END: August 2025

(\$20.94 mn), followed by environmental protection programs (\$17.12 mn).

2023: Of the \$175 mn disbursed by US

AID to India, Health and Population got \$120

mn, with \$83.22 mn for basic health, including \$54 mn for Covid-19.

Maternal and child health got \$16.28 mn, HIV/AIDS \$12.13 mn, and environmental protection \$9.62 mn.

2022: \$180 mn of the \$228 mn disbursed by USAID was for the Health and Population category, including \$140.7 mn for basic health (\$120 mn was for Covid-19 control). Around \$25.09 mn was given for maternal and child health, \$10.57 mn for HIV/AIDS, and \$7.18 mn for environment protection.

When funds tap is shut

In its effort to stop the US economy from hemorrhaging resources amid growing debt, the Trump administration has gone after USAID and its funding initiatives with a sledgehammer. The impact will be felt in underdeveloped and developing countries in Asia and Africa, including India — especially in those health and social care areas in which Indian government funding is limited.

TUBERCULOSIS: 'Breaking the Barriers', a program to increase knowledge about TB in the poorest regions of Karnataka, Telangana, Bihar, and Assam will be a key project that will be hit. Over the 2022-23 period, USAID provided \$7 mn to the program.

HIV/AIDS: USAID and PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) have been the major contributors to the global fight against HIV/AIDS.

"[The mission] is currently under threat because of the Trump administration disbanding and abandoning USAID. We are unclear what will happen but the disruption that has already taken place will manifest itself in lives lost and prevention of onward transmission of HIV infections," German population health researcher Dr Till Barnighausen told *The Indian Express* recently.

The German Consul General in Bengaluru Achim Burkard said at a recent public lecture that the cutting of USAID funds "means losing lives". In Zambia alone 150,000 people are in desperate need of HIV medication, in the absence of which they will die, Burkard said.

"The rich countries have a responsibility to support the countries that are not able to support themselves. With at least 50% of the world's population having no access to safe, affordable, timely healthcare services, delivering healthcare remains an urgent task," he said.

On February 13, a US federal court halted the January 20 executive order to halt all foreign aid. The Trump administration appealed at the US Supreme Court and argued that 5,800 foreign aid awards had been evaluated and 500 had been retained. In a 5-4 verdict on March 5, the court rejected the government's request to cancel the February 13 order of the federal court.

Pashu Aushadhi initiative for health of livestock

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 6

THE GOVERNMENT will open "Pashu Aushadhi" stores across the country to provide affordable generic veterinary medicines for livestock to people engaged in animal husbandry and dairying.

The Pashu Aushadhi initiative is part of the revised Livestock Health and Disease Control Program (LHDPC), which was approved by the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday.

LHDPC has an overall outlay of Rs 3,880 crore for 2024-25 and 2025-26. Of this, Rs 75 crore has been provided for good quality and affordable generic veterinary medicine and incentive for sale of medicines under the

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Pashu Aushadhi component.

Based on Janaushadhi Kendras

The initiative has been conceptualised on the lines of the existing Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Janaushadhi Kendras, which provide "quality generic medicines at affordable prices" to "bring down the healthcare budget of every citizen of India".

"Generic medicines" are non-branded drugs, which are marketed under a non-proprietary or approved name rather than a proprietary or brand name.

More than 10,300 Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Janaushadhi Kendras are currently functional, according to the Department of Pharmaceuticals under the Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilisers. March 7 will be celebrated as Janaushadhi Diwas.

Why Pashu Aushadhi matters

As per the 20th Livestock Census, India's livestock population stood at 535.78 million in 2019. This included a total bovine population (including cattle, buffalo, mithun and yak) of 302.79 million.

According to the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying, the "productivity of livestock is impacted adversely due to diseases like Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), Brucellosis, Peste des Petits Ruminants (PPR), Contagious Fluid (CSF), Lumpy Skin Disease, etc."

While measures such as vaccination drives have been taken proactively, much remains to be done. A significant portion of the out-of-pocket expenditure of farmers goes into buying medicines to treat their cattle and other animals for illnesses. Implementing

LHDPC can help reduce those losses through disease prevention, the ministry said.

To be run by co-op societies

The Pashu Aushadhi stores will be run by cooperative societies and Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samridhi Kendras. The Department of Animal Husbandry & Dairying will release guidelines for their functioning, a source said.

The Pashu Aushadhi Kendras will also sell ethnoveterinary medicines, which are based on traditional beliefs and indigenous knowledge and practices. The National Dairy Development Board has compiled a list of ethnoveterinary formulations for major ailments in bovines, including treatments for mastitis, FMD disease lesions, fever, and worms.

LONGER VERSION ON
indianexpress.com/explained

How does a cricket ball swing? How does saliva help in its movement?

SRIRAM VEERA
MUMBAI, MARCH 6

INDIAN PACER Mohammad Shami on Thursday appealed to the ICC to lift the ban on using saliva to shine cricket balls that was introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since 2011, two balls have been used per innings in ODIs. This means that balls are not as scuffed up as they used to be. Add to this the prohibition on using saliva, generating reverse swing has gotten much more difficult.

"We are trying to reverse, but you are not getting the use of saliva into the game," Shami told reporters in Dubai.

What is swing? Why does a ball swing?

Swing refers to the lateral movement of a cricket ball in the air, before it lands on the pitch. It is essentially a product of an air pressure differential on either side of the ball.

A thin layer of air forms along the ball's surface after it is released by the bowler. But

the so-called "boundary layer" must separate from the surface at some point. Where this separation occurs on either side of the ball determines the air pressure on that side.

Bowlers generally tilt the seam towards one direction or the other. In a new ball, the raised seam disturbs the airflow on the side towards which it is tilted. This turbulent flow on the seam side sticks to the ball's surface longer and travels faster than the smooth laminar flow on the other side.

According to Bernoulli's principle, faster travelling air on the seam side results in a decrease of air pressure on that side, making the ball swing in that direction. In theory, a new ball that is held straight — with the seam perfectly aligned to the direction it is travelling — will not swing because the airflow on both sides of the ball is even.

What is reverse swing? Why does it occur?

What has been discussed so far is conventional swing which generally occurs with a new ball. Things get more interest-



Spit is used to shine the ball. Reuters

ing when the ball gets older, its lacquer wears off, and its surface gets more abrasive. This is when the ball starts to reverse, that is, move in the direction opposite to the seam side.

From the moment they are banded the ball, the fielding team makes efforts to shine

one side. Consequently, as the ball gets older, one side is smoother than the other. That said, the so-called shiny side is nonetheless rougher than a new ball. This means that this side still generates sticky, turbulent airflow.

However, the rougher side generates

even more turbulent airflow than the shinier side, which can be further aggravated with the help of the seam. This extra turbulent airflow is not as sticky as the turbulent airflow on the other side. It shears off — meaning that the point of separation from the boundary layer moves towards the front of the ball. As a consequence, the air pressure on the seam side is now relatively higher than on that on the shiny side. This makes the ball swing on the side opposite to the seam.

To aid reverse swing, bowlers also try to ensure that the shiny side is slightly heavier than the other side. This gives the ball a natural tendency to fall in that direction.

Where does saliva figure in all this?

Cricketers have traditionally used saliva to shine one side of the ball, smoothen the surface, and make it a tad heavier on that side. The idea is to create as great a contrast between the two sides of the ball as possible, which helps generate reverse swing. Cricketers have chewed on all kinds of mints and candy to aid the shining process — sugary saliva is heavier, and thus

considered more effective for shining a cricket ball.

Can something else be used in saliva's place? In theory, yes. But saliva is the most readily accessible shining agent that works the way cricketers want it to.

Take sweat, for example. Rubbing the ball with sweat is legal but sweat is not as good a polishing agent as saliva, presumably because it does not contain mucus.

Moreover, the ball tends to soak up sweat — too much sweat can soften the ball which is not something bowlers want. Softer balls do not bounce as much, they do not turn as quickly, or retain much pace after pitching. In short, they are easier for a batter to deal with.

Then there is the fact that unlike saliva, sweating is condition-dependent. Players simply do not sweat enough in cold conditions for it to be an effective shining substance.

Other substances, like vaseline have also been touted, although they are not as effective. Notably, vaseline is thinner than sweat. As former Indian pacer Ashish Nehra once said, "Vaseline can help keep the shine, but it does not make the ball heavier on one side".

Is Artificial Intelligence affecting critical thinking skills?



Arun Kumar Tangirala
Professor
Chemical Engineering, IIT Tirupati, and
Professor,
Wadhvani
School of Data Science and AI,
IIT Madras



Arul George Scaria
Professor of
Law, National
Law School of
India
University,
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PARLEY

Arificial Intelligence (AI) tools are increasingly being used in classrooms around the world. Last month, British universities were warned to “stress-test” all assessments after new research revealed that “almost all” undergraduates are using generative AI (GenAI) in their studies. Last year, a study by TeamLease EdTech revealed that over 65% of educators in India are using AI tools. All this has given rise to fears that students will likely begin accepting information at face value rather than critically analysing it. Does the use of AI in education affect critical thinking skills? Arun Kumar Tangirala and Arul George Scaria discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Sai Charan. Edited excerpts:

Should AI be permitted in college classrooms? If yes, to what extent?

Arun Kumar Tangirala: Yes, AI should be permitted. As it has pervaded every aspect of our lives, it is not a good idea to prohibit it. Even if you were to prohibit it, students will use it because it has pervaded every home and device. The extent to which it should be used and who should be using it in the classroom is contextual. It would depend on whether I am teaching a coding course, a technical course, a science course, or a humanities course. For example, if my aim is to impart cognitive skills, I would use AI minimally. But if I am teaching coding, it would be different. There has been a shift in skill sets in the industry. The ability to code is not necessarily the primary skill; the ability to evaluate and validate a code is more or less the evolving skill. So I would use AI, because everybody uses AI to generate codes. But it is important to make sure that the students use AI in an ethical and responsible way.

There are no government regulations on usage yet. So institutes and instructors have to form their own rules, declare these clearly at the beginning of the course, and also explain why they are imposing these. As long as things are done in a systematic, informed, ethical, and responsible manner, AI should be allowed.

Arul George Scaria: It is nearly impossible and perhaps even futile to prohibit AI in classrooms. Whether we like it or not, that is the reality. We might have to change our teaching and learning approaches according to this changing scenario because AI is also getting more and more integrated into many of the applications we use daily. For example, Copilot is getting integrated into Microsoft Word. Even when you open Adobe Reader, it suggests providing an AI-generated summary.

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India's first AI teacher 'Iris' interacts with students at a school at Attingal in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. PTI

When we talk about AI usage in classrooms, we have to also understand that it is not just students who are using AI; teachers are using it too. School administrators want to bring AI into the classroom and many policymakers believe that there should be greater use of AI in education. But in all these contexts, ethical and responsible AI usage policies are required. AI is helpful in many ways, but it is also a tool that needs to be used cautiously for a wide variety of reasons, including, but not limited to, issues such as potential biases in responses.

The decision on the extent of use should be clearly guided by the learning objectives of the courses. When I teach a comparative copyright law course in collaboration with Professor William Fisher at the Harvard Law School, one of the assignments I give to the students is to use different AI platforms to generate potentially copyright infringing materials. Through this hands-on experience, the students get a better picture of the diverse issues in this particular area. They even get a better sense of whether it is possible to prevent generation of potentially copyright infringing materials and what kind of steps have been put in place by firms in this regard. So we need to evolve general guidelines for all stakeholders in an educational institution, but let the specific approaches for each course be developed as per the learning objectives of those courses.

Courses are being developed with AI. In that case, do you think AI will slowly be seen as a critical part of infrastructure?

AKT: Yes, AI is going to be integral to every type of operation in an academic institution, company, or any other organisation. Therefore, preparations have to be underway in order to integrate AI in a seamless manner. A report published by the World Economic Forum not



We need to educate everyone on how to be responsible AI users, particularly by understanding the limitations of the technology

ARUL GEORGE SCARIA

only throws light on the future skills required, but also on how institutions should realign themselves. The Future of Jobs Report 2025, published in January, showed that the top skills that learners require are analytical and cognitive thinking. AI related skills, social connection, adaptability, etc. Programming skills are lower down the list. If you compare it with earlier reports, the big difference you see is the arrival of AI and related skills. If AI-related skills have to be acquired, not only by the users, but also by employees, it has to be integrated into the infrastructure. But there has to be a secure way of doing this. Unlike a calculator or a computer, AI tools such as Chat GPT, Perplexity, and other LLM models that you are using take your data and broadcast it back to the server, which means that your own personal and confidential information could be at stake if it is not integrated properly. Every user has to be trained and made aware of the benefits and side effects.

AGS: AI is becoming critical infrastructure in many different ways. The government and other stakeholders need to be mindful of this and take appropriate measures for regulation. For example, many State governments suggest adopting AI in schools. But has there been a safety audit of the AI tools that have been suggested for incorporation in these schools? Has there been an audit on the potential biases that might exist in the system? With respect to the training data, are we demanding disclosure? Are we mindful of the impacts?

With AI here to stay, do you think we should accept it in a regulated manner rather than being critical about it?

AKT: There is apprehension and fear about the usage of AI. But we should start using it. For a long time, I also desisted and my reason for using it was to really experience what the fears are about. There is no point in imagining what may happen. Start using AI in a limited way, and experience the benefits and the possible risks. Do it the way you would with an automobile.

The difference is that for automobiles, we have excellent regulations. For AI, it will take time. There are countries saying forget about regulations for now, because that is going to hamper the growth of this technology. I

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disagree. While technology is evolving, discussions on regulation should also be happening. The European Union has been active in that respect. In India, there are more and more discussions happening now, but it will take some time for actual regulations to kick in.

AGS: It is clear that the state might take some time to frame regulations. To me, it is vital that every university initiates dialogues among faculty members and students on responsible AI usage. This will help in evolving appropriate and ethical usage guidelines as per the needs of the institution. We cannot have universal rules, but at least some general guidelines can be evolved at the institutional level. The most prominent global universities have a general AI policy and they have also left it to the faculty to frame specific policies with respect to their courses. That is the only way forward now.

There are concerns that students may become overly dependent on AI-generated responses. Are these valid?

AKT: It's true; many teachers fear this. I don't think it is a valid fear. It depends on what skills we want to impart. An academic institution has its own goals apart from preparing students for employment. Those goals may include training students to think deeply and in a scholarly manner. But at the same time, we need to be practical. We have to train our students so that they get jobs, not necessarily scholarly ones, but where they can implement what they have learned. So, in any course, we will probably have to ask to what extent we want to impart critical thinking skills vis-a-vis practical skills.

AGS: I have a slightly different perspective. At a broader level, I fear that we are currently seeing an over-dependence on AI-generated responses among students and sometimes even among many faculty members. So we need to educate everyone on how to be responsible AI users, particularly by understanding the limitations of the technology. This might even require re-imagining many components of our education. Maybe the kind of technology which we are talking about here can have more negative impacts if we indiscriminately adopt it. Over time, AI technologies may also be more mature. But as it stands now, my fear is that most of the time, people are overlooking the limitations of technology.



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

NOTEBOOK

When an officer from the CMO asked for a journalist's source

Every observation and interaction with Jayalalithaa was instructive

T. Ramakrishnan

Recently, several prominent personalities paid tributes to former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa on her 77th birth anniversary. I had followed Jayalalithaa's public life from the beginning. She, like me, was also once a resident of T. Nagar, a shopper's paradise in Chennai.

Every observation and interaction yielded new discoveries. On May 16, 2011, when she was sworn in as Chief Minister for the third time, I saw how strongly she could express herself without saying a word. When I bent forward to give my visiting card to her at the Chief Minister's chamber at Fort St George, the seat of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly and Secretariat, a police constable tried to push me gently. The way she stared at the constable is still fresh in my memory.

However, in 2001, when Jayalalithaa returned to power, her equation with the media was anything but cordial. Her government began to file defamation cases against the press. By September 2003, her establishment had filed 15 defamation complaints against *The Hindu*, apart from having initiated breach of privilege proceedings in the Assembly against the newspaper for three reports and an editorial titled 'Rising intolerance'.

Back then, I had done some research and calls for a story that I thought was harmless. The story was about the Tamil Nadu government's decision to construct a check dam to augment water supply to Chennai. Tamil Nadu, like many other parts of the country, was reeling under a long spell of acute water shortage. Chennai, which largely depends on rainfall to quench its thirst, was affected badly. Any news report on water caught public attention then, as it invariably appeared on the front page. My story, too, appeared on page 1 of *The Hindu* on July 26, 2001.

But Jayalalithaa had a different opinion. Her objection was not to the core part of the story, but to the penultimate para, which said that she would meet Andhra

Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu in Hyderabad on August 3 to seek more Krishna water, which had become an important source for Chennai for 1996.

I didn't know this until the next day when, at around 8 a.m., I received a call on my landline at home from an IAS officer, who told me to be prepared to receive a call from another officer attached to the Chief Minister's Office (CMO). The other officer came on the line. Speaking in a soft tone, he broached the matter regarding the Chief Minister's proposed visit to Hyderabad and asked me to reveal my source. I was stumped. The officer added that only a few people knew about her trip. I replied to him that he, being the representative of an "all-mighty government," was wasting his time and energy by talking to a "lowly mortal." He abruptly cut the call. I told the Chief of the News Bureau, V. Jayanth, about the call.

Later that day, the CMO issued a statement denying that Jayalalithaa would meet Mr. Naidu on August 3. It added that in the event of such a trip being planned, the news would be given to everyone. It became clear to me that Jayalalithaa first wanted to make public any "positive news" about her or her government's measures. When Mr. Jayanth came across the press release, he thought of mentioning in the copy about the CMO's denial, the conversation that I had had with the officer from the CMO. However, on second thoughts, he dropped it, unwilling to precipitate matters.

My source remained in the position for more than two years. The officer who called me also stayed at the CMO for two years. While I always remembered the episode, forever smarting from the fact that I had been asked to reveal my source, he had forgotten about it. I met him in 2013 at a public function and reminded him about the call. When his turn came that day to give a talk, he welcomed me and even referred to the phone conversation. Jayalalithaa was still in power at that time.

ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Birds of a feather



Pelicans and painted storks at the Indira Gandhi Zoological Park in Visakhapatnam. The birds' enclosure was completely damaged during Cyclone Hudhud in 2014. Since then, they have been freely moving around the zoo. K.R. DEEPAK

FROM THE ARCHIVES The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 7, 1975

Arab guerillas die in Tel Aviv hotel shootout

Tel Aviv, March 6: Israeli troops smashed a hotel siege "by Arab guerillas yesterday in a battle that left 14 dead - seven terrorists, four hostages and three Israeli soldiers," the Israeli command said.

After a day of confusion and various official announcements on casualties and hostages, Maj. Gen. Shlomo Gazit, Chief of Military Intelligence, put the final death toll at 14. One guerilla was taken alive.

"The eight guerillas stormed ashore late last night, grabbed hostages and shot their way

into the cheap Savoy Hotel on the road to Jaffa, Tel Aviv's neighbouring Israeli Arab township.

Some reports said as many as 40 hostages were held throughout the night until Israeli troops burst into the building at dawn in a crescendo of gunfire and explosions.

The Israeli attack was thought to have ended the drama - the first of its kind experienced by Tel Aviv. x

But fresh firing broke out at about noon as troops combed the hotel and surrounding area.

In a brief flurry of fighting one guerilla was overpowered and captured alive and another was shot dead.

The Israeli Military Command said some of the hostages were killed in an explosion set off by the guerillas.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 7, 1925

Burma war memorial

Rangoon, March 5: H.E. the Governor unveiled the Burma War Memorial this evening in the presence of an influential gathering. The memorial is in the form of an obelisk about fifty feet high standing in the centre of a circular platform 60 feet in diameter. Near the top of the obelisk is a bronze band with a wreath facing the roadway and at its mesrine base are four bronze inscription plates facing the east being inscribed: "For the glorious dead 1914-18" while others give in English, Burmese and Hindi a list of the Units which left Burma on war service. The design is simple and the monument military in its character with no religious emblems.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

Vicky Kaushal as Sambhaji Maharaj in *Chhaava*.

How 'Chhaava' erases history and leaves no room for complexity

When history in cinema becomes merely a tool to evoke anger, disgust and hatred, it robs us from understanding history in all its complexity. *Chhaava's* world of Hindus versus Muslims/Indians versus foreigners is far from the real 17th century

Nissim Mannathukkaren

After watching the latest Bollywood blockbuster *Chhaava*, a viewer in Gujarat tore the cinema screen angered by the torture inflicted by Aurangzeb on Sambhaji. Multiple videos of viewers, including children, crying and shouting slogans, after watching the film, have been circulating on social media. Any film that devotes the final 40 of a total 136 minutes, to a brutal depiction of torture is already suspect with its sense of aesthetics.

Chhaava does have the laudable goal of setting the historical record straight about Sambhaji as a great warrior and administrator against biased accounts. But it becomes harmful national-level propaganda when it is fixated on the good Hindu versus the bad Muslim binary, skips some incontrovertible facts, and is in complete sync with the ruling party's ideology. Thus, it joins the cohort of over 20 blatant propaganda films made recently such as *The Kashmir Files*, *The Kerala Story*, *The Vaccine War*, *Article 370*, *Bastar*, *The Naxal Story*, *Swatantrya Veer Savarkar*, *JNU: Jahangir National University*, *The Sabarnati Report* and *Samrat Prithviraj*. And *Chhaava*, like some others, was endorsed by the Prime Minister and other Ministers, and made tax-free in certain BJP-ruled States.

Hindu vs Muslim binary

Chhaava's world is one in which the relentless quest to expose the evilness of the Muslim Aurangzeb makes it omit that he came to power on the basis of support from the Rajputs; that his administration had the highest percentage of Hindu Mansabdar in Mughal history (33%); that he had Hindu in the posts of the Dewan and as heads of two important

provinces; and that the emperor who imposed the *jizya* (but exempted it for Brahmins, Rajputs, women, the elderly, etc.) protected some temples just as he demolished others, according to some historians.

This, of course, does not make Aurangzeb tolerant, only that his orthodoxy had to accommodate political pragmatism. While secularist historians emphasise this political pragmatism, Samina Sheikh shows how Aurangzeb's Sunni bigotry arguably persecuted Shia and other Islamic millenarian groups such as the Mahdavis, Dawoodi Bohras and Sufis more than the Hindus. This persecution had an economic side too – the rising prosperity of these 'heretic' groups drew the ire of Aurangzeb's Sunni clerics who had business motives as well.

Of course, these complexities/debates cannot be a part of *Chhaava's* world in which the quest for Maratha 'Swaraj' under Sambhaji is suffused with Hindu imagery and is presented as liberating India from 'foreign rule.' Actually, the Mughals had already lived in India for over 150 years then. Historian Stewart Gordon argues that Chhatrapati Shivaji, who championed tolerance and syncretism, and who had beseeched Aurangzeb to follow Akbar's tolerance, was not advocating nationalism or the cause of a 'universal Hindu rule.' Shivaji, too, had a substantial number of Muslims in his administration, including top military commanders.

No room for nuance
Chhaava's world of Hindus versus Muslims/Indians versus foreigners is far from the real 17th century in which there were multiple states and emerging European powers, with various cross-cutting alliances and rivalries between them. A strong coastal power

was the Sidis of Janjira, who were African Muslims, while the Peshwa of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate for 26 years was the legendary military general Malik Ambar, an Ethiopian slave. Shivaji (and his father) were a part of the Adil Shahi rule of Bijapur. Even when he rebelled and carved out his own kingdom, he allied with them, the Qutb Shahis of Golconda and even the Mughals, and sometimes against Hindu kingdoms like the Nayaks of the Karnata. Similarly, Sambhaji, too, allied with Muslim Sultanates against Hindu kings like Chikka Devaraja of Mysore.

Chhaava's central narrative of Aurangzeb's evilness would be diluted of its shock value if the film showed that Sambhaji himself had rebelled against his father Shivaji and had briefly joined the same evil Aurangzeb! While *Chhaava*, unlike other propaganda films, does show aberrations in the 'good Hindus' narrative by showing some Hindu traitors, including in his own family, all the kohl-lined Muslims are universally bad.

In positing Aurangzeb's torture as exceptional, what *Chhaava's* world elides is the brutal nature of the medieval world with daily wars. States, including the Marathas, were built through consolidation, as well as through the violent subjugation of Hindu (and Muslim) landed nobles (*deshmukhs*, *jagirdars*, etc.) who were constantly shifting allegiances between states for better material/symbolic benefits. Internecine conflict between family members, just like among the Mughals, was rife: Shivaji battled his half-brother Ekoji, and so did Sambhaji's son with other contenders. When the film shows the failed plot to poison Sambhaji on behalf of his half-brother Rajaram, where 20 key Maratha ministers and elites are executed, it only hints at the violence by the

trampling of elephants. When Sambhaji's Marathas attack Goa, a Portuguese account (cited by historian Jadunath Sarkar) says, "up to now nowhere else in India has such barbarity been seen..." While such narratives have to be treated carefully, what it shows was that violence was pervasive, even if degrees varied.

Ignoring caste

Critically, *Chhaava's* Hindu-Muslim binary glosses over caste. It was the lowest castes and the poor who faced the worst forms of oppression across Hindu and Muslim states. In the 1818 Battle of Koregaon, the East India Company forces, with the Dalit Mahars in it, defeated the Peshwa-led Maratha confederacy. It became a symbol of caste resistance for Ambedkar and the Dalits. The film is also ironical considering that the Maharashtra non-Brahman movement had contended for long that the demonisation of Sambhaji as weak, incompetent and morally deficient was perpetuated by Brahmin narratives. This was also repeated by Hindutva ideologues like Savarkar and Golwalkar. The film has led to new Maratha versus Brahmin sentiments.

The world of *Chhaava*, like many other propaganda history films, is governed by present-day predilections in which a majoritarian nationalism is rampant, with the national audience further reinforcing it. When history in cinema becomes merely a tool to evoke anger, disgust and hatred, it robs us from understanding history in all its complexity. When history textbooks are being rewritten, and when people read history mostly through WhatsApp forwards, films like *Chhaava* with their erasures portend a dangerous tendency.

Nissim Mannathukkaren is with Dalhousie University, Canada and is on X @nmannathukkaren.

THE DAILY QUIZ

International Women's Day is observed every year on March 8. A quiz on iconic women and their achievements

Franciszek Snarski

QUESTION 1

This event was started by a massive women-led protest on March 8, 1917 in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg), Russia, and eventually led to the abdication of the Tsar. The date was later commemorated as International Women's Day. What is this event called?

QUESTION 2

This Indian social reformer and educationist co-founded the first school for girls in Pune along with her husband, working tirelessly for women's education. Who is she?

QUESTION 3

On this day in 1979, this West

Asian country saw tens of thousands of women protest against newly imposed compulsory veiling laws. Which country was it?

QUESTION 4

This pioneering scientist, born in Poland, became the first woman to win a Nobel Prize and remains the only person to have won Nobel Prizes in two different scientific fields. Who is she?

QUESTION 5

This person, a Kenyan environmentalist and women's rights activist, became the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She was the founder of the Green Belt Movement, which focused on tree planting, conservation, and women's empowerment. Who is she?

**Visual question:**

This Chinese writer was a leading figure in 20th century Chinese literature. She was known for her works exploring the struggles of women in a changing society. However, her activism led to persecution during a major political event. Name the person and the event.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Originally named Chen Gangsheng, this person took a more Western name after migrating to Australia. **Ans: Jackie Chan**

2. A revolutionary, a socialist and an advocate of Pan-Africanism, this person was born with the name Francis Nwia-Kofi Ngonioma. **Ans: Kwame Nkrumah**

3. The name Robert Zimmerman chose after being inspired by a Welsh poet. **Ans: Bob Dylan**

4. This Indian citizen was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. **Ans: Mother Teresa**

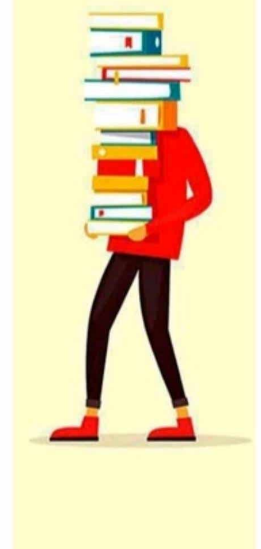
5. The pen name of Eric Arthur Blair. **Ans: George Orwell**

Visual: Name the religion and the famous name of this person. **Ans: Rastafarianism; Haile Selassie**

Early Birds: Tamal Biswas| Erfanally Oosmany| M. Suresh Kumar| Piyali Tulji| Sonali Das

Franciszek Snarski is an intern with The Hindu.

Please send in your answers to
dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"What is the difference between 'cut in' and 'cut up'?"

"Cut in" means to interrupt someone when he/she is speaking. When John was explaining how to make pedas, his wife cut in and said he was wrong. The speaker lost his temper when Ram cut in a couple of times. "Cut up" means "to be upset or angry about something. I was cut up when my boss said I was incompetent. Krishna thought he had done well in the examination. He was cut up when he was told that he had got a 'C' in his examination."

"Is it all right to say 'I gave him a nose-cut'?"

"Nose-cut" in the sense of 'snub' is used in Tamil Nadu. It is a literal translation of a Tamil expression. It is not used in English, not yet! "Nose-cry" is another expression which is used by Tamil speakers, not by the English. In Tamil, "I gave him a nose-cut" means "I snubbed him."

"What is the meaning of 'Her remarks got up my nose'?"

"It means that her remarks annoyed you. 'To get up someone's nose' means 'to annoy someone.'"

"What is the meaning of 'He walks with his nose in the air'?"

"It means he is very haughty. 'Walk with one's nose in the air' means 'very haughty.'"

"What exactly is the meaning of 'negotiate'?"

"To negotiate" means 'to try to reach an agreement by discussion'. When you negotiate, you are worried whether you will succeed or not. You are not at ease. You are uncomfortable. This is what negotiate really means. It is from Latin 'neg', not and 'otium', 'ease', 'leisure'. Negotiators are ill at ease till the negotiations are over!"

Published in *The Hindu* on September 12, 1995.

Word of the day

Ostentatious:

intended to attract notice and impress others; (of a display) tawdry or vulgar

Synonym: pretentious

Usage: She was always smartly dressed but not in an ostentatious way.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/ostentatiouspro

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/os.ten.tes.jas/, /ps.tan.tes.jas/

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

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Accidents in industrial units in Chhattisgarh in 13 months

171 As many as 124 workers were killed and 86 injured in 171 accidents that occurred in industrial units in Chhattisgarh in 13 months between January 1, 2024, to January 31 this year. A compensation of ₹17,23,68,454 was given to the kin of the deceased workers in these incidents. PTI

The drop in automobile retail sales in February

7 In per cent. Automobile retail sales across categories, including two-wheelers, witnessed a drop of 7% in February amid declining demand, the Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations. Overall retail sales in the domestic market stood at 18,99,196 units last month. PTI

Number of children injured by leftover explosives in Syria

188 Landmines and unexploded ordnances in Syria have killed or injured at least 188 children since president Bashar al-Assad's overthrow in December, the Save the Children charity said. The group called on the authorities to speed up the process of clearing mines. AFP

The U.S. trade deficit surges to a new record in January

131.4 In \$ billion, The U.S. trade deficit surged to a new record in January, data showed, as imports spiked while tariff worries flared in the month of President Donald Trump's inauguration. The overall trade gap of the economy ballooned 34% to \$131.4 billion. PTI

Number of persons in Tenkasi ostracised over a land dispute

30 The National Human Rights Commission said it has taken suo motu cognisance of the reports alleging ostracisation of 30 people of eight families by a village chief over a land dispute in Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu, and issued a notice to its district collector. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The academic link between Nepal and India

When it comes to the history of 'modern' formal education in Nepal, a cursory glance will reveal that not only is it not very old, it also displays intricate connections with India. Higher educational training embeds avenues that register learning experiences as impactful memories which shape future lives and proclivities

FULL CONTEXT

Swatahsiddha Sarkar

In February 16, a third-year woman student from Nepal was found dead by suicide in the Bhubaneswar-based Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT). Initial investigation by the police revealed that harassment from a fellow male student had led the student to take her own life. Other students from Nepal carried out a protest stating that the university had ignored the consistent complaints made by the female student about the harassment. This led to KIIT halting academic activities and ordering students from Nepal to vacate the campus. This move caused widespread outrage, with the Nepali government also getting involved. KIIT eventually withdrew the order and resumed the academic session.

This piece intends to shed light on some necessary but seldom discussed issues affecting students from Nepal in India.

Foreign student enrolment in India

The latest available All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data reveals that during 2021-22, 46,878 foreign students from 170 nations were enrolled in various institutes of higher learning in India, and that the highest share of foreign students came from Nepal (28%). The percentage share of foreign students from Nepal had been the highest (21%) when the figure for total foreign student enrolment was 34,774 even in 2012-13, as per AISHE data. It is thus evidenced that while the number of foreign students enrolling in India has been on the rise over the years, majority of them came from Nepal. Table 1 gives us a brief overview of the enrolment of students from Nepal studying different courses offered by almost 180 Indian universities and institutes.

These students are spread across the nation – from Kashmir University in the north to Kerala University in the south, from North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in the east to Gujarat Ayurveda University in the west. While the enrolment is highest in the undergraduate category, enrolment in higher categories like PhD displays a steady increase, although it is far from being impressive. Students from Nepal display an increasing attraction to Indian institutes offering training and degrees in engineering and technology. As a matter of fact, their presence in IITs (Delhi, Kanpur, Roorkee, Guwahati among others), the Indian Institute of Science (IISc Bangalore), and other private institutes like KIIT, has been substantial.

An academic relationship

Nepal's academic relationship with India and Indian academic institutions in particular illustrate a rich history. Paying a cursory look at that historical tapestry, as shown by scholars like Pradyumn Osta or Rhoderick Chalmers, would help us recognise the contribution of Banaras and Darjeeling in shaping Nepali public sphere from both within and outside Nepal. However, unlike the colonial legacy associated to the 'Gorkhas', the cultural linkage between Nepal and India, which epitomised India as an educational hub for the Nepalis, is as old as the Gurukul system. Since the days of the Rana regime when education in Nepal remained exclusively an elitist affair, places in India like Banaras, Patna, Dehradun, Gorakhpur and Darjeeling

Destination India, for higher education

The latest available All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data reveals that during 2021-22, 46,878 foreign students from 170 nations were enrolled in various institutes of higher learning in India. Join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/+Bu7senHpQdhiODg1>



Table 1: Students from Nepal studying at different levels in Indian universities and institutes of higher learning

Enrolment of foreign students from Nepal	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
PhD	28	51	33	43	42	50	48	86	104	114
MPhil	0	3	2	1	10	0	2	0	1	1
PG	1,015	1,085	1,195	1,272	1,285	1,357	1,357	1,608	1,587	1,534
UG	5,839	6,859	7,044	7,544	8,796	9,191	9,644	10,804	10,836	10,708
PG Diploma	7	17	2	19	18	15	7	12	14	8
Diploma	251	265	360	617	1,010	799	1,562	1,252	977	666
Certificate	5	3	1	1	64	7	23	3	3	10
Integrated	22	77	57	77	85	102	104	115	52	85
Total students enrolled from Nepal	7,167	8,360	8,694	9,574	11,250	11,521	12,747	13,880	13,574	13,126
Total foreign students enrolled	34,774	39,517	42,297	45,421	47,575	46,144	47,427	49,348	48,035	46,878
% of students enrolled from Nepal	21%	21%	21%	21%	23.60%	24.90%	26.88%	28.10%	28.26%	28%

Source: Compiled from AISHE Reports of respective years

Join FREE Whatsapp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6RGJOKH6oBd0F> opened up opportunities to those who could afford to send their wards to India for education.

Further, when it comes to the history of the 'modern' formal education system in Nepal, a cursory glance will reveal that not only is it not very old, but it also displays intricate connections with India. It is said that the western-style of education began in Nepal with the establishment of the Durbar High School in 1854, although accessible only to the children of the royal family and courtiers. In 1901, some steps were taken for the benefit of the public, as schools, such as the Bhasa Pathshala (Language Schools), were opened up with Nepali (then known as Gorkhali/Khas) as the medium of instruction. The Tri-Chandra College was established in Kathmandu in 1918 and was initially affiliated to Calcutta University which later shifted to Patna University, India. As per this affiliation, the responsibility of the college lied only with the teaching part while the overall academic programme, including courses, textbooks, pedagogy, examinations, award of degree, were run by the affiliating Indian institute.

Letting go of colonial influence

Thus, without even being colonised, the colonial legacy of Nepal's education system was established through two routes: first, by affiliating the first college in Nepal to universities of colonial India, thereby, diminishing any opportunity to premise pedagogy around Nepali roots and branches (except language); and the second was through college instructors, all of whom had received their master's degrees from Indian universities, and

therefore felt secure in following the same content. Before the establishment of the Tribhuvan University in 1959, there was no provision for postgraduate instruction in the country, and higher education was limited to the undergraduate level. Social science teaching, followed by science, was introduced in Nepal only in the 1940s, starting with economics and geography, while sociology and anthropology came a little while later in the 1950s.

In summary, until the 1950s, the colonial legacy of British India strongly influenced Nepal's education, even when attempts were undertaken to 'Nepalise' the education system. Towards this end, the Gandhian model of education was valorised as a reference point albeit with certain tweaks. Finally, in 1954, the government constituted the National Educational Planning Commission (NEPC) to give recommendations across all aspects of education, having declared that the goal is to make education relevant to 'national need'. Later, with the introduction of the New Education System Plan (NESP) in 1971, the entire machinery was revamped. Nepal began her independent journey in the sphere of higher education, even though students from Nepal continued to enrol themselves in Indian higher education institutions. Major players within the intellectual field post-1950s Nepal, were trained in India, and with the passage of time the numbers kept on rising, even amidst ups and downs in diplomatic relations between these two nations.

Cultural capital

Higher educational training, even though

available as a commodity, still embeds avenues that register learning experiences as impactful memories which shape future lives and proclivities. These memories, among other things, are potential sources of South Asian cultural capital that grows spontaneously when nurtured with care. And when this process involves the category of 'foreign students', it becomes the responsibility of the host institution to prevent the process from turning into a pedagogy of the oppressed.

Students are students, no matter where they are from. Creating categories within studenthood and offering differential treatment is an act of institutionally sponsored ragging that devalues the institution, renders the educational ambience volatile, and most importantly, propagates a culture of misanthropy, thereby nullifying the core of education in itself, no matter where the institution appears on the charts of national or international grading systems.

Moreover, the KIIT instance, when viewed in the light of the Indo-Nepal Peace Treaty of 1950, appears to be a case that is in direct conflict with Article 6 (confirms national treatment to be offered to the nationals of either country) and Article 7 (confirms reciprocal privileges of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other) of the said Treaty, and thereby has the potency to affect bilateral ties between India and Nepal.

Swatahsiddha Sarkar teaches at the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal.

THE GIST

On February 16, a third-year Nepali woman student was found dead by suicide in the Bhubaneswar-based Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT).

Nepal's academic relationship with India and Indian academic institutions in particular illustrate a rich history.

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Medical wearables tech: an early warning system for your health

Whether a fitness enthusiast uses a smartwatch to track her daily activity or a diabetic patient utilises a continuous glucose monitor to check blood glucose levels, these devices promise real-time data and valuable insights to help both patients and healthcare providers make informed decisions

Somita Pal

Over the past decade, patient care has seen a paradigm shift, with advancements in medical wearables turning out to be a powerful catalyst in the management of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases.

These gadgets are no longer merely lifestyle accessories but are increasingly becoming essential tools that empower individuals to monitor their health in real-time and take a more proactive approach to their healthcare management.

Healthcare professionals say this tech has helped elevate people's awareness about risk factors of lifestyle diseases like heart disease and diabetes and has changed their focus from reactive healthcare approaches to more proactive and preventive care.

"I had a patient in her early 40s some time ago, who started using an Apple Watch and noticed an unusual heart rate," says Nagesh Waghmare, a cardiologist from Mumbai, adding that though the patient was asymptomatic, blood tests revealed that she was pre-diabetic and had high lipid levels. "She improved her diet and focused on other lifestyle changes, including exercise. Now, all her parameters are normal. There are many examples like hers where we have managed prevention of the disease," Dr. Waghmare says.

A seismic shift post pandemic

Medical wearables such as smartwatches, fitness trackers, and biosensors are electronic devices designed to be worn on the body to monitor and manage various health parameters: blood sugar levels, heart rate, physical activity, sleep patterns, and even blood oxygen levels.

Whether a fitness enthusiast uses a smartwatch to track her daily activity or a diabetic patient utilises a continuous glucose monitor (CGM) to check blood glucose levels, these devices promise real-time data and valuable insights to help both patients and healthcare providers make informed decisions.

While CGMs are predominantly used for diabetes management, other medical wearables are making waves in cardiac and respiratory health. Rahul Baxi, a diabetologist in Mumbai, notes that the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted approval to the Apple Watch to detect atrial fibrillation, a serious heart condition. "There have been numerous instances where the Apple Watch has alerted individuals about irregular heart rates, allowing for early intervention and the prevention of life-threatening complications," he says.

Wearables have also played a vital role in monitoring respiratory health, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Devices that track respiratory rates, oxygen saturation, and pulse rates have become essential tools for patients with chronic respiratory conditions such as asthma or COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point for the adoption of wearable medical devices. "There is a clear distinction pre- and post-COVID-19. After

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Wearable tech has helped elevate people's awareness about the risk factors of lifestyle diseases. Photograph used for representational purposes only. GETTY IMAGES
Join FREE Whatsapp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Vn2VRb6RGJOKH6oBd0f>

the pandemic, the wearable medical market has exploded. People are now more aware of the importance of monitoring their vitals," Dr. Waghmare explains.

During the pandemic, devices such as pulse oximeters became household essentials and the trend has only accelerated since then. "Today, people in their 40s and 50s are increasingly using Fitbits, Apple Watches, and other devices to monitor their heart rate and blood pressure, helping them stay more informed about their health," he adds.

Empowering patients

The visual feedback that devices offer often serves as a wake-up call, encouraging healthier lifestyle choices, say healthcare experts.

"CGMs have helped patients see how their sugar spikes after eating certain foods, and it motivates them to make changes," says Dr. Baxi. For instance, a patient might notice that their sugar levels rise more after eating idli compared to sprouts, prompting them to choose healthier alternatives. "This real-time data makes a far greater impact than just telling someone to avoid certain foods," he adds. "It empowers them to take control of their health. We are seeing patients who are tracking their sleep quality, physical activity, and stress levels and are taking proactive steps towards maintaining long-term health."

This constant data flow is crucial for the early detection of health issues. For instance, patients with cardiovascular conditions can receive immediate alerts if irregular heart rhythms are detected, allowing for timely interventions before complications arise.

"Wearables have shifted the focus from reactive treatment to proactive prevention, enabling individuals to monitor their health continuously and



With CGMs, I can monitor my patient's condition from anywhere in the world and make real-time adjustments to their insulin dosage.

seek medical attention before major issues arise," says Rushikesh Patil, a cardiologist in Mumbai.

Better patient-doctor interaction

Medical wearables are also enhancing the interaction between patients and doctors, particularly in the realm of tele-health. By integrating data from wearables, tele-health platforms provide healthcare providers with a comprehensive view of a patient's health before consultations. This allows for more accurate diagnoses and the development of personalised treatment plans.

Remote patient monitoring has been significantly improved by wearable devices such as CGMs, which allow healthcare providers to monitor patients from afar and make real-time adjustments to treatment plans.

Dr. Baxi, for instance, has used CGMs to track his patients' blood sugar levels remotely. "With CGMs, I can monitor my patient's condition from anywhere in the world and make real-time adjustments to their insulin dosage," he says. This level of monitoring was not possible before the advent of wearables, making healthcare more accessible and convenient for the patient.

Dr. Waghmare says wearables have improved the compliance rate to treatment as, traditionally, patients would return for a check-up every few months, leaving long gaps between consultations.

"Previously, we relied on infrequent visits to adjust medication dosages based on blood pressure and heart rate. But now, with wearables, we can monitor these vitals continuously and adjust treatment plans much more effectively," he says.

This real-time data helps doctors optimise medication dosages, ensuring patients receive the best care for their recovery and for the improvement of their long-term survival. "We can confidently adjust the dose of medicines based on real-time heart rate or blood pressure data, which was not possible before these devices," he notes.

Future of health monitoring

The future of medical wearable technology looks even more promising, with researchers developing innovative health-monitoring tools that will seamlessly integrate into daily life. Smart textiles, for example, are being developed to embed sensors directly into clothing. These smart fabrics could track heart rates, respiratory rates, and even glucose levels, offering non-invasive health monitoring in real time.

Non-invasive glucose monitoring is another exciting area of research. Scientists are exploring methods to measure glucose levels through biofluids such as sweat, saliva, or tears, potentially eliminating the need for devices that puncture the skin. As these technologies continue to evolve, wearable devices will become even more integrated into everyday life, offering seamless and non-invasive health monitoring for all users.

Affordability, a concern

Despite the numerous benefits of medical wearables, affordability remains a significant barrier, especially in countries like India. Devices like CGMs can be expensive, with the cost of sensors adding up over time. Gaurish Kenkre, general manager and physiotherapist, Atharv Ability, Mumbai, acknowledges that only a small percentage of his patients can afford CGMs and other medical wearables, primarily due to their high costs.

"In India, a CGM sensor costs around ₹5,000 for two weeks, which means patients spend roughly ₹10,000 a month. That is not affordable for everyone," Dr. Baxi acknowledges.

However, he emphasises that even short-term use of these medical wearables can provide valuable insights. "For example, even using a CGM for a few weeks can help patients understand how their diet, exercise, and medications affect their blood sugar levels," he says. This information can then be used to make long-term lifestyle changes, improving overall health outcomes.

Dr. Patil says there is also another issue to consider: there are many false positives and false negatives. "Individuals should not panic due to the results; they must consult their doctor," he says.

As technology continues to evolve, medical wearables are set to play an increasingly vital role in healthcare, not just for diabetes management but across various medical fields.

(Somita Pal is a journalist with nearly two decades of experience covering healthcare in Mumbai. She covers a range of topics, focusing on health, social issues, and civic news. somitapal@gmail.com)



Students wearing Michael Jackson masks at an awareness rally on vitiligo in Chennai. FILE PHOTO

Harnessing gut microbiome to halt vitiligo

Ramya Kannan

The current decade will probably be known as the decade of the gut, given the incredible number of significant biological connections we are making between the gut and human well-being. However, this is not about the gut per se; this is about the role of gut-friendly bacteria in the process of re-pigmentation, particularly in persons with vitiligo.

Vitiligo is a chronic autoimmune disorder where the body's defence system begins to attack the pigment-producing cells and causes de-pigmented white patches on the skin. While usually the condition can be only cosmetic, these patches on the skin can be stigmatising for the patient, particularly if they are present on the face or arms, and thus obvious to others. New research from Northwestern University from a pre-clinical trial in mice has shown that a natural compound derived from gut-friendly bacteria significantly slows down the progression of vitiligo and may restore pigmentation. The findings, if substantiated through rigorous double blind random control clinical trials, could offer hope to millions affected by the autoimmune disease.

It is estimated that vitiligo affects 0.5% to 2% of the global population and is linked to other health challenges, including for some persons, higher risks of cardiovascular disease, psychological distress, and endocrine disorders. The prevalence of vitiligo in India has been invariably reported between 0.25% and 4% of dermatology outpatients across studies from India, and up to 8.8% in Gujarat and Rajasthan, as per a paper in the *Indian Dermatology Online Journal*. Studies and observations have recorded an erosion of self confidence among those with vitiligo, resulting in an impact on the mental health of the individual.

Vitiligo affects 0.5% to 2% of the global population and is linked to other issues, including higher risks of cardiovascular disease, psychological distress, and endocrine disorders

"The results in our model were astonishing," says I. Caroline Le Poole, professor of dermatology and microbiology-immunology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "We found that administering a microbial compound weekly to vitiligo-prone mice significantly suppressed disease progression. It made a spectacular difference in an aggressive model of the disease." The results of the study were recently published in the *Journal of Investigative Dermatology*.

"We are trying to understand the pigment cell and how it works. Vitiligo patches can be a big deal for patients, particularly during adolescence and youth," Dr. Le Poole explains in a video call. While acknowledging the renewed global interest in what microbiomes can do for health, she adds that she was interested first in the effect of the gut microbiome on antibody-mediated autoimmune disease, here in the development of vitiligo patches.

Dr. Le Poole and her colleagues administered a microbial product weekly to vitiligo-prone mice over an 18-week period. By the end, pigment loss on the mice's backs was reduced by 74%. The product reduced killer T cells that attack the skin's pigment and increased protective regulatory T cells, which are typically scarce in vitiligo patients. "This simple microbial compound could work as a standalone therapy or in synergy with existing treatments," Dr. Le Poole says.

However, she adds that it is necessary to intervene as early as possible and that the effects might not be as dramatic or efficient in advanced disease. There are typically two peaks in persons with vitiligo – in adolescence, and then, again, during the 40s and 50s.

(ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in)

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

On women's health

Aithra Elssa Johnson

QUESTION 1

_____ is the hormone primarily responsible for regulating the menstrual cycle and supporting pregnancy. It also helps maintain bone density and affects mood and skin health.

QUESTION 2

Often recommended during pregnancy, this B vitamin helps prevent neural tube defects in developing babies and supports red blood cell formation. Leafy greens, citrus fruits, and legumes are rich in this nutrient. What is it?

QUESTION 3

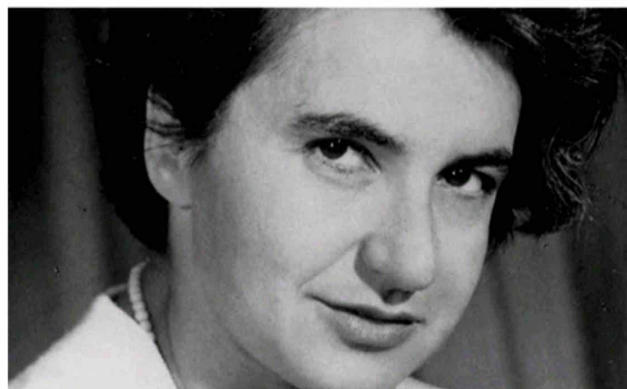
_____ is a condition where the body doesn't produce enough red blood cells or haemoglobin, leading to fatigue, weakness, and pale skin. It's often caused by iron deficiency, especially in menstruating women.

QUESTION 4

Known as the "sunshine vitamin," _____ plays a crucial role in calcium absorption and bone health, which is particularly important for women to prevent osteoporosis after menopause.

QUESTION 5

Progesterone levels remain constant throughout a woman's menstrual cycle. True or False



In the above visual identify the Nobel Prize-winning scientist whose groundbreaking research led to the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA, a major leap in understanding genetics and hereditary health risks for women.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Please send in your answers to
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Tyranny of numbers

Federal principles, democratic impulses are in conflict over delimitation

The call at an all-party meeting chaired by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, in Chennai on Wednesday, to freeze the strength of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies for 30 years beyond 2026 might seem like pushing away a pressing problem into the distant future. The challenges in 2056, when delimitation is eventually taken up, could be far more complex than those of the last exercise, conducted after the Delimitation Commission was set up in 2002. Even if the northern States bring down the fertility rate to replacement level by that time, the grouse of the southern States, that seat share as a proportion of the total strength of the Lok Sabha will come down, will still not find redress. Moreover, the imbalance in the number of electors across constituencies varies in each State. Between 2004 (the last general election before the 2008 delimitation) and 2024, the country's electorate has grown by approximately 45%. In just over 15 years, there has been significant malapportionment in many constituencies. In Karnataka, Bangalore North has 3.2 million voters, while Udupi Chikmagalur, with an electorate of just under 1.6 million, has less than half that number. One solution, doubtless a partial one, could be to allow delimitation within each State, but not across the country. This would be in keeping with federal principles but might be unfair to large States that have seen a huge, disproportionate population jump over the last 50 years.

The concerns of the southern States regarding a potential unfair outcome are valid. There is a risk of losing significant representation in the Lok Sabha if population strictly governs seat allocation. However, the Constitution recognises that apportionment should be done "so far as practicable", allowing room for considerations beyond mere numbers. Mr. Stalin has expressed apprehension that if the 2026 Census data is used as the basis for delimitation, and Tamil Nadu's seat share is reduced, it would lead to "indelible injustice". The all-party meeting rightly pointed out that Tamil Nadu is not opposed to delimitation per se, but that the process should not penalise progressive States (the entire southern region). Since delimitation has remained a contentious issue, the Union government should build a consensus on the terms of reference for the next Delimitation Commission. A transparent and inclusive approach can help restore the missing trust between the ruling party at the Centre and the non-BJP Opposition. Moreover, those advocating for an early delimitation should respect the Constitution's federal character and demonstrate flexibility in addressing regional concerns.

Unsettling plans

Trump seems oblivious to the long-term consequences of his policies

President Donald Trump used the bully pulpit of his first joint address to Congress to emphasise, among other priorities, his administration's intent to up the ante on the trade war that began with the U.S. slamming India, China, Canada and Mexico with tariffs of 25% or higher. Amidst walkouts by numerous Democratic lawmakers, he flagged his administration's 100 executive orders and 400 executive actions to date as proof of his "swift and unrelenting action", including on issues critical to American voters, such as reducing the cost of energy and "working tirelessly to end the savage conflict in Ukraine". Early on in the speech, Mr. Trump underscored the U.S.'s withdrawal from the Paris climate accords, WHO and the U.N. Human Rights Council, even as he reiterated his administration's commitment to the mantra of fossil fuel exploitation — "drill, baby, drill" — as the key approach to bringing down energy prices. He also railed against woke culture, specifically focusing on "getting men out of women's sports," as he had promised in his election campaign. In a hat tip to Elon Musk, the boss of the newly founded Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), he claimed that the initiative had already "found hundreds of billions of dollars of fraud". This was notwithstanding shockwaves reverberating across the world from funding cuts and firings at organisations such as USAID, involved in critical projects in numerous countries; and lawsuits aimed at blocking DOGE's access to confidential government data.

On the one hand, it is hardly surprising that Mr. Trump is pushing a conservative agenda, for example through his administration's aggressive drive towards smaller government. On the other, there is a serious question of whether some of his second-term policies risk self-goals. Tariffs are a case in point, as independent economists have argued that higher import costs resulting from increased tariffs could lead importers to pass the economic burden onto consumers through higher prices, driving inflation, contrary to his economic promises. However, this warning has largely fallen on deaf ears among MAGA supporters. Similarly, there is a distinct possibility of the U.S. saving resources and materials of war if "pauses" military support to Ukraine, yet this strategy does not apparently concern itself with the longer-term, possibly trans-Atlantic, consequences of signalling weakness of defence against Russian territorial ambitions looming over Europe. While the 2024 election revealed the depth of the partisan chasm between sections of American voters over crucial, emotive issues such as immigration, reproductive rights, and the economy, the tone and tenor of the second Trump administration does not instill confidence that this gap might be bridged in four years.

In the run-up to International Women's Day, commentaries on some of the key issues in the gender space, in the print and online editions

Women in corporate leadership, the lived reality

Once again, the world will celebrate International Women's Day on March 8, 2025 and companies will attempt to showcase steps taken toward the inclusion and the increase of women in the workforce. Yet, the lived reality of women in or trying to enter the corporate workforce is starkly different.

The recent instance of rolling back diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programmes in the United States federal government, which also encourages the private sector to end DEI preference hirings, highlights the challenges and the barriers to increasing women's participation in the workforce. Women, who comprise 48% of corporate America's workforce, are reeling from the aftershock of this order and are now facing the threat of identity erasure.

A ripple effect

It may be easy to brush aside this order as an issue that plagues only the United States. However, the effects of a dip in DEI hirings and women's exclusion can have severe repercussions in all parts of today's globally connected world. Regardless of where one is situated globally, conversations relating to the participation of women in the corporate workforce are significant.

While DEI may simply be a corporate mechanism to make small inroads into women participation in the workforce, especially at an entry level, at present, even such an entry mechanism has not really increased women's participation in leadership roles. For instance, in India, women have been historically marginalised from the workforce and comprise about 35.9% of the worker population ratio; the number is starker at the senior and middle management levels where women account for only 12.7% leadership roles as of 2024.

It is easy to brush aside DEI as being a fabricated gesture of tokenism, where women placed in companies are viewed as suffrage or an obligation rather than finding a way at the table on their own merit. Of course, while DEI may help women make an in-road into leadership roles in companies and have a semblance of a level playing field, their performance and ability to consolidate their position will depend on their



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Policy changes in the United States highlight the challenges and the barriers to increasing women's participation in the corporate workforce; these have global relevance

own performance and further normalise the presence of women at all levels of the workforce.

The effect of legal mandates

Over the past decade, Indian legal mandates can be credited to help increase the presence of women in the corporate workforce especially at the senior level. In 2014, the Companies Act, 2013 mandated that at least one woman director should be placed on the board of certain class of public limited companies, and in 2015, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) mandated that at least one independent woman director be appointed to the board of India's top 1000 listed companies. Thus, it is largely due to a legal mandate that companies are attempting to uphold best practices of gender diversity. The inclusion of women directors on the board of NSE 500 listed companies has increased more than threefold, from 5% in 2011 to 18% in 2023.

Research across the world finds that organisations also greatly benefit from women in leadership roles. At a fundamental level, the presence of women increases the depth of the talent pool available in the workforce. Women provide informational diversity gained from different educational and career trajectories and distinct social and professional network associations and offer a participative, democratic leadership style that stimulates robust discussion, drives a richer challenge and delivers greater value. Additionally, women tend to focus on relationship building, foster greater stakeholder commitment and assist in formulating strategies that address stakeholder concerns while also overseeing better monitoring, broader human capital management, and communication channels which increase corporate accountability and reduce corporate risks.

When companies have more women in senior management and leadership roles, they begin to appear on lists of the most admired and ethical companies, best companies to work for, and best corporate citizens, thereby also serving the agenda of companies from an optics perspective and feeding into a virtuous cycle of benefits.

Key identified areas where women leaders bring greater dividends are corporate

governance, strategic proposition oversight, risk management, shareholder and stakeholder value, gender and society, and environmental responsibility, all of which are important facets of running an efficient and clean corporate ship which contributes to economic parity.

What real change is

While token participation of women in companies may be a way out for some companies to demonstrate commitment towards gender diversity in the workplace, leaders are truly effective corporate leaders when they are given actual power and responsibility and not merely appointed to positions as a token for gender diversity or to serve the agenda of their male benefactors. It is only when a greater number of

C-Suite/KMPs (top-level executives in an organisation and Key Managerial Personnel, or KMPs) are women, and, in addition, more independent directors and chairpersons of committees of the board and board committees are women, that they are truly effective corporate leaders. Importantly, the remuneration of women that is at parity with their male counterparts is a key indicator that women's presence in the corporate workforce is real and robust.

While we do have a lot to celebrate on the occasion of Women's Day this year, it is important to keep in mind that there are still significant steps that companies and regulators must take in order to ensure that women's participation in the corporate workforce, especially in senior leadership roles, is strong, contributes meaningfully toward corporate governance and is not just a token concept that is aimed at gaining brownie points from stakeholders. Women's participation in the workforce must be promoted for its many benefits and must not fall victim to the dominant political narrative.

End note: The issue of women in the corporate workforce, especially on company boards, is of great significance and merits deep research into various facets. Thought Arbitrage is undertaking such a study which maps the patterns of women on corporate boards by using qualitative and quantitative research methodologies over a 10-year period, involving about 1,000 companies.



ACCELERATE ACTION FOR GENDER EQUALITY



ACCELERATE ACTION FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Beyond 'Beijing', unlocking a feminist future in India

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is one of the most comprehensive global blueprints for advancing women's rights. India's progress on gender equality stands as a testament to sustained policy efforts, grassroots movements, and the resilience of women and girls.

The Beijing meeting, in 1995, brought together world leaders and 17,000 delegates from 189 countries to agree on a road map to accelerate women's equality through 12 critical "areas of concern". More than 200 Indian women were in attendance along with the Government of India. The areas of concern included poverty reduction, education and training, health, violence against women, women's economic empowerment and influence in decision making. The past three decades have witnessed remarkable strides in many of these dimensions.

Visible evidence of change

The expansion of maternal health care under initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan and the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana has increased institutional deliveries to 95%. Maternal mortality has dropped from 130 to 97 deaths per 1,00,000 births between 2014 and 2020 (Sample Registration System data). Today, over half of married women (56.5%) choose to use modern contraceptives, giving them greater control over their reproductive health.

The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, the world's largest government-funded health-care scheme, has provided millions of women with free access to critical medical treatment. Education, a core pillar of the Beijing Platform for Action, has seen notable progress. The 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' (BBBP) initiative has played a pivotal role in improving the child sex ratio and increasing school enrolments for girls.

The National Education Policy 2020 has paved the way for higher retention rates and opportunities in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Though safety concerns in higher secondary education remain in some places, the Ministry of Education has integrated education with skills development and life skills training, charting flexible and



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As India continues its journey toward gender equality, the Beijing Platform for Action remains a guiding framework

inclusive pathways for adolescents. UNICEF has been able to provide support in increasing linkages with broader support systems — improved sanitation reducing menstruation related absences.

Women's economic empowerment has been central to India's gender-equality agenda. Through the National Rural and Urban Livelihood Missions, nearly 100 million women have been connected to financial networks via self-help groups, fostering entrepreneurship and financial independence. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has revolutionised financial transactions, with women increasingly using digital platforms for savings and investments.

The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission has empowered over 100 million rural women through access to credit, livelihood opportunities, and financial literacy programmes. The Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan has trained over 35 million rural women in digital literacy, ensuring that they are not left behind in the digital revolution. Bridging the digital gender divide has helped women participate in the digital economy.

India has increasingly financed women's empowerment through gender-responsive budgeting. The share of the Gender Budget in the total national Budget has increased from 6.8% in 2024-25 to 8.8% in 2025-26; \$55.2 billion is allocated toward gender-specific programmes. UN Women has been able to provide support for these government efforts.

The shadow of violence

Gender-based violence remains a challenge. The Beijing Declaration called for ending violence against women, yet many women still face violence, here and across the world. The establishment of 770 One Stop Centres has provided essential medical, legal, and psychological support to survivors of violence. The introduction of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, which came into effect in July 2024, strengthens legal protections and improves women's safety and justice.

The country's efforts to eliminate harmful

practices and strengthen responses include many innovations — a blockchain-based system in Odisha ensures that survivors receive swift, confidential, and coordinated support.

Partnerships such as the one between the United Nations Population Fund and the Rajasthan Police Academy, have enhanced gender-responsive policing, building survivor trust, and expanding access to justice.

A powerful force for change lies in the leadership of young women. From climate action to digital entrepreneurship, young leaders are redefining gender.

Initiatives such as the Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions (GATT) project, which promotes women in STEM, and the G20 TechEquity platform, which has trained thousands of young women in emerging technologies, showcase their potential.

Women have played a pivotal role in India's transformation, driving change, from technology and entrepreneurship to governance and social development. The Women's Reservation Bill, which guarantees 33% legislative representation, builds on local governance successes that have empowered close to 1.5 million women leaders, the largest cohort of women political leaders in the world.

A guiding framework

The 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration reinforces that gender equality is not just a women's issue. It is a global imperative. India's progress has been propelled by strong government leadership and capable partners, both local and global. Strengthening collaborations, investing in young women's leadership, and addressing systemic barriers will be key to accelerating action and progress.

The Beijing Platform for Action remains a guiding framework as India continues its journey toward gender equality.

With an unwavering commitment to women-led development, financial inclusion, and social transformation, India is setting a global benchmark for inclusive and sustainable growth — one that is needed in the world today, now more than ever.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India and quality research

I write this as an INSA Senior Scientist and Adjunct Professor, National Institute for Advanced Studies, Bengaluru. I was also a former Director of the Indian Institute of Technology Ropar. This is with reference to the report, "India to go past U.S. in scientific publications by 2029, says Minister" (Inside pages, March 1). Union Minister for Science and Technology Jitendra Singh,

while quoting the Publication of National Science Board of USA on science and engineering (S and E) indicators, claims that India will go past the U.S. in scientific publications by 2029. He makes this prediction based on Table PBS-1 of the NSB which lists the number of S and E publications from 2012 to 2022, which is based on the Scopus database assessed in April 2023. I wish to highlight the

point that the scholarly output of India's total publications in all disciplines including S and E for 2024 based on Clarivate (In Cites) as on February 25, 2025, stands at 1,91,703 and the corresponding number of publications for the U.S. is 6,48,905. With such a staggering lead, I wonder how India can surpass the U.S. by 2029. How realistic is the Minister's prediction? The Minister appears to be

silent on the average quality of publications from India. Further, Clarivate depicts the CNCI value (indicator of quality of publications) for Indian publications at just 0.879 in contrast to values of 1.12 and 1.25 for China and the U.S. Out of 30 countries, India is ranked 28 with respect to the CNCI value. I appeal to the Minister to determine the root cause for the poor quality of Indian publications rather than

dwelling on the quantity of our publications.

M.K. Surappa, Bengaluru

An opportunity

U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to threaten and impose higher tariffs on India from April 2 should push India to reduce its dependence on the U.S. and explore other markets. Instead of relying on protective nets, Indian industries must become

globally competitive. Instead of fearing Trump's tariff hikes, India should turn this into an opportunity by diversifying its imports, improving its manufacturing quality, and expanding into new markets. India must strengthen its position as a major industrial country.

Gopalaswamy J., Chennai

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



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

The art of writing is the art of discovering what you believe.
Gustave Flaubert

Move to revisit SEZs in Goa must have people's mandate

In a surprising return to the contentious issue of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), the State government is set to reintroduce this economic model after it scrapped the proposals in the face of vehement public opposition a good decade and a half ago. The decision to revisit SEZs comes as a surprise. It raises essential questions about the state's trajectory, its preparedness, the impact of central policies, and the lessons learned from the past.

Back in 2007, the initial excitement surrounding SEZs snowballed into a nightmare as the public expressed fierce resistance with mass movements across the State. While the government touted economic growth and employment opportunities, the opponents highlighted deep-rooted concerns over the erosion of Goa's identity and the strain on its fragile infrastructure.

The fear was palpable: an influx of "outsiders" competing for jobs that locals might not fill, leading to social and cultural displacement. This outcry brought the then Congress government to its knees, marking an unprecedented instance where ethnic and regional sentiments combined to successfully resist a central policy decision.

Now, with the state government poised to revive SEZs, we may ask: what has changed between then and now? The current administration appears eager to align with central government initiatives to boost trade and employment through SEZs, specifically under the banner of sustainable developments, but does that decision have a people's mandate? Does this ambition align with the realities and sentiments of Goans today?

The government's plan to study Gujarat's SEZ model before implementing similar initiatives in Goa raises red flags. The previous experience with SEZs suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate, especially in a unique socio-cultural landscape like Goa. Stakeholder consultations seem scant; the prevailing sentiment among local communities was neither sought nor considered the last time SEZs were on the table. Ignoring this aspect could lead to the same fate as before and Goa may witness protests, unrest, and ultimately, abandonment of the project.

Moreover, the question of whether the current government has regained the confidence of its constituents remains unanswered. The challenges of job creation in the state are significant, but are SEZs genuinely the solution? While they promise investment and employment, an unaddressed concern remains: will these jobs go to locals or outsiders? Without a job reservation law, the government must articulate clear, actionable measures to ensure that the benefits of such a model extend to Goans and do not merely serve corporate interests.

As the State stands at a crossroads once again, the revival of SEZs cannot be just an ambitious move to "boost the economy." It is paramount that the government engages meaningfully with the people of the State to foster a cooperative approach towards development. The wounds of the past run deep, hence, a comprehensive framework that respects local ethos while promoting economic growth is imperative.

The decision to revisit SEZs may be bold, but it still stands as a litmus test for the government. It bears the opportunity to either redefine its developmental policies in sync with the people's aspirations or risk repeating past missteps that could culminate in yet another societal discord. A balanced, inclusive dialogue with all stakeholders will be key in navigating this turbulent issue and ensuring that Goa's future economic strategies align with its identity and the aspirations of its people.

OPEN SPACE >>

Canvas shoes? Stop cutting trees to save environment

Citing environmental concerns, the Directorate of Education has reportedly made canvas shoes mandatory as part of the school student uniform in government, aided, unaided, primary, secondary higher secondary and special schools, except during the monsoon season, when rainwear is permitted. It is a fact that leather is a by-product of the cattle industry and a major culprit of deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions globally. It contributes to significant biodiversity loss. Canvas shoes are lightweight and well-ventilated, making them ideal for warmer weather. However, they have a shorter lifespan than leather shoes as they are prone to wear and tear. Canvas shoes are also often affordable and available in a variety of colours and designs. Crafted from breathable materials, canvas shoes are lightweight and perfect for long hours of wear. However, making canvas shoes mandatory for school students is a very minuscule step towards preventing environmental degradation. In Goa it is a well-known fact that rampant deforestation is being carried out to make way for concrete jungles. Hill cutting and deforestation will have a much more negative impact on nature than students wearing leather shoes.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

Trump tariffs an opportunity for India

The Trump offer of tit-for-tat tariffs is a good chance for India to trim its import duties and give exporters a big boost



AJIT RANADE

>The writer is a noted Pune-based economist

President Donald Trump has a way with words. America's federal income tax department is called Internal Revenue Service. Trump says he will build an External Revenue Service. It is an appealing concept. Instead of burdening US taxpayers, he proposes to tax outsiders.

He says America is one of the most open consumer markets in the world, with access given to all exporting countries. But those exporting countries often have high tariff walls protecting their domestic markets. He says that is unfair to America's exporters.

Hence, he has proposed to raise import tariffs to match the exporting country's tariffs. It's a tit for tat strategy, which he claims will raise much revenue for America, and punish those who keep their domestic markets protected. Never mind that the WTO rules do not allow America to selectively differentiate import tariffs for the same product from different origins. This is called the MFN rule.

Never mind that raising import tariffs will hurt the American consumer, since it will raise prices and hence inflation.

Never mind that the reason developing countries like India were allowed to have higher import tariffs than countries like the USA was to compensate their domestic industries for domestic handicaps like high cost of power, infrastructure, credit, and lower labour productivity.

This was all a part of the grand design of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to get all on board. India, and many other developing countries, have enjoyed a special and differential treatment for good reason in the WTO. It is also true that a country like India, boasting of being the fifth largest economy in the world, cannot hide behind high protective tariff walls.

The Trump tariff proposal gives India an opportunity to overhaul and reduce its import tariffs, at least on those items which are of interest to the USA. Such a mutual agreement on tariffs will surely fall foul of the WTO's MFN rule.

The Trump negotiation is a great opportunity to push the tariff reform since it will be net beneficial to our export prospects and competitiveness. As such,



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general tariff levels have gone up since 2015 and have drifted up 4 or 5 per cent and are, on an average, around 15 per cent for non-agricultural goods.

Further, the proportion of those tariff lines that have MFN rates above 15 per cent has risen to one fourth of all lines. This upward drift was justified for Make in India and later as sectoral support for the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme. But the time has come to slash these rates back to what they were before 2015 and progressively move toward a level on par with our peers in ASEAN countries.

The Trump threat gives India an alibi to do this much-needed reform. Just as 1991 reforms were pushed through as part of conditionalities of a loan from the IMF, this tariff reform, too, could use an "external" justification.

The US is India's largest trading partner, and this fiscal year the exports to America between April and December have grown at 5.6 per cent to reach a level of 60 billion dollars. A substantial contribution is the export of smartphones, which will clock 30 billion dollars, including exports to other countries.

India has roughly a 45-billion-dollar trade surplus with the US, which includes software services exports as well. The simple average tariff that India charges on imports, as per the WTO data, is 17 per cent whereas the US is at 3.3 per cent. But on a bilateral basis, these numbers are likely to be different. Not a simple average, but a weighted average tariff difference between the two countries is likely to be about 7 or 8 per cent excluding agricultural products.

A hike in import tariffs on India's exports will hurt steel, aluminium, pharmaceuticals, and electronics. But in pharma, as also smartphones, polished diamonds and petro products, the import component is large. So, the net negative impact is smaller.

India has agreed to increase crude oil purchases from the US, which will be factored into the negotiations. By giving duty-free or moderate duty access to Harley Davidson motorcycles or Bourbon whiskey, the loss to India's economy is negligible.

But jeopardising India's access to the software services export market of the US is a big risk. Even in this context, the big services exporters out of India to the US are American companies like EY, Accenture, IBM, Google, Microsoft and Genpact.

The proliferation of Global Capability Centres run by major American corporations in India is a tribute to the confidence in Indian talent. That trend needs to be nurtured and enhanced, and if that requires a concession by reducing import tariffs, so be it.

India could also tap into the huge untapped potential of the export of agricultural products, including agro-processing. At 50 billion dollars, India's exports are barely 1.5 per cent of global exports in agricultural and related products.

India is the world's largest producer of milk, has the highest population of cattle, is among the top two or three producers of fruits and vegetables, and has one of the longest coastlines. How well does that translate into the export of milk products, cheeses, confectionery, meat, poultry, fisheries, fruit juices, nutraceuticals, and organic foods? There is no use in hiding behind the excuse of "protecting the small farmer" for putting large export and import barriers in agricultural trade. The US can be a big exporting opportunity for this relatively neglected sector.

Thus, the Trump offer of tit-for-tat tariffs is an opportunity for India to trim its import duties and give exporters a big boost. There will be some losers, but on the balance, it can have a huge positive impact.

— FPI

THE INBOX >>

Recognise authoritarian bullies and counter them

The authoritarian bullies democratically elected in our modern times are, ironically enough, are recognised by the entire world as one, except by their own people. Everyone outside of the US, for example knew that the unhinged Trump would be a dangerous disruptor. These authoritarian populists are experts at dividing people using religion, ethnicity, otherisation, etc. Rabble rousing rhetoric and branding their opposition as traitors, anti-nationals, secessionists is their calling card. Masters at gaslighting, they psychologically manipulate citizens through conspiracy theories, outright lies and fake news with the help of spineless media organisations. They end up winning successive elections while their true worth and real intentions are better known to those living outside who look at the authoritarians objectively sans the shoutfests, jingoism and hagiography. Trump and Modi are not the only examples of this flawed binary, there are many others. But by the time people become aware of their mistakes mostly made because of bigotry or an erroneous understanding of nationhood, irreparable damage will have been done.

REKHA SARIN TREHAN, Benaulim

Review infra projects that will destroy environment

This is with reference to the report, "Leather shoes out, only canvas shoes from new academic year - The Goan Everyday - March 6, 2025." Only canvas shoes for school children from new academic year, that's very thoughtful of the authorities. According to the news report, the department says that "The protection of the environment needs to be practised as much as it is preached." How one wishes all departments, whether in Goa or Mumbai or wherever, would give

April start not in interest of students

The advisory by the Education Department to begin the school calendar in April instead of June is unjustified as we all know that April/May are peak summer months with temperatures rising to 34/35° C. The authorities should have applied their minds before coming to such a draconian decision putting the health of students into jeopardy. In the Middle East, school holidays are from July to August, as these two months are at the peak of summer where temps rise to 40/43° C and the Education departments have the wellbeing of their students in their hearts and mind. Even now it is not too late to revert back to the old school calendar. Is anybody listening?

LUCAS D'SOUZA, Verna

a thought to protecting the environment.

The government needs to review the present infrastructure projects in Goa which are destroying the environment. Indeed, destruction of nature all across the country must stop, rather we need to focus on protection and preserving our forests and wetlands. Climate change is for real and already at our door. We need to go beyond lip service.

MELVILLE X'D'SOUZA, Mumbai

Police complaints not enough to root out corruption

Recently an ex-BJP minister Pandurang Madhikar accused his own BJP party of being involved in massive corruption. Needless to say that it's common knowledge now that corruption is very high within the current Goa government; with cases coming much more frequently than before. What I was appalled by is that the senior BJP ministers in reply asked the former minister to name the minister/person and make a police complaint. These senior ruling ministers themselves jumped from other parties and have serious corruption cases against them that are being strangely

hushed up by the Goa government. There are so many examples with some prominent ones including: Lokayukta based on facts/evidence asked for a probe against former BJP chief minister in mining cases; major chief secretary Goel involved in a major land related irregularity/fraud; numerous complaints made against Chief Town Planner Rajesh Naik and so on. In all these cases has there been any action by the current Goa BJP government? So why would the solution of filing a police complaint on this subject create any value, other than just to have the matter "cool down" and eventually be "forgotten".

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

Are police trying to allow land grab accused go free?

Notorious criminal/land grab accused Suleman Siddiqui Khan in ditto Bollywood-film style was seen dangle handing over a letter to the media containing explosive allegations against top government officials and police officials while being produced before the Judicial Magistrate First Class (JMFC) at Altinho on Wednesday. When the cops know that there are so many criminal cases pending against the said accused Suleman in different courts then why are they still seen taking things so lightly and casually allowing him to even pass letters to some media persons to prove his own innocence in Goa? Or is the Goa Police itself slowly trying to acquit him from all charges just to save some of its own top officials and politicians? Well, the accusations/charges which Suleman has made every now and then are of serious nature and due to which this case should be handed over to the CBI or a Judicial Commission headed by a retired High Court Judge should be constituted to inquire into all allegations to bring out the actual truth in the above matter.

JERRY FERNANDES, Salgao



Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

Reaffirm the federal pact

The Centre should hold a conversation with the southern state to dispel fears about delimitation

A meeting of 35 political parties in Tamil Nadu, convened by CM MK Stalin and attended by all parties save the BJP and its allies, has put forth a set of guidelines on the contentious issue of delimitation of parliamentary constituencies. The meeting demanded among other things, a 30-year status quo on the number of Lok Sabha seats with the 1971 consensus as the basis for delimitation. Stalin has announced that he will seek support from other southern states for the proposals. The five southern states of Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and the UT of Puducherry together elect 130 members to the Lok Sabha. Various estimations indicate that post-delimitation, the proportional representation of these states could reduce in an expanded Parliament. This fear of being marginalised politically, and thereby losing clout in financial bargains as well as shaping policies at the Centre has influenced Tamil Nadu and others to up the ante on delimitation. These fears are legitimate and need to be assuaged.

The stand-off on delimitation has multiple layers. Not all of them are related to the question of political representation, but they feed into the concern that the Centre seeks to impose itself on the states at the risk of upsetting the federal balance. For instance, the polemical stance of Tamil Nadu over the National Education Policy and the three-language formula, unfounded as it may be, is not merely the hangover of the state's political legacy, which privileges the Tamil linguistic identity over other markers of citizenship; it has also been sharpened by the Centre's inflexibility in nancing policies to absorb regional concerns and sensitivities. Similarly, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh have spoken about reversing trends in population growth against the backdrop of an ageing population and increasing migration. Amidst all this, overreaching governors have muddied the waters, even inviting censure from the Supreme Court. And at a time when welfareism wins elections, the Centre has encroached into state subjects with branded welfare schemes.

The Centre has been quick to dispel fears of loss of seats with ministers issuing statements in public forums. It could take a step further and call an all-party meeting to build consensus on the delimitation process. The principle of one citizen, one vote, one value is central to representative democracy, which means delimitation cannot be deferred indefinitely or be based on old data. A conversation reaffirming faith in the federal pact could help rebuild trust among the Centre, the states and the Opposition, and ease the work of the executive.

The curious case of Hathras stampede

The report of the judicial commission that probed the stampede at a religious gathering in Hathras last year is curious: There is a clear and justified inculpation of the local civil and police authorities, but absolution of Suraj Pal, also known as Narayan Sakar Hari and Bhola Baba, the godman at whose *satsang*, a sudden stampede left 121 people dead on July 2 last year. The local administration certainly must shoulder part of the blame, and the report thoroughly discusses its lapses. From an uncharacteristically expedited grant of permission to failure to inspect the site before allowing the gathering to happen, the administration must answer for several instances of dereliction.

It isn't clear why the report, which enumerates a clutch of lapses on the part of organisers, is silent on Pal's role in the matter. The report says that the crowd size estimated was thrice what the site could hold, making it clear that the organisers never acted to limit entry after peak capacity was reached. It also notes that the organisers didn't allow the police and other officials to function nor instruct the crowd to move in an orderly manner when there was a rush to collect "charan raut" (dust touched by a godman's feet) as Pal was about to exit the stage. Even so, the report shies away from pinning any accountability to the controversial godman. In cults/sects such as Pal's, practices often originate from the so-called godmen and are often inseparable from their personalities; *satsang* organisers, too, respond to cues from the cult/sect leader. Therefore, the report's exoneration of Pal despite the fatal mismanagement and suggestion that the incident could be a "conspiracy" to defame the state government is downright dubious.

What to do when the market keeps falling

Your portfolio tells a story. If the bleed is less than the market average, it's a good story, else you need to read this

Stock markets go up and down. Investors who enjoyed the 20% plus returns for four years ending September 2024 are seeing red in their one-year returns on the Sensex but returns of two years are still in the 10% plus range. Held for five years, the returns are an impressive 16% average annual. These see-saws are not something new. Those who save their portfolios plunge a heart-stopping 40% over January to March 2020, saw them roar back to double and more over the next few years. Over its history, there have been over 19 instances when the Sensex dropped 6% in a day, but over 24 instances when it rose by 6% in a day. The Sensex's worst one-day fall was 13% in April 1992. But its best day was a one-day leap of 17% in May 2009. Markets go up and down. But the colour on your portfolio shows how you rode this horse. A horse is a horse. In this case, the horse is not wild but highly regulated. Now, it is up to the skill of the jockey to keep riding.

How you ride this horse depends on how well you understand it and

its workings. A stock market is not a lottery ticket for overnight wealth, but a marketplace where firms offer their shares for sale to investors. Investors buy (or should buy) for two reasons — dividend income and profit. Both these come from profit-making (or future profit-making) companies that have the potential for growth. A higher share price indicates a greater profitability or growth potential or both. The short-term speculation on prices is not (or should not be) a game that investors play.

So, what should be your game? As an investor, your plan should be asset allocation and not speculation or short-term return maximising. You need to think of your investments as a portfolio rather than looking at individual stock or mutual fund returns. Each product has a role in the portfolio. Tell me, can you eat just rice without dal or vegetables as accompaniments? Or just eat pickle for the full meal? Hopefully not. The carbs and pickle need to be backed with protein, fibre, minerals and other nutrients for the meal to be complete. Look at your portfolio in a similar manner. Unless you have a mix of assets you are going to get indigestion. If small caps dominated your equity portfolio, by now you know what a full meal of pickle tastes like.

The most basic asset allocation is

between debt and equity. Debt includes fixed deposits, provident fund, public provident fund, debt funds and other interest-bearing products. Equity includes direct stocks and equity funds. If you had all of your ₹100 in equity and the market fell 20%, then you lost 20%. But if you were 50:50 in debt and equity and debt returns were 6%, then you lost just 7%. Other than stabilising the portfolio, the role of debt in your portfolio is to give liquidity, safety and predictability. The role of equity is to give long-term inflation

and tax-plus returns. You have a mix of debt and equity so that when you have a short-term need, you use your FDs, debt funds and bonds. You harvest equity in two situations. One, when a market run-up breaches your chosen allocation. As it must have done

in 2024 — that was the time to pause your SIPs, not today. That was the time to sell some equity and buy more bond funds. Or when your goal is approaching — you then move from equity to debt. To keep money in the stock market for a near-term goal is dangerous. Markets go up and down and nobody can predict what they will be doing when you need the money.

Why do you need an asset allocation approach? Because of the reduction of risk that diversification, or holding assets with different attrib-



Monika Halan



As an investor, your plan should be asset allocation and not speculation or short-term return maximising.

utes, brings to the portfolio. Debt and equity are not correlated. This means the volatility of equity is usually not felt in debt. As equity markets swing, the debt part of your portfolio gives stability. Portfolios with at least 30% in debt have lost less money in the last year than pure equity ones.

One step further in this thinking about diversification is within equity. Tell me: What is the chance that the one stock you bought will go to zero? That chance is non-zero. What is the chance that two stocks you bought will go to zero? That chance is non-zero. What is the chance that all 30 stocks in the Sensex and the 50 in the Nifty50 will go to zero together? That chance is zero. In fact, if you think there is a chance of all the stocks in the broad market index going to zero together, you should be buying gems,

building bunkers, stocking grain and physical gold and not thinking about the current fall in stock prices.

Now look at your portfolio with both debt and equity together. Collect the value of your fixed deposits, count in your provident fund and public provident fund, include your bond funds and all your equity holdings and see if your portfolio has lost less than the market average. Your portfolio tells a story. It is your report card of your understanding of the market and how you participate in it. What is your portfolio telling you about what your understanding of the stock market is?

Monika Halan is the best-selling author of the Let's Talk series of books on money. The views expressed are personal

Anora is an exposition of unyielding class divides

Anora received the Oscar for Best Picture at a time when the Donald Trump administration in the US unofficially declared the American dream dead, imposing instead the idea of Make America Great Again (MAGA). To rise above the excruciating circumstances on which we don't have any control and overcome them through sheer determination is what the American dream is, and it is in this way that it connects it to the Cinderella trope.

But, the Trump-and-Musk show has shattered that dream. Anora is an independent movie that depicts the deeper class tensions of American society, wherein Prince Charming arrives from elsewhere and his eventual escape represents the flight of capital in a caricatured way. Mikey Madison's is a compelling performance as Ani, and the director and writer of the movie, Sean Baker, who stands for independent movie making, rightly deserves the Oscar. This movie also has won the Palme d'Or at Cannes.

Anora is the name of the central character of this movie. She prefers to be called Ani, a sufficiently Americanised name, while she is Russian, and her full name is Anora Mikheeva. Anora means brightness or light, and Ani, in a conversation with Igor, who also comes from underclass circumstances, says that in America names have no meaning. Igor, a Russian henchman who has not cut his roots off like Ani, says that his name has a meaning, which means warrior.

The emptying of meaning from the name was also aspirational, intended to forsake one identity and the past it contained and assume another for a better future.

So, you find people from other countries moving to the US and removing the cultural markers that come with the name. It could be an aspirational instinct of the third-world class.

Ani is a 22-year-old sex worker working at a Manhattan strip club. Her clients are well-to-do. Interestingly, in the movie, she is referred to as a "prostitute" and a "whore", to which Ani surely protests but never addresses herself as a sex worker. An academic term doesn't have any standing in industrial parlance.

One night, she is introduced to a young Russian client whose name is both Ivan and

Vanya. Vanya was searching for someone who speaks Russian. Ani prefers speaking in American English but acknowledges that she understands Russian and occasionally speaks it.

They both get together well, and Vanya repeatedly says he feels very comfortable with Ani. For Ani, the client is rich, decent, and fair business.

Vanya is the son of a Russian oligarch, and it seems he is quite impressed with himself for being the son of an oligarch. In one of their meetings, Ani is truly carried away by her client's huge mansion and exuberance of richness. She asks him about his family, and Vanya finds that Ani is so information-poor that she doesn't recognise his father's name — Nikolai Shakhov.

One answer to a dearth of information is to Google it. Ani finds out all over there. Vanya is a childish character not to be mistaken with Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin of the novel, *The Idiot*. Vanya is on a hedonistic spree with his rich dad's money, seeking salvation in the American dream, on which Jean Baudrillard says the idea of hyper-reality is built — in other words, strip-tease capitalism.

Vanya and Ani pair up so well, and she is invited to a New Year's party in Las Vegas. She offers him both exhilarating and consoling sex. Ani demands extra charges for the vacation party, to which Vanya readily agrees.

Things escalate from here. Vanya doesn't want to return to Russia to join his dad's business, and aspires to get US citizenship. He is spellbound by Ani and also America, and says, "God bless America".

To get hold of a green card, they mutually agree to marry. Ani is enraptured by Vanya's proposal. She asks for a three-carat ring, and he offers four. Interestingly, in Trump's America, accessing US citizenship is easier, and it costs only \$5 million.

Oligarchs of the media pay; they have the US gold card to gain.

Be it Christianity, culture, or communism, Russia was/is orthodox as always, and Putin has ensured that it glitters as such. Vanya's parents, particularly his mother, tremble at the news of her son marrying a stripper. The Russian orthodoxy and the American dream clash with each other.

Toros, Vanya's American handler, who is also a Russian priest, is instructed immediately to round them up and annul the marriage. With two henchmen, he reaches the mansion where both are staying, and the subsequent scenes are generically termed as comedy-drama.

In this hilarity, Ani's precarity is well brought out. The pain and humiliation that she encounters bring to screen the deeper class divisions.

Finally, even without an apology or remorse, Vanya takes the flight back to Russia as mama's boy. They mutually settle for a divorce.

Ani returns to New York with Igor. Igor, being from the same precarious class, understands the pain that suffered. Igor mispronounces the French word *touché*. In the final poignant moment, the meaning of *touché* is simply felt. Capitalism does not offer the liberative life to all.



Damodar Prasad

Damodar Prasad is a media researcher and writer. The views expressed are personal



Anora depicts the deeper class tensions of American society. ANORA/PROMOTION/ENRICH

[VIKTOR ORBAN | PRIME MINISTER, HUNGARY]

My meetings in France confirmed that while we may disagree on the modalities of peace, we do agree that we must strengthen the defence capabilities of European nations



Taking a stand against centralisation of policies

The issue of Hindi imposition has been a longstanding point of contention between the Union government and the government of Tamil Nadu. The state has consistently voiced its concerns over the imposition of Hindi since the 1930s. But, the recent resurgence of the debate can be traced to Union government's decision to withhold ₹2,153 crore due to Tamil Nadu's department of school education under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan cited Tamil Nadu's refusal to fully endorse the National Education Policy (NEP) as the reason. Chief minister MK Stalin condemned the denial of funds, terming it pressuring Tamil Nadu into compliance.

The Union government's decision to withhold funds intended for primary education raises concerns regarding leveraging of financial allocations to advance its political agenda. It strikes at the heart of India's democratic and federal structure. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) has voiced well-founded reservations against the NEP, particularly over its impact on state autonomy.

First, the NEP's one-size-fits-all approach is fundamentally flawed for a country as diverse as India. India's diversity is not just cultural and linguistic, but also developmental. For instance, Tamil Nadu has 4,000 doctors per million inhabitants, compared to Gujarat's 750 and Bihar's 637. In terms of economic disparities, in 2023, 5.8% of the population in Tamil Nadu lived below the poverty line, whereas the figures for Gujarat and Bihar stood at 21.8% and 23.3%, respectively. Given such stark variation, imposing a uniform policy across all regions risks stifling the progress of well-performing states while failing to uplift those lagging behind. Education reforms must be tailored to address the specific challenges and strengths of each state. States should have the freedom to design their own programmes while being held accountable through measurable outcomes, with funds released based on performance benchmarks, not political leverage.

A major point of contention with the NEP is the imposition of the three-language formula, with Hindi positioned as the default third language. Tamil Nadu has historically rejected this formula, opting for its own well-established two-language system. The NEP's insistence on a third language does not consider the logistical challenges of its implementation — recruiting language teachers for multiple languages in every school is not a practical solution, given the state of India's education infrastructure. For instance, as of February 2024, Gujarat

reported that 1,606 primary schools operated with only one teacher and had over 10,000 teacher vacancies. Under the NEP, if government-school students must choose a third language, preferences could extend across multiple languages. This would require each school to hire additional language teachers — adding approximately 80 lakh per teacher per annum to the state's spending while aggravating existing teacher vacancies. In such a scenario, Hindi would inevitably become the default third language, leading to what many perceive as an indirect imposition. If language learning is deemed necessary, why limit students to Indian languages? Proficiency in foreign languages — such as French, Chinese, Spanish, or Russian — would open far greater international opportunities for students, enriching their education and broadening their horizons.

The NEP's 5+3+3+4 system, which introduces public examinations in Class 5 and Class 8, raises further concerns.

World Bank research indicates that early public exams contribute significantly to dropout rates, particularly among girls in developing economies. Tamil Nadu, with its high literacy rate, especially among girls, has chosen a different path, introducing public exams only after the 10th grade. This has helped maintain a high gross enrolment ratio for girls in the senior secondary level. The NEP contradicts this model, undermining its own goal of fostering inclusivity and improving educational outcomes.

The NEP also represents a broader encroachment on the rights of states by the Union government. Education is a subject on the Concurrent List, which allows both the Union and state governments to share responsibility. However, the Union government's increasing efforts at centralisation, including through withholding of funds and through centrally sponsored schemes (CSS), erode federalism. Opposition-led state governments, including Tamil Nadu, have raised alarms about this discrimination, with CSS being used to bypass state-level initiatives.

India is an unparalleled experiment in pluralism, and imposing unity through excessive uniformity is not only counterproductive but potentially dangerous. Tamil Nadu's resistance to the NEP is not an act of defiance but a principled stand for the preservation of federalism and rational policymaking that respects regional diversity.

Salem Dhanarathnam is a spokesperson of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. The views expressed are personal



Salem Dhanarathnam

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Tariff tangle

Litmus test for India's play-it-safe diplomacy

INDIA is racing against time to stop or at least slow down Donald Trump's tariff juggernaut. In line with his 'America First' policy, the US President has announced tit-for-tat action from April 2 against India and other nations that have been imposing higher levies on imports from the US. New Delhi is looking to find an amicable solution to the vexing problem under the framework of a mega trade deal with Washington. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal is already in the US, holding negotiations regarding the deal, which is expected to be finalised by the year-end. The million-dollar question is: Can India delay the inevitable, and for how long?

After their meeting last month, Trump had lauded Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a "better, tougher negotiator", but he also made it clear that India would not be exempted from reciprocal tariffs. His clinching argument was that "nobody can argue with me" on this issue. However, Delhi continues to hope that Team Modi will pull a rabbit out of the hat in the form of a mutually beneficial outcome.

India's diplomatic approach is to play it safe and not infuriate Trump, unlike the belligerent stand adopted by countries like Canada and China. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has called American tariffs "very dumb" and accused the US President of appeasing Russia, while Beijing has warned that it is ready to "fight till the end" if the US is hell-bent on waging a tariff or trade war. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's nightmarish experience at the Oval Office has taught India that things can easily go from bad to worse if you are in Trump's bad books. The US is India's largest trading partner in 2022-23, with the bilateral trade amounting to \$190 billion; the two sides are keen to raise it to \$500 billion by 2030. The long-term picture might prompt Delhi to bite the tariff bullet.

Hathras stampede

A catastrophe rooted in negligence

THE Hathras stampede of July 2, 2024, which claimed 121 lives, stands as yet another grim reminder of administrative negligence, lack of planning and the perils of unregulated mass gatherings. The judicial inquiry report, tabled in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly on Wednesday, exposes glaring lapses in crowd management, haphazard permissions and a troubling abdication of responsibility by the authorities. The most damning revelation is the mechanical approval of the event. The permission process, completed in a day without any site inspection, reeks of bureaucratic complacency. The organisers estimated 80,000 attendees, yet over 2.5 lakh devotees swarmed the venue. Despite this, no proactive crowd control measures were in place. Water tankers stationed near a muddy highway created a treacherous ground and savadras — rather than trained personnel — were tasked with managing the crowd.

The report also hints at a conspiracy angle, suggesting attempts to misdirect the probe through suspicious affidavits and misleading narratives. Yet, in its reluctance to directly indict Bhole Baba, the panel leaves room for ambiguity. The absence of his name from the FIR and charge-sheet raises uncomfortable questions — does faith shield individuals from accountability? The recommendations, including mandatory videography, stricter permission protocols and the use of drones for crowd-monitoring, are welcome. But the real challenge lies in ensuring their implementation. In a country where religious gatherings at times morph into stampedes (Maha Kumbh being the latest), will this tragedy serve as a wake-up call or merely be buried under bureaucratic inertia?

The Hathras disaster wasn't an accident; it was an avoidable catastrophe. Holding mid-level officials accountable while letting powerful organisers off the hook cannot be the takeaway. The state must move beyond damage control and enforce real, systemic reforms.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

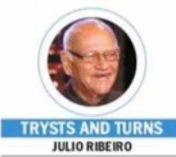
LAHORE, SATURDAY, MARCH 7, 1925

Indianisation agenda

IT is impossible not to contrast the tone and temper of the official speeches during this year's budget discussion in the Legislative Assembly with those made on the same occasion about this time last year. The reason for the difference is perfectly obvious. Last year, in spite of formal assurances of support on the part of the Labour Government, officials in India were not absolutely sure as to what the ultimate attitude of that government would be and how far it would be prepared to go in resisting the will and the considered judgment of the people of India. With the Conservatives firmly seated in power, there is no longer that uncertainty regarding the attitude of His Majesty's government. Between the general attitude of that party in regard to Indian affairs and the official attitude in India, there never has been and never can be any substantial difference, for the simple reason that both want the same thing, the perpetuation or indefinite prolongation of the bureaucratic form of rule in India. A glaring illustration of the change in the official angle of vision was afforded by the Home Member the other day when during the discussion on a resolution in the Council of State, with which the European members of the Services had nothing to do, he went entirely out of his way to give an assurance to those members, which they could scarcely be said to need, that the Indianisation of the Civil Service and other All-India Services would not be by the door of supersession. An even more conspicuous illustration of the same truth was afforded in the Legislative Assembly on Wednesday by a similar declaration in regard to the Army by the Commander-in-Chief.

Giving cricket a communal spin

It's not surprising that Hindutva enthusiasts use an India-Pak match as a pretext to incite hatred

TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

MY friend, Mahesh Narayan Singh, whom I meet every morning while doing exercise, was visibly impressed by our Prime Minister's knowledge of Sufi beliefs and practices. MN, as I call him, felt that PM Narendra Modi was very eloquent, enthusiastic and conciliatory during his recent address to a gathering of Muslims. That is a great change in attitude that Modi should share with his followers in India and even abroad.

The hate and divisiveness that have been the hallmark of the ruling dispensation since Modi took charge of the government in 2014 will take much time and effort to eradicate. They manifest themselves almost daily in one corner or the other of the country. The earlier intention may have been to win elections and usher in the rule of Hindutva, but Modi, being an intelligent mass leader, has realised that disunity will destroy India in the long run. Lately, he has been trying to correct the imbalance, especially after his numerous visits abroad.

I am doubtful if a leopard can change its spots at any time. When it needs the shelter of foliage to hide those spots from its prey, it will adjust its tactics accordingly. Our Prime Minister has introduced the hug, or the embrace, if you want to call it that, as a form of greeting when meeting other heads of state. That form of greeting has gone down well with rulers of Gulf nations that are overwhelmingly Islamic.



FEVER PITCH: Every India-Pakistan encounter evokes strong emotions. AP/PTI

But the "modus vivendi" that once characterised relations between our Hindu and Muslim compatriots in India has suffered severe jolts in the last decade. In Mumbai, Mohalla Committee members, representing both major communities, continue to meet every month to foster understanding and friendship, but each has noticed the shift in attitudes and thinking of their brethren in their respective communities.

That is not surprising. Modi's followers have targeted the minority community where it hurts the most — their very livelihood. Butchers and cattle traders have been put out of business, but even those who sell only vegetables, fruits or other commonly hawked goods have been specifically prevented from doing so at fairs, though they have been frequenting those places for generations.

In a small town on the outskirts of Mumbai, a person passing by a house on February 23, when the India-Pakistan cricket match was being played

while his parents were arrested for allegedly abusing the complainant.

The punitive action did not end there. The improvised shed which the boy's parents had constructed to keep scrap (the father is a scrap dealer) was demolished by the panchayat without the 15-day notice mandated by the Supreme Court in a recent judgment. So great was the public anger, according to the authorities, that a similar shed constructed by the man's brother was also reduced to rubble.

If such instances of rough and ready 'justice' are not manifestations of the new India proclaimed by the BJP, then what are? Wherever the BJP holds sway, the police, who are often slammed for inaction or belated action when children in schools are molested or young women raped, rush in when VHP or Bajrang Dal operatives complain of 'anti-national' activity of Muslim neighbours, as happened in this case.

On February 23, I was torn between my love for horse racing and cricket. I chose the lat-

ter simply because our team was taking on Pakistan. On Sundays, my immediate family meets over lunch. I rushed back home from my daughter's dining table to see the first ball being bowled. (Incidentally, I could not reach home in time — one over had been bowled before I switched on the television).

On my way from my daughter's home, I found the streets deserted. This happens whenever Indian and Pakistani teams meet on the cricket field. It is satisfying to assert our superiority in sports. The ancient Greeks thought on those lines when they introduced the Olympic Games, with Zeus, their principal god, looking down from heaven as the chief guest. Presumably, residents of Sparta, Crete and Macedonia, all Greek-speaking, were among the participants.

In view of the emotions that an India-Pakistan match evokes, it is not surprising that Hindutva enthusiasts, whose dislike of Muslims surpasses their enthusiasm for cricket, misuse the occasion to incite hatred.

What is unacceptable is that the police go to the extent of ignoring the law of the land, which has not criminalised the support of a lad for the underdog as an anti-national manifestation. Further, the action of the sardarch and the officials who participated in the demolition of the irregular construction without following the proper procedure will surely attract "contempt of court" provisions even if it is felt that the police action of arresting the Muslim couple prevented communal riots.

The least that the government can do now is to carry forward Modi's new agenda of better inter-community relations by allotting slivers of land to the father and uncle of the boy who was rooting for the losing team.

The least that the government can do is to carry forward Modi's new agenda of better relations among communities.

In Dubai, reported to the police as well as to his friends in the locality that a Muslim boy in that house was rooting for Pakistan. That prompted swift action by cops, who are often accused of lethargy.

The 15-year-old boy was detained and despatched to the reformatory for 'correc-

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The universal brotherhood of man is our most precious possession. — Mark Twain

When love and loss share a date

SANTOSH JATRAPRA

AN anniversary is supposed to be a day of celebration, right? You dress up in your finest attire, cut a cake, maybe clink a glass or two, and reminisce about how you've survived another year of wedded bliss (and arguments about who left the lights on). But what do you do when your marriage anniversary collides with a day of solemn remembrance?

On our wedding anniversary four years ago, my husband and I found ourselves grappling with one of life's strangest twists — mourning the loss of my mother-in-law while marking a milestone of togetherness. Here we were, ready to celebrate another year of love and laughter, when the universe decided to throw in a curveball. It was like planning a beach vacation and finding out there's a hurricane warning.

Tradition emphasises honouring the departed, and my mother-in-law's memory is deeply cherished. She was a woman of immense strength and sharp wit. She had an opinion on everything, and she never hesitated to share it.

I can't help thinking that she might find humour in the irony of choosing our wedding anniversary as the day to take her final bow. It feels like a cosmic wink from her, a reminder of her knack for making her presence felt even in her absence. It's as if she left us with a life lesson in her own style: life, in all its complexity, weaves joy and sorrow into the same fabric and shows how it can be both beautiful and heartbreaking.

Now, every year, we face the same question: Do we celebrate, mourn or attempt some hybrid of both? As with most things in a long marriage, the solution is compromise. We try to blend the two occasions: a moment of silence before a quiet dinner, followed by a toast to both her memory and our enduring partnership. Sometimes, we split the day in two — spending the morning in quiet reflection, honouring the solemn occasion, and dedicating the latter half to celebrating the fact that we've managed to keep the spark alive despite the odds (and the snoring). Other times, like the year she passed, we remind ourselves that anniversaries come around every year, just as solemn remembrances do. Balancing both is never easy, but it's our way of cherishing the past while embracing the present.

It's not the kind of anniversary most couples envision, but it's ours — a blend of life's contradictions, where joy and grief walk hand in hand. In a way, it's a reminder of marriage itself: a journey that's equal parts love, loss and laughter, punctuated by the occasional bitterness twist. So, while our anniversary will forever share its date with her passing, we've come to see it not as a dash, but as a coexistence of memories, a testament to the life she lived and the life we continue to build.

And sometimes, I hope my mother-in-law is smiling down on us, probably rolling her eyes and saying, "Well, at least you didn't forget the date. Now you'll never forget me!" — and honestly, she'd be absolutely right.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Give patients a choice

Refer to 'Fleeing patients': the high cost of medicines in private hospitals continues to trouble patients; under pressure from pharmaceutical companies, doctors prefer prescribing expensive branded drugs. Despite the availability of affordable generic medicines, lack of awareness and accessibility forces patients to bear a huge financial burden. Government-run Jan Aushadhi Kendras, meant to provide low-cost generics, face consistent shortages and quality concerns, further limiting the options. To curb this exploitation, it must be made mandatory for doctors to mention the generic name alongside branded prescriptions, giving patients a choice. Strengthening drug regulation and improving the availability of quality generics can ensure fair pricing in healthcare and protect patients from undue monetary strain.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

Quality of generic medicines

Apropos of 'Fleeing patients', Jan Aushadhi Kendras help in providing generic medicines at cheap prices. However, people remain preoccupied with quality concerns. A thorough overhaul of the regulatory system is required to dispel apprehensions. Vigilance needs to be maintained on pharmaceutical companies, followed by post-marketing surveillance. Compliance with good manufacturing practices that encourage ethical clinical trials needs to be monitored. R&D in the pharmaceutical sector in our country should be scaled up. Public awareness about generic medicines must be increased.

VAIBHAV GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

Random sampling of medicines

Refer to 'Fleeing patients': generic medicines at Jan Aushadhi Kendras are far cheaper than branded ones, raising doubts among the people regarding their quality. This stops them from buying generic medicines, especially for ailments like diabetes, hypertension and cardiac problems where quality makes a big difference. The question arises as to how the community at large can be convinced about the quality of generic medicines. Here the role of government regulatory bodies comes into play. They should do regular random sampling and testing of these medicines and publish the results in newspapers and on social media, besides

holding workshops to create awareness about the quality of medicines. This will allay the fears and doubts of the public.

KK CHAWLA, BY MAIL

Develop crop-specific boards

Apropos of 'Punjab in turmoil': decreased landholdings, increasing input costs and lack of viable agricultural insurance policies make farming an unviable option, especially for small and marginal farmers, forcing them to sell land and send their children in foreign countries. Inadequate food processing facilities add to the woes of Punjab farmers. The state must develop more crop-specific institutions, like agricultural boards for medicinal spices, pulses, etc which should develop a well-researched package of practices for these diversified crops, help farmers grow them at a low cost of cultivation and create marketing avenues.

HARVINDER SINGH CHUGH, JALANDHAR

Punjab's governance crisis

Apropos of 'Punjab in turmoil': having lost Delhi to the BJP, the AAP leadership seems to be in an ideological quandary. The Punjab chief minister's decision to take on farmers and revenue officers could prove counterproductive. It underlines the crisis in governance. Walking out of a meeting with farmers is an indication of a failed dialogue. Strong-arm tactics of the AAP government may dent the image of Bhagwant Mann as a common man's chief minister.

RAJ BHADHUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

INDIA bloc must unite

Refer to 'Why the unity of INDIA bloc is faltering': the Congress must realise that it is not possible to fight the formidable BJP on its own. Owing to its better electoral strategy, planning and well-organised cadre of workers, the BJP is going strong after election under the leadership of PM Modi. The Modi-Shah magic is outsmarting the INDIA bloc in every aspect and thus recording emphatic wins. Unless INDIA puts up a united front against the BJP its dream of wresting power seems a distant dream. Alliances demand sacrifice, resolution of ideological differences as well as the abandonment of personal ambitions for a common cause.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Punjab crisis: AAP & politics of righteousness



PARAMJIT S. JUDGE
FORMER PROFESSOR, GURU
NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

WHILE dealing with the Punjab situation, there is a tendency to quickly term it as a crisis. The term crisis with regard to Punjab was popularised in the 1980s when the Sikh militant movement almost halted the development and governance processes in Punjab. It is still in vogue, though the present conditions in Punjab do not warrant it to be called so. Interestingly, the dramatic crash that the stock exchange has recently experienced is still not being treated as a crisis.

Corruption is an all-India phenomenon and Punjab is no exception. But understanding how corruption is the root cause of the crisis in the state requires some serious introspection. The AAP's crusade against corruption after it came to power was noticed and there was a dramatic drop in corrupt practices in government offices. But it turned out to be a temporary pause as within six months of its rule, corruption resumed and, at present, there is hardly any

government office where there is no corruption.

The corrupt practices resumed largely as rumours of some AAP leaders indulging in corruption began to spread in the state.

It is interesting that after two years of AAP's rule, the issue of corruption has almost disappeared from the state. There seems to be a standard pattern in this silence and it is common to many political parties in power in various states.

During the initial phase of the government, the people's representatives are given freedom to make money, for without it, elections cannot be won. When it enters the third year, there is a sudden rise in action against corrupt officials.

We have witnessed this crackdown recently, though most of the officials acted against are small fish and there is hardly any intent to catch the big fish. The arrest of a tehsildar by the Vigilance Bureau in Ludhiana led to a strike by the tehsildars. But it was quickly withdrawn after the Punjab government hardened its stance against the striking tehsildars.

The issue of corruption is much more serious than we generally think. Instead of distancing themselves from the corrupt tehsildar, his fellow officers endorsed his misdeed by going on strike in his support. This is an indication of a serious moral crisis in the society, where corruption is regarded as functional for everybody.



SHORT-LIVED: AAP's crusade against corruption turned out to be a temporary phase. TRIBUNE PHOTO

A considerable number of people willingly bribe officials to get their work done. As the slogan goes, corruption breeds cooperation. There are two reasons for bribing officials. First, there are certain anomalies in his/her case that the person wants to cover. Second, people want their work done quickly even if their papers are in order. In such situations, corruption becomes a part of the culture and a permanent institutionalised practice.

Agriculture has been regarded as the mainstay of Punjab since the Green Revolution in the late 1960s. However, the Green Revolution has outlived its advantage and now most of the states are producing grains, through Punjab is still the largest contributor to the Centre's kitty. Agricultural practices have moved to monoculture, in which wheat

Once the legitimacy of the farmers' movement is lost, it will take little time for the State to suppress it. The only way out for them is a united struggle at the national level.

and paddy have become the major crops. The water-intensive cropping pattern has caused havoc to the underground water table. The AAP government has made some positive efforts to extend canal water, but it has to be a long-term effort.

Despite the efforts of the government to convince the farmers to go for diversification of the cropping pattern, they are not doing so due to lack of expertise and the availability of minimum support price for certain crops.

According to the 2022-2023 economic survey of Punjab, the gross state value of agriculture and related services is about 29 per cent employing about 25 per cent of the workers, most of whom are migrant labourers. In contrast, the industry's share is about 25 per cent employing 36 per cent of the workers. And, interestingly, services constitute about 46 per cent

employing about 38 per cent of workers.

Agriculture and related services have declined progressively over time. Punjab's economy greatly benefits from the Punjab diaspora who regularly visit the state and spend money in various ways.

Owing to the uneconomical nature of agriculture, the land market in villages has declined considerably and it has become difficult to find buyers.

The core of the crisis in agriculture in Punjab is exemplified by the recent farmers' movement. From 2020, when they protested against the three farm laws and succeeded in getting them repealed in 2021, to the present, Punjab farmers have not stopped their struggle.

At present, their struggle is at the pre-organisational level owing to the split among the farmers. There are more than 30 unions and each one has its distinct character. The decision by some unions to go to Delhi last year to protest was bound to fail because of the lack of unity among them.

The Swaminathan Committee's recommendations have not been implemented despite assurances by various political parties during successive elections. In addition, the Central government has been gradually withdrawing the subsidy to agriculture.

The Punjab government is still supplying free power for tubewells to farmers. Otherwise, under the WTO agree-

ment, the Indian state has already withdrawn indirect input subsidies. The greatest farce is the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, under which some cash is deposited in the bank accounts of farmers. The amount is too meagre to help them.

At this moment, the farmers are fighting two wars. First, they are fighting for minimum support price for certain crops all over the country; and second, against the open and subtle corporatisation of agriculture.

However, their dharnas on roads and railway tracks have become an irritant for a considerable number of commuters as well as the government. The reaction of the Punjab CM in the recent meeting with farmers and subsequent action against them on March 5 is a result of such a situation.

The institutionalisation of a movement always leads to a loss in its sheen and that is what is happening to the farmers' movement. Once the legitimacy of the movement is lost, it will take little time for the State to completely suppress it. The only way out is a united struggle at the national level.

The root cause of the crisis lies in the loss of moral values in the system, where money and profit have become primary. Irrational spray of pesticides, adulteration of milk and considering corruption as natural way of becoming rich are some practices that characterise the Punjab crisis.

Address IAF's depleting offensive capability



AIR VICE MARSHAL ARJUN SUBRAMANIAM (RETD)
AIR POWER ANALYST

THE IAF today stands at an inflection point. On the one hand, it has articulated a doctrine that is sweeping in its scope and ambitious in its aspiration. On the other hand, the gap between its articulation and the capability to execute is growing ever so wide. The gap merits serious examination through a concerning lens of an erosion in its offensive capabilities.

At around 30 fighter squadrons, the IAF is at its lowest strength ever. And what is more alarming is that the pipeline of fighter replacements is restricted for at least the next five years to a trickle from the Tejas Mk1A assembly lines.

It has taken Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) almost nine years to deliver the first 40 Mk1 jets. Even a dramatic improvement in the production of the Tejas Mk1A, that doubles the delivery numbers (83) in a little over half the time frame (five years), will

only cater to the corresponding phasing out of the existing squadrons (the remaining MiG-21s and Jaguars).

Even a speedy finalisation of the multi-role fighter aircraft (MRFA) deal of 114 fighter aircraft will, at best, fructify in deliveries commencing by the end of the decade if it is a government-to-government (G2G) deal. If the process continues its present trajectory, ie a global tendering process, it could take almost a decade to result in deliveries.

That alarm bells are ringing in New Delhi is quite apparent by the speedy submission of an in-house report from the MoD on an IAF roadmap for expedited capability enhancement. While the scope of the report is as expansive as the IAF doctrine, it is too early to assess when the deliverables will start flowing in.

By any logical assessment, there are no answers in the short and medium term other than impressing upon the US to ensure that the deliveries of the GE 404 and 414 engines are expedited so that at least the light combat aircraft (LCA) programme is on track.

The willingness of the political executive to unshackle the IAF over eastern Ladakh and test its coercive capability at Balakot in 2019 were steps in the right direction. But the two episodes also brought into



HIGH TIME: The IAF must concentrate on building credible offensive capability. M

focus the after-effects of coercion in an adversarial environment of parity or near-parity on both the northern and western fronts.

The sheer lack of numbers, capability gaps in long-range air-to-air missiles that still exist and other structural deficiencies in the IAF's air defence networks and sensors are a cause for concern. To the IAF's credit, it has done its best to plug these gaps, but there is only so much it can do with the dismal decline in the numbers.

The current inventory of offensive multi-role platforms is about 14-15 SU-30 MkD, three Mirage-2000, three MiG-29 and two Rafale squadrons. A few Jaguar, Tejas Mk1 and

The sheer lack of numbers, capability gaps in long-range air-to-air missiles and other structural deficiencies in the IAF's air defence networks and sensors are a cause for concern.

MG-21 squadrons make up for the rest of the force.

If this depleted force is to punch above its weight, it must have the following: an over-weight complement of air-to-air and air-to-surface weapons; electronic warfare (EW) capability to degrade an extremely dense and sophisticated adversarial air defence network, particularly in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR); readily available and on call complement of aerial refuellers; airborne warning and control systems (AWACS); and airborne early warning platforms, all of which are scarce as their fighter brethren.

Considering the reported likelihood of the Pakistan Air

Force (PAF) acquiring the multi-role stealth fighter, the JF-35 (export version of the J-31) by the end of this decade, coupled with the speedy operationalisation of an Italian data link network akin to the NATO Link-16, any competitive advantage enjoyed by the IAF over the PAF is steadily getting eroded.

Even if one looks at the Chinese fifth generation capability with a pinch of salt and reckons that platforms like the Rafale, with its entire suite of EW and weapons will be a fair match till India acquires or develops its own fifth and sixth generation fighters, any talk of catching up with the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) sounds rather far-fetched and the possibility of any leap-frogging seems remote.

What then is the way forward? Considering that several recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) of over two decades ago are still unrealised, it is important to assess which of these recommendations attach themselves to the IAF's existing capability. These should be addressed on priority, with accountability and clear deliverables, a facet that has been missing in our aeronautical development ecosystem.

Next is to mitigate the gap created by the continuing shortage of the fixed wing offensive platform. To do this,

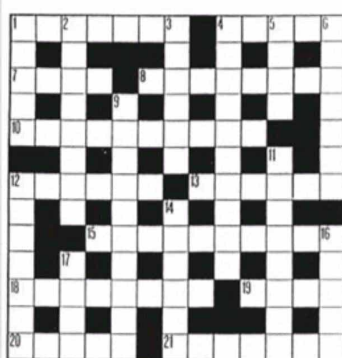
there is a need to fast-track the induction of systems, such as drone swarms, unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) and long-range surface-to-surface missiles of the Brahmos family without succumbing to the false narrative that these would ultimately replace manned aircraft.

Policymakers must digest the inescapable reality that so long as full-spectrum threats exist for India along its northern and western borders, the IAF will be compelled to wield a mix of fixed wing, unmanned and surface-to-surface weapons.

On a different plane, after a decade of successfully building its non-kinetic capability (transport and helicopter fleets), which has contributed brilliantly to statecraft and nation-building, it is time for the IAF to concentrate on building credible offensive capability. Notwithstanding several propositions in the air, such as the development of the advanced medium combat aircraft (AMCA), red herrings like the F35, the long gestation periods of new acquisitions and the collaborative development of jet engines, the future is largely uncertain.

The IAF will have to be innovative and nimble to harness its depleting offensive assets with a very high quality of training and operational preparedness.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Devout visitor to shrine (7)
 - To hinge (5)
 - Small broad-headed nail (4)
 - Single-reed woodwind instrument (8)
 - At this very moment (4,3,3)
 - For choice (6)
 - Typically French (6)
 - Combine efforts (4,6)
 - New York theatreland (8)
 - Bucket (4)
 - Relations by marriage (2,4)
 - Further (5)
 - Companionship (7)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Part company, 9 Haggard, 10 Rupee, 11 Stem, 12 Habitual, 14 No-good, 16 Take to, 18 Travesty, 19 Open, 22 Acute, 23 Grenade, 24 Send packing.

Down: 2 Argue, 3 Teak, 4 Ordeal, 5 Partisan, 6 Neptune, 7 This and that, 8 Well-founded, 13 Bonehead, 15 Granule, 17 Stigma, 20 Plain, 21 Meek.

- DOWN**
- Degree of roof's slope (5)
 - To stir (8)
 - Ailment (6)
 - A coffee-making utensil (10)
 - Outlet (4)
 - Enormous (7)
 - Be totally unaware (4,2,4)
 - Interdiction of nation's sea lanes (8)
 - Ludicrous (7)
 - Relations by marriage (2,4)
 - Morose (5)
 - Awkward brutish man (4)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MARCH 7, 2025, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samant 1946
- Pragati Shaka 16
- Pragati Panishat 24
- Hijri 1446
- Shaka Palsha Tithi 8, up to 9.19 am
- Pri Yoga up to 6.15 pm
- Mingzhihaka Nakshatra up to 11.32 pm
- Moon enters Gemini sign 11.45 am

FORECAST

SUNSET	FRIDAY	18:24 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	26	10
New Delhi	30	13
Amritsar	25	08
Bathinda	28	10
Jalandhar	25	08
Ludhiana	26	12
Bhivani	27	09
Hisar	29	10
Sirsa	28	10
Dharamsala	21	05
Manali	16	03
Shimla	18	08
Srinagar	16	0
Jammu	24	09
Kargil	-01	-13
Leh	0	-14
Dehradun	22	09
Mussoorie	17	05

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Opinion

FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 2025

The north-south chasm

A mix of federal equity and efficient use of fiscal resources is the solution to delimitation row

TAMIL NADU CHIEF Minister MK Stalin has urged the Centre to retain the existing number of Lok Sabha (LS) seats and constituency boundaries for the next 30 years. A furor over the impending redrawing of the boundaries of the LS constituencies on the basis of the 16th census was to be expected. The delimitation exercise has remained frozen since 1971; the 84th Constitution amendment in 2002 set down status quo of constituency limits until "the first census taken after the year 2026". While decennial census, last conducted in 2011, is delayed, reports suggest that it will start in 2025, with data and the National Population Register update expected by 2026. Or it could even be staggered to meet the "after-2026" condition. Another delimitation would result in a significant increase in LS seats from the extant 543, fixed over five decades ago on the basis of the 1971 census. The population has presumably grown by roughly 2.6 times since then, with the rate of increase among states being very uneven.

Union home minister Amit Shah has recently said that the LS seats will not reduce for any state and, instead, increase "on a pro rata basis". But back-of-the-envelope calculations indicate that southern states, with their populations having been stabilised over decades, would see their representation in LS shrink in relative terms. The minister's assurance is to be inferred to mean that absolute number of LS seats for any state would not reduce (as no state might have seen their population decline), and might only increase in almost all cases. Among the other states, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand as well as the northeastern states might also be disadvantaged by the next delimitation. The northern states, on the other hand, would witness their representation rise substantially, with the biggest gainers likely being Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh.

Total fertility rates of all five southern states are already well below the replacement rate. So, their populations would peak rather soon. However, as the United Nations estimates, for the country as a whole, the peaking would take place only by early 2060s when the population hits 1.7 billion. The southern states' relative success in population control has already led to much-reduced tax transfers. Besides, they are now faced with the grim prospect of substantially reduced electoral heft. This is even as the resource transfers to the "Hindi Belt" states over decades have not satisfactorily addressed their socioeconomic backwardness. If at all, the divide may only widened.

True, at a fundamental level the choice is a difficult one, between the democratic principle of "one person, one vote, one value" or representative franchise and federal equity. The solution should be one where incentives for performance coalesce with more efficient use of the funds channelled to the backward states from others. These transfers should be put to productive use as investments in social and industrial spheres. Their outcomes should be monitored and quantified, under a formal mechanism. The last thing the country would want is a situation where even the progressive states take resort to raise their population, and goastray. The United States' population has risen by four times over last 112 years, yet the strength of House of Representatives hasn't been changed, in keeping with federal principles. The world's largest economy bears testimony to the notion that equity begets efficiency.

Honda could get BYD-ed in key scooter market

FOR THE WORLD'S carmakers, the inexorable rise of Chinese electric vehicle-maker BYD and its local rivals in recent years has been a brutal lesson in disruptive innovation. China, a market that was once core to their global growth plans, has become a wasteland for their petrol-powered line-ups as electric vehicles grew from 6.2% of sales in 2020 to 45% last year.

The foreign brands that dominated in the 2010s have been devastated. Sales by Ford Motor and Nissan Motor — both top-10 brands in 2017 — have since fallen by 81% and 45% respectively. Ford dropped behind barely-known local electric marques such as Zeekr and Deepal. General Motors is facing extinction, with Buick down 66% over the period and Chevrolet slumping 92%, while Honda Motor Corp.'s sales have dropped 40%. BYD, the 21st-biggest carmaker in 2017, last year sold more cars in China than the 10 major Japanese brands put together.

Get ready to see the same pattern play out on two wheels. Right now, scooters and motorbikes are a market where Japan is in the ascendant. With rising incomes across India and Southeast Asia, the sector is booming; McKinsey & Co. reckons sales will grow at 8.7% a year through 2029, compared to about 1% this decade for passenger cars. Honda has 40% of this global market, and reckons it can grow to 50% as sales rise to 60 million bikes by 2030. Its two-wheeler business is seen as the jewel of the on-again, off-again merger between Honda and Nissan.

That makes the eccentric, timid nature of its electrification plans confounding. The most important plank of this shift was announced in India last year with the rollout of the Active e, a battery-powered version of its top-selling local bike. Weirdly, it doesn't allow owners to charge it up at home, forcing them to instead sign up to battery-swapping service that will only be available in Bengaluru, Delhi, and Mumbai.

It's hard to comprehend the logic of this. One thing we know about the EV-curious is that they're stricken with range anxiety. Imagine adding to that concern by making your buyers dependent on a network of distributors that may be too far away, or closed, or out of stock when you roll into their carpark.

The Active e is a "bizarre bet", the *Morning Context*, a local financial news site, wrote in January. "If it fails, it will hurt a brand that took the company over two decades to build." Ownership costs (a key consideration given how many Indian two-wheeler owners are delivery drivers and taxi riders who have to make every rupee and paise count) also look uncompetitive once you sign up to Honda's battery-as-a-service subscription, the site estimated.

It's not that Honda lacks the technology to provide the benefits of quick battery-swapping alongside those of home-charging, either. The CUVe, its parallel model for Southeast Asia and other markets, has precisely that ability. Instead, the company is looking to gamble its leading position in the world's biggest two-wheeler market over a half-baked idea.

Local rivals aren't standing still. Ola Electric Mobility, which is laying off employees and bleeding losses after an initial public offering last year that valued it at \$4 billion, still has a quarter of the market. Its array of models ranges from hulking motorbikes to ones aimed at delivery drivers, and cost about a third the price of an Active e. Established local rivals, rather than Honda, provide the most aggressive competition to Ola. ATVS Motor, electric two-wheeler sales increased by 57% from a year earlier in the December quarter. "We want to look at global markets with our EV products," Chief Executive Officer K. Radhakrishnan told investors on January 28. Southeast Asian competitors are looking equally aggressive. Vietnam's VinFast Auto wants to tie up with an Indian manufacturer to gain entry into the market.

There is a golden opportunity that's about to be squandered. BloombergNEF estimates EVs will comprise as many as half of two-wheelers sold in 2030, but Honda is aiming to produce just four million of them — a far cry from its dominant share of internal combustion engines. The carmakers that have been wrong, fooled by the rise of Chinese electric cars can at least plead that nothing of the sort had ever happened before. For Honda, its grim future is already staring it in the face.



DAVID FICKLING, Bloomberg

STORAGE MARKET HAS MADE STELLAR PROGRESS IN 2024, BODING WELL FOR GRID AND RENEWABLES

Battery storage is here

HIMRAJ DANG
DEBMALYA SEN

Respectively independent consultant and energy lead, World Economic Forum



grid, estimated to rise from the current 200 Gw to 500 Gw capacity by 2030. Also, given the estimated growth in demand of 7% per annum in this period, a study by the India Energy and Climate Center at the University of California, Berkeley, concludes that "by 2027, 100-120 Gw of new solar, out of which 50-100 Gw is co-located with 16-30 Gw x 4-6 hours of storage, can avoid shortages".

Tender configurations

Tenders come in an array of configurations: stand-alone (BESS, PHS); renewable energy (RE)-ESS; round-the-clock (RTC); solar-BESS; and firm and dispatchable RE or FDRE (assured peak, load following, RTC, and specific peak supply). These are differentiated by technology, capacity utilisation, tariff structure, peak requirement, mandatory storage participation, and peak availability.

Bidders and buyers

Most of the bidders in these tenders are RE independent power producers (IPPs), and conventional generators, as expected. The usual RE IPPs show up, namely Renew, Greenko, ACME, Hero Futures, Sembcorp, O2 Power, Avaada, Juniper, Serenita, BrightNight, etc. Conventional generators include NTPC, Reliance Power, Tata Power, JSW, Essar, L&T, etc.

Energy storage is projected to grow 5x between 2026 and 2032 with an estimated investment of \$4.79 lakh crore (\$55 billion) by 2032

Tariffs

The tariff trends for various segments of storage are revealing. For stand-alone BESS, for example, 10.7 Gwh of tenders have been issued, 80% in 2024. Tariffs have seen a 66% decline in two years from ₹10.6 lakh/Mwh/month to ₹3.72 lakh/Mwh/month (without viability gap funding or VGF, going down further to ₹2.21 lakh/Mwh/month with VGF). With this competitiveness in the markets, there may be no need for VGF in the future.

For FDRE, 20.2 Gwh of tenders have been issued, 50% in 2024. Peak guarantee tariffs have been steady in the range of ₹4.25-4.69/kilowatt-hour (kwh) in 2024. For solar-BESS tenders, 8.9 Gwh of tenders have been issued, 88% in 2024. Tariffs have seen a steep

decline from ₹5.6/kwh in 2021 to ₹3.52/kwh in 2024.

Global story

BloombergNEF's *Levelized Cost of Electricity* report indicates that the global benchmark cost for battery storage projects fell by a third in 2024 to \$104 per Mwh. The forecast is for batteries to finally cross the vaunted \$100/Mwh threshold in 2025, already surpassed in China by 2023.

China's energy storage sector saw an annual increment of 1.3x in 2024, with total installed capacity reaching 73.76 Gw, according to Bian Guangqi, an official with the National Energy Administration.

Market concerns

As battery prices have been falling and the need for grid stability rises, given the injection of renewables, this is an industry segment that promises super-normal growth. Post-award management should improve to avoid cancellations, and the lack of signing of purchase and sale agreements. One reason for cancellations is the wish for ever-declining tariffs, ignoring the fact that price discovery only happens with a steady stream of tendered capacity.

It is also surprising that an important new study by the CEA on generation planning for 2032 forecasts the need for 84 Gw of fresh thermal capacity while ignoring the role of storage. The bundling of competitive RE and storage in various configurations should be a like-to-like replacement for firm thermal power, especially in states with high average power purchase cost, peak demand, and VRE penetration.

Given the rapid coming of age of ESS, with lower tariffs and time-bound execution, this asset class should be a key input in managing power shortages, planning fresh capacity, and decarbonisation of the grid.

Has Trump done what WTO couldn't?



MADAN SABNAVIS

Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda

IDIOSYNCRASY AND VICISSITUDE stamp Donald Trump as exceptional. He has been erratic in articulation but consistent in his stance on economic policy, whether the world likes it or not. His recent tirade on customs tariffs is something that has got all nations back to the negotiation table. But, if one reflects, it will appear that his proposed actions would do something that the World Trade Organization (WTO) was unable to accomplish. Will this be a turning point in foreign trade?

The US is the largest importer of goods at around \$3.3 trillion, followed by China (\$2.6 trillion) and Germany (\$1.5 trillion). The next in the top 10 are the Netherlands, UK, France, Japan, India, Hong Kong, and South Korea. These nations have considerable power over imposing tariffs, given the quantum of imports. The US threat to impose reciprocal tariffs on all trading partners may not be feasible, as imports from almost 180 countries. Besides, the number of products is large, and it would be hard to compare commodity- and country-wise tariffs for comparison. While the threat has been on matching tariffs based on commodities, it could practically be applied in generalised terms only. In this context, the average customs tariffs imposed by countries could be looked at, though this may not necessarily match the average that the US faces due to several free-trade agreements between countries, including the most favoured nation (MFN) status.

The weighted mean average tariff on commodities imported is relevant here. World Bank data for 2022 throws some light on these rates, which vary from almost nil in Singapore to 29.5% in Bermuda. For India, it was 11.5%, while it was 8.6% in Korea, 7.4% in Brazil, 4.7% in South Africa, 3.1% in China, 3.1% in UK, 1.3% in France and Germany, and 1.5% in the US. These are averages and would have a varied set, depending on the commodities that are imported.

The outcome of the reciprocal tariff policy approach of the US has led to two things. The first is that it has opened the doors for negotiation, and this has meant that countries are talking to the US.

The second fallout is that countries have resumed talking to one another on trade issues. This was abandoned once the WTO concept fizzled out. What this will mean is that more agreements will be forged by like-minded nations on trade, which can be either bilateral or within groups of countries where the MFN-like status would be incorporated. India is already in talks with the UK and the European Union, which too are significant trade partners. The impetus for this will be more on the fear of the US raising its antenna at some point to tax goods from countries that have higher

The US president is calling the shots and has changed the entire discourse of economics, with all countries revisiting their trade and tariff structures

tariffs than it does (currently the number is nearly 100). Over 60 have an average rate of 5% or more.

The US trade policy has become the fulcrum for world economies as the concept of reciprocal tariffs has caught on. It is not certain whether these would be applied across the board. The higher tariffs on steel and aluminium are real and signal to the world that the US means business. Also, given that most of the exporting countries

to the US have higher tariffs, non-compliance may not matter if there are no fewer cheaper substitutes. This can hold good in industries like pharmaceutical, where the US has to import because it is a necessity. Even in case of steel and aluminium, the US has to continue importing as it lacks production capabilities within. It will lead to higher

prices and inflation in the US and could affect imports only marginally. It has also been noticed that when tariffs are imposed on specific countries, there is a tendency to reroute goods through a third country. This helps dodge the higher tariffs. Often countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council are used for such routing. However, countries will deliberate whether rates should be rationalised keeping this factor in mind. It can lead to a reduction in tariffs on several product lines, which would be good for

global trade, but this would also come in the way of domestic industry, which will see competition increase substantially.

For Indian companies, any reduction or rationalisation in tariffs would mean the doors are open wider for imports, which can affect competition. Therefore, the inherent protection that existed due to tariffs being at relatively higher levels would be withdrawn over time, becoming a major concern for the countries as well as individual industries.

At the policy level, there is always the threat of dumping where lowering of tariffs in general can lead to predatory trade. Other nations may under-price and sell their goods. A good example is China. India has had to apply anti-dumping duties to stem the flow of such goods. Surveillance would have to be increased to watch out for such practices.

The US double-speak is evident as the talk is only on goods and not services, where ambivalence persists. There is stern talk about driving migrants back, with some moves being made already. This will be a concern, given that there will be restrictions on issuing work-related visas. But then, this is the might of the US where the President is calling the shots and has changed the entire discourse of economics, with all countries revisiting their trade and tariff structures. Hence, it can be said that Trump has done what the WTO couldn't.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tariff a blunt tool

Apropos of "Will Trump tariff?" (FE, March 6), tariff walls, however high, cannot elevate the US to manufacturing preeminence in the near future. Spurring on cheap imports by leveraging the dollar as the global currency, at next to nil tariffs, it had shrunk its auto and steel industries. It has long been swept away by the Chinese manufacturing tsunami. It woke up to the STEM

(science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) initiative just a few years ago while other nations took the lead in higher education to leapfrog in advanced technology and research. Years of idle opulence is exacting its price on a nation guilty of hubris as the sole printer of the dollar. It intends to take recourse to its might to regain a wider base in manufacturing, without which tariff is a blunt tool for the US and benefits none.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

KYC misused

Apropos of "The KYC crisis" (FE, March 6), too many people have been defrauded by threats from cyber crooks of freezing accounts. Forced to disclose personal details, many have found their bank accounts emptied after complying with the instructions as demanded by fraudsters in the guise of bankers. Banks refuse to take responsibility and the government seems helpless in dealing with crooks.

The KYC is supposed to help in weeding out benami accounts in theory, but even with all the protection in place there is no dearth of mule accounts used for cheating. One cannot blame the bankers because the central bank and the government are quick to levy penalties for any laxity in obeying their instructions.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

GBG Bill: Will promise inspire reform?

The Greater Bengaluru Governance Bill, drafted by a joint committee, has been tabled in the Karnataka legislature, proposing significant reforms to address Bengaluru's deep-rooted governance challenges. One of the key highlights of the bill is the splitting of the existing Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) into seven separate corporations. The bill aims to decentralise the city's administration, making it more efficient and citizen-friendly, while instilling greater transparency and accountability. The reforms are being touted as forward-thinking, but the question

remains whether they will deliver the transformative change that Bengaluru needs. For decades, there has been a persistent complaint that various parastatal agencies dealing with water, public transport, power, infrastructure and other civic amenities, have been working in isolation, often at cross-purposes, due to a lack of coordination. The proposed Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) is expected to fill this gap by bringing all these agencies under one unified framework to ensure better coordination and efficiency.

However, the organisational structure of the new mechanism raises several questions. With the GBA headed by the Chief Minister, there is no doubt that the mayor with a 30-month term will be no more than a titular head. Besides undermining the concept of local self governance, this could severely affect the autonomy of the GBA, reducing it to a hand-maiden of the state government, which would exert significant influence over the city's administration. The structure thus lacks clarity. The bill also ignores the long-pending demand for a directly elected mayor-in-council with a fixed term of five years. The inclusion of MPs, MLAs and MLCs in the corporation council is a major drawback. This setup has in the past been used to manipulate the council strength and create an artificial majority for a particular party to enable them to elect a mayor who does not reflect the people's choice. Lawmakers have distinct roles that do not involve meddling with city administration. At most, they may be invited to participate in meetings, but granting them voting powers is unnecessary and counterproductive to local governance.

The bill is a mixed bag, and it is crucial that legislators thoroughly discuss the pros and cons, putting aside political considerations. Moreover, the bill should not be used to delay the already overdue elections to BBMP. Their guiding principle should be the greater good of Bengaluru. The focus should be on streamlining governance, not complicating it further. While the bill presents a promising opportunity to address the city's administrative woes, its success hinges on the willingness of the lawmakers to prioritise Bengaluru's long-term interests over short-term political gains.

Weighed down by obesity epidemic

Obesity has assumed epidemic proportions in India and emerged as a major health threat. India has the third highest percentage of obese persons in the world and, according to data from the National Family Health Survey-5, there is prevalence of obesity among 24 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men. An analysis in the journal *The Lancet* says India will have 450 million obese persons, the largest obese population in the world, by 2050 – up from the current 180 million. The crisis has exploded in the last two decades. About 73 lakh boys and 52 lakh girls were found to be obese in 2022 compared to 21 lakh in 1990. The rising numbers will pose serious challenges to public health. India is already the diabetes capital of the world, accounting for over 23 per cent of the global number of patients. Obesity, diabetes, and other lifestyle ailments can make a large segment of the population unhealthy. It is only recently that obesity received the attention it deserved as a health challenge.

Consumption of junk food, changes in patterns and timings of work, lack of physical activity, and high levels of screen time are some of the reasons that contribute to obesity. As people walk less and travel more in vehicles, other lifestyle changes continue to make people vulnerable to obesity. They also lead to greater incidence of cardiovascular diseases, dementia, and cancer; these conditions also affect mental health and increase medical spending, eventually taking a toll on the economy. It is estimated that obesity-related health issues will make a 1.8 per cent dent in the GDP by 2035.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently drew attention to the problem and nominated 10 prominent personalities from different fields to spread awareness about the threat posed by obesity. Consumption of food is a major factor. The Prime Minister has called for a 10 per cent reduction in cooking oil consumption. The annual edible oil consumption in India is 20 kg per person, while the WHO recommended limit is 12 kg. Obesity should be dealt with as a major public health issue and all its contributing factors should be addressed. There should be initiatives focussed on children and adolescents, and schools should have an important role in them. It has been observed that childhood undernutrition sometimes leads to obesity in later life. National action plans that target the entire gamut of the obesity challenge need to be drawn up and implemented.

Alarming numbers warrant national action plans that also focus on children, adolescents

COMMENT

UNEVEN PROGRESS

Maternal mortality and India's multifold challenges

Maternal mortality rates have improved but socio-economic imbalances remain a hurdle

C M LAKSHMANA

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.1 set by the United Nations is aimed at reducing the maternal mortality rate (MMR) to 70 per lakh live births by 2030. India has achieved significant progress in improving maternal health outcomes, reflected in a steady decline in MMR and expanded access to quality maternal healthcare services. Through a robust framework of national programmes such as the National Health Mission (NHM), Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health plus Nutrition (RMNCH+A) strategy, and Ayushman Bharat, India has demonstrated its commitment to achieving the target.

Maternal health is an important aspect for the development of any country in terms of increasing equity and reducing poverty. The survival and wellbeing of mothers is not only important, but is also central to solving larger, broader, economic, social, and developmental challenges. Massive and strategic investments have been made under the NHM for improvement of maternal health. However, one of the key indicators of maternal mortality is the MMR which is defined as the number of maternal deaths during a given time per 100,000 live births during the same time.

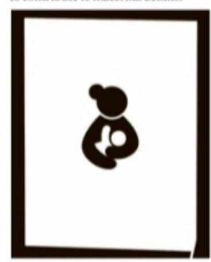
A study of MMR in India during the pre-NRHM (now NHM) and post-NRHM periods shows a significant reduction in the rates. As per the Sample Registration Survey (SRS) of India, MMR was 398 in 1997-98, it decreased to 212 in 2007-09 and further declined to 97 by 2018-20. The decline can be attributed to effective implementation of various health programmes and schemes under NHM. A similar decline could be seen across all the major states for the same periods. But many states have continued to report high MMR – these include Assam (385), Madhya Pradesh (173), Rajasthan (167), Uttar Pradesh (103), Haryana (101), Punjab (105), and West Bengal (103).

No doubt, under the NHM, there has been a substantial improvement in terms of socio-economic development. However, regional imbalances have stopped the progress of many states in efforts to reach a two-digit rate. The SRS figures show that the southern states – Kerala (49), Telangana (43), Andhra Pradesh (45), Tamil Nadu (54), and Karnataka (69) – have done significantly better. These states have reached the SDG goal well in advance.

In the central region, except Jharkhand, no state has recorded a two-digit MMR. The national health programmes and plans have evidently led to positive maternal health outcomes. But now, special attention needs to be given to the central and north-eastern states to ensure an even national spread of the initiatives.

Navigating barriers

Maternal mortality remains a significant public health challenge due to multiple medical, infrastructural, socio-economic, and systemic factors. Despite efforts to enhance maternal healthcare services, several critical issues continue to contribute to maternal deaths.



1. High-risk pregnancies: Many maternal deaths occur due to high-risk conditions such as gestational diabetes, hypertension, anaemia, and pre-eclampsia. These complications require timely medical intervention, which is often delayed due to a lack of awareness, inadequate healthcare facilities, or financial constraints.

2. Limited access to healthcare facilities in vulnerable areas: Pregnant women in rural, remote, and hard-to-reach areas face significant challenges in accessing maternal healthcare. Poor road infrastructure and inadequate transportation services exacerbate delays in reaching healthcare facilities.

3. Out-of-pocket expenditure despite government schemes: Although government schemes have promoted institutional deliveries, many women still incur out-of-pocket expenses for medication, diagnostics, transportation, and other indirect costs. This financial burden discourages women, especially from poor backgrounds, from seeking timely antenatal and delivery care.

4. Reluctance to visit hospitals until full delivery: Many rural women hesitate to visit healthcare facilities during early labour due to the fear of increased C-sections and additional costs. This delay increases the risk of complications such as prolonged labour, fetal distress, and postpartum haemorrhage which

require immediate medical intervention. 5. Postpartum haemorrhage and excessive bleeding: One of the leading causes of maternal mortality is excessive bleeding (haemorrhage) during childbirth or the postpartum period. Delayed medical intervention, lack of trained birth attendants, and inadequate blood transfusion services aggravate this risk.

6. Overcrowded secondary healthcare facilities in urban areas: In urban localities, secondary healthcare facilities are overburdened, leading to delays in providing maternal care. In states like Rajasthan, deliveries are not conducted at many PHCs and CHCs which do not operate 24x7, forcing women to rely on congested secondary and tertiary hospitals.

7. Non-adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs): While many healthcare facilities have shown enthusiasm for quality assessments, some PHCs and smaller facilities still fail to follow SOPs for deliveries, increasing the risk of infections and complications for both mother and child.

8. Shortage of skilled healthcare professionals: A lack of trained gynaecologists, obstetricians, and midwives in rural and underserved areas contributes to poor maternal health outcomes. Many healthcare facilities face human resource shortages, limiting their ability to manage emergency obstetric cases.

9. Inadequate emergency referral and transport services: Delays in emergency referrals and transport coordination hinder timely access to higher-level healthcare facilities. Weak communication between PHCs and secondary hospitals often results in maternal deaths that could have been prevented with quicker medical intervention.

10. Underlying malnutrition and poor pre-pregnancy health: Many women enter pregnancy with pre-existing malnutrition, anaemia, or chronic illnesses, which increases their risk of developing complications. Poor nutritional status impacts fetal growth and increases the likelihood of maternal and neonatal deaths.

11. Delayed postnatal care and follow-up: Many maternal deaths occur in the postpartum period due to a lack of adequate postnatal monitoring. Women, especially in rural areas, may not return for follow-up visits, leading to undiagnosed infections, postpartum haemorrhage, or other complications that go untreated.

Even considering the existing challenges, continuity in the present initiatives with greater intent can take all Indian states to the target MMR by or before 2030.

(The writer is a professor and head, Population Research Centre, Institute for Social and Economic Change)

SPEAK OUT

The older you get in politics, the more mature you become. Similarly, the youths can also be successful. However, I feel that Tejashwi Yadav, who calls himself a youth, doesn't have any capability. Is he the only youth?



Jitan Ram Manjhi, Union Minister

Old age and treachery will always beat youth and exuberance.

David Mamet

TO BE PRECISE

If you see Mr Trump coming, run!



IN PERSPECTIVE

Teeth tell stories of ancient labour

Dental pathologies reveal occupational stress, lived experiences of our ancestors

SINGDHA KONAR

Archaeology, a field often associated with grand monuments and burial sites, has a more intimate storyteller: human teeth. Beyond their role in dietary studies, teeth bear marks of daily life, chronicling stress, occupational habits, and craft specialisation in ancient societies. Recent research underscores the significance of dental pathologies in reconstructing labour practices, offering unique insights into the division of work, social hierarchy, and even toxic exposure in pre-modern populations.

Dental tissues, being highly resistant to degradation, serve as enduring records of individual experiences. Unlike bones, which remodel over time, teeth retain evidence of stress and repetitive activity throughout life. Archaeologists and bioarchaeologists have leveraged these characteristics to explore past lifestyles, particularly focusing on how different occupations leave distinct marks on dentition.

Microscopic dental wear patterns, for instance, reveal dietary habits, but they also indicate exposure to materials used in specialised crafts. Enamel hypoplasia – characterised by grooves or pits on teeth – suggests physiological stress during childhood, often linked to malnutrition or disease. However, other dental conditions like excessive wear, abscesses, and alveolar bone loss are increasingly being linked to occupational activities rather than mere dietary factors.

The labour-intensive nature of ancient crafts often resulted in characteristic dental pathologies. Potters, for example, frequently suffered from enamel wear due to the constant exposure to abrasive clay particles. Similarly, textile workers, who used their teeth to hold and manipulate threads, exhibited high rates of alveolar bone loss and dental abscesses. Leatherworkers also developed unique wear patterns from using their teeth to soften hides, while metalworkers may have suffered from enamel degradation due to toxic exposure.

A striking example comes from medieval European populations, where higher rates of dental abscesses were observed among individuals engaged in textile production. The repetitive tension and clenching associated with thread-spinning likely contributed to this condition. Likewise, in ancient Egyptian mummies, severe dental wear suggests artisans used their teeth as tools, possibly for cutting or smoothing materials.

Among the Maya, scribes and artisans had intentionally modified teeth, including filing and notching, which not only reflected their occupational

roles but also indicated social differentiation. Such evidence challenges the traditional notion that craft specialisation was solely determined by skeletal modifications, emphasising that dentition can provide an equally compelling narrative.

Archaeological studies across the globe have provided tangible evidence of these trends. In Central Europe, a Bronze Age site revealed that individuals engaged in pottery production displayed distinct enamel wear, indicative of prolonged exposure to gritty materials. Similarly, among medieval Scandinavian populations, individuals associated with textile work exhibited specific patterns of dental trauma linked to repetitive stress.

In a more extreme case, the skeletal remains of miners in ancient Rome showed severe enamel degradation, possibly caused by prolonged inhalation of toxic metal dust. This aligns with modern understandings of occupational hazards and reinforces the argument that ancient labour conditions could have had long-term health consequences.

Scientific advancements in dental analysis

Modern archaeological methods are refining our ability to interpret dental pathologies with unprecedented precision. Micro-computed tomography (Micro-CT) imaging, for instance, enables detailed assessments of enamel wear and microfractures, offering deeper insights into mechanical stress exerted on teeth. Stable isotope analysis helps differentiate between dietary and occupational influences on dental wear, providing a clearer picture of ancient labour practices.

Geometric morphometric analysis – another cutting-edge tool – allows researchers to map surface changes in dentition over time, facilitating comparisons across different populations and craft specialisations. These technological advancements enhance the reliability of interpretations and reinforce the significance of dental studies in reconstructing ancient work environments.

The study of dental pathologies offers a fresh perspective on ancient labour organisation in ancient societies. It challenges conventional interpretations of skeletal remains and expands the scope of archaeological inquiry beyond elite burials and monumental structures.

Teeth are more than just remnants of an individual's diet; they are imprints of labour, stress, and survival strategies. The growing emphasis on dental pathologies in archaeology is redefining how we understand occupational health and craft specialisation in ancient societies. From potters to scribes, artists to miners, the marks left on teeth serve as silent witnesses to the lived experiences of our ancestors. By continuing to refine these methods, we not only reconstruct past labour practices but also gain deeper insights into the resilience and adaptability of human societies throughout time.

(The writer is a PhD scholar at the Barbot Sahai Institute of Palaeosciences, Lucknow)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A crepe beyond borders

I was surprised to learn that the dosa had won over a Jharkhand village

USHA GAUTAM

Dulari is a charming, sweet-tempered 24-year-old. She arrived at her new home in a village in Jharkhand a year ago and has proved indispensable ever since. She "floats and shimmers," as Bertie Wooster would say, and she always seems to have everything just when it is needed. Whether to walk the dog or to cover for the cook who took an unexpected day off, but perhaps her most prized skill is in the household: her ability to make *dosas*.

My brother's Punjabi wife, true to her lineage, loves her *kulhi* *dosa* and *sambhar*. Their two children have also inherited these taste buds. So a *dosa* dinner is as popular, perhaps even more so, than *sushi* night or *pasta* parties, since *dosas* are an unequivocal favourite with

every member of the family. Knowing this, I offered to treat them to *dosas* during a recent visit. Along with homemade *dill-poddi* and *sambhar*, where the whole spices and coconut are freshly roasted (*varutha*) and ground (*aracha*). During dinner I hovered for a bit in the kitchen. I assumed Dulari could use some help in producing *dosas* to match their rapid rate of consumption. I was surprised to find she had no trouble at all and was efficiently turning out two kinds – millet (*brown-walla*) and standard (*ajafal-walla*). I happily returned to the dinner table and enjoyed both the food and the compliments.

The following day I observed that Dulari and the day staff were warming up leffers and planning a *dosa* feast of their own. I asked Dulari whether she liked eating *dosa*. Imagine my surprise when she not only said yes but also that it was regularly made in her home in a remote village in Jharkhand! Extremely intrigued, I asked how this came to be. Her answer was even more surprising. She said it was a customary

practice there and that during festivals and special days, *dosas* were served in all the houses! The batter was made the traditional way, by hand and in stone grinders. Accompaniments, though, were more local, in lieu of the ubiquitous *chutney* and *sambhar* of the South.

Dulari was unable to provide further clues for this amazing cultural diffusion. Across thousands of kilometres and India's hinterland, where the pace and rhythm of life is so much more closely tied to immediate environs.

This heartwarming tale is a delectable example of the marvel of India's melting pot. Which naturally absorbs and quietly integrates. But equally thrilling is the fascinating story of migration and assimilation. How did this humble South Indian crepe reach and blend into a culture so far removed from its birthplace? Who was the person who first began making *dosas* in Dulari's village? How did it then become an integral part of its local cuisine? This is food lore worth chasing. And it will make for another captivating chronicle.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A boost for livestock farmers

I refer to Cabinet okaying supply of generic veterinary medicines to farmers (Mar 6). This move is a significant step forward, as livestock rearing is an essential part of livelihoods in Indian villages. However, rapid urbanisation and limited access to healthcare for livestock have led many farmers to abandon this practice altogether, affecting not only their livelihoods but also the economy as a whole. The Pashu Aushadhi scheme, part of the Livestock Health and Disease Control Programme (LHDPC), will provide

preventive healthcare for livestock, encouraging more farmers to take up rearing. Making generic medicines available through the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samridhi Kendras and co-operatives is a commendable initiative that will help prevent livestock diseases, improve productivity, and support the economy. The doorstep delivery of livestock healthcare services is particularly welcome, as it will enable farmers to focus on rearing livestock.

Raghavendra A. Bengaluru

Fare hike regressive

Appropriately 'Pollution level spikes as metro use dips' (Mar 5). The recent hike in Metro fares has not only imposed a financial burden on commuters but also had undesirable consequences for pollution levels, affecting the entire city. The exorbitant fare increase has forced commuters to rely on private vehicles, significantly adding to air pollutants and

Recharge groundwater

The depletion of groundwater is alarming, and urgent action is necessary to replenish it. A crucial first step is to promote rainwater harvesting as a mass movement, conserving this precious resource while simultaneously reducing waste. We must adopt a mission-mode approach to tackle this impending crisis effectively.

V Padmanabhan, Bengaluru

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



FIRST COLUMN

THE RISE OF EU-INDIA DIGITAL COOPERATION

The EU and India are strengthening ties in digital governance, AI and semiconductor resilience



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

Even as President Trump of the USA was busy being the world's most popular content creator, the global forces were turning the gears of a strategic realignment. After the televised, admonishment of Ukrainian President Zelensky by US President Trump and his VP JD Vance, the former was seen with several leaders of the European Union. As the case may be European leaders didn't have much to offer to Ukraine, except a subtle message to make peace with the US President. It may be a matter of time, before, Ukrainian President Zelensky has to evacuate his bunker office in Kyiv and perhaps make way for a more, current US head of state worldview representative. The message for the world was clear, the US would no longer be happy to bankroll, what it considers vague political narratives, potentially considered to be the hallmark of a free liberal world order. This world order, incidentally a post-World War creation, by the US, ensured free fair open markets, meant for the prosperity of all. What this free world order has achieved in the past many decades can be debated, however, it has ensured the US retains its supremacy in the economic prosperity index and so have many of the aligned nations including India (since the 1990s). Just before the US and Ukraine visible split, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen led a large delegation of senior ministers to Delhi to re-establish the high-level EU India Trade and Technology Council conversations. Given the current geo-political landscape, one of the major focus areas was Digital Economy and Governance.

The European Union (EU) and India reaffirmed their commitment to deepening digital cooperation, emphasising shared values through their Working Group 1 on Strategic Technologies, Digital Governance, and Digital Connectivity. Both sides pledged to accelerate human-centric



digital transformation and advance key technologies, including AI, semiconductors, High-Performance Computing and 6G, to benefit both economies and societies. The two parties agreed to enhance research and innovation to improve competitiveness and economic security while promoting a cyber-secure global digital ecosystem. They also stressed the importance of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) in fostering inclusive digital economies. Both sides committed to ensuring interoperability between their respective DPis, safeguarding human rights, and protecting personal data and intellectual property. They also discussed mutual recognition of e-signatures to facilitate cross-border digital transactions.

On semiconductor collaboration, the EU and India focused on strengthening the resilience of supply chains and expanding joint research in areas such as chip design and sustainable technologies. The two sides underscored their shared commitment to the responsible development of AI, agreeing to further cooperation through joint projects and the development of frameworks for ethical AI. They also plan to enhance cooperation on large language models and AI applications in sectors like climate change and bioinformatics. They also committed to implementing the Global Digital Compact, which was endorsed at the UN General Assembly in September 2024, and ensuring continued global support for multi-stakeholder internet governance at the upcoming World Summit on Information Society +20. It may be the right click for both the EU and India. The EU and India are seizing the opportunity to strengthen their digital and technological ties. Their renewed partnership signals a commitment to fostering a resilient, secure, and inclusive digital future, underpinned by shared values and mutual economic interests. As old alliances shift, new partnerships may define the contours of the evolving world order.

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

Namaste at Oscars: Indian cinema has arrived



CHAITANYA K. PRASAD

Indian storytelling captivates and inspire audiences worldwide. With the right strategy, this moment can shape the future of Indian cinema



The Namaste at the Oscars 2025 has reinforced the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: "The world is one family," a vision that transcends borders yet thrives on respect, mutual interdependence and a shared spirit of creativity. This symbolic gesture was not merely a greeting but a powerful moment of inclusivity, reflecting cinema's unique ability to bring together artists, audiences and creators from across the globe.

This moment at the Academy Awards highlights how soft power is no longer confined to diplomacy alone; it now permeates events, institutions, and cultural exchanges. Cinema, often regarded as the perfect brand platform for fostering relationships, stood at the centre of this phenomenon.

The Namaste was a gateway, introducing the legacy of Indian storytelling to a diverse global audience and reinforcing the deep cultural interconnect between nations through the lens of cinema.

Beyond its immediate impact, this gesture has set the stage for the future of the Oscars and similar global platforms. It paves the way for cultural ethos to play a larger role in how nations and their creative industries collaborate and connect.

A simple, well-timed Namaste has given Incredible India a renewed global identity, transforming its participation in world cinema from occasional recognition to strategic influence.

Conan O'Brien's decision to open the Oscars with Namaste was not accidental. It was a statement, an acknowledgement that Indian cinema is no longer at the periphery of global storytelling. This was not a token mention of India, nor was it a cursory reference to its billion-strong audience.

This was a recognition of India's growing cinematic legacy and influence. India has long been part of Oscar history, but often through an external gaze. Films like Gandhi (1982) won big, Lagaan (2001)



A SIMPLE, WELL-TIMED NAMASTE HAS GIVEN INCREDIBLE INDIA A RENEWED GLOBAL IDENTITY, TRANSFORMING ITS PARTICIPATION IN WORLD CINEMA FROM OCCASIONAL RECOGNITION TO STRATEGIC INFLUENCE.

came close, and Slumdog Millionaire (2008) swept the Academy Awards, yet these narratives were largely shaped by Western filmmakers. The paradigm began to shift with R (2022), which not only won an Oscar for Natu Naatu but also forced global audiences to acknowledge the unapologetic, high-energy storytelling of Indian filmmakers.

This shift was further cemented when Payal Kapadia's All We Imagine as Light (2024) won the Grand Prix at Cannes, a rare honour for Indian cinema. Films like Chaitanya Tamhane's The Disciple (2020), Rima Das's Village Rockstars (2017), and Nandita Das's Manto (2018) have been steadily breaking barriers, proving that Indian cinema is no longer defined by stereotypes but by diverse, powerful narratives. The power of this Namaste must be harnessed beyond the Oscars. As India gears up for Cannes 2025, this moment should serve as a launching pad for stronger positioning. India's representation at global film festivals must be strategic, ensuring that films sent to these platforms reflect the depth, diversity, and dynamism of Indian storytelling.

The Cannes Film Festival has already been a crucial stepping stone for Indian cinema. From Neecha Nagar (1946) winning the Palme d'Or to Masan (2015) winning the UN Certain Regard prize, India's legacy at Cannes has been long-standing. However, now is the time to transition from isolated wins to sustained influence.

The government and industry stakeholders must work together to ensure that Indian cinema is

not just participating but actively shaping the conversation. One powerful example of how such moments create ripples is Life of Pi (2012). When director Ang Lee won the Oscar for Best Director, he greeted the audience with a Namaste, acknowledging the deep Indian cultural influence on the film.

That moment reinforced India's storytelling traditions, but the Namaste at the Oscars 2025 is even more significant; it wasn't just about one film, it was about the entire Indian cinematic movement. India must now leverage this momentum through platforms like WAVES, the country's film export initiative. WAVES has the potential to push Indian cinema into untapped markets, ensuring that films from independent, regional, and mainstream creators reach wider international audiences.

By riding the wave of this Namaste moment, WAVES can position Indian cinema not just as entertainment, but as a formidable cultural force. Strategic collaborations, international distribution networks, and dedicated Oscar campaigns must now be part of the plan.

If South Korea could orchestrate a global push for Parasite (2019), resulting in its historic Oscar win, India must now do the same, systematically pushing its best films into the international awards circuit.

This is not just about recognition; it's about claiming a rightful place in world cinema. The Namaste at the Oscars 2025 should serve as a wake-up call, a reminder that Indian cinema has evolved from

a land of fantasy to a nation of action. It is no longer a question of whether Indian films will win the Oscar; it is now a matter of when and how often. India is no longer a guest at the global film table—it is a host, a creator, and an influencer.

The Namaste was not just a greeting; it was an invitation for the world to recognise Indian cinema's true potential. The time to capitalise on this moment is now. With the right vision and action, this could be the defining decade when Indian cinema not only participates in global storytelling but leads it.

The world has acknowledged India. Now, Indian cinema must ensure that every frame, every story, and every festival presence echoes the power of that Namaste. The Namaste at the Oscars 2025 was more than a greeting—it was a defining moment for Indian cinema on the global stage. It symbolised India's growing influence in storytelling, marking a shift from sporadic recognition to strategic presence. To sustain this momentum,

India must leverage platforms like WAVES, push for global collaborations, and ensure strong representation at festivals. The world has acknowledged India's cinematic potential; now, it is time for Indian cinema to lead. With the right strategy, this moment can shape the future, ensuring that Indian storytelling continues to captivate and inspire audiences worldwide.

(The writer is former civil servant writes on cinema and strategic communication. Inputs provided by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavi Srinivasan)

Ganges dolphin resurfaces in Charikadia river after 25 years

The conservation of the Gangetic dolphin is not just about protecting a single species; it is intrinsically linked to keeping the Ganga clean

The recent sighting of the endangered Ganges dolphin (Platanista gangetica) in Assam's Charikadia River at Dhakukhanna, Lakhimpur district, has sparked immense interest. Locally known as Silu, this marks the first recorded presence of the species in the river since 1998, ending a 25-year absence. The prolonged disappearance of the Ganges dolphin from this waterway had fueled concerns over its dwindling numbers and possible extinction. The disappearance of the species from the Charikadia River has been attributed to several factors, including hunting, habitat destruction, and depletion of food sources. Historically, Ganges dolphins thrived across major river systems



RAJESH KUMAR SINGH

in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, including the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna and Karapoti-Sangu river systems. However, their population has now become fragmented, with significant numbers surviving only in isolated sections of these river systems. The Ganges dolphin is a unique freshwater species that is functionally blind and relies

on echolocation to hunt. Despite its remarkable adaptations, the species faces severe threats, primarily due to habitat degradation from large-scale development projects, including dam construction, drainage works, and embankments.

Pollution further exacerbates the risks to their survival. Recognizing the urgent need for conservation, India has taken steps to protect the Ganges dolphin. The National Ganga Dolphin Research Centre (NGDRC), the country's first dedicated research facility for this species, was inaugurated on March 4, 2024, in Patna, Bihar. Located on the Patna University campus, near the Ganges River, the center spans 4,400 square meters and aims to conduct in-depth research

on dolphin behavior, survival, and threats.

It also provides training to fishermen, equipping them with conservation techniques to protect dolphins during fishing activities. Despite conservation efforts, human infrastructure projects continue to pose significant challenges. The collapse of a four-lane bridge under construction over the Ganga River at Sultanganj, Agartala in Bihar for the third time has drawn attention to the environmental impact of such developments. In 1990, the Bihar government declared a 60-km stretch of the Ganga River from Sultanganj to Kahlagona as the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary, aiming to protect the species while promoting eco-tourism. Recognizing the ecological



significance of the Ganges dolphin, the Government of India designated it as the national aquatic animal in October 2009 during the inaugural meeting of the National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA), chaired by then-Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. The Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary currently hosts approximately 250 dolphins, frequently observed between Shankar Talkies and

Manik Sarkar Ghat. While government agencies have made efforts to protect the species, conservationists emphasize that illegal sand mining must be curbed to ensure its survival. Large-scale sand extraction disrupts river ecosystems by altering water flow and destroying the dolphins' habitat and food sources, such as small fish. Mechanized sand mining further exacerbates environmental damage, creating deep trenches that negatively impact

river health. Experts warn that unless illegal activities are controlled, the already fragile dolphin population will continue to decline. On a more optimistic note, Union Water Resources Minister C.R. Patil has stated that the Namami Ganga Mission—a large-scale initiative aimed at rejuvenating the Ganga—has contributed to a rise in the dolphin population. Experts view this as an encouraging sign of improving environmental conditions. According to the Wildlife Institute of India, approximately 4,000 Gangetic dolphins currently inhabit the Ganga and its tributaries, with nearly 2,000 residing in Uttar Pradesh alone. In response, the Uttar Pradesh government has introduced a tourism policy designating a dolphin sanctuary

within the Chambal Sanctuary to bolster conservation efforts. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's launch of Project Dolphin has significantly increased public awareness of the species. This initiative strengthens conservation measures while promoting the ecological health of the Ganga River. Further emphasizing its commitment to protecting the species, the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife has designated October 5 as National Dolphin Day. With increasing awareness and conservation initiatives, there is renewed hope that these remarkable creatures will continue to thrive in their natural habitat.

(The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)

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PAPER WITH PASSION

A game changer

The strengthening of EU-India ties offers a promising path towards stability, prosperity and technological advancement

The European Union's outreach to India has gained significant momentum, marking a new chapter in their strategic relationship. In the wake of global disruptions, including the shifting stance of the United States under Donald Trump characterised by tariffs, the withdrawal of support for Ukraine, and disengagement from Gaza—the strengthening of EU-India ties emerges as a stabilising force in global geopolitics. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's recent visit to India underscores the EU's commitment to deepening ties with New Delhi. Meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Hyderabad House, von der Leyen expressed the EU's high regard for India as a partner. She emphasised that as the two enter the third decade of their strategic partnership, "the best is yet to come." This sentiment reflects the EU's vision of India as a key player in shaping global economic and political landscapes. A focal point of their discussions was the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a crucial initiative aimed at boosting connectivity, trade and energy cooperation.



Given the evolving geopolitical dynamics, this corridor could serve as a counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative, ensuring a more diversified and resilient global supply chain. A significant highlight of the India-EU partnership is its deepening engagement in digital and technological arenas. With India emerging as a technological powerhouse and the EU striving for digital sovereignty, collaboration in these areas can create a formidable synergy. The EU's focus on clean energy aligns with India's ambitious renewable energy goals. Such initiatives can help India and the EU lead the global transition towards a sustainable future. Beyond technology and energy, trade remains a cornerstone of EU-India ties. Both sides are actively negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that could unlock significant economic potential. The EU is India's second-largest trading partner and a comprehensive trade agreement would not only boost exports but also enhance supply chain resilience, particularly in a world grappling with economic volatility. With Trump's protectionist policies disrupting global trade, an EU-India trade pact could serve as a counterweight, ensuring that both economies remain competitive and open to global commerce. The collaboration on supply chain resilience will also be crucial in mitigating risks associated with overdependence on specific markets. With Trump's policies creating uncertainty in trans-Atlantic relations and global trade, the EU's pivot towards India reflects a strategic recalibration. The EU recognises India's growing role as a stabilising force in global affairs—both as a democratic counterweight to authoritarian regimes and as a crucial player in maintaining a rules-based international order. The EU-India partnership stands at a defining moment. With digital collaboration, green energy initiatives, and robust trade negotiations at the forefront, this relationship could reshape global economic and political alignments.

EU lead the global transition towards a sustainable future. Beyond technology and energy, trade remains a cornerstone of EU-India ties. Both sides are actively negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that could unlock significant economic potential. The EU is India's second-largest trading partner and a comprehensive trade agreement would not only boost exports but also enhance supply chain resilience, particularly in a world grappling with economic volatility. With Trump's protectionist policies disrupting global trade, an EU-India trade pact could serve as a counterweight, ensuring that both economies remain competitive and open to global commerce. The collaboration on supply chain resilience will also be crucial in mitigating risks associated with overdependence on specific markets. With Trump's policies creating uncertainty in trans-Atlantic relations and global trade, the EU's pivot towards India reflects a strategic recalibration. The EU recognises India's growing role as a stabilising force in global affairs—both as a democratic counterweight to authoritarian regimes and as a crucial player in maintaining a rules-based international order. The EU-India partnership stands at a defining moment. With digital collaboration, green energy initiatives, and robust trade negotiations at the forefront, this relationship could reshape global economic and political alignments.

PICTALK



An Indian myna perches on a red silk-cotton tree (Bombax ceiba), in Nadia

When no solution is the only solution

Whether due to ego or rivalry, certain disputes become intractable, spanning generations. The irony is that winning does not always make one a winner



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

One of the bigger challenges in life is to find an answer to a question dealing with life itself. The glib belief is that every problem has a solution. A wise-crack has rightly commented that every problem has a solution but the solution creates a problem of its own. If it were a simple, straightforward dimension, such as that, there would be nothing to worry about because problems and solutions would be in a dyadic relationship.

The problem arises when a problem is not solvable because two sides want a solution on their terms or indeed have no solution at all. This need not necessarily be an act of mischief, but it may be a simple case of jealousy/envy or indeed a bitter competitiveness that brooks no solution at all. The first exposure to such an intractable jungle-like situation today is that the two parties concerned themselves do not see a solution worth pursuing. This may be because of many reasons, one of them being that the person concerned may genuinely believe he has an upper hand and that he is not going to lose that advantage. Very often, this gets intertwined with ego, worth, or dislike.

If there are stakeholders beyond this, of a variety which see an advantage in the continuing parties being maintained as contending parties, or there is a personal dislike between the two people concerned, then also a solution becomes well-nigh impossible. Thus, it is that certain problems have subsisted beyond generations and led to devastating wars which ultimately wiped out both parties, and there was nothing for the winner to take away at all. The story of the Mahabharata is a telltale story of the winners ultimately having nothing to gain, at least for the generation in play. In more recent times, World War I and World War II did not produce any obvious winners, and the world went



back to a full circle. The better-known cases of history have similar dots on a lesser scale and indeed, this can be true also in personal lives.

The long and short of it is, it takes more than a 'win' to become a winner. At a different scale altogether, personal dislikes and prejudices can be so large that one adopts an attitude where one concludes that, irrespective of the nuances, one will simply not work towards a solution. Here again, the resolution of the conflict becomes difficult. Hence, it is a fortunate situation where both sides want a situation of solution and therefore are open to it. This is so often a given in this set of circumstances that to pray for it would be to hope for the near impossible.

To expect divine grace to sort out the situation may be the only route forward. Other factors prevent a meaningful resolution of a conflict, one being a gender dimension and another as sibling rivalry. Be that as it

may, it is necessary to recognise that no conflict can be eternal either. While it is true that generations have transferred the conflict from one to another, the nature of the conflict itself became an impediment to solutions, and if nothing else, the ego factor may become a primary determinant of the way forward. Under such circumstances, the generational transformation of the rivals involved alters the nature of the solution that is feasible. Indeed, no solution is feasible unless it is doable and sustainable. People often align together because of their own needs and then find arguments to sustain their position. In many cases, logic gives way to simple impulses and a non-thinking solution takes hold of the operationally powerful. The operationally powerful impose their solution, and the predictable happens. The flawed solution is subverted by the party whose basic need for advantage

flowing out of the conflict was not met. Under such circumstances, it may be useful to suspend the conflict and learn to live with it rather than solve the problem. Avoiding a problem or indeed learning to live with it may at times be a solution. This can follow many routes including not letting the problem escalate.

The enigmatic context is that very often, as the needs of the combatants change, the search for solutions also becomes elusive. This is because one has no use for "the solutions". The times have changed, and the solutions are passive because there is nothing left to enjoy in becoming a winner. It is therefore important to realise, in many cases, that a solution is only a solution if it makes winners of all concerned. However, that may be another matter altogether.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BLUE ECONOMY NEEDS PROTECTION

Madam—Kudos for 'Balancing growth and conservation' (March 6) for highlighting the most sensitive issue of conservation at Kerala's Quilon fish bank. This is only one of the several aspects of conservation, and its ignorance has a massive, devastating effect on the blue economy and fishing community. Fifty-six per cent of our coastal population is directly and indirectly dependent on the blue economy. The conservation aspect of sustainable growth and development has long been ignored by the policymakers. The political ecosystem is insensitive to conservation. In fact, extensive conservation projects need to be conceived and implemented on all river fronts, particularly in the hilly areas. In the absence of geological studies and research and conservation, mass destruction of life and property in hills is caused by torrential rains and floods.

Several rivers are disappearing fast, causing mass annihilation of flora and fauna as well as cultivation. The Geological Survey of India should carry out wide-ranging and widespread surveys and research in hills, riverbeds, and coastal regions to ascertain and fetch fresh data. The Archaeological Survey of India should engage conservation architects for carrying out conservation of excavation sites, historic places and buildings, ancient temples, river fronts, and coastal regions. Against all beliefs and perceptions, the conservation projects are potential employers and sources of revenue. Unfortunately, our engineering colleges are producing fewer conservation architects. Urban development is incomplete without conservation. Oceanic studies and research institutions should be established in all potential regions for sustainable growth and development.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

US IMPOSES HEAVY TARIFF

Madam—US President Trump launched trade war against America's three biggest trade partners, drawing immediate retal-

PM Modi inaugurates Vantara



The recent visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the inauguration of Vantara - Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre in Gujarat's Jamnagar has hit the headlines with heart warming pictures of the PM spending happy moments with the animals there. Spread over 3,000 acres, Vantara—a brain child of Anant Ambani of the Reliance group—is all set to become the world's largest zoo and

rehabilitation centre. The world class rehabilitation centre is equipped with modern veterinary technology, including ICU, MRI, CT scan, X-ray, dialysis, ultrasound and endoscopy units, besides research institutions and academic hubs. Vantara, which received the prestigious 'Prani Mitra' national award focusses on rescue, rehabilitation and protection of animals globally. The facility has through its various operations rescued abused, injured and endangered animals from different parts of the globe. The rehabilitation center has been designed to recreate a natural and nurturing environment akin to the lush habitats from which the rescued animals had come from.

M Pradyu | Kannur

proceedings against US at the WTO on the additional tariffs. Trump's new tariff Imposition will certainly rattle financial markets, raising concern about renewal inflation and business uncertainty in US and abroad.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

CONG LEADER COURTS CONTROVERSY

Madam—Congress spokesperson Sharma Mohamed stirred controversy by calling Rohit Sharma 'fat for a sportsman' and the "most unimpressive" captain India has had. Congress is already losing deposits and the recent debacle at Delhi elections proved their worth and the high command must have decent control over the cadres by teaching them how to talk on a public platform. In a historic achievement, India captain Rohit has become the first captain to lead his team to the final in all four major Men's ICC tournaments.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

A parent's reflection on society and the next generation

I was raised with the values of respect, resilience and financial prudence principles. yet, I sometimes wonder if these values still carry the same significance



SANJAY CHANDRA

I was born in a middle-class family 66 years back, less than 12 years after independence. My father was an engineer in a state government department. I came across my mother's diary a few years back. She had spent her life painstakingly balancing a low government income against the rising expenses of bringing up three children. My parents inculcated in us the value of money.

Another value that was deeply ingrained into our psyche by my parents was to respect everyone. I was taught that relationships were more important. A look of reproach from my mother was enough for me to realise my mistake if I was disrespectful.

This is what I tried to pass on to my children. I often look at them with pride. Having lived a better part of my life trying to hold on to these values, I now find myself at crossroads. Rapid urbanisation has resulted in concentration of bigger population in apartments. Technology has evolved like never before to provide faster modes of communication. Society WhatsApp group is unfortunately used by a few people at the expense of har-



monious relationships.

Recently, I found myself at the receiving end of a vitriolic diatribe. My fault was that I had taken the initiative of organising a cultural and literature festival.

I sincerely believe that our youngsters need more exposure to the arts to navigate an increasingly fast-paced and more stressful world than what we grew up in. The language used by a few of these persons, who have claimed to be my good friends and neighbours over the past eight years, left me nonplussed at best and painfully hurt at worst. It should not have surprised me. These very people have been habitually doing the same followed by profuse apologies as it suits them. It just seems expedient to them in the murky world of society

politics. It does not matter to them if their actions are derogatory.

The condominium seems to be mirroring the happenings beyond the residential complex. I am left wondering that politics and religion, the two factors that should create a unified society, are used to divide.

It is at times like these that I start doubting the values inculcated by my parents, and that in turn, I expect my children to follow. I talked to many other residents working with me for the festival. They were also indignant and sad about the way things were turning out to be.

They had their own stories to narrate. One lady was rudely told to curb her flair for taking good initiative. Another lady was left with only four

other friends when it was time to pitch in. The majority suffers in silence at the hands of the minority. It made me rethink if our parents were wrong in turning us what many may call timid to suffer mental anguish. I also debated if we passed the right values to our children.

We were unanimous in our shared belief. I derived strength as I looked around, and talked to these parents, many of whom were younger. We have been right in teaching our children to be better humans.

Our children are better than us. They are putting the same technology to better use. 'Me Too, Girls' Right to Education, Let's Talk, Good Touch Bad Touch are only a few of the initiatives that they are pursuing with single-minded devotion to make this a better world. I am confident that they will set better examples for the next generations to raise their voices and not suffer in silence against the bullies.

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

DECCAN Chronicle

7 MARCH 2025

Delimitation row: Focus on population goals too

The demand made by an all-party meeting the Tamil Nadu government had called on Wednesday of a status quo on the distribution of Lok Sabha seats to states based on the 1971 census for the next 30 years calls for debating the relationship between delimitation and national goals with respect to population control. The meeting also asked the Union government to introduce an amendment to the Constitution this effect.

As per the Constitution, the next delimitation exercise would be based on data derived from the census held after 2026. But if the demand of the Tamil Nadu parties is to be fulfilled, it will be based on 1971 data, which means the same data would then go on and remain in effect for 55 years. It may be remembered that the decision to freeze the calculations for 25 years on the 1971 census was taken in 1976 and extended later in 2001 as a "motivational measure" to enable state governments to pursue the agenda for population stabilisation.

The critical question the country must ponder while taking up the topic of delimitation is population stabilisation and the attendant issues. The fact is that while several states have gone far in their efforts and top all performance charts based on human development indices, some keep lagging.

Equally important is bringing the focus back on rolling out a national programme that can help the poor performers control their population growth. It will not be a Herculean task...

The cumulative result is a big disparity in quality of life — those with less population make rapid progress in their HDI indices and vice-versa. Now, ironically, successful states will have lesser say in defining national goals while the laggards will enjoy more political power.

The Constitution mandates that the number of seats in the Lok Sabha be decided "in such manner that the ratio between that number and the population of the state is, so far as practicable, the same for all states". It is very natural that there will be an unacceptable anomaly in that ratio when the population figure is frozen on the 1971 data when the states show huge disparities in their rate of population growth.

These two issues must be addressed in tandem if the solution to this difficult situation is to be found in the spirit of democracy. Population growth is a product of a range of factors including health, education, cultural background and historical trends. Of them, governments can make a direct intervention in education and health which can have an immediate impact. A piece of data will illustrate this better: female literacy in Rajasthan, which has registered a high rate of population growth over the last 50 years, is 52 per cent while in Tamil Nadu it's 73.

But leaders may yet reach a consensus on arriving at a formula for seat distribution which factors in the surge in population without asking those who have stabilised their population to pay the price. Equally important is bringing the focus back on rolling out a national programme that can help the poor performers control their population growth. It will not be a Herculean task since we have successful models within the country itself. A time-bound result-oriented plan for major governmental intervention in health and education would be a reasonable first step.

RBI cautious amid uncertainties

The Reserve Bank of India's announcement to inject nearly ₹1.9 lakh crore into the banking system in March, in addition to ₹1.7 lakh crores that it infused in February as part of its liquidity-enhancing measures, reflects its concerns about global economic uncertainties.

By the end of every financial year, the economy witnesses a liquidity crunch in view of the advance payment of taxes by companies and banks racing to meet their annual lending targets. While the RBI injected ₹1.9 lakh crores through open market operations and forex swaps last March, too, this year's infusion appears extraordinary as it comes merely a month after it injected ₹1.7 lakh crores in view of tighter liquidity in the system.

These measures are expected to provide additional liquidity in anticipation of tight financial conditions towards the end of the fiscal year. 'Tax outflows and banks' efforts to meet lending targets had raised concerns over a liquidity crunch, prompting the RBI to step in. The central bank stated that it would "continue to monitor evolving liquidity and market conditions and take measures as appropriate to ensure orderly liquidity conditions".

According to analysts, the dual moves will result in an excess liquidity of ₹1.2 lakh crores by the end of March, unless the RBI intervenes in the forex market by defending rupee by selling the US dollars. Apart from addressing the liquidity concerns, these measures will also support the economic system from the impact of the global monetary headwinds.

RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra also postponed the implementation of New Liquidity Coverage Ratio (LCR) and project financing norms by a year, deferring them to March 31, 2026. Without the postponement, banks would have had to park ₹4 lakh crores into government bonds, severely restricting their ability to lend corporates and individuals and creating an enormous liquidity crunch in the economy.

Subhani



Shoring up India's flagging growth: Key govt challenge



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

The main challenge before the Narendra Modi government is how to balance the onerous investment and institutional demands of high growth, without risking a political blow-back. The story thus far, is of a generous government like a "river of wealth" available for its subjects with a consistent, if shallow, growth strategy, based on allocating existing resources rather than unearthing new fiscal resources.

Going forward, non-tax revenue must expand significantly — including via privatisation of government companies, sale of government assets and the flab in government's welfare schemes cut to size, at the risk of annoying key voter bases. Consider that US President Donald Trump can unleash the ravages of DOGE to streamline government expenditure and finances because he has just a four-year term. This is a difficult option for any government which hopes to remain in power over decades.

To be fair, Prime Minister Modi's government has harnessed tax revenue well. But it is also super-efficient at handling the 2022 paper by Bhalla, Bhassin and Virmani credits them with reducing extreme poverty to a marginal level of one per cent of the population at a poverty line of PPP \$1.90 per day per person. The World Bank estimates, that based on a \$2.15 per day poverty line, 12.9 per cent were poor in 2021. There is no official count of the poor in India, after 2012, because the 2018 census was unacceptable to the government.

Doles reduce poverty significantly: The primary mechanism behind this sharp drop in poverty is providing free food to 800 million people, or more than half the population. Other measures include special cash transfers for

women, farmers and the aged. Alongside, the public health system works free or at rock-bottom charges, a bare bones free health insurance scheme is also available, enabling access to the burgeoning private health facilities across the value chain from clinics to small hospitals to multi-specialty wellness centres and hospitals. Add to this, free or cheap electricity and water supply for small customers and farmers and the glass of freebies is over full.

Efficient welfare delivery creates fiscal room for investment: Updating poverty estimates is critical for streamlining the efficiency with which doles are conceived and transferred. Forensic auditing of welfare schemes can determine which schemes are necessary to keep the bottom 10 per cent by income, above the poverty line, and the rest of the population to implement a strategy to weed out beneficiaries as they become better off. Second, a backstop strategy for the next 20 per cent who have graduated from poverty is necessary to stop them from being sucked back again.

Families relapse into poverty quite often. The sudden loss of a job/income, the loss of a family member, or the wage earner falling seriously ill or his/her demise, or poor leadership within the family, results in inability to keep kids in school, fruitfully engaged in learning, or well-fed and socialised. Specific public support systems range from direct cash grants, which kick in when a red flag is raised, to community support schemes mixing the public financial support to ensure protection for families when natural, medical or personal disasters strike.

Decentralised welfare and management: A pertinent issue is who should be the prime mover for overseeing the broad spec-

Shun the temptation to leverage public resources via borrowing. Favour conservative budgeting, as expected from state governments, to deal with implementation issues, identified by digital monitoring.

trum of social welfare. It is an aberration of the Indian institutional system that the Union government plays a large role in these services, getting envisaged that the states, and not the Union government, are responsible for social welfare measures. Since the Union government is fiscally dominant in India, it has traditional gone well beyond its core sovereign mandate — defence, diplomacy, fiscal management, internal security, regulating nuclear services, getting environmental policy and national standards and management of major minerals.

It is also true that state governments, in general, have not been efficient at tax collection or in managing public allocation efficiently. Examples abound of their inefficiency. Property tax collections are one-fifth of global comparators even if property prices have soared. They have not made agriculture a state subject — globally competitive nor do they tax income from agriculture. Most states are unable to get their electricity distribution and water supply utilities to meet their expenses by charging normative cost-based charges. Some states have been fiscally irresponsible by reverting, in a series of the fiscally ruinous "defined benefit" pension schemes implemented in 2004. The former benefits employees but imposes higher costs on the government budget.

GDP growth higher than comparators: GDP growth in real terms during the third quarter (October-December) of this fiscal, at 6.2 per cent, is higher than the average of the first two quarters. The

IMF (January 2025 update) estimates annual growth in India this fiscal at 6.5 per cent. This implies a required growth rate of about 7.7 per cent during the final quarter, on the back of high growth of 7.3 per cent in the fourth year of the previous fiscal. But that was before Trumpian global disruptions, major downturns in global stock markets, including in India, and uncertain expectations for global inflation.

On a relative basis, an annual real GDP growth of 6.25 to 6.5 per cent is a positive outcome, given that the IMF anticipates global growth at 3.3 per cent and growth in emerging and developing Asia — the fastest growing segment — at 5.2 per cent. The dissatisfaction, if any, is versus India's own medium term growth expectations.

Increasing global uncertainties will have to be managed in real time. The only way the government can be prepared is to remain fiscally prudent. Reducing the fiscal deficit below the 4.5 per cent target for 2025-26 and below the 4 per cent of GDP assured by 2026-27 would reaffirm fiscal responsibility.

Keep resources in reserve to manage uncertainty: Shun the temptation to leverage public resources via borrowing. Favour conservative budgeting, as expected from state governments, to deal with implementation inefficiencies, identified by digital monitoring. Bravado, like assuming that inflation is under control today, is a foundation at misstep. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have withdrawn about \$3 trillion from the Indian stock markets valued at about \$384 trillion, or 110 per cent of GDP, over the past six months, spooked by strengthening dollar and inflation impact of global uncertainty on India. Prime Minister Modi's signature commitment in 2014 was that his would be a "report card" based government. To score higher grades and avoid "under shooting" build high margins into targets. We are not there yet.

The writer is a former IAS officer, and a governance and economic regulation expert

LETTERS CHASE MASTER

Congratulations to the Men in Blue, especially the chase master, Virat Kohli, who stitched vital partnerships with Shreyas Iyer, Axer Patel and KL Rahul to take Team India to the Champions Trophy final. Credit should also go to our bowlers, who, after their initial inability to halt Head, were able to restrict the Australian total to 264. Ironically, Rohit Sharma, after the initial blurt, threw away his wicket to put pressure on our middle order batsmen, who came to the party at Dubai in chasing a tricky target.

N. Mahadevan
Chennai

TRUMP'S TRADE WAR

The trade war unleashed by US President Donald Trump is not limited to China or Canada or Mexico. Mr. Trump's announcement of reciprocal tariffs, with the US to charge the same duty on imports that the exporting countries levy on goods from America, will affect virtually every country with which the US trades, both as a goods importer and exporter. With the US increasingly cutting itself off from imports, it has heightened the prospect of higher inflation, a rise in interest rates, and higher capital outflows from emerging market countries such as India. However, the massive global disruption that unfolds now is an opportune moment for India to establish itself as a reliable global trade partner with a focus on encouraging exporters to explore new markets.

M. Jeyaram
Sholavandan

HEINOUS ACT

Words are not sufficient to condemn the incident of kidnapping of a truck driver and conductor and the gruesome murder of one of them by alleged cow vigilantes in Punjab, Haryana, on suspicion of cow smuggling. This is the latest event in a series of well-orchestrated attacks by anti-social hooligans masquerading as moral and cultural vigilantes. What is disturbing is fact that the trend fails to evoke strong response from the public. The audacity with which the perpetrators committed the crime reveals their scant regard for the law coupled with the intention to disrupt communal harmony. As rightly said by the renowned humanist, Albert Einstein: "The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil; but by those who watch them without doing anything."

B.Suresh Kumar
Coimbatore

Mail your letters to chennai@deccanmail.com

Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu

Throwing the book at Buch! Old case, but new questions

Well, here's a financial thriller twist no one saw coming — a Mumbai court has ordered an FIR against former Sebi chief Madhavi Puri Buch over alleged regulatory lapses in case that dates back to 1994! Talk about digging deep.

But this isn't just about an old IPO listing. Ms Buch has been in the limelight recently for all the wrong reasons. First, Hindenburg Research alleged that she and her husband held stakes in offshore entities linked to the Adani Group — raising questions about whether Sebi's investigations into the conglomerate were truly independent. She called the allegations baseless.

Then came fresh political heat. The Congress claimed Ms Buch earned rental income from a company under Sebi's scrutiny while still benefiting from ICICI Bank stock options long after leaving the bank. ICICI quickly denied making any payments beyond standard retirement benefits.

And even inside Sebi, things weren't exactly smooth sailing. Reports suggest that towards the end of her tenure, employees staged protests over "unfair work practices", and when she left, there was no farewell — just the door.

So, is this FIR a long-overdue reckoning or a convenient distraction? Why unearth a 30-year-old case now? And how much of this is about regulatory lapses versus the bigger power struggles at play?

TWO WOMEN AT HELM — WHAT CHANGES? Delhi's corridors of power just got a fresh dynamic — chief minister Rekha Gupta now has IAS officer Madhavi Puri as her secretary. With two women in key leadership roles, does this signal a shift in governance style? Or will the city's political and bureaucratic machinery continue business as usual?

Strong leadership is key for a city as complex as Delhi, where governance has often been a battleground between the state and the Centre. That may not be an issue now with a BJP "double-engine" Sarkar. Also, Rekha Gupta, known for her sharp political instincts, now has an experienced bureaucrat by her side. Teotia's track record in public administration, particularly in health policy, could bring a more holistic, policy-driven approach to governance. But will that translate into real change?

Historically, presence of women in leadership has been linked to better policy outcomes in areas like healthcare, education, and social welfare. Will this duo prioritise these issues, or will the day-today tug-of-war of Delhi politics dilute any potential impact? Also, will their leadership style differ from their predecessors? Women in power are often expected to bring a collaborative, inclusive approach, but politics doesn't always reward that.

Another question looms: Will having two women in charge challenge entrenched bureaucratic and political hierarchies, or will it reinforce them? Leadership in Delhi is as much about navigating power struggles as it is about policy. Gupta and Teotia may set a new precedent — or they may find themselves playing the same old game, just with new players.

For now, Delhi watches.

WHAT'S THE PMO'S GAME PLAN? The appointment of former RBI governor Shaktikanta Das as principal secretary-2 (PS-2) to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, alongside Dr P.K. Mishra as principal secretary-1 (PS-1), has set babu circles abuzz. Seasoned debates are wondering whether this signals a gradual transition, with Mr Das eventually stepping into Dr Mishra's shoes, or if it simply reinforces Mishra's position as the key

figure in personnel affairs, with Das as a trusted lieutenant. Despite its opacity, so-called pundits believe the move strengthens the PMO by bringing in a macroeconomic expert with a solid track record in finance and administration. Mr Das' linguistic versatility may also help navigate the complex power dynamics at the top. While some speculate that this could dilute the finance ministry's influence, others suggest that with Mr Das and Cabinet secretary Dr T.V. Somasudhan — both from the Tamil Nadu cadre — working in tandem, coordination between the PMO and the bureaucracy may improve.

As for the PMO's advisers, their role is unlikely to be diminished, though there may be a realignment of responsibilities. In the larger scheme of things, this development appears to be part of the Modi government's ongoing efforts to streamline and consolidate governance within the PMO, ensuring that efficiency takes precedence over individual positioning.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the baba guarantee and Dilip's belief. Share significant baba escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com.

India's universities: Liberal in label, authoritarian at heart

JOHN J. KENNEDY

Recent student protests at a prominent private university near Delhi—sparked by the installation of scanners and metal detectors deemed intrusive—have reignited a crucial debate on the state of liberal education in India. While university administrations often justify such measures as necessary for safety and discipline, they risk fostering mistrust and undermining the intellectual freedom central to liberal education. This incident raises broader questions about the authenticity of universities branding themselves as “liberal” and their alignment with the true essence of liberal education—a philosophy that remains widely misunderstood in India, often reduced to a buzzword rather than embraced as a transformative ideal.

The word “university,” derived from the Latin *universitas*, signifies a “whole”—a community dedicated to cultivating diverse knowledge through collaboration between teachers and learners. Historically, universities have been envisioned as

spaces for enlightenment and intellectual liberation. They were not merely training grounds for careers but sanctuaries for self-discovery, debate, and the fearless pursuit of truth. Thinkers like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, India's former president and a renowned philosopher, echoed this vision, describing universities as “nurseries of youthful courage and excitement.” Yet, the reality of Indian universities today often diverges sharply from this ideal. Bureaucratic stagnation, rote learning, and a culture that discourages dissent have stifled intellectual curiosity and critical thought, leaving little room for the spirit of liberal education to thrive.

The emergence of universities in India claiming to offer liberal education initially seemed promising. However, many of these institutions have fallen short, revealing deep contradictions. One significant issue is the conflation of “liberal arts” and “liberal education.” While liberal arts focuses on the study of disciplines like literature, philosophy, and history, liberal education transcends disciplinary boundaries. It is not just about what is studied

but how knowledge is engaged with. Liberal arts education is very different from merely offering liberal arts programmes. At its core, liberal education fosters critical thinking, open inquiry, and the courage to challenge assumptions. Unfortunately, many Indian universities branding themselves as “liberal” undermine these principles through surveillance, rigid norms, and the suppression of dissent. Such measures erode the trust and openness essential to a genuinely liberal environment. Moreover, the assumption that hiring faculty educated at liberal universities abroad will inherently help nurture a liberal university environment on Indian campuses is misguided.

For many higher educational institutions, the term “liberal” serves more as a marketing tool than a commitment to intellectual freedom. In a competitive education market, adopting the label “liberal” may attract students and parents seeking a modern, progressive education. However, without meaningful cultural shifts, these institutions remain bound by traditional hierarchies, standardised assessments,

and a results-oriented mindset that prioritises reputation over student growth. A truly liberal university would stress curiosity, encourage intellectual risk-taking, and nurture an environment where students feel free to challenge norms and engage in meaningful dialogue. Yet, many so-called liberal institutions fail to move beyond superficial branding.

This challenge is not unique to India. Even globally renowned institutions like Harvard have faced criticism for compromising their liberal ideals under external pressures. A recent viral video of a Harvard graduate criticising the university for failing to uphold its principles highlighted the universal tension between lofty ideals and practical constraints. However, throughout history, great educators and philosophers have articulated the essence of liberal education. Socrates urged us to “question everything.” Confucius emphasised moral growth and societal harmony, and Rabindranath Tagore championed creative freedom and interconnectedness. These thinkers remind us that liberal education is not defined by curricula or marketing rhetoric but by a culture that

values curiosity, independence, and the courage to question authority.

Against this backdrop, the University Grants Commission's (UGC) proposal to appoint non-academics as vice chancellors adds another layer of complexity. While strategic planning and corporate practices can bring value, prioritising efficiency over intellectual exploration risks turning universities into corporate entities. Regardless of background, university leadership must uphold academic freedom and critical inquiry. Universities are not merely institutions but spaces for dialogue, dissent, and intellectual growth. For Indian universities to truly embody liberal education, they must move beyond superficial branding and embrace meaningful reform. Data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020-21 reveals that only 1.5% of Indian universities even offer interdisciplinary liberal arts programmes, highlighting the limited scope and reach of a possibility toward liberal education. Naturally, therefore, a 2022 study by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) found

that 68% of students feel discouraged from expressing dissenting opinions, citing fear of administrative backlash.

The path forward requires reimagining universities as spaces for intellectual liberation. This includes decentralising administrative control, encouraging student-led initiatives, and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration. Universities must not be viewed as factories producing graduates but as incubators of thoughtful, engaged global citizens. This vision, championed by scholars and thinkers of the East and the West, remains within reach if universities are willing to rise to the challenge. By embracing the true spirit of liberal education—rooted in curiosity, critical inquiry, and intellectual freedom—Indian universities can reclaim their role as nurseries of youthful courage and excitement. They can prepare students not just for careers but for lives of purpose and meaning, ensuring that the ideals of liberal education are not just a slogan but a lived reality.

(The writer is a professor and dean at Christ Deemed to be University, Bengaluru)

The US president's praise of the Pakistani government for its role in capturing a 'top terrorist' signalled a possible strengthening of counter-terrorism ties

ZIA UR-REHMAN

As President Donald Trump delivered a speech to Congress on Tuesday night for the first time since reentering the White House, one country made a surprising cameo: Pakistan.

Trump thanked the Pakistani government for its role in capturing a regional Islamic State leader linked to an attack in 2021 at the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, that killed 13 American service members and dozens of Afghan civilians.

“We have just apprehended the top terrorist responsible for that atrocity, and he is right now on his way here to face the swift sword of American justice,” Trump said during his address.

The president's announcement of the arrest signalled a possible strengthening of counterterrorism ties between Pakistan and the United States, just as the Pakistani government is seeking international support to combat a resurgence of terrorism within the country's borders.

Pakistan, a nuclear-armed nation of about 250 million people, is navigating a complex web of internal and external pressures. Domestically, armed groups including the Pakistani Taliban in the north and ethnic separatists in the south have dramatically ramped up attacks. At the same time, the country is grappling with deepening economic instability and ongoing political turmoil after the ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022.

Outside Pakistan's borders, the departure of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021 has altered regional dynamics. Pakistani leaders have increasingly been at odds with the Taliban government in Afghanistan, where militant groups—some aligned with the Taliban and some opposed—have a growing foothold. And Pakistan's expanding alliance with China has strained relations with the United States, which has reduced assistance to Pakistan since the end of the Afghan war.

Trump's statement about the detention of what he called a “top terrorist” came as Pakistan has experienced three suicide bombings in two volatile provinces over just four days.

One of those attacks, on an Islamic seminary in Pakistan long associated with the Afghan Taliban, was believed to have been carried out by ISIS-K, a regional affiliate of the Islamic State militant group. That suggests the group's wave of assaults targeting Taliban leaders in Afghanistan has now entered Pakistan with the killing of pro-Taliban figures.

Adam Weinstein, deputy director of the Middle East program at the Quincy Institute, a think tank in Washington, said that “a thank-you from President Trump is no small win for Pakistan,” a country seeking recognition for its counterterrorism efforts in the region.

He emphasized, however, that Pakistan's powerful military seeks more than gratitude. It wants a security partnership that actively targets its enemies, particularly Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, also known as the Pakistani Taliban. Pakistani leaders accuse the Taliban administration in Afghanistan of harbouring the group and allowing it to conduct cross-border attacks,



People attend the funeral prayers for the victims of the March 4 suicide bombing in Bannu, Pakistan. AP

Pakistan's quiet win in Washington

allegations that Taliban officials in Kabul deny.

Experts noted that the operation to capture the man linked to the Kabul airport attack in 2021 highlighted ongoing intelligence cooperation between the United States and Pakistan—at least against mutual threats like ISIS-K, a group that poses global security risks.

In a social media statement Wednesday, Pakistan's prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif, thanked Trump for “acknowledging and appreciating” his country's support in counterterrorism efforts across the region.

US and Pakistani officials said that the United States had provided intelligence to Pakistan that led to the capture of Muhammad Sharifullah, an Afghan national who is a leader of ISIS-K.

Sharif said that Sharifullah had been arrested “in a successful operation conducted in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region.” The prime minister did not say exactly where Sharifullah had been captured.

On Wednesday, a spokesperson for the Taliban administration in Afghanistan, Zabihullah Mujahid, claimed that the arrest served as “proof” of ISIS-K hideouts on Pakistani soil.

Ifthikhar Firdous, editor of *The Khorasan Diary*, a research organisation based in Islamabad that monitors militant groups, said Sharifullah had been involved in dozens of attacks in Afghanistan since joining ISIS-K in 2016.

He said that Sharifullah had previously been arrested by the US-backed Ashraf

Ghani administration in Kabul but was released when the Taliban freed about 1,700 hard-core militants after taking power in 2021.

A Justice Department news release implicated Sharifullah in the ISIS-K attack last year in suburban Moscow that killed more than 130 people. Sharifullah was flown to the United States on Wednesday and charged with violating terrorism statutes.

“The coordination between the CIA and Pakistan's prime intelligence agency” in arresting Sharifullah, Firdous said, “marks yet another instance of a long history of cooperation that both the U.S. and Pakistan will depend on each other, even if it's not borne on the ground.”

A global terrorism index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, an international think tank, ranks Pakistan as the country second most affected by terrorism, after Burkina Faso.

Terrorist attacks in Pakistan are at their highest level since 2014. Deaths related to terrorism surged by 45% in 2024 over the year before, to 1,081, while attacks more than doubled, from 517 to 1,059.

On Tuesday evening, two suicide bombers associated with a local Pakistani Taliban commander drove vehicles packed with explosives into a military base in the Bannu district in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa before other attackers stormed the compound. At least 18 people were killed, including five soldiers, and dozens were wounded, according to

the Pakistani military.

On Monday, a suicide bomber targeted a security forces compound in Kalam, in the southwestern province of Balochistan, killing a paramilitary soldier and injuring four others.

On Friday, in the suspected ISIS-K suicide attack on the seminary, six worshippers in a mosque there were killed in the Nowsheera district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

While the United States-Pakistan collaboration in arresting the suspect in the Kabul airport attack raised hopes in Pakistan of further help in combating terrorist groups, it also had political repercussions.

Supporters of Khan, the prime minister who was ousted after falling out with the military, have hoped that the Trump administration will push for his release from prison. That expectation was heightened after close allies of Trump made statements supportive of Khan.

But those hopes may now be diminished after Trump's praise of the Pakistani government, which has long been guided behind the scenes by the military, political analysts said.

Pakistan's military chief “just won another round in his showdown with Imran Khan,” Sadanand Dhume, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said on social media. The Pakistani army, he added, “hasn't lost its uncanny ability to ingratiate itself with whoever is in power in Washington.”

The New York Times

It helps to have more women on board

V PRABHU DEV

The representation of women on corporate boards has been widely debated in seminars and conferences across the world. Experts have highlighted the impact of gender diversity on corporate performance, emphasising the advantages of collective wisdom through female participation.

Women on many corporate boards have demonstrated their capabilities through their effective contribution. Having women on boards offers distinct advantages: it brings diverse perspectives, greater intuitiveness, and a more collaborative leadership style. A growing body of academic research supports the link between gender diversity and improved financial performance.

A study conducted by McKinsey suggests that women's participation enhances organisational performance, with one of the biggest advantages being participative decision-making. Further, the intellectual stimulation within the boardroom improves with gender diversity. Women also contribute to more effective communication, and their collective wisdom leads to better decision-making.

Women bring qualities such as sensitivity, sensibility, dexterity, and patience—attributes essential for effective leadership. Patience and perseverance, in particular, are defining traits of successful leaders.

There is no shortage of qualified and experienced women capable of assuming roles of corporate directors. Their ability to collaborate with board members is unquestionable, and they can contribute meaningfully to boardroom discussions. Gender diversity in the boardroom is a strategic advantage, not just a regulatory requirement.

A study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) indicates that companies with more women in senior positions tend to experience significantly higher economic benefits.

The legislative intent also favours gender diversity in the corporate boardrooms. The Indian Companies Act, 2013, mandates the appointment of at least one woman director for: a) All listed public companies; b) Every public company with a paid-up capital of at least Rs 100 crore; c) Every public company with a turnover of at least Rs 300 crore.

This requirement helps break traditional gender stereotypes, promotes gender balance, and enhances boardroom effectiveness. While this mandate may seem relatively liberal compared to stricter global norms, it is none-

theless a welcome step.

According to the PRIME database, women constitute only 17% of board directors in India, compared to the global average of 19.7%. However, certain sectors—such as healthcare, IT, and telecom—have fared better in gender representation.

Encouragingly, 60% of women directors held independent directorships, dispelling concerns that companies would comply with gender diversity mandates by appointing relatives of board members. Some forward-thinking companies appointed women directors even before the statutory requirement was introduced.

Despite progress, the representation of women in top corporate positions remains disappointing. According to the PRIME Database, women accounted for only 21.8% of top leadership roles in 2023. Among board committees, the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Committee has the highest proportion of women, followed by Audit Committees.

A global comparison reveals that European markets have demonstrated leadership in promoting gender diversity. Norway was the first country to set a high minimum threshold limit—at least 40% women board members. Non-compliance attracts regulatory action. Other countries, including Germany, France, and the UK, have also adopted this model, resulting in a significant increase in the number of women directors. France accounts for 43.2% of women directors.

To fully realise the potential of gender diversity, companies in India must go beyond the stipulated minimum of one woman director on the board. Companies must have at least one woman-independent director. Further, the statutory minimum threshold limit for female representation must be progressively enhanced. This will encourage companies to take up the issue of women's representation on the board, there is a long way to go when compared to developed economies.

Companies in India must go beyond the statutory requirement to reap the dividends of gender diversity. What requires is a shift in the corporate mindset. (The writer is a professor and director at MQI College of Management, Bengaluru)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1975

JP leads 'People's March'

New Delhi, March 6
Mr. Jaya Prakash Narayan today led a mammoth “People's March” from the Red Fort to Parliament. Nearly two lakh people were present at India Gate which marked the culmination of this massive protest move. Mr. Narayan and leaders of non-Communist Opposition parties in Parliament presented the seven-point charter of demands to the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Mr. G. S. Dhillon, and the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, Mr. B. D. Jatti, separately. The CPM, while associating itself with the charter, did not sign the documents.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2000

BJP's allies refuse to back Centre on RSS issue

New Delhi, March 6 (PTI)
The NDA today failed to resolve the week-long dead-lock in Parliament on the RSS issue with the BJP's allies sticking to their stand that there should be no censure discussion as demanded by the Opposition. At a meeting convened by Prime Minister A B Vajpayee, the allies stuck to their view that the matter be taken up through a simple discussion under rule 193 and not under rule 194, which aims to censure of the treasury benches. Speaker G M C Balayogi had earlier agreed for a simple discussion.

OASIS | JAMUNA RAO

Selfcare lies in listening to the self

As we constantly reach out to self-help and lifestyle advice and find them a bit disappointing or simply not viable, what does one do? If being or existing is a unique experience, what keeps it going also has to be worked out by oneself.

Every experience, positive or otherwise, comes with some insights. Leveraging these insights or resources is certainly an option. Even as no experience repeats itself, the idea that there are resources that can be drawn upon creates a positive feeling. It stimulates curiosity and the willingness to experiment with an idea. This contributes most to surviving both

setbacks and good times. Overcoming the fear that setbacks will never end and the feeling that good times are too good to be true is what resilience is all about. What makes a person resilient is, again, a very personal response to a challenge, and each person deals with it with a different imagination. The self-help generalisations may be of little value.

While all these point to a unique, customised approach, the exciting anticipation is that one never knows what quarter help or solace can come from. Cultivated support

systems and networks may fail, but something unexpected may emerge. This is often the theme of fairy tales and folklore.

While altruism from an unexpected source is uplifting, caution is important. Protecting oneself from toxic relationships, situations, and environments is of paramount importance. These situations have no general definitions. They are deeply personal experiences and must be attended to as such. Hurting or causing harm to others is harmful to oneself; putting up with what feels toxic is worse. Tranquillity comes as much

from severing such attachments as it does from mindfulness.

It may all be in the mind, but the body-mind interconnectedness is not only real but really important. Listening to the body enables the body to listen to us. If the body says no, just stop. Giving and sharing are important feel-good factors. Thoughtful giving is more difficult than mere spending. It calls for sensitivity and some sacrifice. Sacrificing time can result in being compassionate. The ultimate in compassion is when the feeling encompasses the environment. It is perhaps the best possible self-help one can indulge in.