



Mohammed Iqbal, the father of Mohammed Shahabaz, and Shahabaz's uncle, Mubeen Rahman, attend a prayer meet. K. RAGESH

A party, a street fight, and the death of a boy

On March 1, Mohammed Shahabaz, a Class 10 student in Kozhikode district, succumbed to the injuries he had sustained during a street fight between students a few days prior. Six students have been nabbed by the police in connection with the incident. **Mithosh Joseph** reports on the ongoing police investigation in the case and the increasing worries about minors in conflict with the law

With his hands folded and eyes partly closed, Mohammed Iqbal, 47, is immersed in prayer. Clad in a white shirt and dhoti at his ancestral home in Thamarassery, a village in Kerala's Kozhikode district, Iqbal is at a religious ritual for the third day. He is mourning the death of his eldest son, Mohammed Shahabaz, 15. When he starts chanting prayers, tears roll down his cheeks. His relatives stand around him. "His wife and three children have not accepted the fact that Shahabaz is no more," one of them says.

Iqbal, who had toiled for years as a daily wage labourer abroad, says his eldest son was really smart. "He performed well in school. He would make electronic toys. He loved playing sports. He always took care of his younger siblings. I couldn't even buy him a mobile phone, as I was short of money," he says. Iqbal vows to fight until death to secure justice for his son.

Shahabaz, a Class 10 student at a government-aided school at Elettil village, died on March 1 after he was brutally assaulted during a clash between two groups of teenagers at Thamarassery in Kozhikode on February 27. His death led to widespread protests by the Youth Congress, the Kerala Students' Union, and the Muslim Students Federation, among others. These organisations allege that Shahabaz was murdered and that there was a conspiracy behind his death. The Kerala government described the incident as "unfortunate" and said a comprehensive investigation would be conducted. The Kerala State Commission for Protection of Child Rights also registered a suo motu case on the incident.

A deadly brawl

The problem began on February 23, when there was an argument between the students of two schools — Muhammedali Jauhar Higher Secondary School, Elettil, and Government Vocational Higher Secondary School, Thamarassery — at Trizz, a local training centre in Thamarassery, according to records at the centre. There was a farewell party for Class 10 students from the two schools that day at the centre. When the music that was being played for a dance performance at the party stopped due to technical glitches, students from the Thamarassery school laughed, and this led to a heated argument between the students of the two schools, say trainers.

The students met again on February 27 at the centre. "Shahabaz was not a student at Trizz, but he came to the spot along with his friends from the Muhammedali School to settle scores with the students from Thamarassery," says a trainer. Witnesses say the first clash between the two groups took place along a dingy corridor of a building complex near the tuition centre. When the locals intervened, the students moved to other spots. They clashed four times in front of about 50 students at the centre, say locals.

"The students from both the schools began assembling near the tuition centre at around 4.30 in the evening. The clash broke out around 5.30 and went on till 7," recall Siddique and Shukkur, two tea shop owners who saw the brawl. According to them, after the students fought the first time, teachers from the tuition centre intervened and forced the students to disperse.

Hajira and Jaseera, who run a stitching unit

There are many deviant characters these days, and they are a big concern for teachers. We are helpless; we cannot combat the issue alone

J. MINI
Headmistress
Muhammedali
Jauhar Higher
Secondary School
at Elettil

near the incident spot, say they heard loud noises around the building but they were too scared to intervene. "We thought that this was a minor quarrel between the students as such incidents happen sometimes. We never thought that it would lead to this," Hajira says.

K.K. Akhilesh, the head of the tuition centre, says the five students who were nabbed the next day by the police in connection with the incident, based on a complaint by Shahabaz's parents, had not turned up for classes that day and were waiting outside the centre. "They did not have any criminal background, nor were they aggressive. They were good students who studied hard," Akhilesh says. A sixth student was nabbed in connection with the incident on March 4.

When Shahabaz sustained a head injury and collapsed, the tuition centre trainers and locals called his family, who rushed him to the Thamarassery taluk hospital. There, he was referred to the Kozhikode Medical College, according to the police. Shahabaz had become unconscious after several episodes of vomiting and also had severe wounds in his eyes. He succumbed to injuries on March 1. That evening, he was laid to rest at the Kedavoor Juma Masjid Khabar Sthan.

Murmurs of a conspiracy

According to the postmortem report, Shahabaz had suffered a deep head injury and a fractured skull. The police later found that he had been attacked with a *nunchaku*, a martial arts weapon consisting of two sticks. The police say one of the six students involved in the incident had brought the weapon, which had been in the possession of his older brother, with him.

Anger built up when a photo emerged showing the father of one of the accused alongside a convict in the 2012 murder of Revolutionary Marxist Party leader, T.P. Chandrasekharan. Further, the police say they found a WhatsApp group that was created by the six accused. They say the messages on the group of 60 people and another Instagram group showed that the six boys had



The voice messages sent by some of the students on the WhatsApp group clearly explain their plan. The messages indicate a dangerous criminal trend among adolescents

Senior police officer

been planning the clash for more than four days. The police recovered a laptop, four phones, and the weapon from the houses of the accused.

A senior police officer says the accused show no repentance. "They had discussed everything on a social media group and even posted details of the *nunchaku* that was brought to the spot. The voice messages sent by some of the students on the group clearly explained the plan. The messages indicate a dangerous criminal trend among adolescents," he says.

P. Jayesh, a professional karate trainer, says the *nunchaku* is banned in several countries, but not in India. "If people simply watch some demonstration videos and use it, they may use it crudely. This can lead to an unpredictable outcome. There should be a proper vigil against the misuse of such weapons," he says.

Iqbal worries about the probe. "One of the key accused is the son of a policeman, while a few others are the children of politically influential people," he says.

The police have charged the teenagers under Sections 103(1) (murder), 118(2) (causing grievous hurt using dangerous weapons), 126(2) (wrongful restraint), 189(2) (unlawful assembly), 191(2) (rioting), and 190 (every member of unlawful assembly guilty of offence committed in prosecution of common object) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023. They say more sections of the BNS are likely to be invoked once the probe is completed and the final report submitted. The police have also reached out to Meta and other social media platforms to collect evidence.

A recurring phenomenon

Some traders say that students from the two schools, located nearly 7 kilometers apart, have been fighting for years on various issues, such as sports and cultural programmes. They even have a name for it — "Friday Thallumala", an act of revenge. Some local traders also sought action from the police a few months ago, to end the street scuffles that took place on Fridays.

The incident and investigation have largely affected the two schools and their students and teachers. Mohammed Basheer, headmaster of the Government Vocational Higher Secondary School, Thamarassery, is in tears. All the six students who have been held are from his school. "The school has been putting up a good performance. Now, everyone is shaken. This is my last year in my career as a teacher and this happens," he says, sitting in his office room.

The situation is no different at the Muhammedali Jauhar Higher Secondary School at Elettil, where the students are mourning the death of their close friend and struggling to focus on exams. One of them says, "Shahabaz was a tech-savvy student." Another says, "Shahabaz was athletic and was active in the school football team." Two Class 10 students say Shahabaz was never part of any gang and never got into trouble. Teachers also echo these sentiments.

J. Mini, the headmistress of the school, says the school authorities have arranged for counselling sessions for Shahabaz's classmates to help them cope with the trauma. She also worries about this becoming more common: "There are many deviant characters these days, who are a big concern for teachers. We are helpless; we cannot combat the issue alone. Throughout the State, we are seeing such unhealthy developments. Incidents of substance abuse and related crimes are also increasing. It is time for stronger interventions."

The students involved in the incident were shifted to a government observation home in Kozhikode and allowed to write the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) exam. This has

led to protests by students' organisations.

Iqbal, too, is furious with the Education Department. "A special exam centre with police protection should not have been sanctioned by the government inside the observation home. It was humiliating for us when the boys wrote their exams so comfortably when my son, who was also supposed to write the SSLC exam, was being buried," he told politicians who visited him.

Iqbal says he received the biggest shock when he found out that one of Shahabaz's former close friends participated in the assault. The boy had studied with Shahabaz for about seven years in another school and had even visited Shahabaz's home and shared meals with him. The two of them had moved to different schools after Class 8. Class photos of the two students have been recovered and support the father's claims, according to the police.

District Police Chief (Kozhikode rural) K.E. Baiju says the police have taken all possible legal action, as part of their investigation. He says they cannot endorse any stand that advocates curtailing the right of students to write exams, as this would be unconstitutional. Baiju also says the police will investigate more to track all those who were part of the "conspiracy".

"The students involved in the incident were not found to have the thoughts of ordinary students. Our investigation indicates that this was a well-planned attack," he adds.

Juvenile Justice Board member Mohan Kumar says the trial will be conducted immediately after the police submit the final investigation report. "All the legal procedures have been followed as the involved students are minors. They can also move for bail complying with the existing rules and regulations," Kumar says.

Distressing figures

"Kaval" is a programme implemented by the Department of Women and Child Development with support from the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bengaluru. It focuses on the rehabilitation and social reintegration of children in conflict with the law through a psychosocial approach. Data with Kaval shows that 2,274 children in the 14-18 age group attended counselling sessions between April 2023 and March 2024. Of them, about 100 were involved in murder attempt cases and about 800 in various cases registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012. The majority of the children did not have any criminal background and at least 1,600 of them were from rural areas. More than 1,750 of them came from families below the poverty line. Only 296 students were found to have behavioral issues.

Dr. P.N. Suresh Kumar, a psychiatrist, points out that a multi-dimensional approach with a focus on reducing adolescents' exposure to violent content on social media and films will help society address the issue. "The unrestricted exposure to violence affects the frontal lobe of the brain that controls thoughts, movements, and social skills," he says. Teachers should work with the Health Department to screen adolescents with behavioral issues. Dr. Suresh Kumar adds.

An official from the Department of Education says there are ongoing discussions on the formation of a State-level intervention module. Kerala is also trying to strengthen existing projects such as "Our Responsibility to Children" and "Student Police Cadets". A meeting of the heads of various schools will be convened before the next academic year to finalise the action plan, he adds.

Shahabaz's uncle, Mubeen Rahman, says he was close to his nephew. "He would ask me for money for his electronic experiments. He had the freedom to ask me anything. We used to travel together when he had school vacations. He was not a child with any criminal tendencies; he was a creative and imaginative boy," he says.

Another uncle, Najeem, says the family will meet the Chief Minister and senior police officers and demand that everyone responsible for the boy's death be arrested. "No parent should have to go through the trauma of seeing their child being killed," he says.

Opinion

SATURDAY, MARCH 8, 2025

Reciprocal tariff turmoil

Trump and Lutnick's recent comments make India's task of clinching a bilateral trade deal really tough

LIKE OTHER NATIONS, India has to navigate through the turbulence and disruption of a global tariff war triggered by US President Donald Trump. In his address to the joint session of the US Congress this week, he criticised the high tariffs levied by India and other countries as "unfair" and announced reciprocal tariffs from April 2. "Whatever they tax us, we will tax them. If they use non-monetary barriers to keep us out of their market, then we will use non-monetary barriers to keep them out of our market," Trump stated. The US President's weaponisation of tariffs should not come as a surprise to India as he ordered his administration to prepare reciprocal tariffs on trading partners headed by India barely hours before his one-on-one meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the White House last month. India hopes to negotiate a mutually beneficial, multi-sector bilateral trade agreement (BTA) this autumn to fend off Trump's reciprocal tariffs.

Trump's announcement of reciprocal tariffs also happened when India's commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal was in Washington for high-level trade talks with the US secretary of commerce Howard Lutnick and the United States Trade Representative James Gorman. Prior to his departure for the US, Goyal sounded bullish on his forthcoming talks and promised a mother-of-all-trade deals with the US. Since Trump singled out India's higher than 100% tariffs on autos, India has prepared a list of items — like luxury cars, electronics, solar cells, and chemicals — where it could offer substantial tariff cuts and greater market access for US goods. Budget 2025 pre-emptively reduced import duties for electronics, textiles, bourbon whiskey and high-end motorcycles like Harley Davidson. At a media event on Friday, Lutnick indicated that product-by-product negotiations could take forward, and the US wanted India to focus on a "macro, large-scale, and broad-based agreement." India's market has to open up. How you do that must be smart and thoughtful when you have the most attractive partner on the other side," he said, making clear the inflexible stand of the US on the issue.

The question naturally is whether a BTA is indeed feasible. It bears mention that in Trump 1.0 there was a willingness to negotiate a trade agreement but it did not work out as there was no follow-up on the mutual commitments to conclude such a trade deal. Both sides were not even able to ink a "mini deal" to maintain India's benefits under the Generalised System of Preferences that ended in March 2019. Trump 2.0 wants India to eliminate tariffs on car imports under the proposed BTA — presumably to facilitate the entry of Tesla — but New Delhi is reluctant to immediately bring down such duties to protect the domestic auto industry even as it considers further cuts. The US has reportedly sought a zero-to-zero tariff regime on almost all goods, barring agricultural ones. The only official reaction so far has been from Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman who said that India's interests will be safeguarded in the trade talks, adding that based on the negotiations Goyal has had in Washington, "we will take a call".

While India prepares for a BTA — and shows accommodation on specific products of interest to the US as it has done with bilateral trade policy dialogues in recent years — the big challenge is to navigate through Trump's disruption to global trade. Looking ahead, the most efficacious strategy will be to diversify its trading relationships.

How to hedge against AI stealing your job

WILL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE take my job? This question is really starting to preoccupy me and millions of other white-collar workers. There's even a word for it — FOMO, or fear of becoming obsolete — and, regrettably, our apprehension isn't entirely unfounded.

While I'm not concerned about AI taking my job, I do think knowledge workers — a catch-all term for people such as administrators, financial analysts, software developers, legal professionals, and those in the creative industries whose jobs are most likely to be transformed by AI — should prepare for massive upheaval. This means embracing AI to become more productive, while having a back-up plan in case your efforts to resist the march of the machines fail.

Think tank IPPR estimates that knowledge work now accounts for around half of UK labour market activity, and as much as 70% of those tasks could be significantly transformed or replaced by generative AI. Those earning more than \$250,000 a year contribute around half of US consumer spending, according to a recent Moody's Analytics analysis. What if millions of high earners are replaced by algorithms?

While I'm not an unbiased observer, OpenAI co-founder Sam Altman says a software engineering agent will eventually be capable of doing most things that a human engineer with several years of experience can do, albeit with supervision. And "eventually" might be quite soon. Meta Platforms boss Mark Zuckerberg says the use of AI co-workers will have the coding and problem-solving abilities of a mid-level engineer by this year.

Unlike people, AI agents can be deployed at near limitless scale across all kinds of knowledge work. So while AI will certainly augment existing roles and create entirely new occupations, I think lots of job losses are inevitable (and Altman agrees). There's already talk of a white-collar recession as graduates from top MBA programmes struggle to find work, translator commissions are drying up, starting salaries for consultants stagnate, and layoffs in information technology increase.

Salesforce says it won't hire any software engineers this year thanks to productivity advances from AI tools; Nvidia will soon require all its software engineers to use AI agents, while more than one quarter of new code at Alphabet's Google is now generated by AI.

In banking, AI can draft almost all of an IPO prospectus in minutes, according to Goldman Sachs Group chief executive officer David Solomon; previously, that might have taken a six-person team two weeks to produce. Last month, Singapore bank DBS Group Holdings said it would cut around 4,000 contract and temporary staff in the next three years as AI takes over their roles.

It makes sense to have a back-up plan. The first step is to familiarise oneself with AI tools and become expert at using them. Doing so will also give you a better idea of whether your job is in danger, while offering some protection that you won't be among the first to get laid off. However, we won't all succeed in becoming AI managers — so keep networking on LinkedIn and elsewhere in case you do need a career lifeline.

Those yet to join the workforce — or counselling their children — face difficult choices. Nvidia boss Jensen Huang last year sounded less convinced about the merits of learning to code because soon everyone will be able to programme using natural language (however, I tend to agree with Microsoft founder Bill Gates that learning the basics is still important).

Others further along in their careers should consider whether they have skills that open doors to a job or entrepreneurial opportunity that isn't susceptible to AI disruption. In other words, it's a good moment to perfect that side hustle. While I struggle to imagine doing anything other than journalism, I'm half-convinced I'd make a decent landscape gardener or barber, or failing that a cat café or cheese-shop owner (I'm only half-kidding).

Unfortunately, there's no guarantee AI won't steal your knowledge-worker job. But having a back-up plan can at least help keep the FOMO at bay.

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POPULISM AND POLITICS

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar

Historically, populism is bad economics. And once a leader gets attached to populism it is difficult to get out of the crisis. The central factor must be the good of the people, the largest good of the people, the lasting good of the people

LEVELLING THE FIELD

ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES LIKE BUILDING ALLIES CAN HELP WOMEN LEADERS OVERCOME PERSISTENT BIASES

The silent exclusion

SAUMYA SINDHWANI
SUDIPTA SHAW

Assistant professor of organisational behaviour (practice), and research associate, Indian School of Business



"I was dumbfounded. It felt like all my struggle, knowledge, and expertise had been erased. No matter how much I tried to say, 'Hey, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here,' they just wouldn't listen. It was as if I spoke apophony, and they heard oranges."

HER STORY ISN'T unique. Across interviews with 104 women leaders and entrepreneurs, nearly all described being overlooked — often in the very rooms where they were supposed to have a voice. But by the time they walked into those meetings, the real decisions had already been made elsewhere. Nearly 87% of our interviewees recalled decisions being handed to them, wondering, "When was this discussed? Where was I?" Their voices weren't just overlooked inside the room; they were excluded long before the conversations began. Women entrepreneurs working alongside their better halves, male co-founders, or extended male family echoed similar experiences.

No coincidence

This isn't a coincidence but a system. A quiet, informal network that operates outside official meetings, where men build alliances over Friday evening beers, cricket match screenings, or casual WhatsApp groups where key decisions take shape. A space where women are rarely invited or truly included.

This invisibility isn't just frustrating. It comes with a price tag. Women left out of these informal power circles miss critical career opportunities, from salary hikes to leadership roles. Many interviewees spoke about the financial cost of exclusion — promotions and deals happening in closed rooms or WhatsApp groups they weren't in.

Our analysis suggests this isn't about performance, but proximity. Many women leaders told us how their work tirelessly, exceeded expectations, and still

got passed over for promotions. Why? Because when the next big role opened, the bosses already had a name in mind — and it usually belonged to those who had spent extra hours bonding beyond work, over cricket matches or impromptu coffee breaks. Meanwhile, women rarely get the same opportunities to build credibility outside work.

This is not new. In male-dominated spaces, women often feel pressured to fit into a mould, staying hyper-prepared and guarded while men can afford to be casual, imperfect, and even joke around. Women constantly work their worth, working twice as hard to be accepted, leaving little room to belong. So, how do women break this cycle of invisibility? How can they carve out a space for themselves, not just to be present but to truly belong? How can they move from being on the sidelines to being at the centre of key decisions, without constantly needing to prove their worth?

This International Women's Day, we bring you four actionable strategies for women looking to claim their visibility and build their influence.

Lead in your style

"If I was direct, I was 'aggressive.' If I was calm, I was 'not assertive enough.' I kept asking myself to be 'likable,' until I realised I didn't have to be a male version of a leader. I could just be a leader."

Women in leadership often face a double bias. When they don't appear strong, makes women seem difficult. The pressure to fit into a traditional male archetype of leadership is exhausting.

Here's the truth: there is no single way to lead. Women bring collaboration, empathy, adaptability, and purpose-driven leadership. Instead of moulding yourself into what leadership is "supposed" to look like, own your style. Reflect, practise self-compassion, and lead on your terms.

Find, and be, an ally

"As a female entrepreneur, I have often voiced ideas that went unnoticed until my male co-founder backed me up. Only then did people start listening."

Men in leadership have built-in support. They advocate for each other, and open doors for one another, both in meetings and behind closed doors. Women, too often, stand alone. This must change. Male allies are key to changing this. Seek out those in leadership who recognise these disparities and will amplify your voice. Further, as you rise, be that ally. Sponsor women, recommend them, and challenge closed-door decisions.

Change won't happen by accident, it's actively built.

Bring your own table

"Their gatherings were always

improvised — over drinks, during match screenings, or in passing conversations. I was never invited, and when I tried to join I felt like an outsider."

This was a recurring theme. The informal power circles that shape careers were not designed for women. The casual, last-minute nature of these gatherings makes them hard for women to participate, and even when they do, they are often observers, not insiders.

So instead of forcing a way in, curate your own networking spaces that work for you — structured, intentional, and inclusive. Whether it's breakfast meetings, mentorship circles, or virtual meetups, take charge where, when, and of how you connect.

Don't just fight for a seat at the table; bring the table.

Knock on another door

"I kept waiting for opportunities that never came. I networked, asked for promotions, and proved myself repeatedly, only to be told I was too ambitious. That's when it hit me — I was knocking on a door that was never meant to open for me. So, I stopped waiting. I knocked on another one, built a business and realised my ambition on my own terms."

Too often, women find themselves waiting — for promotions, leadership roles, or fair treatment. But when one door refuses to open, it's time to change the door. If your growth is stalling, look beyond the obvious paths. Instead of waiting for a promotion, explore lateral moves that expand your influence. If leadership roles are scarce, create your own through advisory roles, or entrepreneurship.

Don't wait for permission to lead, lead anyway.

Shift your mindset, build allies, create your space, and if doors stay closed, change them. Enough of being sidelined, build your own place to belong.

RBI must not fall for Trump's crypto circus



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

Corporate advisor & independent director on corporate boards

THE WHITE HOUSE is now the world's biggest crypto exchange — only the man running it also has in the crypto game personally. The news of US President Donald Trump hosting the first-ever White House conference on cryptocurrency this Friday has set off a wave of excitement among crypto enthusiasts worldwide. His family holds vast crypto assets and two of his firms control 80% of a token valued at over \$1.4 billion on paper. If Trump's crypto assets gain legitimacy under his own administration, does that not amount to a self-styled financial monarchy, where regulation serves personal gain?

India, on the other hand, has taken a cautious and prudent approach to cryptocurrency, driven by the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) clear stance on financial stability. In its December 2024 Financial Stability Report, the RBI laid out unambiguous concerns — crypto's unchecked expansion could undermine monetary policy, create fiscal risks, and even circulate capital and flow regulations. If excessive adoption leads to the diversion of resources from the real economy, what happens to businesses that depend on structured financing? The answer is clear: economic instability.

The irony of crypto is that while its proponents champion decentralisation and financial freedom, the reality is often the opposite. Investors blindly follow the social media pronouncements of self-styled crypto influencers, piling into high-risk assets without understanding the consequences. If history has taught us anything, it is that financial bubbles do not

send advance warnings before they burst.

The crypto world is speculating on the RBI's possible softening stance based on the governor's remarks about a discussion paper on the horizon. This signals a shift from strong opposition just six months ago, when the RBI warned that cryptocurrencies threaten financial stability and could undermine central bank control. The RBI's firm stance has been echoed on global platforms, from the International Monetary Fund to the Bank for International Settlements.

Will the RBI hold its ground, or will Trump's crypto euphoria and geopolitical pressures test its resolve?

Cryptocurrency, by design, facilitates opaque financial transfers. While purchase transactions may be routed through official banking channels with KYC, what happens to those assets once inside a digital wallet is an entirely different story. Can anyone say with certainty that no individual has exceeded India's annual liberalised remittance scheme limit using crypto? If enforcement agencies struggle to track illicit funds in conventional banking systems, tracing decentralised crypto transactions is like looking for a needle in a haystack — except that the haystack keeps moving.

The push for global crypto adoption is not just about finance but also about geopolitical influence. The US has a long his-

tory of shaping global markets in its favour through financial instruments and has always used financial innovation as a tool of diplomacy. If India bends under this pressure, it risks aligning its financial system with a model that prioritises short-term speculation over long-term stability. The US economy operates on high debt, aggressive risk-taking, and frequent bailouts. That is not the model India should follow.

The crypto industry thrives by seeking out the weakest regulatory oversight. It shifts between jurisdictions that offer the most lenient rules. Investors follow, chasing opportunities that often turn into high-risk traps. If Trump's America becomes the new promised land for crypto, it could trigger a wave of capital flight. Indian investors might be drawn into this environment, thinking they are entering a stable market. The reality is often different.

Every major crypto crash has left ordinary investors in financial ruin, while the industry's biggest players walk away unscathed. India should not allow its investors to be pulled into yet another speculative storm.

India has built a strong digital finance ecosystem without relying on speculative crypto assets, including United Payments Interface, Aadhaar-enabled payments, and the digital rupee. These are meaningful innovations that support real econom-

ic activity. The focus should be on strengthening these frameworks, not on accommodating unregulated digital assets. The RBI isn't just managing today's risks; it is fortifying India's financial future against speculative chaos. If we allow crypto's speculative chaos to take root, we risk dismantling decades of monetary discipline.

This Sunday, President Trump announced the formation of a US Crypto Strategic Reserve. This move signals a dramatic shift in the government's stance on digital assets, integrating major cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, Ethereum, XRP, and Cardano (ADA) into the country's financial infrastructure. If this actualises, it could legitimise crypto as a state-backed asset class, blurring the lines between regulation and speculation.

The RBI's job is thankless, but crucial — especially when crypto is hailed as revolutionary. The RBI's vigilance has shielded the economy from multiple global shocks, including the 2008 financial crisis and, more recently, the Silicon Valley Bank collapse and the crypto crashes of FTX and Terra-Luna.

A country drowning in debt, rocked by a financial crisis almost every decade, and now led by one of the world's largest crypto holders is hardly a model of financial prudence. If anything, Trump's actions should serve as a cautionary tale of why regulatory capture is dangerous.

Let the White House crypto party go on. Who knows? Maybe America's crypto czar, David Sacks, will hear Trump's famous "You're fired!" — right after Trump books his profits.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Delimitation dilemma

Apropos of "The north-south chasm" (FE, March 7), southern states are not very happy with the delimitation as proposed by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government at the Centre. Union home minister Amit Shah has assured Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin that the number of seats in the region would not be reduced, but it is more than likely that states in the north

would increase, thus skewing the ratio of parliamentary seats in the latter's favour. This could be regarded as a punishment for doing well on the population front. In almost all parameters, the south is doing better than the north. Allowing more representation from the north goes against the principles of natural justice. India has many problems, we could do without one more.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Expanding energy storage

Apropos of "Battery storage is here" (FE, March 7), India has been making rapid strides in the renewable energy (RE) sector to reach the target of 500 GW (Gw) by 2030, of which solar power generation forms a major part. The more RE we produce, the more is the need to store the energy to meet demand as and when it arises. Energy

storage systems play a vital role for the grid integration of renewables. The recent commissioning of 178 megawatt-hour of battery storage is not enough against the set target. China's energy storage sector is already witnessing consistent growth, with total installed capacity crossing 73 GWh. India must pick up the pace.

—RV Baskaran, Chennai

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

Editorial



Diversify now

India needs to expand its trading base to overcome global headwinds

February's sharp rise in the monthly services Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), to 59, has provided a welcome relief to investors and policymakers, following the rise in GDP growth numbers, released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) for the December quarter of the current fiscal (Q3FY25). The strong rebound in the services PMI, up from 56.5 in January, which marked a 25-month low, helped offset the decline in the manufacturing PMI, which fell to a 14-month low of 56.3 in February. A PMI reading above 50 signals expansion, while anything below this indicates contraction. The PMI survey, conducted every month by S&P Global across over 40 countries, is a key indicator of economic momentum. The fact that manufacturing and services – sectors that have accounted for about 80% of India's GDP since 2010 – remain in expansion mode is positive. This resilience persists despite capital outflows from Indian markets, suggesting that the country's economic fundamentals remain strong. A more telling indicator of long-term economic strength is the quarterly earnings of the SENSEX, India's benchmark index comprising 30 of the most valued and actively traded companies on the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE). The Q3FY25 results point to solid net profit growth for nearly all firms.

However, looming economic risks remain. The threat of reciprocal tariffs announced by United States President Donald Trump, and set to take effect on April 2, poses a challenge for the manufacturing sector. Meanwhile, the services sector is facing a different disruption: the rapid pivot to artificial intelligence (AI)-driven solutions. While the NSO reported 6.2% real GDP growth for Q3FY25, top executives from India's leading IT firms have, at an industry event in Mumbai, cautioned that growth in the sector could be as low as 5.1% in FY25, up from 3.8% in FY24. Although this may seem concerning for an industry that has enjoyed a 16% compounded annual growth rate for nearly 25 years, it still represents an increase of \$29 billion, bringing the sector's expected value to \$283 billion in FY25. In its 2025 Strategic Review report, NASSCOM has identified geopolitical upheavals and rising tariffs as key challenges. But business leaders at the event attributed much of the slowdown to the disruptive impact of AI, which is reducing earnings from new contracts and reshaping hiring and training practices. India's services and manufacturing sectors face a triple challenge: rapid technological transformation, increasing global protectionism, and the potential for a U.S. recession. This could have significant repercussions for India, given that the U.S. remains its largest trading partner. To navigate these headwinds, India must urgently diversify its trading base.

Himalayan tragedy

Impact of natural disasters, which are not very predictable, can be controlled

Earlier this week, Indian Army and Indo-Tibetan Border Police teams rescued 23 workers who were stuck in a rubble of snow and ice, following an avalanche at Mana village, Uttarakhand. Eight workers died in the disaster, which occurred at a Border Roads Organisation construction site that had housed 54 labourers in eight containers. To say that the rescue operation was arduous would be an understatement. The rescue teams worked in a near-continuous 60-hour shift amidst heavy snowfall at an elevation of 10,500 feet above mean sea level. With the roads blocked by the snow, helicopters were used to evacuate those rescued to the Jomshim Army Hospital – five helicopters from the Indian Army, two from the Indian Air Force and one civilian copter. Along with the sheer physical effort expended in the extraction, the rescue operation employed a drone-based detection system to detect the containers that were buried under several feet of snow, ice and rock.

Avalanches in the Himalayan States, like the one in Mana, which is among the last outposts in Indian territory and close to the border with China, are not uncommon. Villagers here have historically been 'winter-migrants', which means that during the winter months the village is deserted. Coinciding with the ritual closing of the Badrinath temple in November, there is migration to villages lower down, such as Gopeshwar and Jyotirmath, for the winter, with residents returning only when the temple reopens in April or May. This is part of traditional wisdom and has a lot to do with the historical experience of the upper Himalayan stretches being prone to disasters. While these practices may have saved the resident villagers, it still raises the question as to whether the workers – several of them migrants – were adequately aware of the risks of their enterprise. Given the strategic location of the village and the need to develop improved roads for civilian and military access, there will always be a sizeable number of people engaged in activity in regions that are inherently inhospitable and risk-prone. Once disaster strikes, efforts focus on the rescue operation, and once they conclude, there is little reflection on whether preventive measures could have been taken. Avalanches cannot be predicted with precision, but steps can be taken to design containers that are safer to live in and can improve the odds of survival. There is much to learn from the way bomb shelters are imagined or how research stations at Antarctica are designed. All of this requires a greater sensitivity to workers who toil amidst hazards and not merely label these tragedies as inevitable consequences of natural disasters.

On International Women's Day, commentaries on some of the key issues in the gender space, in the print and online editions

Inclusion in public spaces – from fear to freedom

India is often considered to be one of the most unsafe countries for women, a reality that demands urgent and deliberate change. India was ranked 128 among 177 countries rated in Women, Peace and Security Index 2023. While deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that lead to violence cannot be dismantled overnight, meaningful progress can be made by challenging the everyday barriers that women face. On International Women's Day today, it is crucial to reflect on a fundamental but an often-ignored issue – the accessibility of public spaces for women.

While the topic is deeply studied and researched in the academic world, very little has changed practically. For instance, how many women do we see on roads when compared to men at any given point of time? Which are the spaces where they are more visible? And which are the areas which they completely avoid? How freely can women walk on the streets? Or do women consciously regulate their body language to conform to the male gaze?

Gendered spatial control

It is important to understand them because public spaces serve as arenas where socio-economic life thrives and evolves through mutual interactions and collective experiences, shaping community identities and social dynamics. It is where people cultivate political identities, build livelihoods, and actively engage in community life. By enthusiastically participating in the everyday nuances of public spaces, individuals get more integrated into societal processes. Moreover, a key indicator of a place's safety is the presence of women freely choosing to relax and enjoy themselves there.

What impacts women's mobilities? Studies indicate that public spaces are both gendered and political where a majority of women are mostly confined to the private and domestic sphere. This gendered spatial control takes place in many ways. According to National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4) data (2015-16), 54% of Indian women had the freedom to visit markets alone, while 50% could access health-care facilities independently, and 48% were permitted to travel outside their village or community unaccompanied.

Also, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for 2023-24 indicates that the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for women is 35.6%. Even though it has risen significantly over the years, unfortunately, this highlights that more



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Public spaces, which are arenas where socio-economic life thrives, need to be reshaped where women feel safe and welcome

than half the female population remains outside the workforce. Therefore, while a majority of women are confined to private spaces, there is a rising number of women who are using public spaces.

However, for working women, public spaces primarily serve as transitional zones, facilitating their commute between home and workplace. These spaces are rarely utilised for leisure or recreation. Consequently, women's engagement with public spaces is purpose-driven and time-bound, reinforcing spatial restrictions that limit their presence to functional necessities rather than unrestricted social participation.

A space is truly safe and inclusive when women can navigate it freely and without hesitation. As argued in 'Why Loiter?' (Phadke, Ranade, Khan, 2011), reclaiming public spaces is not just about necessity but also about leisure and uninhibited presence. When women can move without a purpose, without urgency, without having to conform to the male gaze, they assert their right to belong, transforming public spaces into shared, equitable environments. Simply put, women should be able to just exist in public spaces.

The issue of safety

During such instances, the issue of women's safety becomes a pressing concern. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that violence against women is not confined to public spaces as many face threats even within their homes which is considered to be a comparatively safer space. In open spaces, the risk of gendered violence from multiple strangers is high. This has reinforced the belief that women need protection, ultimately restricting their autonomy. As a result, women are largely found in curated spaces such as malls, theatres, and cafes, where the likelihood of violence is perceived to be lower. But what about women on footpaths, bus stations, or narrow streets – just a group of girls sitting around and having fun?

Street amusement where women are the participants is not a normal sight. Everyday public spaces – those that men navigate freely – continue to be unwelcoming to women. The fact that women cannot simply exist in these spaces without discomfort or fear raises a critical question. What is fundamentally flawed in the design of public spaces that prevents women

from fully claiming and navigating them as their own? It is here that the community and the government can be great enablers. As a society, we must acknowledge and accept the fact that public spaces afford a sense of freedom. Yet, this very freedom often translates to a loss of control for families over women's mobility. Risk is inevitable but avoiding public spaces is not the solution. Men are subjected to street violence as well, even though their nature of vulnerability is different from that of women. Women need to reclaim these spaces with the same ease as men, fostering autonomy rather than restriction. For this, women should have more conversations about this problem, take out time to go around and 'hang out' and have fun in public spaces. Normalising a woman's use of public space for leisure can contribute to this shift.



Policy level changes

At the policy level, the government can drive change by reimagining public space planning and design. This includes improving street lighting, ensuring safe and accessible public toilets, installing street furniture such as benches, and creating more recreational spaces tailored for women. Another critical area requiring government intervention is strengthening public safety through stringent laws and their effective enforcement to address crimes against women in public spaces. How many men are actually punished for gender-based violence in public spaces? How many secure bail, only to repeat their crimes? The low conviction rate remains a glaring issue that must be addressed. Even today, women are often blamed for being in the 'wrong place at the wrong time', shifting the focus from the perpetrator to the victim. Society places the burden of safety on women while simultaneously excusing or downplaying the actions of offenders. This not only fosters a culture of impunity but also reinforces a gendered fear that serves as a tool for patriarchal control.

So, by consciously reshaping public spaces, we can create environments where women feel safe and truly welcome. While centuries of patriarchy cannot be dismantled overnight, meaningful change begins with small, everyday actions. From the built environment of public space to societal attitudes, every shift, no matter how gradual, brings us closer to an inclusive society where women can navigate and own public spaces freely, without fear or restriction.

An equitable future for women in science, in India

Women in science navigate a minefield of challenges that often start early.

Educational barriers, such as limited access to quality schools and gendered societal norms, can discourage girls from pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). For those who persist and are fortunate to get past these early hurdles, cultural expectations frequently demand that they prioritise family over careers, severely jeopardising professional growth. Gender stereotypes further restrict opportunities, affecting hiring, promotions and funding. Harassment and discrimination in academic settings add another dimension of hostility that push many women out of the field.

A study of STEM scientists

Globally, as well as in India, we see similar patterns. A study of STEM scientists across 38 countries reveals higher attrition rates for women, driven by non-inclusive workplaces, work-life balance struggles, and limited access to high-impact research.

These barriers slow career progression and reduce access to senior roles and professional networks, increasing dropout rates. The postdoc-to-faculty transition is especially challenging for women, with familial responsibilities, low confidence, and a lack of female role models cited as key factors, as highlighted by research from the National Institutes of Health.

These barriers compel us to consider why it is vital to prioritise the retention of women in science. Diverse teams drive creativity and innovation, leading to breakthroughs by integrating multiple perspectives. More women in science also results in role models for future generations, inspiring girls to pursue STEM. Promoting equity ensures that women can contribute fully to scientific progress, enriching society with a more inclusive workforce.

This conversation has progressed little over the centuries. The 'Matilda Effect' – named after 19th-century feminist Matilda Joselyn Gage – describes the tendency to downplay or overshadow women's scientific contributions in favour of their male colleagues, highlighting the



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With India continuing to push the boundaries of scientific and technological advancement, it must ensure the full inclusion of women in this journey

historic struggle for proper recognition of women's innovations. Nearly 20 years later, gender inequality in STEM persists. Jacob Clark Blickenstaff's 'leaky pipeline' metaphor describes women dropping out of STEM due to biased pedagogy, a lack of role models, and hostile workplaces. Critiqued as somewhat simplistic, this model does not consider systemic power dynamics. A more recent 'Chutes and Ladders' model focuses on broader structural and environmental barriers, highlighting how mentorship, access to hidden knowledge, and career disruptions disproportionately hinder women, minorities, and marginalised groups, emphasising the need to address inequities within academic systems.

A survey across India

Examining these concepts is particularly valuable in the context of India, where conservative attitudes abound. In an extensive survey across 98 institutions across India conducted in 2020-21, the proportion of women faculty members across all the fields was a mere 17%, ranging from 23% in biology to 8% in engineering. The proportion was even lower within higher-ranked institutions, with dwindling ratios within senior career faculty. The data showed that women scientists were vastly under-represented at conferences and often overlooked in career-enhancing activities.

Addressing these challenges demands a reimagined approach that embraces diverse career paths and involves policymakers, institutions, and the scientific community in fostering inclusivity, particularly for underrepresented and economically disadvantaged women. Approaches vary based on the timing of intervention. Early intervention, engaging parents, educators, and the broader social environment, is key to lasting impact.

We propose three key recommendations to improve the retention of women in STEM at the early- and mid-career levels. First, institutional changes such as flexible work options, affordable childcare, and policies supporting work-family integration are essential. Second, public

recognition of both triumphs and obstacles is crucial. Showcasing successful women in science challenges stereotypes, inspires the next generation, and reinforces the need for greater visibility and representation. At the same time, calling out setbacks, as exemplified by BiasWatchIndia, can drive incremental progress by exposing gender inequities in academia. Finally, a nuanced approach across career stages is crucial, eliminating age restrictions on grants, fostering mentorship networks, supporting career re-entry after a break for family or personal reasons, and amplifying senior women's voices in leadership and decision-making.

Interventions

The Indian government has taken significant steps to advance gender equity in science and technology. The Department of Science and

Technology (DST) launched the Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions (GATI) pilot in 2020 to foster an inclusive environment for women and gender-diverse individuals in STEM, supporting participation-boosting initiatives such as the Women in Science and Engineering Knowledge Involvement in Research Advancement through Nurturing, or WISE-KIRAN, and the Women Scientists Scheme (WOS) programmes. Noteworthy efforts include the Department of Biotechnology's Biotechnology Career Advancement and Re-orientation (BioCare) programme, which supports women scientists returning to research after career breaks.

Additionally, the Indian Council of Medical Research spearheads several programmes promoting women's health and training for women scientists. While these initiatives reflect progress, they must scale into broader reforms to ensure that women scientists are recognised, empowered, and valued.

As India continues to push the boundaries of scientific and technological advancement, the full inclusion of women in this journey is not only a matter of fairness but also an example of true progress that can set a powerful example for the world to emulate.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump and MAGA

U.S. President Donald Trump follows an unorthodox way of administration. Many of his policies are totally impractical. He cannot alienate the entire world and run America. His tantrums against Canada, proposed annexation of Greenland, and tariff war

with China and Europe are some of the policies which are unwarranted and unworkable. There appears to be brewing discontent among the very American people whom he says are to benefit from his policies. Mr. Trump should not be swayed by the advice of Elon Musk. Mr. Trump should remember that the

Americans voted for him and not Mr. Musk.
T. Anand Raj,
Chennai

Mr. Trump's imposition of tariffs followed by quick deferment shows a hesitancy as well as attempt to shake up the system. His MAGA frenzy and vindictive attitudes

need to soften. Though his attempts to end wars are laudable, his offensive actions hurt American interests.

Rajaro Kumar,
Bengaluru

Three languages
Language is always an emotive issue and the Union government should

understand the implications of forcing students in South India to study three languages under the National Education Policy. States should be given more freedom in formulating higher education policies. Even if three languages are to be studied, the condition that the third language should

be an Indian language should be scrapped. The BJP State unit should convince its central leadership on the need to understand the feelings of people of Tamil Nadu.
P. Radhakrishnan,
Coimbatore
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Making roads safer

Holding engineers accountable a welcome move

NITIN Gadkari, who has been serving as the Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways since 2014, has finally hit the nail on the head. He has blamed defective road design and faulty DPRs (detailed project reports) prepared by engineers and consultants for the ever-increasing road accidents and fatalities in the country. India has the second largest road network (after the US) in the world, but it continues to have the dubious distinction of recording the highest number of road mishap deaths globally year after year; the national toll was around 1.8 lakh in 2023 — a staggering average of 500 lives snuffed out every day.

Despite being a major cause of accidents, flawed road design rarely gets due attention of policymakers and other stakeholders. The general tendency is to blame reckless driving and poor law enforcement for mishaps. This virtually absolves the people involved in the planning and execution of road projects. It's not uncommon to see even newly built roads develop cracks. Unfortunate motorists suffer due to the lapses made by engineers and other officials. Shoddy maintenance of roads only worsens the situation.

It is hoped that Gadkari's tough talk will bring about a transformation on the ground. His observation that "even small things" like road signage and marking systems are very poor in India is ironically a reflection on his own long tenure. There is no doubt that accountability must be fixed for negligence that endangers lives, but at the same time, Central and state governments should also be answerable to the public for any laxity on their part. Last month, ministers from 100 countries met in Morocco and endorsed a declaration that calls on governments to make road safety a political priority. However, this issue of public interest is usually conspicuous by its absence from the agendas of political parties in India. The Punjab government's Sadak Suraksha Force is a rare initiative to make highways safer. More such sustainable solutions are needed to turn the tide.

Boosting R&D

Will the private sector deliver?

THE Modi government's Rs 1 lakh crore fund proposed to boost private sector research and development (R&D) is a bold step towards addressing the country's chronic underinvestment in innovation. Structured as low-interest, long-term loans, this initiative signals a crucial shift in the country's approach to scientific advancement — one that places the private sector at the forefront of the nation's research ecosystem. India has long lagged behind global leaders in R&D investment, with expenditure stuck at a dismal 0.65 per cent of the GDP. In contrast, the US and China allocate over 2 per cent of the GDP, with their private sectors contributing a staggering 75 per cent of the total R&D spending. In India, however, private sector investment has hovered around 30-35 per cent, reflecting a deep-seated reluctance among industries to prioritise fundamental research over short-term profits. The new scheme seeks to reverse this trend by making funding accessible to companies with commercially viable research proposals, a model akin to a production-linked incentive scheme for R&D.

The newly established Anusandhan National Research Foundation is expected to play a pivotal role in administering these funds. Unlike traditional grant-based schemes, this initiative emphasises applied research with clear commercial potential. This focus on tangible outcomes may ensure that the investment translates into new products, patents and economic growth. However, its success hinges on robust implementation, transparent selection criteria and the ability to attract industry participation beyond a few dominant sectors like pharmaceuticals and defence.

While this move is promising, the government must also strengthen academia-industry collaboration, streamline bureaucratic hurdles and create incentives for long-term innovation rather than short-term gains. The growing number of patents filed by Indians underscores potential for innovation, giving power to the government's ambitious plan.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Viceroy's conference

IT has now been officially announced that it's at the invitation of the Secretary of State in Council that the Viceroy is going home on leave and that His Excellency sails from Bombay on April 10. An attempt has been made in the Legislative Assembly to find out the exact nature of the subjects that are likely to be discussed between the Viceroy and Lord Birkenhead, but it has so far only succeeded in eliciting from the Home Member the general and by no means informing statement that "the more outstanding matters regarding the affairs of India would undoubtedly be included among the subjects of discussion." He would not even admit that the report of the Reforms Committee presided over by himself was one of these subjects, but left it to the members to judge for themselves whether it was one of the important outstanding matters. This deliberate attempt to keep back from the Legislature information to which it was certainly entitled, unjustifiable as it was, was probably not without a purpose. That purpose was to deprive the Legislature of an opportunity of expressing its considered opinion on the outstanding issues to be discussed at the conference. If this, however, was the object of the government, that object is bound to be defeated. The Muddiman Committee's report is about to be published, and it is inconceivable that the House will not be afforded an opportunity of discussing it this month. On some of the other matters, such as the Bengal Ordinance, the Assembly has already expressed an opinion, while it will have an opportunity during the next three weeks of discussing the rest.

Trump-Putin-Modi summit is doable

Can the PM, whose foreign policy dexterity must be applauded, take a leaf out of Virat's book?



THE GREAT GAME
JYOTI MALHOTRA

THE blow-up between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelenskyy a week ago is already a thing of the past. The world changed that Oval Office morning and the world saw the raw exercise of power. If Europe — and the Ukrainians — flummoxed at the lack of grace and courtesy in the exercise of that power, perhaps they're right. But they also know that it's not easy to make omelettes if you can't break a few eggs.

What is amusing is that the Europeans and Britain are this shocked. The British and the French, both Security Council permanent veto powers — as well as all those other nations on the Continent trying desperately to assert themselves on the world stage — have known to the Americans at least since the end of the Second World War, riding piggyback on the strength of the American dollar.

Europe's worst-kept secret is the barely hidden contempt the Europeans have for the ugly American — except they want their money. The most overpriced baguettes the other side of Suez are manufactured by Parisians in the summer — when Paris empties itself in anticipation of the hordes of American tourists descending upon the French capital, all looking for one or another version of *A Moveable Feast* à la Hemingway.

The thing about Trump & Co — JD Vance, Elon Musk and the lot — is that they have no time for what well-known journalist Shekhar Gupta calls "tanpura-setting." Meaning, all the frills and the fuss that Europe loves so much, couched in words like



ENTENTE: Trump has recognised that his real antagonist is Xi Jinping, not Putin. AP/PTI

"egalite" and "liberte" and even "fraternite" — although you should, dear Reader, check out France's not-long-ago record in North Africa, especially Algeria, where even the White French were dismissively known as "pied noir" or "black feet," because they weren't white enough for Mainland French — is all so soul-stirring and uplifting because at the end of the day they know that the bill will be picked up by the Americans across the pond.

Well, Trump & Vance just announced that the time for all this "tanpura-setting" is over. Or, you can continue to set your tanpura, but not on our time or our cheque book. So Ukraine is welcome to fight till the last Ukrainian, but not on American money. At least Afghanistan taught the US & Europe one thing — fighting someone else's war doesn't mean your boys should die for it. Perhaps that's why they loosened their purse strings, to assuage their guilt.

Trump called out Europe's hypocrisy that morning in the Oval Office. For three years, Europe and Canada have been encouraging Zelenskyy to fight Vladimir Putin, except, unlike in Afghanistan, they have not been

If Modi plays this well, he can leverage India's standing both in the West and in the East.

willing to put their body bags where their mouths are.

It's taken less than a week for the world to fall in line. Not just Zelenskyy, everyone else is also preparing for a Trump-led brave new world, because they know they have no other choice.

Only the Chinese are standing up for now. You know what that means. That Trump has recognised that his real antagonist is Xi Jinping, not Putin. That the Chinese, no one else, have the strength and the wherewithal to take on the Americans. Perhaps

that's why Trump wants to embrace the Russian bear — he wants to wean him away from the dragon-like clasp of the Chinese leader. It's incredible that Trump has realised this basic truth so quickly, but that it eluded the rest of Washington DC for years.

What, then, must one make of Indian foreign policy in the Age of Trump? Clearly, the Modi government did well by going to meet Trump early, even though this happened around the same time Indians were being deported by the US President in handcuffs and chains. So Modi swallowed the bitter pill quickly because he knew he had to — quickly get out in front, meet the American President and say your piece.

Modi's presence in DC was also a reminder of his old slogan, "Ab ki baar, Trump Sarkar", the stark opposite of Zelenskyy's support for Biden.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar is smartly tying up the rest. That's why he announced that India will not be in favour of a de-dollarisation move, although that is exactly what India had signed up for at the China-led BRICS summit in Russia's Kazan; before the Budget, tariffs for luxury motorcycles were brought down, because

Trump had wanted that to happen in his first administration.

In short, try and please Trump, or at the very least pacify him, show him you mean no harm. You know he's unpredictable — he has just reversed the tariffs he had set for Mexico and Canada — so get on his right side. Don't pretend you're not aligned, because you're not, nor publicly blather about your friendship as is the usual wont of insecure allies.

As for the upcoming US-Russia entente, India has just been thrown a roll of dice and come up trumps. If Modi plays this well, he can leverage India's standing both in the West and in the East. A Trump-Putin-Modi summit is no longer out of the realm of possibility.

It follows that the Modi government should pick up some tips about the exercise of power — making friends with your enemies is far more important than with your friends, for example. If Modi wants India to become a regional power, he cannot allow the old prejudices about Pakistan to come in the way. This is far more important than the desire for people-to-people contact — although it would be wonderful to have friends from Pakistan visit for life-changing events like celebrations and marriages in Delhi — and amounts to a fundamental strategic shift in PM Modi's world-view.

India can never be strong if it is faced by a China-Pakistan axis on either side. Why not drive a wedge between the two by making friends with your weaker, western neighbour, one with whom you also have so much more in common? Instead, India has restored the relationship with China and continues to blackball Pakistan.

Vinod Kohli, about whom the PM admirably tweets and often, showed the way some days ago when he bent over to tie the shoelaces of the Pakistani batsman he was playing against — a calm confidence about himself, his game and his place in the world.

Can the PM, whose foreign policy dexterity must be applauded, take a leaf out of Virat's book?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The secret of politics? Make a good treaty with Russia. —Otto von Bismarck

Girls with the guts to speak up

USHA BANDE

I glanced at her cherubic face — pink cheeks and a creamy complexion. Manbhari seemed a befitting name for the lovely girl. I smiled. Her eyes sparkled momentarily and clouded just as suddenly and her expression changed to an unsmiling enigma with downturned lips.

Manbhari was our new household help, hired thanks to the entreaties of her mother, who assumed that city life would drum some sense into the adamant and querulous girl. "Nobody will marry her," she added. However, I found Manbhari a docile and willing worker. She was an eager learner and tutoring her was a pleasure.

As Manbhari settled in our household, she opened up. From the snippets she shared occasionally, we could figure out her family's attitude and perception and reconstruct the story of her rebelliousness. Her family back in the village was frustrated with the birth of five daughters. "When I was born, they called me Manbhari because they were fed up." It must be painful for the child to fight the negativity her name exuded, to combat the daily mocking of her schoolmates rhyming Manbhari with Rasbhari (raspberry).

"I don't like this name, Didi ji," she confided in me. "It sounds like eatables: Rasbhari, Jharberi or Imarti" — a la Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. She yearned for a moniker like Pooja, her favourite teacher. It was amazing to have a glimpse of a rural world where girls were keen to assert their identity.

Manbhari's story transported me back to the days of my research on gender issues in Maharashtra's rural Satara, where I came across several girls named Nakoshi. In Manthi, Nakoshi means "unwanted." The story is almost identical — when daughter after daughter is born, the last one becomes unwanted.

Finding sympathetic listeners in us, the girls voiced their resentment. "Why don't they call the sons 'Nakoshi'?" they argued. One Nakoshi reminisced how a teacher convinced her mother to change her name to Laxmi. Interestingly, these girls had a cherished list of beautiful modern names they aspired to have one day — Deepa, Juhi, Priya and the like. "Maybe my husband would understand and change my name," quipped another Nakoshi, while others giggled.

Year after year, as we celebrate International Women's Day, honouring urban women, conferring awards on them for their achievements and patting our backs for empowering them, let us be aware of the struggles of womenfolk in the hinterland who are still burdened with societal insensitivity and expectations. How can a woman, struggling with her callously chosen name that remains etched in her psyche, ever be empowered?

Yet there is a bright side to the stark picture. Girls like Manbhari and Nakoshi are mustering courage to speak up, to make their voices heard. "A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman," Melinda Gates has rightly said.

Transactional Trump

Apropos of "Tariff tangle", Trump has made it clear that he will treat friends and foes alike when it comes to tackling American trade deficit concerns. As a businessman, Trump is aware of the global supply chains and how these can benefit American businesses. The US President's reciprocal tariff policy is not in our favour. India must reduce some of its own tariffs and prioritise US exports. The trajectory of India-US ties will be determined largely by Delhi's response to Trump's tariff action. The US has a huge global trade deficit in goods, and Trump believes imposing tariffs can enhance domestic manufacturing. Before Trump's tariff war escalates, India must propose a comprehensive free trade agreement with the US.

SK SINGH, BY MAIL

Sign FTA with US

Donald Trump's stand on tariffs has been quite clear from the outset. In a pre-emptive move, India tried to reduce some duties in the 2025 Budget. India has offered to buy more US oil, gas and military hardware, which eventually will boost mutual trade. But Trump's reciprocal tariffs are bound to hit Indian exports. So what can India do before the tariffs take effect in just a few weeks' time? India should not waste time in signing a free trade agreement (FTA) with the US. It would be advisable to slash tariffs by about 90 per cent and also seek reciprocal concessions. Meanwhile, India should also strike deals with other countries affected by Trump's tariffs, such as Canada. The latter will have a lot of spare oil and other commodities if it does not sell them to the US.

PL SINGH, BY MAIL

Seek help to fight drug menace

The Aam Aadmi Party came to power on the basis of promises such as eradication of the drug menace. Three years have gone by, but the scourge has grown instead of receding. The state is on the verge of ruin. Many families have been left devastated. Anxious parents want their wards to settle abroad to keep them away from drugs. The deep-rooted problem cannot be controlled without the involvement of the Central Government. Local agencies like panchayats and NGOs must be roped in. The law

and order situation has to be improved in order to curb drug trafficking.

KARNAIL SINGH, KHARAR

Retrograde delimitation step

With reference to TN all-party meet seeks delimitation on basis of 1971 Census for next 30 years; the very notion of 1971 as the benchmark year for any future delimitation is retrograde and defies logic and ground reality. Regional party politics should not be allowed to thwart course correction meant to undo the current glaring disparity in proportional representation. The crafty plea that population cannot be a basis for recalculation of seats in legislatures should be nipped in the bud and discarded. Democracy is best served by consensus rather than by majority.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Southem states anxious

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin convened an all-party meeting to discuss serious concerns regarding the delimitation of parliamentary constituencies. The demand for a 30-year status quo, based on the 1971 Census, reflects the anxiety over potential political marginalisation. With southern states fearing a reduced proportional representation in Parliament, it is essential to address their concerns regarding the fairness of the process and its impact on regional autonomy. It is crucial to ensure that the delimitation process is not used as a tool for political domination. The Centre should take proactive steps to engage all stakeholders, including state governments, through all-party consultations to build consensus.

VANDANA, CHANDIGARH

PoK issue needs deft handling

Apropos of "K solution possible if Pak returns PoK. EAM", the answer to J&K CM Omar Abdullah's question — "Who is stopping you (India) from getting back PoK?" — is that Delhi does not want a Gaza-like situation. Our wait for over 70 long years is bearing fruit. We have done well to keep the PoK issue a bilateral matter. Pakistan has been trying in vain to make it an international issue. Let us show patience as sensitive issues need delicate handling.

DV SHARMA, MUKERJAN

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[OUR TAKE]

Managing the language wars

The political class must negotiate the language fault line by recognising its fraught history and respecting constitutional guardrails

The row over RSS ideologue Suresh "Bhaiyyaji" Joshi's remarks on the place of Marathi in Mumbai puts the spotlight on the language debate that has roiled the nation since Independence. It also overlaps with many ongoing controversies such as the one over the three-language formula and flags the question if a linguistic singularity can be imposed on the nation and the metropolises that drive its economy.

It is not surprising that Joshi's remarks — "Mumbai doesn't have a single language" and that "if you are residing in Mumbai, it is not necessary that you have to learn Marathi" — touched a raw nerve in Maharashtra, which was formed in 1960 following an agitation by the Maharashtra Sangharsh Samiti that advocated the formation of a state of native Marathi speakers residing in western and central India. A key demand of the Samiti was that Mumbai, then Bombay, should be the capital of this new state. Joshi has since clarified that his remarks were misunderstood, but a point he reiterated even in his clarification — that Mumbai "is a great example of coexistence that people speaking so many different languages in India live together" — is pertinent. This state of coexistence is not a given, but one that is constantly negotiated by speakers of the dominant native language and non-native migrant residents. Competition for resources, especially jobs, often upsets the delicate balance of interests and populist politicians weaponise language to fuel resentment and polarise voters for electoral gains. Most of India's large metros — Bengaluru, Chennai, and Gurugram besides Mumbai — have experienced such divisive politics in the form of street mobilisations and privileging of the local language over other tongues to legislative action for reserving jobs to native residents.

Language has always been a major fault line in our polity, which has also shaped the contours of Indian federalism. Borrowing the logic of the modern nation-State, some have advocated a common national official language for the country. Others have argued for treating all recognised languages as equals and against the imposition of any one language as official or national. This debate can be traced to the early days of the national movement — the 1920 Nagpur Congress Session passed a resolution in favour of provincial Congress committees based on the linguistic principle. Linguistic sub-nationalism emerged in different parts of India along with the rise of nationalist sentiment. The Nagpur resolution foresaw this development and recognised the need to forge a pact between the two. However, the first States Reorganisation Committee (SRC) was set up only after public protests and led to the reconfiguration of provinces in southern India in 1956. India's Northeast also saw major language-centric political movements, the Assam agitation being the most notable and influential one.

This history needs to be kept in mind as the Centre engages with state governments that refuse to yield any inch on the language question. Aspiring for a monolingual existence is a fraught idea that militates against India's political and constitutional history. A big political challenge of our time is to balance linguistic sub-nationalism with the unitarian demands of the nation-State. Both can co-exist in a truly federal system. The periodic, and perhaps inevitable, rise in tensions needs to be negotiated in a spirit of give and take and within the principles outlined in the Constitution.

The blueprint for becoming a global knowledge power

For Make in India to work, marry it to Invent in India. To that end, India should step up its R&D spending by 1% of the GDP over the next decade

India produces the highest number of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Stem) graduates in the world, after China. However, it is bursting with tech talent, as is indicated by the fact that three-quarters of the top 500 multinational corporations in the world have established development centres in India.

All that talent means India can do a lot more to develop its own technology base aiming to be among the top three science and technology (S&T) nations in the world.

However, it comes in currently at 39th on the Global Innovation Index, while China is placed 11th. In 2022, India spent 0.65% of its GDP on research and development (R&D), much lower than that of other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations (Brazil 1.35%, Russia 0.94%, China 2.43%), let alone advanced S&T powers like the US, Japan, Israel and South Korea.

India is at present a lower-middle income country that has still some way to go before it reaches its productivity frontier.

There is a case to be made that it should focus, for now, on the diffusion of existing technologies that make its labour-intensive industries grow, and think later about enhancing R&D. The answer is that India is a large country with a diversified economy and needs to do both at once.

While the economy certainly needs to grow its labour-intensive sectors to pursue the Holy Grail of generating jobs at scale, India cannot ignore the fact that skill and capital-intensive areas such as pharma, chemicals, automotive, etc., currently dominate its industrial sector.

Further advancement here will require it to compete head-to-head with developed countries as well as other emerging economies. R&D is needed for deep-tech startups to thrive and for large Indian companies to take on global competition — in short, for the economy to grow to Indian aspirations.

Second, as labour costs rise, even labour-intensive sectors need local innovation to raise productivity, increase value addition and exports, and keep the Indian economy globally differentiated. China and South Korea are two recent examples of countries that invested heavily in S&T even at low per capita income levels and reaped phenomenal growth as a result.

Apart from underfunding, Indian R&D is still anchored to an old model where research is only funded majorly by the government and carried out chiefly under its auspices but also focuses on a few priority sectors such as defence and space. Globally, since the latter half of the 20th century, R&D investments have shifted from being primarily government-funded to primarily privately funded, while research at higher education institutions (HEIs) also plays a key role. Productive R&D establishments are characterised by intense collaborative exchanges between government, industry and academia.

One can conceptually separate the funding and performance of research, and there are massive advantages to making universities and HEIs key players in the latter.

They bring in competition, interdisciplinarity, new thinking and diverse interests to the performance of research, while churning out a steady stream of students trained in research. Stanford University, for example, plays a central role in the early development of Silicon Valley and is still a significant contributor to its success.

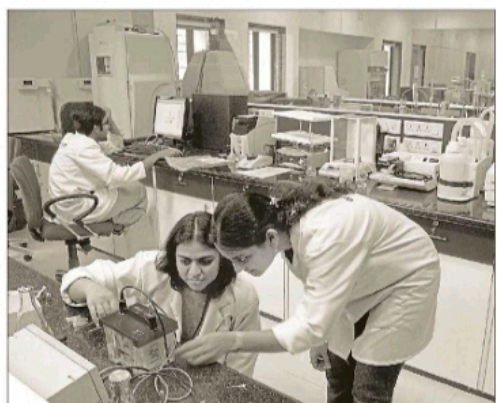
Fortunately, new initiatives such as the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) promise to revamp some of India's outdated funding structures. ANRF received a shot in the arm during Prime Minister Naren-



Ashish Dhawan



Swagato Ganguly



The key to ANRF's success will be understanding how effective research is done and developing strong project management capability.

HT PHOTO

dra Modi's visit to Washington in February this year, when the two governments agreed to get the US National Science Foundation (NSF) to partner ANRF for research in critical and emerging technologies.

The key to ANRF's success will be understanding how effective research is done and developing strong project management capability.

ANRF can be given a structure analogous to NSF or the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), with efficient programme managers and competitive and transparent procedures for selecting projects to fund. A chief executive officer, supported by mission directors who deploy the funds, is a good model. While tracking the research projects funded, this organisation should also be allowed to take some risks.

Early-stage research needs open-ended exploratory work that won't always be successful but produces breakthroughs that shape the future.

In the Union budget, the government also announced a ₹1 lakh crore innovation fund to provide long-term loans at low or nil interest rates for projects at the cutting edge of tech innovation. To stimulate India's deep-tech ecosystem, this amount should be disbursed within the next three to five years. It can function in a manner complementary to ANRF. While the latter helps Indian HEIs become world-class institutions that carry out upstream research pushing forward the frontiers of knowledge, the former can help indus-

try commercialise mature technologies for the market.

South Korea was poor in 1970 but experienced rapid growth over the next two decades — in the same period, its R&D spending went up from 0.4% to 2.5% of its (rising) GDP. Chinese spending on R&D also went up from 0.6% of its GDP during the late 1990s to 2.4% currently — also its best growth years.

India should step up its R&D spending by 1% of GDP over the next decade, going from 0.65% of GDP now to at least 1.6% of GDP by 2035.

Out of this 1% of GDP should be spent on R&D by India's private sector (going up from 0.25% of GDP at present). It is worth remembering that between 1975 and 2005 — which was also the period when South Korea went from being a lower-middle income to a developed nation — R&D investments by its corporate sector soared 800 times in dollar value.

If India wishes to escape the middle-income trap, R&D that drives rapid economic growth is the only possible pathway. Historically, prior to the European Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, India had always been at the forefront of economic as well as knowledge production. It should aspire to become *vishva gura* once again. It has the potential, and deserves to be, one of the world's great S&T powers.

Ashish Dhawan is founder-CEO and Swagato Ganguly is senior fellow at The Convergence Foundation. The views expressed are personal

Women's development to women-led development

As the world celebrates the International Women's Day, I want to reflect on how India is embarking on an inspiring journey from the era of women's development to a new dawn of women-led development. This transformation marks a crucial distinction: Development that includes women is an essential step that provides women with access to opportunities, services, and spaces, ensuring equality.

However, women-led development goes beyond inclusion. It empowers women to take the reins of leadership, drive innovation, and shape policies from the forefront.

There has been a paradigm shift in how we view women's empowerment. India has emphatically declared that women are at the centre of development. The power dynamics is changing so that they can drive the change themselves. Women are not just passive beneficiaries of policies and programmes but are now active change-makers. India envisions a future where women are at the heart of decision-making, leadership, and execution of policies, lead businesses and community initiatives. They empower the nation. As Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi says: "When women prosper, the world prospers." The progress of women gives strength to the empowerment of our nation.

India has always cherished and upheld its rich traditions of female leadership, deeply ingrained in its cultural and historical tapestry. In the Vedic period, Gargi and Maitreyi were philosophers who participated as equals in debates with other philosophers and served as symbols of educational opportunities available to women even in those times. Women like Rani Lakshmi Bai and Kittur Rani Chennamma symbolised the regional and gender diversity of India's freedom movement. Today, President Droupadi Murmu holds the distinction of being the first person belonging to a tribal community and the second woman to hold the high office. Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan missions were successful largely because of India's stellar female scientists. They led these positions because 43% of India's graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses are women. The worldwide share of female STEM graduates is around 30%. Today, women are leading in fields such as business, medicine, and the armed forces. But change isn't restricted to these alone.

Millions of women at the grassroots are being empowered across India. The National Rural Livelihoods Mission has nearly 15.5 million Lakshmi Didi, who are members of self-help groups (SHGs) and have an annual household income above ₹1 lakh. The Drone Didi scheme aims to provide drones to 15,000 selected SHGs between 2024-25 and 2025-2026. The drones can be used for applying liquid fertilisers and pesticides to agricultural fields, managing water resources and irrigation by identifying areas that need water, and analysing soil quality and fertility. Since its inception, over 69% of the loans provided under the PM Mudra Yojana — the government's collateral free credit scheme — have gone to women. Nearly 80% of women in India have a bank account that they operate themselves. Programmes such as Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) and the Jal Jeevan Mission have benefited nearly 100 million and 122 million households, providing access to toilets and tap water, respectively, and thereby benefiting millions of women. Under the rural housing programme, 74% of the houses registered are either solely or jointly in women's names. The government's programme to distribute free gas cylinders has



Millions of women at the grassroots are being empowered across India.

AP PHOTO



Annpurna Devi

helped 103 million women get access to smoke-free kitchens. As of May 2024, over 14 million women were elected members of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), which includes the position of sarpanch. This makes up 46% of the total elected representatives of PRIs. Women sarpanches have been involved in projects to improve water, solar power, paved roads, toilets, and banks in their villages.

To enable women with voice and agency to lead, an extra push is required. Our government has demonstrated commitment to this agenda through landmark legislations such as the Women's Reservation Bill that guarantees 33% of all seats in the directly elected Lok Sabha and state assemblies. The amendment to the Maternity Benefit Act guarantees paid maternity leave for up to 26 weeks to the country's women. Initiatives such as the Women's Helpline and SHe-Box provide support to women in distress while the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) aims to set up 1,000 working women's hostels across the country, fostering economic independence. The PM's clarion call for women-led development during India's G20 presidency was endorsed by Brazil during its presidency in 2024. It is our nation's commitment towards harnessing the full potential of our women, recognising their invaluable contribution, and celebrating their role as leaders in the journey towards progress and prosperity. Let's come together and unite for #AccelerateAction, leading the charge to shape the future of India. We must all join hands, embrace change, and be a part of this inspiring journey towards progress and empowerment.

Annpurna Devi is Union minister of women and child development. The views expressed are personal

Women at forest frontline break stereotypes, barriers

As the successor to the Imperial Forest Service that was created in 1865, the Indian Forest Service (IFS) became a central service in 1966. The semi-uniformed forest department was primarily oriented towards living and working in remote locations, and women entered the service only in 1980, with the induction of three officers. It required only minor amendments (in relaxation on physical criteria). There has been no turning back since; the strength of women in the IFS has grown from a mere handful to over 350 serving officers today.

I first came across women foresters while working in Kaziranga. Over 300 women forest guards, officers, and forest battalions constables were recruited as part of a mass enrolment drive by Assam government in 2023. Mostly

from rural backgrounds, they had their baptism by fire during the three months of rigorous training. The women were toughened mentally and physically to endure the hardships of a "jungle posting".

Then came the challenge of housing them. Anti-poaching camps are key to the Kaziranga model of conservation. Unless there is a flood, the camps are manned at all times. There are 233 anti-poaching camps in Kaziranga, the highest in terms of area coverage. The camps are basic and largely meant to house only individual men without families. Bathing area, toilets and improvised kitchens were a few pre-requisites for housing the frontline women. All-women camps were established, but the real challenge was the

mind-set of male peers and superiors. Will the women be up to the challenge of living in the forests?

The women showed they could more than meet the challenge. In July 2024, Kaziranga saw the most devastating floods since 1991. On July 2, animals started leaving the park in search of higher grounds. It was also a time when humans were at distress too and anti-poaching camps were cut-off from the outside world. Rations, including drinking water, were meagre, and the frontline had to prevent mentally and physically fit to prevent any personal illness.

The National Highway 715, located along the southern boundary of the park, became the warzone. The women frontline regulated traffic flow, ensured safe passage of wild animals in the nine designated corridors, undertook rescue and release of stranded wild animals and continued with anti-poaching duties alongside their male peers. As a result of the collaborative efforts, 204 recorded the lowest ever wildlife mortality (two hog deer) from road-kills and

other anthropogenic causes. Local communities, student volunteers, and the civil society contributed equity to the flood-time management. After 35 gruelling days, a total of 180 stranded animals were rescued. 148 of these could be successfully released back into the wild — one of the best showings so far.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his maiden visit to Kaziranga on March 9, 2024, had met the women frontline and named them Van Durgas (goddesses of the forests). Today, they have broken the societal and cultural barriers and the stereotype that remote forests and tough postings are meant only for men. They proved that combating devoted poachers or caring for wild animals can be done equally well and easily by women if they are trained well.

Women bring additional skills of effective communication, greater connect to rural communities, and a sincerity and dedication. If nature does not discriminate, why must we?

Sonali Ghosh is field director, Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve. The views expressed are personal



Sonali Ghosh

HT EDITOR'S PICK

Our editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

POLITICS OF LANGUAGE POLICY

The Centre withholding Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan funds from Tamil Nadu over the state's refusal to fully endorse the National Education Policy (NEP) has sparked a fresh row over Hindi imposition.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's action and called it an attempt to pressure Tamil Nadu into compliance, as the three-language formula emerged as a major point of contention with the NEP.

This week, we recommend *Language Policy and Education in India*, a collection of essays tracing the history of English and language education development in India. The essays examine the role of language in the colonial era, language policy, identity, nationhood, and sub-nationalism. The volume traces the sociocultural and economic factors that shaped the writing and publishing of textbooks, and dictionaries and determines the direction of language teaching by drawing on archival material such as policy documents, books, and periodicals.



Language Policy and Education in India
M Sridhar, Sunita Mishra
Year: 2017

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Story of 26/11 accused Rana, set to be extradited to India from US

DEEPTIMAN TIWARY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 7

THE UNITED STATES Supreme Court on Thursday rejected the plea of the 2008 Mumbai terror attack accused Tahawwur Hussain Rana against his extradition to India.

Rana, 64, had filed an "Emergency Application for Stay" after President Donald Trump approved his extradition following his meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month.

Rana will be extradited on the basis of the India-US Extradition Treaty signed by the two countries in 1997.

Rana's story, from 2009

Rana is accused of aiding and abetting the reconnaissance for the attacks carried out by David Coleman Headley, with whom he went to school in Pakistan, and of participating in the terror conspiracy.

Rana was arrested in Chicago in October 2009 for his involvement in the 26/11 attacks

and the foiled attack on Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* that same year.

The US District Court for the Northern District of Illinois prosecuted him for conspiracy to provide material support to terrorism in India and Denmark, and to the Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist group.

The jury acquitted Rana of the charge of conspiring to provide material support to terrorism in India, but convicted him on the other two counts. On January 7, 2013, Rana was sentenced to 168 months in prison.

On June 9, 2020, he was released on compassionate grounds. A day later, a Magistrate Judge in California, where Rana was serving his sentence, signed a provisional arrest warrant with a view to extraditing him to India based on a December 2019 extradition request.

Rana opposed his extradition on the ground of "double jeopardy". A Magistrate Judge rejected his arguments on May 16, 2023. Rana then petitioned the US District Court for the Central District of California for a writ of habeas corpus.

After this was rejected on August 10,

2023, he appealed in the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. This too was rejected.

Rana then filed a writ of *certiorari* in the US Supreme Court, which was rejected on January 21 this year. After Trump announced his extradition last month, Rana filed the emergency application in a last-ditch attempt to stay in the US.

India-US extradition treaty

The treaty established a legal framework for the extradition of individuals charged with or convicted of serious offences in either country. An offence is extraditable if it is punishable by imprisonment for more than one year under the laws of both countries.

Political offences are not extraditable under the treaty. However, certain actions such as the murder or other willful crime against a Head of State/Government or a member of their family, aircraft hijacking and aviation sabotage, crimes against internationally protected persons, and hostage-taking, etc., are not con-

strued as political offences under the treaty.

Tahawwur Rana's case

Following his provisional arrest in 2020, US authorities had submitted in court that Rana should be cleared for extradition to India as his offences and legal situation met all criteria required under the extradition treaty.

They said there was "probable cause to believe that Rana committed the offences" of which he had been accused in India.

The US government submitted that it was not proceeding on Indian charges such as "membership of a terrorist organisation", "conspiracy to wage war" and "conspiracy to commit terrorist act" because they did not fulfil the criteria of "dual criminality".

However, "the dual-criminality requirement (of the extradition treaty) is met because the remaining charged offences are punishable in both India and the United States", the US said.

Rana claim of "double jeopardy" — argu-

ing that India intended to prosecute him for the same offences of which he had been acquitted by the Chicago court — was rejected by the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit on the ground that the Indian charges had "elements" distinct from the charges under which he had been prosecuted, and eventually acquitted, by the Chicago court.

The court held that "India [had] provided sufficient competent evidence to support the magistrate judge's finding of probable cause that Rana committed the charged crimes."

Other extraditions from US

There have been only two extraditions of alleged terrorists from the US to India so far — alleged Khalistanis Charanjit Singh Cheema and Kulbinder Singh Kulbinder in February 2005 and June 2006 respectively.

According to data provided by the Ministry of External Affairs to Parliament, the treaty facilitated the extradition of only 11 Indian fugitives between 2002 and 2018.

One of these individuals was accused of the sexual abuse of children, another of at-

tempt to murder. The rest were accused of financial fraud and cheating.

The government told Parliament recently that 65 requests for extradition remain pending with the US.

The US has rejected several requests for extradition from India, most importantly that of Rana's associate Headley.

The Lashkar operative who was born Daoud Gilani was arrested in October 2009. He was tried and sentenced by a US court for the killing of six Americans in the Mumbai attacks after he pleaded guilty to the charges.

One of the key terms of his plea bargain was that he would not be extradited to India.

The US had earlier rejected India's request to extradite Warren Anderson, who was CEO of Union Carbide at the time of the 1984 Bhopal gas leak. Anderson had been arrested by police in India, but he was soon given bail and allowed to leave the country.

Almost 20 years later, in May 2003, India sent a request for his extradition to the US, which was declined on the ground of insufficient evidence.

EXPLAINED ENVIRONMENT

US BUTTERFLY POPULATION DECLINED BY 22% SINCE 2000, FINDS STUDY

A NEW study has found that America's butterflies are disappearing because of insecticides, climate change and habitat loss, with the number of winged beauties down 22% since 2000.

"Butterflies have been declining the last 20 years," said study co-author Nick Haddad, an entomologist at Michigan State University. "And we don't see any sign that that's going to end."

Catastrophic findings

The first countrywide systematic analysis of butterfly abundance found that the number of butterflies in the Lower 48 states (minus Alaska and Hawaii) has been falling on average 1.3% a year since the turn of the century. The study was published in *Science* on Thursday. (Rapid butterfly declines across the United States during the 21st century).

Scientists combined 76,957 surveys from 35 monitoring programs and counted 12.6 million butterflies over the decades. Last month, an annual survey that looked just at monarch butterflies, which federal officials plan to put on the threatened species list, counted a nearly all-time low of fewer than 10,000 — down from 1.2 million in 1997.

Many of the species in decline fell by 40% or more. David Wagner, a University of Connecticut entomologist who wasn't part of the study, said the data may not seem alarming outright but is "catastrophic and saddening" when compounded over time. "In just 30 or 40 years we are talking about losing half the butterflies (and other insect life) over a continent," Wagner said.

Warning sign for humans

Cornell University butterfly expert Anurag Agrawal said he worries most about the future of a different species: humans. "The loss of butterflies, parrots and porpoises is undoubtedly a bad sign for us, the ecosystems we need and the nature we enjoy," Agrawal, who wasn't part of the study, said in an email.

"They are telling us that our continent's health is not doing so well... Butterflies are an ambassador for nature's health, fragility and the interdependence of species. They have something to teach us." What's happening to butterflies in



UDIT MISRA

US officials plan to put the monarch butterfly on threatened list. Reuters

the United States is probably happening to other, less-studied insects across the continent and world, Wagner said. Butterflies are also pollinators for crops such as cotton.

Human hand

The study also found that the driest and warmest areas are the worst for butterflies. The biggest decrease in butterflies was in the Southwest, where the number of butterflies dropped by more than half in the 20 years.

When they looked at butterfly species that lived both in the hotter South and cooler North, the ones that did better were in the cooler areas. Climate change, habitat loss and insecticides tend to work together to weaken butterfly populations, Edwards and Haddad said.

Of the three, it seems that insecticides are the biggest cause, based on previous research, Haddad said. "It makes sense because insecticide use has changed in dramatic ways in the time since our study started," Haddad said.

The silver lining is that habitats can be restored and so can butterflies.

"You can make changes in your backyard and in your neighborhood and in your state," Haddad said, adding that simply doing this "could really improve the situation for a lot of species."

ASSOCIATED PRESS



UDIT MISRA

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP has announced "reciprocal tariffs" on US trade partners from April 2 to correct the "very unfair" situation of other countries charging the US "tremendously higher tariffs than we charge them". In his speech to a joint session of Congress on March 4, Trump specifically mentioned the European Union (EU), China, Brazil, India, Mexico, and Canada.

What Trump is betting on

The President and his supporters firmly believe that the only way to stop the rest of the world being free riders benefiting from US largesse is by the US reevaluating its international relationships in every way.

Thus, if European countries — or other traditional US allies — do not pay the US or benefit it in trade, the US will no longer provide them protection or financial assistance.

Trump is betting that given the strength of the US economy and its record of sustained growth even against terrible odds — often referred to as US exceptionalism — the threat of tariffs will force foreign companies and countries to set up shop inside the US, reducing the trade deficit, boosting American manufacturing, and creating jobs and prosperity.

"It will be like nothing that has ever been seen before," Trump told Congress.

The argument against tariffs

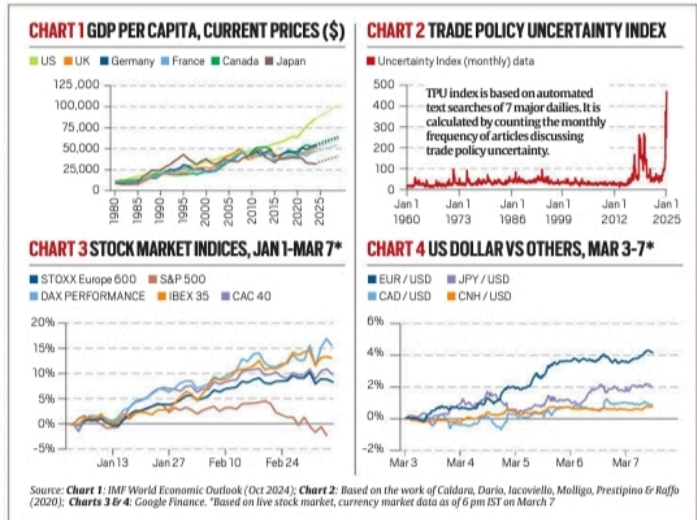
Many have pointed out that tariffs are deeply counter-productive, and the US may have already started to drift towards a recession. And given how Trump is running American foreign policy, it may not even have many friends left if and when it falters.

China and Canada, countries against whom US tariffs went into force this week, have hit back with counter-tariffs, and Mexico is preparing to do the same.

And with their seven-decade-old transatlantic partnership with the US seemingly under deep threat, several European countries are planning to build up their own economies.

Earlier this week, Friedrich Merz, who will likely become the next Chancellor of Germany, announced that Europe's largest economy will raise hundreds of billions of euros in extra spending on defence and infrastructure. "The rule for our defence now has to be whatever it takes," he said.

Economic growth has been stagnant in



most Western economies since the global financial crisis of 2008 (Chart 1). This has led to falling per capita incomes and productivity, and fuelled social unrest. Britain leaving the EU is one example how economic stress and social unrest triggered counter-productive and reactionary decisions.

Fallout of Trump's policies

The President's tariff actions have introduced an unprecedented level of trade policy uncertainty in global markets (Chart 2). This means that businesses, especially on two sides of the Atlantic Ocean, are completely clueless when and how tariffs will affect them, how much their products would cost after tariffs, what the demand would be at the higher price, whether they need to fire some employees or hire new ones, etc. Consumers are similarly confused and anxious.

STOCK MARKETS: The relative performance of the various stock market indices is a good initial indicator of how firms and investors are looking at Trump's tariffs. (Chart 3)

The S&P 500 index — which tracks the top 500 companies listed in the US — is below its level at the start of 2025, while the Stoxx

Europe 600 has outperformed handsomely. Since last 600 companies of large, mid, and small capitalisation spread over 17 European countries. European country-specific indices — such as the French benchmark CAC40, the DAX of German blue chips, and the Spanish benchmark IBEX — have also done better.

DOLLAR VS REST: Another indicator is in the way the US dollar has moved against competing currencies (Chart 4).

Since March 3, the dollar has weakened against all its closest competitors — its Canadian cousin, the euro, the Japanese yen, and the Chinese yuan.

This is a change from the situation prevailing for several months, during which the dollar has risen relentlessly against all currencies. The dollar continued to strengthen even after Trump first threatened to impose tariffs.

The rise of the dollar was in part due to the proverbial American exceptionalism. The US was the only major economy that registered a genuine V-shaped recovery post-pandemic — which requires the absolute GDP to reach the level it would have been at before there had been no economic disruption.

Fifty per cent of global transactions are in-

voiced in dollars, making it the default currency of the international order. The US is the world's biggest economy by size, and its policy choices have global impact. Trust in the dollar's purchasing power during times of uncertainty is second only to the trust investors have in gold.

Rise in European bonds

As Trump has gone about his tariff policy, there has been a broad-based sell-off in government bonds of Germany, France, Japan, etc. As a result, yields of 10-year government bonds in all these countries have registered a sharp spike. Investors are selling because they anticipate the issuance of fresh bonds with better returns as these developed countries start borrowing billions of dollars to boost their domestic economies.

Bond yields and bond prices move in opposite directions. That's because every government bond carries a set amount of absolute return (called the coupon rate); yield is the size of the coupon as a proportion of the bond price. When there is a sell-off, bond prices fall and their yields go up even at the same coupon rate.

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Why Vanuatu boasts one of the most popular 'golden passport' schemes

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 7

FORMER IPI chief Lalit Modi has applied to surrender his passport to the Indian High Commission in London, and acquired the citizenship of Vanuatu, a tiny island nation in the South Pacific, the Ministry of External Affairs confirmed on Friday.

Vanuatu has a popular citizenship by investment (CBI) or "golden passport" program, which allows wealthy individuals to purchase its passport.

Buying citizenship

CBI or economic citizenship allows indi-

viduals to acquire citizenship in a country by making significant financial contributions to its economy. Countries around the world offer foreigners citizenship to attract investment and stimulate economic growth. Malta, Turkey, Montenegro, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and Egypt also have CBI programs.

Vanuatu's program

According to the website of investment migration firm Global Residence Index, "Vanuatu's citizenship by investment program is the fastest and most simple citizenship program available... Very few documents are required, and all documentation can be provided digitally", meaning the applicant does not even have



to set foot in the country to become a citizen. The cost of Vanuatu citizenship ranges from \$135,500 to \$155,500 (Rs 1.18 cr to 1.35 cr), with options to also purchase citizenship for a family of four. Processing times vary from 30 to 60 days after the filing of the application. The BBC reported in 2019 that passport sales account for roughly 30% of the country's revenue.

Specific advantages

Aside from the ease and speed of the process, Vanuatu's program provides some specific benefits.

■ As of 2025, a Vanuatu passport allows visa-free entry to 113 countries. The Henley Passport Index ranks the Vanuatu passport as the 51st strongest in the world (out of 199 countries), ahead of Saudi Arabia (57), China (59), and Indonesia (64). India ranks 80th.

Vanuatu's passport was even stronger until March 2022 when the European Council temporarily suspended its visa-free access to the European Union due to security concerns around the golden passport scheme. The suspension was made permanent in February 2023.

■ Vanuatu is, for all intents and purposes,

a tax haven. It is a zero-tax jurisdiction that is free of personal income tax, capital gains tax, inheritance tax, and wealth tax. While Vanuatu does charge indirect taxes such as VAT, as well as tax on property transactions, rates are typically lower than other countries in the South Pacific. It also has lax reporting requirements, which make it a "strategic jurisdiction" for tax purposes.

For what remains a very poor country, with a per capita GDP (current US\$) of only 3,515.2 (World Bank, 2023), there is a major financial incentive to be a tax haven. Offshore financial services is one of the biggest revenue generators for the country.

Scandals in recent years

In recent years, Vanuatu has faced mul-

tiples corruption scandals and allegations that its citizenship scheme and tax laws are being used by global criminal syndicates.

Analysing more than 2,000 golden passports issued in 2020, *The Guardian* reported that among those granted citizenship was a Syrian businessman with US sanctions against his businesses, a suspected North Korean politician, an Italian businessman accused of extorting the Vatican, a former member of a notorious Australian motorcycle gang, and South African brothers accused of a \$3.6bn cryptocurrency heist.

"Experts have warned the scheme is ripe for exploitation, creating a back door for access to the EU and UK... Vanuatu's taxation laws make the country an attractive site for money laundering," UK daily said.

Breaking Barriers, Shaping the Future

The story of women in mining is one of determination, transformation and triumph. From fighting legal battles to working deep underground, from leading corporate teams to redefining industry norms, they are proving that no profession is beyond their reach

Mining has long been regarded as one of the most grueling and physically demanding industries, a domain in which women were historically deemed unfit to participate. The underground mines, characterised by darkness, dirt, and danger, were legally off-limits to women for decades. However, times have changed. Today, women are not only entering the mining sector but excelling in roles that were once considered the exclusive territory of men. Their journey from exclusion to inclusion is a story of resilience, courage, and determination.

For years, the legal framework itself reinforced gender-based exclusion. The British government imposed a ban on women working in underground mines in 1937, citing the hazardous and oppressive nature of the work. A brief lift of the restriction in 1943 was followed by its reinstatement in 1946, cementing the notion that mining was unsuitable for women. This exclusion persisted for over seven decades until a group of seven young mining engineering students in India decided to challenge the status quo.

In 2017, these women, led by Neredukomma Hiranmayee, noticed that job advertisements in the sector clearly stated "Men Only." Determined to fight for their right to work in the field they had trained for, they took their petition to the Narendra Modi-led Central Government. Their persistence paid off when the Mines Act of 1952 was amended in 2019, allowing women to work in underground mines with certain conditions. They were permitted to work between 7 AM and 6 PM but had to provide written consent, and were required to work in groups for safety. While these conditions still imposed limitations, the amendment marked a historic turning point for gender inclusion in mining.

Since this breakthrough, several women have entered the mining workforce, proving their capabilities and resilience. In the Singareni Collieries of Telangana, one of India's oldest coal mining PSUs, women miners are now working underground alongside men. Their presence is reshaping the industry and breaking long-held stereotypes. Swathi Penugonda, whose family had a legacy in coal mining, left her job in aerospace engineering to become a miner when the opportunity finally opened up. For her, mining was not just a profession but a tribute to her grandparents who had worked in Singareni mines before her. Another trailblazer, Allam Nayavashree, started as a section supervisor in an underground mine, facing scepticism from male colleagues who doubted her abilities. Over time, she earned their respect, eventually supervising some of the very men who once questioned her competence.

For Chunchu Sandhya Rani, mining was an unexpected career path. Married while still in college, she assumed her professional aspirations would be set aside. However, with the support of her husband and in-laws, she pursued her mining engineering degree and secured a job at Singareni. Today, while she works underground, her husband takes care of her two children, proving that with family support, women can balance both career and motherhood in even the most challenging professions.

These stories of perseverance are not limited to fieldwork alone. Women are also taking on leadership roles within the mining sector, ensuring that gender equality is not just about numbers but about real empowerment. Singareni Collieries, recognising the need for inclusive leadership, has placed women in key decision-making positions. Kavitha Naidu has become the first woman General Manager to handle Personnel & Industrial Relations, a role that involves managing labour disputes, transfers, and negotiations for thousands of workers. Dr



Sujatha, as the Chief Medical Officer, oversees the company's extensive healthcare network, while Sunitha Devi has broken new ground as Singareni's first woman Company Secretary, managing board meetings and corporate governance. These women are not just participating in the industry but they are shaping its future. The inclusion of women in mining is not just about gender equality; it also brings tangible benefits to the sector. Studies worldwide have shown that diverse workplaces lead to better decision-making, improved efficiency, and stronger financial performance. Women bring unique perspectives and problem-solving approaches, making workplaces more innovative and dynamic. In mining, where safety and operational efficiency are paramount, their contributions are proving invaluable.

Recognising these advantages, mining companies are actively working to create an inclusive and safe work environment for women. Singareni Collieries has implemented several initiatives, including dedicated transport facilities, separate first aid rooms with female medical staff, proper washrooms and hygiene facilities in underground sites, and childcare support for working mothers. Additionally, gender sensitivity training has been introduced to ensure a workplace culture that is welcoming and respectful.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain. The nature of mining still presents physical and logistical difficulties, and societal perceptions about women in demanding professions are slow to change. However, the growing presence of women in mining is sending a strong message that they are not only capable of handling the work but excelling in it. The number of women in the industry is rising and with upcoming recruitment drives, their representation is set to increase significantly in the coming years.

The Ministry of Coal and the Ministry of Mines have taken significant steps to encourage and support women's participation in the sector. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a strong emphasis has been placed



SATISH CHANDRA DUBEY

on empowering women in traditionally male-dominated industries. The amendments in mining laws to allow women in underground mines were just the beginning. Today, multiple government policies are actively fostering gender inclusion.

Several Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) under the Coal and Mines Ministries, such as Coal India Limited (CIL) and Hindustan Copper Limited (HCL), have introduced recruitment policies aimed at increasing women's representation. The Commercial Coal Mine Auctions, launched by the Ministry, have also opened new opportunities for women entrepreneurs and professionals in mining and allied sectors. As the industry expands, the vision is to ensure that women are a key part of this growth.

To further encourage women in mining, the government has launched skill development programs and scholarships for female mining engineering students. Mission Karmayogi, an initiative reviewed for the Ministry of Coal and Mines, focuses on creating a skilled and future-ready workforce, ensuring that women receive equal access to training and leadership programs. The government's 'Nari Shakti' initiative is also playing a crucial role in promoting women's participation in sectors like mining, ensuring safe working conditions and career growth opportunities.

The Ministry of Mines is also actively working on integrating women into the future of critical minerals exploration. As India moves towards sustainable mining and the development of lithium, cobalt, and other rare minerals essential for electric vehicles and renewable energy, women professionals are being encouraged to take up leadership roles in these

futuristic industries.

The women in mining are not just breaking barriers; they are shaping the future of the industry with resilience and determination. Their courage to step into the depths of the earth, to lead, innovate, and inspire, is a testament to their unwavering spirit. From underground miners to corporate leaders, they are redefining possibilities and proving that strength knows no gender. As India's mining sector evolves, their contributions will be the bedrock of progress. We salute these trailblazers who work tirelessly, often in unseen and challenging conditions, to power our nation. Their journey is not just inspiring but also a beacon of empowerment, resilience, and hope for generations to come.

The future of women in mining is not confined to coal alone. As India expands its focus on renewable energy and sustainable resource management, new opportunities are emerging in sectors such as solar energy, thermal projects, and mineral exploration. Women are increasingly stepping into these roles, contributing to technological advancements and strategic decision-making. As we celebrate International Women's Day, it is essential to recognise the pioneering women who have shattered barriers in mining and those who continue to push the boundaries. Their achievements are not just personal victories but milestones in India's journey toward gender-inclusive economic growth. The once male-dominated world of mining is evolving into a field where merit, not gender, determines success.

The story of women in mining is one of determination, transformation, and triumph. From fighting legal battles to working deep underground, from leading corporate teams to redefining industry norms, they are proving that no profession is beyond their reach. Their strength, resilience, and ambition are not only shaping the mines of today but also paving the way for the miners of tomorrow.

(The writer is Union Minister of State for Coal and Mines, Government of India; views are personal)

Today is a day beyond celebrations; it is a clarion call for gender justice

For us, Women's Day is more than just a celebration; it is a call to recognise the immense potential that has been tapped only to deep-seated biases. At Gedik Holding and Gedik University, we take pride in fostering an environment where over 250 women are breaking barriers in fields as diverse as aerospace technology and welding. Our commitment to the growth and empowerment of women and girls has spanned over six decades, and today, we witness the transformative results of these efforts.

The gendering of professions has always been fluid. Welding, a field often perceived as male-dominated, is now seeing thousands of women actively shaping the manufacturing of cutting-edge technology. Similarly, computing, once largely led by men, is again being pioneered by women. Industries that have historically excluded women must reevaluate their biases. Women have long played a dominant role in sectors such as computing and manufacturing, and there is no reason why they cannot thrive in today's high-paying fields like engineering, finance, and technology. The cost of exclusion is not merely social—it is economic.

Both India and Turkey face challenges when it comes to women's participation in the workforce. While the majority of employable men are already working, female labour force participation remains significantly lower. According to the World Economic Forum, India's female labour force participation rate is around 24 per cent, while Turkey stands at approximately 35 per cent. This underutilisation of women in the workforce is one of the greatest economic inefficiencies of our time. Prioritising female education is crucial for both nations. India's female literacy rate is currently at 70 per cent, while Turkey's is at 95 per cent. While India is making rapid progress, particularly in rural areas, there is still much to be done. Investing in women's education presents an opportunity for India and Turkey to collaborate and drive economic growth together.

Economic partnerships offer a powerful avenue to enhance women's participation in business. Textiles and tourism are two industries where India and Turkey have developed growing cooperation. India is one of the largest exporters of yarn to Turkey, where manufacturers transform these raw materials into high-end fashion garments for global markets. Women play a pivotal role in both economies—whether as artisans in India weaving traditional textiles or as designers and business leaders in Turkey's fashion industry.

Indian wedding tourism in Turkey is flourishing, and Turkish women have been instrumental in shaping this transformation.

From event planning to hospitality, luxury services, and cultural adaptation, they bridge the gap between Indian traditions and Turkish hospitality to create seamless, grand wedding experiences. Many Turkish women have specialised in organising elaborate Indian weddings in luxury destinations such as Antalya, Bodrum, and Istanbul. Hotels and resorts have trained female staff to provide authentic Indian wedding hospitality, while Turkish women in the culinary industry have honed their skills to master Indian cuisine. Their expertise extends to styling, entertainment, and venue management, making Turkey one of the most sought-after destinations for Indian weddings.

Beyond trade, fostering women entrepreneurs can further strengthen economic ties between India and Turkey. Business networks, trade fairs, and mentorship programs connecting Indian and Turkish women professionals could lead to new opportunities and innovations.

Women-led startups in both countries would benefit from cultural exchange programs, digital marketplaces, and co-working initiatives that promote cross-border entrepreneurship.

Cultural ties between India and Turkey extend beyond business, with over 300,000 Indian tourists visiting Turkey annually. From the bustling bazaars of Istanbul to the vibrant markets of Delhi, both nations share a love for dynamic street food cultures, rich history, and warm hospitality.

One fascinating cultural parallel is their tea traditions. In Turkey, tea is known as çay, while in India, masala chai is a daily staple. More than just beverages, tea symbolises hospitality, conversation, and community. Whether served in a tulip-shaped glass in Istanbul or a clay cup on the streets of Kolkata, tea fosters social connections and business discussions alike.

There is also an increasing appreciation for cultural exchange in the creative economy, including film, cinema, and music. Turkish television dramas have gained immense popularity in India, while Bollywood films enjoy a dedicated audience in Turkey. This mutual admiration provides a platform to highlight women's contributions in creative industries, from filmmaking to fashion.

Gender equality is not just a moral imperative; it is an economic necessity. The cost of sexism is evident in lost productivity, missed opportunities, and lower economic growth. By prioritising women's education, integrating them into various industries, and fostering international collaborations such as those between India and Turkey—businesses and economies can unlock unprecedented potential. Women's Day serves as a reminder that true empowerment does not stem from symbolic gestures but from meaningful structural change. It is time for policymakers, business leaders, and communities to invest in women—not just for the sake of equality, but for the economic prosperity of all.

(The writer is Chairperson, Gedik Holding, Türkiye & Chairperson, Board of Trustees, Istanbul Gedik University; views are personal)



HÜLYA GEDİK

Esnure swift and uncompromising justice for rape survivors

The fight against sexual violence in India is far from over. Every woman in our country has a fundamental right to safety, dignity and justice. Yet, incidents of sexual violence continue to surface, exposing the deep-rooted challenges in our societal structures. We must take decisive and solution-oriented steps to prevent such crimes and build a future where women and children are safe.

For the founder of PARI Foundation, I have dedicated my life to advocating for survivors of rape and sexual violence. On December 16, 2024, PARI took a significant step forward by convening the First-ever National Convention on the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children. This landmark event marked a turning point in our efforts to combat sexual violence, bringing together policymakers, legal experts, civil society organisations, educators and survivors to discuss concrete measures for prevention, response and rehabilitation. At the heart of this initiative was the launch of 'Agaz', a programme focused on a comprehensive, solution-driven approach to addressing gender-based violence.

One of the most pressing areas of reform is education. Schools and universities must play a proactive role in fostering gender sensitivity. Mandatory workshops and seminars should be conducted regularly for teachers and parents to create awareness about gender equality, consent and bystander intervention. Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) training must be compulsory

for all school and college staff to ensure compliance with the law, while Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) training should be a requirement for all teachers and administrators, equipping them with the knowledge to protect children effectively.

Beyond just policies, schools should incorporate gender studies and emotional intelligence training into their curriculum, helping young minds develop respectful and healthy perspectives on relationships. Digital safety education is also critical, ensuring students understand the risks of cyberstalking, online harassment, and digital consent.

Understanding criminal psychology and the media's influence is crucial to combating sexual violence. Research must be expanded to examine the motivations, triggers and behavioural patterns of sexual offenders, helping develop targeted prevention strategies. The media's portrayal of gender dynamics must also be critically evaluated, with efforts to promote responsible storytelling that challenges toxic masculinity and harmful stereotypes.

Additionally, news reporting of sexual violence needs to be reformed. Sensationalised or insensitive coverage often leads to re-victimisation of survivors and reinforces rape culture. The media should follow ethical guidelines in reporting cases with dignity, ensuring that survivors' identities and rights are protected.

Survivors of sexual violence need more than just

legal justice—they need holistic support to rebuild their lives. Rape Crisis Centres (RCCs) should be established in every city, town, and village, providing medical, legal, financial and psychological assistance to survivors. Vocational training and educational support should be offered to help them regain independence and stability.



YOGITA BHAYANA

A national movement must be initiated to eradicate victim-blaming, shifting societal attitudes toward supporting and empowering survivors. Public campaigns should be launched to challenge myths surrounding rape, educate communities on the importance of believing survivors, and encourage bystander intervention to prevent violence.

Police reforms are equally urgent. The inefficiency and insensitivity of law enforcement often discourage survivors from reporting crimes. Dedicated emergency duty numbers should be staffed with personnel trained to handle sexual violence cases with empathy and efficiency.

First responders and forensic teams must adhere to strict protocols for evidence collection, post-

mortems, and forensic investigations. Special Investigation Units (SIUs) should be created within police departments, comprising forensic experts, counsellors and legal advisors specifically trained to handle sexual violence cases. Mandatory gender sensitisation training for all police personnel must be conducted during induction and as annual refresher courses.

The workplace should be a space of safety and dignity for all, yet harassment and violence persist. POSH training and audits must be strictly enforced across all organisations, ensuring compliance with anti-harassment policies. Internal Committees (ICs) should undergo annual audits to assess their effectiveness in handling sexual harassment complaints.

Special protections should be introduced for women labourers and construction workers, ensuring access to safe working conditions, legal recourse, and healthcare facilities. Shelter homes for homeless women and children must be set up across urban and rural areas, providing them with a secure environment. Workplaces must offer safe and affordable childcare facilities to support working mothers.

The media and digital platforms wield immense power in shaping perceptions and behaviours. A nationwide ban on pornography must be considered, given its proven link to increased sexual violence. Research suggests that a significant percentage of sexual violence perpetrators have been influenced by pornographic content. OTT platforms must be sub-

ject to stringent regulations regarding the depiction of sexual violence, preventing the glorification of such acts. The media should actively promote positive narratives that challenge regressive gender norms and advocate for women's safety and dignity.

At the same time, online safety laws must be strengthened to curb cyber harassment, deepfake pornography, and digital sexual violence. Social media platforms should be held accountable for removing exploitative content and ensuring survivor privacy.

While policy reforms and legal mechanisms play a crucial role in addressing sexual violence, true change will only come when society as a whole rises against this menace. 'Women and Child Safety Mission 2029' envisions an India where, by 2029, women and children can live free from the fear of violence. This mission calls for multi-sectoral collaboration, involving the government, businesses, media, educational institutions, law enforcement, and civil society. I urge every citizen, policymaker, and stakeholder to join hands in this fight. We must demand swift and uncompromising justice for rape survivors and implement meaningful changes to prevent future crimes. Together, let us ensure that 'Agaz' is not just an initiative, but the beginning of a safer, more just India for all.

(The writer is rape victim activist & founder PARI Foundation; views are personal)

Women's Day rhetoric vs everyday reality



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INTERNATIONAL Women's Day has rolled around again. Thank God and the Constitution that we can say that women in India at least are free and equal. But can we? The de jure and de facto reality is that there has been many a slip between the cup and the lip.

The fact that women's status has to be debated and defended constantly is itself proof that degrees of equality and freedom are constantly in flux.

The Constitution provides a robust statutory framework for equality. Recognising the historical disadvantages faced by women, it specifically forbids discrimination and has put in place legislative and institutional pathways to equality. However, much of the impact lies unrealised as policy and practice towards equality are fitfully implemented and mediated through a cultural lens, which is often in con-

tradition to the codified law. In India, where deeply held societal norms dash everyday with constitutional obligations, the churning of an essentially feudal society into modernity brings with it conflict and contradiction.

The example of marital rape illustrates this. The very label 'marital rape' embodies inherent contradictions. For one, it acknowledges the presence of the core element of rape: the absence of genuine consent. Yet, the prefix 'marital' is used to introduce legal and social absolution, as if saying: 'Yes, this is rape but you can have a free get-out-of-jail-free card.'

The stubborn exclusion from punishment for marital rape is based on the principle that once the knot is tied, a woman has forever given up her consent to sexual intercourse and that some kind of right of trespass accrues in the husband.

The rationale that implicitly accepts that sexual violence is permissible in the cause of holding together the family forces one to ask weekly again: what legitimacy does 'family' have that is based on oppression and sexual slavery of its women? What does marriage being 'sacrosanct' really boil down to when it accommodates at its core a permission to commit acts which for any other individual would be a crime



UNEQUAL: Within marriage, a woman's 'no' is disregarded. REUTERS

but is sanctioned within a 'sacred' space, merely because it is done by one particular perpetrator?

Ironically, within marriage, a woman's 'no' is disregarded while outside, her 'yes', where she willingly consents to relationships that deviate from societal or familial expectations, is overridden by societal or familial disapproval.

All too often, where an adult woman's status or behaviour is seen as 'unbecoming' — say when she 'runs away' or enters into a live-in relationship or marries a person of her choice against the family's consent — every obvious ruse to

Exclusion from punishment for marital rape is based on the principle that a wife has forever given up her consent to sexual intercourse.

regain control of her, like filing police reports alleging minority, trafficking or kidnapping — is brought to bear. And, the state's institutions — who should know better — too, often respond on the basis of a shared morality rather than the provisions of law that confer upon her the absolute right to make her own choices and still be entitled to the protection of all agencies of state.

The obvious disapproval for behaviour comes through in random sermonising about 'bad' or 'rebel' or 'illicit' behaviour and invocations of religion and tradition that forbid premarital relations and, indeed, even

provide for strict medieval punishments.

Sexual subjugation and restriction of individual choice are elements of perpetuating broader baked-in designs of inequality.

Most recently, the Uttarakhand High Court upheld the mandatory registration of live-in relationships under the state's new Uniform Civil Code (UCC). While reportedly remarking about the 'brazenness of living together', it reasoned that the state is not prohibiting live-in relationships but merely regulating them. It essentially took the stance that if a relationship is openly lived, then it is not private.

This is false equivalence: Just because a relationship is visible to the community does not mean the state has automatic authority to demand it be formally recorded. The very idea that the state is compelling registration on pain of punishment raises serious questions about the state's overreach into personal lives and, under the guise of providing 'protection', opens the main gate to surveillance.

Worse. Instead of making sure that the state will protect everyone from threat from any quarter as it is its bounded duty to do for anyone, the law implies that it is in the state's discretion to opt for who

'deserves' protection and who will be denied it.

All this runs counter to the Supreme Court which has repeatedly affirmed the validity of live-in relationships, affirmed the right to privacy and the right to live together without interference. The constitutional imperative requires that like every other individual, women must be and feel safe, whether in public or in private. Not because they are some special category of vulnerable people, but because they are making their own choices in a rule-of-law nation. The state has a duty to actively ensure it and be active in discarding the shackles of outdated traditions that deny women their rightful place in a just and equitable society.

Culture, dynamic and absorptive, shifts unevenly to influence societies, grasping what is just and fair while discarding ossified old prejudices and practices that have long lost their rationale.

In the end, when another and another and another Women's Day rolls around, women's struggle for equality and equity will remain. These values are a practical underpinning for the country's social stability and economic progress. To respect women is to respect the Constitution. Denial is discrimination.



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WITH so much emphasis on women's betterment and empowerment in India these days, it is time we evaluated the story of a programme highlighted as a women beneficiary scheme. It relates to women's role in the panchayat system, which has been acclaimed as truly women-oriented. The state of Haryana is a good example to measure the veracity of this claim.

The Haryana Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Act, 2020 provides 50 per cent reservation for women. Consequently, at present, there are 6,186 sarpanches in Haryana. Of them, 3,621 are male and 2,565 female. Out of these, 1,436 sarpanches belong to the Scheduled Castes, 1,671 to the Other Backward Classes and 3,079 to the general category.

This gives the impression that there has been increased empowerment of women in the gram panchayats of Haryana because the Panchayati Raj System is sarpanch-centric and the

panches have little share in it. The erroneous impression of increased empowerment of women is further strengthened by the fact that education is the basic requirement for a woman to become a sarpanch. Thus, all of them have education above the middle school level, with some of them having education above that level.

However, the claim of increased empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj institutions by prescribing the minimum educational qualification stands challenged by the ground realities.

By making it mandatory for its candidates to be eighth and tenth pass, along with other criteria like the two-child norm and tolets, the Government of Haryana (and Rajasthan) has debared more than 70 per cent of the rural electorate, especially women, from contesting the panchayat poll.

It has also made hardly any difference to the women representatives who get elected as they continue to face discrimination. They are generally ignored and bypassed in official, semi-official and even informal meetings by the male elected representatives. The male officials manning the government machinery, too, generally prefer to interact with the male representatives.

This has fostered the culture of sarpanch pati or *pardah pati*, depriving the elected women representatives of



RIGID NORMS: In Haryana, women are still expected to cover their heads in front of their male peers and elders, especially at public places. TRIBUNE PHOTO

their leadership and voice in public affairs.

What can one expect in a state where rigid socio-cultural norms, such as the *pardah pratha* or the covering of the head by women in front of their male peers, is a reality, more so if the males are elders and they are at a public place.

Women are also required not to speak out in male gatherings in general and cover their face with a veil. This orientation is extended to the panchayat and gram sabha meetings.

The sarpanch's husband, the so-called *sarpanch pati*, is someone who is recognised in the village. People vote for him, and not for the proxy woman candidate. He is the person who mobilises the community on the ground and has a pulse on the local

The district administrations must take a firm stand and not allow the male kin of elected women representatives to function as their proxies.

politics. During elections, be it panchayat, assembly or parliamentary, he is involved in coordinating election efforts. For all practical purposes, once the proxy woman sarpanch is elected, the *sarpanch pati* runs the show.

In fact, this phenomenon of *sarpanch patis* (husbands of the sarpanch) performing the role of their wives who get elected as sarpanch in the village has been extended. Now, there are *sarpanch bhaais* (woman sarpanch's brother), *sarpanch pitas* (sarpanch's father), *sarpanch saasurs* (father-in-law of sarpanch) and *sarpanch jethas* (elder brother-in-law of sarpanch).

This has happened because some families that did not have an educated daughter-in-law decided to field their educated daughters to retain the *chaudhar* (power) in the

village. Some other families hurriedly married their sons to the girls fulfilling the educational qualifications required for contesting the office of the sarpanch.

The position of the backward caste women sarpanches is worse because the landless backward classes from the artisan services or agricultural labour class cannot dare to have any control over the power structure of the village.

The position of the Schedule Caste women sarpanches is the worst because they suffer from a double disadvantage — first as Dalits and secondly as women.

This mixed caste representation is visible in the panchayat meetings, where women representatives are seen wearing the *ghunghat*.

The women representatives face multiple burdens as they are expected to balance their public life with their domestic and caregiving responsibilities.

The elected women are hesitant to take financial decisions independently, which leads to their being dependent on their husbands/male relatives. It restricts the development of an independent mindset as well as a measure of autonomy and independent action.

Moreover, most elected women panchayat members lack sufficient knowledge of the governance structures. As a result, they are often isolated, with hardly any support from the government-

appointed functionaries in the panchayat.

This vacuum creates a space for male relative or other males to step in, effectively rendering the elected women representatives powerless.

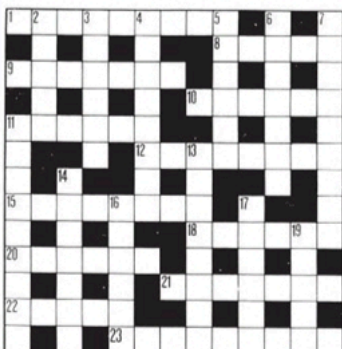
Women's representation in panchayats is, therefore, more symbolic than real. The elected women representatives in most panchayats face a lack of or limited opportunities and access to rapid and customised capacity-building training. They also have very limited access to mentors who can advise and guide them in their new roles, making them effective political leaders. They must get training in effective local governance.

Clearly, there is an urgent need to rectify the matters. The district administrations must take a firm stand and not allow the male kin of elected women representatives to function as their proxies.

Further, a group of educated women must be formed by the Women and Child Development Department to assist the women sarpanches. Self-help groups may also be encouraged to extend logistic support to the women sarpanches. For capacity-building of women sarpanches, exclusive programmes may be organised.

All these efforts are urgently needed as the Haryana society remains rooted in a culture which is hardly mindful of women's rights.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS


- 1 Bear critical examination (4,5)
- 8 Nimble (5)
- 9 Before long (7)
- 10 Nonsense (6)
- 11 Decisive moment (6)
- 12 Prominence (8)
- 15 A financial stake (8)
- 18 (Chao) nod horizontally (6)
- 20 Alcoholic spirit distilled from wine (6)
- 21 Final goal of Buddhism (7)
- 22 Point of view (5)
- 23 Create a stir (4,5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Pilgrim, 4 Pivot, 7 Tack, 8 Clarinet, 10 Here and now, 12 Rather, 13 Garlic, 15 Join forces, 18 Broadway, 19 Pail, 20 Extra, 21 Society.

Down: 1 Pitch, 2 Lacinate, 3 Malady, 4 Percolator, 5 Vent, 6 Titanic, 9 Have no idea, 11 Blockade, 12 Risible, 14 In-laws, 16 Sukky, 17 Lout.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR
MARCH 8, 2025, SATURDAY

- Shukla Samvrit 19:46
- Phalgun Shukla 17
- Phalgun Purnimite 25
- Hijaz 14:46
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 9, up to 8:17 am
- Ayushman Yoga up to 4:24 pm
- Aardra Nakshatra up to 11:29 pm
- Moon in Gemini sign

FORECAST

	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	18:26 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	26	10	
New Delhi	31	12	
Amritsar	27	10	
Bathinda	28	09	
Jalandhar	27	09	
Ludhiana	28	12	
Bhivani	30	11	
Hisar	30	10	
Sirsa	29	11	
Dharamsala	21	06	
Manali	18	03	
Shimla	18	09	
Srinagar	16	01	
Jammu	25	10	
Kargil	-01	-13	
Leh	0	-14	
Dehradun	23	09	
Mussoorie	20	06	

Ukraine peace talks require a real US security guarantee



ANDREAS KLUTH

Don't be distracted by whatever "minerals deal" the US and Ukraine may or may not hash out in the coming weeks, for it will not address the main obstacle to the kind of cease-fire between Russia and Ukraine that US President Donald Trump so badly wants to broker. That question is: How can third-party guarantors credibly assure the security of Ukraine after an armistice?

Credibility: Every devil in every detail is wrapped up in that one word. The concept is so slippery that it kept strategists busy at least since the American scholar Thomas Schelling (who later won a Nobel Prize for his work in game theory) analysed types of deterrence during the early Cold War. We can't ask Schelling to weigh in on Ukraine today (he died in 2016). But here's what he wrote about American troops — and obliquely about their British and French partners as well — stationed in West Berlin at the time.

"What can 70,000 American troops do, or 12,000 Allied troops?" he asked. "Bluntly, they can die. They can die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there. They represent the pride, the honour and the reputation of the United States government and its armed forces; and they can apparently hold the entire Red Army at bay." What Schelling was

describing is a tripwire force. A literal tripwire is a thread that, when a trespasser stumbles over it, triggers an alarm or a detonation or some other consequence that the intruder has reason to fear. A metaphorical tripwire is a relatively modest deployment of troops that could never stop an invading army but that would, if eliminated by the enemy, compel the home nation to seek revenge and enter the war.

Deterrence is said to be strong when two conditions are met. First, the country (or coalition) that sent the tripwire force must seem committed to avenging its troops if they are harmed. Second, the country must also be capable of defeating the aggressor, which in the Ukrainian scenario is Russia under its president, Vladimir Putin.

The Allied tripwire forces in West Berlin and West Germany were an example of successful deterrence: The Cold

War, despite several hair-raising crises, never turned hot. Beyond that case, though, precedents of credible tripwire strategies are rare, as Dan Reiter at Emory University and Paul Post at the University of Chicago have shown.

In 1949, for example, the Americans kept enough forces in East Asia to deter a North Korean attack on South Korea, but by 1950 the American presence shrank, the tripwire lost credibility, and the North went to war. When the US provides the peacekeepers, the question is at least not about theoretical capability — the American military could win any single fight it chooses. Not so when others send the troops. In today's Ukrainian context, too, it is moot whether, say, a Franco-British tripwire force without US capital backing would be credible or credible in deterring Putin from invading again.

Now consider why Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is so disheartened by everything Mr Trump and JD Vance have said and done for the past month, during which they've taken up the Kremlin's absurd narrative that Ukraine (rather than Russia) is the aggressor. During the disastrous bust-up in the Oval Office last week, the point the Ukrainian was trying (and failing) to make was precisely this need for security guarantees to be credible, meaning American-backed.

The security guarantee that Mr Zelenskyy understandably wants, and Mr Putin fears, is Ukraine's accession to NATO. Inexplicably for somebody who fancies himself a dealmaker, Mr Trump has already taken that chip off the table before negotiations have even begun. So neither Europe, NATO and other Western countries are now discussing laying a tripwire without American support. But that runs into the vexed twin question

of capability and credibility. No matter what else Trump and others propose, there is no skirting the dilemma: Earnest cease-fire talks cannot begin without the prospect of credible security guarantees; no guarantee can be credible without the US; but the US under Mr Trump is moving away from such a commitment.

During the Cold War, American presidents of both parties saw the stakes in hotspots such as West Berlin as nothing less than what Schelling called "the pride, the honour, and the reputation of the United States." Mr Trump and Mr Vance are quite clear that they define the stakes in Ukraine which, if fought for its survival as a nation, as little more than the rare earths in its ground. "I'm not worried about security," Mr Trump snarled at Zelenskyy in the Oval Office. "I'm worried about getting the deal done." The more Mr Trump asserts that, the more he undermines the trust, and, thus, enters, talks to end the war.

Bloomberg



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Trick or retreat

It is fashionable to curse Rajiv for Bofors and more, but the truth is that 1985–89 was the only period in our history when weapon acquisitions were proactive and futuristic

This begins with a spoiler alert — if you promise to not read the postscript first. In my column, I play a trick on you.

After ages, India has a chief who speaks the hard truth. Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh has persistently and firmly drawn attention to the Indian Air Force's alarming numbers and technology gap with its rivals. He even held up the mirror to the holiest of the holy among our PSU monopolies, HAL, on cameras and microphones. This is refreshing when you're used to hearing from a succession of chiefs self-playing platitudes like: "We will fight with what we have."

The reaction to the Air Chief breaking the silence barrier is predictable. Anybody pointing to what the armed forces are short of is instinctively accused of being import-hungry or sold out. The insinuation: An evil cabal is preventing India from developing its military, jointly run by the late Stephen P Cohen and Nand Dasgupta (who worked with me at *India Today* three decades ago). The book bemoans the lack of a culture of strategic thinking and planning in India.

The Indian doctrine, they insist, is too old, too episodic, immediate need-based. My own most telling insight on this sits in my rather flimsy personal archives. It's a note scribbled with a pencil on a scrap from Jaswant Singh. He slipped the note from his pocket when he was in the defence ministry, after the late Stephen P Cohen and Nand Dasgupta (who worked with me at *India Today* three decades ago). The book bemoans the lack of a culture of strategic thinking and planning in India.

There is zero evidence this has changed. Because if it had, we would not be buying fighter jets off the shelf, as if picking groceries at a supermarket or toys at Hamleys. Or Spike anti-tank missiles a few hundred at a time, and infantry rifles in batches of 60,000 or three-above. This is not a new phenomenon.

Stockholm-based SIPRI, which estimates imports in terms of constant 1990 dollars, puts the value of India's total arms imports in 10 years (2015-24) at a little over \$237 billion, (9.8 per cent of global arms imports). The average is a mere \$2.3 billion per year.

Two points to note. That Narendra Modi's decisions to order Rafales, Apaches, M-77 mountain howitzers, Harpoon missiles, MH-60 Romeo naval helicopter, and MQ-9B drones,

among others off the shelf were wise and brave, like a senior doctor risking a series of immediate surgeries to save a deteriorating patient. The second is a question. How does the world's fourth-largest military, with two live borders, manage to keep itself in the ICU forever — often needing emergency surgery in the middle of the night over a weekend?

One to make it inconvenient for this columnist. Mr Editor, go get your head examined. How can you accuse a country importing most armaments of suffering from a fear of acquisitions? How can it then be perpetually short of critical weaponry?

These are perfectly valid questions and reflect the multiple paradoxes of India's defence planning, deserving a couple of thoughts. My favourite is the one about the joint venture between the late Stephen P Cohen and Nand Dasgupta (who worked with me at *India Today* three decades ago). The book bemoans the lack of a culture of strategic thinking and planning in India.

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Canberra (since retired), was nursed back to base by a deft crew with a crippled engine. All four were hit by shoulder-fired missiles. Once IAF woke up, bought overnight laser kits from Israel for its night-flying, high-altitude Mirage, the picture changed.

This isn't meant to be a litany of our *"chalta hai"* terrorism. It is to explore a limited question, with apologies to Erica Jong. Why this fear of buying? Since 1987, one reason is the Bofors syndrome. Every defence purchase is fraught, delayed or "thrown in orbit", the description George Fernandes preferred for sending a file into a permanent spiral of indecision. This makes New Delhi the easiest playground for arms dealers, middlemen, and power phenomena, the dedicated, B-to-B, arms bazaar media. The public is confused between negotiations, shifting requirements, a constant whiff of worry that the system is owned by this evil arms trade. At the same time, we import more than any other nation. You want a paradox: A K Antony, our most risk-averse, ended up buying more from Bofors and government-to-government (C-130s, C-17s, P-8Is) deals, than in our entire independent history. Mr Modi resumed that de-risked, emergency-buying tradition, though with more urgency.

The only way to fight phobias is to face them. It is foolish to curse Rajiv for Bofors and more, but the truth is, 1985-89 was the only period in our history when weapon acquisitions were proactive, futuristic and redefined our largely defensive tactical doctrines. Sandurji's Brass Tacks and Checkboard exercises "fought" the war in enemy territory. Even today, much of the modern Indian military, from the Bofors war was procured under Rajiv — Mirages, T-72 tanks, new-series MIGs, BMP armoured fighting vehicles, and, of course, Bofors artillery. During those years, our defence budget crossed the Lakshman Rekha of 4 per cent of GDP.

To understand how self-defeating this phobia is, we have to look back to the 1950s. It was a decade amount to less than half of our annual gold imports and, more tellingly, under 5 per cent of Reliance Industries' import bill and about 8 per cent of that of Indian Oil Corporation, a PSU. Our annual average military imports, at \$2.3 billion, is less than one-fourth of our fertiliser imports. Why is buying for the kisan less scandal-prone or more important than buying for the kargil?

Controversy dogs defence imports not because they are huge, but because they are small, piecemeal, with many vendors, and the "system" games will keep. If we don't conquer this phobia, we will find ourselves in the ICU over a weekend, needing an emergency transfusion, if not surgery, soon.

Postscript: Here's the trick I played on you. I had written a National Interest on April 27, 2015, in the wake of the Rafale controversy. This week, I have mostly written over the same text, changing the figures and updating the context. This shows that the more things change — or don't — the more the world is the fourth-largest military power in the world.

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A gift that keeps giving



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHI DATTA

Yesterday, Intuitive Machines (IM), a private company based out of Houston, Texas, landed an unmanned vehicle, Athena, on the Moon. This is IM's second Moon landing. Another Texas-based company, Aerospace Corp., landed its Blue Ghost lander on Sunday, becoming the second private company to reach Luna.

Both missions are part of NASA's \$2.6 billion Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS) programme, which partners with private industry to cut costs and support Artemis, a mission to return man to the Moon.

Athena will drill in search of ice, tested a 4G network, and launch three rovers along with a new hopping drone, Grace — aptly named after computer scientist Grace Hopper. The earlier IM lander, Odysseus, made it to the surface in February 2024 but it didn't stay upright. There are fears Athena has also landed awkwardly. Both landers are 4.8 metres tall and spin — roughly the height of a giraffe. Most landers tend to squat and boxy because it's easier to keep such a design stable due to a low centre of gravity.

The landers carry a host of gear. There are several privately funded payloads, as well as multiple NASA instruments. Those include a laser retroreflector

to bounce back lasers beamed from Earth, and a low-frequency radio receiver for measuring charged particles.

One of the rovers will try to establish a 4G network, using a new Nokia rover, which connects to the lander. A successful, this will be extended to include other lunar vehicles and eventually provide mobile services to the Artemis Mission, which envisages an orbital station around the Moon, as well as a manned hub on the surface.

Grace hops because that may be the fastest mode of surface travel. The Moon's lack of atmosphere makes flight impossible without using rockets, unlike Mars where NASA successfully landed the Perseverance rover. It will hop into a canyon so deep it has never seen sunlight. If the hopper works, it could make explorations considerably easier.

The Blue Ghost lander from Firefly is designed for a different purpose. It is intended to deliver payloads of up to 150 kg, trip to the lunar surface. This reusable module would be key to meeting the logistics demands of a manned mission, where astronauts work on the Moon for extended periods.

The first lander did consist of multiple scientific experiments. Apart from testing soil, Blue Ghost will deploy radiation-resistant computing equipment for testing. It's already scored a major success. One of its trials, NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO), designed by Italy's space agency, has successfully received global positioning system (GPS) signals beamed from Earth's orbit. In theory, this means lunar locations could be mapped and placed on grids as accurately as terrestrial ones — though the process is more complex and expensive.

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improve mapping and exploration tasks. When combined with a mobile network, it would vastly improve safety parameters for human exploration and would make it much easier to accurately plot trips between Earth and the Moon.

Note that, although the Moon is tiny, we don't really know what one side looks like. The so-called "dark side" is permanently facing away from Earth. Also due to the absence of surface water, the Moon's land area is roughly a quarter of Earth's land area, though its total surface area is only about 7 per cent of Earth's.

Artemis aims to place humans in orbit around the Moon and land a manned mission by 2028. While the timelines may be delayed, Elon Musk has a big personal stake in the success of these missions through SpaceX. So it's unlikely funding will be slashed. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and private players have stakes in Artemis.

Space exploration has its "blue sky" aspect. That is, the discovery process may lead to no immediate payoff.

In the very long term, meaning decades down the line, space mining may be a truly profitable venture. In the short term though, the commercial payoffs will come from adapting the technology developed and gaining a better understanding of the way things work.

Space exploration has delivered solar energy, robotics, global communications, and an improved understanding of climate science. That's quite apart from things like compact gym equipment, autonomous vehicles, and a host of medical and GPS. Space could continue to be the gift that keeps giving.

travel to the Red Planet if given the chance and assurance of a safe return.

The assumption of an augmented safe journey is unlikely to become a reality anytime soon. As Mr Musk himself has put it, "This is a very hard, dangerous, and difficult thing — not for the faint of heart. There's a good chance you'll die; it's going to be pretty glorious if it works out."

Can tourists find Mars an alluring destination? Mr Musk has previously estimated ticket prices for potential Mars travellers between \$100,000 and \$500,000. "Almost anyone can work and save up and eventually go to Mars if they want," he stated. Indeed, Mr Musk? However, if the trip is not safe enough, there would even be enough ultra-rich tourists available?

The expense of colonising Mars is enormous and involves roughly \$1 billion for every tonne of usable payload delivered to the planet's surface. Even the world's richest person wouldn't be able to finance the Mars mission on his own. And if there's no prospect of a profit or return, would the government or private investors be interested?

A fraction of the vast resources aimed at preventing environmental catastrophe on Earth, such as lowering the temperature by 2 degrees Celsius, could that even reduce the urgency for a multiplanetary civilisation? Yet, the Mars project marches on with full vigour, with organisations like NASA, Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin, and Mr Musk's SpaceX — perhaps all vying for the title of Imperator of Mars.

The author is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata



TICKER

MIHIR S SHARMA

American President Donald Trump's second administration has, in a few short weeks, made it obvious that it will be not like his first. Mr Trump is moving far more quickly and decisively on an agenda that is considerably more extreme than what was visible in early 2017.

There are many possible reasons for this change. There are fewer mainstream Republicans in this United States (US) administration than there were in the last, for example, which constrains him less. Those who are part of his movement — or those who want to be for their own ends, like Elon Musk — have had longer to prepare for this moment, given that this victory was not as much of a surprise as 2016.

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Trump has betrayed Ukraine in less surprising than the speed with which he has moved on. There is perhaps no doubt that he had no love lost for the country that was at the centre of his impeachment drama. Nor should it be a shock that the US has acted on trade policy and tariffs with more alacrity than it did in the past. Mr Trump has, if anything, become more invested over time of the utility of protectionism as a source of growth and even revenue.

The multiple fronts on which the new administration has gotten to work in the past weeks have perhaps overwhelmed observers. There's very little analysis of what has been revealed of the broader thrust of the administration's strategy — or, more likely, instincts. And this is a pity, because this is in fact the most surprising thing.

Two things have been long assumed about the Trump movement and Mr Trump himself. First, that the movement is about retaining and re-asserting the US' primacy in world affairs. That is, after all, what a plain reading of "make America great again" (MAGA) would suggest. And second, that the President himself is all about the "art of the deal", and is focused on transactional politics and commerce. But what if both of these things are untrue? Certainly, the first weeks of the second Trump administration have challenged these assumptions.

Far from focusing on American leadership, the MAGA movement is happier with American retreat. It does not see the need for the US to patrol the world's seas at great expense, or to have a long list of tributary and dependent states. It does not even want to bring its enemies — Russia, China, or Iran — low if doing so would impose the slightest burden on the rest of the world. And Mr Trump's behaviour, alongside that of his administration, is not focused on a rational, transactional restructuring of US commitments. No, it feels profoundly ideological: Refocusing the US as a managed democracy with traditional values. His partisans in this are those countries with similar approaches, Russia and China, not those who are disappointingly liberal, like Europe and Canada. Europe will get higher tariffs than China, because he dislikes the former more. This is an unusually ideologically committed government, it is just so much a reverse that the shift has gone unnoticed.

Imperator of Mars

EYE CULTURE

ATANU BISWAS

Elon Musk made his stage debut at a campaign rally alongside Donald Trump on October 5 at the Butler, Pennsylvania, rural farm show-ground. But did everyone notice the T-shirt peeking out from under his jacket? "Occupy Mars" was written there as a slogan.

Mr Musk's SpaceX delayed its eighth Starship rocket test this week due to a booster problem. The world's richest person is indeed a dream merchant. His SpaceX aims to put humans on Mars by 2026 and then build a self-sustaining city of a million inhabitants by 2050, perhaps under glass domes, as portrayed in James S.A. Corey's series of novels *The Expanse*. Apparently, Mr Musk fears an impending "population collapse" on Earth and wants to ensure that life — of all species — can continue elsewhere if a meteor strike, like the one that wiped out the dinosaurs, occurs, or if World War III breaks out and humanity destroys itself. As one may remember, in the Anthony Hoffman-directed 2000 film *The Planet*, set in 2056, humanity has been terraforming Mars as its new home by bringing atmosphere-producing algae to its surface in response to Earth's ecological crises. Sounds somewhat similar?

Mr Musk is aware that the process of colonising Mars would involve a fleet of reusable spaceships, a substantial financial outlay that might never be recovered, courageous

explorers prepared to die in the adventure, and eventually a resident population.

Sometime in 2021, the Tesla boss changed his Twitter — now X — bio to read: "Technoking of Mars, Imperator of Mars." In ancient Rome, "Imperator" referred to an emperor or military commander. However, Mr Musk by no means the first to champion the idea of colonising Mars. Many of his fans have depicted that the first lander did consist of multiple scientific experiments. Apart from testing soil, Blue Ghost will deploy radiation-resistant computing equipment for testing. It's already scored a major success. One of its trials, NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO), designed by Italy's space agency, has successfully received global positioning system (GPS) signals beamed from Earth's orbit. In theory, this means lunar locations could be mapped and placed on grids as accurately as terrestrial ones — though the process is more complex and expensive.

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The best way to predict the future is to create it

Peter Drucker

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

— Ramnath Goenka

REVERSE CAPEX DROP, PRIVATE FINANCE STALL FOR SMOOTH GROWTH

PRIVATE sector investments remain the missing link in India's growth. Latest estimates show private sector capital expenditure fell to a three-year low of 11.2 percent in 2023-24, below the pre-Covid average of 11.8 percent. Worryingly, analysts believe the downward trend will likely continue in the current fiscal, with capex potentially dropping below 11 percent of GDP. This is despite India Inc's profitability touching near decadal highs. Crisil says corporate revenue growth will likely accelerate to 8 percent in 2025-26 on the back of higher volumes. At the same time, profitability is set to increase for the third successive year on the back of soft commodity prices. However, companies are deploying money to retire debt rather than investing in creating new capacities when capacity utilisation levels are high. Uncertainties due to a volatile global environment and unevenness in domestic demand are also restraining corporates from unleashing animal spirits.

Between 2015 and 2020, investments stagnated at 29.9 percent owing to delays in project execution, the twin-balance problem and a high percentage of bad loans among private and public sector banks. They further fell to a two-decade low of 27.5 percent during pandemic. Though the annual investment rate briefly rose in subsequent years, the anticipated broad-based upswing in private capex remained elusive, reflective of broader challenges in reviving the private investment cycle. A sectoral analysis shows the decline in the investment rate was driven by the services and industrial sectors, whose investment rate fell from 4.3 percent and 6.7 percent in 2022-23 to 3.1 percent and 6.2 percent in 2023-24, respectively.

Undeniably, investment stagnation leads to slower economic growth and higher unemployment rates. As the recent Economic Survey outlined, India needs an investment rate of at least 35 percent to emerge as a developed nation by 2047. But the RBI dashed all hopes, stating that a revival in the private investment cycle would be improbable in the coming year, though Governor Sanjay Malhotra pointed towards strong corporate balance sheets. The government's recent efforts to restart the virtuous cycle of consumption and employment via capex boost post-Covid failed to deliver. So, it turned to tax cuts and now hopes the recent personal IT reduction will boost purchasing power, which, in turn, will kickstart private investment.

ASHA PROTEST GENUINE, RESOLVE, DO NOT MOCK

THE Left government in Kerala is drawing flak for its handling of the agitation by Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), and rightly so. Their protest, demanding a higher honorarium and other benefits, is nearing a month. The government has done precious little to end the stalemate, apart from blaming the Centre. Naturally the agitation has triggered a political slugfest, with the opposition using the opportunity to settle scores. The ASHAs—community health workers engaged under the National Health Mission (NHM)—number 26,125 in Kerala and are demanding their pending wages, increase in monthly honorarium from ₹7,000 to ₹21,000, retirement benefits of ₹5 lakh and fixed working hours.

The Kerala government argues that the NHM is a central scheme. The workers are considered volunteers, not regular employees, and hence, the minimum daily wage of ₹700, promised in the ruling LDF's election manifesto, does not apply to them. It claims the Centre is yet to clear ₹100 crore meant for ASHAs and Kerala already pays the highest honorarium among the states. The protesters argue ASHAs work for the state health department and the honorarium is its responsibility. The opposition has accused the government of misleading people, saying the Centre has already released ₹815 crore of the ₹915 crore allocated to Kerala for all NHM schemes (not just ASHA).

Government actions vitiated the atmosphere, including unsavoury remarks by ruling front leaders against ASHAs, the government's sudden decision to train 1,300 people on work on various health programmes, NHM state arm's threat to dismiss the workers on protest, police action against them and the personal attack on Kerala ASHA Health Workers Association vice-president S Mini. These actions were seen as intimidation tactics.

The government must acknowledge ASHA workers' contribution to Kerala's commendable strides in healthcare, not ridicule their agitation. Since the agitation began, support from civil society has been pouring in, and prominent people have spoken out against the government's tactics. ASHAs are underpaid and overworked even as their role has expanded. It's a shame their fight for minimum wages, recognition, and dignity has become a matter of cheap politics. The government must engage with the activists, address their grievances, and end the protest.

QUICK TAKE

SHRUGGING OFF RAGGING WORSE

THREE recent ragging incidents in Kerala made the High Court ask the government to strengthen its anti-ragging legislation. The laws and UGC guidelines are adequate. The problem is indifferent enforcement. Action ensues only when victims report ragging or get killed or grievously injured. Let educational institutions found apathetic and dismissing ragging complaints as trivial fake fund cuts or de-recognition. Convert anti-ragging committees in colleges into monitoring panels with the authority to intervene. The government must mandate fast-track trials in every ragging case for swift justice. Disabuse students of the notion that ragging is a tradition. It can turn victims into future assaulters if the cycle of abuse continues.

THIS question pops up time and again. The most recent pop-up happened at the disastrous Oval Office meeting of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine, with the irrepressible Donald Trump, President of the United States. Well nigh near the close of the abruptly truncated visit, Zelenskyy was asked how he was dressed by a rather straight-jacketed Brian Glen, a correspondent with the right-wing cable network, 'Real America's Voice'. "Why don't you wear a suit? Do you own a suit?" Zelenskyy's reply was quick and measured. He said, "I will wear a costume after this war finishes. Maybe like yours. Or better. Cheaper."

Both the question and the answer are worth discussing. The question was meant to put Zelenskyy in a corner, telling him that he was not thankful enough to the president and the US for all it has contributed to the war kitty; it also told the president of Ukraine that he could not be so casual with the US and its people. Clothes make a man. Clothes convey respect. Clothes are deferential even. Clothes cannot look as defiant as a sweat-shirt and a pair of jeans.

Zelenskyy's answer was a classic repartee as well. Instead of being offended, he clothed his reply with the troubles of his people and the war. And then he hastened to say he could do one better on the correspondent, at least in terms of a suit. He quickly added "cheaper" to bring home the wartime realities of his nation.

The key question, then, Are the clothes you wear important? Must you dress for events? Must you dress for the role, or must the role dress you? What is formal? And what is informal? A fortnight before the Zelenskyy-Trump meet, there had been a Modi-Trump meet in the same of office, with both leaders seated on the edge of yellow upholstered sofas. PM Modi was in a very Indian and dignified Bandhgala and, underneath it, a kurta-salwar. He was 'desi' and 'formal' (whatever that means). The beauty of a Bandhgala is that you don't have to wear a tie to make a jacket look formal. The Bandhgala is by itself entirely formal (that is, if showing your neck is meant to be informal).

The clothes that leaders wear, whether in the context of political or corporate leadership, have always been a matter of debate. In India, the moment a leader is in a suit and tie, it means he is senior and occupies a dignified position in whatever he is doing. The necktie, in many ways, signifies an extreme sense of formality. Those who wear neckties are meant to be

Earlier, how you dressed spoke of your standing in your career. Important people wore suits and ties. But today, the focus is more on comfort, and highlighting the quality of work over clothes

DO THE CLOTHES YOU WEAR DEFINE YOU AND MUST THEY?

HARISH BUJOR

Brand Guru and Founder, Harish Bajor Consults



MANDAR PANDHAR

at the top of the perch. They are the ones who sit in air-conditioned offices. Corner offices even. Those who do not are the ones in the field. They work in the sun. To see Gen Z lingo, they 'hit the grass'. They are in the real world of hard work.

And then things changed in India. As the type-of-work pie changed in the country, in came IT, ITES and a whole set of work related to writing code, enabling end-to-end services and delivering customer service at the back end. The whole profile of work changed. Somewhere in the 70s then, the tie and jacket moved down the pyramid of workers' profiles. Salesmen who front-ended the company with customers were expected to be in a tie and jacket, and those at the back end could wear less formal clothes.

Trousers and long-sleeved shirts became the norm for the latter.

And then things changed even more. The very profile of those who worked in the new-age tech-led workspace changed. Employees were younger, much more irreverent and ready to bring themselves into the workplace in all kinds of 'costumes'. They nudged the boundaries of what corporate HR would tolerate. Today, IT workspaces, and more so workspaces that revel in mind-work of every kind (GenAI, quantum computing included), are much more informal in dressing than ever before. It is not common to find a techie at the workplace in loose gym pants and a T-shirt. And the foot is no longer cloistered in a tight pair of formal leather shoes, or, for that matter, the more

SAFFRON SIZZLES, BROCCOLI BECKONS: NEW-AGE FARMING

MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior Journalist

REVERSE SWING

AND software-driven precision. I think some of his dreams are easier to realise now. Internet apps and data analysis platforms can now monitor crop health and guide precision farming, not to mention accurate weather forecasts.

Entrepreneurs find new ways to succeed if costs and benefits make sense. A few days ago, I watched a Tamil news channel



Agriculture startups like DeHaan, AgroStar, and Ninjacart treat farmers like entrepreneurs by using soil testing, distribution, and consulting practices. A series of Indian websites now offer education on everything from quinoa cultivation to urban farming

show a fish farmer in Tamil Nadu who literally bought tonnes of watermelons at wholesale prices and emptied a truckload into a pond because that helps breed fish by the shoals!

Last year, there was news of Shashi Kumar, who quit a career in Wipro after 17 years to pursue his passion for organic farming and received high-profile venture capital that made headlines. The government of PM Narendra Modi, besides steering crop insurance and direct transfer of funds to farmers, has been advocating practices like the use of neem-coated urea to absorb nitrogen. That conserves urea, which India imports from half a dozen countries. The government is also report-

ed to including hydroponics, precision agriculture, and aquaponics in its new horticulture mission.

There are, of course, nagging questions on how a wide range of new-age practices can aid the average farmer. Agriculture startups like DeHaan, AgroStar, and Ninjacart treat farmers like entrepreneurs by using soil testing, distribution, and consulting practices. But we do need to ask if these startups are only latter-day middlemen or mentors to boost farm incomes.

A series of Indian websites now offer education on everything from quinoa cultivation to urban farming. I was impressed by one claim that said investing ₹7,000 per acre in the cultivation of quinoa can result in a 750-kg yield and fetch ₹75,000 in annual revenue. Online retail prices of quinoa, upwards of ₹450 per kg, seem to back this.

Exotic stuff can turn cheap if demand for fashionable food items like quinoa surges. I recently bought broccoli at a mere ₹20 a kg at my local mandi—an incredible journey from the 1990s when the vegetable was associated with expensive salads in five-star hotels.

Jitendra Ladkat, a Pune farmer, reportedly brought the first few broccoli seeds from Kenya during the Gulf War in 1990. That must join the league of various vegetables, such as mushrooms, considered of foreign origin or taste and are now readily available in India.

However, nothing can replace large-scale price support that can make farmers invest in new practices. In the 1990s, PepsiCo was compelled to meet special obligations as part of its entry into India. While that became part of a strategy to sell its cola, there is no doubt its agricultural push aided farmers by introducing contract farming for tomatoes and potatoes.

Ultimately, it is not technology but money that can help farmers reverse-swing from crisis to comfort. Without scalable incentives, farmers cannot quite go against the ubiquitous grain!

(Views are personal) (On X @madversity)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@morningstandard.in

Censorship woes

Ref: Filmmakers, self-censor, keep off gross violence (Mar 7). Films glorify violence to such an extent that impressionable minds will easily sway towards violence in real life. Censorship is itself not beyond censure as one cannot imagine how they certify movies as 'U' when it smacks of bloodshed and grueling torture scenes. The government must step in with drastic measures for proper censorship. Parsa V R Rao, Hyderabad

Surging crime

I wouldn't subscribe to the theory that the film industry is largely responsible for the surge of crimes in India. Ineffective or absence of proper parenting, unbridled access to toxic substances, peer pressure, fear of failure and rapidly changing lifestyle, all contribute to the attempts at wrongdoing. Sanath Kumar T, Thrissur

Startup challenges

Ref: Role of entrepreneurial torque and original startups (Mar 7). The story of Jamsetji Tata, VOC Pillai, and Narottam Morarjee shows the tough challenges of starting a business. Tata and Pillai faced unfair practices from powerful British companies and a colonial government. In contrast, Morarjee succeeded due to a more supportive post-World War I situation and a well-rounded approach that included training, trading, and shipbuilding. NR Jagannath, Bengaluru

Business environment

Tata, VOC and Narottam had the inherent entrepreneurial torque. But only Narottam's strategy succeeded. All upcoming entrepreneurs must realise that though entrepreneurial torque is essential, the business environment and strategy matter for any startup to succeed. Katragadda Sarveswara Rao, Bhuvanagiri

Khalistani trouble

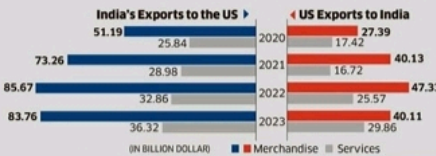
Ref: Khalistani bid to heckle Jai Shikhar (Mar 7). The breach of security during the External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to the UK by a group of extremists is unacceptable and unpardonable. Such dangerous and intolerant activities should be nipped in the bud. R Pichumani, Kumbakonam

Enforcing Hindi

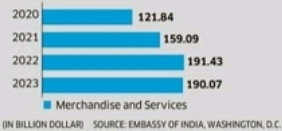
The three-language curriculum is just a backdrop story to enforce Hindi. In India, over five hundred million people speak languages unconnected or feebly connected to Hindi. Adding Hindi to their curriculum will not add any value. Instead, resources should be better utilised to improve the standard in other vital subjects, where we lag badly. Venkat Ramana Naidu, Hyderabad

DOING BUSINESS WITH UNCLE SAM

The US is the largest trading partner of India



Total Bilateral Trade between India and the US



Reciprocal Tariff March 4, 2025: Trump announces that the US will impose reciprocal tariffs on India, others from April 2, 2025

- Implications for India**

1 If the US imposes a uniform tariff, Indian exports could face an **additional tariff of 8.9%**, compared to the current 2.8%
- 2 Indian farm exports would be hit hardest, with shrimp, dairy, and processed foods facing up to **38.2% tariffs**
- 3 Pharmaceuticals (10.9% tariff), diamonds and jewellery (13.3%), and electronics (7.2%) face major risks

SOURCE: GTRI REPORT, FEB 2025

Tariff threats and trade talks

GYANENDRA KESHRI
DH NEWS SERVICE

As he joined Prime Minister Narendra Modi to address journalists at the East Room of the White House on February 13, President Donald Trump did his usual ranting about India's high tariffs on US exports and vowed to impose reciprocal tariffs. But he also noted that Modi's government in New Delhi, "as a signal of good faith", recently moved to slash tariffs on several products to help boost US exports to India. The leaders also announced that the two nations would restart negotiations for a trade agreement with the target of concluding at least the first part of it by fall 2025. So, the policymakers in New Delhi, as well as the trading community, were expecting that the US president might take a softer stance on India. "We were expecting that since India and the US decided to negotiate a bilateral trade agreement, we might be given a long rope," said Federation of Indian Export Organisation (FIEO) Director General Ajay Sahai. The expectations were belied, though.

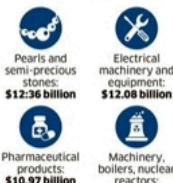
Trump announced on March 4 that the US would impose reciprocal tariffs on India, along with other nations, on April 2. The announcement was made when Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal was in Washington, D.C., to set the stage for starting negotiations for the trade deal. Sahai said that Trump's announcement about reciprocal tariffs on India's exports to the US could be a kind of posturing to expedite the trade negotiations and extract a more favourable deal. Pankaj Chadha, chairman of the Engineering Export Promotion Council (EEPC), said that any undue concession promised to the US, especially in sectors like auto and food products, could trigger similar demands from other trading partners of India. "We are also negotiating trade agreements with the UK and the EU. If we give concessions to the US, they will also ask for the same," said Chadha. India already offers favourable deals to the US when compared with other countries. The weighted average tariff in India on US goods is 7.7%, which is lower than the overall average of around 11%. Earlier this year, India lowered tariffs on several

US products, including bourbon whiskey, motorcycles, Information and Communication Technology and metal goods. There is, however, a substantial – around five percentage point – gap in the average tariffs charged by the US and India. The weighted average tariff imposed by the US on Indian goods is 2.8%. This means that average tariffs imposed by India are 4.9% higher when compared with the US. It is still not clear how the US will implement reciprocal tariffs. It could be zero-for-zero, or matching tariffs product-wise or the country weighted average. Mithleshwar Thakur, secretary general of Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEPF), said that India should offer a zero-for-zero deal to the US on apparel products. In 2024, the value of India's apparel exports to the US stood at \$5.2 billion, while imports were negligible. Around 35% of India's total apparel exports go to the US. Thakur expressed hope that the bilateral trade agreement would not only mitigate the potential risk of tariffs but also create possibilities for enhancing apparel exports to the US.

But can a trade deal with the US shield India from tariff wars like the one unleashed by Trump? The experiences of Canada and Mexico, which have a tripartite trade agreement with the US, are not reassuring. Trump targeted both neighbours of the US with tariffs. The Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) stated that the trade deal should ensure easier market access and regulatory harmonization so that Indian products and services could find a greater foothold in the US market and vice versa.



Major exports from India to the US in 2023



Major exports from the US to India in 2023



India must resist US pressure

AJAY SRIVASTAVA

United States President Donald Trump's recent announcement about imposing reciprocal tariffs on India from April 2 didn't come as a surprise. He has already imposed tariffs on Mexico, Canada, and China and threatened to do the same with the European Union and other trade partners of the US.



However, as India and the US have agreed to negotiate a comprehensive multi-sectoral trade agreement during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the White House on February 13, Trump's latest announcement raises an important question: Can any meaningful negotiation progress under the imminent threat of reciprocal tariffs?

Negotiating a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the US under such circumstances is not in India's best interest. Washington's demands would likely extend beyond tariff cuts to include opening government procurement for US companies, reducing agricultural subsidies, weakening patent protections, and allowing unrestricted data flows – concessions India has resisted for decades. Trump has a track record of renegotiating or outrightly disregarding trade agreements. This was evident when he dismantled the North American Free Trade Agreement in 2018-19, replacing it with the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). Yet, despite negotiating and finalizing the USMCA, he is now imposing tariffs that violate its terms. Given these factors, India should avoid committing to a comprehensive FTA with the US and instead explore alternative trade strategies.

Zero-for-Zero strategy

One viable approach for India is a Zero-for-Zero tariff deal. Under this framework, India could propose eliminating tariffs on most industrial products from the US, provided the Trump Administration reciprocates by removing duties on Indian goods. India could identify tariff lines where it already permits duty-free imports under the existing FTAs, ensuring minimal disruption to domestic

industries. Importantly, agriculture should be excluded from this arrangement to safeguard India's farmers and rural economy. India should present this proposal before April 2, pre-empting any punitive US tariff decisions. If other countries raise objections, India can later notify the deal to the World Trade Organization (WTO) as a goods-only value agreement. The approach would allow India to retain control over its trade policy while avoiding the broader risks of a full-fledged FTA.

US reciprocal tariffs: Impact on India

The US argues that while it keeps tariffs low on foreign goods, other countries impose higher tariffs, leading to a trade deficit of over \$1 trillion and harming its industries and workers. To address this, President Trump introduced the reciprocal tariff plan on February 13, allowing the US to raise tariffs on countries with which it has a trade deficit. For India, Trump's proposed reciprocal tariffs could have varied sectoral impacts. More concerning is that Trump's approach might not be limited to tariff differentials alone. He may factor in non-tariff barriers and local taxes like GST, further increasing retaliatory tariffs. For a few sectors, new tariffs may not mean much. For example, even without new tariffs, India's passenger car exports to the US have already seen a decline. In FY 2024, these exports were worth \$12.9 million and could fall below \$8 million in FY 2025. A 100% tariff would dampen this already limited trade, but the impact would be negligible considering the low values involved. India may not agree to substantial tariff cuts on automobiles. The US is India's largest trade partner, with bilateral trade in goods and services exceeding \$190 billion in 2024. Indian businesses are concerned about the impact of Trump's tariffs. But Trump's tariff threats reinforce the need for India to adopt a cautious and strategic approach in its trade negotiations with the US. Any deal must protect India's core interests, including tariff flexibility, government procurement autonomy, and agricultural subsidies. As global trade tensions rise, India must remain proactive in safeguarding its economic interests against shifting US policies. (The writer is the founder of the Global Trade Research Initiative.)

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

What Trump's climate rollbacks mean to India

Impact on the renewable energy sector may be huge, writes Kavitha Yarlagadda

As climate disasters such as raging wildfires and hurricanes cause widespread devastation, and extreme heat waves break records, the Donald Trump administration has taken a controversial step that could worsen the crisis. By officially withdrawing the United States from the Paris Agreement, the Trump administration has signalled an undermining of efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and slowing progress in the fight against climate change. This decision weakens international cooperation and raises concerns about the long-term environmental and economic consequences, as the absence of US leadership may encourage other nations to scale back their climate goals. The US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement weakens global climate cooperation and may place a greater burden on developing nations like India. This change could limit climate finance for these countries, making implementing mitigation and adaptation efforts harder. Additionally, it may shrink the available emission space and increase emission costs for other nations, potentially affecting India's economy. President Donald Trump also signed an executive order promoting plastic drinking straws, countering previous efforts to reduce single-use plastics and address waste. This move was part of his broader rollback of environmental policies, including his decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Climate Agreement for the second time early in his second term. Trump's withdrawal looked like a sign to other nations that they could weaken their climate commitments. Some countries, especially in Europe, reinforced their dedication to the agreement, while global efforts to



reduce emissions lost momentum due to the US stepping back. The United States continues to be a key consumer and producer of coal despite the rise of renewable energy. While coal consumption and production have declined in recent years, they remain a significant source of electricity generation in the country. Despite the decline of coal consumption in the US, the new administration under President Donald Trump may reverse this trend. On his first day in office, Trump declared a national energy emergency and later announced that coal could be a fuel source for new power plants. Despite record-breaking growth last year, the renewable energy sector now faces uncertainty. Trump's policies have challenged clean energy, though experts believe growth will continue. A major impact of the US exit from the Paris Agreement was the sudden halt in climate finance. This fund was intended to help developing nations adopt renewable energy, strengthen infrastructure, and adapt to climate change. While the US had committed \$3 billion, only a tiny portion was delivered under Trump. The withdrawal of financial support also hindered global efforts in climate adaptation and emissions reduction, particularly in poorer countries that are most at risk. The Trump administration reversed over 100 environmental regulations, including vehicle

fuel efficiency standards and power plant emissions limits. One major rollback was loosening restrictions on coal-fired power plants, a major contributor to US greenhouse gas emissions. Trump justified these measures as efforts to revive the energy sector and create jobs in coal-producing regions. Under the Trump administration, US greenhouse gas emissions could increase by up to 36% above current policy projections by 2035. This shift may also lead to higher household energy costs and increased reliance on imported oil and gas. The United States was expected to contribute to the Green Climate Fund (GCF), but with reduced funding, India may have to depend on countries like Europe and Japan for support. The GCF aids developing nations in cutting greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing climate resilience. Historically, the US has been a key donor, and its withdrawal could hinder technology transfers, delaying advancements in green hydrogen, battery storage, and other critical clean energy innovations in India. The Avana Sustainability Fund (ASF) is a USD 120 million venture capital fund that aims to invest in early-stage climate technology companies in India. US \$4.5 million was invested in Avana as part of the GCF fund. The India E-mobility programme also received GCF funding. There are many more ongoing GCF-funded programs in India. Established

under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2010. The US is the largest buyer of carbon credits, and its policy changes could drive prices down, affecting Indian companies that rely on exports or US demand for growth. Companies in emission-reducing sectors like waste management, transportation, renewables, energy efficiency, and reforestation stand to gain from climate action efforts. In India, too, benefits are mainly generated through afforestation, renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, and carbon capture projects. Carbon credit sales help reduce greenhouse gas emissions in India while driving investment in clean technology and sustainable practices, fostering economic growth. The Trump administration may impose tariffs on wind turbines and solar panels, further impacting India's renewable energy sector. Trade barriers could slow progress by increasing technology and raw material costs, which many Indian companies depend on for their expansion and sustainability efforts. If the new administration cuts Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) incentives and raises import tariffs, Indian exporters may face additional challenges. As the module manufacturing sector becomes increasingly competitive, the risk of overcapacity by FY28 could pressure Indian manufacturers. In such a scenario, smaller players may struggle to survive. Since most of India's module exports go to the US, expanding US domestic capacity driven by IRA incentives could further limit opportunities for Indian manufacturers. Trump's dismantling of USAID threatens billions in climate funding. USAID's funding has supported one of Zimbabwe's largest disaster relief programmes, helping smallholder farmers improve water stability through rain catchment systems and soil restoration. Without this funding, Zimbabwe will struggle to meet its Paris Agreement commitments, including renewable energy development and drought and flood protection investments. However, USAID's renewable energy initiatives may endure as they do not rely on ongoing agency involvement. India has actively advanced green hydrogen, battery technology and renewable energy initiatives. Without US support in technology transfer and investments, sustaining progress in these areas may become difficult.

DID YOU KNOW?

Tracing how bird songs evolved

How did bird songs evolve? New research from the University of Oxford has provided fresh insights, revealing a key role for population dynamics in shaping song diversity and change. The researchers spent three years collecting over 20,000 hours of sound recordings from a wild population of great tits (*Parus major*) in Oxfordshire. They form a part of a collection of 100,000 such songs collected over the years. The researchers wanted to investigate how the movement, age, and turnover of birds within a population influences the diversity and evolution of their songs – including which songs become locally popular, which fade away, and how varied their song repertoires become. They used a new approach involving training an AI model to recognise individual birds based on their songs alone and measure song differences between individuals. The method allowed them to track variations in song repertoires across the population and uncover patterns in song evolution. The results showed that birds of similar age tend to have more similar repertoires, with mixed-age neighbourhoods having higher cultural diversity. Furthermore, the pace of song turnover within neighbourhoods is driven by individuals coming and going. When birds leave or die, many song types disappear with them. The young birds that replace them can speed up the adoption of new song types. Also, age serves as a brake on change, as older birds continue to sing song types that are becoming less frequent in the population. Thus, older birds can function as 'song repositories' of older song types that younger birds may not know, just as grandparents might remember songs that today's teenagers have never heard. However, age is not the sole factor influencing song change. The study also found that when birds mix more – through increased local dispersal and the arrival of immigrants – they tend to adopt more common songs, which also slows the pace of song evolution. 'Homegrown' songs tend to stay unique. Areas where birds stay close to their birthplace maintain more diverse and unique song cultures, similar to how isolated human communities often develop distinct dialects or musical styles. The results indicated that newcomers tend to adapt but also enrich song diversity. Immigrant birds typically adopt local songs rather than introducing entirely new tunes. However, they tend to learn more songs overall, enriching the local 'musical scene.' Just as human communities develop distinct dialects and musical traditions, some birds also have evolving local song cultures. Our study shows how population dynamics – the comings and goings of individual birds – affect this cultural learning process, influencing song diversity and the pace of change," said lead researcher Nilo Merino Recalde from the Department of Biology, University of Oxford. The findings have been published in *Current Biology*.



- Kalyan Ray

"With more than 11 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh entirely dependent on humanitarian aid, the drastic aid cut by the World Food Programme will put immense strain on families."

—THE DAILY STAR

THE IDEAS PAGE

Diplomacy & table manners

The 'impoliteness' of Donald Trump and JD Vance should not be seen as an aberration. For, that directs us to the spurious belief in polite and civilised world leaders who have our best interests at heart



SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

BY ONE ACCOUNT, between the end of World War II and the opening decade of the 21st century, the United States had carried out operations to destabilise, overthrow and supplant foreign governments in over 70 countries. In the late 1940s, with president Harry S Truman in power, the US intervened in Greece on behalf of pro-monarchist forces against Communist ones; in 1953, during the Eisenhower presidency, the US was involved in the overthrow of Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh and the restoration of the autocracy of the Shah; in 1960, also under Eisenhower, CIA-supported activities led to the assassination of the president of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba; from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the actions of a variety of US presidents led to the Vietnam War; and, in 1973, during the Nixon presidency, American support led the establishment of the murderous regime of Augusto Pinochet in Chile. The American political schedule as "leader of the free world" is a very extensive one indeed.

Over the past few days, there has been a great deal of public commentary decrying the "bullying" and "rudeness" displayed by Donald Trump and his deputy JD Vance towards the Ukrainian head of state, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Trump's presidency has been singled out as a completely new era of 'American imperialism', one marked by crassness of language, lack of diplomatic niceties, sexism and undisguised misogyny. Nothing troubles Euro-American (and, quite often, Indian) liberalism more than the lack of table manners. The manner in which the Trump presidency has come in for criticism and condemnation would seem to suggest that it is qualitatively different from those of his predecessors, those that bullied and damaged the world in the name of promoting and preserving democratic values. The current episode is, however, primarily about the need to have table manners when conducting the affairs of the world.

Barring the rudeness factor, American dealings with the world under the Trumpist Male America Great Again (MAGA) era are no different. The key role of the idea of a very rude current American president is to paint the American past — and past American presidents — as better. This, in turn, is linked to the idea of Vladimir Putin as a power-hungry madman, acting in ways that are both incomprehensible and beyond European 'civilisational values'. European civilisational values



C R Sasikumar

and table manners, we should remember, flourished alongside European colonial endeavours. King Leopold II (1835-1909) of Belgium constructed some very beautiful buildings in Brussels through wealth extraction from Congo based on forms of brutality that no other colonial power could match. Ideas of a rude Trump and an 'uncivilised' Putin — along with a 'heroic' Zelenskyy — allow Western governments and media commentators to present the situation as a simple confrontation between politeness and civility on the one hand and madness and megalomania on the other.

The issue of Ukraine's membership of NATO and Putin's objection to it is not a simple matter of a head of state bullying a much smaller country into submission. It has everything to do with the nature of the modern nation-states. Wherever possible, each state to defend its perceived interests. In this, the Russian nation-state is no different from others. It is not any more imperial in its ambitions than, say, European ones. It is worth remembering that France and the United States continue to hold territories that they acquired during the heydays of their own imperial ambitions.

To psychologise the interests of the Russian nation state in seeking to counter endless NATO expansion through centring the argument on Putin's personality — "he is a madman" — is to argue that "polite" and "civilised" American and European heads of state make for a better world. It masks the multiple ways in which — as the German philosopher Walter Benjamin said — barbarism is the flip side of civilisation. It dignifies the argument that the actions of Euro-American nation states are, intrinsically, civilised, for after all, that is the nature of the European people. And it completely bypasses another laughable assumption

The result of the "Trump is a very rude man" and "Putin is a madman" school of analysis is, on the one hand, the spurious distinction between Trump and his predecessors and, on the other, the terrible devastation of Ukraine, one that might possibly have been avoided through recognising the ways in which nation-states define their self-interest. Notwithstanding a great deal of media characterisation, the Russian nation-state is no more "mad" than the American.

tion: That while America and its allies refused to provide Ukraine ironclad security guarantees before the Russian invasion, they would be willing to do so after it. It excuses Euro-American self-interest through psychologising Putin.

The result of the "Trump is a very rude man" and "Putin is a madman" school of analysis is, on the one hand, the spurious distinction between Trump and his predecessors and, on the other, the terrible devastation of Ukraine, one that might possibly have been avoided through recognising the ways in which nation-states define their self-interest. Notwithstanding a great deal of media characterisation, the Russian nation-state is no more "mad" than the American; the American-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 reflected the US understanding of its national interests and has been analysed as such rather than in the language of incumbent US president John F Kennedy being a mad man. But that is not often an analytical privilege extended to political leaders outside the Euro-American sphere. "Our brutality is born of rational behaviour whereas yours is just another form of animal behaviour" is a cliché that converted to a truism.

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard had once suggested that the Watergate affair should not be spoken of as a scandal as that suggests that there is a less scandalous and "clean" American political system beyond it and that Watergate was an aberration. The "impoliteness" of Trump and Vance should not, similarly, be seen as an aberration. For that directs us to the spurious belief in polite and civilised world leaders who have our best interests at heart.

The writer is distinguished research professor, SOAS University of London

A commitment to Nari Shakti

Prime Minister Modi has consistently ensured that women are not just participants but leaders in shaping Viksit Bharat



ANANDIBEN PATEL

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT has never been merely a slogan for Prime Minister Narendra Modi — it reflects the values he has practised and championed throughout his life. He witnessed the struggles of his mother and learned from her values. From his time as an RSS pracharak to his leadership in the BJP and now as Prime Minister of India, Modi has consistently broken barriers, challenged norms, and ensured that women are not just participants but leaders in shaping Viksit Bharat.

Many, including myself, recall how he consistently advocated for greater representation of women in party bodies. At a working committee meeting of the party in Baroda, he played a key role in securing 30 per cent reservation for women in the party's organisational structure. However, he wanted women to move beyond symbolic roles and take on significant leadership positions. While he was serving as Gujarat's organisational general secretary, as the leader of the party's women's wing, I often received his guidance. He always ensured that every Mahila Morcha event or initiative was managed by women, and took the initiative to impart a wide range of skills at training camps for women workers.

Several instances can be mentioned about Modi's approach to advancing women in politics — whether it was ensuring women candidates in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections in Gujarat, or most recently, a woman Chief Minister for Delhi. With his keen eye for natural leadership, Modi saw women who were socially active and took lead roles in weddings or village functions as natural organisers and potential political leaders. In his view, women's leadership did not need to be artificially created — it already existed everywhere, waiting to be recognised.

As Gujarat's Chief Minister, he ensured that several villages and municipal areas had entire administrative units led by women. In municipal bodies, he actively promoted women as mayors, deputy mayors, standing committee chairs, and leaders of the house, even in unreserved constituencies. One of CM Modi's most impactful social interventions was ending the "sarpach pat" practice in Gujarat, where husbands would effectively run the panchayat on behalf of elected women. When the BJP won the Ahmedabad municipal elections for the first time in 1987, Modi, as the party's organisational general secretary, ensured that the celebratory event featured the felicitations of a Dalit woman. When he entered his official residence as Gujarat's Chief Minister for the first time, a Dalit girl was invited to install the kalash.

Modi firmly believed that gender equality should begin at home. While dining at the homes of karyakartas, he would never allow girls to be excluded from dining with boys. He always advised karyakartas to provide equal educational opportunities for both boys and girls.

As Gujarat's Chief Minister, Modi intro-

duced schemes that not only empowered women across the state but became models for national programmes after 2014. In 2005, Gujarat launched the Beti Vadhao mission to eliminate female foeticide and raise awareness about the value of the girl child. Modi's strong belief in education as a tool for empowerment led to the launch of the Kanya Kalavani programme in 2003, with massive enrolment drives for girls. In 2006, Modi launched Nari Gaurav Niti, a comprehensive framework focused on women's safety, health, economic security, and social empowerment in Gujarat. It established Mahila Suraksha Samitis to support domestic violence survivors and created Nari Adalats to provide legal assistance to women. In 2009, Gujarat passed a landmark bill providing 50 per cent reservation for women in local governance. Even during the Kutch earthquake rehabilitation, he ensured equality by mandating that newly built houses be registered in the names of both husbands and wives.

The Chiranjeevi Vaidya aimed to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates by promoting institutional deliveries. The Khilkhilat ambulance service offered free transport for pregnant women and newborns. The women's nutrition campaign was another significant step. The Nirmal Gujarat programme, a precursor to the Swachh Bharat Mission, focused on toilet construction, greatly benefiting women. The Mukhyamantri Amrutam Yojana was launched to provide healthcare to underprivileged women. The Mission Mangalam initiative focused on self-help groups to engage unemployed women in income-generating activities. Sakhi Mandals played a key role in microfinance and skill training. Additionally, when ensuring 24x7 electricity in Gujarat, a major consideration was to ease women's lives by enabling the use of household appliances like washing machines and mixers.

When Modi assumed office as Prime Minister in 2014, his lifelong commitment to Nari Shakti was transformed into nationwide policies aimed at empowering women. One of the earliest reflections of this commitment was seen in the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, where he placed special emphasis on building toilets to restore dignity and improve safety for women, especially in rural areas. This was followed by the launch of Beti Bachao Beti Padhao to address gender imbalance and promote girls' education. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana provided over 10 crore LPG connections, freeing women from the health hazards of smoke-filled kitchens. Several other schemes followed, and initiatives like PM Awas Yojana were particularly beneficial to women, providing them with housing security. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniya, which reserves one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women, became a reality under the Modi government.

Under the vision of Prime Minister Modi, women are no longer seen merely as beneficiaries of government programmes — they have emerged as leaders, entrepreneurs, decision-makers, and changemakers. On this Women's Day, let us celebrate the transformational journey of India's Nari Shakti, driving the nation's progress towards Viksit Bharat 2047.

The writer is Governor of Uttar Pradesh and former chief minister, Gujarat

With dignity and respect

Task today is to ensure women are at the centre of our institutions



BY RAM MADHAV

IT IS CUSTOMARY to celebrate femininity on International Women's Day. Promises are made, schemes announced, and at times tears are shed on the state of women. But have we ever paused and asked, "Why is there no International Men's Day?"

The answer is simple. We built a world centred around men and created all institutions accordingly. We compelled women to be silent participants in that world. We assumed that silence was a weakness and that women hence needed a system to protect them. We understood the physical strength of men as the real power and the battles he waged and the empires he built as "real manliness". We didn't realise that given an opportunity, a woman, too, can display the same physical strength as a man. Instances like Golda Meir's leadership during the Yom Kippur War in Israel in 1973 or India Gandhi's role during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 are seen as exceptions.

Physical strength is not about gender. It is about the institutional structures we create. Since they are centred around men, we have armies of men. But in the past, women had armies several times. Joan of Arc led the French forces in the Hundred Years' War in the 15th century. Queen Isabella I's support was crucial to the Spanish Army in the unifying war, the Reconquista. Catherine the Great led the Russian Army against the Ottomans and expanded her country's territory. In India, there are several such examples. These include rulers like Rani Rudrama Devi of the Kakatiya

dynasty in South India in the 12th century and Begum Razia Sultana (1205-40), the queen of Delhi, who defended their kingdoms efficiently from foreign invaders. Jhalsi Bhonsale (1598-1674) inspired her son Shivaji to establish Hindu Pad Padshahi — an independent Hindu nation. Tarabai (1675-1761), widow of Rajaram Bhonsale, Shivaji's son, took it upon herself to ward off the continued Mughal efforts to take over the kingdom. Rani Durgavati (1524-64), queen of Gondwana, fought against the Mughal invaders for several years. The Tuluvu queen Rani Abbakka Chowta (1525-1570) defended Ullal in Karnataka from the Portuguese invaders for 40 years. The British Army had to endure the ferocity of several queen rulers in wars. Velu Nachiyar, queen of Sivaganga (1730-96), fought and defeated the British. Rani Chennamma (1778-1829) of Kittur fought the British until death to defend her freedom. Then there were legendary rulers like Avanti Bai of Ramgarh and Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi.

The real power of a woman doesn't lie in her physical strength, but in her role as the creator. Men assume that they are stronger. But the strength required for procreation, the struggle that a woman has to wage for months and the pain that she endures at the time of delivery is probably beyond men's imagination. Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese poet, said that children are "the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself". When creation longed for its eternity, it chose women to uphold the responsibility for its perpetuity. In that sense,

women are far more important and superior in nature's scheme of things.

Traditional societies like India understood this and accorded a higher status of motherhood to women. Motherhood is not just about giving birth to children. It is about a woman's higher power of creation. Gandhi's wife Kastur was referred to as "ba" — meaning mother in Gujarati. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa regarded his wife Sarada Devi as the divine mother.

Some women abhor this description because they look at motherhood from a Victorian prism. Victorian morality, the orthodox social order that was strictly implemented in England during the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, regarded women as mere procreative machines. Victorian men were supposed to be strong, ambitious and independent while women were weak, dependent and submissive. Women were seen as the property of men. They could neither own property nor have any political rights like voting.

Certain aspects of Victorian morality came to influence India, too, during the colonial subjugation. Women were confined to homes and limited freedoms were accorded to them. The freedom of women came to be identified with promiscuity. The birth of a girl became a burden and regressive practices like female foeticide became a norm among certain communities. Gandhi was among the prominent men in modern times to reject that mindset. In a letter to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur in October 1936,

he insisted that women themselves should resist being the "slaves" of men. "If you women only realise your dignity and privilege, and make full sense of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves till the slave and holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. I was once a slaveholder myself but I proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission," he wrote. Gandhi even upheld a woman's right to live separately from an unjust husband.

The "dignity and privilege" that Gandhi talked about is the key. It calls for a mind change from man-centric approach to a man-woman-centric one. Gender equality in actions and gender neutrality in perception is the need of the hour. The objectification of womanhood is a concern to be addressed seriously. Hillary Clinton once said: "If I want to knock a story off the front page, I just change my hairstyle."

The safety of women lies not in restricting their lives, but in according dignity and respect to them. Swami Vivekananda was once asked about his views on the protection of women. He laughed out loudly and said "Protection of women? You will protect her? She is Durga; she is Kali; Mahishasura Mardini and Sakshat Jagannatha herself. And you want to protect her?" Respect her, he said, "so that her safety is automatically taken care of".

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LANGUAGE WARS

THIS REFERS TO the two articles, 'A fig leaf for an imposition' and 'Protect language, don't politicise it' (IE, March 7). The Centre should conduct a survey in the northern states to find out the percentage of people who can read, write and speak three languages. Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan says he is not imposing Hindi, but providing an incentive for students to study one more language. If so, Tamil Nadu should opt to teach one more south Indian language, like Kannada or Malayalam, which would be easier for the students to learn.

Peter Mundackal, Noida

A NEW PARTY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Movement to party' (IE, March 7). A student-led political party has been launched in Bangladesh with the avowed aim of fulfilling the "new hopes and aspirations" that were born after the 2024 uprising. The Jatya Nagorik Party's top brass includes young activists who played a key role in the anti-discrimination movement. Their decision to form their own party reflects their disenchantment with the interim government headed by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus. Bangladesh today stands on the brink of a precipice.

It needs sweeping reforms to restore democracy, but other political groups are getting impatient for elections. However, it is obvious that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party cannot consider its re-election as a foreign conclusion. Another key stakeholder is Army Chief General Wake-uz-Zaman. The Bangladesh military's growing closeness to Pakistan indicates that he has big ambitions of his own.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

POWER POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Of big powers and pawns' (IE, March 6). It looks like we are going back to an era of imperialism where rulers fought to occupy more and more land. Donald Trump has been trying to undo the policies of the Biden administration by justifying the Russian occupation of some Ukrainian territories. His suggestions about the inclusion of Taiwan as 51st state of the US and the annexation of Greenland do look superfluous but surely paint him more as a tyrant leader than the president of a democratic country. Is liberalism in jeopardy? And is imperialism going to become the norm again? If yes, then the true torchbearers of democracy around the world need to act swiftly.

Amanpreet Balra, Srisro

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

SHE STILL RISES

An irreversible force ensures that every day is Women's Day. Progress is achieved despite hurdles, with or without support

IT IS OFTEN easy to lose sight of the struggles and assertions that paved the way to International Women's Day. In 1909, spurred by labour movements across the world, close to 20,000 female garment factory workers took out a march in New York, demanding better pay, shorter work hours and voting rights. The New York Shirtwaist Strike would become the inspiration for the International Women's Day proposed by German activist Clara Zetkin during the Second International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen in 1910 and adopted over time across the world. The Indian Constitution guaranteed many of these hard-won rights — universal suffrage and equality before the law, among them — to women from the moment it came into existence. But, in practice, like their counterparts elsewhere, Indian women have had to work twice as hard, and more, to make themselves seen and heard. It is, therefore, a mark of their remarkable resolve and determination that, today and going ahead, women-led development has become one of the foundational promises of governance in the country. Political parties across the spectrum are reaching out to them with competing promises and schemes, which keep their aspirations at their core.

In a sense, political parties have only acknowledged, and responded to, an upsurge from below. The Female Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has overtaken Male GER since 2017-18. In medicine, for every 100 men, there were 100 women enrolled in medical colleges in India in 2020-21. At premier institutes of higher education such as the IITs, there is an increasing representation of women, supported by good-faith affirmative action. These changes signal an innate resilience where progress is achieved despite hurdles, with or without the support of men. Their irrepressible force has ensured that every day is women's day in the country. A female gaze that nurtures their passage from home to the larger world is being empowered and institutionalised in the system.

Yet, the male gaze continues to restrict the imagination of women's rights — in the way that the same schemes that address women and acknowledge their agency, such as the Ladki Bahin Yojana and the Mahalakshmi Scheme in Maharashtra, the Kanyashree in West Bengal or Ladki Behta Yojana in Madhya Pradesh, can also reduce the woman to a mere beneficiary of doles; or, in the design of public spaces and transport systems that don't take into account women's safety. A report published by the UN on March 6 shows that in 2024, nearly a quarter of governments worldwide reported a backlash on women's rights. In India, legal provisions such as the Uniform Civil Code introduced in Uttarakhand, for instance, infantilise their choice by insisting upon regulating who they fall in love with or choose to share a home with. The Time Use Survey 2024 (January-December), released by the MoSPI last month, shows that women spend more time in unpaid work at home compared to men, that despite a rise in labour force participation — 47.7 per cent as per data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023-24 — they still account for a small proportion of the total workforce and much of it remains self-employment. Despite the roadblocks, like the Maya Angelou poem, she still rises.

A NEW RULE BOOK

Brazil minister's suggestion of mechanisms to complement UNFCCC on climate negotiation is welcome

THE ADOPTION of the Paris Climate Pact, 10 years ago, instilled hope that the global community had found the resolve to tackle one of the most difficult challenges before it. It spurred countries to draft national plans to combat global warming and paved the way for a "rule book" for climate action. The momentum generated at Paris, however, waned in less than half a decade. National commitments today are nowhere close to meeting the pact's goal of limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The transition to green energy remains fraught, with the developed world, emerging economies and the least developed countries not being on the same page on eliminating fossil fuel use. These failures have raised questions over the processes of the UNFCCC — the UN body which steers global climate change negotiations. This week, Brazil's Minister for Climate Action, Marina Silva, suggested setting up "additional multilateral mechanisms complementary to the Paris Agreement framework" to ensure that countries adhere to national commitments.

Immediately after the Paris Pact was inked, a section of experts and policymakers advocated that the UNFCCC should transition from being primarily a platform for international treaty negotiations to one that supports and monitors implementation. On paper, the agency today has more than 30 subsidiary agencies that deal with issues including funding, capacity building, assessing loss and damage and adaptation to climate change. However, the continued breach of the temperature threshold set in Paris speaks of the inadequacy of these institutions. Minister Silva has indicated that the mechanism to review national goals related to the Paris Pact needs reform. "The goals are reviewed every five years. Maybe this is not enough," she said. The trouble, however, is that the UNFCCC has limited enforcement mechanisms. One way to strengthen the agency is to accord a greater role to parties other than nations — the IPCC, for example. The agency is currently the umbrella body for climate research. The hefty and goodwill it has acquired in the last 30 years could be better utilised by giving it a greater role in climate diplomacy.

The fact also is that climate negotiation is too serious an issue to be left solely to one UN agency. It requires building alliances at regional levels — between neighbouring countries, among civil society groups and business organisations. Brazil's climate action minister's suggestion could be seen as a precursor to a different — and hopefully more effective — global warming diplomacy.

A PENNY'S WORTH

It may be a wasteful act of minting. But its survival, and creative uses, tell a story

OF THE MANY things that make *Homo sapiens* human is the ability to tell stories — about ourselves, the past and even looking into the future. One of the most important stories is the one that features money and currency. The leaps of imagination and intellect required to comprehend currency in the current moment — the mediums of exchange of goods and services are becoming increasingly abstract, from scanning codes and swiping cards to the advanced tech behind cryptocurrency — pale in comparison to the humble coin of yesteryear.

When Benjamin Franklin wrote, "A penny saved is a penny earned", he likely did not imagine that a penny had incurred a loss. Decades of inflation have made the smallest unit of the US currency, 100 pennies or cents make a dollar — all but worthless. In fact, for some years now, it has cost more than a penny (about 4 cents, in fact) to make a penny. This waste has long irked fiscal conservatives and Donald Trump, in line with a campaign promise, has ordered the US Mint to stop striking the coins. But, as it turns out, a penny is sometimes worth it. The zinc-coated cent is used by entrepreneurs worldwide to make souvenirs as it is malleable enough to "stamp" with emblems, such as those of cartoon characters or the outline of a tourist destination. These coins are, of course, sold for well over a penny.

The penny is perhaps a counterproductive act of minting. But its survival — and the myriad ways it's being used — is also a reminder that money and value, in the ultimate scheme of things, are products of the human imagination. While the accountant must do her job and money remains arguably one of the most significant concepts human beings have developed, some stories can overcome the cold calculus of its use and origins.



SANJAY BHATTACHARYYA

LAST MONTH, WHEN US President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by his side, announced that Palestinians could not live amidst war debris and would wish to leave the Gaza Strip, making way for the establishment of a "riviera" which would be taken over by the US, he set the proverbial cat among the pigeons. The extraordinary proposal, largely criticised by the global community, has been rejected by the Palestinians and provoked Arab stakeholders.

Netanyahu said the proposal to relocate Gazans and preparations for a post-Hamas phase deserved attention. It consolidated his right-wing support base, and some saw this as the grand prize after a prolonged conflict. Israel's position on the ongoing truce with Hamas has hardened, with calls for the immediate return of the remaining hostages and for not proceeding to the second phase, which entailed the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. Israeli intelligence agencies, however, are cautious, fearing backlash after Ramadan.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio later explained that Washington's proposal was aimed at encouraging countries with economic and technological capacity to help with the rebuilding, that Gazans might have to relocate in the interim and that there was no intention to station US troops in Gaza. Significantly, the White House waded into direct contact with Hamas, to set the parameters for peace, without involving the Israelis.

As US pressure mounted, Egypt and Jordan stoutly rejected Trump's proposal. They insisted Palestinians would stay on their land and there would be no forced deportations. When the King of Jordan said he would host 2,000 sick Palestinian children, he was criticised by the rest of the Arab world. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, leveraging his position as recent host to US-Russia talks, hosted seven Arab leaders in Riyadh to emphasise unity in the Arab ranks.

Egyptian and Qatari mediators found that the mood had changed — Hamas was unhappy Israel had delayed the release of prisoners and was blocking international relief, while Israel sought to press on without promising withdrawal. The lack of trust has exposed the fragility of the truce. At the Arab summit, Egypt

Gaza reconstruction plans, proposed by US and Arab states, underline a standstill waiting to be broken

In the 21st century, it is necessary to take a fresh look at problems and seek non-conflict-based solutions. There is a crisis of leadership in the Middle East. In some ways, Trump seeks to break the cycle of conflict. Only the transition of self-governance in Gaza and the West Bank, as established in the Oslo Accords, towards the realisation of a two-state solution, can break this vicious cycle, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security.

presented a reconstruction plan for Gaza. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi emphasised the right of Palestinians to rebuild, guaranteeing their existence on their land.

The reconstruction plan envisages three phases, till 2030, at a cost of \$53 billion. The first phase of six months would focus on the de-mining and clearing of debris, when Palestinians would be provided shelter in temporary camps within Gaza. Egypt would host an international funding conference. The second phase of about three years would focus on construction, especially of public infrastructure, housing and sources of livelihood. In the final stage, connectivity and industry would be developed and the Palestinian Authority would assume control over both Gaza and the West Bank.

New governance structures would be established in Gaza — Hamas would have to cede power to an independent team of Palestinian experts and technocrats for this purpose, a World Bank supervised trust fund would manage the financial pledges for reconstruction, and the UN Security Council would call for the deployment of an international peacekeeping force in Gaza and the occupied West Bank. The proposal was unanimously endorsed by Arab leaders, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

The US has rejected the Arab proposal, reiterating that Palestinians must relocate as the enclave is not livable. Israel, too, rejected the proposal, discrediting its reliance on the Palestinian Authority and UNRWA and saying that Arab states were using the Palestinian issue to counter Israel. Even as the US has reportedly begun talks with Hamas, tensions seem to have been aggravated by Trump's ultimatum to hand over the rest of the Israeli hostages.

The Israel-Palestine conflict has a long and troubled history. Israel has struggled to obtain security in its neighbourhood and still needs the support of the US, while the Palestinians fight to retain their land and their home. Their displacement in the West Bank and Gaza and to neighbouring Arab states as refugees has spurred popular resistance in the Arab street, with the potential to destabilise Arab governments if memories of the Nakba or forced deportation are rekindled.

There is an urgent need that hostilities do

not resume, hostages and prisoners are returned and the humanitarian cost of conflict is addressed. The US and regional powers including Arabs, Egypt, Iran and Turkey would need to provide a supporting hand but trust between Israel and Palestine would be the key to any progress. Any enduring solution would need guarantees for peace and stability and regard for sentiments on either side, through a process of give and take. It may be difficult for Israel to accept the continuance of Hamas-led governance in Gaza. Similarly, it may be impossible for Palestinians and Arab states to accept the permanent displacement of the former from Gaza or the West Bank.

For the Palestinian Authority, a moderate Fatah-led leadership, both in Gaza and the West Bank, may be the only option. For this, Fatah will have to regain the confidence of the people, deliver governance on the ground and welcome younger leaders, including those in exile or in detention. The activities of militant elements will need to be curbed; they not only pose a threat to Israel's security but also diminish Palestinian security and stability as their actions invite harsh retaliatory measures.

Israel, too, would benefit from durable security and stability through coexistence. On the one hand, the expansion of Israeli settlements in Palestinian lands has eroded the capacity of the Palestinian Authority and led to friction. On the other hand, Israel's model of democracy, economic growth, technological excellence and high standards of living is a magnet for Arab countries, many of which have normalised relations with Israel.

In the 21st century, it is necessary to take a fresh look at problems and seek non-conflict-based solutions. There is a crisis of leadership in the Middle East. In some ways, Trump seeks to break the cycle of conflict. Only the transition of self-governance in Gaza and the West Bank, as established in the Oslo Accords, towards the realisation of a two-state solution, can break this vicious cycle, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security.

The writer is a former diplomat and currently professor of Diplomatic Practice at Jindal Global University



MANURAJ SHUNMUGASUNDARAM

THE CHIEF MINISTER of Tamil Nadu and president of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, MK Stalin, has thrown down the gauntlet to the Union government on the issue of delimitation. He has articulated the deepest concerns of not just Tamil Nadu but five southern states as to the future of their representative strength in Parliament. The Union Home Minister was unable to defuse the issue and an all-party meeting held in Chennai this week confirmed that this will be a political issue between states ruled by non-Bharatiya Janata Party-led governments and the BJP.

According to Article 82 of the Constitution of India, upon the completion of each census, the allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha (LS) to states shall be readjusted. This provides a constitutional mandate to revise the strength of the LS in accordance with changes to the population. Consequently, in 1952, 1962 and 1972, successive Parliaments enacted a Delimitation Act and revised the parliamentary strength. In 1976, as population control measures were prioritised by the Centre, a 25-year freeze on the number of LS seats was put in force. Subsequently, the Constitution (84th Amendment) Act, 2002 was enacted to extend the freeze till 2026. The then Union government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee had justified the extension of the freeze and continuation of parliamentary representation on the basis of the 1971 census to enable states to pursue population stabilisation.

Some states have performed well to bring

DELIMITATION NEEDS DELIBERATION

CM Stalin's move to set up a joint action committee has set the ball rolling

If we were to increase the number of constituencies now, then it is imperative to understand what the next three decades look like. According to a recent UN report, the population of India is expected to peak at 1.7 billion before it starts declining from 2060. This begs the question why there is a need now to increase the number of seats in the LS when the population may only grow by 20 per cent over the next 35 years or so.

down fertility rates through targeted interventions, including increasing female literacy, gender empowerment initiatives, enhancing female labour force participation and creating awareness on the National Population Policy. It is ironic that these states are set to lose a significant number of seats in the LS. According to a recent report of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the following nine states stand to lose between one and eight LS seats: Uttarakhand, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, Odisha, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu. The five southern states, especially, stand to lose 26 seats altogether.

With the freeze ending in 2026, the first Census thereafter will be used to determine the number of seats in the LS, unless the present freeze is extended by way of a constitutional amendment like in 2002. The Union government is expected to set up a Delimitation Commission consisting of a retired judge to provide a report based on changes to the population. Once the Commission provides its report, courts cannot interfere. This makes it necessary for the issue to be raised earlier.

In 1950, India's population was 359 million people and we had 500 LS members. In 1967 the number of LS members grew to 521 while our population grew to 522 million people. In 1976, the population increased to 637 million while the LS was expanded to accommodate 543 members. Since 1976, India's population has more than doubled to 1.45 bil-

lion now, while the LS has remained constant at 543. Between 1950 and 2025, India's population has grown by four times but the LS changed by less than 10 per cent.

If we were to increase the number of constituencies now, it is imperative to understand what the next three decades look like. According to a UN report, the population of India is expected to peak at 1.7 billion before it starts declining from 2060. This begs the question why there is a need now to increase the number of seats in the LS when the population may only grow by 20 per cent from the present number over the next 35 years or so.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, during a media interaction, recently said that delimitation would not adversely affect the interest of the states and changes to parliamentary representation would happen "pro rata". There has been no further clarification from the Centre, leading Stalin to term this vague and unclear. Given that the 50-year freeze on delimitation will come to an end soon, the Union government is obligated to consider all political moves before taking a decision. The recent move by Stalin to set up a Joint Action Committee of chief ministers and non-BJP leaders has set the ball rolling for a nationwide debate on delimitation. The battle lines have been drawn before the number of constituencies can be redrawn.

The writer is an advocate practising in Madras High Court and spokesperson, DMK

MARCH 9, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIA-USSR TIES

INDIA AND THE Soviet Union are likely to step up their cooperation in the defence sphere next week when the Defence Minister, P V Narasimha Rao, will lead a high-level delegation to Moscow. Narasimha Rao is leaving for Moscow on March 12. Altogether, he will be in the Soviet Union for five days, having talks with the Soviet Defence Minister, Marshal Sergei Sokolov, and other important Soviet leaders. Official sources here appeared to be attaching considerable importance to the visit in view of New Delhi's drive to match Pakistan's latest acquisition of sophisticated weaponry. The last time an Indian defence

minister visited Moscow was in October last year, but the then defence minister, S B Chavan, had to cut short his visit because of Indira Gandhi's assassination.

MINI CABINET

AMINI THREE-MEMBER Cabinet, headed by Ramakrishna Hegde and comprising B Rachiah and Abdul Nazir Sab, was sworn in by the Governor, N A Banerji, on Friday evening, a couple of hours after Hegde was formally elected leader of the new Janata legislature party. For the first time in the history of Karnataka, the swearing-in ceremony was held at the eastern gate of Vidhana Soudha, the seat of power of the state, against the ma-

jestic backdrop of the high dome and the stately pillars atop several sprawling steps. This was where the state was renamed Karnataka by the then Chief Minister, Devraj Urs, way back in 1973.

CMS TO STAY

THE CONGRESS (I) is not likely to disturb most of its chief ministers, especially in the states where the party has managed to fare well in the recent assembly elections. The AICC (I) observers, who have gone to the state legislatures to supervise the election of the state legislature party leaders, are accordingly being directed to try for maximum consensus for reinstalling the present chief ministers.





DECCAN HERALD
ESTABLISHED 1948

Amid steep targets, a budget for balance

Karnataka made history in 2004-05 when Siddaramaiah, then Deputy Chief Minister holding the finance portfolio, presented the state's first-ever revenue surplus budget. At the time, Karnataka was hailed as the first state to achieve this milestone – ahead of the Centre, earning Siddaramaiah national praise for projecting a dramatic improvement in the state's fiscal health. The Karnataka Fiscal Responsibility Act (KFRA) of 2002 mandates that the state must present a revenue surplus budget. However, Siddaramaiah's record 16th budget has now projected a revenue deficit for the second consecutive year. While the deficit of Rs 19,262 crore marks a significant improvement from the previous year's revised deficit estimate of Rs 26,127 crore, it still reflects the state's ongoing financial struggles. With Rs 51,034 crore allotted to the five guarantee schemes, it is evident that the Chief Minister is grappling with the complexities of balancing welfare commitments and fiscal discipline. Karnataka is now steadily inching towards breaching KFRA's targets. The state's fiscal deficit stands at 2.95% of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), just under the 3% cap mandated by the Act. The total liabilities have surged to 24.91% nearing the 25% ceiling.

The budget emphasises Siddaramaiah's long-standing focus on welfare, with significant allocations to agriculture and irrigation. A notable highlight is the 47.3% increase in capital expenditure, the highest ever for asset creation, amounting to over Rs 83,200 crore. Additionally, infrastructure development in Bengaluru has received a substantial push, addressing some of the city's chronic congestion issues. However, the budget falls short in addressing the state's heavy reliance on the service sector, which dominates Karnataka's economy. The sector contributes 66% to the gross value added (GVA) and has grown at an impressive 8.5%. Economists have repeatedly warned that such over-reliance on the service sector is precarious and have advocated a greater focus on expanding the manufacturing sector. While the Industrial Policy for 2025-30 sets an ambitious target of 12% growth for manufacturing, the sector's current growth rate stands at a modest 5.8%. The budget lacks a clear roadmap to achieve this target by 2030, raising questions about its feasibility.

Overall, the budget attempts to strike a balance between immediate welfare needs and long-term infrastructure goals. However, it falls short in presenting a transformative vision for Karnataka's future. While it addresses urban challenges, particularly in Bengaluru, and prioritises the welfare of marginalised communities and farmers, it compromises on fiscal prudence. On a positive note, the state has exceeded its revenue targets, but unless fiscal management is strengthened, Karnataka, which has long prided itself on being well-managed, risks perpetuating its cycle of deficits and unmet development promises.

Siddaramaiah tries balancing welfare with growth goals but vision is short on fiscal prudence

AI adoption must address inequity, labour distress

Strategies should involve all stakeholders, leverage economic potential without displacing labour

SHISHIR PRIVADARSHI AND
NISHIT PATIL

The transformative power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has shifted from the realm of theoretical speculation to the forefront of real-world applications over the past decade. Historically, modernisation in major sectors often led to concerns about mass layoffs. Over time, many of these disruptions were mitigated by parallel employment growth in emerging industries. AI, however, poses challenges of a far more transformative nature. In light of such developments, a stark reality persists: millions of workers could be displaced as machines learn to carry out tasks once performed by humans. The Union Budget 2025 puts forth several initiatives aimed at nurturing AI innovation while expanding the skill set of India's workforce, but the devil lies in the details of implementation and scale.

Central to the mission is the announcement of five new National Centres of Excellence (CoEs) in skilling, each with specialised curricula designed to prepare both new entrants and existing workers for the AI-driven future which are envisioned to be developed through global frameworks and partnerships, ensuring that the curriculum remains aligned with the latest international standards. This may include forging agreements with top-tier global institutions and technology companies, so that students and seasoned professionals acquire hands-on experience in operating AI tools, interpreting large datasets, and deploying automated solutions to real-world problems. The government's intention is not merely to equip the youth but to cater to those who need to pivot from traditional roles that are at risk of obsolescence.

Another key component of the budget is the Rs-500 crore AI-powered CoE in Education. This project can serve as a way to transform teaching methodologies, especially in domains where practical experience is as essential as theoretical grounding such as in the medical field. By integrating AI and Virtual Reality (VR) tools into the medical curriculum, students can practise surgeries in a risk-free, virtual environment and master complex anatomical concepts through immersive, interactive simulations. The government's decision of introducing new

Atal Tinkering Labs (ATLs) reflects an overarching approach of instilling a culture of innovation from a young age. These labs are designed to acquaint rural school children to coding, robotics, and other foundational AI skills.

While training the next generation is crucial, the policymakers also grapple with the requirement of re-skilling existing workforce. India has a vast labour force employed in sectors that may be significantly transformed by AI such as manufacturing, call centres, and even service sectors that rely on relatively routine coding tasks. Recognising that large segments of these workers risk displacement if they do not adapt, the government plans to utilise the new

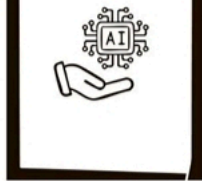
One of the more debated topics in the lead-up to the Budget was whether the government would propose direct social security measures to protect those most vulnerable to AI-induced job displacement. There is no explicit mention of an unemployment insurance scheme in the final budget document. Critics argue that without a robust safety net, the semi-skilled workforce, especially in the manufacturing and service sectors, could face abrupt displacement. Proponents of the government's approach maintain that upskilling efforts will mitigate the potential job loss by opening new opportunities in AI-driven industries. The truth likely lies somewhere in between.

In light of these debates, the formation of a dedicated committee focused on the regulatory aspects of AI-driven labour reforms could serve as an informative authority on the matter. It shall contain representatives from the government, private sector, labour unions, academicians, and subject matter experts to ensure just representation of the labour force. It would help establish guidelines on best practices for both upskilling programmes and worker transition support; it would help standardise skill development methodologies, assess AI-related disruptions in real time, and recommend the necessary course correction.

The path to inclusive AI adoption may incorporate an ongoing dialogue between policymakers, industry and the public. This kind of multi-stakeholder engagement can help identify unforeseen bottlenecks and course correct policies before labour displacement or ethical oversight becomes severe. The Budget stands as a unique embodiment of the concept of 'IKIGAI' – India's Knowledge Induced Growth in Artificial Intelligence, underlining both the abundant promise and the real-world complexities of adopting AI.

While strategic investments signify a step forward, the question of workforce displacement cannot be ignored. By embracing a collaborative approach among the stakeholders, India can fully realise AI's potential as an economic catalyst, while safeguarding the livelihoods of millions. Ultimately, the sustainability of this 'IKIGAI' journey will hinge on how effectively the announced initiatives are implemented, how equitably access to technology is expanded, and how steadfast India remains committed to making AI-driven innovation a force for inclusive growth.

(Shishir is the president of Chinan Research Foundation and Nishit is a research analyst at Chinan Research Foundation)



CoEs in skilling and upskilling hubs.

In the realm of fiscal incentives, the budget has taken a two-pronged approach. First, a Fund of Funds (FoF) for DeepTech startups of Rs 10,000 crore, and second, funding support for R&D, earmarking Rs 20,000 crore for encouraging private sector investment in the field. Such measures reflect the belief that India can carve out a place in the global AI ecosystem, as a generator of cutting-edge intellectual property. This collaborative strategy also resonates with India's broader vision of "Make in India, Make for the World."

Disruption and course correction

Yet for all these initiatives to bear fruit, we must address issues of digital infrastructure and inclusion. AI-based tools demand reliable connectivity and adequate bandwidth, something that remains elusive in many parts of India. The budget allocation for digital infrastructure includes proposals to expand BharatNet, a government-run project aimed to bring 50 networks to semi-urban and remote districts. In principle, these measures could bridge the digital gap.

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Joy amidst the daily tumble

We lived carefree lives, mindless of the urban chaos

SUDHA DEVI NAYAK

As children growing up in a bustling metropolis, life was crowded with incidents. We were woken early in the morning, squeezed up, fed, clothed, and sent to school. The street we had to traverse was large and broad and formed part of the famed Grand Trunk Road running through Calcutta (now Kolkata), with lorries and buses and occasional cars trundling down the street, hedged in by narrow houses that stood cheek by jowl with old dilapidated mansions. There were no footpaths, and we managed to keep to the narrow and narrow stretch meant for pedestrians with those huge, noisy vehicles whizzing past at breakneck pace. A scene that most modern parents would balk at sending

their progeny down that street, but our parents with no options sent us out with hearts of steel and nerves of titanium on a wing and a prayer.

We, of course, enjoyed the walk, reveling in the marvels of the street, and friends joined us on the way, and before we knew it, we were through the 2-km stretch and found ourselves at the iron gates that delivered us into the school. We joined the long lines for the customary prayer before being herded into different classes. The teachers were in charge; we tried to pay attention and learnt the fundamentals, the occasional prank that incensed the teachers, but added to the excitement of school life.

There were sports events, concerts, and interschool tournaments that pepped up our young lives. The green frocks of our school, ringed by tall trees of jamun, silk cotton, and mango, held our fascination, and in the sun-sungled afternoons of childhood, away from the prying eyes of teachers, we would be seen perched precariously on their branches, feeling on top of the world

and its ills. The trailing bougainvillea on the walls, beds of sunflowers and chrysanthemums, together with the sprinklers and lawn mowers doing their job faithfully, added lustre to our young lives as the breeze ruffled our hair and the grass. We talked to our heart's content, reveling in the sheer joy of words.

Examinations were a necessary evil; report cards sometimes told sad stories evoking reprimands from teachers and parents. Sometimes they were a cause for elation too. We put it down to the vagaries of examinations, the whims of teachers, and divine dispensation. Lunches were communal, shared with a sense of unity amidst the diversity with undiluted happiness. Before long the idyllic came to an end, and we shifted into the big bad world and its demands. We meet sometimes, by accident or design; we hear of others doing well and still others who were and no more. We remember a life wholly lived and with joy now turned to memory and nostalgia.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Maternal mortality: Why socio-cultural awareness matters

Appropos 'Maternal mortality and India's multifold challenges' (Mar 7), while the article highlights key issues, it overlooks a crucial aspect: the socio-cultural dimension. Data reveals that a specific region comprising five countries – Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, UP, and MP – has alarmingly high maternal mortality rates and has failed to reduce the numbers below 100. What explains this anomaly? The answer may lie in the shared socio-cultural

tissue of these states. Postnatal care is often stigmatised, and new mothers are expected to resume household duties within 15-20 days. Elderly women, responsible for caregiving, often resist modern nutritional guidelines, depriving mothers of proper nutrition during both antenatal and postnatal phases. The government must prioritise socio-cultural awareness alongside healthcare initiatives. **Prahalad Bhukhar**, Bengaluru

Pollution politics

I refer to 'Cong MLA as KSPCB chief: HC orders notice to govt' (Mar 5). By amending the State Pollution Control Board (Manner of Nomination and Conditions of Service of Chairman) Rules, 2024, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change has weakened the eligibility requirements for the SPCB chief posts, despite the Supreme Court's ruling. This amendment has paved

the way for political appointees rather than domain experts to occupy SPCB positions. Unqualified political appointees, beholden to their political masters, cannot deliver impartial judgements. The authorities' lack of commitment to environmental protection is evident in their actions. **KV Chandramouli**, Mysuru

Rampant corruption

Appropos 'More commission now

than before, says contractor's body' (Mar 4), it is clear that corruption remains a pervasive issue in our country, transcending party lines; the question is no longer who is corrupt but who is more corrupt. **CV Aravind**, 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 writer's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

States that produce more kids will not benefit more during delimitation. It doesn't work like that. We are not only the world's largest democracy but also the world's most mature governance system... **Hardeep Singh Puri**, Union Minister

The text has disappeared under the interpretation. **Friedrich Nietzsche**

TO BE PRECISE

CLAIM THE CENTRE IS DEAF AND DEFLATE THE LANGUAGE ROW! WHAT SAY?



IN PERSPECTIVE

Can peacekeeping do without women?

Women in peacekeeping forces have improved community engagement, reduced improper use of force

D JEEVAN KUMAR

The first-ever United Nations Conference for Women Peacekeepers themed Women in Peacekeeping: A Global South Perspective was held in New Delhi on February 24-25, bringing together UN Women Peacekeepers from 35 troop-contributing countries. Organised by the Government of India and the Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping (CUNPK), it highlighted the need for greater female participation and leadership in UN peacekeeping missions worldwide.

Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar noted that 2025 marks 25 years since the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. He stressed the importance of building on the progress so far to enhance and empower women's roles in peace and security.

In 2003, the UN appointed the first ever woman Police Advisor, Kiran Bedi from India. Speaking at the conference, she reinforced why female participation is vital: "Our presence ensures the needs of women and children are addressed; we can advocate for the most vulnerable."

Despite various initiatives, fewer than 10% of the UN's approximately 70,000 uniformed Peacekeepers (military, police, and observers) are women. The UN aims to reach 15% women in military contingents and 25% women in police contingents by 2028 (under the uniformed gender parity strategy).

Gender parity in peacekeeping – especially among leaders and uniformed personnel – has long been a UN priority. The UN which relies on member states for military and police contingents has launched several initiatives urging and incentivising troop- and police-contributing countries to deploy more Women Peacekeepers.

In 2000, Security Council Resolution 1325 kickstarted the initiative to promote women's role in conflict prevention and resolution, urging increased female participation in all UN Peace and Security efforts. Subsequent UN Women in Peace and Security (WPS) Resolutions (1820, 1888, 1889, 2122, 2242) emphasised women's leadership in peace processes, post-conflict reconstruction, and preventing sexual violence.

Countries of the Global South are the largest troop-contributors to UN Peacekeeping, with India as the world's top troop-contributing nation. In the 1960s, Indian women medical officers were deployed in the Congo – initiating India's legacy of women in peacekeeping. In 2007, India became the first nation to deploy an all-women police unit in Liberia. This groundbreaking move inspired local women to join the security sector and sparked broader UN efforts to increase female deployment.

Today, India leads with more than 150 Women Peacekeepers serving in UN critical missions, including those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Lebanon, and the Golan Heights. As role models, negotiators, and peacekeepers, women often bring invaluable perspectives to peacekeeping operations. Inspector General Seema Dhundia, who led India's first all-women FPU in Liberia, reflected on the experience: "We immersed ourselves in local society, communicating and practising inclusiveness. Our efforts motivated young Liberian women to join their national police. By the time we left, the number of women in the Liberian National Police had significantly increased."

This success story inspired other nations – such as Bangladesh and Rwanda – to increase female police deployments to UN missions. Rwanda now boasts one of the highest percentages of women in its security forces, owing to proactive policies towards recruiting and training women for peacekeeping. Gorette Mwenanzigwa, a Rwandan Peacekeeper, highlighted the pivotal role of women's inclusion in Rwanda's post-conflict reforms.

Vice-Chief of Indian Army Lt Gen S Raju Subramanian noted, "Women are far better negotiators and mediators. They help resolve conflicts, and their presence enhances operational effectiveness, wherever missions are deployed. Their approach, combined with diverse perspectives, improves mission performance and use of force. We must prioritise negotiation."

From Liberia to Rwanda, Sri Lanka to Morocco, the stories of UN Women Peacekeepers showcase their transformative impact on host communities. They deliver operational effectiveness, empathy, and much-needed stability in conflict areas.

The conference concluded with a renewed commitment to invest in women's participation and leadership, reinforcing the global peacekeeping framework. Wrapping up the conference, Inspector-General Seema Dhundia captured a simple truth: "The question is not whether women can do peacekeeping. The question is whether peacekeeping can do without women."

(The writer is an honorary professor at the Karnataka State Rural Development and Panchayat Raj University, Gadag)

Welcome judgement, abstract caveat

Podcaster Ranveer Allahbadia, who has been hailed over the coals for some controversial and distasteful comments on social media, has got some relief from the court but is not off the hook. He had secured protection from arrest following several FIRs registered against him and now, the Supreme Court has allowed him to produce his shows as long as they don't violate "traditional Indian norms." The court said his podcast should be deemed suitable for all age groups. It also felt that "regulatory measures" are needed against the abuse of the right to free speech and expression in social media to ensure that the use of "filthy language" and "vulgarity" did not pass off as humour in programmes streamed online. While maintaining that there must be a way to ensure that the programmes adhere to "well known moral standards" of Indian society, the court told the government to explore measures that would strike a balance between upholding the right to free speech and reasonable restrictions on it imposed by the Constitution.

The court did well to allow Allahbadia to resume his profession, as the earlier blanket ban on his podcasts, which he is entitled to produce as part of his right to life and right to free speech and expression, was unusual. The court had in the past disavoured such blanket bans as they "gag orders have a chilling effect on free speech." It has told Allahbadia that "if the posts tweets in violation of law", he would be answerable for it. The challenge is that "traditional Indian norms" are a vague standard that changes from state to state and region to region, and from time to time. Judgements on the basis of such vague norms often become subjective, personal, and even political, as it tends to happen in these times. Adding to the confusion is that in cases like Allahbadia's, it is obscurity – which many would say lies in the eye or mind of the observer – that is to be judged. The question is whether we have objective legal tools to make a judgement.

Court wants Allahbadia to comply with "traditional" norms but what really qualifies as tradition?

The court has favoured a regulatory scheme that would respect freedom of speech and operate within the framework of "reasonable restrictions" imposed by the Constitution. The government would welcome that proposition as it would only like stricter regulation on anything. But the laws on obscenity and related offences already exist, as seen in the fact that cases have been registered against Allahbadia and others. The real issue is the scope of the law and its interpretation in particular cases. Importantly, there should be room for laughter in society, and the law should not silence it.

31 BIG PICTURE

THE 63 IN ASSAM WITH 'NO ADDRESSES'

'We can't be from nowhere'

Bilal Dewan was declared an "illegal foreigner". So was his brother, both of whom spent years in Assam's jails, including in the Matia detention camp, till they came out on bail a few months ago. With the state telling the Supreme Court that the 63 inmates at the camp are Bangladeshis without an address, Bilal tells SUKRITA BARUAH: 'What address can I tell them... when I was born here, my grandparents were here?'

WHEN Bilal Dewan was taken into Assam's Matia camp on March 11, 2023, he had already spent over seven years in detention at Dibrugarh Central jail. In all those years, he had neither met nor spoken to anyone from his family. But to his joy, in the sprawling Matia transit camp — Assam's designated detention camp to house "illegal foreigners" that became functional in 2023 — he met Abdul Rahim, his elder brother. Abdul Rahim had similarly been brought to the camp the previous day after having spent six years in Jorhat jail.

"Maybe it was sad to find out that we were both in this situation. But at that moment, I was so happy. He was the first family member I had seen in seven years," says Bilal Dewan, now 30.

In that complex where the brothers lived for another nearly two years among others similarly condemned as foreigners, Bilal and Abdul laid their mattresses next to each other's — the days went past and they wondered if anything would change for them.

It did. On November 30, 2024, Abdul Rahim stepped out on bail and returned to his family home in Central Assam's Nagaon district. Two months later, Bilal Dewan too was released on bail after having spent nine years in detention. As he returned to his siblings in Nagaon after nearly a decade, unbeknownst to him, five days after his release, the Supreme Court directed the Assam government to initiate the process of his deportation from the country within two weeks.

Bilal Dewan was among 63 inmates of the Matia camp (as on January 21) whose uncertain status has spurred the Supreme Court to question the process of deportation of individuals who have been declared as not being Indian citizens but whose nationality is not ascertained. At the core of what the Supreme Court is pushing the state and the Centre to answer is: what happens to people declared foreigners by foreigners' tribunals in Assam after they are detained?

"When we asked a question to the Chief

Secretary of Assam... whether the nationality of the persons listed at serial nos. 1 to 63 is known, he answered affirmatively. As it is known that persons at serial nos. 1 to 63 are citizens of a particular country [Bangladesh], there is no reason why State of Assam cannot start procedure for their deportation," stated the Supreme Court bench of Justice Abhay Oka and Justice Ujjal Bhuyan in their February 4 order.

When *The Indian Express* met Bilal in the eastern Assam town of Moran — where he has returned to work as a scrap collector after his release — he had not heard about the discussion in the Supreme Court and was bewildered when told about it.

"I don't even know Bangladesh. I have never been there. I have never even seen what kind of a place Bangladesh is. They can send me there only if I am from Bangladesh. But I have always been here," says Bilal. While Bilal is one of those directly addressed by the Supreme Court's order, its implication extends to those like his elder brother Abdul Rahim, 40, who was an inmate at the Matia camp until shortly before the February 4 order of the Supreme Court.

"Broadly, there are two categories of foreigners. One category is where the persons are declared as not Indian nationals and their nationality is known. The other category is where the [foreigners'] tribunal has declared that the persons are not Indian nationals but their nationality is not known. As far as the first category is concerned, it poses no difficulty. As far as the second category is concerned, the Union of India will have to tell the Court in what manner their cases will be dealt with because they are neither Indian nationals nor their citizenship status is known," stated the Supreme Court Bench on February 4.

The brothers are part of this 'second category' and the Solicitor General recently stated that the question was being dealt with "at the highest level". Following this, the court granted the Centre time till March 21 to place its decision on record.

'No one told me why I'm a Bangladeshi'

Like in thousands of cases of people declared foreigners by tribunals, both Bilal Dewan and Abdul Rahim had been declared foreigners 'ex-parte', meaning that the proceedings had been conducted and orders passed in their absence.

The tribunals get two kinds of cases: those against whom a "reference" has been made by the border police, and those whose names in the electoral rolls have a 'D' (Doubtful) against them — D-voters are people who in 1997 were marked "doubtful" in the electoral rolls of Assam after allegedly being unable to prove their citizenship during verification.

According to latest data presented by the

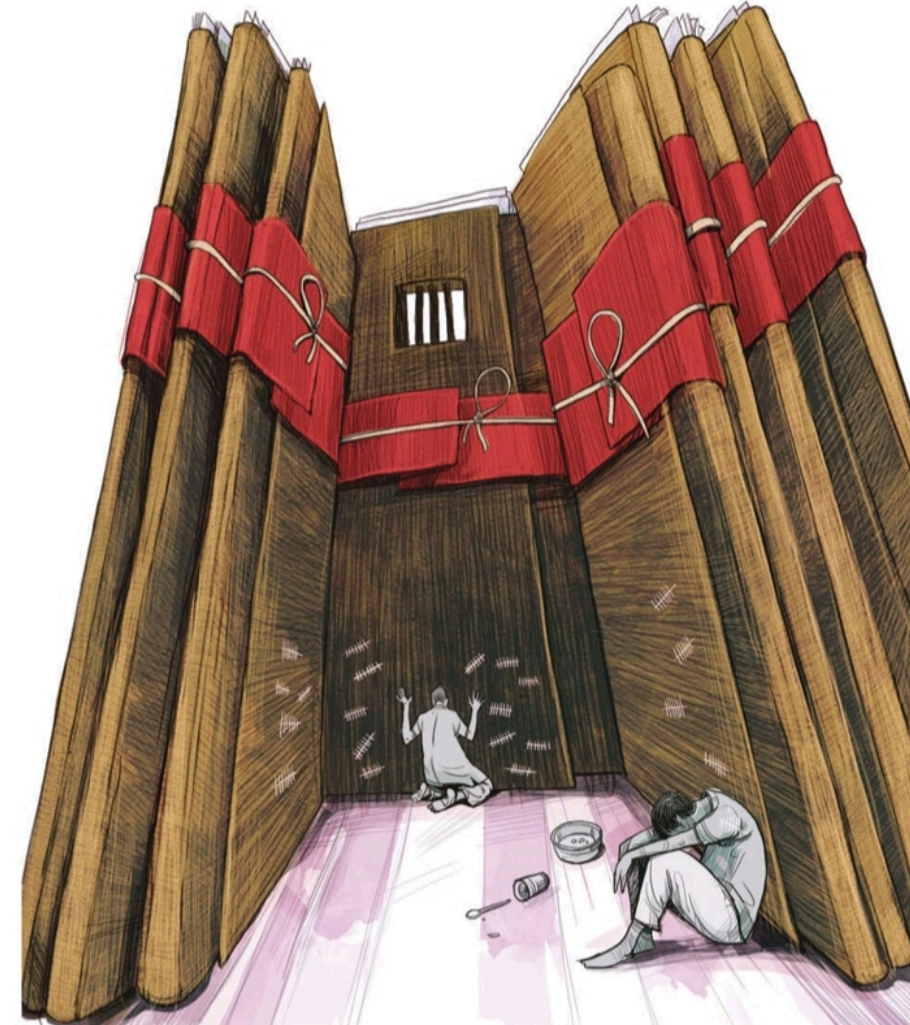


Illustration: Suvajit Dey

Inside the Matia camp

Last month, the Supreme Court directed the Assam government to initiate the process of deportation of 63 inmates of the Matia detention camp. How the numbers stack up



270 inmates in the Matia camp as of January 21, 2025

136 people of the 270 — 103 Rohingyas, 32 Chin people and a person from Senegal — have been sentenced and convicted for violations of the Foreigners Act, the Citizenship Act and the Passports Act. They have been declared citizens of other countries, have completed their jail sentence, and have been placed in the 'transit camp' while awaiting deportation

133 inmates have been declared "foreigners" by Foreigners Tribunals in Assam. Of the 133, 70 have "admitted to being Bangladeshi nationals" and have shared addresses in Bangladesh

63, including Bilal Dewan, have not shared an address. Of the 63, 13 are women, 50 are men

Source: Data provided by the state government to the Supreme Court

to the police station and I sat there for some time. Then, I was given a chaffan for Jorhat jail. That was on August 5, 2016. Since then, I was in jail until I got out two months ago," says Abdul Rahim.

He says that at that time, he was not aware of what he had been accused of. "Only realised when I went to the jail. There were many more people like me. Some 300-350 people were there who were called Bangladeshis. Some of them had been there for seven years, eight years..." he says.

Later, he says, he was told by police that he had been served a notice by border police in Haibargaon in 2005. However, his sister Ameena Khatoun, who is the one who coordinated with lawyers to get him out, claims that no one in their family had received it. "Our parents died when we were children, and I was very young. We don't know when the notice came or who received it," she says.

The Indian Express accessed the order by the Sivasagar foreigners' tribunal, dated May 22, 2008, which had declared him a foreigner, and found that it was a "common judgement" which collectively declared 95 people — including Abdul Rahim — foreigners 'ex-parte' (in their absence). The order states that in the case of all 95 people, the notices could not be served to the person concerned since they had moved away from their last known places of residence and instead, signatures had been taken from "respectable witnesses" in the localities.

Similarly, Bilal's order, dated February 7, 2014, states that he has been declared a foreigner as he did not appear before the tribunal and failed to discharge his burden of

proving that he is not a foreigner.

Both the brothers insist that their paternal grandfather Misir Ali Dewan was included in the 1951 National Register of Citizens and recorded as a resident of Nagaon's Haibargaon.

"When I found out what the case was, I asked the police sir for a chance to bring my documents from Nagaon and show him, but he said that the case is already done. No one told me why I'm a Bangladeshi. I don't even know anything about all these things and processes, so what would I have even done if I knew? Once inside, I stayed as they kept me. What could I have said to anyone? I stayed how they kept, would eat food when they would give food, that's it," says Bilal.

Now, however, a set of lawyers working on citizenship matters — who helped them secure their bail on the basis of the Supreme Court's 2020 directions to release on bail such individuals who had been in detention for over two years — are looking to challenge the tribunals' orders in the High Court.

"We met the two brothers when we happened to visit the Matia Transit Camp for another case. At first, we were shocked to find that both the cases are ex-parte, which also means that no effective legal representation was provided to them at the trial stage. It took us some time to get them out on the SC's release orders as multiple jurisdictions were involved. Our next step is to challenge their orders at the High Court. Of course, the larger issue of constitutionality of detention is sub-judice in the Supreme Court, therefore, I am barred from commenting on that. We only hope for the best," said Dipesh Agarwal, one of the lawyers.

Several others among the 63 detainees, and other people who have been declared foreigners and detained in the past are in various stages of legally challenging the orders of the tribunals.

'An arbitrary system'

While Bilal and Abdul Rahim have been declared foreigners by tribunals, what the

'No one told me why I'm a Bangladeshi. I don't even know anything about all these things and processes, so what would I have even done if I knew? Once inside (Matia), I stayed as they kept me, would eat food when they would give food... That's it,' says Bilal

Assam government had told the Supreme Court is that it had not been able to initiate the process of deportation of declared foreigners because they had not "divulged" their Bangladesh addresses.

A senior Assam government official earlier told *The Indian Express*, "The process of deportation is a diplomatic issue and is a Central government matter. The role of the state government is limited to referring the matter to the Ministry of External Affairs. In all these cases, we have to fill a Nationality Verification Status Report and send it to the MEA which it sends to the embassy or high commission of the other country. Once the embassy tells us that the individual is indeed a national of that country and the address is correct, we hand over these persons to the BSF, which takes it up with the paramilitary force of the other country... In all the other cases [204 other inmates in the detention camp at the time] we have sent the reports to the MEA but these 63 people have not divulged an address in Bangladesh."

However, as noted by the Supreme Court, the state asserts that they know that their country of origin is Bangladesh.

"What address can I tell them? How can I say that I have an address in Bangladesh when I was born here and even my grandparents were here?" argues Bilal.

Lawyer Aman Wadud, who has worked extensively on citizenship cases, questions the process. "It's an arbitrary system where a large number of Indian citizens are accused of being illegal immigrants by investigation agencies, mostly without proper investigation. These cases are referred to the tribunals, where they are stripped of their citizenship — either for not appearing before the tribunal or for minor variations in names in their documents. But to deport them, the 'country of origin' needs to confirm that they are nationals of that country. Why will Bangladesh do that? The tribunal decides whether a person is an illegal immigrant or not and they are de facto accused of coming from Bangladesh," he says.

More than eight years after he was first detained, Abdul Rahim still comprehends very little of his experience. He is now going through the motions — making his weekly appearance at the local police station, as is mandated by his bail conditions. But he is quick to grasp the implications of all the talk on deportation.

"How can I accept anyone saying that we should be removed from India? If they remove us, where will they put us? They need to give us a place somewhere. If they don't, how will we go? We have not given an address for anywhere else because we don't have one. We only have an Indian address. If they want us to go there, they will have to give us citizenship for that country. We can't be from nowhere."

Editor's TAKE

Women's Day: Not an episodic event but an ongoing epic saga

The future belongs to those who dare to demolish barriers and Indian women are quick learners

International Women's Day is not an annual event, to be reduced to yet another date routinely done and dusted in the yearly calendar. It is a potent reminder of the struggles women have endured through history and the milestones yet to be achieved. Indian women, in particular, have battled intense socio-economic and cultural challenges. What sets them apart on the global stage, however, is their unique gift of grit and determination to shatter stereotypes and leave their indelible ink on countless pages of narratives historically dominated and scripted by men, and admittedly some women, for an inherently patriarchal society. Today, as we celebrate these achievements, we must remember that true emancipation for the Indian woman is still a work in progress, indeed an ongoing journey. En route to the final destination lies a path strewn with constrictive societal norms and gender biases that must be negotiated with. The Indian woman shall, and will.

Historically shackled to the home and hearth with limited access to education and career opportunities, the Indian woman has not had it easy. Today, despite the gradual bridging of time-worn gender faultlines, the modern Indian woman still confronts lack of representation in leadership roles. Safety concerns, particularly gender-based violence and harassment, remain pressing issues that not only require a systemic change but a decisive obliteration of decadent mindsets. Cultural expectations are an encumbrance that every woman must fight, her individual battles, her attempts to strike a picture-perfect balance between professional aspirations and family needs. This dual responsibility has often compelled our women to compromises, many stepping back from their place of work due to lack of institutional support, such as maternity benefits and flexible work environments.

Despite these hurdles, Indian women have carved a niche for themselves with their unique resilience. For instance, the Armed Forces, once an exclusive preserve of our young men, now proudly showcases our women as fighter pilots, commanding officers, and front-line warriors. Leaders like Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw in biotechnology, Falguni Nayar in entrepreneurship, Rani Rampal in sports, all have redefined success, inspiring millions. Women journalists, scientists, and engineers have risen to prominence, from Gagandeep Kang in virology to Tessa Thomas, India's 'Missile Woman'. The Indian judiciary, today has an enviable gallery of women judges championing gender justice, with a lady perhaps poised to become the country's first female Chief Justice.

However, true gender equality must reflect in increased representation of women in politics and corporate boardrooms. Laws do exist to protect their rights, but enforcement is often weak. Education and financial independence are key to furthering women's empowerment and must form the bedrock of fundamental rights. Policy reforms must ensure equal pay, safer workplaces, and equal career growth opportunities. Societal mindsets need to shift, with men playing an active role in supporting gender equality. Schools must instill values of inclusivity from an early age, ensuring that each generation is sensitised to the need for a more equitable perspective.

Today serves as a reminder that while progress has been made, the journey toward true empowerment is far from over. It is not just about celebrating achievements but about continuing the fight against gender inequality. India stands at a crossroads where women's participation in every sphere can redefine the nation's future. With a concerted and synchronised effort—from policymakers, businesses, society, to individuals—women's emancipation can move beyond discourse to become an everyday reality. The road ahead is long, and there are promises to keep. Today's Indian woman is not a silent spectator to this change. She is the change.

Leaderspeak



Today is Women's Day. In Navsari, I will participate in a programme. On the occasion of Women's Day, I am going to hand over my social media account to some such inspiring sisters and daughters. The son of a poor mother decided that Modi will give guarantee to the poor. Modi took guarantee for the poor and started MUDRA Yojana. Today, ₹32 lakh crore has been given to the poor without any guarantee—and those who abuse us, those who have the 'zero seat', will not understand this, they will not even be able to tell how many zeros are there in ₹32 lakh crore...

Miles to go before she sleeps

International Women's Day underscores the need to remember that gender justice should be an integral part of policy-making and governance, beyond symbolic gestures and rhetorical lectures

As a woman in politics and an advocate for women's voices nationally and internationally, I extend my warmest wishes on this International Women's Day. This occasion serves not just as a celebration but also as a moment of reflection on the progress we have made and the long road ahead in achieving true gender equality. This year's Women's Day comes a short month after the Delhi elections, marking a historic moment with the appointment of the city's fourth female Chief Minister and first-ever female Leader of Opposition. We also witnessed an unprecedented voter turnout, with women surpassing men—60.9 per cent against 60.2 per cent—in exercising their democratic rights. Delhi also saw the highest number of women contesting the election this time, making up 14 per cent of the total candidates. However, the same did not translate into elected representatives, with only 7 per cent of the seats going to women, the lowest in a decade.

Before we see these figures as a sign of progress towards women's equal representation in the democratic process, I must remind you of the Women's Reservation Act passed in 2023 to ensure 33 per cent representation of women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. Despite getting full support across party lines, this Act remains in limbo, awaiting the completion of the census and delimitation exercises before getting implemented.

The census was postponed from 2020 and has been indefinitely delayed since the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. As a result, the aspiration of 33 per cent representation remains a distant dream, while the reality continues to hover around 10-14 per cent. This pattern is visible across states that recently held their elections—women comprised 9 per cent of candidates and 8 per cent of elected representatives in Maharashtra, 10 per cent of candidates and 14 per cent winners in Haryana, and 11 per cent of candidates with 15 per cent representation in Jharkhand.

Even as we fight for greater representation in politics, the discourse around women remains regressive, with many politicians making misogynistic comments about how women should dress, behave and conduct themselves. Women continue to be blamed for their harassment, while structural issues of gender-based violence remain unaddressed. India still lacks a marital rape law, and progressive legislation such as Maharashtra's proposed Shakti Bill—designed to curb crimes against women and children—was returned against the Centre's assent. A society where women's safety and



dignity are up for debate cannot claim to be on the path to equality. The gender gap in representation extends beyond politics into the corporate world. Even after tokenistic efforts to mandate having at least one woman on company boards, the progress on parity has been slow.

Women held just 18 per cent of board seats in India in 2023, lagging the global average of 23 per cent. Of this, the number of women chairing company boards stands low at 4 per cent. The situation is even worse at the highest executive levels—only 6 per cent of CEOs globally are women, with India standing at a meagre 5 per cent. Middle management, the crucial pipeline for future leadership, has also declined, with women's representation falling from 18-19 per cent in 2019 to 14-16 per cent post-pandemic. India's total share of female employees in senior and middle management is only 12.7 per cent, significantly lower than neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka (24.6 per cent) and Thailand (34.7 per cent). The situation is no better for women entrepreneurs. India ranks 57th out of 65 on the Index of Women Entrepreneurs, and only 20 per cent of businesses are led by women. The funding gap is particularly stark—just 0.3 per cent of India's venture capital funding went to women-led startups in 2021.

This funding disparity is not just an Indian problem; globally, women-led startups receive only a fraction of venture capital. In the US, despite women owning almost 40 per cent of businesses, they receive only 2 per

cent of VC funding. Europe presents a similar picture, with male-led startups consistently securing the lion's share of investments. Gender bias in the investment process is well-established. Experiments have shown that identical startup pitches are more likely to receive funding when delivered by a male voice than a female one.

Investors ask male founders about growth potential, while female entrepreneurs are questioned about personal commitments—marital status, children and whether their business is merely a 'lifestyle venture'. These biases are deeply ingrained and systemic, stalling women's progress at every level. It is, therefore, not surprising that our artificial intelligence systems, the technology of the future, turn out to be gender-biased as well. AI is only as unbiased as the data it is trained on. The gender disparities in our society are mirrored in AI decision-making, reinforcing rather than challenging existing inequalities.

If we want a more equitable future, we need to change our thinking at the fundamental level—ensuring women's inclusion is not just a tokenistic effort but a structural, sustained commitment across politics, business and governance and shift towards women-led development and change.

In the wake of these sobering realities, we must also recognise the steps that can drive real change.

The Government must ensure the timely implementation of the Women's Reservation Act. Companies need to go beyond filling quotas and focus on mentoring and promoting women in leadership roles. Investors and venture capitalists must address their biases and provide fair funding opportunities to women entrepreneurs. Education and skill-building programmes must empower young women to take on leadership roles in various sectors.

Moreover, it is necessary that we, as a society, foster an environment where women feel safe and supported in the workplace, in politics, and in public spaces. Sexual harassment and workplace discrimination must be addressed with stronger legal protections and zero-tolerance policies, and public representatives should reflect these values.

Women's issues must not be sidelined or treated as secondary concerns but should be an integral part of policy-making and governance. On this Women's Day, let us go beyond symbolic gestures. The numbers tell a sobering story, but they also offer a clear roadmap for change. It is time to turn these statistics into tangible action and move beyond rhetoric to create a world where women are equal stakeholders in every sphere of life.

(The writer is a politician and member of Rajya Sabha; views expressed are personal)

Do not besmirch legacy with obscenity

SECOND Opinion

As a proud Bihari, a Bollywood actress and a global inspirational figure, I feel an urgent need to address a critical issue that has long tarnished our cultural heritage and posed a serious threat to women's dignity and safety. The growing obscenity in Bhojpuri music is not merely a matter of artistic expression; it is a reflection of deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes that devalue women, normalise objectification and perpetuate a culture of disrespect and violence. This degradation of our musical tradition has had far-reaching consequences and we must take decisive action to restore its lost dignity. For generations, Bhojpuri music has been a vibrant medium of cultural expression, deeply rooted in our traditions and values.

It has narrated stories of love, devotion and social issues, resonating with the soul of our people. However, in recent years, this once-respected art form has been reduced to a vehicle for vulgarity and misogyny. The lyrics of many modern Bhojpuri songs objectify women, reduce them to mere objects of desire, and promote harmful stereotypes that erode their self-worth. This rampant objectification not only diminishes women's confidence but also fosters an environment where gender-based violence is normalised. When music—one of the most powerful tools of influence—portrays women in a degrading manner, it reinforces the notion that they are inferior and unde-



NITU CHANDRA

serving of respect. Beyond its impact on women, the obscenity in Bhojpuri music is also corroding the cultural fabric of Bihar and other Bhojpuri-speaking regions. What was once a genre celebrated for its poetic richness and emotional depth has now become synonymous with crudeness and disrespect. The commercialisation of vulgarity in Bhojpuri songs has not only tarnished the reputation of our music but has also created a rift between generations—alienating those who grew up cherishing its traditional essence.

The urgency of this issue demands a comprehensive approach to restore respectability to Bhojpuri music while simultaneously ensuring women's dignity and safety. Laws must be enforced to curb the production and dissemination of obscene content in Bhojpuri music. While artistic freedom is important, it should not come at the cost of degrading an entire genre or dismantling cultural values. Stronger regulations should be implemented to hold singers, lyricists, producers, and distributors accountable for their content. The government should establish a monitoring body to review music content before its release, and strict penalties should be imposed on those who promote vulgarity in the name of entertainment. Awareness campaigns should be launched to educate them about their rights and the harmful effects of such content.

This can be achieved by promoting artists who create respectful, meaningful, and uplifting content. Music labels should be encouraged to invest in artists who uphold the

integrity of Bhojpuri music. Awards and incentives should be introduced to honour musicians who create songs that celebrate women and cultural values. Schools and cultural institutions should integrate traditional Bhojpuri music into their curriculum to revive its authentic charm. Restoring dignity to Bhojpuri music requires collective action from society. The degradation of Bhojpuri music into a platform for obscenity is an issue that affects not just women but the very soul of our cultural identity.

We must act now to reclaim the dignity of our music, ensure women's safety, and uphold the values that define us as a society. The fight against obscenity in Bhojpuri music is not about restricting artistic expression but about fostering a culture where art uplifts rather than degrades. It is time for us to unite and take a stand. Let us demand accountability from those who produce and promote obscene content. Let us empower women to challenge these harmful narratives. Let us support artists who honour our traditions and values. Above all, let us work together to build a world where Bhojpuri music is once again a source of pride, inspiration, and cultural enrichment. The time for change is now—let us be the voice that restores honour to Bhojpuri music and creates a world where women are valued, respected, and celebrated. Together, we can bring back the true essence of Bhojpuri music and ensure that it remains a symbol of our rich cultural legacy for generations to come.

(The writer is an actress, producer and an advocate for cultural reforms; views are personal)

Letters to the Editor

India aims \$5 trillion economy

Madam—Apropos of the news on PM Modi's vow for a \$5 trillion economy (March 6, 2025), the segmental approach on manufacturing, the service sector, IT, GDP indices, education, health, engineering, AI, defence, etc., for achieving the target of a \$5 trillion economy is not just sufficient. The state governments are not doing enough to generate their own resources and contribute to infrastructure development significantly. The infrastructure development of roads, aviation and maritime, education and health, defence, industry, IT, and technology is key to achieving this target. For the past 5 years, there has been a marathon race in state and Union governments to spend more and more on freebies and welfare schemes with no standards set to benchmark the optimum expenditure out of the budget. Only needy people should get freebies.

We are idling our potential men and women power through freebies. It takes a toll on infrastructure development. The deficit budgets of the state governments are onerous for GDP growth and marching beyond the 5th largest economy, whereas China is regaining its GDP growth. If the entire agriculture and manufacturing sectors are accounted for, we are already at the \$5 trillion economy mark. The indiscriminately higher GST is discouraging the manufacturing sector from disclosing its production for income tax and indirect taxes.

VINOD JOHRI | DELHI

DMK plays language politics

Madam—The ruling DMK has started the language rhetoric 'anti-Hindi imposition' in the state as a signal that the elections are round the corner. Now that actor Vijay, who also shares the Dravidian ideology, is likely to split the DMK's vote and the party having to fight the anti-incumbency and serious corruption charges by several cabinet colleagues, the delimitation issue has come in handy as the language issue seems to have not caught on well so far.

Delimitation, once completed, seeks to decide on the number of parliament seats based on the population of the state, which, when completed and implemented, Tamil Nadu and southern states are likely to lose in number of states, while the northern states like Bihar, UP, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, etc., are likely to gain. Tamil Nadu's plea is that the southern states are not to be penalised for having followed the population control policy directives issued post-1971 census while the northern states, which have failed, are getting more representation. The argument, though valid, is one that needs discussion, keeping the fairness of democratic principles in mind, which entails that all the voters need to be represented equally. DMK's MK Stalin also would not find supporters for his theory from his own INDI alliance partners.

GOPALSWAMY J | CHENNAI

Countries retaliate to US tariffs

Madam—Apropos of the editorial 'Beginning of a Trade War' (March 6, 2025), no doubt, President Trump has shaken the world with his policy announcements and being criticised for his trade and tariff war. But in many respects, Trump is right in doing whatever he is in the best of America's interest. Since World War II, America has been exploited by the world in many ways. Europe, Latin America and developing countries took maximum benefits by exploiting the US. Illegal immigration to America from developing countries hurt America badly. No doubt in the present we are criticising Trump, but history may prove that many of his actions set things right in international relations and made a level playing field for international trade.

National interests determine the relations of every nation with other countries. America being no exception. The world should not create a hue and cry when Trump makes policies in the interest of America. All targeted countries, China, Canada, Mexico, etc., immediately retaliated with equally high tariffs. Whereas America tolerated their unfair and high tariffs for decades and even helped and supported these countries in many other ways. The onus for this trade war is on China, Canada, Mexico, South Korea, India, etc., who heavily taxed imports from the US. Instead of criticising Trump, we should wait and watch for a just and fair international trade.

VINAY KR MALHOTRA | AMBALA CANT

HEALTHCARE NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

The article about healthcare in non-metro areas (March 6, 2025) presents good reading material. The scope and necessity to develop healthcare facilities in small cities and even in rural areas are much more than what they are today. But the task of developing healthcare in cities is left to the private players in the field for whom healthcare is undoubtedly a commodity to mint profit rather than a service.

Healthcare seekers come to cities mostly from rural areas and go to metros when specialised treatment is required. Very few of them are fortunate enough to avail themselves of such specialised treatment in public sector healthcare institutions, and others either seek the intervention of insurance providers or meet the high cost by disposing of assets.

If the healthcare institutions and system of educating the public on preventive aspects and providing periodic check-ups even in the absence of any visible symptoms are ensured in the rural areas and towns, the rush in the cities could be considerably reduced. Most of the hospitals are functioning with gross deficiencies in terms of professional infrastructure or materials, including medicines. A government hospital in Anantapur treats an average of 1500 inpatients a day. Its bed strength is 750 on paper, but the budget provided is for a 500-bed capacity. The highlight of it is that it has a super speciality hospital attached to manage its fund requirements.

We find an analysis machine that costs a few lakhs but is not put in use for want of an A/C to maintain temperature. This state of affairs is quoted to mention it as an example. Another issue is the quality of medical education. Many teaching institutions suffer due to a want of experienced and efficient teachers. Still, they pump out graduates and post-graduates.

In India, falling sick is taxable. Medicines, medical devices, and ICU-level care are taxed. All these woes are the fall-out of the apathy of the government that doesn't prioritise the healthcare of the people but aims at making India the global destination for healthcare. We still have a long way to go.

AG RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR