

THE ASIAN AGE

9 JANUARY 2025

Fall in consumption signals economic slumpies ahead

The Indian economy is likely to record the slowest growth in the last four years at 6.4 per cent in the next financial year 2024-25, according to the first advance estimates released by the government on Tuesday. The muted growth is supposed to be caused by lagging manufacturing and lower capital formation.

The advance estimates are prepared by the National Statistics Office (NSO), which will be the biases for the Union Budget to be presented by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Lok Sabha on February 1.

While agriculture was a standout performer, with growth estimated at 3.8 per cent, the growth of industry is projected to moderate to 6.2 per cent. The growth in the manufacturing sector, constrained by weak exports and slowing global demand, is expected to muted at 5.3 per cent from the previous year's high of 9.9 per cent.

Private consumption — spending by individuals — is set to recover, with a 7.3 per cent growth forecast, which is almost double the four per cent, which reflects a revival in rural demand and improved consumer sentiment. The government spending too is projected to rise by 4.1 per cent, recovering from 2.5 per cent last year.

Without either investing in new capacities and thereby creating new jobs or increasing salaries to allow workers to consume more, higher corporate profits don't serve the common good.

The exports are expected to grow 5.9 per cent, while imports are forecast to shrink 1.3 per cent because of slower global recovery and geopolitical developments. A brief look at sectoral growth indicators reveals that, except for agriculture, all others are forecast to witness lower growth, suggesting that an all-pervading slump is in store for the Indian economy. This also corroborates low investments as reflected in the lower GFCF.

Nevertheless, the Economic Survey 2023 had declared that profitability of the Indian corporate sector has touched a 15-year high. If the companies are sitting on mountains of profits, why have capital investments remained so low and employee salaries raised a paltry 9.5 per cent?

The appropriation of corporate profits to swell its cash reserves would hurt the economy badly. Without either investing in new capacities and thereby creating new jobs or increasing employee salaries to allow them to contribute more to the economic growth by consuming more, higher corporate profits serve no purpose for the common good of the country. The Narendra Modi government ought to look into this aspect, if it wants to revive the economy.

Pranab memorial: Act of grace

Having decided to build a memorial for former President Pranab Mukherjee, the Union government has chosen a site for it at the Rashtriya Smriti Sthal in Rajghat. This has been done with good grace and accepted graciously by the former President's daughter who had reminded the government about the intention in honouring a past President.

The way in which the Congress Party politicised the issue over a spot to cremate former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and to find a site for his memorial had left a bad taste in the mouth, more so because the gentleman PM himself may have wanted none of it, so self-effacing was he in an important office he held for two terms.

The Congress Party's anxiety to honour its favourites is understandable though it did not apply the same yardstick to a former Prime Minister in Narasimha Rao who may, however, not have kowtowed to the party's first family as much as his successor did, even if Manmohan did so only in his understated ways to keep things rolling smoothly in party and government.

The Congress Party is fond of celebrating birth and death anniversaries, which would probably number more than the days in the calendar considering its long history stretches to more than 125 years and the head of leaders it has had to be celebrated in posterity after their departure. Building memorials do make sense to mark a spot for those wishing to pay homage in a country known for its sentimentalism.

The point is bickering over the departure of past luminaries is best avoided since there are so many issues that political parties may wish not to tackle. Regulations to be put in a handbook of how to handle funerals and build memorials for Presidents and Prime Ministers may be welcome, much as Presidents of the US and UK's royalty do in addressing the issue even when they are alive without being superstitious or sentimental about it.

A memorial for Manmohan should be built in time. While this is not an entitlement considering there are no memorials for every departed Prime Minister — there is none for VP Singh — a beloved two-term PM like the Congressman will deserve to be celebrated with a place in history as well as with a memorial on the ground.

THE ASIAN AGE

Krishnan Srinivasan

The Asian Age office is located at: New Delhi: Jawahar Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Droni Dey Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 011-23211214. Published and Printed on behalf of and for: The Asian Age Holdings Limited, Jawahar Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Droni Dey Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002 at 011, India. Tel: 011-23211214, C/O: Sector 33, Noida-201303. E-mail: Quicknews@aa.com, 88, First Floor, Block 2, Eblock House, 29 Vasant Vihar, New Delhi-110025. GST Registration number: 27252954

Krishnan Srinivasan

Political instability growing in Europe: Germany faces poll amid global churn

Two leading European Union countries are both under severe internal pressures — France with its fourth Prime Minister in 2024, and Germany facing a snap poll that will take place in a particularly challenging global context. In addition to the ongoing NATO-Russia tensions, the economic position in Europe, it is also facing problems in dealing with trade with China.

Early elections are rare in Germany, with only three precedents, but national elections due in September 2025 will now be advanced to February 23. This comes as no surprise after the country's uneasy three years in office: the "traffic light coalition" comprising the red of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats (SPD), yellow of Free Democrats (FD) and green of Green Party (Grüne) was in growing political and economic difficulty.

The premature cause of Germany's political difficulties was its support for embattled Ukraine, when Mr Scholz instructed finance minister Christian Lindner to ignore the debt brake so that the Chancellor could add another \$15.7 billion for Ukraine in addition to the \$8.4 billion already donated this year, possibly to compensate for not donating long-range Taurus missiles to Kyiv. The Free Democrats refused and Mr Lindner was dismissed because he was considered more party-oriented than nationalist. Meanwhile, the Greens have been consistently difficult for Mr Scholz. The coalition suffered severe losses in recent regional elections in Thuringia and Saxony, and much of its financing was from the fund meant for Covid-19 and thus of doubtful legitimacy.

On December 16, 2024, Chancellor Scholz called for, and lost, a no-confidence vote as he no longer had a majority and the non-ideological coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democrats was dysfunctional. Unable to pass his 2025 Budget, Mr Scholz is now a lame-duck caretaker.

After the retirement of Chancellor Angela Merkel, an European leader and crisis manager for 16 years till 2021, Mr Scholz's personality is by contrast considered colourless and without impact, with a low popularity rating, the SPD seems headed for its worst-ever election result at 16 per cent while its Green coalition partners are polling even lower at 13 per cent.

Germany is Europe's biggest country and economy, and is now in decline, with recession for two years in succession due to multiple factors. West-led Russian sanctions and loss of cheap energy, leaving nuclear energy seen as the only answer, and 40 per cent of the electorate comprising senior citizens and pensioners with public works about inflation. Germany's growth is only 0.2 per cent, the weakest in the G-7. There is a cost-of-living crisis, with the economy struck by self-imposed budgetary constraints that rule out stimulus policies, and EU's tariff against Chinese electric cars that have led to Volkswagen, an national symbol and Germany's biggest employer in the

auto but declining car-making sector, ending its job guarantee and preparing for plant closures and mass lay-offs for the first time. The incoming German government will probably be a coalition of pro-EU, pro-Ukraine, centre-right and centre-left CDU and SPD, since all the historic major parties refuse to work with the increasingly popular Alternative for Germany (AfD), now lying second in the polls and which in September last year became the first far-right party to win a German state election since the Nazi era. AfD was the indirect cause of the latest political shake-up, since the established political parties have expressed outrage at US technology magnate and outspoken Trump supporter Elon Musk, accusing him of interfering in the next election through his praise for the AfD. Mr Musk is accused of claiming in the conservative World on Sunday (Welt am Sonntag) paper that Germany was teetering on the edge of economic collapse, and that the AfD could revive Germany's economy and prevent a loss of identity through a controlled immigration policy. In the article, Musk also praised the AfD's approach to regulation, taxes and market deregulation.

In Germany, the media are obliged to observe the principles of objectivity, impartiality and diversity of opinion. However, this does not exclude the possibility of individuals expressing opinions in commentaries that could be interpreted as editorial endorsements. Musk's comments caused a

government spokesperson to riposte that "it is a fact that Elon Musk is trying to exert influence on the parliamentary election (whereas) the country's elections are a matter for Germans", recalling that various AfD branches had been labelled extremist by Germany's domestic security agency and "hostile to democracy".

Friedrich Merz, Christian Democrat (CDU) leader, currently in Opposition, who leads the polls ahead of the election, agreed with the government on the causes of severely restricting immigration and making peace with Russia. The immigration context is that Germany took in a million Syrians and more Ukrainians than any other EU nation, with the resulting strong sentiment that it cannot and should not take any more. The next months will be decisive for France and Germany; either greater economic and political stability, or a crisis of even more formidable proportions.

Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Indian foreign journalist

Subhani



Why Israel wants Gaza to be free of all Palestinians



Sunanda K. Datta-Ray
Reflections

Even Israel's admirers and well-wishers, including Narendra Modi's India, must wonder as the new year breaks what exactly Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hopes to achieve by bombing the Gaza Strip into extinction. Is there really a plan behind the continuing bombardment or are Mr Netanyahu and his friends driven by sheer rage like an angry child smashing into smithereens a toy that has incurred their unreasoning wrath? More and more one suspects the latter. Israel's real aim is to create a *terra nullius*, a "territory without a master", where Israeli ownership can no longer be questioned.

The Latin term has been used to justify the white colonisation of non-white lands like Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America and Canada. An early instance of this kind of acquisition is commemorated in a romanticised oil painting by John Alexander Gilfillan, later popularised through Samuel Calder's 1865 engraved drawing, depicting Lieutenant James Cook annexing New South Wales in the name of the British Crown on August 22, 1770. However, the High Court of Australia overturned this implementation of the legal principle of *terra nullius* in Australian law in 1992, and recognised the continuing connection and rights to land of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through Native Title.

Not that Israel is bothered about precedents. It will create them, where it can, and the glib public's imagination too, the *terra nullius* definition indicates that the land in question can legally be occupied with sovereign rights by another nation, under the doctrine of discovery which the International Court of Justice approves as a legal method of territorial acquisition. In practice, the term has often been cynically used to ignore the rights and even physical presence of the original natives (Australian aboriginals or American Indians) to legitimise state occupation and colonisation. This produced the fiasco of a small group of Australian aboriginal men once landing somewhere on the British coast and claiming to take possession of the United Kingdom.

Israel's apparent attempt to legitimise its occupation of Arab lands could be treated as a similar farcical enactment of history — like the *nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 referring to the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians in 1948 — if it were not for the deadly intent of the aggressors. The bombardment of Gaza started on October 7, 2023, immediately after Hamas attacked Israel, killing about 1,200 people and taking more than 250 hostages.

Israel began ground operations in the 25-mile-long Gaza Strip, which is between 3.7 and 7.5 miles wide and whose 141 sq miles supported 2.3 million Palestinians and boasted one of the world's highest population densities. This wanted killing of men, women and children, and the deliberate razing into dust of their homes and all supporting amenities of civilised urban living could be attributed to the blind desire for revenge. Jews accept the Bible's Old Testament where the Book of Matthew 5:38 speaks of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" on the grounds that the law ordains that the punishment must match the injury.

On October 13, however, Israel went beyond the

The Israeli police began investigating him in December 2016 and, subsequently, Mr Netanyahu was officially indicted for breach of trust, accepting bribes, and fraud on November 21, 2019

Judaic injunction on crime and punishment and articulated four goals it sought to achieve — to destroy Hamas, free the hostages, ensure Gaza no longer poses a threat to Israel, and in return displaced residents of Northern Israel. More than 35,000 Palestinians, including more than 7,000 children and 4,500 women, have been killed in Gaza since the retaliatory operation began. Another 10,000 people are missing and presumed dead under the rubble of destroyed buildings. Israel is accused of war crimes and genocide. It is also alleged that but for the war emergency, Mr Netanyahu would have to face charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust by him and his close political allies during his fourth and fifth terms as Prime Minister. The Israeli police began investigating him in December 2016 and, subsequently, Mr Netanyahu was officially indicted for breach of trust, accepting bribes, and fraud on November 21, 2019. As a result, he was obliged to legally relinquish his ministry portfolios other than the office of Prime Minister.

By mid-December, Israel had dropped 29,000 munitions on Gaza, destroying homes, schools, hospitals and any kind of tools and infrastructure. Israel says that it is eliminating terrorists, but then it bombs a hospital or a school and says — producing no proof — that terrorists were hiding in the hospital/school.

Such problems will no longer bedevil the strongest power in West Asia if Gaza is depopulated so that "between the sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty" as the founding father of Mr Netanyahu's Likud party wrote. That *terra nullius* will not then be a "territory without a master". It will be entirely Israel's property.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS CANADIAN RESET?

The surprise resignation of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau could pave the way for a diplomatic reset with India, following contentious allegations about New Delhi's involvement in the killing of Sikh separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar on Canadian soil in June last year. It is not yet clear whom the Liberal Party will choose as Trudeau's successor, but analysts say there will now be room for renewed negotiations between the two countries as Trudeau's successor may not like to be seen as being hostile towards India. The political upheaval comes at a difficult moment for the North American country internationally.

R. Sivakumar
Chennai

ACCHE DIN INDEED

AS PER National Statistics Office data, the GDP will grow at the rate of 6.4 per cent in the financial year 2025. This will be the lowest growth rate since the Covid year 2020-21, and even lower than the 6.6 per cent in 2022. This is not a good news. The Indian economy is already struggling on various fronts with inflation and unemployment. Jobs will be further hit and the service sector will grow only at 5.8 per cent against last year's growth rate of 6.4 per cent. Comprising finance, hotels, transport, IT and communications, it is the backbone of the Indian economy, so this is definitely a cause of worry.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

WHOSE PRANAB?

THIS IS with reference to the Central government's decision to set up a memorial for our former President Pranab Mukherjee at the Rashtra Smriti Sthal complex. Probably, the permission for Dr Manmohan Singh's memorial has prompted this decision. Or is it a way for the BJP to appropriate the legacy of another person wronged by the Congress? Whatever it is, at this rate, in another decade or so, New Delhi will have more memorials than government offices or even residences. Hence our government should dispense with this tradition.

Capt. N. Viswanathan
Coimbatore

Metros and riders

Planning requires rethinking for improved outcomes

The Union government has announced the length of India's Metro network has now crossed 1,000 kilometres, spread over 11 states, covering 23 cities. Another 1,000 kilometres or so is under construction or in an advanced stage of planning. This is a remarkable achievement, given India's broader struggle to build world-class urban infrastructure. Where Metro rail works, such as in Delhi, it has the potential to transform the urban experience. Delhi is not known for attention to public civility — except in the Metro, where the average rider pays far greater attention to such norms than they would on roads. Unsurprisingly, multiple state and local leaders are determined to extend the number of available Metros so that every town has the opportunity to share in this experience. What is essential is to ensure that the experience remains world-class, through management and maintenance. The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, for example, has done a better job of this than the Kolkata Metro, India's first.

Fulfilling this ambition has been made easier for the Union government through concessional finance. The bill for just the years between 2021 and 2025 is expected to be ₹3 trillion. But little of that falls directly on the Union Budget. For the second phase of the Chennai Metro, for example, about a third — ₹34,000 crore — will be provided by the Government of Tamil Nadu. Most of the rest comes from loans taken by the Union government on behalf of the implementing agency, particularly from lenders linked to the Japanese government such as the Asian Development Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency. China-linked agencies such as the New Development (or Brics) Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are also involved. About half the money for the Ahmedabad Metro comes from German and French development banks; the Germans are also supporting the second phase of the Bengaluru Metro. For many of these foreign governments, the decision to lend is partly to support the purchase of rolling stock or construction equipment made by factories located in the countries in question — for example, Germany's Siemens for the Ahmedabad Metro.

Yet there have been significant mistakes made in this rollout as well. The biggest reason why the Metro in Delhi has been relatively successful is that there is no widely used suburban train network with which it must compete and connect, and that it very quickly managed to extend its network considerably. The truth is that, flashy showpieces in city centres notwithstanding, the most effective and in-demand Metros in India are those that are light suburban rail. Last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Delhi-Meerut light rail link, which connects the Uttar Pradesh town to Delhi with trains running every 15 minutes. This is a classic suburban rail project, and more such are needed. The ideal use case for actual Metros — such as those in New York, Paris, or Tokyo — exists when there are multiple stops and stations in the city centre, and few individuals are longer than 15 minutes' walk from a train. Even in Delhi — with stations that are large and far apart — this use case does not exist. It is no wonder that a study conducted by researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology of Delhi has pointed out that not one Indian Metro has met ridership targets. In Mumbai, it is a third of projections; in Bengaluru, the first phase hit only 6 per cent. None of them is cost-effective. A re-examination of why some Metros work, and where they don't, is overdue.

A much-needed charge

PM E-Drive could be a game-changer

The lack of charging stations has long been pinpointed as a brake on the faster growth of the electric-vehicle (EV) market in India. In this context, the government's plans to provide up to 80 per cent or higher subsidies to the next-generation upstream infrastructure, or charging points, as reported in this newspaper, is an essential response to the problem. According to the report, the ₹2,000 crore under the PM Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PM E-Drive) scheme, which replaces the earlier subsidy programme, will be spent to support 48,400 fast-charging points for electric two- and three-wheelers, 22,100 points for electric cars, and 1,800 points for electric buses and trucks. The objective is to add 72,300 fast-chargers to the current modest network of 1,300-odd points. The Ministry of Heavy Industries has also identified 40 cities for electric four-wheeler charging-points with Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Hyderabad leading the way, and 40 highway corridors for e-bus transit. Overall, the push could be a game-changer, especially given the unenviable ownership economics of battery swapping. The question is whether the programme and its structure will go far enough to meet the ambitious target of a 30 per cent EV market share by 2030.

The two key issues are whether the programme can help match this target and the efficiency of the subsidy-disbursement mechanism. One comparison can be drawn from China, the world's largest EV market. EVs account for over half the market there and they are served by over ₹3 million public charging-points, the largest such network in the world. In India, EVs are expected to account for about 7.5 per cent of the market in 2025 and are grossly underserved by the public infrastructure for charging. In that sense, PM E-Drive could make an appreciable difference. However, the key would be how it is implemented. The functioning of the two editions of Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid & Electric Vehicles, or the FAME scheme, suffered from operational glitches on account of the manner in which manufacturers claimed subsidies.

The staggered design of subsidy disbursement under the current scheme has the potential to mire the charging-point business in red tape. Under the scheme, 30 per cent of the subsidy will be released after the tender-award stage, 40 per cent after the fast-charging station is deployed, and the rest after the successful commercial operation of the charging station. These terms may need clarification to avoid confusion over definitions of "deployment" and "successful commercial operation". The other standard problem of delays over subsidy disbursement, a common complaint of beneficiaries of the FAME scheme, also needs to be avoided if the scheme is to gain traction. While the pitfalls of the earlier scheme need to be avoided to increase the penetration and adoption of EVs, the charging infrastructure bit is perhaps more crucial. While the PM E-Drive initiative aims to boost the penetration of e-buses and e-trucks — a move that is certainly welcome — establishing robust charging infrastructure will be crucial for the broader adoption of EVs, particularly among private vehicles, which dominate Indian roads.

A threat to investment

Retrospective policy changes have previously plunged the economy into uncertainty — now, a similar situation looms again

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Achieving the aspirational target of increasing per capita income to attain developed country status by 2047 requires the economy to grow at an average rate of more than 8 per cent per year over the next 23 years. At the prevailing incremental capital-output ratio, this requires the economy to enhance the investment rate to about 40 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) from the present estimate of 32 per cent.

This calls for, *inter alia*, an accommodating, stable, and forward-looking policy environment in which all three arms of the government — the legislature, executive, and judiciary — and the Union, state, and local governments coordinate policy formulation and implementation effectively.

To have an accommodating investment climate, it is important to ensure stable governance. Clarity in constitutional assignments, coordinated policy calibration, certainty in governance, and consistency in court judgments are important preconditions to creating a stable investment climate in the country. The environment gets vitiated when judgments take a retrospective approach, as investors do not expect rules to change for past business activities.

In this context, the significant adverse economic implications of the judgment by eight judges in the nine-judge Bench of the Supreme Court last year led by then Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, in the case of *Mineral Area Development Authority & Anr. vs M/S Steel Authority of India & Anr.*, have largely gone unnoticed.

On July 25, 2024, overruling several earlier decisions, the Bench ruled that: (i) There is no overlap in the tax powers assigned to the Union and states

under the Seventh Schedule; (ii) the royalty determined under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) (MMDR) Act and paid by the lessee to the lessor is not in the nature of a tax; (iii) while Entry 50 of the State List empowers the states to levy the tax on mineral rights subject to limitations placed by Parliament through laws relating to mineral development, the regulation placed under Entry 54 of the Union List does not apply to this power to levy the tax; and (iv) the regulation under Entry 54 does not limit the states' power to levy a tax on land bearing minerals under Entry 49 of the State List.

A subsequent order by the Bench on August 14, 2024, further stated: (i) the states can levy or renew tax demands retrospectively from April 1, 2005; (ii) the interest and penalties levied on demands prior to July 25, 2024 will be waived; and (iii) payment for the retrospective tax demand made before July 25, 2024, may be staggered over a 12-year period commencing from April 1, 2026. Following the judgment, some states have initiated measures to levy taxes on minerals, with some states proposing to levy a tax on land as high as three times the value of the royalty.

Admittedly, the states have limited tax powers, and with the implementation of the goods and services tax (GST), their ability to raise revenue through taxes has significantly diminished. But, it is equally important to ensure that granting tax powers to them for this reason does not vitiate the business environment.

In justification, the judgment quotes an earlier judgment on a different issue by Justice Jeevan Reddy, which stated: "The fact that under the

scheme of our Constitution, greater power is conferred upon the Centre vis-à-vis the states does not mean that states are mere appendages on the Centre. Within the sphere allotted to them, states are supreme. The Centre cannot tamper with their powers. More particularly, the courts should not adopt an approach, an interpretation, which has the effect of or tends to have the effect of whittling down the powers reserved to the states."

While the above dictum is commendable and will be appreciated by federalists who want to safeguard state powers, it is important to take note of the economic implications of this judgment. In *Shivshakti Sugars v Renuka Sugars (2017)* judgment, the Supreme Court had emphasised that courts have a duty to undertake a detailed economic analysis of the impact of their decisions, and when multiple interpretations of the law are possible, the court must adopt the view that "...subverses the economic interest of the nation." Some of the economic pitfalls of the judgment were spelt out by Justice B V Nagarathna in her lone dissenting judgment, but the adverse economic consequences of the judgment are even more pronounced.

First, the mines are leased by governments, and the royalty charged is equivalent to the administered price of the produce. It is a known fact that administered pricing in the case of a public monopoly is akin to an excise duty. Second, mines are not mobile and the states with mineral wealth can impose high taxes on these products, exporting the burden to residents of other states, as these are not destination-based taxes. Third, mineral products are basic inputs in industries, and exorbitant levels of extraction in the form of royalty, taxes on minerals, and taxes on mineral-bearing land are likely to result in significant cascading effects. Since these are not part of GST, there will be no input tax relief, and given that mineral products are essential inputs in manufacturing, heavy taxation could cause significant cascading and escalation in costs. Fourth, multiple taxation of minerals is likely to render Indian manufacturing non-competitive, prompting industry to either reduce dependence on domestic suppliers by resorting to imports or lobby for high tariff protection. Resorting to imports could lead to the closure of mines and jobs. Alternatively, lobbying for higher tariffs would only hurt consumers.

The most pernicious impact of the judgment is the power to levy retrospective taxation. Retrospective changes in policies have previously plunged the economy into a quagmire of uncertainty, vitiating the investment climate. We had a bad experience with the Vodafone tax case, and a similar situation has emerged now. The retrospective taxation can create a climate of uncertainty for investors. The only hope is that the states will realise the pitfalls of heavy taxation on these inputs and avoid applying them retrospectively in the interest of fostering a more accommodating business environment.

The author is chairman, Karnataka Regional Imbalances Redressal Committee. The views are personal

POLICY PILLARS

M GOVINDA RAO



India's missing managerial capital

One of the great things about the periodic visits by marquee Indian-origin chief executive officers (CEOs) such as Alphabet and Google's Sundar Pichai and Microsoft's Satya Nadella is that they leave middle-class Indians basking in the warm glow of reflected glory. Both usually pay obligatory obeisance to that ultra-scarce resource in India: Human capital. Mr Nadella on his recent visit said: "There is no denying that anyone who does not tap into India's human capital is making a choice to not be competitive."

At one level, Mr Nadella's statement can be read as an urgent message to the incoming Trump administration not to monkey around with the H-1B visa system that Silicon Valley has so profitably exploited for decades. It can also be interpreted as a reflection of the emerging global capability centres in India that enable US corporations to deploy IT-educated Indian "human capital" at minimal cost. This is the usual understanding of such complimentary statements. What few successful Indian-origin CEOs choose to address is why Indian businesses have not produced equivalents to Nadella, Pichai and others like them in the Indian business environment. After all, there is no shortage of top-quality graduates from India's premier engineering and management institutes in India companies.

Many bytes have been expended over the decades on the structural limitations of Indian economic policy and bureaucratic red-tape that have constrained Indian business. These are valid arguments up to a point. But they do not explain the constraining management ecosystem that Indian businesses appear to adopt by choice. One of the less acknowledged

points is the general absence of a genuine merit-based system in the Indian business environment. India's largest businesses are family-owned and their strategic management ecosystem remains within the founder family. It is not that we lack dynamic and even top-class managers. But organisations with senior reporting structures that are disproportionately weighted in favour of the boss' son, daughter, spouse, brother, niece, nephew and all other kinsmen in between can have a discouraging effect on managerial innovation.

The point to note is that many of the US companies that Indians now head were also founder-driven at some point — from Google to Microsoft to Adobe, Pepsi, IBM and so on. But unlike India's largest businesses, no one would classify them as family managed. But most founders gradually step back, subject their startups to market discipline, transform their management into professional mercatorics (among the FAANGs, Amazon and Meta remain relatively youthful outliers) and create an enabling environment for talent and innovation.

That may explain why the faster growing and innovative Indian businesses are emerging from the startup universe where young people can operate outside the suffocating environment of family management. That applies equally to corporate boards. Where boards in the West are known to have jettisoned poorly performing CEOs and founders — Apple, HP, Yahoo and Uber being good examples — no board in a conventional company in India has been so bold as to dismiss its promoter or CEO, even those

with proven records of shenanigans. Whether Satyam or YES Bank, both led by powerful founder CEOs, it's been the job of the regulatory agencies to show them the door.

It is not as though Indian startups are managerial models by any means. Entries on Glassdoor.com attest to the toxic atmosphere that founders create in many of them. But two factors act as checks and balances to the broader transgressions of powerful founder-CEOs. The first is the fact that co-founders tend to be a bunch of professional and friends who have banded together to create a business, so meritocracy is the default standard operating procedure. Second, since they raise their money from venture capital (VC) and private equity (PE) funds, they are subject to a degree of scrutiny that India's narrow capital markets somehow do not. The contrast is noticeable. In 2015, the board of housing.com sacked one of its founders and CEO Rahul Yadav for his erratic conduct. In 2022, Bharti's co-founder Aditya Birla was dismissed by the board for various acts of omission and commission.

In contrast, consider Bly's, the meteoric online education firm. Now swamped by debt, court cases and insolvency proceedings, it remained an essentially family-driven outfit with the founder, his wife and brother running the show. Independent board members quit after it became clear that their advice was being ignored. This, again, is a rarity in most Indian boards. If the independent directors remain comfortably dependent on the promoters' goodwill and obligingly rubber stamp their plans.

A critical mass of creative, innovative management is a key "human capital" resource that countries need just as much as a well-educated and healthy workforce. India lacks both, which may explain why Indian businesses remain minnows in global corporate waters.

SWOT

KANIKA DATTA



(among the FAANGs, Amazon and Meta remain relatively youthful outliers) and create an enabling environment for talent and innovation.

That may explain why the faster growing and innovative Indian businesses are emerging from the startup universe where young people can operate outside the suffocating environment of family management. That applies equally to corporate boards. Where boards in the West are known to have jettisoned poorly performing CEOs and founders — Apple, HP, Yahoo and Uber being good examples — no board in a conventional company in India has been so bold as to dismiss its promoter or CEO, even those

Foreign policy begins at home



BOOK REVIEW

GUNJAN SINGH

In his latest book, Dhruva Jaishankar explains the origin and meaning of the Sanskrit words *Vishwa Shashtra*, used in the title, as "treatise of the world". As he writes, "For it to be India's world, a *Vishwa Shashtra* is necessary". The book, however, is "a basic introduction to India and the world, one that remedies some of the shortcomings of the existing literature." That's exactly what the author achieves.

Vishwa Shashtra is full of information and follows a linear approach to analyse the nuances of the Indian foreign policy. From ancient to modern, Mr Jaishankar attempts to highlight key events, decisions and policy shifts that have been crucial in moulding Indian foreign policy. The book

presents a detailed picture of the path that India adopted to reach its current foreign policy paradigms, dwelling on the limitations as well as the challenges.

The book is a great addition to the literature on Indian foreign policy, principally because it provides a bird's-eye view. It is not focused on any one region or a specific time frame, and thus, offers a global perspective on India's position in the international order. It also succeeds in explaining how major foreign policy decisions were curated and what motivated them. Most importantly, Mr Jaishankar combines India's domestic policy decisions with its foreign policy decisions because, as he argues, "...to start, foreign policy will have to begin at home." He adds, "Just as its foreign policy begins at home, India's domestic policy will have to have an inherently international character."

One of the most important domestic policy decisions that the book examines is India's nuclear programme and ambitions. "India's nuclear development both fuelled and was informed by the rivalry with Pakistan, but it had wider

implications for India's domestic development and relations with the superpowers," he writes. This is well-known but the book offers a detailed account of how New Delhi managed to achieve this feat. "India experienced several fundamental changes in and around 1991 that sharply altered its international environment, its economy, its domestic politics, and its national security," he writes, underscoring how domestic political changes and aspirations have had a direct impact on India's foreign policy and its international positioning and posturing.

He also rightly argues that today's globalised world order is not devoid of any kind of great power rivalries. The rise of China as a revisionist state and the challenges this poses to the American-led liberal world order has emerged as a major ideological conflict. This global rivalry puts India in a difficult position, given New Delhi's growing closeness with the United States even as it tries to manage its confidential relations with Beijing.

On India's neighbourhood and

policies, the author concludes that, "Greater diplomatic attention, better functioning regional cooperation, increased economic, and humanitarian assistance, and improved regional connectivity are a bare minimum for India if it seeks to retain a leadership role in the neighbourhood." The book also dwells on the inroads made by China in South Asia and argues that, "Ultimately, the future well-being of India's neighbourhood should matter far more to New Delhi than it does to any other major power."

While discussing India-China relations and providing a detailed overview of this bilateral relationship, the author's conclusion is that "unless China adopts a fundamentally different approach to its role in international affairs, New Delhi will have to continue to prepare for a much more competitive relationship with Beijing."

The most pertinent challenge for Indian foreign policy has been its

relationship with Pakistan. Since partition, Indo-Pakistan relations have witnessed a range of policies. Islamabad also poses a fundamental challenge to India's security and domestic peace. From wars to cross-border terrorism, its closeness to China, all these decisions have provided a challenge for New Delhi's foreign policymaking. The author suggests that, "For all these reasons, a nuclear-armed, terrorism-supporting, revisionist Pakistan is a problem to be managed by India over the medium-term, not necessarily one to be resolved."

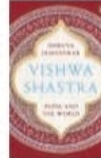
The book also focuses on India's relations with the world with the help of changes within Indian domestic policies. The push for non-alignment and the challenges that emerge from that are discussed in detail and so are policies such as Look East and Act East, the acceptance of the concept of the Indo-Pacific and the Quad. For all these, the author emphasises there is a strong

domestic component. This is as true of India's relations with West Asia. Its participation in a variety of institutions from Brics to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) shows how India is trying to emerge as a voice of the Global South.

To be sure, there is nothing new that the book discusses or promises to uncover. What it achieves instead is its ability to simplify and highlight many of the events that have had a pertinent impact on India as well as the global order. It juxtaposes Indian domestic policies with the way the country's foreign policy has unfolded and suggests the direction it should take. India has come a long way, evolving from a newly independent state to one that plays a significant role in the global system.

However, the book, though exhaustive, pays less attention to regions such as the European Union, Latin America and Africa, underscoring the point that they remain peripheral to India's world view.

The reviewer is associate professor, OP Jindal Global University



Governor and the politics of spite

Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi has turned out to be repeat offender, creating controversies and confrontations with the state government only for the sake of creating them. On Monday, he walked out of the State Assembly without reading his customary address at the beginning of the session. He claimed that he left the Assembly because the national anthem was not sung before he delivered his address. Raj Bhavan said that "the Constitution of Bharat and the national anthem were once again insulted" in the Assembly and he could not be a party to it. The convention in the House has been for the state anthem — Tamil Thaa Vazhuthu — to be played at the beginning of the proceedings and the national anthem at the end. The state government has said that the Governor's action was "childish" and unbecoming of his position.

It is clear that the Governor was inventing an issue for confrontation with the government. This is the third year in succession that he has created a controversy and unsavoury scenes over his address to the State Assembly. In 2023, he omitted some parts of the address prepared by the state government, including a reference to the "Dravidian model of governance." Last year, he deviated from the text and left the House in a huff when a resolution was moved urging the Speaker to maintain on records only the speech approved by the government. It is surprising that the Governor considers it an insult to the national anthem when it is not sung on an occasion that did not require it to be sung. There is no protocol about the national anthem that it should be sung before the Governor's address. So there was no insult to the national anthem and the Constitution in the assembly on Monday. Governor Ravi was actually accused of disrespect of the Constitution when he left the Assembly last year without waiting for the national anthem.

It may be noted that Governor Ravi has used such situations to show the DMK government as unpatriotic. It is the constitutional duty of a Governor to read out the address to the Assembly prepared by the state government. Governor Ravi has refused to carry out that duty and created tantrums over the address. His various actions, such as holding up legislation by delaying assent to bills, and other decisions and statements critical of the government have reduced the constitutional office that he holds to a platform for political opposition to the government. Governors in other states ruled by non-BJP parties have also conducted themselves in the same fashion. It is such conduct that goes against the Constitution and harms democracy.

Public transport not only about revenues

The Karnataka government's decision to increase bus fares by 15% across the four regional transport corporations (RTC) has sparked significant public discontent. The fare hike is projected to generate an additional Rs 74.85 crore monthly, and help offset rising costs, primarily due to the escalation in diesel prices and wage revision for employees. The last fare revision was in 2015 for BMTC and in 2020 for the other RTCs. With an average of 116 passengers relying on these services daily, the impact is significant. As if these were not enough, Bengaluru Metro fares are set to jump by 45-50%, marking the first revision in eight years. Under the revised tariff, the base fare will rise from Rs 10 to Rs 15, while the maximum fare will increase from Rs 60 to Rs 80. This raises a crucial question: would it not be prudent for the government to introduce small, periodic fare hikes, rather than imposing a steep burden on commuters?

These fare hikes have reignited the debate on whether public transportation should prioritise profitability or serve the larger interests of society, that is, promoting social mobility, reducing congestion, and mitigating environmental impacts. The government must strike a balance between the financial viability of transport corporations and the need for social equity. Public transport serves as the lifeline for many, especially those in the low-income groups who depend on it to access employment, education, and healthcare. Rising fares could disproportionately burden vulnerable communities, risking their exclusion from essential services. Affordable public transport also offers significant environmental benefits including reduced reliance on private vehicles and thereby, lowered emissions. Luxembourg, for example, has demonstrated how free public transport can lead to greater economic participation and social equity. Karnataka's Shakti scheme, which provides free travel to over 64 lakh women every day on non-luxury buses, further illustrates how targeted initiatives can empower marginalised groups.

The challenge, however, lies in ensuring financial sustainability of public transport systems without compromising accessibility. The government should explore innovative funding options, such as non-fare revenues — advertising, partnerships, or public-private collaborations — alongside subsidies that support free or reduced fares. A holistic, integrated public transport system that offers seamless connectivity, unified ticketing, and easy transfers is crucial for maximising the social benefits of transit while minimising operational costs. Ultimately, public transport should not be seen solely as a revenue-generating enterprise. It should be a tool for enhancing the quality of life, fostering inclusivity and contributing to a more sustainable environment. By adopting a comprehensive, forward-thinking transport policy, the government can build a system that is both financially viable and socially responsible.

Fare hikes revive the question — should the government prioritise profitability over social equity?

There are friends, there's family, and then there are friends who become family

FREEDA WILSON

In an era where social media dominates our lives, it is refreshing to remember that the good old days when friendships were forged without the aid of technology. Our group of 16 friends, all women, met and got to know each other during our first job in the late 1980s and gradually formed a strong bond over the last 25 years! Back then, mobile phones and WhatsApp were unheard of. Over the course of time, we took other jobs and drifted apart, leading our own lives until the advent of Facebook, and one of our friends brought us all together, reconnecting everyone after almost 10 long years!

We got together more frequently, as time permitted, catching up over lunches and marvelling at how time

had flown by. Almost all of us were now married, with children, and some had relocated to different cities or countries. Our get-togethers were all about non-stop chatter, laughter, and unfettered conversations. Our friendship was a unique entity, distinct from our relationships with family members, spouses and acquaintances.

After a few years, we decided to take our camaraderie to the next level by planning a trip together and spend a good few days together. A day of chatter wasn't enough anymore. Our first excursion was to Kodakanal, a kid-free and husband-free zone, where we rekindled every moment together. The experience was rejuvenating, and we returned home refreshed. The joy lasted a year and then we wanted to do more. We stayed more connected now that we had social media, mobile phones, and WhatsApp. We realised we had so much in common — we were practically like family, sharing everything from our clothes to food and gossip, without baring an eyelid. Another trip

to Puducherry was soon planned and executed! The sun, sand, and sea; our never-ending chatter; laughter and countless photographs summed up our getaways.

With the mountains and the sea done, it was time to do something different. A third trip to a farm on the outskirts of Bengaluru was planned recently. It gave us an opportunity to do things we always wanted to do: sing and dance, and have a bonfire. We came some rags, walk around in the rain huddled together under shared umbrellas, ride a tractor, and eat some wholesome organic food.

There are friends, there is family, and there are friends who become family. These relationships that have stood the test of time are rare and precious. To all the boys and girls, men and women out there, I urge you to find your tribe and nurture those relationships. In a world that's increasingly fast-paced and chaotic, it's essential to hold on to friendships that uplift and refresh your soul. The rest of the world can wait!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Will Trudeau's exit help thaw India-Canada ties?

Apropos Trudeau: A chip off the old block in wrecking ties with India (China), Justin Trudeau's decision to step down as Canadian Prime Minister marks the end of an era that began with promise but was marred by political missteps and economic challenges. Trudeau's government was seen as a beacon of liberal values, contrasting with the isolationist rhetoric of US President Donald Trump's first term. However, public fatigue set in as

Trudeau faltered in the face of rising living costs, housing crises, and internal party struggles. His handling of the economy, marked by rising inflation and stagnant wages, failed to satisfy most Canadians. Trudeau's exit may thaw the India-Canada chill, but improvement depends on the next government addressing India's key security concerns, which worsened under Trudeau. **N Sathvisha Reddy, Bengaluru**

Unjustified hike

The recent KSRTC fare hike is a severe blow to commuters. It's a clear case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. The state government must reconsider its Shakti scheme, which offers free bus travel to women, and redirect the benefits to senior citizens, Divyangs, and school children, regardless of gender. This will also reduce the financial burden on the government. Instead, the government is hiking taxes and fares, with milk prices likely to follow. A comparison with neighbouring states

reveals that Karnataka's fares are already high. **N Devarajan, Nanjangud**

Alarming

The report that 7.11 lakh parcels of farmland in Karnataka (Jan 8) are under illegal and non-agricultural use is a damning indictment of successive governments' town planning policies. This has compromised the allocation of open spaces, parks, playgrounds, and road networks, turning cities into concrete jungles. Revenue Minister Krishna Byre

Gowda has rightly described the situation as having a "humongous and cascading effect." The Akrama Sakrama scheme has exacerbated the issue, allowing real estate violators to flourish and impacting citizens' health through pollution. It's time to reverse this trend and prioritise good living conditions. **H R Bapu Satyanarayana, Mysuru**

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

NEW ORDER

What drives India's shift to processed foods

Findings from the HCES and other surveys underline worrying trends in dietary habits

MAYA K AND NEERAJ KUMAR

India's rich culinary tradition, deeply rooted in its culture, embodies a profound understanding of nutrition and healthy living. However, the recent Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (2023-24) highlights concerning trends, particularly a decline in traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically, the share of food items in monthly per capita expenditure decreased from 52.9% to 47.4% in rural areas and from 42.6% to 39.6% in urban areas between 2011-12 and 2023-24. This decline highlights the worrying trend of vanishing traditional cooking practices in Indian kitchens. The survey also shows reduced cereal expenditure in rural and urban areas. Specifically,



A thought for today
Sadly, it's much easier to create
a desert than a forest

JAMES LOVELOCK

What The Zuck

Meta dropping fact-checks is reminder why established news media is vital for information dissemination

Zuckerberg said doing away with fact-checks from Meta/Facebook in US is a 'free speech issue'. LOL. Trump demanded it. Zuck agreed. Trump's response all but confirmed it. Is there any debate on how harmful online disinformation can be? Aside from giving a free rein to truly dangerous loonies, it can directly impact public welfare. Recall the flood of misinformation around Covid. Recall posts that have stoked rioting in various countries. Fact-checkers spot speculation or rumour - regardless of whether the disinformation is floated out of ignorance or intended with malice. Dodgy online posts can be deployed to disrupt institutional structures or influence voter/citizen/consumer behaviours - whatever its intent, it needs to be stopped at the gate. Therefore, fact-checks have nothing to do with 'freedom of speech', but with facts alone. There are irrefutable facts that even the current trend, pronounced in parts of the world, of rewriting history can barely 'unwrite'. For example, facts backed by scientific evidence, which is irrefutable. But Zuck knows all of this. He played for one side when Trump lost, and is playing for the other side now.

X preceeded Facebook in removing fact-checks. So, Big Tech's accountability is all but zero now. Despite global subscribers the size of a big nation, social media companies have long dodged responsibility for what's on offer on their platforms. It is tireless citizen-advocacy that ensured 'fact-checks' are institutionalised - Facebook at one time worked with almost 80 organisations globally on its platform, WhatsApp and Instagram. Now, it will likely all unravel. But just because Trump/Musk wants it can't and shouldn't make all other govts helpless. In Europe and Asia, govts must double down on efforts to make social media accountable, hopefully without restricting genuine freedom of speech.

It's also necessary to restate the fundamental difference between mainstream news media, especially established newspapers such as TOI, and social media. Fact-checks had to be introduced to online platforms. But fact-checks are journalism's foundational principle. Newspapers, whether print or digital, have multiple gatekeepers not because govts ask them to do so. But because that's how journalism works. Big Tech platforms fight against being called 'publishers' to shy away from accountability as well as to profit from news-gathering a news company invests in. Citizens everywhere should know that much of what they are reading on their social media feed can be plain wrong - and some of it dangerously so.

Black Holes

Death toll of illegal mines, which are also environmental hazards, keeps rising as govts look the other way

One miner had died and at least eight others were feared trapped in a 'rat-hole' coal mine - a narrow, deep and illegal mine with no safety measures - in Assam until Wednesday evening. When the rescue operation is over, the bodies won't figure in official statistics because India's Directorate General of Mines Safety only counts accidents in the formal sector. It claims coal mines have become safer over the years. Fatal accidents in coal mines declined from 143 in 1997 to 24 in 2022, it says. That's good, but what about the thousands of men, women and children - smaller bodies are an asset in these claustrophobic pits - risking life and limb every day? Rat-hole mines become big news every few years, but casualties are far more frequent. It's only when the toll mounts that news seeps out to the national level. Fifteen rat-hole miners died in an accident in July 2012. 15 again in Dec 2018, five in May 2021, six in Jan 2024, and these were just the too-big-to-ignore cases. Nobody really knows what goes on in Meghalaya's 25,000-odd rat-hole mines that never shut down despite an NGT order in 2014, or the hundreds more in Assam.

There's illegal sand mining too that's destroying rivers across the country. One study claimed 95 people drowned in sand pits dug in riverbeds by the mining mafia between Jan 2019 and Nov 2020. In 2018, a CAG report flagged the illegal extraction of almost 100L tonnes of minerals - copper, lead and zinc among them - over five years in just five Rajasthan districts. This is problematic on several counts. First, the obvious revenue loss to the state. Second, illegal mines never adhere to environmental regulations. Third and most important, they don't care about the lives of miners, as we are seeing now in Assam.



Mark Antony's speech

At funeral of Kolkata's yellow Ambassador cabs

Bachli Karkaria
Friends, bhodrolog, commuters, lend me your fears; I come to bury our Peeli, not to praise them.
The evil that taxis do lives after them;
The good is off interred in the pot-holes.
So let it be with Peeli. The noble shorkar
Hath told you the old Ambassadors are obnoxious;
If it were so, it was a grievous phauli.
And grievously hath these spluttering warriors answer'd it.
Here, under leave of Transport Baha and embitterment
Come I to speak in Peeli Ambassador's funeral.
It was my friend, faithful and useful phor me.
It hath brought many office-goers home
Whose licences died the state's coffers fill.
O nostalgia thou art fled to pollihashan priests,
And men have lost their emo-shans. Bear with me;
My heart is in the rusty dickie
there with Peeli.



erratica

And I must pause till it comes back to me...
If you have sneers, prepare to shed them now...
Look, in this place ran radio cabs' dagger through;
See what a rent the new 'No Refusal' taxi made;
Through this once-beloved Transport Babustab'd;
And as he plucked his wretched licence away.
Mark how the flames of Peeli follow'd it.
As rushing out of choked exhaust to be resolved
If PUC was finally mandatory or no...
This was the most unkindest cut of all;
For when the noble Peeli hath this diklat,
Ingratitude - not strong than traitors' arms, Quik vanquish'd it!
Then burst its dilapidated radiator; And, leaping at the base of Netaji's statues, ...obscure Ambassador fell.
O, what a banishment was there, my Kolkata-men!
Yes trams, and rickshaws and ghoda gaddis, all have banished
Whilst bloody mini-bus, Merc and Metro flourish over us.
Alec Smart said: "We've had HMPV for years: H Maintenance People Virus."

Dharmakirti Joshi

India's economy will expand at 6.4% this fiscal as per the first advance estimate of the gross domestic product, broadly in line with downward revised expectations following a sharp drop in second quarter growth to 5.4%.

Nominal GDP, which does not strip out the impact of inflation, grew at 8.7%, lower than budgetary expectation of 10.5%. With this, India will become a \$3.9n economy in fiscal 2025 from \$3.6n in the previous year.

Before delving further into the how and why of GDP growth, two things are worth noting.

● First, National Statistical Office started releasing the first advance estimate of GDP in early Jan each year in 2017 to facilitate Budget preparations. That year, govts advanced the Budget announcement date by a month to the first day of Feb.

● Second, these estimates are based on limited info available till Dec and can change when fresh data is available. The estimates also reveal that GDP growth is expected to pick up to 6.8% in the second half of the fiscal from 6.0% in the first.

What's behind the slowdown? The growth deceleration is attributed to a sharp slowdown in the second quarter; reduced govt investment support, high interest rates and stricter lending norms.

Following the second quarter slowdown in GDP growth to 5.4%, various forecasting agencies revised their full-year outlooks downwards. Reserve Bank of India also lowered its forecast to 6.5% from 7.2%.

Public investments by central and state govts are unlikely to meet budgeted targets, impacting investment spending estimates. Between April and Nov, investment spending by 16 major state govts was only 42% of the budgeted capital expenditure for the full fiscal, while central govt capex for the same period was 46.2% of the budgeted amount.

Additionally, private corporate sector investment remained sluggish despite healthy balance sheets and govt infra spending. Consequently, overall investment growth slowed to 6.4%, down from 9% in the previous year.

Private consumption bounces back | On a positive note, private consumption performed relatively well, exceeding the overall GDP growth. In the last fiscal, private consumption grew at half the rate of GDP growth. Rural consumption, which accounts for about 60%

of India's private consumption according to the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023-24, has been supported by healthy kharif production and promising prospects for the rabi season. This is reflected in the higher agri-growth estimates for fiscal 2025 and increased demand for rural-focused products.



such as two-wheelers. Additionally, the expected decline in food inflation will support discretionary spending, particularly by low-income households, who have a higher proportion of food in their consumption basket in both urban and rural areas.

Urban economy faces the dual challenge of high inflation and slowing credit growth. Recent data from

RBI indicates that consumer confidence has moderated in urban areas and growth in retail credit, which has a larger footprint in the urban economy, has slowed.

Overall, private consumption growth is expected to pick up in the second half of the year (7.9% vs 6.7%) as inflation eases. Additionally, we expect govt capital expenditure to remain supportive throughout the fiscal. It is essential to increase employment opportunities and household permanent income. This, in turn, will positively influence the outlook for private investment.

Economy likely to grow at 6.7% in fiscal 2026 | Next fiscal is expected to be globally tumultuous, with tariff wars likely to intensify as Trump assumes the US presidency later this month. While slower global growth may dampen export prospects, it will help keep crude oil prices low, benefitting the Indian economy, which imports 87% of its oil needs.

We anticipate crude oil prices to be \$70-\$75 per barrel in calendar year 2025, which will support growth, help contain inflation and keep the current account deficit within safe limits. Additionally, we expect govt capital expenditure to remain supportive throughout the fiscal.

Assuming a normal monsoon, we project GDP growth at 6.7% for fiscal 2026, slightly above the pre-pandemic decadal average of 6.6%.

GDP data will not impact monetary policy | We do not expect GDP data to change the direction of monetary policy. Inflation, and not growth, remains the important hurdle for monetary policy. We are pencilling in 50-75 basis point rate cuts over the next 12 months as inflationary pressures ease.

The total reduction in the upcoming cutting cycle is expected to be less than the 250 basis points increase since May 2022. This is because domestic growth is anticipated to stay healthy and the global rate cut cycle is likely to be shallower.

Budget should retain focus on infra buildout | Govt should prioritise infra development through budgetary spending and asset monetisation.

Beyond the multiplier effects, this approach will enhance logistics efficiency, boost growth potential and enable backward integration of manufacturing operations that currently rely on imported inputs, such as electronics.

Additionally, production-linked incentives for sectors with higher domestic value addition and higher investment requirements will support private capital expenditure.

The writer is Chief Economist, CRISIL Ltd

It Was Here He First Became Just-Out Trudeau

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly when Canadians soured on him. But his first trip to India, where he invited a convicted terrorist to his entourage, was a big turning point

Daniel Bordman



Columnist based in Toronto

On the morning of Jan 6 Justin Trudeau walked down the steps of his home to address the media, stating that he is a "fighter" and that he "never quits" before subsequently resigning his job. Trudeau stated that he would resign as leader of the Liberal Party and PM of Canada, only after there is a newly elected leader of the Liberal Party, a process that he promised will take months. Meaning the world is not quite done with Trudeau just yet.

But the effective rule of Trudeau is done. With parliament prorogued until March 24 and an election to be held in Oct at the very latest, all bills currently going through the process in parliament are now dead, and there is not enough time for a new leader to possibly pass anything before Oct. Which begs the question in Canada: Why are we going through this charade? Do the Liberals really think that a new leader can bring them another term in office?

Canada is facing a cataclysmic economic shock wave with the return of the Trump administration promising 25% tariffs on Canadian exports to US. The final act of Trudeau sums up the Liberal philosophy of the last decade: Ego before party, and party before country.

How did we get here? The most obvious answer is that Trudeau's policies failed. You can dress up bad ideas in all the fancy and wrap yourself in empathy and moral virtue while you "grow the economy from the heart outwards", but at the end of the day economic policy is a bit more complicated than that. It turns out the man who said that "the budget will balance itself" and that he "doesn't think much about economic policy" did not in fact balance the budget and tanked the economy.

Ten years into Trudeau and even the upper-

middle class is feeling the pinch. However, it all goes much deeper than just poor economics. Another axiom of the 2015 Trudeau campaign was that Canada was a "post-national state", meaning we had no worthwhile identity or relevant history to bind us.

All cultures are equal, except for our own which is inherently worse because of our past sins. Again, this may have been a fun thing to say at the time, but the realities of mass migration with no expectation of assimilation are unaffordable housing costs, nearly crippled social services, and near full cultural breakdown as authorities have ceded our cities to various bands of aggressive extremists.

Coming from the Canadian-Jewish community myself, I can say that nearly every family has at least considered the possibility that Canada is no longer safe for Jews. But the most extreme example of the cultural breakdown is Khalistani lunatics running around the country threatening airline travel and attacking Hindu temples.

Even after Khalistanis were captured on video starting a fight outside the Hindu Sabha Mandir in Brampton and then breaking into the temple grounds and attacking devotees with Khalistani flags, the Canadian establishment couldn't even bring themselves to name the perpetrators.

Considering the multitude of Trudeau scandals and mishaps it is hard to pinpoint exactly where the country soured on him. For some it was hypocrisy, like when he called doctors, farmers and small business owners

"tax cheats" to justify changing the tax laws to fight the rich that just happened to not change the tax status of his personal trust fund. Some people saw the seriousness of his major scandals like SNC-Lavalin or the WE scandal and determined he was an unfit leader. Others turned on him after it was found out that he had invited so many times he could not count the incidents by memory.

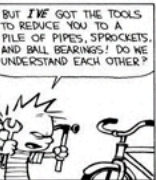
There was one major turning point in the perception of Trudeau, and that was his first trip to India. It was not the fact that he invited a convicted terrorist to his entourage. Canadians are very good at ignoring stories that they find too scary to deal with. It was the general buffoonery of the whole thing. When Canadians saw Indian society mocking Trudeau, that was the moment the handsome progressive icon died and the international laughing stock was born.

Despite it all, Trudeau earned the name 'telfon Trudeau'. But the bubble finally burst when he decided it was time to sacrifice his finance minister and deputy PM Chrystia Freeland due to another terrible Fall Economic Statement when Canada ended up running a C\$82bn deficit.

If Trudeau's legacy can teach us one thing, it is that maybe we should avoid the handsome yet vain man with a famous last name. The world may claim that a progressive and dynamic leader will bring you more international respect than your old, boring, economically literate leader, but that is not the reality in the long term.

The writer is a Canadian journalist

Calvin & Hobbes



The Love-Hate Spectrum Is A Compass For Life Choices

Harsh Kabra

In our nation of over billion hearts, love and hate shape destinies every day. From online debates to street protests, from cricket stadium to courtrooms, emotions swing between love and hate are no longer just personal - they're India's collective reality. The love-hate spectrum highlights the subtle, overlapping emotions influencing spiritual and moral choices. It reflects our feelings towards people, experiences, or situations and guides us to understand what we value or reject. Recognising these nuances helps avoid apathy and discern selfishness from selflessness. In India, this spectrum is more pronounced than ever due to growing social, cultural, and political polarisation. Issues like caste, religion, and regional identities evoke strong emotions. Love and hate are also guideposts for what we value. Emotions can shift based

on circumstances and growth. By understanding and navigating this emotional range, we can act with clarity and purpose, make conscious choices, foster empathy, resolve inner conflicts, and align actions with our true desires, creating a more meaningful and balanced life. Love inspires growth and connection. When we align choices with love, we foster harmony. A mother sacrificing sleep for her child does so out of deep love, not obligation. Even when inconvenient, choosing to support a friend in need strengthens bonds and builds trust. Rumi said, "Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray." This advice encourages introspection. What excites us? What feels meaningful? These questions can guide life's big decisions, from career paths to

personal relationships. Hate, often seen as a negative force, can also serve as a teacher. It points to unresolved conflicts or misalignments with our values. For example, if a work environment feels toxic, the discomfort can motivate us to seek better opportunities. However, dwelling in hate leads to bitterness. The Bhagwad Gita reminds us, "Hate never ends through hatred. By non-hatred alone does it end." Emotions influence choices. A 2023 paper from the *Journal of Emotional Intelligence* showed that individuals who reflect on their feelings make better decisions. They're less likely to act impulsively and more likely to pursue long-term goals. Imagine you are deciding between two job offers. One pays more but feels draining; the other aligns with your passions but offers less money. Under-

Sacredspace



The agreeable passions of love and joy can satisfy and support the heart without any auxiliary pleasure. The bitter and painful emotions of grief and resentment more strongly require healing consolation of sympathy. Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

RTI on its knees

Landmark law needs a new lease of life

THE Right to Information (RTI) Act, a landmark legislation enacted by the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government with the twin objectives of empowering citizens and ensuring transparency in governance, will complete two decades of its existence later this year. However, there is little to celebrate as this law is losing its potency due to the apathy or insincerity of Central as well as state governments. Vacancies in the Central Information Commission (CIC) and state information commissions are not being filled, even as the backlog of RTI appeals is rising alarmingly. And then there is an OTP-via-email feature that works erratically, frustrating applicants who wish to know the status of their queries and the replies from government departments.

"What is the use of RTI if there are no people to work for it?" the Supreme Court has wondered, while ordering the Union Government's Department of Personnel and Training and various states to submit a timeline for filling vacancies. The CIC alone has eight key posts vacant, while the count of pending appeals has crossed 23,000. Some states have conveniently allowed their information panels to become defunct. The dilly-dallying is nothing but an attempt to ward off truth-seekers. The modus operandi is simple: Keep them waiting, tire them out and they will eventually lose interest.

Justice delayed is justice denied. The same holds true for the information that curious people seek from public authorities. Governments are wary of disclosures as they have plenty of skeletons in their cupboard. Yet again, the apex court has intervened to shake the rulers out of slumber. There is a dire need to give the RTI Act a new lease of life so that citizens become active partners in democracy. The BJP-led Centre would be doing a huge disservice to the nation if it lets partisan politics blunt this powerful tool for raising public awareness.

Teacher crisis

Prioritise holistic revival of schools

HIMACHAL Pradesh's schools are grappling with a dire teacher shortage, with 125 schools devoid of educators and 2,600 running with only one teacher. Despite the government's claims of progress, the challenges in ensuring quality education remain stark. The state government's recent decision to demote or merge over 1,100 schools with zero or low enrolment has stirred controversy. While this measure is pragmatic, reallocating teachers from defunct schools to understaffed ones, it highlights a deeper systemic issue: the chronic underfunding and lack of strategic planning in education.

Moreover, the shortage of 12,000 schoolteachers underscores the gap between policy intent and implementation. Although recruitment efforts have been initiated, the reliance on temporary measures like deputations and guest teachers raises questions about sustainability. The merging of institutions and clustering of schools for resource sharing are commendable steps, but they address symptoms rather than root causes. The declining enrolment in government schools adds another dimension to the crisis. The allure of private institutions, fuelled by better facilities and English-medium instruction, continues to draw students away. While the government's initiatives like identifying 'Schools of Excellence' and enhanced teacher training are steps in the right direction, they need robust execution and consistent follow-through.

However, education reform requires more than infrastructural improvements. The focus must shift to filling vacancies, addressing regional disparities and enhancing the learning experience for students. Policymakers should view the education sector not as a political battleground but as a cornerstone for the state's future. The government's actions so far indicate intent, but outcomes will depend on translating these efforts into tangible, long-term benefits. Himachal Pradesh must prioritise the holistic revival of its education sector to ensure every child's right to quality learning.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 1925

An extraordinary proposal

ANNIE Besant was once described by a friendly critic as a lady of surprises. There can be no doubt that a closer study of her interesting and, in many ways, wonderful career does reveal the existence in her of a fairly strong tendency to spring surprises upon an unsuspecting world. Who could have imagined Besant in 1905 to be capable of playing the great part she did play in India's political history in the memorable era, 1914 to 1917? Who again could have imagined that after having played that memorable part and been partly instrumental in forcing England to recognise the necessity of introducing reforms in India, and after having described the reforms actually conceded to this country as being equally unworthy of the giver and the receiver, she would have taken up a position that could scarcely have been different had she always been among their out-and-out advocates? Nor was the speedy disillusionment which her recent visit to England brought in its train, in its actual measure and intensity, and less a surprise. Others who had gone with her and worked with her had the same experience. But she was the first to make that experience the basis of a new idea, and to express that idea in a language of uncompromising fervour. The conviction she had brought back with her, she said, was that the political salvation of India depended absolutely upon her offering a united front, and that the thing that was necessary above everything else was for all political parties to sink their differences and formulate and present to England a united scheme of Indian self-government.

Alcohol intake entwined with cancer risk

It's critical to guard against industry lobbies that try to stall health-related regulations

DINESH CH SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

THE new year has begun with a new health warning. America's Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has released an advisory, pointing to a direct link between alcohol consumption and increased cancer risk. Alcohol consumption is the third leading preventable cause of cancer in the US. Alcohol, the advisory says, increases risk for at least seven types of cancer (breast, colorectum, esophagus, liver, oral cavity, throat and voice box), regardless of the type of alcohol consumed. As much as 16.4 per cent of the breast cancer cases in the US are attributable to alcohol consumption. For certain cancers, such as breast, mouth and throat, the advisory warns that "the risk of developing cancer may start to increase around one or fewer drinks per day". Even small amounts of alcohol can contribute to chronic conditions like liver cirrhosis. An individual's risk of developing cancer due to alcohol consumption, however, depends on several biological, environmental and social factors.

The advisory follows the 2023 statement of the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the risks and harms associated with drinking alcohol, based on a systematic evaluation of scientific evidence. Alcohol is responsible for a substantial disease burden directly, and accounts for a sizeable number of alcohol-related road accidents. The WHO statement published in *The Lancet Public Health* concluded, "When it comes to alcohol consumption, there is no safe amount that does not affect health."

Back in the 1980s, the International Agency for Research on



HAZARDOUS: According to the WHO, there is no safe amount of alcohol consumption that doesn't affect health, as

Cancer classified alcohol as a Group 1 carcinogen. This is the highest-risk category of cancer-causing substances that includes tobacco, radiation and asbestos. Ethanol causes cancer through biological mechanisms as it breaks down in the body. Therefore, any beverage containing alcohol (be it beer, wine or whiskey) poses a health risk. In its statement, the WHO pointed out that the risk increases substantially with the amount of alcohol going up.

This evidence busts the myth that some alcoholic drinks, particularly red wine, are beneficial for health if consumed in moderation. For decades, the alcohol industry has propped up cardiologists to promote the idea that wine in moderation is good for the heart's health without any credible scientific study to back such claims.

On the other hand, data from the WHO's European Region shows that half of all alcohol-attributable cancers are caused by what is generally considered 'light' and 'moderate' consumption like a bottle of wine or two bottles of beer per week. As per the WHO, there are no studies that demonstrate beneficial effects of light and moderate drinking on heart disease or dia-

Warning labels on alcohol products can help people make informed decisions.

betes or studies that outweigh the cancer risk associated with such levels of consumption. Carina Ferreira-Borges, an expert on alcohol and illicit drugs at the WHO, has said, "The only thing that we can say for sure is that the more you drink, the more harmful it is. In other words, the less you drink, the safer it is."

When there is scientific evidence about the ill effects of a commonly produced and consumed commodity that also yields substantial revenue for governments, what are the available options to reduce the harm? The WHO's statement on alcohol distils available scientific evidence and also presents policy

options available to governments. It is for the governments to act. One of the most obvious options to reduce alcohol consumption is to make people aware of the potential harm through warning labels on alcohol bottles. This is among the measures Murthy has suggested for the US and what some European countries are planning to do. Murthy has also called for a reassessment of the guideline limits for alcohol consumption to account for cancer risk.

The warning labels under consideration by various countries are of many types — with messages against general harm to health, harms of excessive use and abuse and those for specific groups (underage people, pregnant women, etc.). For instance, the warning Ireland plans to introduce in 2026 says, "Drinking alcohol causes liver cancer". In 2019, India mandated more generic warnings that say "Consumption of alcohol is injurious to health" for hard liquor and "Be safe, don't drink and drive" for low-alcohol beverages.

Apart from warning labels, restrictions on alcohol marketing are in place in India. Alcohol advertising is banned in newspapers, radio and television, though

surrogate advertising continues in many ways, taking advantage of loopholes in advertising regulations. In recent years, surreptitious advertising through social media and digital platforms is posing new challenges.

Like in the case of warnings on tobacco labels, industry and pro-industry groups argue that health warning labels are of little use in reducing consumption. But available evidence — as reported in a recent review published in *The Lancet* — points out that warning labels on alcohol products are useful in many ways. They can enhance awareness of alcohol-related harms, contribute to the normalisation of alcohol use and help people make informed decisions, thereby promoting public health. The effectiveness of health labels depends on their design and content. At present, there is no standardisation of health warning labels and the content is very general, which may not help people make informed decisions.

India has implemented regulations on warning labels on alcohol products for about five years now. We are yet to know how effective this exercise has been. We need continuous research on the design and content of warning messages, and consumer feedback on the same. Unlike tobacco products, where health warnings occupy a good part of the packaging and are more graphic, warnings on liquor bottles occupy tiny space and are vague. Along with health warnings, additional measures like regulation of alcohol sale on highways, curbing sale to underage consumers and drunken driving need to be implemented more stringently.

It is critical to guard against industry lobbies that are constantly trying to stall health-related and other regulations in India. We need more champions of public health like Murthy to reduce the healthcare burden due to alcohol. Remember, the first warning on tobacco's link with cancer, too, came from a Surgeon General in 1964.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Every form of addiction is bad, no matter whether the narcotic be alcohol or morphine or idealism. — Carl Jung

A soldier's creed is a class apart

Lt Col Dilbag Singh Dabas (Retd)

WHEN World War II broke out in 1939, Subedar Richpal Ram of 4 Rajputana Rifles was on two months' leave at his village Barda in Gurgaon district. Barda was known in the region as 'Rajput ka gaon' since almost every household had at least one member who was serving or had served in the defence services.

Soon after the war started, most *faujias* on leave in the village received recall telegrams one after another. They cut short their leave and returned to their *paltans* (battalions). Upset due to the non-receipt of a telegram for many days, Subedar Richpal unilaterally decided to rejoin his *paltan*. Jansaki, his wife, told him to wait, but he argued that the telegram meant for him had perhaps been wrongly addressed or got misplaced in transit. He insisted that his soldier's creed demanded his service and it was time for him to prove his *wojadhari* (loyalty) towards his *paltan* and his country. During his send-off at the tonga stand, Richpal said to his wife, "Main ulto aavunga, warcho jete ke aavunga. Aur jab ulto na on pago to is kuchh karzanga ke mahari poori bindadi ke pe gare karegi" (I will return victorious. But if I don't come back, I would have done something for which our entire clan will be extremely proud of you). Sadly, he did not return from the war, but he kept his promise. He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

Fast-forward to the middle of 1969, when the war clouds were gathering over Kargil. Some officers and jawans of the 17 Jatt battalion were on leave. Realising the operational urgency, the battalion adjutant, Major HS Madan, started sending recall telegrams. Major Deepak Rampal, Delta Company Commander, 17 Jatt, was on long leave, preparing for the staff college exam scheduled for September 1969. Unwilling to disturb Major Rampal during his preparations, the Commanding Officer, Col US Bawa, thought of sending a recall notice to him later, when the war became imminent.

Col Bawa was pleasantly surprised when he saw Major Rampal, carrying a rucksack, walk into the battalion's operational room. When asked what made him rejoin without receiving the recall telegram, he replied, "Sir, I heard on the radio news about Pak infiltration in the Kargil sector. I also read in the newspaper about the missing patrol of 4 Jatt led by Lt Saurabh Kaika and the torture inflicted upon him and his men. I also saw coffins of our soldiers being brought to their villages. Did I need to know more and see more to take a decision?"

Within a fortnight of his rejoining the battalion, Major Rampal had his 'Delta Company' during an assault on the formidable Whale Back feature strongly held by Pakistani troops. After a night-long fierce fight, including hand-to-hand combat, the Whale Back was back in Indian hands. Major Rampal received a well-deserved *Vir Chakra*.

Not just Richpal and Rampal, all Indian soldiers have always been like that — a class apart. For them, their country and their *paltan* are supreme. Leave is too small a privilege for them.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trudeau's decline & fall

Refer to 'Trudeau's travails': one of Canada's longest-serving prime ministers and its most popular leader in recent history has announced his resignation amid increasing discontent within the ruling party as well as among voters. His highly publicised diplomatic spat with India failed to yield results and further eroded his domestic popularity. The impending Trump presidency has generated more economic and diplomatic uncertainty, and his statement that he wants to merge Canada with America is worrying for the Maple Country. The changing of the guard in Canada offers an opportunity to India to mend ties, even as Trudeau's departure will present new political challenges for his country.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Canada at a crossroads

Apogees of 'Trudeau's travails', the Canadian Prime Minister's resignation has brought his country to a crossroads. Trudeau quit after disputes with allies, pressure from Donald Trump, falling popularity figures and dissent within the Liberal Party. The development has made Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre the frontrunner to take over the reins of Canadian politics. Trudeau's rule witnessed a historic low in India-Canada relations after he accused the Indian government of involvement in Hardeep Singh Nijjar's murder. India may feel a sigh of relief in view of 'Trudeau's anti-India stance'. His resignation opens the possibility for a new leadership that could prioritise improving relations with India.

HARBINDER S DHILLON, UNA

Legitimising politicisation

Refer to the editorial, 'Politicising VCs': there is nothing new about the politicisation of VCs' appointments in universities, but the new draft of UGC regulations has legitimised it. Similarly, joint secretary-level officers have been selected as IAS officers from among professionals of the industrial and corporate sectors. This has been done to ensure absolute control over educational institutions. A positive aspect of this change seems to be the administrative and professional experience for better managing of universities. The plan to remove the 10 per cent

limit of recruiting contractual staff will have a huge impact on jobs in universities.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

Battleground Delhi

The Delhi Assembly elections will be a high-stakes political battle for the main contenders — AAP, BJP and the Congress. The BJP is hoping to turn the tables on the ruling party by highlighting the allegedly corrupt deeds of ex-CM Arvind Kejriwal. But what exactly will Delhi residents vote for? In almost every election, especially in the post-Covid era, freebies have influenced electoral outcomes to the point that parties are vying to outdo one another. Won't it be better if the voters ask political parties to pledge to build more public hospitals, schools and colleges and insist on the implementation of these promises?

SK SINGH, BY MAIL

Tread warily on CDS's rank

Apogees of the pitfalls of elevating CDS to five-star rank: for a country like India, flanked by hostile neighbours, the chiefs of services must be given free rein. Giving the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) a five-star rank would create problems regarding centralisation that would affect collaborative efforts. One of the primary challenges in selecting the CDS lies in the limited tenure if the senior-most officer is appointed. Striking a balance between representing the forces and negotiating with the government is a delicate task that requires deft handling.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Education needs paradigm shift

Refer to 'Looking for a new culture of learning in 2025': the article is thought-provoking and a good commentary on the need for true education. Definitely, education has got a higher purpose than merely gooding students to seek jobs. It's basically meant to shape career-wives of the youth by inculcating democratic and liberal values, critical thinking and cultural pluralism in them. The right kind of education is the only way forward to effect a paradigm shift and enable the youth fight evils such as market-driven education, consumerism and hyper-nationalism.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunenews.com

Why China has made new units in Aksai Chin



P STOB DAN
SENIOR FELLOW, DELHI
POLICY GROUP, NEW DELHI

CHINA has just announced the creation of two new counties in Xinjiang: Heilan and Hekang. These counties will cover the entire Aksai Chin plateau, including the 38,000 square km area claimed by India. Honglu (Dahongliu) is being announced as the capital of Heilan and Xeyidula (Shahidullah) of Hekang.

On December 27, 2024, Xinhua reported that the decision to create two new counties out of Hotan (Khotan) and Pishan counties had been approved by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council. The move comes after the Indian and Chinese troops completed the disengagement process along the LAC on October 28, 2024.

The reason for Khotan's division is not clear. Gaustana or Godaniya, which translates to 'land of the cows' in Sanskrit, is Hotan's original name. It was called Ling-yul by the Ladakhis and Yu-t'en by the Chinese.

Before the Chinese arrived here in the ninth and tenth centuries, Khotan was an important point on the Silk

Road, with a flourishing Indian culture. It was the centre of the ancient Buddhist Saka Kingdom. Khotan was ruled by Mirza Abu Bakr Dughlat before Gazi Sultan Syed Khan established the Yarkand Khanate in 1510.

Khotan became a county in 1913 after the collapse of the Qing Empire. In 1919, the Karakoram/Moyu county was separated from Khotan. In 1933, Muhammad Amin Bughra, a local Amir, declared Khotan an Emirate. The People's Liberation Army entered Hotan on December 22, 1949. In 2013, a Muslim uprising in Hanerik resulted in the death of hundreds of people.

The greater part of Aksai Chin, which includes the picturesque Aksai Chin Lake or Amrogo 'Bo, will be included in the new Heilan county, with Honglu as its capital. South-east of the Lingzi-Thang plains is Surghil Yunglung K'o, also called Saliyuli Genzhi 'Bo, from where Indian nomads collected salt until the 1950s to trade with other areas.

India's claims line encompasses the strategically crucial Tianshuihai, which is also called Ladakhis as the Thal-da Basin or Mapothang. Tianshuihai is situated east of the Lakh-Zang range and north-west of the Aksai Chin Lake, which separates the Aksai Chin plateau from the Lingzi-Thang plains in the south and the Kunlun plains in the north.

The 1962 clash between India and China took place in these locations. Tianshuihai



ALONG LAC: China is creating two new counties that will cover the entire Aksai Chin. FILE PHOTO

and Tianshuihai are major military sites in the PLA area, which is traversed by China's G315 and G219 highways.

The LAC is situated near Honglu town, which is also called Dahongliu. The place was earlier a barren stop for trucks travelling on the G219 highway. The area has become a hot spot for rare metal mining due to the abundant resources of lithium, rubidium, beryllium, tantalum and niobium. The Chinese have been developing infrastructure to make use of the abundant pegmatite resource in Dahongliu, which is believed to have more than 2 million tonnes of lithium. It's possible that Honglu's new administrative town is being constructed to promote mining. There are almost no villages in the region.

It is inevitable that Aksai

It is inevitable that Aksai Chin, which is uninhabited, will eventually be subjected to a colonising mission. With China's large investments in infra and mining, Han migrants could enter the area claimed by India.

Chin, which is uninhabited, will eventually be subjected to a colonising mission. With large-scale investments by China in infrastructure and mining, Han migrants could enter the area claimed by India. China is possibly aiming to turn this deserted and prone-to-war frontier area into an economic outpost by connecting it to the global network as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

It appears that the Hekang county, with Xeyidula (Shahidullah) as its capital, is being created from the current Pishan/Guma county. From here, the Karakash (Black Jade) river flows north into Khotan and becomes closer to Kamkoram. Shahidullah in the Karakash Valley was a vital point of entry and location for the British, Russian, Chinese and Kashmiri empires during

the Great Game.

The Hindu Tash region in the Kunlun minge was the extent of India's dominance at that time. Samgal (meaning 'three fords' in Ladakhi), which used to be the main route between Karakash and Khotan, is located between the Hindu-Tash mountain and the Aksai Chin plains.

In 1864, Maharaja Ranbir Singh of Jammu and Kashmir ordered the construction of a fort on a bluff near Shahidullah, where a small Dogra force guarded the fort until 1866, when its remote location led to its abandonment. In 1865, William Johnson established a forward line and marked India's border at Brinja in the Kunlun, across Karanghu Tagh of Ladakh. The Khotanese area included the Chinese 'Mang' Langar. The northernmost boundary line of India was marked by a broad swath of the Kunlun, which includes the Kilian and Sanja. Following a 100-mile stretch east of the Kunlun, the Ladakh-Khotan frontiers then detoured beyond the Kunlun before heading south-east to incorporate Aksai Chin and connect with the Lingzi-Thang plains of Ladakh.

Johnson may have been motivated to draw the alignment for several reasons: a) Uyghur, Indian and Tibetan caravans passed through Shahidullah, a vital tract junction between the Kunlun and Kamkoram ranges; b) Karakash has a strong Indian Buddhist influence that dates

back thousands of years; c) the Uyghur tribes have long recognised the Hindu-Tash or Hindu-Tash pass as the traditional border with India; d) farmers from Nubra and Changthang could have easily brought the entire Karakash valley under cultivation due to its abundance of water; e) population would have been another factor, though the area was susceptible to Kanjuti robber attacks; and f) Yaqub Beg himself thought the Kunlun delineated the Kashgharia border.

Nevertheless, the British recognised Beg's dominance over Shahidullah, denied the Maharaja's claim and blocked Johnson's plan. Rather, they considered Ak-Tagh in the Karakoram as India's natural frontier. Since the British colonists had no intention of keeping the passes north of the Karakoram, the Chinese occupied Shahidullah in 1890.

The Chinese took control of the Maharaja's fort and erected a new one at Suget Kanul, close to Suget Pass, after the Indian garrisons were evacuated by 1892. Since then, China has continued its incursions into Aksai Chin and south of the Kamkoram.

Another possibility is that China is responding to India's decision, announced in August 2024, to create five new administrative districts (Sham, Nubra, Changthang, Zaskar and Druso) out of the districts of Ladakh, Kargil and Leh. India must also develop a more compelling regional economic story for Eastern Ladakh.

Women defence officers are not cosmetic appendages



CHANDAR SUTA DOGRA
SENIOR JOURNALIST

WHEN the annals are compiled of how women entered the forbidding portals of the Indian armed forces, at first hesitantly, then with more confidence when they found that the judiciary was prepared to call the system's bluff, the names of a handful of courageous women will be right up there. Smartly dressed women leading parades at Rajpath, flying aircraft or serving in militancy-infested areas are seen as India's pride. They are frequently brought out on display during ceremonial occasions as evidence that women do have an equal opportunity of employment as enshrined under the Constitution.

Few, however, know of the odds they have battled to reach there. They have battled gender discrimination, patriarchy, prejudice, stereotypes and humiliation only because, as an honourable judge notes, "they were women."

The recent controversy over a leaked letter by a Corps Commander to his superior officer, the Eastern Army

Commander, that contained adverse comments about the performance of eight women commanding officers under him give us a rude insight into what the Army's top brass really thinks about having women working alongside them in command and other assignments. The worthy general did not feel the need to do a similar evaluation of the 40-odd male commanding officers in his command.

Be that as it may, the women corps will probably dismiss the general's slights with a wry smile because it is just one among the many hurdles they have overcome. The trajectory of women's participation in the armed forces has been charted in an anthology, appropriately titled *In Her Defence*. It tells the story through essays and commentaries by jurists and academics. Edited by military lawyer Navdeep Singh and Shivani Dasmahapatra, it also builds several myths or urban legends, as advocates like to call the falsehoods that have grown around the issue.

Chief among the falsehoods is that women have been clamouring for entry into frontline combat arms like the infantry or the armoured corps — areas that are barred for them as a matter of policy. They have never done so. In fact, even the Supreme Court, which has pushed for gender parity in the armed forces, has desisted from interfering in the govern-



INDIA'S PRIDE: Women military officers have battled gender discrimination and patriarchy. FILE PHOTO

ment's decision to keep women away from combat arms because 'it was 'conscious of the limitations of security and policy'.

So, what were the fights about? They began with something as basic as a permanent commission. A government notification of January 30, 1992 first made women eligible to become officers in some cadres, like the Army Postal Service, the Judge Advocate General's Department (JAG), the Army Education Corps (AEC) and some branches of the Army Ordnance and Army Service Corps. A year later, they began to be inducted into the Signals and Intelligence Corps as well as the Corps of Engineers, the Electrical and Mechanical Engineering and the Regiment of Artillery.

They were initially commissioned for five years and later, their service was extended to 14

Now the real battle for women officers is to be prepared for gender-neutral norms, where they will be called on to deliver equal performance in all aspects of military service.

years under the Women Special Entry Scheme, a Short Service Commission (SSC) scheme. There is an SSC scheme for male officers, too, and some of them get permanent commission (PC), depending on their performance.

In 2003, an advocate, Babita Punjia, through a public interest litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court, demanded that women appointed as SSC officers should be considered for PC, like their male colleagues. During the PIL's pendency, the government announced PC prospectively to women officers in only the JAG and AEC. Those commissioned earlier were excluded. Two serving officers, Major Leena Gaumav and Major Sandhya Yadav, joined the battle. The landscape of gender equality within the armed forces was about to change.

In a landmark judgement,

on March 12, 2010, the Delhi High Court, while upholding the women's contention, held that if women officers were deprived of PC while male officers were granted the opportunity for the same, it would be a violation of the principle of equality protected by the Constitution. The judgement was challenged before the SC by the Central government, but the SC did not stay its operation. The government dug in its heels for nine years, till February 2019, when it granted PC to SSC women officers in eight branches, with the caveat that they will be employed only in 'staff appointments'.

Another obstacle still lurked around the corner. The SC found that the governments' proposal to grant PC to women officers envisaged only those who had been in service for less than 14 years. Was it the women's fault that they had finished serving for 14 years and had to go home, while the government resisted implementing the Delhi High Court's 2010 order to grant them PC? The SC again cracked the whip and said that it was the Union government's failure to comply with the high court order, which had not been stayed by the SC. This forced the reluctant government to give PC to all women who had been employed as SSC officers and also opened the doors for them to assume command assignments.

But, hold on to the slowdown. Around the same time, 17

SSC women officers of the Navy were also fighting it out for PC. One of the objections of the government before the courts was that as officers are required to serve on ships, it could not permit women to get PC because 'there is an absence of toilet facilities for women' on board Naval ships!

Now that gender parity has been achieved, the real battle for women officers is to be prepared for gender-neutral norms, where they will be called on to deliver equal performance in all aspects of military service.

For all these years, women officers have largely been seen as cosmetic appendages, handled with kid gloves and kept away from hard tasks, contributing to much angst among the male colleagues. Lt Col Anila Khatri pointed out recently how she was fêted for doing 89 para jumps while male officers with more than 3,000 jumps found no mention.

If viewed objectively, beyond the prism of women's rights, Lt Gen Rajeev Puri — whose letter created the controversy — was pointing out just that. He has recommended that there should be a policy on gender neutrality that covers postings and selections. 'Gender neutrality lays emphasis on equality in dealing and progression irrespective of gender,' he said in his letter.

No quarred with that. But please don't blame the women for the lapses in training due to delays by the government.

QUICK CROSSWORD

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

ACROSS

1 Lose consciousness (4,3)

2 Blow with fist (5)

3 Hypnotic state (6)

4 Equitable treatment (4,4)

10 Carefully selected (4,6)

12 Unfasten and remove (6)

13 Negligently inert (6)

15 One who sees event happen (10)

18 Total liberty of action (4,4)

19 A travel permit (4)

20 Assign to a category (5)

21 Pressing (7)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Down the road, 9 Ethical, 10 Tense, 11 Term, 12 Colonel, 14 Apollo, 16 Canyon, 18 Fracture, 19 Stir, 22 Aili, 23 Caustic, 24 On the square.

Down: 2 Other, 3 Nick, 4 Hollow, 5 Rational, 6 Annuity, 7 Meet halfway, 8 Beaten track, 13 Flatfish, 15 Ovation, 17 Crocus, 20 Tutor, 21 Tutu.

SU DO KU

6

2

3

4

7

3

1

9

6

2

4

5

3

8

5

8

9

1

7

5

1

8

9

3

4

8

6

5

V. HARD

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	18	09
New Delhi	20	06
Amritsar	17	03
Bathinda	17	06
Jalandhar	17	03
Ludhiana	15	07
Bhivani	19	05
Hisar	19	06
Sirsa	19	06
Dharamsala	23	06
Manali	15	01
Shimla	16	05
Shrinagar	09	-05
Jammu	19	07
Kargil	-01	-04
Leh	02	-10
Dehradun	23	12
Mussoorie	16	05

100% WINDS IN °C

SLOWDOWN BLUES FOR INDIAN ECONOMY

That the Indian economy is slowing down, despite still being the fastest, is a given. A premier government institution on Tuesday dealt a shock, forecasting that economy is set to grow at the slowest pace in 4 years, at 6.4% in 2024-25 as against 8.2% in the previous fiscal. National Statistical Office (NSO) first advance estimates of national accounts are in contrast to World Bank estimates of a robust 7% GDP growth in FY 2024-25. The WB confidence stemmed from the resilience of India's economy.

The NSO's latest projection is surprising in that it is the lowest, lower than the RBI estimate of 6.6% for the current fiscal. It shows a general slowdown in consumer spending, which affects growth. The con-trast is quite sharp given the estimates of

8.2% growth in economy as per the Provisional Estimate (PE) of GDP for FY2023-24. The NSO dwelt deep on the available figures, sample surveys to come out with a detailed justification for its estimates. Broad indications and implications thereof should suffice to get clarity on the current state of economy.

Among the sectors, agriculture and its allied sectors are estimated to grow 3.8% in FY25, compared to a modest 1.4% growth in FY 2023-24. Construction, financial-real estate-professional services segment is also expected to perform well, with an estimated real GVA growth of 7.3% in the same period. But, given that almost 60% of India's GDP is expected to comprise spending by households and businesses, food inflation is a worry. It surged

to 10.87% in last October. It makes up half the retail consumption and affects purchasing power of middle classes. That bank credit growth rate is contracting is also a factor for low spending by households.

The Modi government has to act innovatively as export curbs failed to cool food prices in the country. Soaring food inflation is also restraining RBI from easing interest rates, a move termed long-due by industry as well as certain quarters in the government. Instead of acting on its priorities, it is odd that the government blames it on the central bank for weak economic performance.

"The combination of money-tary policy stance and macroprudential measures by the central bank have contributed to the de-mand slowdown," says Department of Eco-

nomics Affairs in its monthly economic review for November. Of late, wary of India's sluggish growth rate, foreign investors, on expectations of dollar strengthening under Trump regime, are pulling out funds from equities. India's growing appetite for high-value imports such as crude oil and gold and sluggish exports paved for weakening of the rupee. Rupee hovers over 85 rupees to dollar as against 61 rupees a decade ago.

While India still ranks as a major player on the world stage, boosted by its strong GDP growth, it cannot remain complacent in terms of capital expenditure, reining in food prices and increasing export competi-tiveness. It also has to improve the edge of its human capital, by developing skills and promoting re-search so as to get productive jobs or turn en-

trepreneurs. India continues to fare poorly on indices of health and inequality.

Thus, there is a need for stronger inflation control and increased government spending to boost domestic consumption as well as increase services exports. Physical goods exports scenario is bleak amidst Trump's policies, geopolitics and global trade uncertainties. It being an election year, government consumption would have lagged, but it is time to double down. A 7-quarter low of GDP in the second quarter at 5.4% and a five-quarter low of 6.7% in the previous quarter should be proved a transient phase. GST revenue is also seen falling as interest rates, causing concern. Thus, the Modi government has its task cut out.

The rage to gaze in wonderment

TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

EARLY writings about exploration date back to the 4th millennium BC in ancient Egypt. One of the earliest, and most im-pactful, thinkers on exploration was Ptolemy, in the 2nd century AD. Between the 5th century and 15th century AD, most exploration was done by Chinese and Arab explorers. This was followed by the Age of Discovery, after European scholars rediscovered the works of early Latin and Greek geographers. It was the period when European explorers ventured out from their homelands, to explore, conquer, and colonise, other continents. The main areas they travelled to were the Americas, Africa, and East Asia. These lands contained vast natural resources, which Europeans used to their own ends.

This broader knowledge of the world's geography meant that people were able to make world maps, depicting all land known. The first modern Atlas was the Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, published by Abraham Ortelius, which included a world map that depicted all of Earth's continents. While there were countless positive developments that occurred during this era, there were also a number of devastating consequences to indigenous peoples, as well as to the ecosystem of the newly-discovered territories.

Exploration can mean many things in different contexts such as, for instance, a preliminary engagement, of institutions or individuals, to pave the way for building a relationship or to describe a preparatory mission, to pre-cede a plan or programme. The trip this columnist made in 1997 to Eritrea to prepare a blueprint for a programme of assistance by India to Eritrea, under the World Food Programme or the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), is one such example.

Geographical exploration is another type of quest, the objective being to discover remote lands. One major era, in the history of Earth, saw people moving out of Africa, settling in new lands, and developing distinct cultures. Early explorers settled in Europe and Asia about 14,000 years ago with people migrating from Siberia to Alaska, and moving southwards, to settle in the Americas. Another was over the last 10,000 years, involving cross-cultural exchanges, through trade and exploration, marked a new paradigm, of cultural intermingling. Urban exploration relates to manmade structures, abandoned ruins or hidden components of the manmade environment.

Likewise, hydrocarbon exploration is the search, by petroleum geologists and geophysicists, for petroleum and natural gas in the Earth's crust, employing petroleum geology. Offshore drilling is into the ocean floor and on-shore drilling is on land.

Astronomy, or the observation of objects in space, predates recorded history. Exploring outer space has always proved an irresistible lure, particularly for astronomers,

PART-II

Geographical exploration is a type of quest, the objective being to discover remote lands. One major era, in the history of Earth, saw people moving out of Africa, settling in new lands, and developing distinct cultures. Early explorers settled in Europe and Asia about 14,000 years ago, with people migrating from Siberia to Alaska, and moving southwards, to settle in the Americas. Another was over the last 10,000 years, involving cross-cultural exchanges, through trade and exploration, marked a new paradigm, of cultural intermingling



scientists and science fiction writers, with the prospect of travelling to distant, and unexplored, corners of the universe, triggering their imagination.

Those who have watched the adventures of Captain Kirk, and Nimbus III, the crew of spaceship 'Enterprise', in the futuristic, and exciting, science fiction media franchise, 'Star Trek', will surely have fantasised about the wonders of space. 'To boldly go where no one has gone before', is the spirit embodying the deep space adventures of Enterprise, and space is described as the 'final frontier'.

The development of large, and efficient, rockets during the mid-twentieth century, made physical extraterrestrial exploration a reality, for exploring, advancing scientific research, national prestige,

uniting different nations, ensuring the future survival of humanity, and developing military and strategic advantages against other countries. It was largely driven by competition between the Soviet Union and the United States to achieve the first spaceflight.

Now, private sector and national governments are investing in space exploration, primarily to protect human life from catastrophic events and to leverage the resources of space. The future of space exploration will involve both the telescopic, and physical, exploration, by robotic and human spaceflights, by way of mounting expeditions to the Moon and other planets of the Solar System, to establish settlements as well mining and fueling outposts. It is expected that moving high polluting industries to space (which

sounds familiar, being like what the developed countries on Earth are doing with developing countries), will reduce the emissions on Earth, leading to the discovery of cleaner energy sources. Undoubtedly, an enticing prospect, but not without attendant challenges, which are complex, technological, and economic.

Fascinating developments are taking place, around the world, with individuals and private sector institutions entering the arena of space travel, and working more efficiently, and reducing costs. The American space technology company, SpaceX, has, in particular, been a dominant leader in that push, and has launched the first commercial rocket, with humans aboard, an endeavour termed Falcon 9.

The unique attributes of space enable astronauts to conduct research that could not otherwise be done on Earth. Currently, ongoing research, by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), at the International Space Station (ISS), includes biomedical research, material science, technology advancement, and methods to enable future space exploration.

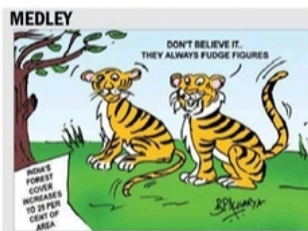
As of 2022, the farthest any human-made probe has travelled is the current NASA mission Voyager 1, 23.6 billion km from Earth, while the nearest star is around 4.24 light years away. The astronomical order of magnitude of the distance between Earth and the nearest stars is a challenge for the current development of space exploration. Autonomy will be a key technology for the future exploration of the Solar System, where robotic spacecraft will often be out of communica-

tion with their human controllers.

Elon Musk, an American businessman, is known for his spectacle achievements, such as being the founder of the world's most dominant space launch provider, SpaceX, as also owner of X Corp, the company which operates the social media platform X (previously Twitter). In 2017, he announced the development of rocket travel to transport humans from one city to another in under an hour. Another interesting development of recent times is that of Sunita Williams, daughter of Indian American neutron anatomist Deepak Pandya, who, along with fellow astronaut Butch Wilmore, is currently on board the International Space Station, in a mission which started in August 2024 and will last till March 2025, undertaking scientific experiments and maintenance tasks.

The subject of oil exploration takes me back to when my cousin G R K Rao was working as a Senior Geologist in the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation of India. I was, at that time, Assistant Collector (under training) in Krishna district, of which Machilipatnam was the headquarters. His work brought him to Machilipatnam, where he and his wife lived in a tent for a few weeks. The work involved the use of an instrument which had to come all the way from Dehradun. The amusing part was that the machine used to travel in a first class coupe compartment reserved in the name of Mrs and Mr G R K Rao!

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



LETTERS

Trudeau's expedient politics come to end

That Justin Trudeau is resigning as the Prime Minister of Canada and as the leader of Liberal party is not surprising. The political downfall is his own making. His rise to power as a promising young leader in 2015 has not lasted a decade, thanks to his misadventures in public administration. Economic downturn, crisis in housing sector and overwhelming immigration are the main reasons for him and his ruling dispensation to lose public faith. He earned discontent even in his own party, leave alone in the coalition partners. As he sensed the dwindling image in people, he tried to get the support of some fringe sections like pro-Khalistani groups desperately, which has turned badly on the diplomatic front. The final straw may be US President-elect's statement that reveals the intention of rising taxes on imports from Canada. His resignation is a damage control exercise for his party.

Dr DVG Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Why virtual inaugurations at all?

It has become a norm for the Prime Minister to inaugurate virtually railway stations & trains, projects, flyovers, expressways etc. very frequently. Such actions can send several wrong signals to people. When there are specific ministers, why should PM inaugurate the above virtually? Do they need inaugurations? Does he want to have 'One man show' in every function in the country and not concentrating enough on people's problems?

Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Time for Kohli to hang his boots

FINALLY, like Manjrekar, Irfan has called a spade a spade. A test average of 30 by Virat Kohli in the last 5 years is very mediocre indeed and he doesn't deserve a place in the playing 11 especially after the horror show in the last 2 series. Also, he neither wants to play domestic cricket nor wants to admit and seek help to rectify his glaring technical faults thanks to his arrogance and ego. Add to that, his on/off field controversies and antics have put Indian cricket to shame, especially this BGT. In spite of knowing that his pathetic batting has hurt the team, if he is still stubborn and selfish enough not to retire gracefully, then he needs to be shown the exit door. Just to grace him that he is not bigger than Indian cricket.

Akhilesh Krishnan, Mumbai

Western diet not easy for Indians

A PROPOS Healthy diet staples... it makes little sense to Indian readers to follow the dietary rules of those who live in the developed west. Things like grapefruit, cranberry and pomegranate juice will be out of reach of 99.9% of those living in India. Articles by writers from other nations very often have no relevance to India and must be dispensed with. 80 crore Indians are living on 5 kg free rations. Can one really expect them to be careful of what they eat? In fact, they will be happy to eat anything. One more thing is the body functioning depends on various factors including climate and way of life. Indians have been toughened by hard living and are immune to many things that would send the others rushing to the doctors.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

thehansreader@gmail.com

Shaping a safe and equitable digital future

As the world navigates rapid digital transformation, the 19th United Nations Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has convened in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, under the theme "Building Our Multistakeholder Digital Future". Bringing together participants from over 170 countries, the Forum comes at a pivotal moment following the recent adoption of the Global Digital Compact (GDC). The comprehensive framework, adopted as part of the Pact for the Future, aims to ensure digital technologies serve humanity's best interests.

In his message for the day, UN Secretary-General António Guterres underscored the transformative power of digital technology. He stated: "Digital technology has fundamentally reshaped our world and holds enormous potential to accelerate human progress. But unlocking this potential for all people requires guard-rails, and a collaborative approach to governance," he emphasised.

Participants tackled key issues such as digital inclusion, artificial intelligence

governance and countering online misinformation. Despite the rapid expansion of digital technology, 2.6 billion people worldwide remain offline with the majority residing in developing countries. Addressing this gap, alongside fostering trust and security in the digital realm, will be central to the Forum's discussions. Abdullah Alswaha, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Communications and Information Technology, said that IGF Riyadh 2024 "offers a global platform to promote international digital cooperation in the age of AI". He encouraged stakeholders to deeply engage in the Forum in Riyadh, to help "shape innovative Internet governance and support a prosperous and sustainable digital future for the benefit of humanity".

The Forum also aims to reinforce human rights in digital spaces, with a focus on equitable data use and privacy protections. In a rapidly changing digital world, the collaborative efforts led by the IGF and the GDC will be essential in ensuring that technology serves humanity and promotes a future where



A surge in the development of powerful artificial intelligence (AI) tools is already bringing fresh urgency to calls for regulation, as more and more governments wake up to the risks. Effective global regulation to ensure that AI is developed safely for the benefit of all is urgently needed.

no one is left behind.

A surge in the development of powerful artificial intelligence (AI) tools is already bringing fresh urgency to calls for regulation, as more and more governments wake up to the risks. Effective global regulation to ensure that AI is developed safely for the benefit of all is urgently needed.

also bringing fresh urgency to calls for regulation, as more and more governments wake up to the risks. Effective global regulation to ensure that AI is developed safely for the benefit of all is urgently needed.

Early 2024, an audience in a Geneva conference hall sat captivated by a video screen carrying live pictures of a 25-year-old man in Portugal suffering from 'locked-in syndrome', a devastating neurological disorder that causes patients to lose control of their body; some two years after contracting the condition, he was unable to move or speak. Nevertheless, he was able to communicate with the audience and

answer a series of questions, using his mind to connect with a digital, AI-powered tool that translated his thoughts into words, spoken in his voice.

The experience was overwhelming for many in the audience, several of whom were in tears. "I had to compose myself," says Fred Werner, Head of Strategic Engagement at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN agency for digital technology, and one of the organizers of the AI for Good summit. "Yes, there are many discussions around safety, privacy, ethics and sustainability, but I don't think it's a stretch to say that lives are being saved by AI." Werner was quick to point out that the positive aspects of AI are not being overlooked by the UN.

"We've identified over 400 applications of AI across the UN system. It's being used in areas ranging from natural hazards management to human rights monitoring, a wide selection of sustainable development-related activities".

Whilst the Geneva demonstration of AI technology

serves as a powerful example of the positive effect that artificial intelligence can have on people's lives, Werner acknowledged that excitement over the potential benefits of AI is tempered by the risks. "I think that AI is moving so fast that there is no time to waste. How do we deal with deepfakes, and misinformation? We have to really collaborate on creating international AI standards."

Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and big data can play a central role in optimizing energy consumption of our digital world. For example, by harnessing AI algorithms, data centers can optimize energy efficiency, streamline operations, and reduce their carbon footprint, ITU says.

However, as the use of digital products and services grows, so does the amount of energy and water used, and e-waste produced. Growing demands of digitization demand more energy, which raises greenhouse gas emissions. AI programmes need servers that run around the clock. These servers and the data centres that house them use a lot of electricity. In addition, even more energy is required to cool the data centers. These and other need to be debated threadbare in the days to come.

What Delhi won't debate this election, or any election

DATeline New Delhi

SHEMIN JOY

For the colonial masters, there were several reasons for shifting British India's capital from Kolkata (then Calcutta) to Delhi. Among them, the burgeoning troubles following the splitting of Bengal were a key factor necessitating the speedy shifting. The British laid the foundation stone for a new Delhi in 1911, and two decades later, the new capital city stood in all its magnificence.

The partition saw lakhs walking into Delhi with anxieties about the future in their minds and almost nothing in their hands. Post-independence, as India settled into a coherent nation, millions flocked into 'Indraprastha' from the length and

breadth of the country to build their lives and nation block by block.

And they continue to do so. At least 63.40 lakh of 1.67 crore people counted in Delhi during the 2011 Census belonged to other states, not counting those who return to their homes in neighbouring states after work every day. "If one had a choice, would they really choose to live here?" as writer Kishwar Singh wrote once, is a question, but left unanswered by prospective rulers.

Political cacophony, or as *Dilliwallas* call it, *tu-tu mein-mein*, is making screaming headlines as the capital is heading to an election and the 'gaffe' (abuses) season is all set to become harsher this winter. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will continue his AAP as *AAPda* (disaster) co-sage while BJP's principal rival, Arvind Kejriwal, would keep repeating AAP's promises.

In the melee, voters too forget to question those seeking their mandate. While

affordable health, education, housing, power, and water should top the agenda, the discourse in Delhi does not centre around them as fundamental rights of a citizen. Leaders of all hues, eager to distract voters, project them as 'freelancers'.

Breathing in Delhi has become a daily challenge, with the city's air remaining polluted for most of the year. Rapid urbanisation, increasing vehicular emissions, and dust from rising construction activities and industries contribute to Delhi's air becoming unbreathable even on a normal day. Diwali and winter months see the usual blame game over crackers and stubble burning.

Discussions and debates recede once Diwali is over and the intensity of stubble burning decreases. The government would blame meteorological conditions as the "driving force" in the pollution crisis, which is true to an extent, but the Supreme Court reminds them, "If it is

monitored even with half of the intensity that is required, we wouldn't reach this situation." In the blame game, this issue dies a neglected death while respiratory illnesses rise.

Only months ago, a young boy and two girls drowned in the basement of a coaching centre for civil service exams after severe waterlogging following heavy rains. They wanted to be part of the famed Indian bureaucracy, but the dreams were shattered as a callous system led officers and politicians to fail to find solutions for a problem that was troubling the capital for years.

This issue too remains under the carpet this election season. The same is the case with disposing of garbage or burgeoning parking woes.

Rising crime too escapes the attention of the mainstream. AAP raised the issue in the last quarter of 2024, but it ended up as a blame game. One may talk about RJD

losing power in Bihar and the Samajwadi Party getting defeated in Uttar Pradesh over law and order issues but not in Delhi. Gangs rise, snatchers run, and vehicle thieves flee.

Slums are disappearing fast as demolition drives intensify. But where are the slum dwellers going? While new apartment complexes for a few hundred are inaugurated, an NGO Housing and Land Rights Network estimates that more than three lakh people are still staying in the open without shelter. At the same time, the city is getting more congested.

Another issue that appears to be escaping the attention of politicians and policy makers is the rising rents, which have pushed essential workers like housemaids, 'rickshawallas', and students migrating to Delhi to the brink. They can't find affordable accommodation. A recent study revealed a 70% rise in rents over two years, with property dealers, many of them local

politicians or with links to leaders, jacking up rents for profit.

These days, it seems you need a tragedy to create ripples in Delhi. Earlier, a protest by anganwadi workers, a students' group, or anyone else could capture attention. Parliament marches and rallies in Ramliya Maidan sent shivers down the power structures.

A dissenting populace is the strength of a democracy, but in Delhi, police barricades, if not bulldozers, and shut Metro stations stonewall protesters from seeking the attention of those in power.

As a free election comes beckoning the capital, the leaders need to be reminded of what the 18th-century Urdu poet Meer Taqi Meer wrote (as translated by Khushwant Singh): There once was a fair city / Among cities of the world the first in fame / It has been ruined and laid desolate / To that city I belong: Delhi is its name.

DHNS

The president-elect did not elaborate on what actions he might take if the captives are not released by the time he takes office

MICHAEL D SHEAR AND
MICHAEL CROWLEY

President-elect Donald Trump said Tuesday that "all hell will break out in the Middle East" if the hostages being held by Hamas are not released by Inauguration Day, repeating the threat four times during a wide-ranging news conference at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida.

"If they're not back by the time I get into office, all hell will break out in the Middle East," he told reporters. "And it will not be good for Hamas, and it will not be good, frankly, for anyone. All hell will break out. I don't have to say any more, but that's what it is."

Trump did not elaborate about what actions he might take if the hostages were not released by the time he enters office. And he declined to provide details about what he or his advisers are doing in the days leading up to the inauguration on January 20. Officials say about 100 hostages, including some Americans, who were seized on October 7, 2023, remain captive in the Gaza Strip, though they believe many of them may have died in captivity.

"They should have never taken them," Trump told reporters. "There should have never been the attack of October 7. People forget that. But there was, and many people were killed."

President Joe Biden and his top national security aides have been working for months to try to negotiate the release of the remaining hostages. A deal has seemed imminent several times, only to fall apart after what Biden administration officials have said were rejections by Hamas negotiators. Israeli officials have also objected to some parts of proposed deals.

During his remarks, Trump suggested that his threats against Hamas would cause the group to relent. But experts on the Middle East struggled to understand the meaning of Trump's threats.

"I don't have a clue, nor does he," said Daniel Kurtzer, a US ambassador to Israel during the George W. Bush administration. Over the past 15 months, Israel's military has nearly destroyed Hamas as an organised fighting force. It is unclear what more any escalated attacks by the incoming Trump administration, or Israel, could accomplish.

"I see no scenario where US forces would be engaged; in any event, we don't have a better idea than the Israelis what would force Hamas' hand," Kurtzer added. "Bluster is the worst form of policy."

Aaron David Miller, a former State Department Middle East analyst and negotiator, said it was unclear what Trump could do if the hostages were not released by his deadline. And he questioned whether Trump could persuade Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel to take a deal.

"Trump will never be able to inflict more pain on Hamas and Palestinians than Israel already has," Miller said. "He does have leverage over Netanyahu. But would he really use it to press Israel to agree to terms of a deal that might appear to benefit Hamas?"

At one point Tuesday, the president-elect invited Steve Witkoff, whom he intends to appoint as his Middle East envoy, to speak to reporters. Witkoff said



ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARSHADHAN

All hell will break loose: Trump's ultimatum to Hamas

negotiators were "making a lot of progress," but he did not give specifics.

"And I don't want to say too much, because I think they're doing a really good job," Witkoff said. "I'm really hopeful that by the inaugural we'll have some good things to announce on behalf of the president."

Witkoff seemed to praise the Biden administration's efforts, saying that "I actually believe that we're working in tandem in a really good way." But he also singled out Trump, saying it was the president-elect's "stature" and "the red lines he's put out there that's driving this negotiation."

Witkoff added that he was "leaving tomorrow" to go back to Doha, Qatar, where delegations from Israel and Hamas have been negotiating through Qatari mediators. It was unclear what role, if any, Witkoff has been playing in those talks.

The reality of a change of administrations in the United States has complicated the last-ditch efforts by Biden and his advisers to get a deal to release the hostages. Families of those still being held have urged Biden and Trump officials to work together toward that goal.

Biden national security officials have said they are keeping their Trump counterparts fully informed about negotiations. And members of both teams appear aligned behind the same goal: using the deadline of the inauguration to pressure Hamas to release everyone it is holding. But if a release happens, the two ad-

ministrations are likely to be starkly divided over who deserves praise.

The comments by Trump and Witkoff on Tuesday appeared to be devised at least in part so the president-elect can claim credit for a release if it happens just before he takes office. Witkoff told reporters that he thought Hamas was listening to Trump.

"He exhorts us to speak emphatically, and emphatically means you better get it—you better do this," he said, adding that Hamas is not waiting for Trump to take office. "I think they heard him loud and clear. Better get done by the inaugural."

Aides to Biden said Witkoff and Brett McGurk, the chief negotiator for the Biden administration, had been talking regularly and that the discussions had been "constructive" and "appropriate." McGurk has been the lead negotiator working to bring the two sides to an agreement.

That context illustrates that "the Biden and Trump teams are far more coordinated than were, say, the Obama and Trump teams in late 2016 and early 2017," said Natan Sachs, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

But Biden officials have argued that progress toward a deal is the result of months of painstaking discussions and Israel's intense bombardment of Hamas. Israel's bombing of Gaza—which has come under intense scrutiny from many parts of the world because it has killed tens of thousands of people—severely damaged Hamas and left most of its lead-

ers dead, including Yahya Sinwar and the masterminds of the October 7 attacks. Israel's strikes against Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon have further isolated Hamas, Biden officials say.

They also note that the deal under consideration now with Hamas is based on an agreement that Biden offered to Israel and Hamas in May and that was later endorsed by the U.S. Security Council.

Miller said it would be unusual for a member of an incoming administration, like Witkoff, to be a direct part of sensitive negotiations with foreign countries.

"It's fascinating that he said today 'we're making progress,'" Miller said, referring to Witkoff. "He's inserted himself—as has Trump—in a negotiating process owned by the Biden administration and in which they have no official role. And of course they're setting the stage to claim credit for the deal when it happens."

Meanwhile, Donald Trump on Tuesday refused to rule out using military force to retake the Panama Canal, which was returned by the United States to that country's control decades ago. Last month, he falsely accused Panama of allowing Chinese soldiers to control the vital shipping route, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and of overcharging American ships. While it is unclear what prompted Trump's recent obsession with the Panama Canal, some Republicans have long objected to a decades-old treaty that turned the shipping lane over to Panamanian control.

The New York Times

Women are recasting the electoral pitch

DEEPAKSHU MOHAN

India's electoral history is riven with a technocratic shift, driven by the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party. At its heart lies a quiet yet powerful revolution—the rising influence of women voters.

Often overlooked in mainstream political analyses, women are no longer mere numbers in the arithmetic of elections. They have emerged as a decisive force, driving transformative changes across assembly and national elections.

This silent surge has reshaped the strategies of political parties. It has influenced electoral campaigns, policy designs, and welfare schemes, steering governance towards a welfare-centric approach to state-society relations.

In 2024, 312 million women cast their votes, eclipsing male voter turnout in 137 constituencies. This was more than a numerical milestone; it marked a shift in the political consciousness of women as voters with agency—an independent voice advocating for better well-being and economic opportunities.

This change extends beyond turnout. A 2014 survey revealed that 70% of women voters made independent decisions, free from familial or spousal influences. By 2024, this autonomy became even more pronounced, with women prioritising welfare, safety, and financial security over communal or ideological rhetoric. This shift has forced political parties, including the BJP, to recalibrate their approach, toning down divisive rhetoric in favour of targeted welfare schemes to win over women voters.

Consider the 2024 Maharashtra assembly elections. The BJP-led alliance launched Mahi Ladki Bahin Yojana, offering Rs 1,500 monthly to women—a carefully crafted strategy, not just another welfare pitch. Similarly, Karnataka's Mahila Yojana, which provided Rs 1,000 monthly to women, helped the JMM-Congress alliance consolidate its base. These schemes were not mere giveaways; they were lifelines for families struggling with rising costs and their electoral impact was undeniable.

A report by CSDS suggested that women, benefiting from government schemes were more likely to support incumbents and less likely to vote for narrow, caste-based parties. Welfare schemes like Ujjwala Yojana, which subsidised cooking gas, are emblematic of how women are driving political agendas. Data from the National Election Studies 2019 data underlines this trend. Beneficiaries of the Ujjwala scheme were 4.6 percentage points more likely to

believe the BJP works for the poor and 4.5 points more satisfied with the central government.

But while women voters have tipped the scales in state and national elections, women's representation in politics remains dismal. Women constitute just 13.6% of the Lok Sabha, far below the global average of 25%. While the Women Reservation Bill promised to reserve 33% of seats for women, its implementation remains stalled, casting doubt on its intent. Critics argue the bill, introduced before the 2024 elections, was a publicity stunt to project progressiveness rather than genuine commitment to gender equality in leadership.

Political parties, accustomed to ignoring the unique needs of women voters, have been forced to adapt. Still, these temporal initiatives, though important, often fall short on addressing systemic issues affecting the structural inequities and inadequacies that affect women's well-being. Welfare schemes are effective for providing short-term relief or heightening electoral expectations, but they cannot replace long-term, deeper reforms through a cultural shift anchored by greater investment in education, employment, and healthcare.

Despite the popularity of conditional and unconditional cash transfer programmes—now active in 14 states and reaching 20% of India's adult female population—they risk being a patchy solution that fails to address deeper structural problems while imposing fiscal profligacy questions.

What's needed is a decisive shift from transactional, short-term, welfare populist policies to transformational policies benefiting women across states and socio-economic divides.

For every cash transfer scheme that provides temporary relief, there needs to be proportional increases in social and public investment for girls' and women's participation in vocational training programmes, higher education, better quality of schools for girls and safer workplaces and mobility conditions for women; that needs to be put in place.

Women have demonstrated their transformative power as voters, reshaping electoral outcomes across the nation. For this vision to materialise, Indian politics and parties must go beyond symbolic gestures. Political parties need to prioritise structural reforms such as gender-sensitive budgeting, mentorship programmes for women leaders, and stronger anti-discrimination laws in workplaces.

(The writer is a professor, dean, and director, Centre for New Economic Studies, OP Jindal Global University)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

Snags in Indo-US food aid talks overcome

Washington, January 8
The snags that developed during negotiations at the official level over the terms of American food shipments have been resolved in principle following a meeting between India's Ambassador T. N. Kaul and US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger yesterday. Details are now expected to be worked out by the two Governments and an agreement for the supply of between 3,00,000 tonnes to 5,00,000 tonnes of wheat will be signed shortly. Washington wanted a provision to be included to the effect that India will not re-export US foodgrains.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2000

Hunting festivals rampant in Blore Rural

Bangalore, Jan 8
Come winter, large scale ritual hunting of wild animals is prevalent at several places in Bangalore Rural district. The ritual hunting comes soon after the harvest season as farmers have time to spare. Aghanahalli and Hulsikatti in Doddaballapur taluk, Soddavahalli in Nelamangala, Motaganahalli and Voddarabelli in Magadi are some of the places where such ritual hunting takes place. In the ritual hunting, either guns are used to kill the animals or men with stout sticks chase the animals and bludgeon them to death.

It is normal that people experience anxiety. It's our body and brain's way of keeping us alert, and it can improve performance," says Hayley Vaughan-Smith, a licensed therapeutic counsellor. It has in-depth meaning. How often do we get anxious and repent for being so? Anxiety is a part of life, and we should embrace this emotion as we sail through tough waters. This emotion increases personal growth and can even be a powerful motivator in life to work where we are uncomfortable. Many scientists have cited that experiencing an optimal level of anxiety is not all that bad and can increase alertness. Eustress, or, to put it in other words, good stress, can help

us to change our outlook towards life. Let us take some instances from mythology where optimal stress has been beneficial. The great warrior Arjuna fell into the shackles of anxiety in the great battle against the Kauravas. Had he not embraced this feeling of anxiety, he would have never sought Lord Krishna's help for solace. Ultimately, it is this feeling of anxiety that served him as a catalyst for spiritual growth. The Bhagavad Gita would have never been in existence had he not experienced anxiety. Let us take the example of Sage



Narada. Sage Narada is known for his restless and anxious nature for the well-being of the universe. His main aim was to maintain dharma. He could perform his duties diligently because his anxious nature motivated him to establish righteousness in the universe. Also, Lord Hanuman, in his mission to find Deva Seetha, Lord Rama's consort, had to face several obstacles and anxieties in his journey. His anxiety to please Lord Rama made him move out of his comfort zone and achieve his mission. Let us have a look at how anxiety

helped great scientists to achieve their goals. Albert Einstein's famous theory of relativity sprang from his deep anxiety and wonder about the nature of time and space. Isaac Newton's deep anxiety to explore the laws of nature made him uncover a lot of hidden truths about the world around us. Charles Darwin was worried about how his theory of evolution would be received by religious and scientific communities. This anxiety made him to carefully refine his theories. All said and done, anxiety can prove as a powerful motivator and a game changer in life as long as it does not cross the optimal levels.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

How the UAPA, a draconian law, is wrecking lives

The UAPA prohibits a judge from granting bail if, on a perusal of the police diary or the police report, the judge is of the opinion that there are 'reasonable grounds for believing that the accusation is ... prima facie true'

Gautam Bhatia

On January 7, Delhi police opposed the bail pleas of activists Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam and others, who are accused in the 2020 north-east Delhi riots case. These activists have been jailed under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967. In this article, dated August 7, 2022, Gautam Bhatia talks about how the UAPA brings in elements of a trial into a bail hearing.

On March 24, a Sessions Court in Delhi denied bail to Umar Khalid as part of a set of cases that have commonly come to be known as "the Delhi riots cases". The case of the police was that Mr. Khalid was one of the conspirators behind the February 2020 violence in Delhi, which had claimed more than 50 lives. For this, Mr. Khalid, along with many others, was charge-sheeted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967, and jailed pending trial. Mr. Khalid has been in jail for over 500 days. The trial has not yet begun.

Much has been written about the serious problems with the manner in which the Delhi Police has conducted its investigation, and prosecution of the Delhi riots: in particular, its selective targeting of activists who were involved with the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019, which was the alleged trigger for the violence, while refraining from prosecuting individuals who are on record delivering incendiary speeches. The denial of bail to Mr. Khalid highlights an equally serious problem: the broken nature of India's criminal justice system.

Bail hearing becomes trial

First, consider these facts. Mr. Khalid's bail application was filed in July 2021. The order denying bail was passed eight months later, after multiple hours-long hearings, multiple adjournments, and three deferrals of the order itself. It is important to ask why an application for bail took so many hearings and eight months to decide: in criminal law, the purpose of bail is to ensure that an individual is not unjustly denied their liberty while the trial against them is still proceeding and their guilt has not yet been established. As such, in normal circumstances, courts are supposed to consider whether an accused is a flight risk, or is likely to tamper with evidence or intimidate witnesses. If neither of those dangers exist, there is no purpose in denying an individual their freedom before their guilt has been established in a court. This, in other words, is the real meaning of the hoary phrase 'innocent until proven guilty'.

This is where the notorious UAPA comes in. In short of legalese, the UAPA prohibits a judge from granting an individual bail if, on a perusal of the police diary or the police report, the judge is of the opinion that there are "reasonable grounds for believing that the accusation is ... prima facie true." The effect of this, as the criminal legal scholar Abhinav Sekhri has pointed out, is that the UAPA introduces elements of the criminal trial into the question of bail. There are traces of this in the Indian Penal Code as well, for bail under serious



GETTY IMAGES

non-UAPA offences. This hints at a larger problem with the criminal justice system, of which the UAPA is only the starkest example. Questions of guilt or innocence are meant to be determined at the end of a trial, after evidence has been sifted, witnesses examined and cross-examined, and arguments completed. The question of guilt or innocence at the stage of bail short-circuits that essential procedure.

But that is not the only problem with turning bail hearings into mini-trials. The problem is also that this mini-trial – to borrow a colourful phrase from the U.S. Supreme Court – licenses "one side ... to

fight freestyle, while requiring the other to follow the Marquis of Queensberry Rules (i.e., the rules of professional boxing)". What the judge has before them is entirely one side of the case: the police version. In a trial, the defence would be entitled to cross-examine the prosecution's witnesses, determine inconsistencies in their testimony, examine its own witnesses, present its own evidence, and otherwise demonstrate that the case against the accused has not been made out beyond reasonable doubt. In a bail hearing, the defence can do none of that. The starting

point of the bail hearing is the presumption that everything in the police report is true. Based on that presumption, all the two sides can then argue about is whether according to these "facts", the legal ingredients of the offence are fulfilled – or, in some rare cases, about whether the facts themselves are self-contradictory or flat-out implausible, so that no reliance can be placed on them even at the stage of bail. To use an analogy, it is like holding a debate between two sides, stopping it after one side finishes, allowing the other side to pose two or three questions but not say anything more, and then deciding whether the motion passes or falls.

Such a system might possibly be defensible in a situation where criminal justice was swift, efficient, and trustworthy. If, for example, criminal trials habitually concluded within six months, it might just be possible to argue that in terrorism cases, six months of pretrial incarceration is a painful but proportionate price to pay (in my opinion, it is still unjustifiable, but there is at least a case to be made). However, that is not the case in India: a UAPA trial takes years – often more than 10 years. In such a situation, the court's decision on bail, de facto, becomes the decision on the case: the denial of bail means that a person is likely to spend a decade or more behind bars, as the trial winds on. And given the UAPA's abysmally low conviction rates, the trial will likely end in acquittal.

This, thus, explains why bail hearings take so long, and are so convoluted (although there is still little excuse for the eight-month-long process in Mr. Khalid's case). Both the defence and the prosecution know that the outcome of the bail hearing is, for all practical effects, the outcome of the case itself. The result of the denial of bail is, functionally, the same as the result of a finding of guilt: a decade-plus in jail. But, as we have seen, while the denial of bail is effectively a finding of guilt, it has none of the safeguards that the criminal law puts into place before an actual finding of guilt. The accused is first gagged from contesting the police's version and is then condemned for not being able to disprove the police's case.

Rank injustice

In a notorious judgment in *National Investigation Agency v. Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali* (2019), the Supreme Court made a bad situation even worse by forbidding the lower courts from scrutinising in depth even the police case. This leads to absurd situations like Mr. Khalid's bail order.

A reading of the bail order shows that the court reproduces various allegations against Mr. Khalid – some of them hearsay, and therefore inadmissible during the trial, and some extremely implausible; dismisses the defence's challenges to them without any engagement; and then denies bail. Lawyers and legal scholars may disagree over whether the UAPA actually requires the courts to become stenographers for the prosecution, even under existing legal doctrine. The point, however, is that for all the reasons we have discussed above, the result is rank injustice.

Reforming the criminal justice system is the task of many years. In the immediate future, however, it is at least possible to curtail the manner in which the UAPA plays havoc with the lives of so many individuals.

Striking down or reading down its bail prohibitions and subjecting the police case to stricter scrutiny during bail hearings would be a start. It remains to be seen whether the judiciary has the will and the inclination to do so.

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based lawyer.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"Did you or didn't you see the film?"
"That's what I'm trying to tell you. No sooner had I reached the ticket counter when the crowd..."
"... 'than', not 'when'."
"What?"
"The expression is 'no sooner.... than', not 'no sooner... when'. No sooner had the bell rung than the students came running out of their classrooms."
"No sooner had the star arrived than a loud cheer went up!"
"Good. I'm going to make some coffee. How would you like yours?"
"I...er... Well, I..I.."
"As it comes?"
"As it comes? As what comes?"
"The coffee, of course. When somebody asks you how you would like your coffee or tea, and you reply as it comes, you mean you do not mind how strong or weak it is."
"In other words, I'm willing to drink what is given to me. I have no preference."
"That's right. P.r.e.f.e.r.e.n.c.e is pronounced PREFERENCE. The stress is on the first syllable."
"First syllable! Really? PREFERENCE. Rhymes with the word REFERENCE, doesn't it?"
"Yes, it most certainly does. Now, about the coffee. Will you take it as it comes?"
"Oh no! I'd like mine to be strong, please. Really strong... You've been spending a lot of your time in the kitchen lately. What's the reason?"
"I'm learning to be a househusband."
"A househusband! What's that?"
"Why don't you figure it out yourself?"
"Hm...let's see. A 'housewife' is someone who looks after the home. The husband goes out to work and she takes care of the home."
"You're on the right track."
"So a 'househusband' would be a man who looks after the house, while the wife has an outside job."
"Exactly!"
"A man looking after the house!"
"There's nothing wrong with it."
"I never said there was. But you would make a lousy househusband."
"Why do you say that?"
"This coffee! It tastes terrible. By the way, do you know that 'husband' can be used as a verb also?"
"I know."
"What does it mean?"
"To work as a husband."
"No. It means 'to use sparingly and economically.' We must husband our resources. 'It is a formal word.'"
Published in *The Hindu* on August 30, 1994.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz to mark the 18th edition of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas being held in Bhubaneswar

V.V. Ramanan

PBD in 2015?

QUESTION 1

Why was January 9 chosen as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and in which year was the inaugural event held?

QUESTION 2

The past 17 editions have been held in various Indian cities. Which city has hosted the event the most number of times and where was the last edition held?

QUESTION 3

What major change was initiated to the

QUESTION 4

What was special about the edition held in 2021?

QUESTION 5

What is the theme for this year's Pravasi Bharatiya Divas?

QUESTION 6

The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) is sponsored and organised by the Ministry of External Affairs. Which two leading organisations also collaborate with the MEA in celebrating the event?

QUESTION 7

What is the name of the award given to honour exceptional overseas Indians?



Visual question: Identify this former President and Premier of an African nation who was the first chief guest in 2003. FILE PHOTO

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. This film is about a Mexican drug lord who changes gender. **Ans: Emilia Pérez**
2. This TV series is set amid the emerging threat of civil war in Japan in 1600. The writer of the book was a young officer in the Royal Artillery. **Ans: Shōgun; James Clavell**
3. The reason why naming Pia Zadora the new star of the year in 1982 was controversial. **Ans: The film, Butterfly, wasn't even out yet**
4. This actor refused his Golden Globe award and Academy Award in the 1970s for this cult film. **Ans: Marlon Brando; The Godfather**
5. Payal Kapadia lost her Best Director Award to Brady Corbet, who won it for this film. **Ans: The Brutalist**
6. This actor holds the highest number of nominations at the Golden Globe awards. **Ans: Meryl Streep**
Visual: Name the three people here. **Ans: Fred Astaire, Jane Fonda, and John Travolta**
Early Birds: Siddhartha Viswanathan| Rajmohan Velayudhan| Tito Shiladitya| Mohan Lal Patel| K.N. Viswanathan

Word of the day

Gelid:

extremely cold

Synonyms: arctic, frigid, glacial, icy, polar

Usage: She could not long survive the gelid waters of the lake.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/gelidpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈɡɛl.ɪd/

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

www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer | @TheDailyPioneer | instagram.com/dailypioneer/

PAPER WITH PASSION

Brace up for battle royal

With polling scheduled for February 5, Delhi is poised for a fiercely contested three-way battle

As the Election Commission officially announced the schedule for Delhi's upcoming assembly elections, the stage is set for what promises to be a hard-fought, three-cornered contest. Polling for the 70 assembly seats in Delhi will take place on February 5, with the results to be declared on February 8. This election is poised to be a high-stakes battle between the incumbent Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, each bringing its own strategies, narratives and issues to the forefront. Under the leadership of Arvind Kejriwal, AAP is looking to secure a third consecutive term in Delhi. The party, which has enjoyed overwhelming success in the last two elections, is fiercely campaigning for a 'hat-trick.' Kejriwal, whose party has transformed the political landscape of Delhi since its formation in 2012, is betting on his track record of governance and what he calls the 'politics of work.' AAP's focus remains on welfare programmes such as free electricity, water and healthcare, while the party claims its tenure has been marked by development and transparency. With the slogan 'Phir Jayenge Kejriwal', AAP has launched a campaign centred around a positive vision for the future, contrasting its achievements with the BJP's focus on divisive politics. However, AAP's victory is far from assured. Despite its dominance in the previous two elections, the party now faces mounting challenges. AAP has been dogged by corruption allegations, a point of attack that the BJP has effectively capitalised on. For the BJP, this election is a do-or-die contest. The party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has mounted an aggressive campaign aimed at ousting Kejriwal and the AAP from power. The BJP's central theme revolves around anti-incumbency, accusing AAP of corruption and failing to address the capital's development needs. Prime Minister Modi, at the forefront of the BJP's attack, has called the AAP government an 'AAP-da' (disaster) and criticised its inability to offer a vision for Delhi's growth. Modi's rhetoric positions the BJP as the party of national progress, while framing Kejriwal's leadership as an obstacle to Delhi's future. The BJP's strategy is twofold: discredit the AAP's governance while appealing to voters' desire for change. The Congress, once the dominant force in Delhi, is now a distant third. After losing power in the capital in 2013, the party has been trying to rebuild its political base, which has been severely eroded by both AAP and BJP. However, this time the party is determined to make its presence felt in the elections. Given the deepening polarisation, high stakes and aggressive strategies on all sides, the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections are shaping up to be a politically charged, hard-fought, and closely contested battle. Voters will have to choose between a legacy of governance under AAP, a vision for change from the BJP, and the prospect of stability from the Congress, making this election one of the most bitterly fought yet interesting to the core.

Donald Trump's H-1B dilemma

As President-elect Donald Trump prepares for his second term, the debate over H-1B visas for skilled foreign workers is heating up

As the US President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office on January 20, he faces a unique challenge. The issue of immigration and the H-1B visa has become a contentious point among the two key groups. He is trying to satisfy the conflicting interests of the billionaire tech community, who heavily fund his campaigns, and his 'America First' base. Trump's recent favourable statements on H-1B visas for foreign skilled workers have sparked renewed discussions on the future of this critical programme. The New York Post quoted Trump, "I've always liked the visas. I have always been in favour of the visas."

That's why we have them," He added: "I have many H-1B visas on my properties. I've been a believer in H-1B visas. I have used it many times. It's a great program."

Trump admitted, Trump has backed Elon Musk and his other wealthy funders from Silicon Valley (South Africa-born Musk had an H1B visa himself). While tech leaders want a liberal H-1B visa regime, 'America First' hardliners wish for stricter restrictions on immigration at all levels. In his first term, Trump prioritised protecting American citizens' interests, which had significant implications on the H-1B visas. 'America First' advocates argue that H-1B visas take jobs away from American workers. The looming question is, will the Trump's second term will prioritise American workers' jobs, or it could revert to the traditional Republican belief that immigration primarily benefits employers. Debates arose over H-1B visas following Trump's appointment of India-born Sriram Krishnan as his advisor on artificial intelligence. It caused divisions within Trump's team—opponents of the H-1B visa claim 2023, the US approved just over 386,000 H-1B applications. For the fiscal year 2024, there were 758,994 eligible registrations, an increase from 474,421 in 2023. Most approved applicants work in



majorly beneficial for employees. Influential supporters like Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy argue that H-1B visas are crucial for addressing the US engineers shortage. Musk, who built his empire, and Vivek Ramaswamy have strongly supported the program. Musk expressed his readiness to go to war over it. They highlight a significant skills gap in the US labour market, particularly in STEM fields.

What is an H-1B visa, and why is there such controversy surrounding it? Would India suffer if H-1B visas were eliminated? The visa system for skilled workers from other countries was introduced in 1990 by President Bush to work legally in the US. The visa is for three years. Applicants must have a job lined up with a US-based sponsoring company or institution. Since 2004, the United States has limited the number of new H-1B visas to 85,000 yearly.

This cap includes 20,000 visas for international students with advanced degrees from US universities. In the fiscal year 2023, the US approved just over 386,000 H-1B applications. For the fiscal year 2024, there were 758,994 eligible registrations, an increase from 474,421 in 2023. Most approved applicants work in

science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The issue is more than just an economic concern; new developments in artificial intelligence and advanced computing technology make it vital for US defence and national security. India receives approximately 72 per cent of H-1B visas, while Chinese citizens account for around 12 per cent. Eliminating country-specific caps could increase job opportunities for Indians in the United States. It is a significant concern for many prospective applicants. Major employers in the tech industry, including Indian companies like Infosys, TCS, HCL, and Wipro, represent 35 per cent of the top 10 beneficiaries of H-1B visas. Beginning with FY 2025, USCIS changed from an employer-based to a beneficiary-centric registration system, following the agency's 'serious concerns' noted after the FY 2024 registration period. Amazon, the largest H-1B sponsor, saw a steep decline in approvals, dropping from over 11,000 in 2023 to just above 9,000 in 2024. Major US companies, including tech giants like Amazon and Google, are significantly scaling back their sponsorship of H-1B visas. Indian IT firms, including Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), also recorded substantial reductions. Not everyone wants to get rid of the visa system. According to the American Enterprise Institute and the Partnership for a New American Economy, increasing the H-1B visa cap could generate 1.3 million new jobs. It would contribute approximately \$158 billion to the US GDP by 2045. H-1B visa holders often add to the workforce instead of taking jobs from US workers. Trump's recent statement about H-1B visas has given hope to many visa seekers, especially Indians. He stated that the US needs skilled and intelligent people and promised more job opportunities. It provides a positive outlook for H-1B visas. H-1B visa holders often complement, rather than compete with, US workers. Now many H-1B visa seekers are hopeful after Trump has sided with Musk. He claimed that there was a need for skilled and intelligent workers. His promise of unprecedented job opportunities offers a positive outlook for those seeking H-1B visas. The Indian government closely monitors any backlash against Indian H-1B visa holders in the US.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views expressed are personal)

MAJOR US COMPANIES, INCLUDING TECH GIANTS LIKE AMAZON AND GOOGLE, ARE SIGNIFICANTLY SCALING BACK THEIR SPONSORSHIP OF H-1B VISAS. INDIAN IT FIRMS, INCLUDING INFOSYS AND TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES (TCS), ALSO RECORDED SUBSTANTIAL REDUCTIONS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SUPERSTAR CULTURE HURTS TEAM INDIA

Madam — No kudos is enough for Harbhajan Singh for boldly opposing the 'superstar culture' revolving around the 'holy cows' of Indian cricket. Irfan Pathan has also done the same and also questioned the place of Virat Kohli in the team. Not only has Kohli aggregated merely 190 runs in his nine innings in the just-concluded Indo-Australia Test series, but he has averaged less than 30 over the last five years! Yet Kohli gets not only allowed to dominate in the team; a deluge of silly excuses gets bizarrely served on the lines of 'Form/Temporary Class Permanent'; 'A century just an innings away'; and 'Stop criticising; runs will come!' And to render a damn lie to 'ultimate truth' through constant repetition, some former stars have started shouting, "Kohli has still 4-5 years of glorious cricket in him!" But if one is not any 'superstar', we get Wriddhiman Saha! So even after saving India from an imminent defeat in the Kanpur Test against New Zealand, that too by overcoming the unbearable pain of a stiff neck, Saha (then reigning as the world's best wicketkeeper) was clearly conveyed publicly, even when the Test was still on, that he is not in the team's 'scheme of things'! So in this biased, prejudiced setup, it is highly natural that this 'gallant show' of failures is sure to go on unless the 'superstar' culture is made to see its immediate end!

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

JUSTIN TRUDEAU QUITS

Madam — The editorial 'Trudeau steps down' (Jan 8) highlights the domestic political reasons, economic failure and discontent in his own Liberal party for his resignation. In fact, Justin Trudeau scripted his own exit. His diplomatic blunders are also potential reasons for his resignation. He unnecessarily antagonised India for gaining Sikh support in elections without realising that the Khalistani movement is a secessionist and a hostile agitation that has the least support in India. He admitted with no proof of the involvement of

Cashless treatment for road accident victims



As per the report titled "National Strategy for Prevention of Unintentional Injury," there were 430,504 deaths from unintentional injuries and 170,924 deaths due to intentional injuries in India. Despite efforts to improve road safety, India continues to grapple with a high number of fatalities due to road traffic injuries. It is unfortunate. The government of India, in line with its commitment to reduce fatalities, launched a pilot programme in Chandigarh in March 2024 to provide cashless treatment to the victims of road accidents caused by the use of motor vehicles.

Indian agencies, yet he continued to blame India for the Nijjar murder case and promote and protect the extremist Pannu. His open support for Khalistani extremist elements eroded his credibility worldwide, as the Indian diaspora, including Sikh brethren, are peacefully living on all the continents, and only a few in Canada support Khalistan.

Trudeau gambled in vain. India observed utmost diplomatic restraint against Trudeau's anti-India statements on the Khalistani extremists. It is true that no extremist or terrorist group dares to surge without government support, as it needs media, judiciary, police, and diplomatic support and funding for its secessionist, hatred, divisive, and violent activities. Canada provided all these facilities to the Khalistani extremists. Now the Trudeau tenure is over, the Khalistani extremists may not have a favourable time in Canada, and all false allegations against India in the Nijjar murder case will meet a logical end, and hardcore elements like Pannu will not be supported by the state. The Trudeau exit should be a lesson to

those foreign leaders who are inciting and supporting anti-national organisations in India.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

SALARY INCREMENTS DELAYED

Madam — Economic instability and the tendency of customers to reduce expenses have compelled many IT companies to postpone salary increments. This step by reputed firms like Infosys and TCS Mindtree is an effort to maintain financial balance, but its long-term impact could be severe. A blow to employees' morale may lead to a decline in their creativity and efficiency. Additionally, measures like layoffs and reduction in workdays could create insecurity among the workforce. It is essential for companies to take balanced decisions that ensure financial stability while considering the human aspect, paving the way for holistic growth.

R K Jain | Barwani

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

PICTALK



A man and children perform for ahrs at Sagar Island on a foggy winter morning, in South 24 Parganas

PTI

Influencer marketing is making a big impact on India's small towns

Influencer marketing, once seen as an urban phenomenon, is now making waves in India's small towns and rural areas

Influencer marketing is no longer just a big-city thing in India. It has taken even the country's small towns and rural areas. The sole reason behind this shift is the recent surge in regional content creators, who connect deeply with local audiences by speaking their language, both literally and culturally.

The rise in regional content A regional revolution is on the cards for India's digital landscape. The share of regional language consumption on OTT platforms alone is estimated to go beyond 50-50 per cent by 2025, leaving Hindi content behind. This is to say, India's appetite for content in native languages is growing aggressively, laying down a strong foundation for regional influencers to thrive.

Brands tapping into 'Bharat' Brands seem to acknowledge this shift and have begun increasingly collaborating with regional influencers to penetrate non-metro markets. There's no argument over how crucial influencer marketing has become for



brands, with 75 per cent of brands considering it a part of their marketing strategy. Partnering with local creators gives an edge to brands in delivering messages that resonate with regional audiences and build engagement and trust.

Enter micro & nano influencers Brands are going big on micro and nano influencers, given their unmatched effectiveness in these markets. Their content is more relatable and trustworthy to local audiences. Notably, 47 per cent of brands prefer collaborating with micro and nano influencers for cost-effective campaigns and better engagement.

Economic opportunities for regional creators The creator economy is ris-

ing rapidly. The market size is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 22 per cent from 2023 to 2030. This growth rate is proof of the plethora of opportunities that lie for regional creators, enabling them to monetise their content while contributing to the local economy. Despite the promising growth, challenges remain. Many creators in smaller towns may need more access to high-quality production resources or brand partnerships. However, as the digital infrastructure improves, regional influencers will continue to thrive, reshaping content creation and broadening its reach across the nation.

marketing ecosystem.

By tapping into local languages and cultures, these influencers are not only taking brand messages to their target audience but also democratising content creation across the nation. The rise of regional content creators is transforming India's influencer marketing landscape. By connecting with local audiences in their native languages and cultures, these influencers are expanding the reach of brands to non-metro markets. As regional content consumption grows, brands are increasingly partnering with micro and nano influencers to achieve cost-effective, relatable, and trustworthy engagement.

The growing creator economy offers significant economic opportunities, despite challenges like limited access to production resources. As digital infrastructure improves, regional influencers will continue to thrive, reshaping content creation and broadening its reach across the nation. (The writer is Founder and CEO iCubexWire; views expressed are personal)



SAHIL CHOPRA



@ExpressExplained

#ExpressExplained

If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

Before HC: soapstone mining & land-subsidence in Bageshwar

AISHWARYA RAJ
DEHRADUN, JANUARY 8

THE UTTARAKHAND High Court on Monday pulled up the government for unregulated soapstone mining in Bageshwar, a district which currently has more than 160 mines.

The Uttarakhand HC took suo motu cognizance of a report published on November 7, 2024 that stated that due to "rampant unregulated mining of soapstone in certain villages of Tehsil Kanda in Bageshwar, poor residents of those villages are living in constant threat of natural calamity".

EXPLAINED ENVIRONMENT

The HC appointed commissioners to visit these sites and submit a report. After this report was submitted on Monday, a Bench of Justice G Narendran and Manoj Kumar Tiwari observed that its findings were "not merely alarming, but also shocking".

Soapstone is a metamorphic rock made of talc, a naturally occurring mineral, and is used in the construction of countertops, sinks, hearths, and for sculptures. Talc is used in cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and other industries. According to the Indian Bureau of Mines, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand have the largest soapstone reserves in India.

Environmental damage

Land subsidence is a major concern across Uttarakhand. The issue made national news in 2022 after cracks appeared in many roads and houses in Joshimath. Authorities declared the area as a landslide and subsidence-hit zone.

According to the United States' National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), subsidence is the "sinking of the ground because of underground material movement". This can happen due to a host of



A man points to cracks on the walls of his home in Bageshwar. Express

reasons, anthropogenic or otherwise. These include mining activities, removal of water/oil, soil erosion, soil compaction, and earthquakes. The report to the HC states that mining op-

erations in the lower parts of the slopes has led to the loss of their structural integrity, and increased the vulnerability to mass movement. "In all regions where land subsidence is occurring, the mines are located on the lower slopes or at bottom of the terrain, directly impacting the stability of upper slope areas where villages are situated," the report says.

This is more so because the soil in the region is loamy and loose, and thus highly prone to erosion and destabilisation, particularly during the monsoon.

The report points to a lack of green belts and retaining walls around the mine boundaries, coupled with a dearth of safety protocols such as buffer zones, slope monitoring, and protective structures—all of which continue to accelerate erosion. The report also found mining and related activities to be responsible for water scarcity, and waste and air pollution.

Cultural concerns

The adverse consequences of unmiti-

gated soapstone mining is evident in how the region's traditional houses — Kumaoni bhukhis — have fared in recent times.

These traditional structures have demonstrated remarkable resilience over generations, even in the most seismically active zones, with no recorded evidence of widespread structural failure due to quakes. But not any more. Land subsidence and downward mass movement has shifted and damaged the foundation of many bhukhis, the report found.

According to a report by the regional office of the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change submitted to the National Green Tribunal in 2024, the Kanda tehsil is also culturally significant with a strong tradition of folk music, dance, and handicrafts.

The Kalika Temple in Kanda, located in the Bageshwar district of Uttarakhand, is a significant religious site believed to have been established in the 10th century. It is known for its historical and cultural importance, particularly in the context of local beliefs regarding

the protection against malevolent forces," the MoEF report said. Due to land subsidence, cracks have emerged in the temple floors.

Authorities in the dock

The report submitted to the Uttarakhand HC said that the administration was complicit in the matter. "The usage of heavy earth-moving equipment in mining operations without defined policy limits can lead to various negative consequences," the report said.

The report said that the sub-district magistrate was allegedly trying to "suppress the voice of the villagers", and interfered in their interaction with the commissioners. It also alleged that revenue officials were in the know about the encroachment of Van Panchayat lands and the illegal felling of trees for mining, and that the district administration and the mining department was hand-in-glove with mine owners.

The Bench has scheduled the next hearing for Thursday.

EXPLAINED CLIMATE

HOW THE POLAR VORTEX CAUSED A MASSIVE WINTER STORM IN THE US

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 8

THE UNITED STATES and Canada were hit with a massive winter storm over the weekend, leading to mass school closures, dangerous road conditions, and power cuts. At least five people died in the storm, which impacted some 60 million in 30 US states, and has sent temperatures plummeting across much of the continent.

Causing this extreme weather is the southward expansion of the polar vortex.

What is the polar vortex? When does it cause extreme cold?

The polar vortex is a large area of low pressure and cold air surrounding both of Earth's poles. The term "vortex" refers to the counterclockwise flow of air that helps keep the colder air near the poles.

North America, parts of Europe, and Asia experience chilly winds from the polar vortex over the North Pole weakens, and moves from its usual position. "As this system weakens, some of the cold, Arctic air can be pushed off and migrate south, bringing plenty of cold air with it. Areas as far south as Florida may experience Arctic weather as a result," according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) website.

That happens because when the polar vortex is strong and stable, it keeps the jet stream travelling around the planet in a circular path. The jet stream is a narrow band of strong wind in the upper levels of the atmosphere which plays a key role in keeping cold air north and warm air south. "Without that strong low-pressure system, the jet stream does not have enough force to maintain its usual path. It becomes wavy and rambling. When high-pressure systems get in its way, a collection of cold air pushes south, along with the rest of the polar vortex system," the report added.



A person operating a snowplow in Sooris, Prince Edward Island, Canada on Monday. Reuters

Is climate change impacting the polar vortex?

Scientists are still researching the precise impact of climate change on the polar vortex, and if rising temperatures are making the low-pressure system buckle more frequently.

Some researchers believe that since the poles are getting warmer at a faster rate than the rest of the Earth, the polar vortex and jet stream are becoming weaker. Warmer temperatures make it easier for the polar vortex and jet stream to get disrupted.

"It makes sense that the polar vortex tends not to be as strong due to global warming because the planet isn't warming uniformly. It's warming more at the pole, overall decreasing the strength of the polar vortex and the jet stream and making it more susceptible to being dislodged and sent our way," Steven Decker, the director of the Meteorology Undergraduate Program at Rutgers University, said last February in a press statement.

DEEPTIMATI TIWARI
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 8

A POLICE vehicle was blown up in Bijapur by suspected Maoists, killing the driver and eight District Reserve Guards (DRG) of the Chhattisgarh Police on Monday. They were returning after an encounter in Abujmad, where five alleged Maoists were gunned down, and a DRG was killed.

A DRG vehicle had been similarly blown up on April 26, 2023, killing 10 people in the Maoist stronghold of Dantewada.

Between these two attacks, security forces have pushed Maoists hard in their strongholds — 217 alleged Naxal fighters were killed last year. Monday's attack in the forests of Kutru is the Maoists' first major retaliation in more than one-and-a-half years.

How do security forces seek to ensure their safety in Maoist-affected areas?

In the dense jungles of Central India, facing an enemy which engages in guerrilla warfare, avoiding casualties remains a challenge for security forces. That said, there are well-laid-out standard operating procedures (SOPs) to minimise losses. In most cases, from the 2010 Chintalnar massacre to the 2023 Dantewada ambush, major or minor errors in following these SOPs have led to setbacks for the forces.

The general rules to be followed — the SOPs are regularly revised, and specifics can vary from place to place — include:

- Avoiding movement in vehicles as much as possible;
- Keeping movements unpredictable, for instance, not returning from an operation by the same road, and maintaining secrecy about movement;
- Making most movements cross-country either by foot or on bikes;
- Sending trackers and Road Opening Parties (ROP) ahead of vehicular movement;
- Using civilian vehicles for vehicular movement; and
- Being alert to any signs of Maoist movement at all times.

Apart from this, having a robust local intelligence network, and the support of technical intelligence and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) surveillance is helpful.

What kinds of errors lead to setbacks for the forces like the one on Monday?

Although security establishment officials say that the challenges of the jungle terrain



Security personnel at the site of the IED attack in Bijapur on Monday. The explosion left a massive crater in the ground. PTI

mean that casualties can occur even if all SOPs are followed, in most cases, the failure to adhere to some general thumb rules has led to forces walking into an ambush.

In the 2010 Chintalnar massacre, for instance, a huge contingent of CRPF soldiers chose to return by the same route they took for an operation in Dantewada. The Maoists had set up an ambush in the Tadmetla forests, and when the CRPF convoy arrived, they were met with Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blasts, and ballistic attacks from over 300 Naxals. Seventy-six personnel lost their lives.

The 2013 Jhiram Ghati massacre, in which a Congress party convoy on the Jagdalpur-Sukma highway came under attack from Maoists, was no different. The attack led to 27 deaths, and wiped out the entire state leadership of the Congress, including former Union Minister Vidya Charan Shukla, former state minister Mahendra Karma, and then Congress state unit chief Nand Kumar Patel. Investigations revealed the forces had failed to send an ROP to check the route for Maoists or IEDs ahead of the convoy's movement.

However, the March 2017 Bheji attack in Sukma showed that ROPs themselves are vulnerable to attacks. A CRPF ROP was targeted while it was securing a road, and 13 personnel were killed.

In 2018, nine CRPF soldiers travelling in a mine-protected vehicle were killed in an IED blast in Sukma. Following the incident, the commandant of the battalion concerned was transferred for negligence and insubordination — he had been instructed by seniors to not make movements that day, as there was credible intelligence about the presence of Maoists in the area.

The commandant, however, is said to have come under pressure from the then Sukma Superintendent of Police, who insisted on going to Palodi from Kistaram village, and sought CRPF support. Since the DRG had conducted a road opening exercise, the commandant also felt confident. It was later found that the DRG had failed to conduct the exercise on both sides of the road.

Even in the April 2023 attack in Dantewada, small mistakes led to tragic consequences. The convoy not only took the same route to return from an operation, but also failed to notice that the village en route had suddenly emptied. Some children who had put up barricades to collect donations for a function were absent when they were making the return journey. These are all tell-tale signs of Maoist presence.

Could mine-protected vehicles (MPVs) have saved lives on Monday?

Given how powerful the blast on Monday

was, it is unlikely that an MPV would have saved lives.

MPVs are designed to withstand 'pressure' IEDs that use 5-7 kg of explosives, and explode when a person or a vehicle goes over them. Maoists, however, target forces with 'trigger' IEDs, stuffed with at least 20-30 kg of explosives, and triggered manually. The latest attack reportedly used 60-70 kg of explosives.

In the 2018 Sukma attack, a 50 kg IED completely wrecked a CRPF MPV, and killed all its occupants. Such a large IED can toss even massive vehicles several feet into the air — even if the MPV remains intact after the blast, occupants can still die of concussions and neck fractures.

How do Maoists prepare for attacks?

A robust network of jan militia, mainly comprising local villagers, provide Maoists logistical support out of fear or for ideological reasons. The jan militia are also a great intelligence source on the movement of security forces.

Maoists are known to rig roads in their strongholds with IEDs. In many cases, these are laid underground before the roads are even metalled, and can be triggered months later. IEDs can also be quickly laid under a road by digging foxholes. The wires from these IEDs at times run up to hundreds of metres inside the jungles.

Police sources said the nature of the latest operation suggests the Maoists had good knowledge of the movement of the forces. The Maoists are suspected to have simply waited in the jungles for the DRG convoy to arrive, and triggered an IED planted several months ago. The ROP sent ahead of the movement clearly missed the wires.

What makes Abujmad an enduring stronghold of the CPI(Maoist)?

The hills and forests of Abujmad sprawl over an area of about 4,000 sq km in the Bastar region of southern Chhattisgarh, mainly covering the districts of Nayanpur, Bijapur, and Dantewada.

The difficult terrain, the absence of road infrastructure and state administration, and the presence of armed rebels have ensured that 90% of this area — bigger than the state of Goa — remains unsurveyed by the government.

These jungles, including parts of the Indraprastha park in Bijapur district, are used both as a safe haven and a transit corridor by Maoists to travel between Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Odisha via Chhattisgarh's Sukma district.

Drishti IAS

IAS GS Foundation Course

Online Batch | Live Online | 100% English Lecturing | 100% English Medium

City	Batch	Start Date	Admission Open
Delhi	2 months	10 Jan 2025	Admission Open
Mumbai	10 months	10 Jan 2025	Admission Open
Jalpur	10 months	10 Jan 2025	Admission Open
Prayagraj	10 months	10 Jan 2025	Admission Open

87501 87501

Britain's child 'grooming' scandal in which Elon Musk has blamed PM Starmer

YASHEE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 8

BRITAIN'S PRIME MINISTER Keir Starmer this week responded to criticism that as Director of Public Prosecutions from 2008-13, he had failed to go after gangs that sexually exploited children.

Starmer has faced days of abuse on X (formerly Twitter) over the child grooming scandal that surfaced in the mid-2000s, in which men, many of British Pakistani heritage, were alleged to have systematically raped and trafficked girls as young as 11.

The charge against Starmer has been led by the billionaire owner of X, Elon Musk, a close aide of United States President-elect Donald Trump, who has used his platform's megaphone to launch attacks on several European leaders.

On Monday, Starmer said, "When I was chief prosecutor for five years, I tackled that (the grooming cases) head-on, and that's why I reopened cases that had been

closed... I brought the first major prosecution of an Asian grooming gang..."

What is this scandal, and why is it in the news now?

'Grooming' of a child

Grooming is when an adult establishes a relationship of trust with a minor — often targeting vulnerable children — with the intention of initiating an exploitative sexual relationship.

Offenders typically befriend the child through gifts, attention, and considerate behaviour, and then exploit the resultant relationship to coerce or frighten the child into sexual contact.

The cases in the UK

Several instances of gangs exploiting children were reported in British towns such as Rotherham, Bristol, Cornwall, and Oxford from the late 1990s to about 2012. In many of these cases, the offenders were of Pakistani origin.

The gangs often preyed on girls in care homes, or from broken families. Thousands

of girls were befriended, plied with alcohol and drugs, and gang-raped and trafficked.

Some of the survivors have written accounts of their ordeal. An excerpt from one such book, *Prey: My Fight to Survive the Halifax Grooming Gang*, reads: "The pick-ups (by the grooming gang) had become so frequent that I barely spent any time in the house at all. The guys would come by, put me in a car and take me away for the night, or longer. Sometimes I would disappear for days at a time. The booze and all the drugs wiped me out for hours."

The girl, Cassie Pike, was only 11 at the time, with a mother dying of Huntington's disease, a degenerative disease of the brain cells, and a violent, substance-addict father.

Over the years, British police have faced criticism for not joining the dots and reading the pattern when various individual cases were reported to them, for not taking victims seriously, and for allegedly going slow on investigations because they did not want to ignite sectarian tensions and were

afraid of being seen as racist.

However, no evidence of a systematic cover-up has been found.

A recent report by the BBC recalled, "An inquiry into abuse in Rotherham found 1,400 children had been sexually abused over a 16-year period, predominantly by British Pakistani men. An investigation in Telford found that up to 1,000 girls had been abused over 40 years — and that some cases had not been investigated because of 'nervousness about race'."

The current context

In October last year, Safeguarding Minister Jess Phillips rejected a request for a national inquiry into the sexual exploitation cases in Oldham, saying that an ongoing local inquiry should be allowed to proceed.

The issue began gaining steam on social media, and blew up after Musk used it to target Phillips and Starmer. Since then, politicians from the opposition Conservative and Reform UK parties have

also repeatedly raised the matter.

Phillips told the BBC's Newsnight program on Tuesday that "disinformation" spread by Musk — he has called Phillips a "rape genocide apologist" — was "endangering" her, but "I'm no stranger to people who don't know what they're talking about trying to silence women like me".

The far right in Europe and the US has used the cases to push several racist narratives while arguing against immigration.

Inquiry into cases

The report of a national inquiry held over seven years was published in 2022. It made 20 recommendations, which are yet to be implemented.

British academic Alexis Jay, who headed that inquiry, has said that the victims of the cases "want action", and not another inquiry.

The recommendations include setting up a national child protection authority; stricter rules around who can work with vulnerable children; making not reporting child sex abuse an offence (which the gov-

ernment announced on Monday it will do this year); making grooming an aggravating factor when sentencing a child abuse convict; and improve the information gathering on children's exploitation.

The government has said it is working on the last two recommendations.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) that Starmer headed between 2008 and 2013 has admitted in the past that it could have done more to help the grooming victims. But Starmer's role has been lauded by many.

The *Financial Times* quoted Nazir Afzal, a former chief prosecutor for north-west England, as saying, "Keir left in 2013, the CPS having gone from being dire at doing sex-abuse cases to having the highest conviction rate in our history. That would not have been possible without the support, resources and the protection I was given by Keir, at a time when it would have been easier to give up."

In 2013, Starmer improved CPS guidelines on dealing with child victims of sexual abuse.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of migrant expulsions by Russia in 2024

80,000 More than eighty thousand migrants in 2024 were expelled by Russia, nearly twice as many as in 2023, as the country toughens migration policies after last year's Crocus City Hall terror attack. **APF**

Likely investment for Bihar's integrated manufacturing city

16,000 In ₹ crore. The Bihar government has formed the Bihar Integrated Manufacturing City Gaya Ltd to spearhead the integrated manufacturing cluster project in Gaya, which is likely to attract ₹16,000 crore of investment. **PII**

People who have signed up for coverage under Obamacare

24 million. A record 24 million people have signed up for insurance coverage through the Affordable Care Act, former President Barack Obama's landmark health legislation, as the programme awaits an uncertain future under a Republican-controlled White House. **PII**

Coverage of hybrid crop varieties in the total cultivated area

8 In per cent. India needs to accelerate the adoption of hybrid technology in pulses and oilseeds to address production deficits, while acknowledging the challenges faced by farmers in implementing these advanced farm practices, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister P. K. Mishra said. **PII**

The increase in Guyana's oil exports last year

54 In per cent. Guyana's oil exports rose 54% last year to some 5,82,000 barrels per day, fuelled by European refiners' demand for easy-to-process sweet crudes to replace some West Asian grades, according to data from financial firm LSEG. **REUTERS**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Follow us [facebook.com/thehindu](https://www.facebook.com/thehindu) twitter.com/the_hindu [instagram.com/the_hindu](https://www.instagram.com/the_hindu)

Why is deciphering the Indus script important?

Why has Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin announced a \$1-million prize to anyone who deciphers the scripts of the Indus Valley Civilisation? Has any work in recent times pointed to the possible cultural contact between the Indus Valley and south India?

EXPLAINER

T. Ramakrishnan

The story so far:

In January 5, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin announced a \$1-million prize for experts or organisations in the event of their success in deciphering the scripts of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC). He made the announcement at the inauguration of an international conference to mark the centenary of the IVC discovery, which was disclosed through an article published in September 1924 by the then Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) John Marshall. That the Chief Minister of a southern State in the country had made such an announcement was due to the possible Dravidian connection with the IVC. Notwithstanding the political dimension of the Dravidian concept, historians, archaeologists and linguistic scholars have been debating over the Dravidian hypothesis ever since the publication of Marshall's article.

How do scholars define the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC)?

The IVC, also called the Harappan Civilisation, spanned 2,000 sites across 1.5 million sq. km. in the territories of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan during the Bronze Age (3000-1500 BCE). It had a wider geographical area than the combined areas of its contemporary civilisations – Egyptian and Mesopotamian. Talking of the IVC's importance, Pakistan's veteran archaeologist Ahmad Hasan Dani, in the December 1973 issue of *UNESCO Courier*, observed that the Valley lies across "ancient migration routes from central and western Asia to India." The IVC introduced urban life for the first time in the valley when similar civilisations had developed on the banks of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates valleys.

Why is deciphering the Indus script important?

Other scripts encountered in the contemporary Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations had been deciphered in a more satisfying manner. But, the non-decipherment of the Indus script prevents scholars from providing a complete picture of Harappan culture, which is why scholars tend to call it a "mystery script."

What is the Dravidian hypothesis?

The Indus script carries proto-Dravidian references – this is the position of scholars including Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Father Heras, Yri Valentimovich Knorozov, Walter Fairbriss, Iravatham Mahadevan, Kamil Zvelebil, Krishnamurti and Asko Parpola – which can be found in the latest study on Indus signs and graffiti marks of Tamil Nadu.

The IVC "is non-Aryan and pre-Aryan," argued Mahadevan in his article published in *The Hindu* on May 3, 2009. Attributing "solid archaeological and linguistic evidence," the scholar, who passed away in 2018, emphasised that "the Indus script is a writing system encoding the language of the region (most probably Dravidian)". Ruling out Aryan authorship of the civilisation, he hastened to add that this did not automatically make it Dravidian. Yet, "there is substantial linguistic evidence favouring the Dravidian theory: the survival of Brahui, a Dravidian language in the Indus region; the presence of Dravidian



Decoding language: Seals with the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Buried secrets: Different structures are exposed in a trench at Rakhigarhi, a Harappan site in Haryana, in 2022. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

loanwords in the Rigveda; the substratum influence of Dravidian on the Prakrit dialects; and computer analysis of the Indus texts revealing that the language had only suffixes (like Dravidian), and no prefixes (as in Indo-Aryan) or infixes (as in Munda)," Mahadevan wrote. As the Dravidian models of decipherment had still little in common except certain basic features, "it is obvious that much more work remains to be done before a generally acceptable solution emerges," according to him.

What does the latest work have to offer?

Commissioned by the Tamil Nadu government's State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA), the study, which is morphological in nature, reveals that nearly 90% of the graffiti marks found during excavations at archaeological sites in the State have parallels to those found in the Indus Valley Civilisation. "...the exact shapes and their variants found both independently and in composite forms vividly indicate that they were not accidental. It is believed that the Indus script or signs would have not disappeared without any trace[s], rather they would have transformed or evolved into different forms," concludes K. Rajan, formerly professor with Pondicherry University and academic-research advisor to the TNSDA, and R. Sivanantham, joint director in the department, who carried out the study.

Defining the terms "graffiti" and "script," the duo, in a monograph, explain that all the recognisable scratches engraved on the ceramics in south India and, to some extent, on Indus ceramics

are identified as graffiti. The ones engraved on seals and other metal objects of the IVC are designated as script. Even though both were written by the same people, they were differentiated and documented as script and graffiti. "However, the extensive comparative study of graffiti marks and Indus scripts evidently suggests that both are undeciphered signs," the two scholars observe.

Which project has preceded the work?

The findings of a two-year-long project of the TNSDA, called "Documentation and Digitisation of Graffiti and Tamil (Tamil-Brahmi) Inscribed Potsherds of Tamil Nadu", have formed the basis of the monograph.

Aimed at documenting, compiling and analysing the graffiti bearing potsherds and Tamil inscribed potsherds unearthed in archaeological excavations of the State, the project, launched during 2022-23, seeks to compare those graffiti marks with the Indus script to explore whether any cultural relationship existed between the two.

The datasets from the project suggested that 15,184 graffiti-bearing potsherds were reported from 140 sites in the State and nearly 14,165 sherds were documented. Of them, nearly 2,107 signs had been morphologically categorised within a group of 42 base signs, 544 variants and 1,521 composites. Any additional strokes added to the base signs were considered variants of the base signs while a group of signs containing more than one base sign was regarded as a composite sign. "Several signs

encountered in Tamil Nadu had exact parallels in the Indus scripts. Likewise, some signs had near parallels. These signs probably evolved from the base signs. Out of 42 base signs and their variants, nearly 60% of them found their parallels in the Indus script," the document explains.

How has the question of cultural contact between the IVC and south India been explored by the work?

The monograph talks of a "possibility of cultural exchanges." Even though the occurrences of identical graffiti marks in south India suggest a kind of cultural contact, one needs more material evidence and tangible data to support or strengthen the view.

The recent chronometric dates indicate that when the Indus Valley experienced the Copper Age, south India experienced the Iron Age. "In this sense, the Iron Age of South [sic] India and the Copper Age of Indus are contemporary." If that is so, there is a "possibility of cultural exchanges either through direct or intermediate zones," the authors of the monograph point out.

The document goes on to state that the occurrence of a large number of carnelian and agate beads and high-tin bronze objects, particularly from Iron Age graves, give a clue about the contact, as carnelian, agate, copper and tin have to come from the north or elsewhere. Besides semiprecious stones and copper, a few more cultural items are required to prove the existence of contact "convincingly," the authors state, calling for future explorations, excavations, scientific investigations and historical linguistic analysis.

THE GIST

The IVC, also called the Harappan Civilisation, spanned 2,000 sites across 1.5 million sq. km. in the territories of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan during the Bronze Age (3000-1500 BCE). It had a wider geographical area than the combined areas of its contemporary civilisations – Egyptian and Mesopotamian.

Commissioned by the Tamil Nadu government's State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA), a study, which is morphological in nature, reveals that nearly 90% of the graffiti marks found during excavations at archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu have parallels to those found in the Indus Valley Civilisation.

The document goes on to state that the occurrence of a large number of carnelian and agate beads and high-tin bronze objects, particularly from Iron Age graves, give a clue about the contact, as carnelian, agate, copper and tin have to come from the north or elsewhere.

China's long game in Africa

In 2022, when China established its first political training school in Tanzania, the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School, its motivation was unambiguous. With an estimated cost of \$40 million, the school was a tool for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to shape the future political leaders of Africa following the Chinese principles of governance.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the 120 official members of the school's first cohort were from countries with long-standing historical ties to China. These countries continue to be ruled by the liberation parties that came into power through their pre-independence struggles. The countries include South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania. In fact, these six countries, along with Botswana, are also part of the Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa, an informal coalition meant to help one another address governance challenges and stay in power.

Clearly, the move by China to establish the political school is meant to strengthen its relationship and increase its influence among the policymakers of these countries. The political school is another platform for the leaders of these ruling liberation parties to enhance their governance capabilities through shared educational resources. This is also an example of China's broader strategy to shape Africa's political landscape by promoting its governance model based on the centrality of the ruling party and its control over the state.

Game of influence

There are several ways for a country to assert its influence. One way could be mediation or fostering dialogue among the concerned parties to facilitate positive conversations. This also helps in building a strong global image for the mediator country. Historically, the U.S. has been the most influential international



Samir Bhattacharya

Associate Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation

mediator. However, China is increasingly asserting itself in this role, as seen in its involvement in resolving the Saudi Arabia-Iran and Niger-Benin disputes. As China seeks to establish an alternative world order — often complementary to, and sometimes in contrast with, the Western-led global system — it recognises the importance of Africa's support in various multilateral forums. Africa, with 55 countries, is a significant player in international relations. And so, Beijing is intensifying its efforts to build strong ties with Africa as part of its broader strategy to shift the global balance in its favour.

However, China's engagement in Africa's politics is not a recent phenomenon. Beijing has supported African independence movements, military endeavours, and governance structures. It has also helped develop African economies through investments in infrastructure and industrial projects. This historical relationship continues to be strong, as China intensifies its focus on strengthening ties with Africa's ruling parties.

'Study tours' have remained a key part of China's public diplomacy with Africa. Every year, hundreds of African officials visit China for lectures at universities, visits to provincial governments, and cultural exchanges designed to familiarise them with Chinese traditions and governance practices.

Only now has China's game plan to influence African political elites expanded through the introduction of political schools. During the 8th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2021, China acknowledged its ties to over 100 political parties across 51 African countries.

China's growing influence in Africa is evident not only in the establishment of new educational institutions but also in the deepening of its political relationships. Kenya, for example, has expressed its interest in having a leadership school that would be

financed by and modelled on the CCP's Central Party School. These efforts are accompanied by investments in infrastructure. China funded the construction of Kenya's new foreign ministry headquarters, as the two countries were celebrating 60 years of diplomatic relations.

China is not only constructing new institutions, but also refurbishing many existing ones. For instance, China funded the renovation of the Herbert Chitepo School of Ideology in Zimbabwe. Through such initiatives, it aims to establish a governance model similar to its own, based on strong, centralised party systems that offer stability and control. This highlights the effectiveness of building reciprocal relationships, particularly in countries where leadership stability and centralisation are highly valued.

Chinese diplomacy in Africa China's approach to Africa is built on decades of patient diplomacy. While the Nyerere Leadership School represents a significant milestone, it is only one piece of China's broader strategy to embed itself deeply within Africa's political fabric. China's long-term goal is to promote a Sino-centric world order in which it plays a central role in shaping global governance structures.

However, China is also mindful of potential regime changes in Africa. It knows the importance of nurturing opposition parties to safeguard its interests in case political shifts occur. By establishing political schools and cultivating bonds with ruling and opposition parties, China is ensuring that its influence is intact regardless of political transitions.

China's long game in Africa is not just about economic influence or military strength. It is also about the subtle art of diplomacy and influence. Through its strategic investments in Africa's political future, China is ensuring that it remains a key player in shaping Africa's governance structures for years to come.

A step behind Kejriwal

By playing second fiddle to Arvind Kejriwal, Atishi has sent out a clear message

STATE OF PLAY

Nikhil M. Babu
nikhil.m@thehindu.co.in



Last September, when senior Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Atishi assumed charge as Delhi Chief Minister, but sat next to an empty chair used by her predecessor Arvind Kejriwal, she sent out a clear message.

Many thought that the optics would end with this sentimental gesture and the new Chief Minister would soon get down to business. However, the first woman Chief Minister of AAP has been carefully playing second fiddle to Mr. Kejriwal. This can be seen even in her minor gestures — she walks with him but always just a small step behind, and addresses him sometimes as 'sir' or 'jyuu'.

Sources in the party say they do not want her to overshadow the AAP supremo in any way. Others say that the fact that she is a first-time MLA and was chosen to be Chief Minister over founding members of the party and three-time MLAs may also have something to do with it. "It is not completely the party's plan. A lot of what you see is her own decision. She genuinely does not want to overshadow Mr. Kejriwal," a source said.

A day after taking oath as Chief Minister, Ms. Atishi made her first major public appearance at a party event at Jantar Mantar. Her Cabinet colleague, Gopal Rai, spoke first, followed by Dilip Pandey, Manish Sisodia, and Mr. Kejriwal. All of them then stood for the national anthem and left the stage. The Chief Minister did not speak a word.

The next day, when Ms. Atishi entered office, the party's plan became all the more evi-

dent. Before she appeared for the cameras and sat on a white chair beside a larger red chair reserved for Mr. Kejriwal, reporters were told that they would not be allowed inside. Only photographers were let in. No interviews were allowed with the Chief Minister later in the day or during the first week. This was unlike the AAP's style of functioning.

Then, during the first day of the two-day session of the Delhi Assembly, Ms. Atishi and Mr. Kejriwal went to inspect roads in north Delhi. It was Mr. Kejriwal who led the visit, with Ms. Atishi following him. After the visit, the former Chief Minister addressed the media. Later that day too, while Mr. Kejriwal spoke for about 18 minutes in the Assembly, launching a scathing attack against the Central government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Ms. Atishi again remained mum. She later spoke for less than a minute to introduce amendments to a Bill. After the day's session ended, she walked behind Mr. Kejriwal and Mr. Sisodia as they left the Assembly together. She waited for them to get into their car and leave before getting into her relatively inexpensive government vehicle.

Though Ms. Atishi continues to address press conferences, it is Mr. Kejriwal who has announced many important decisions, including Cabinet ones, even though he is no

longer a part of the Cabinet.

On November 25, for instance, while addressing a press conference from the party headquarters, Mr. Kejriwal said that the Delhi Cabinet, headed by Ms. Atishi, had passed a proposal for providing pension to 80,000 more senior citizens. Speaking after him, Ms. Atishi said that 'sir' had made this possible.

The AAP's biggest announcement yet, ahead of the Assembly elections, was made on December 12. Starting the programme at the party headquarters, Ms. Atishi said, "Let us welcome our chief and beloved leader Arvind Kejriwal." She then shouted "Arvind Kejriwal!" The crowd replied, "Zindabad!" Mr. Kejriwal then proceeded to announce another Cabinet decision. This was again a departure from how the AAP government functions — Cabinet decisions have always been announced by the Chief Minister from the Secretariat and not the party headquarters.

All this shows that while Ms. Atishi will be at the helm, she will always remain a step behind Mr. Kejriwal, thus cementing his position as the undisputed leader.

It is difficult even for AAP leaders to hide this clearly thought-out strategy. During the first day of the two-day session of the Assembly on September 26, BJP MLA and the Leader of Opposition, Vijender Gupta, began his speech pointing to Ms. Atishi and Mr. Kejriwal. He said, "Chief Minister ji, Chief Minister ji, both of them are here. You can change his seat to any place (Ms. Atishi got the seat reserved for the Chief Minister, while Mr. Kejriwal was moved to seat 4D), but what difference does it make?" Many AAP leaders, including Ms. Atishi, smiled at the comment.

The Centre's share in States' revenue has surged in the last decade

The falling efficiency of States in collecting more taxes has deepened their dependency on the Centre

DATA POINT

Samreen Wani

Over the last decade, States have been relying more and more on transfers and grants from the Centre.

In the last decade (FY16 to FY25), 23-30% of the total revenue of States was collected from the Centre as transfers. However, in the 2000s and the first half of 2010, the share was 20-24%. Also, close to 65-70% of the non-tax revenue of States was collected from the Centre as grants in the last decade compared to the 2000s and the first half of the 2010s when the share was lower at 55-65%.

States have also not done enough to efficiently collect taxes to increase their own tax revenue. In addition, revenue from non-tax revenue, other than Central grants, has been diminishing.

The combination of these factors has meant that the dependency of States on Central funds has risen in recent years.

Chart 1 shows the share of States' own tax revenue, non-tax revenue, and Central transfers in their total revenue. For over a decade now, States' own tax revenue as a share of their total revenue has remained considerably below the 50% mark, while in the 2000s and in the early 2010s, it had crossed the 50% mark for many years or remained close to it. Own tax revenue of States includes money raised through stamp duty, registration fees, motor vehicle tax, and other taxes, along with the State component in Goods and Services Tax (GST), or State GST (SGST).

Moreover, the share of non-tax revenue in States' total revenue is likely to go below the 24% mark in FY25 for the first time in the past 25 years. Non-tax revenue of States includes grants from the Centre, earnings from social, fiscal, economic, and general services rendered by the States, interest receipts, and dividends/profits from

State public sector enterprises.

While the share of own tax revenue and non-tax revenue of States has reduced, the share of transfers from the Centre has increased (23-30% in the last decade compared to 20-24% in the 15 years before that). This is depicted in **Chart 1**.

Kausik K. Bhadra, PFM consultant, UNICEF, says, "While expenditure responsibilities have been rapidly spiralling, the nearly stagnant own tax revenue mobilisation impedes the States' counter-cyclical expansionary fiscal measures in a sustained manner to boost aggregate demand in the economy."

Mr. Bhadra adds that the share of own tax revenue in States' total revenue is largely driven by SGST. While SGST accounted for 15% of the States' total revenue in FY18, it currently makes up about 22%. This is shown in **Chart 2**. Consequently, the share of own tax revenue, without the contribution from SGST, has declined from 34% to 28%.

This means that not only is the share of States' own tax revenue consistently below the 50% mark, but also an increasing share of it is derived from SGST. It is important to note that the SGST is earned based on rates set by the GST Council and these rates have remained a bone of contention. In the past, Finance Ministers of many Opposition-ruled States including Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal have spoken out against the Council's decisions.

Chart 3 shows a detailed split of States' non-tax revenue. It depicts the share of grants from the Centre, earnings from services, interest receipts, and dividends/profits from State public sector enterprises in the States' non-tax revenue. Interest receipts have not exceeded 5% of non-tax revenues in the last decade compared to the 2000s and first half of 2010 when it formed 5-9% of non-tax revenue. Moreover, the share of dividends and profits garnered from State public sector enterprises has remained under 1%.

Earnings from services rendered, such as public health (social service) and power (economic service), did not cross the 30% mark in the last decade. It is only estimated to cross the mark in FY25. Compare this to the 2000s and first half of 2010 when it crossed the mark for many years.

While the share of interest receipts and earnings from services has come down, the share of grants from the Centre has increased (65-70% in the last decade compared to 55-60% in the 15 years before that). This is shown in **Chart 3**.

Charts 1, 2 and 3 when read together show that the Centre is playing a major role in the revenue earned by the States. However, it is also true that many States are not efficiently collecting taxes using avenues at their disposal.

Table 4 shows the ratio of select States' own tax revenue to its GDP. The trend shows a marked decline in this ratio in six States in particular. For Tamil Nadu, the own tax revenue to GDP ratio has gradually declined from 7.72% in FY13-15 to 6.17% in FY22-24. This has also been the case in Karnataka, Kerala, Bihar, Delhi, and Madhya Pradesh, too. While the ratio has risen in Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Odisha, and Uttarakhand, it has remained stagnant in other States.

"Various States have undertaken a number of measures to improve tax collection from stamp duty, registration fees, and motor vehicle tax. This could likely be considered inadequate and sporadic efforts since these two taxes lack a high degree of technical efficiency according to a number of studies," Mr. Bhadra says.

He adds that "the own tax revenue mobilisation efforts at the State level seems to be falling short of upholding the redistributive macroeconomic implications of tax policies."

samreen.wani@thehindu.co.in

Diminishing States' own revenues

The data for the charts were taken from the RBI's State Finances Report. It also includes The Hindu's calculations

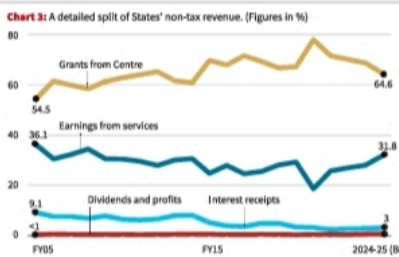
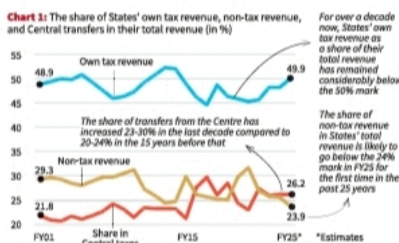


Table 4: Shows the ratio of select States' own tax revenue to their GDP (in %). FY17, FY21 and FY24 are revised estimates. FY25 is budget estimates

State	FY13-15	FY16-18	FY19-21	FY22-24
Tamil Nadu	7.72%	6.67%	6.20%	6.17%
Karnataka	7.69%	6.94%	6.27%	6.29%
Bihar	6.94%	6.25%	5.44%	5.75%
Delhi	5.71%	5.30%	4.51%	4.75%
Kerala	7.00%	6.81%	6.28%	6.70%
Madhya Pradesh	7.74%	7.01%	6.01%	6.11%

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 9, 1975

Destruction of East India Co. records: probe urged

Madras, Jan. 5: The Tamil Nadu Commissioner of Archives and Historical Research, Mr. Badrinath, has suggested to the State Government to appoint a high level committee to probe into the destruction of valuable East India Company records.

Mr. Badrinath told newsmen today that 86,208 East India Company records had been destroyed by the Tamil Nadu Archives between 1969 and 1973 though it was not done by specific authority of the State Governments. These records did not relate to Kachathivu, but certainly belonged to the crucial period between 1786 and 1828 and so they were of immense value for the historical study of South India, he said. They were important because they referred to the agricultural price, law and order situation, tenure system and the relationship between the East India Company and the Polygars, according to him.

Mr. Badrinath, who took charge as Commissioner of Archives in 1974, said as soon as the Tamil Nadu Government came to know of the destruction in the beginning of last year, it had immediately ordered that none of the old records should be destroyed in future until a clear policy had been formulated.

Explaining what he described as "senseless destruction" of public records all over India daily, Mr. Badrinath said this was not surprising in the country lacking a sound criterion to judge the value of a historical document. He said several valuable records relating to Indore State had been and were in the process of being destroyed in Madhya Pradesh. So it would be wrong to isolate what had happened at the Tamil Nadu Archives. The destruction was the work of bureaucrats, who were ignorant of the value of history, he maintained.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 9, 1925

News and notes

A Press Communique says: The Government of India have arranged that from the 1st December, 1924, the opium required for consumption in Sarawak will be sold direct to the Government of Sarawak, subject to certain subsidiary conditions. The agreement will remain in force for a period of five years and a fixed price will be paid. The number of chests of opium offered for sale by public auction in Calcutta is exclusive of any such quantity sold direct.

The EDITORIAL PAGE

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

FIGHT FOR CAPITAL

As campaign for Delhi Assembly warms up, its players must know that this election is where local is national

ON THE FACE of it, the upcoming election in Delhi — the dates for polling and counting were announced by the Election Commission Tuesday — will be a fight between the AAP, BJP and Congress. But it will be much more than just that. It may not be a full state, but the nation's capital is the site, most of all, where the local is the national. People from across the country flock to it, searching for a home or a foothold, often carrying little more than a flickering aspiration to be part of a bigger possibility, a larger whole. To its own, and to those who come to it every day and every year, Delhi is the promise of a better education and greater avenues for growth. It is a shot at more rewarding job opportunities and the precious freedom that comes from social mobility. It is this urban sprawl, with one of the highest per capita incomes, dense with institutions of education and employment, home to the country's largest and busiest metro rail system and, most of all, the city of bustling ambitions and teeming dreams that will vote for a new government on February 5. The campaign that is lifting off the ground, however, does not do justice to its setting.

So far, it seems that the AAP, India's most successful political start-up in recent times, whose spectacular trajectory was also possible only under the Delhi archlights which can make small moments large, may be on a shakier footing than it has been in the last two assembly elections, which it swept comprehensively. The BJP, which has pocketed all the Lok Sabha seats and held on to a robust vote share even though it did not translate into a healthy seat tally in the assembly, is its main contender. The Congress, having ruled Delhi for 15 years, appears to have all but lost its footing. But be it the AAP's attempts to fight the BJP on the BJP's turf by brandishing an overt religiosity, or the BJP's push to corner the AAP on the "sheesh mahal", a self-goal by a party that styled itself as a platform for the aam admi, or the effort by both to outdo each other on DBTs, the battle threatens to be narrow and backward looking.

What Delhi needs to hear from the AAP is how it plans to take forward its big ideas that seem to have stalled because it dropped the ball and/or due to its tug of war with the Centre's nominee, the L-G. It needs to present a report card of the progress made in refurbishing the mohalla clinic and government school, and an account of the AAP's next steps and how they will improve the quality of life beyond a reduced power, water bill. From the BJP, Delhi needs to hear an alternative plan for the city, and also how it will ensure the double benefits of a "double engine sarkar" after having worked to squeeze the space and powers of the Delhi sarkar in the last 10 years relentlessly. As the battle unfolds, all players must know that what they say carries a larger resonance, that it strikes sparks, far beyond their poll arena's boundaries. It's a capital's election which the nation is watching.

PRECAUTION IS KEY

HMPV is a self-defeating virus. The message to all sections of the people must be to keep vigil

THE CENTRE HAS done the right thing in asking state governments to step up surveillance for the HMPV virus. The pathogen is not new. It was first detected in the Netherlands more than 20 years ago and regularly surfaces during the winter months. In several developed countries, HMPV is the second-most frequently detected virus among infants. In India, regular laboratory tests to detect this virus are not conducted. However, studies by the ICMR and other medical research agencies indicate that it is among the common flu pathogens. Reports of increasing hospitalisation because of HMPV infections in China this year have, however, sparked concern, especially because the world has just recovered from the Covid pandemic. The Union Health Ministry has done well to allay fears. At the same time, it has advised basic precautionary measures — wearing masks, avoiding close contact with people exhibiting flu-like symptoms and washing hands regularly. It's now on state and local authorities in different parts of the country to take this information to all sections of people.

The government has also asked the more vulnerable — children under five, senior citizens and patients with chronic respiratory conditions — to be extra careful. This, too, is the right step because first time HMPV infections are usually most serious among this section of patients. Symptoms may turn severe when the infection progresses to the lower respiratory tract and aggravates the condition of patients with a history of asthma, COPD and bronchitis — chronic diseases on the rise in the country. In most cases, however, an HMPV infection is self-limiting and can be cured by addressing the symptoms, good nutrition and adequate hydration.

India has strengthened its mechanisms to monitor respiratory diseases after the Covid pandemic. In the winter of 2023, for instance, the Centre promptly alerted states in the Northeast after an influenza outbreak in parts of China. That most of the HMPV cases reported so far have been detected in hospitals indicates that disease surveillance is functioning well at the healthcare facilities in cities. However, in consonance with the WHO's protocols on respiratory infections, the country needs to apply the precautionary principle to the hilt. This requires stepping up monitoring at the district level, keeping a watch on vulnerable sections and taking real time stock of data. Most government-run healthcare facilities are part of the surveillance network for respiratory diseases. The task now is to integrate the private sector which has a more than 80 per cent share in healthcare services in the country.

FOUR LEGS GOOD

From Perry the donkey to Orangey the cat, here's to the celebrity animals who delight fans and ask only for treats and scritches

HIS ANIMATED ALTER-EGO rescued a princess, wooed and married a dragon and outwitted Rumpelstiltskin, but Perry lived a quieter life, chewing grass on a small pasture in California. The death, at age 30, of the miniature donkey who served as the inspiration for the fan- and critic-favourite character Donkey, in the Shrek film franchise, is not merely the loss of a beloved four-legged celebrity. It is a reminder of the place that animals like Perry have in the story of cinema, which has simultaneously celebrated, ignored and exploited them.

Perry, for instance, didn't earn much more than \$75 for his work in what ended up being a multimillion-dollar franchise. Of course, neither lucre nor fame matter to an animal, and in any case, this story plays in comparison to the many instances of exploitation and abuse that led to animal protection laws being put in place. Messi, the scene-stealing border collie who played Snoop in *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), fared much better, even earning a "Palm Dog" at Cannes. This fact both soothes and aggravates fans, who point to the rules that prevented him from being nominated for an Oscar (the Academy's questionable attitude towards animal performances goes all the way back to the Awards' first edition in 1929 when a dog named Rin Tin Tin was taken out of the running after he polled more votes than any of his human colleagues).

But the lack of an Oscar hardly detracts from the delights of watching an animal casually play itself on the screen, all the way from Orangey the cat who played Cat in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) to Jenny the donkey in *The Baronesse of Inishmere* (2022). In any case, no animal ever did anything for an award — no matter what proponents of dog/cat/pony shows may want to believe. They do it for treats and scritches under the chin, and a sunny place where they can chew grass peacefully.



RAJANI SINHA

THE FIRST ADVANCE GDP growth estimate was keenly awaited as there were concerns around a slowdown in domestic demand, financial market volatility and global policy uncertainty. The economy had decelerated sharply to 5.4 per cent in the second quarter which had come as a jolt and dampened sentiments. The advance estimate does indeed show a moderation, with GDP growth estimated to slow down to 6.4 per cent in 2024-25 from 8.2 per cent in 2023-24. However, the positive aspect is that growth is likely to pick up in the second half of the year — the implied growth for the second half of the year is 6.7 per cent compared to 6 per cent in the first half of the year.

Let us understand what has caused this moderation in growth. This will enable us to infer the economy's future growth trajectory. India's GDP growth after Covid has been mainly led by government capital expenditure. Private capex has been slow to pick up. However, in the current fiscal year, there was a disruption in the government's capex momentum due to several state and central elections. In the first eight months of the current fiscal year, the Centre's capex has fallen by 12 per cent, while aggregate state capex (20 large states) has fallen by 6 per cent compared to the same period last year. Further, major Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) have reported a 10.8 per cent decline in capital expenditure during the first half of the year. This is getting reflected in the GDP data, with investment (gross fixed capital formation) growth estimated to have decelerated sharply to 6.4 per cent in 2024-25, from 9 per cent the previous year. With some of the election-related uncertainty out of the way, the government capex was expected to pick up in the second half of the year. However, advance estimates show investment growth is likely to remain around the same level in the second half as in the first half. This is worrisome.

The positive part of the data is the sharp pick-up in private consumption to 7.3 per

Government has focused on capex-led recovery. It now needs to boost consumption

The positive part of the data is the sharp pick-up in private consumption to 7.3 per cent in 2024-25 from a feeble 4 per cent in the previous year. Around 55 per cent of India's GDP comes from private consumption, hence pick-up in consumption is supportive of overall growth. This year, we have seen a recovery in rural consumption, supported by healthy agri production. However, urban consumption is showing some signs of moderation. High food inflation (around 7.6 per cent) so far has been a dampener. But with food inflation likely to moderate, consumption is estimated to pick up in the coming months.

cent in 2024-25 from a feeble 4 per cent in the previous year. Around 55 per cent of India's GDP comes from private consumption, hence pick-up in consumption is supportive of overall growth. This year, we have seen a recovery in rural consumption, supported by healthy agri production. However, urban consumption is showing some signs of moderation. High food inflation (around 7.6 per cent) so far has been a dampener. But with food inflation likely to moderate, consumption is estimated to pick up in the coming months.

On the external front, goods and services exports are showing an improvement with estimated growth of 6 per cent in 2024-25 compared to 2.6 per cent in the previous year. Services exports continue to record healthy growth, while merchandise exports are also showing some signs of recovery. However, we need to remain cautious on the external front. While the US economy is recording relatively healthy growth, concerns linger for the EU and China. Moreover, with a new President in the US, there are a lot of uncertainties on the trade-policy front which will have repercussions for global trade. This is already getting reflected in the sharp volatility we are seeing in the financial markets with continued strengthening of the US dollar.

The sector-wise break-up of the data shows healthy agricultural growth, aided by a good monsoon. The services sector is also estimated to record a healthy growth of 7.2 per cent, observing some moderation from 7.6 per cent recorded in last year. The concerning aspect is the deceleration in industrial growth — from 9.5 per cent in the previous year to 6.2 per cent this year. There has been a sharp slowdown in mining and manufacturing, even as the healthy momentum has continued in the construction sector.

Nominal GDP growth has been estimated at 9.7 per cent for this year, lower than the Union budget's expectation of 10.5 per cent. However, it will not be a challenge for the

government to achieve the budgeted fiscal deficit target even with slower growth. Given the slow pace of its capex, it is likely that the Centre will miss its capex target by around Rs 1.5 trillion.

Looking ahead, we expect the economy to grow only marginally better at 6.7 per cent in 2025-26. However, even at these levels, India's growth remains relatively healthy in the midst of global turmoil. Nevertheless, the stepping down of growth from the 7-8 per cent level recorded in the last two years warrants attention. With the Union budget round the corner, it is time to introspect on what is required to move the economy back to a higher growth trajectory.

Post Covid, the government has focussed on a capex-led recovery. While the focus on capex should continue in the upcoming budget as well, there is a need to supplement it with some consumption-boosting measures. A sustained pick-up in domestic consumption becomes specifically critical at a time when private investment is slow to recover and the external demand scenario is uncertain. A wide-based and sustained pick-up in consumption will also help bring in private investment.

In the upcoming budget, the focus on job creation and skilling should continue to enable a sustained rise in household incomes and spending. The finance minister should also look at a cut in personal income taxes to boost consumer sentiments and spending. This will involve a loss in government revenue. But the government should go slower in its fiscal consolidation effort while focusing on growth boosting measures. It has set a target of achieving a fiscal deficit lower than 4.5 per cent of GDP by 2025-26. But even if its fiscal deficit hits 4.7 per cent of GDP in 2025-26 and reaches 4.5 per cent only by 2027-28, the general government debt to GDP is still likely to be on a downward trajectory.

The writer is chief economist, CareEdge Ratings

To MOURN A LOST CONNECT

The first step to resolving ecological crises is to understand what has gone missing



JYOTI DALAL

THE PRESENT HUMAN condition is marked by a loss of faith in the permanence of the world. The continuing violence in several places, climate change and ecological crises are chipping away at the assuredness in the sheer presence of the world. What is the nature of pain we encounter in the face of this transitory world? The human condition is characterised by a distinct sense of haphazardness towards this predicament — we seem to be assured of our ability to bandage injuries. Under the moral injunction to act, we take recourse to hasty, unexamined actions, which are sometimes more band-aid than salve.

The call to act in the face of crisis is high enough to foreclose a patient understanding of concerns that demand time. This seems to remove empathy from our understanding of the state of affairs. Hannah Arendt's account of human action is prescient in this respect. Human beings indeed are blessed with this unique capacity to act and bring something new to the world. However, paradoxically, these actions can become self-defeating, as they can set off a chain of events, which are not only beyond their own control but are not limited in self-inflicted catastrophes. The unintended effects of human action, as history has shown, have resulted in unprecedented devastation. At the same time, Arendt underlines the significance of common "human" experiences, especially with those whose perspectives may differ from ours. In recent years, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj

IN GOOD FAITH

What does it then mean to inhabit the world whose permanence one is not sure of? What is the nature of pain we encounter as we become cognisant of this decaying world? In a brilliant three-page essay, 'On Transience', Freud engages with humans' inability to experience joy or the capacity to love in the face of impending decay.

Zizek has warned against the anti-theoretical edge of urgent judgments, finding value in patient learning and understanding of the problem at hand, instead of giving in to the impulse to act immediately.

The crises are exploited by the state-market nexus. It feeds on our anxieties by propelling an urgency to act and save the world. Ironically, its other side is systematically involved in developing a thick immunity to this decaying world — bottled water, air purifiers, air conditioners, and gated communities. A lot of technological solutions to ecological crises are not based on the connection between human being and nature.

Education has always been seen as directly or indirectly responsible for whatever is happening in the world and, therefore, is expected to develop an immediate response to this crisis. Consequently, awareness programmes seem to have received traction in recent times, especially with regard to ecological, social and cultural concerns. But how effective are these as "sensitisation" efforts? Imbuing education with a proactive action plan to avert or delay catastrophes has become the focus of policy and practice. Education does have a role in mitigating or preventing crises. However, the ways in which unrealistic expectations are often placed on education should be of concern to us. Education is not expected to frame a well-thought-out response that engages because of staying with the problem, reflecting and thinking about its contours and encountering the "affect" that it generates. Instead, it is

handed the charge of fixing the problem with implementable, operational plans. Unwittingly, this fake urgency to act, even with the right intentions, only further the artificial divide that is often made between thinking, feeling and doing.

What does it then mean to inhabit the world whose permanence one is not sure of? What is the nature of pain we encounter as we become cognisant of this decaying world? In a brilliant three-page essay, 'On Transience', Freud engages with humans' inability to experience joy or the capacity to love in the face of impending decay. The fact that the loved object will go away, and its transitory, disturbs the worth of that object. For Freud, mourning helps one reconcile with the loss and recalibrate oneself with the changing times.

It may be counter-intuitive to times of hyperoptimism and crude arrogance in our intellect and energies, but we first need to develop cognisance of what we have lost at the level of affect — to feel the loss and let that feeling inform actions. Instead of hiding our contradictions with happiness curriculum and frenzied poster competitions and marches on cleanliness, climate change and carbon footprint, education needs to sensitise us to mourning and then, develop a thoughtful response that is grounded in the times and in the world that we inhabit.

The writer is professor, Institute of Human Economics, University of Delhi

JANUARY 9 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

PM'S GUIDELINES

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV GANDHI has told senior officers that any interference in the functioning of the administrative machinery would not be tolerated. He wants the administrative machinery to be result-oriented. On the basis of his guidelines, detailed notes are being prepared for improving the functioning of various departments, especially those that are public-facing, like the railways, banks etc.

TRAIN TRAGEDY IN UP

ELEVEN PERSONS WERE killed and five others injured, when the engine and six wagons

of an Assam-bound goods train rammed into over half a dozen houses near Babbhan railway station. Though eight hours had elapsed since the accident, no sign of any relief or rescue was visible.

EX-RBI OFFICER SLAIN

RAJINDER NATH MALHOTRA, a 62-year-old retired officer of the Reserve Bank of India, was stabbed to death in his Munirika house by two persons. The victim's wife has been admitted to Safdarjung hospital in a serious condition. Both the assailants, the police said, were well known to the family, and had tea with Malhotra before the stabbing.

DELHI WATER PRICES

CITIZENS OF DELHI will have to pay increased water charges, water tax and scavenging tax from April 1. The hike, approved by the Delhi Water Supply and Sewage Disposal Committee, was announced by the Delhi Municipal Commissioner, K C Baniwala. The municipal commissioner, P P Shrivastava, had earlier said there was no rise in water taxes but a proposal regarding the increased charges and taxes was pending before the committee. Baniwala's press conference exposed the ambiguous statement made by the commissioner.



THE IDEAS PAGE

The maverick and the loyalist

With his tendency to be the former, and fondness for the latter, Donald Trump's return to White House is set to be a time of churn



PETER RONALD DESOUZA

OFTEN THINKERS, WHEN they want to explain how social agents act in the world, posit a pair of personality types as binaries. Arthur Koestler, the former communist intellectual and philosopher of science, wrote a book titled *The Yogi and the Commissar*. In the lead essay, which bears the same title as the book, he discusses the two personality types of the yogi and the commissar. The commissar seeks to manipulate social reality with scientific knowledge, changing it to make it congruent with his own ideals. The yogi, in contrast, turns the gaze inward, seeking internal transformation. The world, as a result, fades into may. On the spectrum between the yogi and commissar, most people are somewhere in between. In India, our genius has enabled us to breach this binary. We have a yogi commissar.

In another interesting binary, presented by Isaiah Berlin in his seminal essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, the Oxford philosopher argues that the "fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." The hedgehog acts with a singular purpose, "a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance" whereas the fox, in contrast, pursues "many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle." The purposeful behaviour of the hedgehog leads to achievable outcomes whereas that of the fox is dispersed and often results in unachieved goals. Again, as in Koestler's argument, most people are somewhere in between.

Looking at the statements and choices of the incoming administration of Donald Trump in the US, two distinct personality types emerge. Unlike the above examples, these are, however, not binaries in opposition but allies. In partnership, they offer a distinctive relationship to social reality. Drawing on the statements of the president-elect, concerning his goals, the qualities he is looking for among those in his inner circle, his plans to radically transform government, and his "day one" agenda, the two personality types that stand out are the "maverick" and the "loyalist." Since we are days away from Trump's assumption of the most powerful job in the world, it is not too soon to speculate on the implications of these personality types, for US politics and the whole world. The prognosis is intimidating.

Trump, by all accounts, is a maverick. Interestingly, he is also closely associated with the maverick, Elon Musk. A maverick is a person whose choices and behaviour are unpredictable. This can have both creative and destructive consequences, creative in that it is unconstrained by the established way of doing things, and destructive in that it upends even the good things of the existing order. The maverick seeks the establishment as having accumulated inefficiencies and regulations. This has to be destabilised. This establishment produces path



C R Sasikumar

dependency. Social behaviour, as a result, stays on the path, finding the cost of exiting too high. The special quality of the maverick is that she is ready, and willing, to exit the path at any time. For the maverick, the path must be destroyed either because it has served its purpose, or because it is an obstacle to a better way of doing things, or because it has accumulated inefficiencies. Schumpeter called this "creative destruction." In the world of commerce, this is often a positive thing. Musk has proved it with Tesla, SpaceX and Neuralink. In the world of government, however, we are not so sure about "creative destruction" since destabilising the government can indeed be costly. Things can fall apart.

A pilot experiment of creative destruction is taking place in Argentina where President Javier Milei is working to overturn the established policies and institutions of the Peronist state. Early data on costs and benefits are trickling in. He has been able to rein in inflation from 26 per cent in December 2023 to 2.7 per cent in October 2024. But his actions have also resulted in an increase in poverty among Argentines from 42 per cent in 2023 to 53 per cent in 2024. The jury is out on the consequences of such radical destabilising of the conventional government. Compared to Milei, Trump is a bigger tsunami. The world awaits his arrival with trepidation.

Which brings me to the other face of the maverick's behaviour—the destructive consequences. By dismantling the established system that has taken decades to evolve, the maverick undermines the primary value of any state, the routinisation of state power. Routinisation is one of the most effective ways to establish the equality of citizens and to consolidate a regime of rights. Routinisation gives citizens a sense of what to legitimately expect from the state. Power becomes impersonal as it gets bound by rules and regulations. This has to be destabilised. The maverick does so and replaces stability

A maverick is a person whose choices and behaviour are unpredictable. This can have both creative and destructive consequences, creative in that it is unconstrained by the established way of doing things, and destructive in that it upends even the good things of the existing order. The maverick seeks the establishment as having accumulated inefficiencies and interests that are hostile to promising innovations. This establishment produces path dependency. Social behaviour, as a result, stays on the path, finding the cost of exiting too high. The special quality of the maverick is that she is ready, and willing, to exit the path at any time.

with uncertainty. Public health experts in the US are currently worried about the incoming health czar Robert F Kennedy Jr, who, as an anti-vaxxer, wants to do away with most vaccines. Destabilising the state will affect the disadvantaged the most.

While the maverick's two faces, creation and destruction, are causing public officials to be anxious, it is the other personality type, the loyalist, a core part of the incoming Trump regime, that, to me, is a cause of greater worry. Information feedback is an important part of every chief executive's decision ecosystem. Such information must be honest. It must have scientific integrity, especially when decisions made have far-reaching consequences. Sometimes, such information can go against the opinion of the primary decision-maker, the boss. Loyalty discounts such a possibility. It compromises the information feedback. It massages the message. This means that sometimes decisions known to be harmful are taken because being loyal is more important than being truthful. This is more true in the context of a president who has a firm opinion on all things. Challenging it is an occupational hazard.

In fast-changing ages, where technology is driving us into the future, where hostilities are breaking out across the world and where the ability to manage them is getting more feeble, leading to a huge loss of innocent lives, as in Gaza, loyalty will push the world into a dangerous corner. Even a powerful president will not be able to manage the ensuing chaos. Across many of the world's democracies, maverick regimes are making an appearance, including in the largest. In 1975, when the Emergency was imposed in India, a maverick-loyalist regime had appeared. American democracy will gain by looking at that episode, especially during its 50th anniversary.

The writer is an independent scholar and co-editor with Rukmini Bhaya Nair of *Keywords for India: A Concultural Lexicon* for the 21st century

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"While the vulnerability of under-five children to cold-related viral diseases is well documented, it is disheartening that many parents across the country remain unaware of the risks. Many mothers, for example, lack knowledge of administering oral rehydration solution (ORS) correctly." — THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

How to say sorry and mean it

Manipur CM has apologised to victims of violence in the state. But reconciliation is possible only when it involves all sides



G AMARJIT SHARMA

ON DECEMBER 31, the Manipur Chief Minister expressed "regret" and "apologies" to all "victims" of the violence that has seized life in the state since May 3, 2023. Amid intractable violence, he appealed to all communities to "forgive and forget" past mistakes and start a new life and make way for a peaceful and prosperous Manipur. One may ask how profound his apology is. After all, it is not merely a question of how deep one's sense of guilt and awareness of mistakes are. It is also a question of how expansive the moral imagination is to overcome the violence and usher in a new political order. Does the apology invoke a philosophy of empathy and dependability towards each other, that all parties have suffered and that endemic violence cannot bring an end to that suffering?

A reasonable apology was also anticipated from the Prime Minister of India for not visiting the state and for avoiding exercising the duties of the state effectively. Law and order matters have been managed by the Unified Command formed on May 31, 2023, and headed by a retired IPS officer. Unified Command oversees operations by the Army, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Assam Rifles, and Border Security Force stationed in the state. By January 2024, the Chief Minister of Manipur informed in an all-party meeting that the Union Government of India had invoked Article 355 in the state. It allows the Centre to take charge of the law and order enforcement practically without dismissing the state government.

But in the aftermath of the horrific killings of women and children last November in the Jiribam district, matters of law enforcement appear to have fallen back under the state government. The Ministry of Home Affairs stated in December, in response to a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed in the Manipur High Court, that the Jiribam killings are matters of "maintenance of law and order, which fall under the state government." However, matters of Manipur violence are still under central agencies like the National Investigation Agency (NIA). NIA considers the cases concerning external linkages of armed groups involved in the violence and "war against India" under its jurisdiction. The situation indicates an extraordinary coexistence of nation-state sovereignty and governmental management of inter-community power relationships. Perhaps, it also explains the reason for not just the CM's delayed apology but also the lack of a reflective political imagination for a future Manipur.

To reconcile the violence in Manipur, one

must understand the complexity of the conflict that has gripped the state. One side of it is concerned solely with wars of ethnic narratives and politics of truth—whose end result more often than not is brutal violence. Another side involves a moral capacity to absorb these multiple narratives and create a new, dependable, and empathetic political order. One must take the second side if there is to be reconciliation. Reconciliation is possible only when all parties and stakeholders realise that conflict does not lead anywhere but to the loss of more lives. The state leadership must show creativity to approach the complexity of violence with the simplicity of truth—that violence is not the path to political reform. The creative approach demands an alternative understanding of militancy, crime, and justice in Manipur violence. It is not just about steps and strategies. It is about creating an atmosphere where these questions, issues and legitimate adversarial positions can be discussed with a sense of reliability among communities.

Although militancy is considered either externally-induced or related to drug money and narcotics, there is a tendency to communalise these acts. But militancy and ethnic violence have emanated from both sides of the conflict in the last 20 months. The state approach to militancy during communal violence lacks the consideration that all communities in the state, irrespective of ethnic backgrounds, share the brunt of this.

The CM has tendered an apology to the victims of the violence. But the process of reconciliation cannot focus only on the victim. Victimhood suffers from problems of relativity. It ethnically and privileges one's condition of pain and loss over others. It does not enable thinking of injury, loss, and suffering due to violence as distributive. Irrespective of communities. Only with this ethical responsibility of relatedness can reconciliation be initiated.

Along with victims, the philosophy of reconciliation must include perpetrators of violence too. The emphasis should be on survival justice so that both victims and perpetrators feel motivated to stop the transformation of loss and suffering into violent action. This will require the involvement of community leaders and organisations.

However, the institutional apology and offer of reconciliation seem to have come in an atmosphere of coercion. The two cannot go together. In the aftermath of the Jiribam killings, the state government employed coercive measures to deal with public anger. Besides attempts to silence criticism, the counter politics of ruling-party supporters were unleashed against the legitimate question of the masses about the failure of leadership. Reconciliation cannot operate in an atmosphere of coercion, repression of criticism, and divisive politics. The road to must be clear, deepened, and made inclusive. It is a long process.

The writer teaches political studies at the Special Centre for the Study of North East India, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi



ANOOP ANTONY JOSEPH

DECEMBER 2024 WAS significant for Indian Christians, specifically the Catholic community. George Jacob Kookal, a priest from Changanassery, Kerala, was elevated to the rank of Cardinal in the Holy See's consistory. However, some seemed not keen to celebrate this occasion. Derek O'Brien, in an article in this newspaper 'Questions after Christmas', (IE, January 3) advocating a "reformist" path for Indian Christians, was among them.

O'Brien, without a word of congratulation for Cardinal Kookal, criticised the Indian Catholic church for celebrating Christmas with PM Narendra Modi. Almost every political leader, from Rahul Gandhi to Mamata Banerjee, celebrates Christmas alongside the clergy. But PM Modi's Christmas celebration irks the likes of O'Brien, who always held matters of the Christian community as the Congress-aligned coterie's domain.

Modi has shaken the colonial mindset held by Congress leaders and others like O'Brien. Minority groups have grown closer to the PM drawn by his aura and inclusive governance of *sabka saath*.

These elite, self-proclaimed "saviours" of Christians, kept the community captive as a vote bank for decades. Their heartburn is obvious as the community drifts toward good governance. In Kerala, Suresh Gopi's victory in a constituency with a sizeable Christian population is just an example. Whether in Kerala or the Northeast,

Terms of inclusion

Modi government has reached out, made room for the Christian community

Christians prioritise action over appeasement. This is why the BJP has the highest number of Christian MLAs in India, unlike the Trinamool Congress, which has none. O'Brien mentioned only this year's Christmas celebration attended by PM Modi but seems to have overlooked that the doors of his residence were opened for Christmas celebration last year, attended by both clergy and laity. A delegation, representing the prime minister and the Indian Christian community, attended the consistory of new Cardinals at the Vatican, and I was honoured to be part of it.

The TMC leader chided the clergy, mentioning unnamed priests who suggested "re-forming" the Indian church through "the laity setting the direction." This itself shows the disconnect the so-called "protectors of the church" like O'Brien have with the Christian community. The Christian church, across India, is one of the most democratically-run structures.

I recall how elections were held in our church in Kerala to elect members of the administrative body, including my father, who served for years. The priest neither interfered in the process nor was he the signing authority in the administrative matters. This democratic spirit is maintained at higher levels too, where social and political policies of churches, be it Oriental or Catholic, are collectively decided by laity representatives. Priests or Bishops serve as guiding lights, which is

why we call them fathers.

His piece mentions the Waqf. In Munambam, Kerala, a protest was initiated by the Latin Catholic church and later joined by other Christian denominations against an attempt by the Waqf Board to seize lands belonging to around 400 poor Christian fishing families. In this ongoing protest, the community raised their voices against the local MP from the Congress, whom they had voted for, and the Left-ruled state government. The Kerala government, alongside Congress, passed a resolution opposing the Centre's proposed Waqf Bill.

By questioning the Munambam protest, simply because the BJP supported the cause, O'Brien is restating the INDIA alliance's stance of backing Waqf land grabs to appease a special vote bank, showing little concern for the plight of the Christian families involved.

Where was O'Brien when, in Alappuzha, Kerala, a Popular Front rally raised slogans against the Christian community, asking to keep Frankincense (used in Christian funerals) ready? Why doesn't he write about the families of "love jihad" victims in Kerala? Why has he forgotten TJ Joseph, whose hand was chopped off?

These individuals, who know little about the community beyond Christmas parties, have consistently tried to mislead it with false narratives. The perfect example is painting the CAA as "anti-Christian" and attempting to lead the community into "foreign-

funded" and "left-curated" protests. Leaders like O'Brien were disappointed when the Christian laity realised the law was only to grant citizenship to persecuted Christians, along with Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and Parsis from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, who arrived in India before December 2014.

Since then, they have continually invented new narratives and misinformation campaigns to pit Christians against the BJP, as PM Modi's appeal within the community has soared. Whether it's housing, scholarships, Mudra loans, jobs, infrastructure, ease of living, welfare schemes, or rescue operations from war zones, Christians are happy to be treated equally like any other community. Once, while travelling in Nagaland, I was elated when a group of Christians conveyed their appreciation for PM Modi's administrative life remaining free from any stain of impunity.

A retired college professor from Kerala, a prominent Christian, told me, "For Christians, it's a matter of joy that former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a visionary leader known for his integrity, was born on Christmas Day. We should observe Good Governance Day during Christmas celebration, as Jesus Christ, who took the whip against the corrupt and liars, exemplifies the highest ideals of good governance."

The writer is a BJP leader

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA-US TIES

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Atomic power equations' (IE, January 8, p. 8). Although India and the US have disagreed on nuclear matters in the past, they have made significant progress in cooperation. The US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement, signed in 2008, was a big step forward. The agreement, negotiated by former President George W. Bush and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, helped India become a part of the global nuclear community. As India expands its nuclear power capacity, working with the US will be crucial. US Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's visit to India shows how important this relationship is and it's essential that both countries continue to work to address technological concerns and shared interests.

Yuvraj Singh, Hissar

UGC REFORMS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Let's trust universities' (IE, January 8, p. 8). Draft Regulations 2025 herald significant changes in higher education. The reforms are aligned with the NEP 2020, addressing innovation, societal contributions and digital content creation, which are commendable. However, this redefinition of eligibility fortifies the academic integrity of university leadership. The draft abolishes the outdated quantitative API system, replacing it with qualitative assessments. These changes will foster flexibility and inclusivity. India's higher education institutions are pillars of intellectual and cultural progress. The UGC must ensure that reforms strengthen their academic foundations.

Sanakar Paul, Nadia

READ, REFLECT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Death of a journalist' (IE, January 8). A freelance journalist's full of ills of dire need that often go unnoticed. There is a dire need for public support to ensure that their work reaches mainstream audiences, particularly when it highlights the shortcomings and nuances of society at the grassroots level. There are ways that this can be achieved, such as a transparent system of funding through donations that can help sustain freelancers who strive to cover vital rural news that is often overlooked. Work outside of organisational lines and conducting fieldwork should be encouraged and financed, not dismissed.

Shawwat Jena, Chuzibad

TIME FOR RESET

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'After Trudeau' (IE, January 8). As Canada witnesses growing discontent, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's decision to step down makes sense. Having lost the confidence of party members and voters, he has decided not to run for a fourth term. This news comes at a time when India-Canada relations are turbulent. Undiplomatic statements were made over Hardeep Singh Nijjar's death, antagonising, an old ally. It should be noted that the next Prime Minister won't find it easy to turn the tide. But all hope is not lost. If Trudeau's exit will help the two democracies press the reset button on their once-harmonious relationship.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

Female birds 'can't reproduce without male sex hormones'

Male and female chickens lacking the androgen receptor showed differences in various aspects. These aspects were hormone-dependent. Surprisingly, certain male traits, for example the length of tail feathers and of spurs, remained unaffected by the genetic modification

Madhurima Pattanayak

The androgen sex hormones are responsible for male sexual development while oestrogen and progesterone play the same roles in females. But new research by a team at the Max Planck Institute of Biological Intelligence and Technical University, Munich, could force scientists to redraw these boundaries. The team has reported that androgen receptors are as important for sexual development and fertility in females as in males.

Specifically, the researchers found that both male and female chickens devoid of androgen receptors turned out to be infertile. But the males still developed testicles and the females ovaries, and produced gonadal hormones. The testicles and ovaries were smaller than in chickens that retained their androgen receptors.

Additionally, female chickens that lacked the receptors failed to develop and lay eggs. And while a few sex-specific peculiarities like tail feathers, spurs, and differences in body size and weight persisted in both sexes, their sexual behaviours failed to develop. Their eye rings remained unpigmented as well.

"For years, one of the key players in avian sexual development has been reported to be testosterone, a steroid hormone belonging to the class of hormones called androgens, commonly thought of as only a male hormone," Mekhla Rudra, a scientist at the Max Planck Institute of Biological Intelligence and a coauthor of the study, said. "One of the key insights this study provides is that testosterone action via androgen signalling is critical in both male and female birds."

"The study illustrates that androgen receptors directly influenced diverse tissues leading to sex-specific phenotypes. In females, too, the effects of androgens are to promote the development of head ornaments and normal ovarian follicle," Peter O'Shaughnessy, a scientist at the University of Glasgow who wasn't involved in the study, said.

Androgen hormones are known to decrease body weight in chickens. Male chickens in commercial settings are thus castrated to prevent androgen secretion and thus increase their bodyweight.

In birds, androgen and oestrogen receptors help regulate sexual development by mediating the actions of these hormones. Unlike mammals, avian somatic cells (cells other than sperm and ova) also manifest sexual traits independent of hormonal influences. "These characteristics are independent of hormonal influence," Rudra said.

The shrinkage that wasn't

The bursa of Fabricius, a.k.a. the cloacal thymus, is a chestnut-shaped lymphoid organ in birds that develops antibodies and B lymphocytes. This organ is also known to be involved in sexual growth and maturation. When a chicken reaches pubescence – around 15-20 weeks after birth – the bursa of Fabricius shrinks in size.

This bursal involution is an androgen-sensitive characteristic that shows sexual development has begun. In the new study, chickens of both sexes lacking androgen receptors had delayed bursal involution. In some cases, the



In the study, female chickens that lacked androgen receptors failed to develop and lay eggs. Representative image. STEPHEN MERENDORF

shrinkage didn't even begin.

According to the researchers, the shrinkage could be the result of cells dying in the bursa of Fabricius in response to the activity of the androgen receptors. When the scientists exposed the embryos without the ability to develop androgen receptors to testosterone, bursal involution still didn't happen. But in embryos that could develop the receptors, the shrinkage happened as well.

Of crows and combs

The bodies of roosters and male chickens have a circadian rhythm, or internal body clock, that sends strong signals for them to crow at dawn. The neural circuit associated with this crowing behaviour is sensitive to the presence of androgen hormones, especially testosterone.

In the study, male chickens without androgen receptors didn't crow even when they were exposed to testosterone a week after hatching. Their receptor-positive counterparts crows. The researchers figured that the neural circuits responsible for crowing behaviour couldn't fully develop in the absence of the receptors. Scientists already know the syringal motor nucleus in the hindbrain and specific midbrain regions govern crowing patterns in birds.

Likewise, comb development – an important sign of sexual maturation among chickens – didn't occur in male or female chicks without androgen receptors, even after they were exposed to testosterone. Receptor-positive chickens began to develop combs within 13-20 days after exposure to testosterone. Previous studies have reported the basal layer of the comb epidermis – called the stratum germinativum – is a place where androgen-receptor genes are expressed, suggesting comb development depends on the presence of the receptors.

As O'Shaughnessy put it, "The effects

of androgens in both sexes appear to be prominent in the sexually dimorphic regions of the head and gonads".

In birds unlike in mammals

A 2021 study examined male chickens whose testicles had been replaced with ovaries through genetic modification. These chickens developed their complete sexual ornaments – which shouldn't have been possible if sexual phenotypic characters were entirely under the influence of the testicular hormones. The study thus challenged the canon that these sexual characteristics in birds are regulated only by testicular hormones. In a 2023 study, scientists showed that when androgen signalling is disrupted in (male or female) humans, the internal and external sex organs, sexual characteristics, and behaviours, couldn't develop properly.

Androgen and oestrogen hormones play their respective roles once they bind to their corresponding receptors. The death or impairment of these receptors eventually disrupts the function of the hormone binding to them.

To understand the function of androgen receptors in avian sexual development, the researchers blocked receptor functions – and thus androgen signalling – by knocking off the genes required to develop the receptors using CRISPR/Cas9.

"The methods used in this study are appropriate and the data are reliable," O'Shaughnessy said.

Necessary but insufficient

In sum, male chickens devoid of androgen receptors didn't display an overall female phenotype – and nor did female chickens lacking in androgen receptors develop an all-male phenotype.

A 2018 study in the *Journal of Physiology A* reported that while oestrogen receptors could contribute to sexual development in birds of both

Androgen signalling plays a crucial role in the development, fertility, physiology and appearance of both sexes as well as sex-specific crowing behaviour in males

sexes, oestrogen signalling alone was insufficient for complete sexual maturation.

"The mechanism of testosterone action in the brain is complex," Rudra said. "Testosterone binds to androgen receptors ... However, in the brain, testosterone is also converted to oestrogen and exerts its role by binding to oestrogen receptors, making the understanding of testosterone-mediated effects quite complicated."

According to her, the study shows androgen signalling plays a crucial role in the development, fertility, physiology and appearance of both sexes as well as sex-specific crowing behaviour in males. "The findings in the current study are valid," O'Shaughnessy said.

Male and female chickens lacking the androgen receptor showed clear differences in various aspects compared to their normal counterparts. These aspects were hormone-dependent. Surprisingly, certain male traits, e.g. the length of tail feathers and of spurs, remained unaffected by the genetic modification.

"These traits are thus controlled by either another hormone system or something entirely different. Thus it appears that the sexual development of birds involves a complex interaction of both hormone-dependent and hormone-independent mechanisms," Rudra said.

(Madhurima Pattanayak is a freelance science writer and journalist based in Kolkata. madhurima.pattanayak@gmail.com)



Fluoride, which also occurs naturally in varying levels, helps restore minerals lost to acid breakdown in teeth. AP

Review asserts link between fluoride levels and IQ loss

Agence France Presse

A divisive new study out on January 6 in a US medical journal could reignite debate over fluoride's safety in water, linking higher exposure levels to lower IQ in children.

Published in the journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Pediatrics it has sparked pushback from some scientists who criticise the study's methods, defend the mineral's proven dental benefits, and warn the findings may not directly apply to typical water fluoridation levels.

Its release comes as US President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office. His health secretary nominee, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is a vocal critic of fluoridated water, which currently serves nearly two-thirds of the US population.

Researchers from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences reviewed 74 studies on fluoride exposure and children's IQ conducted in 10 countries, including India.

The same scientists helped formulate an official government recommendation in August that there is "moderate confidence" that higher levels of fluoride are linked to lower IQ scores.

Now, the team led by Kyla Taylor said the analysis found a "statistically significant association" between fluoride exposure and reduced IQ scores.

The review estimated that for every 1 mg/L increase in urinary fluoride, children's IQ drops by 1.63 points.

Fluoride's neurotoxicity at high doses is well known, but the controversy lies in the study's suggestion that exposure below 1.5 mg/L – currently the World Health Organisation's safety limit – may also affect children's IQ.

However, the paper doesn't clarify how much lower than 1.5 mg/L could be dangerous.

Steven Levy, a member of the national fluoride committee for the American

The review estimated that for every 1 mg/L increase in urinary fluoride, children's IQ drops by 1.63 points

Dental Association, raised significant concerns about the study's methodology.

He pointed out that 52 of the 74 studies reviewed were rated "low quality" by the authors themselves but were still included in the analysis.

"Almost all of the studies have been done in other settings where there are other contaminants, other things we call confounding factors," he told AFP, citing coal pollution in China as an example.

Levy also questioned the study's use of single-point urine samples instead of 24-hour collections, which provide greater accuracy, as well as the challenges in reliably assessing young children's IQ.

With so many uncertainties, Levy argued in an editorial accompanying the study that current policies "should not be affected by the study findings."

That said, the journal also published an editorial commending the study for its methodological rigour.

The benefits of water fluoridation are well documented. Introduced in the US in 1945, it quickly reduced cavities in children and tooth loss in adults, earning recognition from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as one of the greatest public health achievements of the 20th century.

Fluoride, which also occurs naturally in varying levels, helps restore minerals lost to acid breakdown in teeth and reduces acid production by cavity-causing bacteria.

However, with fluoride toothpastes widely available since the 1960s, some research suggests diminishing returns.

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

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

209 years ago, Humphry Davy first tested a peculiar lamp...

Yasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

The Davy lamp was a type of _____ that Humphry Davy designed for use in coal mines. The design prevented the coal dust that hung in the air from catching fire from the lamp's flame. Given this purpose, fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 2

Before Humphry Davy, an English engineer named X had devised a lamp that also didn't ignore the air in coal mines, by feeding oxygen to the flame through small holes but through which the flame couldn't pass. Name X. Davy's lamp achieves the same function using a mesh.

QUESTION 3

Name the lamp X (from Q2). Invented, Humphry Davy and X developed a bitter rivalry over this invention, with Davy refusing to accept X's work and X developing a distrust of experts of theoretical science.

QUESTION 4

Aside from allowing miners to work without fear of combusting coal dust, the Davy lamp also alerted them to the presence of poisonous gases, which most often caused the lamp's flame to burn in what way?

QUESTION 5

The build-up of combustible gases in a coal mine is called a _____ from the German word for 'vapour'. Fill in the blanks. While Davy's lamp

often alerted miners to their presence, it also led to more mining accidents because miners explored new seams of coal that they wouldn't have without the lamp.

Answers to January 7 quiz:

1. Species named for the oily substance in their heads – **Ans: Sperm whales**

2. Term denoting reproductive capacity of a species – **Ans: Fecundity**

3. Organ that the colossal squid possesses in a larger size – **Ans: Eyes**

4. Squid species growing to be larger than colossal squids – **Ans: Giant squid**

5. Phenomenon whereby deep-sea species grow to great sizes – **Ans: Abyssal gigantism**

First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Sheezy Murali | Chandan Kumar Singh | Vijayram Ganasa | Joe V.R.



Visual: Name this town, where Davy tested his lamp for the first time in a colliery. The town also gave its name to a mediocre BBC sitcom of the 2010s. ANDREW THORN (CC BY-SA 2.0)



Growth chill

The economy's sputtering engines necessitate urgent fiscal actions

The National Statistical Agency (NSO) has confirmed emerging fears about the economy's evidently sluggish trajectory through this year in its first Gross Domestic Product (GDP) estimates for 2024-25. While the election-focused first quarter hit public capital spending, the second quarter (Q2) was marred by weak demand and still underwhelming public capex, dragging GDP growth to a seven-quarter low of 5.4%. The Centre and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which were projecting that India would log a fourth year of 7%-plus growth, had pared their hopes to 'about 6.5%' and 6.6%, respectively. This was predicated on a bump-up of about 7% in the second half of the year to offset the first half's 5.6% rise. The NSO, slightly less sanguine, expects GDP to grow at a four-year low pace of 6.4%, from 8.2% in 2023-24, with just agriculture seen rising significantly faster than last year. Manufacturing and mining growth may virtually halve, and though services sectors seem relatively better off, there is some concern of momentum loss. Purchasing Managers' Indices averaged lower than Q2 through Q3, for both manufacturing and services. The NSO expects private consumption to rebound 7.3% this year from just 4% last year. But Q3 trends do not indicate a significant lift-off in urban demand. So, this could be a tad optimistic despite inflation easing slightly since October.

The Finance Ministry has sought to link the demand slowdown to a "combination of monetary policy stance and macroprudential measures by the central bank". Slow wage growth has also been blamed for cramped household demand. The NSO's projection of gross fixed capital formation growth slipping to 6.4% this year from 9% in 2023-24 indicates that private capex — that is contingent on domestic and global demand — remains weak while public capex goals are unlikely to be met. Of course, these early NSO projections are largely conjured up for informing the Union Budget formulation, and some upgrades may happen later, but most economists see significant downside risks for now. Nomura economists, for instance, who have been arguing that India is in the grip of a cyclical slowdown for a while, reckon growth will end up around 6%, implying a flat-lined second half. With the global outlook also shrouded in uncertainty, winter seems to be here for India's economy. How far behind spring lags will depend on policymakers' actions, and inactions. The Union Budget 2025-26 needs to move from incremental tinkering to tailoring reforms and fiscal actions that can bring India's growth back to the 7% mark, if not 8%, at the earliest. If that entails some hard calls such as slashing income, fuel and consumption taxes, along with import tariffs, so be it. Just jinning for interest rate cuts will not suffice anymore.

Cripple and scuttle

Governments are discouraging the exercise of the right to information

Nearly two decades after the passage of the Right to Information Act, it is quite apparent that governments, at least sections of it, are uncomfortable with the idea of transparency and empowerment associated with it. Amendments to dilute its efficacy and attempts to defeat it by delaying or denying information have been quite common for years. Another way to scuttle the law is to cripple the functioning of information commissions at the central and State levels. The issue has surfaced again, with the Supreme Court of India questioning the large number of vacancies in the central and some State Information Commissions. These commissions hear appeals from members of the public who have been denied access to information or have failed to elicit a response from designated information officers in various departments and institutions. A Division Bench has taken note of the fact that there are eight vacancies in the posts of Information Commissioners in the Central Information Commission (CIC), while 23,000 appeals are pending before it. In fact, some State-level Information Commissions are almost defunct for want of members to hear the public. Any such move is bound to ask, as the Court has now done, how an institution can be of any use if it does not have persons to perform the required duties under the law.

The Court has sought to impart some urgency to the matter by directing the Department of Personnel and Training to spell out in two weeks the timelines for completing the selection process and notifying the appointments of the eight Information Commissioners in the CIC. It has also asked for details about the search committee and the list of applicants for the posts. Similarly, States that have initiated the appointment process but without any definite time line have been asked to complete the process within a specified time. However, this may not be enough to bring about a revival in the fulfilment of the original purpose of the Act. Besides filling up vacancies, not all governments have complied with a Court verdict of 2019 that called for proactive efforts to fill up vacancies in time by advertising them early. The CIC's post was stripped of its autonomy some years ago when the government removed the fixed five-year tenure and made it open-ended. Not much has been done to appoint candidates from various walks of life, as retired civil servants continue to be chosen, a point noted by the Bench in the latest hearing. It is inevitable that a large number of vacancies will result in a huge backlog and ultimately discourage the people from seeking information. It is difficult not to conclude that this is what those in power want.

River interlinking, the fount of environmental disaster

In December 25, 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for the Ken-Betwa River Link Project, which aims to solve the water scarcity in the Bundelkhand region that covers parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The project also includes the construction of a dam located within the Panna Tiger Reserve, raising concerns about its submergence. Upon completion, this project will link the supposed water surplus Ken river with the Betwa in drought-stricken Bundelkhand — an area that had 58% forest cover in 1938.

A misplaced model
This project, which costs around ₹45,000 crore, was launched despite the objections raised by experts, including members of an empowered committee appointed by the Supreme Court of India, and by circumventing the law that has strict terms for allowing hydroelectric power projects. Models of grandiose technological fixes as the solution to all water-related problems have gathered momentum. Politicians are now touting the concept of river interlinking for inter-basin water transfers as a geoengineering solution to continued water depletion in India.

The concept of inter-basin transfer was proposed 130 years ago by Sir Arthur Cotton, who designed irrigation dams in the Godavari and Krishna river valleys. M. Visvesvaraya, an early icon among Indian engineers, further refined this idea. K.L. Rao and Captain Dinshaw J. Dastur subsequently expanded the scope of this concept in 1970 and 1980. Initially termed the 'National Water Grid', this concept re-emerged as the 'River-Interlinking Project' (ILR) from the Ministry of Water Resources to transfer surplus waters from the Ganga and the Brahmaputra to water-deficient regions in central and southern India.

Following this, the National Water Development Agency (NWDA) was established in 1982 to conduct surveys and investigations, and to prepare feasibility reports for links under the National Perspective Plan. The NWDA identified 30 links for feasibility studies, divided into 14 Himalayan and 16 Peninsular river links. These links are anticipated to alleviate the impacts of floods and droughts, boost income in rural areas, and address water distress in agriculture.

The currently estimated cost of ₹5.5 lakh crore does not include the social, environmental and operational costs. Ultimately, all this will end up



G.P. Rajendran

Adjunct Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, and an author of the book, 'The Rumbling Earth — The Story of Indian Earthquakes'

as taxes on the common man. This lofty idea of interlinking the rivers, to connect surplus rivers of the country with the deficient rivers is fundamentally flawed as it overlooks the huge environmental costs and the eventual deaths of the rivers and deltaic regions.

The uncontrolled human-induced disequilibrium in natural hydrographic systems will destroy associated ecological niches with incalculable repercussions for the long-term well-being of society — an unpardonable disservice to future generations. We may also have to factor in the consequences of climate change impacting rainfall and river flow, which will aggravate the situation. It is unclear how the nation's declared commitment to mitigating human-induced climate change and river manipulation go hand in hand.

The eco-services of rivers

Policymakers ignore the point that there is no "free" surplus water in any river and simple elementary arithmetic rationalisations such as tapping the "water lost to sea" do not consider the eco-hydrological dimensions of the issue. The supporters of these projects and the politicians do not understand or deliberately ignore viewing the river as a part of the drainage basin with constitutive ecological niches, which includes its final destination of deltaic plains, interfacing with the sea.

The eco-services of the free-flowing rivers include the flushing of silt from riverbeds to the coastal waters to form deltas. Flood water is not to be rationalised as 'surplus'. It needs to be seen as the carrier of minerals for land fertility, groundwater recharge and sustenance of biodiversity, which finally helps the livelihood of millions of marginalised people.

By diverting river water, deltaic regions are starved of water that could have helped balance saltwater from the sea. Now, however, the deltaic ecosystem will suffer from the change. The Indus Delta offers a crucial lesson. Alice Albinia, in her book, *Empires of the Indus: The Story of a River* (2008), narrates how a delta system at the mouth of the Indus — which was once "the richest in all Pakistan" — became impoverished when the British started barrage construction, which Pakistan continued after 1947.

Such examples are aplenty in India as well. The state of the downstream parts of the Narmada since the completion of the Sardar Sarovar dam is a modern example in the making.

The global examples of river channelisation have also proved to be major disasters. The channelisation of the Kissimmee river in the State of Florida, authorised by the U.S. Congress in 1954 to mitigate flooding, is an environmental disaster, resulting in the loss of wetlands. Massive resources are being spent to revive its original configuration. The current state of the Aral Sea — one of the world's largest lakes — is another example of how geoengineering projects destroy natural systems. The lake has now become a howling desert after the rivers that sustained it were diverted by irrigation projects implemented during the heady days of the Soviet Union.

The real reasons for India's water crisis

India's water crisis is spiralling out of control, primarily due to inadequate water management, poor environmental practices, law ambiguity, and corruption. A national water policy should embrace a holistic approach to watershed management, involving local citizens in monitoring the hydrological cycle and working alongside hydrologists, engineers, and biologists. The policy must incorporate effective aquifer management through the regulation of water usage. Farmers should be engaged to help devise strategies for efficient irrigation water usage. The government has limited control over wastewater management and should create innovative reuse programmes. A comprehensive study involving interdisciplinary expertise on river basins is essential before initiating significant water transfer projects.

In the book, *Let There Be Water: Israel's Solution for a Water-Starved World*, Seth M. Siegel notes that Israel's drip irrigation programmes save 25%-75% of pumped water. Israel's success story in water resource management lies in modernising irrigation techniques. This also compels farmers to use less water, fertilisers and pesticides, maintaining aquifer health at an optimum level. Along with such interventions, we must incorporate elements of vernacular practices in watershed management strategies.

Despite the current ruling regime's emphasis on 'Hindutva' and embedded Hindu belief system that exalts the deityship of Indian rivers, the river interlinking project stands out as a stark contrast to such an ideology. Manipulated by dams that are in excess, mauled by human and industrial waste, and commodified for religious marketing, India's rivers are under existential threat. Who will save them?

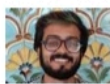
The right to food and the struggle with the PDS

In 2023, there was a report discussing the right to food in the context of Jharkhand. Similarly, a few days ago, there was another report that was in the context of Odisha. These reports highlighted something alarming — that a substantial number of households have been removed from the rolls of the Public Distribution System (PDS). This disturbing situation is not limited to Jharkhand and Odisha. Bihar, another State in the east-central region, has its own PDS tragedy.

The example of the Musahar community
Bihar was blighted by a supply crisis, when ration cards were needed the most, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, there are communities which continue to be in want of a stable supply of ration. This is more notable among extremely marginalised communities such as the Musahars. This is a community that has been pushed beyond the edge of destitution by the socio-politics of caste. Its struggle with the PDS emerges as a significant symptom of the same.

A number of Musahar households in Patna district do not have an active ration card. Even if they do have one, there is another problem — the card does not have the names of all the family members.

There are also several people who have lost access to their monthly supply of ration even since biometric verification was made mandatory at fair price shops (FPS). In such cases, the individuals concerned are forced to get a new ration card as after verification it emerges that their names have been struck off the PDS rolls. The ruling dispensation and its over the top marketing of 'smart cities' clearly posits before us the disconnect between the government and the people most in need of state welfare.



Ananya Krishna

Field Researcher at the DEVISE Charitable Trust



Shalendra Kumar

Field Researcher at the DEVISE Charitable Trust

Bureaucratic hurdles are a reason why a substantial number of households have found themselves removed from PDS rolls in parts of north, central and east India

Problems with the PDS are not limited to enrolment and access. There is also the flow of corruption through the veins of the system. Households enrolled with the PDS have reported that FPS dealers have been releasing only four kilograms of food grain/person when a below poverty line (BPL) household which has a Priority Household (PHH) ration card is entitled to five kilograms a person. The four kilograms of grain being issued is rice, which is the lowest quality of 'Usna' rice. No amount of wheat is issued.

Documentation that has no legal basis

Coming back to the issue of enrolment in PDS. The Government of Bihar offers its citizens the option to file a ration card application using a paper-based application form or by filling in an online application form through its e-PDS portal. The first option requires the Aadhaar details of the applicant and their family members. The second option requires an extra set of documents, namely caste certificate, income certificate, and residence certificate. Even when the applicant uses the first method, the officials eventually demand these certificates.

The demand for such documents is not exclusive to Bihar. Jharkhand also makes such a demand while Uttar Pradesh makes it mandatory to provide an income certificate, and Madhya Pradesh requires the submission of proof of residence.

The requirements of these certificates do not have any legal basis. Neither the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013 nor the PDS control order of 2015 explicate the requirement of such documents. An officer from the Food and Consumer Protection Department in Bihar has confirmed that the requirement of those certificates is an oversight in the online system. Here again we see that in the race towards

digitisation and e-governance, governments have shed all and any conception of governance and citizen welfare.

The issue of exploitation

It is notable, and most unfortunate, that the government, which has complete awareness of its systemic flaws, has made no attempt at systemic change and that people continue to be crushed under the weight of official indifference. To make matters worse, this hubris of power has provided the perfect conditions for the creation of a market of exploitation.

Most of the people, especially in the Musahar community, who seek to avail the benefits of PDS, neither have the resources nor the knowledge to interact with online processes. This situation has been aggressively exploited by middlemen who charge a sum that is north of ₹3,000 to have a ration card made. Within this market of exploitation, it is not uncommon to hear that neither document was issued nor the middleman traceable after payment.

Amidst the myriad challenges, if the people are somehow able to file their application, there is still no guarantee that they will get their ration card. While the 2015 order states that ration card should be issued within 30 days of the application being filled, there are cases of people whose applications have been pending for long — between four to 18 months. These applications are not for an entitlement which goes above and beyond the diurnal needs of a person. They are for the basic means of subsistence. It has been 24 years since the right to food was recognised as a fundamental right in the case, *People's Union of Civil Liberties vs Union of India*. Since then, governments have wound bureaucratic red tape around it so tightly that it is choking the very people it was meant for.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Role of the Governor

The episode of the Governor of Tamil Nadu, R.N. Ravi, walking out of the Legislative Assembly is unheard of. His excellency is bound under Article 176 to address the House. Article 163 makes it clear that he is bound to act on the aid and the advice of the Council of Ministers and not walk out, which is in violation of his constitutional duty. It is not as if the State Government refused to have the National Anthem being played. All that was said was that the State anthem would come first and that the National Anthem would be sung after his address thereby giving primacy to

the State and federal structures. This has been the convention too. The Governor has been making it difficult for the elected representatives to run the State. His excellency walked out of the State Assembly. It is time he walks out of the State too.

N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

Once again, the Tamil Nadu Governor has demeaned himself by walking out of the Assembly. The practice of the Tamil Nadu Governor being played before the National Anthem is well known to his excellency.

Tharulis S. Fernando,
Chennai

Ban plastic flags

It is usually observed that after Independence Day and the Republic Day celebrations are over, miniature plastic flags are seen strewn all over. There is an urgent need to ban plastic flags. School students, especially NCC cadets, girl guides and boy scouts and other students should be assigned the task of disposal in an appropriate manner. There is a need for schools to teach students the dignity behind our national flag.

Cajetan Peter D'Souza,
Mumbai

Roads in Chennai

The need of the hour in Chennai ("Chennai

Corporation plans to float tenders for over 5,000 road works for upcoming year in Jan", December 22) is to impose a ban on the laying of roads in all areas that are prone to flooding. The prime cause of flooding is repeated and unnecessary road-laying. The ease of mechanised road-laying and other factors are what have motivated the Greater Chennai Corporation to go on a road-laying spree. Once roads are 'brought down' to the level prior to the year 2000, miracles would happen. Roads will rise again because the major channels to carry rainwater to the nearest canal. It is illogical and impractical to assume that

every drop of rain must be drained through storm water drains.

Sujatha Vijayaraghavan,
Chennai

The state of Indian cricket

I am one of countless cricket-crazy fans in India for whom playing the game is as important as how the sport is administered and run. The last few series have been very tough for the players, and we, as keen followers, have endured the adrenaline highs and dismal lows of Team India's journey. It does raise a few pertinent questions about the BCCI's approach, since it is the apex body that shapes Indian cricket. As the dust of the defeat in

Australia settles, it raises a few points about how the whole Test panned out. Our obsession with stardom and superstar status clouds clichéd, but past records and performances in other formats do take precedence over the pure form — Test cricket. No one can deny that the team management — read selectors — has to take a tough call to ensure that the team composition is spot on and adequate work-load balance gains precedence over the bloated egos of the people who call the shots.

Sunil Gadeпад,
Pune

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