

Amplifying misinformation

Meta's decision will harm public interest

The decision by Meta (which owns Facebook and Instagram) to end its fact-check programme and replace it with "community notes" like X (formerly Twitter) was triggered by imminent change in America's political order. Meta faces antitrust investigation, and President-elect Donald Trump claimed he was "very probably" responsible for Meta initiating the change. Mr Trump has, on multiple occasions, expressed anger at fact checkers. Meta Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Mark Zuckerberg also said the platform would reverse its 2021 policy of reducing political content. This means more content on hot-button subjects like immigration, gender, and religion will be posted. The change will start in the United States (US). Meta may find it harder to switch in places like the European Union, which have more stringent regulations about hate speech and misinformation than the US. This decision allows how misinformation will be treated on two of the largest platforms. It also impacts the financials of 80-odd fact-checking organisations that work with Meta globally.

Fact-checking was initiated after the 2016 US elections and the Brexit referendum, which were both influenced by rampant disinformation on Facebook. The decision to reduce political content was in response to user feedback. Third-party fact checkers were asked by Meta to verify content. Content rated "false" is downgraded in news feeds. If someone tries to share a false post, they are shown a note explaining why it is misleading. Twitter used a similar system until it was bought by Elon Musk, who replaced it with community notes. This allows users to collaboratively add context to misleading posts on X, relying upon a reader consensus rather than moderation.

While third-party fact check was by no means perfect, the X experience suggests that it was better than community notes. This move to supposedly enable free speech has led to an explosion of hate speech, abuse and harassment, and violent content. The first Transparency Report released by X after Mr Musk took over says 5.3 million accounts were banned for abusive behaviour between January and June 2024. This is over three times the 1.6 million accounts banned in the same period of 2022, before Twitter changed hands (October 2022). X also shares ad revenue with "premium posters". The combination of community notes and revenue sharing is a recipe for disaster. Controversial posts receive higher engagement, and posters that generate controversy get more revenues. The community notes system may also lead to content from and about public figures being mislabelled through concerted action by their opponents, which contradicts basic principles of free speech.

Misinformation on social media about the pandemic contributed to the crisis, with many individuals seeking out quick medication and avoiding vaccination. Similarly, climate-change deniers receive louder megaphone in the absence of fact checks. Mr Zuckerberg admits Meta will "catch less bad stuff" after removing fact checkers. He hopes this will enable more free speech about topics that are mainstream discourse, and reduce censorship and prevent "fake positives" leading to the ban of innocent posters. However, conflating fact checks with censorship of free speech is usually done in bad faith by those who stand to gain. The two are not the same. Unfortunately Facebook, Instagram, and X dominate the social-media landscape, and with Meta falling in line with Mr Trump's wishes, the change may lead to an amplification of misinformation and hate speech across all three platforms.

Local, not global

Indian brands are rare in foreign marketplaces

News that several global private equity firms are queuing up to buy a stake in snack-food major Haldiram's is a reminder of the relative rarity of Indian brands in the global marketplace. Ever since the Indian economy opened up to global competition in 1991, it is foreign names that have come to dominate Indian homes. Many Indian brands have either disappeared or ceded space to foreign competition. Where Onida and Videocon once dominated the domestic market for TVs, washing machines, and household appliances, Japanese, Korean, and, increasingly, Chinese brands now rule the showrooms. In cars, the Premier Padmini and Ambassador vanished when Japan's Suzuki set up its joint venture to launch the Maruti, an Indian brand only in name. Here, too, it is the Japanese, Koreans, Germans, and Chinese that offer consumer choices, with Tata and Mahindra & Mahindra being the only indigenous exceptions. In fast-moving consumer goods, brands such as Anchor, Nirma, Uncle Chips, and Binny's, which once gave multinational players a run for their money, have all vanished or receded to the margins of the market.

Haldiram's, in contrast, is one of the handful of Indian-owned and -developed brands that not only grew but held its own against the snack foods flood from multinationals such as Lay's, Nestlé's, Kellogg's, and Haribo's. More to the point, it took its brand global, with factories and restaurants in the United Kingdom, North America, Southeast Asia, and West Asia. Amul, the flagship brand of the Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF), is another notable exception. The pride of India's White Revolution, it is now a \$80,000 crore brand that strongly expanded its core business of milk, dairy products, and chocolates, against growing competition from both the unorganised sector and entrenched global brands. Apart from exporting to over 50 countries, including the United States and European Union, Amul is now a member of the Global Dairy Trade, a platform where only the world's top six dairy players sell their products. In the main, however, indigenous brands overseas are thin on the ground. Bajaj's two-wheelers, with their decades-long presence in Africa and West Asia, and Airtel, with its pan-African mobile telephony network, are others that have entrenched markets overseas.

The abdication of Indian brands to global competition — with many of them converting themselves into contract manufacturers — reflects the lack of long-term thinking and strategic imagination, which are critical to brand-building. These shortcomings demonstrate how the habits of the protective licence raj have weakened corporate competitive abilities and thinking. This is not to say that Indian business is not capable of plying global competition. Many of those that have been successful at doing so have evolved in the crucible of open competition. For instance, airlines such as Jet Airways (until it imploded), IndiGo, and Vistara (until it merged into Air India) have carved a space for themselves in international skies in the face of formidable competition from the world's biggest airlines. Now, with single malt brands such as Amrut, Rampur, and John Paul's making heady inroads into a space dominated by Scotch whiskeys, there may be reason to raise a glass to the ability of young Indian brands to become truly world-class.

Budgeting in the time of Trump

For the uncertain times ahead, the Budget must balance growth, jobs, and governance — and the recipe is distinctly unglamorous

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Economic policymaking must always reckon with uncertainty. There are times when the uncertainty is acute. The biggest challenge in recent years has been the Covid-19 pandemic. It was hard to tell how long it would last. The policy response to it was, however, quite clear — fiscal and monetary stimulus, although nations came up with varying degrees of stimuli.

What looms ahead of the Union Budget for FY26 is, perhaps, even more challenging. Nobody quite knows how the US President-elect, Donald Trump, will proceed with his plans and how other nations will respond. Also uncertain are his stance on the two geopolitical hotspots at the moment, Ukraine and West Asia, not to mention his own additions, Greenland and the Panama Canal. The only known is that the world economy must brace for major shocks. The focus in the coming Union Budget must be to keep the growth momentum going so that the economy is better placed to withstand any such shocks that arise.

Guided by the latest estimates of the National Statistics Office, the government is likely to fall slightly short of the nominal growth target of 10.5 per cent for FY25. It may still meet the fiscal deficit target of 4.9 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) because capital expenditure will fall below the budgetary estimate.

For FY26, the priority must be to maintain the central government expenditure at the FY25 level of 3.4 per cent of GDP, at the very least. This must not happen at the expense of capital expenditure by public sector undertakings (PSUs). Total central public expenditure (central government plus central PSUs) must be maintained at the FY25 level of 4.5 per cent.

This could well mean exceeding the fiscal deficit target of 4.5 per cent of GDP for FY26 indicated in last year's Budget. So be it. The imperative is to aim for GDP growth of close to 6.5 per cent in the coming year. It is hard to see any big rise in private investment driving

growth in the face of looming uncertainties.

The finance minister had indicated in his speech last year that, from FY27 onwards, the government would focus on ensuring a fall in the central government debt-to-GDP ratio rather than on the fiscal deficit itself. In blunt terms, this means letting go of the fiscal target turned out to be a futile two-decade quest to meet the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) fiscal deficit target of 3 per cent.

A strong fiscal stimulus is especially required because the scope for monetary easing may turn out to be less than what analysts had hoped for. The issue may not just be the persistence of domestic inflation. Mr Trump's position on tariffs spells higher inflation in the US and a strengthening of the dollar, at least in the short run. The US Federal Reserve has indicated that rate cuts in 2025 will be fewer than previously anticipated. Post-Trump, other economies may find it more difficult to delink their policy rates from those of the Fed.

The second priority in the Budget must be the issue of unemployment, especially educated unemployment. Last year's Budget had announced three schemes aimed at incentivising employment in the private sector, along with an internship programme. It projected an expenditure of ₹2 trillion over five years, or ₹40,000 crore annually. However, the discernible allocation in the Budget was only ₹12,000 crore.

The coming Budget should tell us what the outcomes have been. It is unlikely that the private sector has met the government's expectations for job creation, or that it will in the future. Manufacturing has not taken off as expected, and it cannot be relied upon to generate large numbers of jobs in the near future. The services sector generates jobs but many are of low quality.

To alleviate educated unemployment on a crash basis, the government must go all-out to fill vacancies in government. It must also offer the promised intern-

ship stipend of ₹5,000 to all those who apply for internship through the government's portal and fail to secure one within six months. There will be much hand-wringing over unproductive jobs in government and freebies. Critics will say that the government must instead invest more in education and healthcare or in infrastructure. The latter would create conditions for the growth rate to move to over 7 per cent.

We have seen, however, that faster growth does not automatically create sufficient jobs or the right quality of jobs, not just in India, but also in other parts of the world. A large swath of the population needs relief. With both the Centre and the states announcing hand-outs in various forms, we need to move towards an Indian version of a universal basic income. Like it or not, that is the consensus across the political spectrum. If we can, nevertheless, sustain GDP growth at around 6.5 per cent in an adverse global environment, investors will view India's growth-with-inclusiveness model as no mean achievement.

Lastly, the government must focus on improving governance and performance at PSU and public sector banks (PSBs). The imperative is even stronger now that privatisation and asset monetisation have been put on the back burner.

The Financial Services Institutions Bureau (FSIB) has turned out to be a good model for making top-level appointments. The Bureau comprises professionals, a representative of the Reserve Bank of India and a representative of the finance ministry. It recommends whole-time directors and non-executive chairpersons for financial institutions. The government takes a call on the recommendations made by the Bureau.

The Bureau's mandate should also be extended to the appointment of independent directors. The responsibilities cast on independent directors by the RBI have increased considerably. Compensation for independent directors at public sector banks needs to be improved — it is eminently affordable today. A graded scheme can be introduced, depending on the size and performance of a bank.

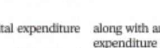
The Public Enterprise Selection Board, which performs similar functions at public enterprises in the non-financial sector, needs to be reconstituted along the same lines as the FSIB. It too must be mandated to appoint independent directors, and on better terms. A separate panel could be created to evaluate the performance of boards at all public enterprises.

A growth rate target of around 6.5 per cent, a high level of public capex, increased government spending on job creation, a relaxed view of the fiscal deficit target, and a greater focus on performance at PSUs/PSBs — the recipe may seem distinctly unglamorous. Well, that is what is required in the uncertain times that the arrival of Mr Trump holds.

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FINGER ON THE PULSE

TT RAM MOHAN



2025: India's tech transformation year

In 2025, India will reach two key milestones — becoming a \$4 trillion economy and surpassing Japan to become the fourth-largest globally. Its future progress towards becoming the third-largest economy will depend on effectively harnessing emerging technologies, with McKinsey's 2024 report identifying 18 tech-sectors that could add \$29 trillion to \$48 trillion globally by 2040.

The economic potential of new technologies can be maximised in two key areas: Production and usage. Producing technologies fosters innovation, creates jobs, and reduces dependency on imports. In a connected world, where network effects are significant, innovation leads to global dominance and huge economic gains, as exemplified by the dominance of a few players in sectors like semiconductors and e-commerce.

This year should be a watershed year, transforming India into a "Product Nation", with ₹1 trillion allocated for Research & Development to the private sector. Finalising its governance and implementation modalities would be of foremost importance. Other policy reforms include: Opening up of R&D across all sectors, including defence, atomic energy, and deep-water technology while removing hurdles from legacy institutions; government procurement policy to foster innovations; greater priority to creating bigger skilled workforce in emerging technologies viz., quantum, cyber-security and space; global branding and export of indigenous industry products through bilateral and multilateral initiatives; reforming standard-making so that it is industry-led and supported by a legislative framework.

The use of new technologies enhances efficiency, boosts productivity, and stimulates innovation, generating multiplier effects throughout the economy. Government actions — creating infrastructure, providing financial support, reducing adoption costs, and enhancing skills — are critical for promoting technology adoption. The success of Aadhaar and UPI showcases the power of government policies in driving widespread tech adoption. A road map for 2025 for a few key technologies is outlined below:

Artificial intelligence: AI, including generative AI, is vital for India to leapfrog development in healthcare, education, and agriculture. The ongoing empanelment of vendors for 10,000 graphics processing units should be expedited. AI infrastructure must be prioritised for defence and security, with a focus on promoting startups and developing foundational models in agriculture, healthcare, education, and sanitation at subsidised rates. API-based access to India's diverse data assets will enable startups to build localised AI models.

Cybersecurity and forensics: India's swift digital adoption has outpaced its cybersecurity preparations, increasing risks. Threats from AI misuse, quantum technologies, and emerging tools like cryptocurrency, satellites, and drones only intensify these challenges. Stringent cybersecurity regulations, with penal provisions, must be enacted across critical sectors such as power, transportation, aviation, oil and gas, and health care. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP), 2023, should be implemented early in 2025. Expanding the use of digital forensics in businesses by notifying private labs as examiners of electronic evidence, along with supporting the development of indigenous tools, is crucial.

Quantum technologies: A nodal ministry should be notified to roll out quantum technologies in key sectors like defence, healthcare, telecommunication, space, and finance. A time-bound action plan for adopting quantum key distribution and post-quantum cryptography solutions, leveraging existing indigenous capabilities, should be implemented. Also, quantum-safe satellite communication capabilities must be developed.

Exploiting data wealth: Tech giants like Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon have become trillion-dollar enterprises leveraging data. India, as a top data producer, can harness the account aggregator (AA) model to monetise data. In 2025, the focus should be on expanding and universalising the AA model in finance, while adapting and rolling it out in education and healthcare.



OFF THE GRID

AJAY KUMAR

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A mensch from Ludhiana



BOOK REVIEW

KANIKA DATTA

The name Kundanial doesn't figure on the list of "Righteous among the Nations", the Holocaust Memorial's designation for those who helped victims of the Third Reich's Final Solution. To Vinay Gupta, author of *A Rescue in Vienna*, Kundanial, a former Provincial Civil Service officer of the Raj and later Ludhiana-based machine tool manufacturer, is a Holocaust survivor of the Jewish families he saved from certain death described him as a *rescuer*, the Yiddish term for a person of honour and integrity. Yet nothing was known of his acts of humanity until his grandson chose to research casual family lore.

Brijmohan Murlal, himself a prominent Ludhiana businessman, remembered him as an innovative businessman who didn't achieve much success.

True, Kundanial (he used no surname), though a vivid personality, would not have merited a biography for his admittedly far-thinking but poorly managed businesses. Indians know of the Maharaja of Jannagar's offer of refuge to about 500 Polish children, Jewish and non-Jewish, orphaned in the Sobibor ghetto in 1942. But as the author points out, that humane act was done at the behest of the Polish Consul General. Kundanial did not risk his livelihood to save Jews. He stumbled on a way to help them when he travelled to Austria in 1938 for surgery and visited a premier European trade fair for business opportunities. By 1938, Austria had been annexed to Hitler's Greater Reich and the process of driving out Jews had begun in earnest. Kundanial probably got the first hint of this crisis when he arrived at the renowned hospital at which he had arranged to have surgery only to find that

Dr Gustav Singer, the famous specialist who was to treat him, had been dismissed for being Jewish.

Kundanial went ahead with the surgery, and during his recovery he met the first of the families he was destined to rescue: Alfred Wachser, who ran an upmarket furniture business, and his wife Lucy, then expecting their first child. There were no complications with Lucy's pregnancy but both were spending prodigious amounts of time in hospital. Later, recovering in a sanatorium, Kundanial met Fritz Weiss, a barrister, who had been admitted with serious injuries. These had been incurred after being attacked by a gang from the Sturmabteilung, the Nazi's paramilitary organisation, and then imprisoned. Barred from practising, his assets confiscated and lacking an ally, Weiss was sheltering in the sanatorium to review his options.

Kundanial, whose big-heartedness was legendary back home, offered Weiss the post of general manager in a new company he planned to start trading wood products

and carpentry supplies called Kundan Agencies. That would give him a reason to get a visa to India. Once he recovered, he approached Wachser, now a father but facing ruin because of boycott of Jewish enterprises. Kundanial offered him a job as master craftsman for his bespoke furniture in the same company. He was willing to sign the unrestricted guarantee the Raj required to provide for the maintenance of any refugees before they were granted an Indian visa.

Kundanial then played "help wanted" ad in a local newspaper asking for experts on wood working and textile weaving (he owned a cloth mill who were willing to work in India. The unwritten condition was that the applicants must be Jewish. That yielded a response from Hans Losch, a textile designer who had lost his job after the anti-Jewish laws were passed. Also responding to the ad was Alfred Schraferne, who ran a plywood business with his brother but had to

"voluntarily" surrender their property. A third rescuee and perhaps the best fit for his core business was Siegmund Retter, owner of a machine tool factory that had been Aryanised.

Neither Fritz Weiss nor Hans Losch stayed in Ludhiana long. Instead, they found lucrative jobs with foreign-owned firms through the Bombay-based Jewish Relief Agency.

A RESCUE IN VIENNA: The Story of an Unlikely Saviour
Author: Vinay Gupta
Publisher: Bloomsbury
Pages: 228
Price: ₹599
It is possible, the author muses, that they struggled in a backwater like Ludhiana after the vibrant and sophisticated culture of Vienna. Kundanial's austere life — a teetotaler and vegetarian — would have added to the difficulties of adjustment. Mr Gupta speculates that they never intended to work for Kundanial and used his offer to exit Austria. He hears them no ill will since both lost family in the death camps. The JRA also found work for Retter, who arrived when Kundanial could no longer afford to hire him because his

fortunes had dipped owing to war-time controls on essential supplies. The two families who did work in Ludhiana were the Wachsers and Schrafernes, and the book has some interesting family photographs of the wives posing in saris.

But their stay was cut short after the British interned all German citizens, Jews and Gentiles. The account of their internment is one of the most interesting parts of the book, revealing the Raj in all its venality. It comes as a surprise to learn that Kundanial, a freedom fighter close to Nehru and a saviour of Jews, was a member of the RSS, unabashed admirers of Hitler. He was arrested for a spell after Gandhi was assassinated and the RSS banned. This is a clear-eyed tribute to an extraordinary man that should remind Indians and Israelis of the values of disinterested humanity. The lack of an index and poor proofing — the spellings of some Austrian names vary, for example — detract from the narrative. It is also a pity that the author chose an inauspicious dialogue to portray events. A story sourced via the "assiduous interviews" he says he conducted and careful documentation would have yielded just as fascinating a story with a more authentic ring.

thehindubusinessline.

FRIDAY • JANUARY 10, 2025

Too taxing

Middle class' tax rates must be rationalised

There can be no argument against giving a consumption boost this Budget (for FY26), even as the first advance estimates of growth for this fiscal point to an element of buoyancy in private final consumption expenditure. This boost seems a tad optimistic, given the mixed trend in lead indicators and the overhang of inflation.



If incomes are indifferent even in the organised sector, as observed by the Chief Economic Advisor recently, it goes beyond saying that India's 10.4 crore taxpayers need more disposable income. A focus on capital spends alone will not be enough to push the economy beyond a growth rate of 6.5 per cent. The middle class has done the heavy lifting on income tax collections in recent years, while the corporates' share has dipped. Since FY23, personal income tax collections have exceeded corporate collections, with the former being 15 per cent higher than the latter in FY24 and accounting for about 54 per cent of the direct tax collection (₹10.45 lakh crore) of ₹19.6 lakh crore. Personal income tax collections were up nearly 25 per cent in FY24, while corporates' tax payouts increased 10.4 per cent to ₹9.1 lakh crore. The skew has worsened in the first half of this fiscal, with a 25 per cent growth in personal income tax collections, against 2.3 per cent growth in corporate taxes. Even sections of India Inc, facing a demand squeeze, have argued for personal tax relief.

It is evident from recent data released by the Central Board of Direct Taxes that the tax burden of those in the ₹5.5-9.5 lakh annual income bracket is rather high, as the total tax payable by those in this category exceeds those in higher income brackets. It is worth considering tax reliefs for this quintessentially middle class bracket as well as those below it, given their high marginal propensity to consume. The sharp fall in number of income tax return filers after the ₹1 crore threshold raises questions of undeclared income, which suggests that the doubling of taxpayers between FY15 to FY24 has happened at the lower end. Therefore, efforts must be made to tax the middle class less, raising the zero-rated income slab from the current ₹3 lakh to, say, ₹5 lakh. A reordering of the income slabs may help, wherein there are just, say, two slabs between ₹5 lakh and ₹12 lakh with rates of 5 per cent and 10 per cent. A 30 per cent rate for an income level of above ₹15 lakh needs upward revision to ₹20 lakh.

The standard deduction allowed under the new scheme can be raised substantially from the present ₹75,000 to encourage a shift from the exemptions-based old scheme. However, a surcharge on incomes above ₹50 lakh is not without merits in a country with income disparities. After all, the burden of paying taxes, direct and indirect, cannot rest on the middle class alone. The tax base (about 10 per cent of the working population) must be increased at the top end.

POCKET

RAVIRKANTH



"There is an advantage with high-interest loans. One doesn't have to read the fine print!"

Is spam being reined in?

PARTIAL RELIEF. While unsolicited commercial calls over telecom networks are falling, those over unregulated OTT platforms need to be addressed



V. SRIHAR

Unsolicited commercial communication (UCC), often referred to as spam, is defined as "any commercial communication that is neither as per the consent nor as per registered preference(s) of recipient" and regulated as per the Telecom Commercial Communication Customer Preference Regulation (TCCPCR) 2018. After five years of enacting this regulation, the common blockchain based distributed ledger technology (DLT), as advocated by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), has been implemented by all the licensed Telecom and Internet Service Providers (TISPs) to protect consumers from spam calls. Further, severe penalties for sending spam calls that do not comply with the regulation, including blacklisting the sending entity for two years was notified by TRAI on August 13, 2024.

Thanks to these initiatives, data recently released by the Ministry of Communications indicates that the UCC calls have been decreasing over the telecom networks.

While the UCC regulations apply to the licensed TISPs, it is not applicable for the Over The Top (OTT) communication services (OTT-Com) such as WhatsApp Business, or Google's Rich Communication Service (RCS) for business that allow Principal Entities (PEs) such as businesses, banks, along

with their telemarketers (TMs), to send chats and related messaging to consumers.

The OTT-Com is provided over the public Internet, "untethered" from the underlying physical network. Due to the above regulations on spam over telecom networks, the telemarketers have resorted to spam over OTT-Com such as WhatsApp. Hence the reason for TISPs to lobby for bringing such OTT-Com also under the UCC regulations.

The TISPs provide inter-operable services (both voice and short message service) as defined by 3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP) and associated standards as enforced through telecom regulation. Hence the DLT platform that has been created by the TISPs provides inter-operability and acts as a single framework to contain spam calls. Is it possible to integrate the OTT messages into this common platform to contain spam over OTT-Com?

Originally developed by the Jabber open community, the Extensible Messaging and Presence Protocol (XMPP) has been customised to a great extent by OTT-Com providers such as WhatsApp, and Google Chat. The RCS used by Google for business communication was started by the GSM Association, the largest professional

It is time OTT communication services look at interoperability of their messaging platforms to facilitate curbing spam calls so that uniform rules shall be applicable

body supported by mobile operators, way back in 2008 to provide multimedia support to SMS. Hence there is reason to believe that using appropriate interfaces, it may be possible to integrate the OTT messages also to the existing DLT platform.

However, the OTT-Coms are not required to be inter-operable as these are not regulated entities. Moreover, unlike the TISPs whose operational jurisdiction is well-bounded, OTTs provide their communication services across countries which have varied regulations for containing UCC. Hence the reluctance of the OTT providers to ensure compatibility with the DLT platform in India.

MESSAGE TRACEABILITY

The other issue is "message traceability". To enhance message traceability for containing spam, TRAI issued directions on August 20, 2024, that message from all sending entities to the recipients must be traceable from December 10, 2024. However, the applicability of this to OTTs is ambiguous. The Information Technology (IT) Act 2008 (2008) through Section 79, provides immunity to all the intermediaries such as OTT-Com providers.

However, the IT (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021 has in its rules, 4(2) that "a significant social media intermediary providing services primarily in the nature of messaging shall enable the identification of the first originator of the information". While the OTT-Com providers contend that adhering to this rule will upend the end-to-end security of their messaging

services, whether the same is applicable to security and privacy of business messages needs a re-examination.

Considering all the above, can a telecom regulation such as TCCPCR be applicable to unregulated OTT-Com providers? If not, should they be brought into the regulatory ambit is a question that haunts regulators around the world. The option that is always open to the OTT-Coms is to take proactive steps in containing spam messaging despite their business interest in promoting the same. This shall be implemented using a robust consumer consent framework and maintaining a repository similar to "do not call registry" maintained by the TISPs.

The regulators across the sectors have realised that the immunity for intermediaries for third party messages is passé. It is time OTT-Coms look at interoperability of their messaging platforms to facilitate curbing spam calls so that uniform rules shall be applicable. The day is not far off as the Digital Markets Act 2022 of the European Union requires all significant OTT-Coms (also referred to as Gatekeepers) to enable their interpersonal communications services interoperable with other service providers.

Towards this, Meta, earlier this year, published 'WhatsApp Reference Offer' on the technical requirements to enable third-party providers to provide inter-operable services with WhatsApp. As the work on interoperability of OTT communication apps have already started, it is time that we incorporate these clauses into our regulatory framework as well.

The writer is Professor, IIT-Bangalore

Warehouse-based agri lending has some way to go

Positive outcome rests on more warehouses registering with the regulator, and further support from the government

Kushankar Dey
Indrajit Banerjee

Launched in December 2024 with a ₹1,000-crore corpus, the Credit Guarantee Scheme for electronic Negotiable Warehouse Receipt (eNWR)-based pledge financing is a welcome move to insure eligible financial institutions' credit risk.

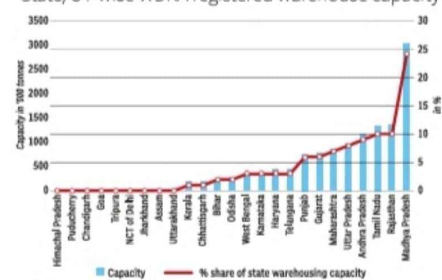
Warehouse service providers (WSPs) and collateral (commodity) management agencies (CMAs) enable pledge lending as they perform a slew of activities, namely, commodity inspection, commodity valuation, stock preservation and management, clearing and settlement — that eventually manage banks' credit risks.

The regulatory environment is the most important enabler to boost pledge financing. For example, agri-warehousing business and physical delivery of agri-commodities came under regulatory oversight after the Warehousing (Development and Regulation) Act was passed in 2007 — the Act set up the Warehousing Development and Regulatory Authority (WDRA) as a statutory body to oversee warehousing business.

However, WDRA-registered warehouses remain 8-10 per cent of the State-wise warehousing capacities reported at 367.49 lakh tonnes in March 2024 (see Chart). Therefore, there is a need to increase WDRA-registered warehouses to boost pledge lending.

The latest scheme includes a

State/UT-wise WDRA registered warehouse capacity





According to the IOC, screening and health evaluation are the only ways to reduce the incidence of cardiovascular accidents. FILE PHOTO

'Periodic screening' required to avert sudden cardiac deaths in athletes

During vigorous physical activity, there is a substantial increase in sympathetic nervous system activity. In predisposed individuals, this surge can trigger arrhythmias and potentially lead to sudden cardiac arrest. Understanding this mechanism is crucial for prevention and risk assessment.

Lakshmi Sundar

Exercise is a vital tool for promoting health and well-being. It improves cardiovascular risk factors like lipid levels, hypertension, insulin sensitivity, and weight. Multiple studies have established a positive correlation between moderate aerobic exercise and reduced risk of coronary artery disease. However, instances of sudden cardiac death (SCD) in athletes, while rare, remain a significant concern that requires careful attention and preventive measures.

SCD is defined as a sudden, unexpected death due to cardiac causes or sudden death in a structurally normal heart with no other explanation and a history consistent with cardiac-related death. The most common cause of SCD is sudden cardiac arrest (SCA), characterised by an unexpected circulatory arrest typically due to cardiac arrhythmia, occurring within an hour of symptom onset. SCA may be reversible with prompt medical intervention, particularly defibrillation.

SCD in athletes draws unwanted media attention and emotionally affects the athlete and the family. An activity that is normally associated with health can draw negative attention.

What does exercise do?

What happens during exercise? During vigorous physical activity, there is a substantial increase in sympathetic nervous system activity. In predisposed individuals, this surge can trigger arrhythmias and potentially lead to sudden cardiac arrest. Understanding this

mechanism is crucial for prevention and risk assessment.

The risk factors for SCA and SCD include coronary artery disease, a genetic predisposition, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, and arrhythmias; pre-existing heart conditions, weight issues, high-intensity exercise without proper training, a history of smoking (current or past), and increased ambient temperature.

According to International Olympic Committee recommendations, pre-participation screening and periodic health evaluation are the only ways to reduce the incidence of cardiovascular accidents and other injuries in athletes.

Elite athletes and people in competitive sports who perform at the highest level are not exempt from cardiovascular incidents on the field. Although the incidence is low, hereditary and congenital abnormalities of the heart are the leading cause of non-accidental deaths in young athletes.

The World Athletics Health and Science Department, based on IOC guidelines, recommends a pre-participation medical evaluation (PPME) at the start of the season for athletes in competitive sports. This includes personal history, family history, physical examination, and 12-lead resting ECG. Those with a positive history or findings will be further evaluated with an echo cardiogram, ambulatory ECG, stress testing, or cardiac MRI, as the case may be.

A study conducted on the benefits of PPME demonstrated a drop in the incidence of SCD by 90% in young athletes from 3.6/100,000 person-years to 0.4/100,000 person-years. They also found that most of the deaths in athletes under 35 years are due to congenital or

acquired cardiac malformations. In the middle-aged population it is due to undiagnosed coronary artery disease.

This kind of screening may not be possible in mass endurance events where the majority of participants are recreational athletes. As event organisers, the registration form for such events could carry specific questions that could identify at-risk individuals. Such individuals could be asked to get a thorough assessment to be done by their physician before the event. Medical bibs could be distributed to help identify athletes at risk.

Despite screening, sudden cardiac arrest may be challenging to predict. But evidence points to excellent survival rates after arrest in this group when appropriate resuscitation is started promptly. For every minute delay, there is a 7% decreased chance of survival. Personnel trained in CPR and access to defibrillators on the route and at sports venues are crucial in reducing the incidence of sudden cardiac death. It is essential for race organisers to have a medical team and plan in place for events with mass participation. The goal isn't just to identify risk – it's to create pathways for safe participation whenever possible.

Health evaluations

The onus just doesn't lie on the organisers. As athletes, competitive or recreational, it is important to have periodic health evaluations. A metabolic panel with a 12-lead ECG is sufficient as step 1. The ECG needs to be read by a trained physician who is aware of the physiological and structural adaptations in the heart of an athlete. There is no benefit in doing an echocardiogram or cardiac MRI as a primary prevention tool.

A study into the benefits of PPME demonstrated a drop in incidence of SCD by 90% in young athletes from 3.6/100,000 person-years to 0.4/100,000 person-years. They also found that most deaths in athletes under 35 are due to congenital cardiac issues

Athletes should also be honest in providing correct medical information.

Although SCD is rare, it is a traumatic event that has a significant impact on society. Exercise is health-promoting and the benefits for physical and mental well-being far outweigh the risks. The risk of sudden cardiac death is higher in those with pre-existing conditions, and hence it is important that exercise be carried out under supervision or with the help of a trained coach. While sudden cardiac events in sports are concerning, they shouldn't prevent us from embracing the profound benefits of physical activity.

Through thoughtful preparation, supportive communities, and responsive care systems, we can create environments where everyone can pursue their athletic aspirations safely. By combining evidence-based preventive measures and responsible training with compassionate support systems, we can help ensure that sports remain a source of health, joy, and community for all participants.

Dr. Lakshmi Sundar is president of the Indian Society of Lifestyle, a board certified LM Physician and has been certified in race emergency medicine by the World Endurance Medicine Academy. sundarlakshmi@hotmail.com



Participants in the Chennai Marathon 2025 which was held last Sunday. NAGU R

Medical tents keep marathon runners out of the danger zone

Sahana Mira S

A marathon is not a run in the park, it comes with its levels of difficulty for the athletes, but also for the organisers. A great deal of preparation is required to iron out the logistics. During the race, medical management is the only thing that stands between euphoria and a possible tragedy.

Over 25,000 runners laced up at 3 a.m. for the Chennai Marathon, hosted by Chennai Runners on Sunday. There were many first-timers amongst this number who took the 10 km route from Napier Bridge. Seasoned runners tackled the half marathon and the full 42 km run, concluding at the Indian Maritime University (IMU) on East Coast Road. But between the adrenaline and the cheers, there were a few incidents, which were handled by race medical director Lakshmi Sundar and her squad of first responders and doctors spread across all 8 zones the run covered.

Dr. Sundar said that the medical team had prepared for various levels of health support, with some zones focusing on minor issues that were treated with ice packs and foot elevation, and some on non-critical care too, while the third level was emergency life support. On reaching the Indian Maritime University, the medical team dealt with the kind of emergencies that accompany long-distance running, such as hyperthermia (elevated body temperature) and hyponatremia (low sodium levels).

Dr. Sundar identified a case involving severe hyperthermia. A runner who had completed her race was brought to the tent showing signs of disorientation. The medical team immersed her in a complete ice water bath, leaving her head exposed outside the tub, to cool her core temperature. Once

The medical tent at the IMU was equipped with critical care and non critical care beds, buckets of ice, and an ice water bath, alongside doctors with an AED defibrillator

stabilised, she was transferred to an emergency bed, dried off and left the venue an hour later.

The medical tent at IMU was equipped with critical care and non critical care beds, buckets of ice, and an ice water bath, alongside doctors with an AED defibrillator. Other incidents on the day included runners who fell on the Adyar Bridge and suffered open wounds that were treated at the tent. Another runner who felt discomfort abandoned the race and was monitored using an ECG.

There were many cases of cramping, but with buckets of ice, they were able to get back on the road. The first responders also provided salt to runners in the tent experiencing dizziness due to dropping levels of sodium in the blood.

The doctors observed that participants in the 10-km run, many of whom were new to running, experienced mostly minor injuries. This was partly because of the lack of preparation – some runners hadn't eaten properly before the race, while others overhydrated. Doctors attending to the initial zones of the 10-km run, including assistant race medical director Erika Patel and lead doctor Tamil Anbu, treated cases of nausea, sprain, ankle inflammation, and falls. (sahana.mira@thehindu.co.in)

Let medical reasons guide decisions to perform hysterectomies, say specialists

Ramya Kannan

National attention has been sought and secured on the subject of caesarean sections – pointing out a possible excess. The likely reliance on more than medical factors to perform the procedure has also become an issue. Calls to regulate have been loud and purposeful, particularly recently in Karnataka. But activists also point to hysterectomies, raising the question of whether such procedures are being done only when warranted.

Does the social and economic status of a woman impact the decision to perform a hysterectomy? What are the factors that truly influence the decision in health care settings in the country?

A study of National Family Health Survey-4 data on hysterectomies revealed that on either end of the income and literacy spectrum, more women were undergoing surgery to

remove the uterus.

In an article *Hysterectomy across Different Occupational Groups of Women in India: A Cross-sectional Study*, recently published in the *Journal of Medical Evidence* (AIMS Rishikesh Journal), authors Gaurav Gunal and Sudeshna Roy from the Department of Biostatistics, International Institute for Population Sciences) recorded that while five in every 100 women had undergone a hysterectomy, it was more likely to be high among agricultural workers in India and women in high-income groups.

Dual trend

"Our paper indicated a dual trend where women from both ends of the wealth/education spectrum exhibit a tendency to undergo hysterectomies, though for different reasons and under distinct circumstances," said Mr. Gunal.

For women agricultural workers limited awareness of sexual and reproductive health, delayed treatment of

gynaecological issues, and poor hygiene are primary causative factors.

"In addition, we need to factor in menstrual taboos, the physical burden of labour-intensive agricultural work, and a desire to eliminate menstruation-related disruptions to their productivity when it comes to these women."

The authors point out that financial incentives through public health insurance schemes sometimes enable access to hysterectomies. Also significant is the lack of alternative treatment options and counselling, which further pushes these women toward hysterectomy.

Ms. Roy points out that on the other side of the spectrum, women in the highest wealth quintile also tend to have more hysterectomies since they are able to afford the expense.

Surgery the last option

Hrishikesh Pai, past president, Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India, says the bottom

line is that every woman should get the right treatment.

"Any medical treatment starts with conservative management; only if that fails do we look at minimally invasive interventions; surgery is the last option," he says. Dr. Pai was on the committee that drew up guidelines for conducting hysterectomies and fixed the protocol and standardised algorithms for the treatments.

"What is important is to maintain equity of care for all. We must give the same treatment to all women, but we are not able to do so. Clearly the yardstick is not merely clinical, it involves the social and economic as well. However, we are doing well – regulations are in place – and monitoring is important in order to ensure that no woman gets treatment that she does not need," Dr. Pai emphasises.

Last year, the Supreme Court urged states and union territories to implement guidelines to monitor "unnecessary" hysterectomies with-

in three months. This followed a public interest litigation that alleged "unnecessary hysterectomies" were carried out in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana.

Excessive bleeding

Excessive menstrual bleeding was the most common underlying condition for undergoing hysterectomy, many studies have shown.

"Ultimately, it is when the patient comes to us that decides what kind of treatment can be started," says N. S. Kanimozhi, obstetrician and gynaecologist and founder of Thaimai Hospital, Chennai. There already exists a rural-urban divide in terms of when women report problems, she adds.

"In our experience, we find that sometimes women only notice they have a problem after they have faint-ed. They do not think excessive bleeding is abnormal. There is a fainting episode after which they are forced to seek care."

"The immediate task is to treat the anaemia and narrow down on the basic cause – if there are fibroids or cysts. We then put them on drugs, oral contraceptives, and if this does not work, we start procedures such as endometrial ablation, and hormonal intra-uterine device insertions. It is only when all this fails that we need to schedule a hysterectomy," Dr. Kanimozhi explains.

She said with modern devices, it is now possible to do minimally invasive hysterectomies, and open surgery is rare. In her opinion, the baseline for determining the course of treatment should be the condition of the patient, and the doctor must be satisfied that the only option left is to perform a hysterectomy. (ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in)

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Damage control

Adherence to existing regulations can limit the impact of earthquakes

This week, an early-morning earthquake in Tibet of magnitude 7.1 and originating at a depth of 10 km has reportedly claimed at least 100 lives and damaged buildings and houses. The tremors from the quake were felt in Nepal as well as parts of Bihar and even New Delhi, thousands of kilometres away. The main earthquake was followed by at least two aftershocks. If the epicentre had been located closer to India, the damage could have been manifold. Earthquakes in the Himalayas evoke a special kind of dread in the country. Memories of two deadly quakes in Nepal in April and May of 2015 that killed at least 9,000 and caused incalculable damage still bubble up. The tectonic plates are the gigantic shards into which Earth is broken up. Layered on these are the continents and the seas. These plates are constantly in motion – colliding with, diverging with, or sliding past one another. The Indian plate collided with the Eurasian plate and the crust tilted upwards, creating the Himalayas. The fractured zones along which they interact create the fault lines where earthquakes occur. By studying these faults and the pattern of past earthquakes, seismologists can estimate how much latent energy at these fault lines, which can run thousands of miles, has been released and how much of it still resides in them.

Scientists have long warned of a massive, overdue earthquake in the Garhwal-Kumaon range because of what is known about the pattern of quakes in the region. The records of the last 300 years suggest that those that have occurred have not released all the pent-up energy and that is why there is a broad consensus among experts that an 8-magnitude tremor is overdue. Unfortunately, predicting the day and time is outside the ambit of current science. Thus, the best we can hope for is insulation against the projected damage. It is in this context that infrastructure development in the Himalayan region must be viewed. While several of these projects are intended to smooth the movement of people and goods, the recurrent landslides and glacial lake outbursts that wash away dams, hydropower projects, and roads serve as a constant reminder of the inherent fragility of the region. Every form of infrastructure in the region – power plant or dam – must take into account the imminence of a major earthquake and the associated costs factored into planning. Adhering to already existing building codes, not only in the Himalayas but in the surrounding Indo-Gangetic plains, can go a long way in limiting the inevitable damage.

Winter contest

Assembly elections to Delhi have an oversized importance

The Delhi Assembly elections on February 5 is set to be a bipolar contest between the incumbent Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Congress, once the most popular party in the national capital, is struggling to regain at least part of its lost prominence. Delhi is not a full-fledged State, and its unique and convoluted governance design often sets the Centre and the State government on a collision course. Still, there is national spotlight on Delhi politics, which the AAP and the BJP have dominated since 2012. Since then, the voters in Delhi have swung overwhelmingly in favour of the AAP in Assembly elections and the BJP in Lok Sabha elections. The AAP nurtures national ambitions and its chief, Arvind Kejriwal, fashions himself as a challenger to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the run-up to the elections, the AAP has had its image of incorruptibility and of being a platform for the commoner severely stained by corruption allegations against Mr. Kejriwal and several of his colleagues. It is true that the central investigative agencies are selective in their anti-corruption probe, but that does not absolve AAP of suspicion. The frequent run-ins with the Lieutenant Governor appointed by the Centre have made it difficult for the party to deliver on what it has promised, even as it makes a bid for a fourth term.

The BJP is pitching a double-engine government that will put an end to the tussle between the two powers that control Delhi. The election is likely to bring up issues concerning the integrity of the election process itself. The AAP has submitted to the Election Commission that the names of bona fide voters are being removed from the electoral rolls. When announcing the elections, the Chief Election Commissioner sought to allay these fears saying deletion of names was not possible without adhering to strict protocols, and every party has the right to raise objections at various stages. In response, the BJP has said that the AAP is worried that illegal Rohingyas and Bangladeshi immigrants who are benefiting from the party's welfare schemes will be struck off the list. The results, scheduled to be announced on February 8, will also be a test of the strength, the strategies, and the coherence of the parties ranged against the BJP. While the AAP and the Congress fought the Lok Sabha elections with a seat-sharing agreement as INDIA partners in an attempt to defeat the BJP, they are opposing each other in this fight. For the BJP that considers every election as a life-and-death matter, Delhi is even more so.

We need accessibility rules that are based on principles

The Supreme Court, in *Rajive Raturi v. Union of India* (2024), held Rule 15 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Rules, 2017, violative of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

The Court reasoned that the Rule was drafted in a discretionary tone whereas the corresponding provisions (Sections 40, 44, 45, 46, 89) in the Act imposed a mandatory obligation for the government. This was significant as Rule 15 was a statutory provision under which the accessibility guidelines of respective departments and ministries were notified. Key examples include the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs' guidelines for creating barrier-free environments, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways' bus body code, and other accessibility standards established by the Ministries of Sports, Culture, and Information and Broadcasting.

The Court observed that these guidelines allowed discretion to the ministries and departments, which is antithetical to the mandatory language of the Act. Moreover, striking down Rule 15 also meant that the accessibility guidelines notified under the Rule lost their statutory authority. As a result, the Court gave the government three months to develop minimum mandatory accessibility requirements to govern all the sectors.

The judgment is a stark reminder of how accessibility guidelines have been created in silos without the identification of normative principles that will ensure universality and intersectorality to those guidelines. Thus, while formulating new guidelines, there needs to be a shift towards a principle-based framework on accessibility rules.

The idea of accessibility

The Court deliberated in detail on the difference between accessibility and reasonable accommodation. Accessibility and reasonable accommodation both originate within the principles of substantive equality of the Constitution. Accessibility is now accepted as a right woven throughout the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Conversely, reasonable accommodation is a facilitator of substantive equality where specific challenges are dealt with in a specific context. Therefore, both concepts should be understood as interdependent and complementary to each other, where accessibility builds the edifice through standardised accessibility standards from the outset, while reasonable accommodation ensures tailored solutions for those individuals who might still face inaccessibility in a specific context.

The idea of accessibility is not static, and the conceptual contours and corresponding tools



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The new accessibility rules must be direct, understandable, and practical to ensure effective implementation

have evolved regularly. For instance, with the advent of Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things and their incorporation into social interactions, the understanding of digital accessibility has evolved simultaneously. This makes it necessary to modify the nature, extent, and type of digitally accessible tools that can ensure broader inclusivity.

The shifting threshold also needs to be understood in the context of phased realisation of accessibility. The Court in *Rajive Raturi* observed that the existing guidelines are framed in a way that establishes long-term goals of accessibility without setting the minimum standards requiring immediate implementation. Hence, the minimum accessibility threshold shall be envisaged on a sliding scale wherein the baseline moves forward at periodical intervals. Canada has developed a comprehensive road map to achieve full accessibility by 2040, focusing on harmonising standards across the country through two work streams, with periodic reviews every five years to adapt to changing needs.

The RPwD Act defines barriers in the broadest form possible, wherein intangible barriers such as attitudinal barriers are recognised in addition to tangible barriers such as infrastructure. This has modified how accessibility is viewed and understood within physical and digital ecosystems. Thus, it is necessary to evolve accessibility parameters in theory and practice to overcome tangible and intangible barriers. For instance, the evolving understanding of disability is an aspect that informs the attitude of society and, hence, directly relates to the attitudinal barrier. Thus, accessibility must also align with this evolution of disability understanding to be truly inclusive.

The understanding of universal design has also evolved over time. It is not just limited to persons with disabilities but also includes every vulnerable community, such as women, children, and the elderly. This reflects a tacit recognition of the universality of disability, which is not identified as an individual's incapacity to perform but rather the composition of the environment in which one operates. Disability may arise from a high cognitive workload causing an inability to focus and control emotions, temporarily broken limbs, unavailability of ramps to a pregnant mother, age-related complications, etc. Thus, the rules should be applicable across groups, providing accessibility in the general sense and not exclusive to persons with disabilities.

Compliance with social audit

Section 48 of the RPwD Act mandates the Central and State governments to regularly undertake social audits of all general schemes and programmes to ensure they do not have an

adverse impact on the needs and concerns of persons with disabilities. Social audits play a vital role in developing and strengthening the accountability of the government and service providers. For instance, regular social audits of schemes providing assistance technologies to persons with disabilities can assess the bottlenecks in the delivery of services, identify the changing needs of individuals, and provide better devices.

However, due to the lack of standardised guidelines under the RPwD Rules, there is no clarity on the scope and methodology of social audits. This might lead to inconsistencies among the Centre and the States, lack of awareness, and insufficient training for auditors. Therefore, clear guidelines and operationalisation of social audits at a larger scale will help identify the changing nature of disability-related challenges and make targeted interventions to enhance service delivery through concerned schemes and programmes.

Rules have to be understandable

The earlier accessibility rules across departments and ministries suffered from bureaucratic complexity regarding their mandate. There were too many technicalities and often contradictory accessibility mandates from multiple ministries that confused the complying entities. For instance, a sporting complex has multiple guidelines for accessibility from the Ministry of Urban Affairs and Housing, Sports, Transport, and others. This led to not just a failure to provide objective parameters but also increased the compliance cost for such establishments. During the proceeding under the redressal mechanism, the complex and overlapping guidelines also delayed the relief sought by persons with disabilities.

The new accessibility rules must be direct, understandable, and practical to ensure effective implementation. The ambiguity in department/ministry jurisdiction that plagued the earlier rules should also be addressed by having a nodal authority, ideally, the sector regulators, and in the absence of it, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment should adjudicate on rules.

The deadline for releasing the new accessibility guidelines is February, subject to extension. Thus, there is a necessity for diverse sectors, both private and public, beyond social services such as financial, technological, transport, to deliberate upon the minimum rules of accessibility. This isn't just warranted by the legislative mandate of the RPwD Act but also a market incentive to tap into the large population base by providing accessible products and services.

Section 152 of BNS should not become a proxy for sedition

The Rajasthan High Court, in *Tejender Pal Singh v. State of Rajasthan* (2024), cautioned against using Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) as a tool to stifle legitimate dissent. In 2022, before the BNS was enacted, the Supreme Court had suspended pending criminal trials and court proceedings under Section 124A (sedition) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) until the government reconsidered the law. This was followed by a verbal proclamation by the Union Home Minister that 'sedition' would be repealed as an offence. Section 152 of the BNS criminalises any act exciting secession, armed rebellion, and subversive activities. It also criminalises acts encouraging feelings of separatism or endangering the sovereignty, unity, and integrity of India. While the BNS does not formally use the term 'sedition', the Rajasthan High Court's recent decision hints that the spectre of sedition still looms large in the BNS.

Problems with Section 152

First, Section 152 BNS criminalises 'acts endangering the sovereignty, unity, and integrity of India'. However, what constitutes such endangerment under Section 152 has not been defined in the statute. This renders the provision vague, and amenable to expansive interpretation by enforcement authorities. Accordingly, a speech criticising a prominent historical or political figure, or sympathising with a controversial public figure, may be construed as 'endangering' the 'unity and integrity of India' for initiating legal action against a person. In the current sociopolitical environment that appears increasingly fragmented, a stringent penal provision without inbuilt checks for abuse may be used to stifle dissent and criticism.



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The lack of a statutory requirement to establish a causal linkage between the speech and its actual consequence before depriving the accused of personal liberty renders Section 152 amenable to abuse

Second, the term 'knowingly' in Section 152 substantially lowers the threshold for commission of the offence, especially in the context of social media. Even if a person does not have the malicious intent to incite activities or feelings prohibited under Section 152, they can still be considered liable for the offence if they share a post knowing it will reach a larger audience and may provoke such activities or feelings. This would be sufficient to arrest a person and prosecute them for commission of the offence under Section 152, which is cognisable and non-bailable. The lack of a statutory requirement to prima facie establish a causal linkage between the speech and its actual consequence before depriving the accused of personal liberty renders Section 152 amenable to abuse much like its predecessor, and has the potential to instill a chilling effect on free speech. The potential for abuse of the sedition-like provision is clearly borne out by data of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) regarding Section 124A of the IPC. Out of 548 persons arrested between 2015 and 2020 for sedition, only 12 people were convicted in seven cases. More importantly, this was the situation when Section 124A IPC was relatively narrower and more specific in comparison to Section 152 of the BNS. Unfortunately, the NCRB data, and the benefit of hindsight regarding abuse of Section 124A, seem to have had no bearing in designing the contours of Section 152 of the BNS.

The way forward

In the past, the judiciary has consistently adopted a constitutionalist interpretation to strike a careful balance between national interest and the freedom of expression. The Supreme Court has given weight to the actual consequence or impact

of free speech in determining the offence rather than considering the 'speech' on its own. For instance, in *Balwant Singh and Anr v. State of Punjab* (1995), the Court drew a line of demarcation between casual gonggonging and its repercussions or consequences, requiring a direct causal nexus between the act and its impact for it to amount to an offence of sedition. Further, in *Javed Ahmad Hazam v. State of Maharashtra and Ors* (2024), the Court said the 'effect of the words must be judged from the standards of reasonable, strong-minded, firm and courageous men, and not those of weak and vacillating minds...'. Moreover, in *Kedar Nath Singh v. State of Bihar* (1962), the Court had differentiated 'disloyalty towards the government' from 'strongly worded criticism of the government and its policies'.

Given the lack of inbuilt safeguards in Section 152 to prevent its abuse, these interpretations should guide the enforcement authorities in applying this provision. Moreover, the Supreme Court should, when it gets the earliest opportunity, craft a set of guidelines for the enforcement authorities, demarcating the boundaries for the terms used under Section 152 BNS, as it did with respect to 'arrest' in *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal*. This will ensure that the provision does not become a proxy for the offence of sedition.

It is important to provide liberal space to thoughts, beliefs and expressions, and to subject them all to unimpeded criticisms, especially in the age of social media. We need to fall back on the concept of 'marketplace of ideas', as envisioned by Justice Holmes in *Abrams v. United States*, because the best test of truth will always be the potential of an idea to get itself accepted in a democratic and diverse society.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Another stampede

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams has a great track record in managing crowds, which is why this incident comes as a surprise ("6 killed, 20 injured in stampede at Tirupati", Jan. 9). In India, stampedes are common, whether at places of worship, processions, or theatres. Devotes always come in larger numbers than expected. The administration must plan for the worst-case scenario. **Kahrisagara Balaji Rao** Hyderabad

The Maha Kumbh Mela will soon be taking place in Uttar Pradesh. The stampedes in Tirupati, Hyderabad and Hathras must serve as a warning to the Uttar Pradesh government. After the stampede in the theatre in Hyderabad, the Telangana police had accused the theatre management and actor Aliu Arjun. Who will the Andhra Pradesh government blame for the Tirupati stampede? **Baru Rajendra Prasad** Hyderabad

A powerful weapon

The RTI Act is the most powerful weapon in the hands of citizens ("Cripple and scuttle", Jan. 9). It empowers citizens and increases accountability and responsibility of public institutions. Filling up vacancies in Information Commissions is crucial for the smooth flow of information. **Kamakshi Saxena** Delhi

Congress and SP have

extended their support to AAP could challenge the Congress's position, both in Delhi, where it is contesting, and within the INDIA bloc, where it holds a leadership position ("backing AAP: rift with Cong. widens", Jan. 9). The shifting power dynamics could lead to fissures within the bloc. **Ahmed Raza Manu** Hyderabad

is not surprising ("Wayward

liberal, Jan. 8"). His political downfall is of his own making, thanks largely to his misadventures in public administration. The economic downturn, the crisis in the housing sector, and overwhelming immigration are the main reasons why he has lost public faith. The final straw may be the prospect of huge tariffs from Canada's main trading partner, the U.S. His resignation is a damage control exercise for his party. But how far the

party will be able to control

the damage is anybody's guess. **D.V.G. Sankar Rao** Vizianagaram



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IN THE LIMELIGHT

Willem Dafoe in a scene from *Nosferatu*. AP

The inescapable cultural infection and relevance of 'Nosferatu'

A hundred years after terrorising its first hapless victims, F.W. Murnau's rebellious expressionist fever dream refuses to fade away, infecting pop culture with an undying persistence, reshaping vampire lore and rewriting the genetic code of horror cinema as we know it

Avaan Paul Chowdhury

In the autumn of 1922, cinemagoers were introduced to a figure who would cast an inextricably formative shadow over the genre. When F.W. Murnau's terrifying monochrome reimagining of Bram Stoker first hit the screens, they were greeted with something primal, grotesque and exceedingly unsettling; far removed from the suave aristocracy of *Dracula*. The silent, jagged masterpiece of German Expressionism, soon sank its ivories into the very essence of what we know of modern horror today, shaping a genre that would never again be the same. With Robert Eggers' much-anticipated remake looming over Indian theatres at long last, it feels only fitting to revisit the ways in which *Nosferatu* casts a decisive darkness as inescapable as Count Orlok's own.

An illicit evil

Let's begin with the legal disclaimer: *Nosferatu* was an unauthorised adaptation of *Dracula*. Prana Film, the short-lived production company behind the project, decided that a few superficial name changes – Count *Dracula* became Count Orlok, Jonathan Harker was rebranded as Hutter – would suffice to sidestep pesky copyright laws. Of course, it didn't. Stoker's worded successfully sued, and a court ordered all copies of the film to be incinerated. That *Nosferatu* survived is a small miracle, and its preservation feels almost poetic: a film about a creature that defies death refusing to succumb to an ashy oblivion.

But it isn't just the film's survival that has given it mythic status; rather the genius with which it redefined the lore. At

first glance, *Nosferatu* appears as a curious anomaly. Orlok, played by a more-than-convincing Max Schreck, was the antithesis to the dignified seducer we've come to associate with *Dracula*. There was no flowing cape or widow's peak; rather a hideous spectral figure with rodent-like features, elongated fingers, and a hunchback. Producer and art director Albin Grau's stark departure in creature design was steeped in occultism and inspired by wartime stories of vampiric folklore that envisioned Orlok as a personification of pestilence.

Schreck's portrayal of Orlok leaned heavily on the exaggerated physicality of German stage tradition, transforming the character into a creature of unrestrained, animalistic menace. Unlike *Dracula*'s meticulously groomed charm, Orlok's monstrosity was raw, unapologetic, and refreshingly devoid of any polish. The film's versatility even spawned urban legends that Schreck wasn't acting at all but was, in fact, a bona fide vampire – the absurdity of which was later immortalised in E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire*, where Dafoe turns Schreck into a method actor with fangs. That Schreck's name translates to "terror" in German feels a little too on the nose to be true.

An expressionist nightmare

German Expressionism found a natural home in *Nosferatu* and it's here that the film broke further ground. While contemporaries like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* revelled in twisted, theatrical sets, *Nosferatu* grounded its terror in real-world locations. Murnau shot much of the film on location in the cobbled streets of Wismar, Germany and the crags of Orava Castle in Slovakia, which lent the

world and its characters a paradoxical realism. The towering cliffs, crumbling castles, and desolate towns feel oppressively authentic, yet Murnau's use of light and shadow transformed them into landscapes of nightmare. Shadows stretched unnaturally; doorways and windows loomed like gaping maws. Even the simplest of actions, like Orlok's unforgettable ascension up a staircase, became an iconic tableau of terror.

Calamity and subversion

Murnau's vampire was a perverse, bloodthirsty fiend; but he was also a harbinger of disease and decay that gnawed at the marrow of a post-pandemic world grappling with invisible horrors. Released in the shadow of the Spanish flu pandemic, the film practically reeked of the plague: rats tumbling from coffins, entire villages felled by a nameless illness. Even the term 'nosferatu', allegedly tied to the Romanian word for "plague-bringer," held up a mirror to communal despair. Orlok's presence in Wisborg was a threat to the very fabric of the community and a metaphor for contagion that resonates uncomfortably in the post-pandemic age.

Yet, *Nosferatu* did more than sicken its audience with existential allegories and its brutal expressionist imagery; it also rewrote the rulebook. The sun, which was once nothing more than a minor inconvenience for *Dracula*, here became a fitting executioner. Orlok's poetic death by daylight birthed a trope so enduring it now haunts every thing from *Buffalo* to *Twilight* to even *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*. But its innovations in the genre couldn't possibly be reduced to killing methods. The film eschewed gore or cheap

jumpscare for atmospheric slow-creeping dread and the power of suggestion. Murnau distilled fear into a visual lexicon, passing it down like a cursed heirloom to everyone, from Hitchcock to del Toro.

An underwater cameo

Few works have left a mark on cinema as indelible as *Nosferatu*, and any attempt to reimagine it must grapple with its towering legacy. But if Eggers' previous work is any indication, he understands what makes this film special: the way *Nosferatu* captures the ineffable – a fear both primordial and contemporaneous. But for an entire generation raised on Nickelodeon, *Nosferatu* has never been this hallowed cornerstone of silent cinema that cinephiles drone on about between criterion sales – he was the weird guy at the Krusty Krah, casually flicking the lights on and off. For those few who might've googled "Nosferatu" years later, imagine the whiplash of discovering this artifact of cinematic history, resurrected by a cartoon that didn't even bother to colour him in. A sponge in square pants may have done more for Count Orlok's pop cultural relevance than a century of earnest film restoration ever could.

What Murnau pulled off a hundred years ago with an unauthorised knockoff of Bram Stoker was the invention of a fresh cinematic grammar for dread. By warping gothic archetypes through an expressionist lens, he birthed something disturbingly primeval. *Nosferatu* endures because it crawls under the skin, rooting out an ancient unease we'd rather ignore – a shadow standing between your doorway, flipping the light switch.

THE DAILY QUIZ

On January 10 or thereabouts, 49 BC, Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon river – an act that also entrenched an idiom in the English language. A quiz on other such idioms

Srinivasan Raman

QUESTION 1

An idiom that means to endure pain with determination; this originated from soldiers in the 19th century given something to bite down on to help them cope with the pain of an amputation without anaesthesia. What was that thing and what is the phrase?

QUESTION 2

Named after a Greek king of the Hellenistic period, this idiom came into being to describe the king's several victories that also took a huge toll on his forces. Name the king and the phrase.

QUESTION 3

A phrase that means solving a complex problem in a decisive/

brute-force manner, this originated as a legend about an act by Alexander the Great which involved using his sword. What is the phrase?

QUESTION 4

A phrase that connotes someone confronting the unpleasant consequences of her/his actions, this originated from the practice of soldiers being asked to listen to a band playing a drumbeat before being punished. What is the phrase?

QUESTION 5

An idiom that suggests the release of something leading to great problems or suffering, this originates from Greek mythology, where the first human woman created by Hephaestus on the instructions of Zeus, is given a box by the gods and is forbidden to open it. What is the idiom?



Visual question: Identify the English word/idiom that has originated from what is seen in this image. And what does it mean? BISWARANJAN ROU

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The reason why January 9 was chosen as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD). It was held first in this year. Ans: To commemorate the return of Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa to India in 1915; 2003

2. This city has hosted the PBD the most number of times. The previous edition was held here. Ans: New Delhi; Indore

3. The major change initiated to the PBD in 2015. Ans: The convention became a biennial event

4. This was special about the edition held in 2021. Ans: It was held virtually because of the COVID pandemic

5. The theme for this year's Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. Ans: 'Diaspora's Contribution to a Viksit Bharat'

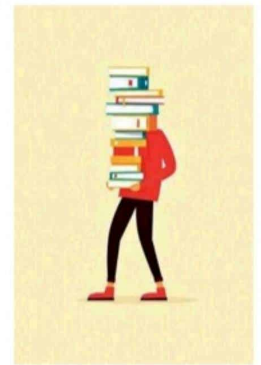
6. The PBD is sponsored by the Ministry of External Affairs along with these two organisations. Ans: Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)

7. The name of the award given to honour overseas Indians. Ans: Pravasi Bharatiya Samman

Visual: Identify this former President and Premier of an African nation. Ans: Sir Akerood Jugnauth of Mauritius

Early Birds: Rajmohan Velayudhan| Gowtham Sankar| Tarnal Biswas| K.N. Viswanathan| Tito Shiladitya

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



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"Guess what? Milind is taking me to a movie tomorrow."

"Milind! I'd advise you to stay away from him. He's a bad egg."

"Bad egg? What does it mean? A bad person?"

"A 'bad egg' is a person who is considered to be dishonest and unreliable! The police put the bad egg in jail."

"In our movies, it's usually the policeman who is the bad egg."

"And if it isn't the policeman, it's..."

"... it's usually a politician. According to me..."

"... how many times do I have to tell you you can't say 'according to me'. It's always 'according to' someone else."

According to the Finance Minister, inflation has come down."

"In my opinion, the Finance Minister is wrong."

"Good. You can either say 'in my opinion', or 'if you ask me'. But never 'according to'."

"You know you have a strange custom of..."

"... I don't have a 'custom', but a 'habit'."

"Custom! 'Habit'! What difference does it make?"

"Well, a 'custom' is something that 'the people of a community or society always do in particular circumstances'."

"So, when you say something is a custom, then a lot of people are involved."

"Yes. The entire community or society is involved. For example, during Deepavali, it is our custom to light lamps."

"It is also a custom to remove our slippers before entering a temple."

"Good example."

"Thanks. But how does it differ from 'habit'?"

"A 'habit' is something that an individual does often or regularly. For example, I have the habit of scratching my head when I'm thinking."

"By the way, is 'foolery' a place where fools live?"

"How did you get the impression?"

"Nunnery" is a place where nuns live. So "foolery"..."

"No, no. 'Foolery' means 'foolish behaviour'. I can't stand his fooleries. Do you know what a 'foolometer' is?"

"No."

"It is a standard for the measurement of fools or folly."

"Can you tell me what the standard is?"

"I can't. I can only tell you that the stress is on the second syllable. The third 'o' in 'foolometer' is pronounced like the 'o' in 'hot'."

Published in *The Hindu* on September 13, 1994.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The UN migration agency's aid appeal for Syria

73 million. The appeal has been made as the country transitions after years of civil war and decades of dictatorship. The UN International Organization for Migration said it was more than doubling an appeal launched last month for Syria, from \$30 million to \$73.2 million. *AP*

Fatalities of Myanmar junta's air strike in the western Rakhine state

40 The Arakan Army is engaged in a fierce fight with the military for control of Rakhine, where it has seized swathes of territory in the past year, all but cutting off the capital Sittwe. The UN said that more than 3.5 million people have been displaced by the conflict in Myanmar. *AP*

The Palestinians killed in the Israel-Hamas war so far

46,000 Children and women make up more than half the fatalities. The Israeli military says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence. It says it tries to avoid harming civilians. *AP*

The oldest ice core from the Antarctic which has been drilled

1.2 million years. An international team of scientists announced that they've drilled one of the oldest ice cores yet, penetrating nearly two miles of the Antarctic bedrock to reach ice they say is at least 1.2 million years old. Analysis of the ice is expected to show how atmosphere and climate evolved. *AP*

Number of special invitees for the 76th Republic Day parade

10,000 Handloom artists, members of the Paralympic contingent, and forest and wildlife conservation workers are among the special guests invited to the parade. *AP*

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Decoding India's growth slowdown

The official diminution of India's projected GDP growth rate may still be an underestimation of the extent of economic slowdown. The revenue mobilisation strategy needs to be reworked to enhance taxation on wealth and profits in order to enhance capex and welfare spending

ECONOMIC NOTES

Prasenjit Bose
Soumyadeep Biswas

The first advance estimates of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2024-25, released by the National Statistics Office (NSO) this week, shows a decline in the real GDP growth rate to 6.4% from 8.2% registered in 2023-24. This is lower than the 6.5 to 7% range projected by the Economic Survey in July 2024. The growth rate of nominal GDP, which is the sum of the real GDP growth rate and the overall inflation rate, is estimated at 9.7% in 2024-25 – significantly lower than the 10.5% growth rate projected in the last Union Budget.

Data discrepancies

The official diminution of India's projected GDP growth rate may still be an underestimation of the extent of economic slowdown. Academics and institutional experts have consistently pointed out serious defects in the official GDP estimates, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recommending an upgrade of the real sector statistics. An "Informational Annex" to the 2023 IMF Staff consultation report on India had inter alia noted that, "...the compilation of constant price GDP deviate from the conceptual requirements of the national accounts, in part due to the use of the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) as a deflator for many economic activities. The appropriate price to deflate GDP by type of activity is the Producer Price Index (PPI), which is under development. Large revisions to historical series, the relatively short time span of the revised series, major discrepancies between GDP by activity and GDP by expenditure, and the lack of official seasonally-adjusted quarterly GDP series complicate analysis. Together, these weaknesses make it challenging to monitor high frequency trends in India's economy through official statistics, particularly from the demand side." The estimation of real or constant price GDP requires the use of a GDP deflator to estimate values of GDP components in constant prices. The GDP deflator being used in India's official estimates is a weighted average of wholesale and retail price indices. The Wholesale Price Index (WPI), 2011-12 series has shown high volatility over the past decade, leading to inexplicably large divergences between the WPI and CPI inflation rates (Chart 1). This has had serious implications for the accuracy of the GDP deflator and real GDP estimates.

For instance, the nominal GDP growth rate was estimated at 14.2% in 2022-23 and 9.6% in 2023-24, which indicated a sharp decline in growth. However, the real GDP growth rate was estimated to have grown from 7.0% to 8.2%, indicating growth acceleration. This implied that the GDP deflator was only 1.4% in 2023-24, even as retail inflation was at 5.4%, because the WPI inflation rate was estimated to have fallen from a high of 9.4% in 2022-23 to a negative of -0.7% in 2023-24. In short, because of high volatility in the WPI, the nominal GDP estimate showed a growth deceleration in 2023-24 but the real GDP estimate reflected growth acceleration. Such anomalous and confounding data on macroeconomic fundamentals invariably lead to delusions and policy errors.

Elusive private investment

Tabled a day ahead of the Union Budget last July, the Economic Survey 2023-24 had taken comfort in the 8.2% growth in

Economic blues

From 2022-23 to 2024-25, real GDP and investment have grown at an annual average rate of 7.2% each and private consumption at 6%. Post-pandemic, there has been one percentage point increase in the annual average growth rate of real investment. Therefore, there is absolutely no indication of any structural break in the investment behaviour of the private corporate sector so far under the 11 years of NDA rule

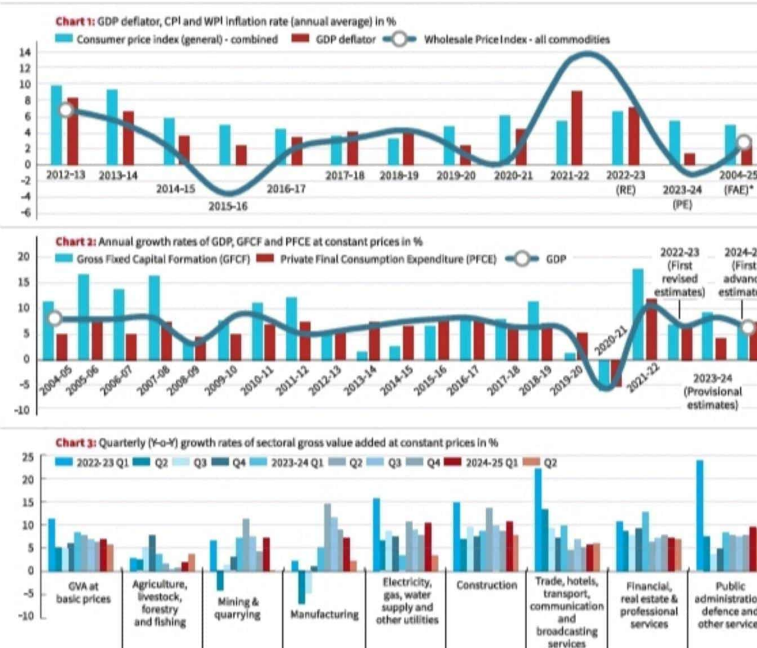


Table 1: Union Government's accounts: revenue and expenditure heads at the end of November 2023 and 2024

	Centre's net tax revenue		Centre's non-tax revenue		Capital expenditure		Revenue expenditure	
	2023-24	2024-25	2023-24	2024-25	2023-24	2024-25	2023-24	2024-25
Budget estimates (B) (₹ crore)	23,30,631	25,83,499	3,01,650	5,45,701	10,00,961	11,11,111	35,02,136	37,09,401
April to November (₹ crore)	14,35,755	14,43,435	2,84,365	4,27,020	5,85,645	5,13,500	20,66,522	22,27,502
% of Budget estimate (April to November)	61.6	55.9	94.3	78.3	58.5	46.2	59.0	60.1
% of Budget estimate (April to March)	99.8	n.a.	133.2	n.a.	94.8	n.a.	99.76	n.a.

Source: Source: Controller General of Accounts (CGA), Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, NSO, MoS&P, GDI, DPT, MoCA, National Accounts Statistics 2024 & First Advance Estimates of GDP for 2024-25.

real GDP and indicated a vigorous expansion of investment by the private sector. Yet, the Chief Economic Advisor had asked whether the corporate sector responded positively to the tax cuts of September 2019, and complained about sluggish corporate investments in machinery and equipment and intellectual property products. He criticised the disproportionate allocation of gross fixed capital formation (investment) in the private sector to "dwellings, other buildings and structures" as an unhealthy mix.

Throwing such caution to the wind, the Union Budget relied entirely on a revival of the private corporate capex cycle to announce the "Prime Minister's Package for Employment and Skillings" with an outlay of ₹2 trillion, aimed at benefiting 41 million youth over a five-year period. The employment linked incentive/subsidy scheme and the internship programme for one crore youth in five years, were premised on the expectation of massive job creation, consequent to an acceleration of private corporate

investment. The fiscal consolidation roadmap, whereby the fiscal deficit was projected to decline from 5.6% of GDP in 2023-24, to 4.9% in 2024-25 and 4.5% in 2025-26, was also announced with the budgetary expectation of the private sector taking a lead in the capital formation process. However, the latest GDP estimates have shown a significant decline in the growth of real gross fixed capital formation from 9% in 2023-24 to 6.4% in 2024-25. A longer view of India's growth trajectory over the past decade, even on the basis of exaggerated official national account estimates, shows the irrationality of official expectations.

During the 10 years of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) rule, between 2004-05 and 2013-14, the average annual growth of real GDP was at 6.8%, investment 10% and private consumption 6% (Chart 1). Between the onset of the present regime till the outbreak of the pandemic, that is, between 2014-15 and 2019-20, real GDP grew at an annual average rate of 6.8% (exactly similar to UPA), but real investment growth fell to

6.3% while private consumption growth increased to 6.8%. Thus, economic growth under NDA was not investment led, as was the case under UPA.

Moreover, during the UPA period, real growth in private investment was over 10%, above the growth of public sector investment at around 9% (Chart 2). Under NDA rule, till the pandemic, public investment in real terms grew faster at an average of 6.6% per year, than private investment which grew by 6.3%.

Investment, consumption and output had collapsed in 2020-21 owing to the lockdown induced recession. The recovery in 2021-22 was indeed led by private investment, but the spikes in the growth rates of investment, consumption and output were on account of base effect – it was simply a return to normalcy after the collapse in the preceding year. From 2022-23 to 2024-25, real GDP and investment have grown at an annual average rate of 7.2% each and private consumption at 6%. Post-pandemic there has been one percentage point increase in the annual average growth rate of real

investment, and 0.8 percentage point decline in the annual average growth rate of private consumption.

Therefore, there is absolutely no indication of any structural break in the investment behaviour of the private corporate sector so far under the 11 years of NDA rule. The deep corporate tax cuts in September 2019 have failed to spur capital formation and real economic activity; rather it has only helped a short lived spurt in corporate earnings and fuelled a post-pandemic bubble in the equity market. In contrast, the advent of the UPA regime had led to a real investment and exports boom between 2004-05 till the financial crisis and global recession of 2008-09, which was facilitated both by a massive increase in industrial bank credit and significant foreign capital inflows. A similar private investment led boom has remained elusive under the NDA regime.

This testifies to the forgotten truth of political economy, that supposedly business friendly governments can deliver much wealth and profits for their cronies but are incapable of bringing about economy-wide structural changes and common prosperity.

Fiscal strains

The more reliable supply side data on the Indian economy reflects a more sober picture of economic recovery since the pandemic and the nature of the slowdown that has set in. Quarterly Gross Value Added (GVA) growth on a year-on-year basis has been on a downward slide since 2023-24 (Chart 3). The agriculture sector continues to show cyclical fluctuations. After showing double-digit growth in the two quarters of 2023-24, the growth rate of manufacturing GVA has been on a downslide. Slowdown is visible not only in the mining, power and construction sectors but also in services like retail trade, transport, communications, finance and real estate.

The only sector where GVA is projected to grow at a higher pace in 2024-25 than the previous year is public administration, defence and other services. This shows the crucial role of public spending in sustaining economic growth in the Indian economy. In this context, the monthly accounts of the Union Government further indicate that crucial revenue and expenditure targets set in the last Union Budget are likely to remain unachieved. While the windfall of a ₹2.11 trillion surplus transfer from the Reserve Bank of India has enabled the Union Government to mobilise over 78% of its non-tax revenue target for 2024-25 by November 2024, mobilisation of the Centre's net tax revenues between April to November 2024 was only 56% of the budgetary target of ₹25.83 trillion (Table 1). This has led to spending less than half of the ₹11.11 trillion, budgeted as capex for 2024-25 till November 2024.

It is clear that economic slowdown has disrupted budgetary plans by slowing down tax revenue growth. Adhering to the fiscal consolidation path would imply a squeeze on public spending, including capital expenditure, which in turn would further aggravate the slowdown. Jettisoning fiscal rectitude altogether is also not feasible, given the already elevated levels of public debt and interest payments. The only way out appears to be a reworking of the revenue mobilisation strategy by enhancing taxation on wealth and profits in order to enhance capex and welfare spending.

Prasenjit Bose is an economist and activist. Soumyadeep Biswas is a data analyst at CPERD Pvt. Ltd.

Opinion

Is India open to the idea of dual citizenship?

**Vivek Katju**
Former
diplomat**Amitabh Mattoo**
Dean of the
School of
International
Studies at the
Jawaharlal
Nehru
University

PARLEY

At an event in December, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said there are a lot of challenges in providing dual citizenship to Indians settled abroad. He pointed out that the Overseas Citizenship of India drive is a step towards meeting the demand and added that the debate on dual citizenship is "still alive". Is India open to the idea of dual citizenship? Amitabh Mattoo and Vivek Katju discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Kallol Bhattacharjee. Edited excerpts:

Do you think dual citizenship for diasporic Indians could become a reality?

Vivek Katju: First, let me distinguish between NRIs living abroad and People of Indian Origin (PIO), NRIs, or Non-Resident Indians, are Indian nationals who hold Indian passports. They have all the rights that accrue to Indian nationals. The only thing they cannot exercise abroad is the right to vote, though I believe arrangements were made at some stage for NRIs to register themselves in the missions so they could vote in their place of entitlement. PIOs are not Indian nationals, quite clearly, and therefore they do not have political rights. At one stage, the government had given expanded economic facilities to PIOs, and later, what was called a PIO card was converted into an Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card. Now, I never understood the reason for this change in designation, as the OCI card does not confer on any person of Indian origin, any additional facilities, or any rights which the PIO card did not already possess. Citizenship essentially has political attributes. If you are a citizen, you have the full right to participate in the political process of the country. A non-citizen does not have that right. So, the word "citizen" is extremely confusing and, in my opinion, it should be avoided as it creates a misleading impression.

Minister Jaishankar's remarks have opened up an issue that has unresolved contours. Professor Mattoo, what are your thoughts about granting dual citizenship rights to people of Indian origin living abroad?

Amitabh Mattoo: I think Mr. Jaishankar must have made an off-the-cuff remark. It cannot be a serious question to be debated at this point in India that certain people or a class of people who are no longer Indian citizens, or who either gave up Indian citizenship or never were Indian citizens, will be given additional citizenship of India. If you look back at the Constitution of India, Part II deals with this section on



In the U.S., you cannot become a President unless you are born in the territory of the country. REUTERS

citizenship. Article 5 of the Constitution defines who is a citizen of India, either by birth, by parentage, or by acquiring it after having remained a resident in India. There is also a distinction between being a domicile and being a citizen. You may be domiciled in India and yet not be a citizen. This was determined by the Supreme Court in *D.P. Joshi v State of Madhya Bharat* in 1955. The only major amendment to the Citizenship Act came in 2019, with the Citizenship Amendment Act. Then there was a fast-track process for minorities from certain neighbourhood countries to be allowed to take Indian citizenship. I don't think it can really be a serious, substantive question to allow people to have citizenship of both India and another country because that would confer political rights. In other words, citizens of the U.S., U.K., or Australia, for example, would not only have political loyalty to those countries but also the right to vote in India. That, frankly, for me is an extremely dangerous idea. As an Indian citizen, I would not be willing to give political rights to anyone with divided loyalties. Because after all, dual citizenship means that you have divided loyalties.

We are not ready to have dual citizenship in this country after just 75 years. I am not xenophobic, I am a person who has grown up with an idea of global citizenship in a larger sense. But in terms of which political dispensation will govern India, I am not willing to share that right with anyone who has but 100% political loyalty to India. Personally, I had the option of acquiring Australian citizenship, and the only reason I did not take it was that it would mean relinquishing Indian citizenship.

The incoming Trump presidency has several Indian-origin people, as well as



I believe it is the democratic right of every Indian to choose the citizenship of another country and relinquish Indian citizenship. But they cannot say I will acquire the citizenship of another country, participate in its political process, and still hold on to political rights in India

VIVEK KATJU

first-generation Indian immigrants, who will hold public office. Do you think that for certain communities and certain kinds of workers who are employable globally, the idea of citizenship requires some degree of flexibility?

VK: No. You cannot have divided loyalties. You are either a citizen of India, which is in full rights, political rights, economic rights, etc, or you are not.

You mentioned that in the U.S., there are people of Indian origin who are holding, who have, and who will be holding the office. I think six persons of Indian origin have been elected to the House of Representatives this time. Let us not forget that they are American citizens. The Indian systems and law demand that the moment you acquire the nationality of another country, you relinquish India's nationality, which means that you do not have political rights anymore.

I believe it is the democratic right of every Indian to choose the citizenship of another country and relinquish Indian citizenship. But they cannot say I will acquire the citizenship of another country, participate in its political process, and still hold on to political rights in India. Now I know that some other countries allow that, but I must confess I have very orthodox views on this. The international system is a system of states.

AM: I completely endorse Mr. Katju's remarks. We cannot, for the sake of populism or to attract foreign investment, create what the Marxists used to call a "comprador" class – a class of people who will act as foreign agents in India. You give them the right to vote and to elect members of Parliament and Legislative Assemblies, that is a sure way of recolonising India.

But if you open this Pandora's box by allowing even a single citizen of another country to have dual citizenship in India, it would be deeply dangerous and subversive. There are situations where people have decided to make India their home have relinquished earlier

citizenship and become citizens of India. Mirra Alfassa, known as The Mother, whose work inspired many and who founded the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, became an Indian citizen despite earlier campaigning for dual citizenship. Similarly, Mother Teresa became an Indian citizen, and economist Jean Drèze, I believe, relinquished his Belgian citizenship and became an Indian citizen. In the U.S., which might seem more flexible, the fact is that you cannot become a President unless you are born in the territory of the U.S. Even Elon Musk, despite all his championing of Donald Trump, can never aspire to be President because he was born in South Africa. So, some laws are much more rigid.

Is the issue being propped by populism?

AM: I hope not, because I have great regard for the External Affairs Minister, so I am sure he is not doing it for populist reasons. The diaspora has a great role to play but not as dual citizens. You have the diaspora playing a role in cementing bilateral relations with the U.S. The hugely successful Indian diaspora in the U.S. often acts as a rallying point for leaders' visits there, and similarly in other countries. The first Indian diaspora of indentured labourer that went into the Caribbean may not have been as successful in material terms as this new wave of diaspora. But, as I said, they can cement bilateral ties and help attract investment from abroad.

As in the case of Microsoft, Satya Nadella has promised investment in artificial intelligence. That is all for the good of the nation. However, the question really is whether this diaspora could become a Frankenstein monster. While its role may appear benign and a source of great good, you may suddenly empower it to the point where it decides who is going to be your next leader. That is where I think there has to be a *lakshman rekha*. You need to maintain a clear line between the useful role played by the diaspora and its crossing the boundaries. I am not willing to let any Satya Nadella or Vivek Ramaswamy or any person of Indian origin who may just acquire Indian citizenship for instrumental reasons while retaining their American or other citizenship decide my political future. I am an Indian citizen, and I vote for my future along with other Indian citizens who do not have any other loyalties to any other country.



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

NOTEBOOK

What it takes to be on right side of facts

Journalists in Kashmir have long navigated a hostile environment, facing threats, surveillance, and legal repercussions

Peerzada Ashiq

Navigating powers in a conflict zone in search of truth is a daunting challenge for journalists. There is a cost to pay for digging for the truth, and bitter truths could prove costlier. The murder of 33-year-old freelance journalist and YouTuber, Mukesh Chandrakar, from Chhattisgarh is a grim reminder of the cost that people pay for holding a mirror to a corrupt system.

In the case of Kashmir, which has seen different phases of violent conflict, journalists could not operate without survival kits. Covering Kashmir in the 1990s, at the peak of militancy, required one set of survival kits to navigate warring parties' intimidation and threats to control narratives. Post-2008, when Kashmir was in the throes of street violence, journalists fine-tuned their operations to ensure reporting truth was not compromised.

However, post-2019, when Jammu and Kashmir's status was downgraded to a Union Territory and special status ended, control and fear became the new instruments for dealing with journalists. There were no survival kits in a dynamic situation where red lines, drawn by State institutions, would change with each passing day for reporters. A ban was put on reporting live encounters, and permission was denied to get closer to the area where militants and security forces would engage in a firefight, unlike in the past. Official versions became the main narratives. Anyone expressing views contrary to the official position was not invited to official functions and was barred from attending visits of official dignitaries.

In September 2019, I filed a report on police data on detentions, especially of mainstream leaders and protesters. The story surfaced when officials denied having centralised data on detentions in Kashmir. A police summons followed the publication of the report and I was asked to reveal my source. However, it was not the summons that was intimidating. The actions taken against my sources in the admini-

stration were chilling. Any office where I signed the check-in logbook was scanned to identify my sources, who were then placed under surveillance and received cryptic warnings. Access to my sources was cut off to the extent that most stopped responding or meeting me.

For many colleagues, it was worse. There was a joke doing the rounds in Kashmir among media persons: post-2019, there were two types of journalists – those who had been raided by security agencies and those who were yet to be raided. Even now, the laptops, drives, and mobile phones of many journalists are with security agencies. Summons and raids were another chilling reminder that the search for truth had become a daring act. Two freelance journalists, Majid Hyderi and Irfan Mehraj, still remain behind bars. While Hyderi faces charges under the Public Safety Act, Mehraj is charged under the provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

Long way ahead

On January 3 this year, J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's maiden and free-wheeling interaction with the press in Srinagar was held against this backdrop. In fact, Mr. Abdullah's opening remarks were itself a commentary on the functioning of the press. As he took many inconvenient questions, he sparked hope that there are freer times ahead. "My wish would be to see a free and open media. This interaction is a step in that direction, where you are not given a list of what you can or cannot ask," he said.

However, there is a long way to go. The Kashmir Press Club has remained shut for many years. Dozens of local scribes have already left Kashmir, and many independent journalists have changed their trade in the face of tough times. The clampdown created a vacuum, which was filled by non-professionals who let sensationalism rather than sensibility dictate the terms of engagement.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Silent waters, hidden catch



Fishermen holding harpoons, covered under blankets, wait in their boats to catch fish using a unique technique called Tchay-e-gard shikar (shadow fishing) on the frozen waters of the Anchar Lake in Srinagar, on Thursday. Every winter, from December 21 to April 30, the Kashmiri fishermen use this method of camouflaging their presence to lure the fish into a trap with the help of reeds and shock waves by beating the water. IIRAH NISSAR

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 10, 1975

U.S. eager to demonetise gold

Washington, Jan. 8: The United States will try to get countries attending international monetary meetings here next week to agree to "abolish controls on official gold transactions, and to refrain from building up their gold stocks for a year or two," the Treasury Under-Secretary, Jack Bennett, said today. Mr. Bennett also said the U.S. would press next

week for agreement on a number of measures depriving gold of any role within the International Monetary Fund. As part of a planned reform of the world monetary system, the U.S. is eager to "demonetise gold – break the traditional link between the precious metal and national currencies." The Americans feel that demonetisation of gold would curb speculation and make future world monetary arrangements more stable and manageable. But if central banks are freed to buy and sell gold freely at free market prices, the U.S. would like them to refrain from buying substantial quantities of gold in the first year or two.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 10, 1925

All-India Music Conference.

Lucknow, Jan. 9: The Fourth All-India Music Conference commenced its Lucknow session yesterday. Nearly 3,000 visitors and delegates including H. H. the Maharaja of Tehri were present. Thakur Nawab Ali, Chairman of the Reception Committee, stated that the aims and objects of the Conference were among others to take steps to uplift Indian music on proper lines and to collect and preserve great masterpieces in the art.

Hard-Selling AI by Non-HR Example

Salesforce showcases productivity gains

Last month, San Francisco-based software biggie Salesforce brought home the chill of AI-induced job losses when it announced it won't be hiring any software engineers in 2025. Earlier, CEO Marc Benioff had said that Salesforce needs 2,000 extra salesmen to peddle its customer relationship management software. Tech layoffs stabilised last year after a brutal 2023, when companies corrected for pandemic over-hiring. But the numbers are still way too high. Current projections don't present a picture of net addition, as AI moves into more functional areas in Silicon Valley and Wall St. Tech and finance industries are seeking productivity gains where AI is making them available, and downsizing in anticipation of required investments where they are not.

Salesforce is ahead of the curve by virtue of its product portfolio, and serves as a marker for AI's progress in agent-based customer roles across Fortune 500 companies. Its wide distribution model underscores potential job displacement from the back to the front office. The company has shed skittishness about going public with the savings it's delivering to its enterprise customers, an issue most companies soft-pedal. The data on which Salesforce's bots train are provided by its customers, reducing the scope of errors of judgement generative AI is prone to. The company has also developed a revenue model that benefits from shrunken sales forces at its client organisations.

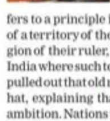
There is now a financial benchmark to AI adoption that companies can chase. That they are not doing it more aggressively is a factor of backward integration of AI processes from the customer interface. This is a more sedate process driven by managerial acceptance of technology. In the case of AI, business leaders also need to review a broader set of issues, including corporate governance and organisational structure. Salesforce has demonstrated productivity enhancement in common business practices. Bigger job displacement awaits companies successfully applying AI to parts of their businesses that make them unique. The Salesforce example could help them focus their minds.

Work to Live, Don't Live to Work

L&T chairman S N Subrahmanyan has gone one up — actually, 20 hours up — on the venerable N R Narayana Murthy. He has suggested that employees should be working 90-hr work weeks. He recounted his encounter with someone who claimed that China can 'beat' the US because people there work 90 hrs a week, while Americans work 50. He went on to exhort L&T employees to 'get to the office and start working' by exclaiming, 'What do you do sitting at home? How long can you stare at your wife? How long can the wife stare at your (sic) husband?'

Putting in more hours at work seems to be the latest sweat-spot in town. The subtext: having a life outside work is for sissies. This line of thinking smacks of an autocratic mindset, as if people solely for societies that aren't communist China. A 'My way or the highway' ethic is an invitation to have everyone march to the beat of one drum — even if that leads everyone off a cliff. India needs latitude to innovate, imagine, live. This is not to diss workaholics — they have their usefulness.

In political science, 'terroritorialism' refers to a principle in 16th c. Europe that required inhabitants of a territory of the Holy Roman Empire to conform to the religion of their ruler, or to emigrate. We, thankfully, live in 21st c. India where such territorialism is regressive, repressive. L&T pulled out that old rabbit of 'work as nation building' out of its hat, explaining that its CEO's remarks reflected this larger ambition. Nations that treat individuals as mere cogs for a 'national project' are unhappy nations. After all, Arbeit macht frei (Work sets you free) was the slogan written on entrances of Nazi concentration camps.



JUST IN JEST

Can Lord Trump of Mar-a-Lago make an offer that they can't refuse?

Dear Greenlanders, Interested in Selling?

If there's anyone we can credit/ blame for Lord Trump of Mar-a-Lago's newfound-land interest in Greenland, it's John Lennon. In the 1964 Richard Lester musical comedy, *A Hard Day's Night*, John is asked by a highfalutin' journalist after the Beatles' return to Britain from their first US tour earlier that year, 'Tell me, how did you find America?' Lennon's deadpan response: 'Turn left at Greenland.' The 18-year-old Don must have registered that wisecrack, and tucked it away for future greenpeace.

With Greenland Don-marked, we now know about the autonomous territory of Denmark better than we ever did. We also know that apart from its strategic location — between Canada and Europe — it's stashed with rare earth elements (raw material for electronics, batteries, precision-guided weapons, etc), and oil and gas under its ice floes and chunks. Greenlanders — all 57,000-odd of them — however, seem to be content with fishing, and not just for compliments. Trump's Maja 2 suggestion — Make Also Greenland American — may come across as an Airbnb-customer wanting to take over someone's home because he loves the view. Don's climate policy may cut no ice with Greenlanders. But who knows? Maybe they wouldn't care about switching from one landlord (Denmark) to another (America) and happily agree. For that, though, it's only polite, and in Putin-iff, to ask them.

How Trump'nMusk could flesh out their 'Welcome, high-skilled! Stay away, illegals!' H-1B plan

WELCOME TO ELON-DO!*



Lubna Kably

With days left for his inauguration, Donald Trump's Maja plan faces controversy. The appointment of an origin entrepreneur Sriram Krishnan as senior policy adviser for AI polarised Trump supporters, especially after his X post advocated the removal of country caps on green cards to unlock skilled immigration.

About 1.40 lakh employment-based green cards are issued annually with no single country allowed more than 7%. This policy disproportionately affects the large Indian diaspora in the US, who are the largest cohort of H-1B visas. The demand for skilled labour in the US remains high, as shown by 4.7 lakh H-1B registrations by American employers for fiscal starting Oct 1, 2024, far exceeding the annual cap of 85,000 (including the 20,000 masters cap for those with advanced US qualifications). A lottery determines successful candidates. Though cap-exempt H-1B visas are available for institutions like universities and government research organisations, the numbers are believed to be fewer. Official data of cap-exempt visas is not available.

Krishnan opened a Pandora's box, and the argument shifted to claims that H-1B visas represent cheap labour that takes away American jobs. Elon Musk went on a warpath defending the need for skilled immigrant labour, but admitted the H-1B system was 'broken' and needed major reform. Trump, voicing his opinion that he 'always liked H-1B visas', sent ripples across his Maja base.

India emphasises that skilled professional mobility is vital for India-US



H-1B, or not to be, that is their question

ties, benefiting both nations. It allows companies like Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Tesla to hire skilled talent, and Indian companies like TCS, Infosys, Wipro and HCL to service their clients onsite in the US.

A National Foundation for American Policy (NAPAP) study revealed Tesla's significant rise in H-1B approvals in FY24, with 742 petitions for initial employment — double its fiscal 2023 total — and 1,625 for continuing employment, a.k.a. visa extensions. Smaller tech firms and other sectors such as health care also rely on Indian H-1B holders.

Indian-origin doctors are crucial in rural American hospitals, with India being the top source of immigrant physicians and surgeons.

According to Migration Policy Institute, of the 9.87 lakh doctors in the US, 26.5% (2.62 lakh) are immigrants, and 30,000 are Indian, representing 22% of all immigrant doctors.

Indians are major H-1B beneficiaries. In FY23, they accounted for 60,653 (69%) of initial employment visas and 2.10 lakh (79%) of extensions, far outpacing China, the second-largest source, with significantly lower allotments of 16,091 and 20,250, respectively.

During Trump's first term, his administration targeted the H-1B programme, proposing policies to hike wages

by 40-100% and restrict eligibility (particularly for client site placements). A lawsuit by the US Chamber of Commerce, Stanford University and others led to a Dec 1, 2020, court ruling striking down these rules for violation of the Administrative Procedure Act by skipping public notice and comment requirements.

In its final days, Trump 1.0 issued the 'H-1B Selection Final Rule' on Jan 8, 2021, prioritising visa selection based on wages.

However, on Sept 15, 2021, a court vacated the rule, citing the acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security's appointment was not valid, which vitiated this rule issued by DHS. The rule was later officially withdrawn and never impacted the spring H-1B cap lottery process.

The rules introduced by the Trump administration earlier were set aside on administrative grounds. But would bringing back these rules really fix the 'broken' H-1B system? The incoming Trump administration needs to look at three critical scenarios.

● **US-qualified freshers** If wage prioritisation is done without due care, it could cut off the talent pipeline, as new graduates, post their optional practical training (OPT), would not be eligible for an H-1B. During his election campaign,

*conditions apply

ign, Trump proposed stapling a green card to international students. Students qualifying in specific targeted fields could be bestowed this benefit, saving them from the vagaries of an H-1B lottery. Canada, for instance, provides additional points to international students seeking permanent residency, which is a point-based mechanism.

● **H-1Bs bogged down in the green card queue** Krishnan rightly pointed out the demerits of a country-cap for green cards. A quick fix would be advancing the dates in the visa bulletin, to clear the backlogs that skilled Indians are reeling under.

● **Rescuing the existing lottery mechanism** Under the lottery mechanism, an individual with a 2-year experience competes with a more senior person who would better serve America's economy. If the aim is to attract 'the best and the brightest', a cusp can be taken from other countries.

In Dec 2024, Australia introduced a new regime for temporary workers. The Skills in Demand visa contains three streams:

► **Specialist Skills Pathway** For high-earning, specialised workforce.

► **Core Skills Pathway** Bulk of immigrant workers fall under this category and are covered by an occupation list.

► **Essential Skills Pathway** For critical lower-paid roles like caregivers for the aged and disabled.

Each stream has a minimum wage prescribed, and the categorisation is aimed at meeting labour market needs.

Then there's Canada's Global Talent stream, which enables innovative tech companies working on cutting-edge technology to have two-billed skilled immigrants in just two weeks.

How Trump'nMusk flesh out their 'Welcome, high-skilled, high-income immigrants! Stay away, illegals!' will be interesting. As will be how Maja-philes will take to such a double-track plan.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

In Search of Moderation

SHIBANI BELLWALKAR

Sophrosyne, a Greek term embodying moderation, self-control and balance, resonates deeply with the tale of Daedalus' tragic awakening, where his greatest triumph turned into a heartbreaking loss. Exiled from Athens to Crete, Daedalus and his son Icarus ingeniously crafted wings from wax and feathers to escape their imprisonment. As they soared towards freedom, Icarus, overwhelmed by excitement of their impossible achievement, ignored his father's cautions about flying too close to the sun or the sea. His disregard led to a tragic fall right before Daedalus' eyes.

This poignant story reveals a timeless life lesson: height of joy and depth of sorrow evoke powerful emotions. The fragility of human desires reminds us to recognise our mortal limits, and importance of balance. It requires a deep understanding of the nature of our ego and illusions we create about our own invincibility. To achieve this equilibrium, one must cultivate mastery over pride, over confidence and fleeting satisfaction with material achievements. The concept of samadhi from the Bhagavad Gita refers to equal vision, free from attachment, prejudice or discrimination. It lets us approach happiness and sorrow, success and failure, with composure. Sophrosyne and samadhi underlie balance, a sense of order and control over one's self. This balance enables us to embrace all with equal measure, in moderation. And, in this, we find the greatest wisdom.

Chat Room

Invest in Most Prized Capital

Apropos the Edit, India's Got HuCap. We Need to Tip It! (Jan 9), the Microsoft chief's observations drawing world attention to India's human capital deserve appropriate follow-up by all stakeholders. Mark Satya Nadella's words, "... anyone who does not put India's human capital as a making a choice (to not be competitive). This puts considerable responsibility on GoI and Indian universities. They have to ensure availability of talent in every sector, since India will be tapped for recruitment. In addition, GoI will have to negotiate with major countries that are potential recruiters to ensure hassle-free issue of employment visas. MG Warrior Mumbai

Below Frosted Glass Ceiling

This refers to BJP likely to see Emergence of a New Set of Leadership by Kumar Anshuman (Jan 9). A Cabinet reshuffle and office bearers might be in the offing in the ruling BJP, with party president JP Nadella's term coming to an end, but not much can be expected from a party where the reins of power are vested with the PM and the home minister.

Even the party president can at best play second fiddle to the PM.

them. As for the local leaders, their sphere of influence is restricted to the states where they hold office, and they might not be in contention for posts in the party's highest echelons. The new leadership might only be from the existing set-up, after all. CV Aravind Bengaluru

Let Our Column Be Bold-Plated

It's not an easy task for a reader to get their letter published in ET, especially if one is a student. While there is nothing wrong with a letter that is out of the box and equally blends with the topic, or being strictly articulate so that the letter is not too long or too short, true effort goes in. Even then, there is no surety that the letter will pass all the filters. The morning after mailing one's letter, one catches the bundle hanging by the hawker, rushes to ET Edit Page, and is on seventh heaven if one's letter is published. What adds to the joy is seeing one's name printed in capital letters and bold typeface. So, please don't push the letter writer into oblivion or forget to publish our names in capital and bold glory. Abhyudita Gupta Ujjain

Letters to the editor may be addressed to edit@timesofindia.com

ChatGPT SHAIPI OF THE DAY

There once was a man named Putin, Who found a return to greatness quite suiting.

He said with a grin, 'Let's trade back that win — Give Alaska! It's Russia's for disputin'!

... (text continues)

Top 1-12: May 24, July 30, Mar 18-Apr 30, May 10-13

Natural Disasters

Around 11,000 people lost their lives as a result of worldwide natural catastrophes in 2024, lower than 2023's estimated 77,600 fatalities and five-year (2019-2023) average of 23,000, according to a report by Munich Re. Last year's deadliest storm was Typhoon Yagi, which swept through the Philippines to mainland China, killing some 850 people. The report pegged overall losses at \$320 billion to Swiss Re's figure of \$310 billion.

Five largest Natural Disasters in 2024

Area/Type	Deaths	Area/Type (deaths)	Overall losses (\$Bn)
China, Vietnam, Philippines, Myanmar, Laos (Typhoon Yagi, flood)	851	US, Mexico, Cuba, Honduras (Hurricane Helene (27))	56
Papua New Guinea (Landslide)	670	US, Mexico (Milton (27))	38
India (Landslide)	369	Japan (Earthquake, tsunami (245))	15
Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, Somalia (Flood, landslide)	351	China, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Philippines, Laos (Typhoon Yagi, flood (851))	14
Afghanistan (Flash flood, flood)	347	China (Flood (77))	12

Sept 2-12, May 24, July 30, Mar 18-Apr 30, May 10-13

Jeaves to HN Woosters



Arijit Barman

India's OI's have a new concourse service for wealth management. Family offices (FOs) are now a must-have for ultra HNIs worth their smart, stocks, stablecoins, sea-facing villas and Souza paintings. Their personas differ. But mostly these are in-house investment teams — financial butlers — have evolved far more swiftly than managers of private banks.

In the last year, they have become bigger, bolder and more bountiful, foraging the market for savvy opportunities.

Being more of an investor than an asset class, these new deal magnets are eating into the lunch of early-stage VCs and PE funds. Bigger FOs, like Azim Premji's Premji Invest, have the flexibility to own stocks, incubate ideas, own businesses, invest in VCs or AIFs, or even buy into companies. If the growing disenchantment with third-party money managers persists, they may soon supplant their successors.

Home to the third-largest count of billionaires, India is playing catch-up to a global trend that started off as a personal investment arm of JPMorgan, but today is among the fastest generators of wealth worldwide. Over 6,000 FOs manage \$4-11 tn in assets — more than hedge funds. In India, too, says Sundaram Alternatives August 2024 Family Office Report: From Legacy to Leadership, more than 300 such offices are managing \$30 bn of assets — 6x jump in a mere four years that is expected to grow 1.5x in the next three years.

What is starker is the degree of reliance on these brain trusts by business families to preserve wealth, administer assets and solve sensitive

succession issues. Creating offshore structures to globalise investment portfolios is common, especially when Next Gen is often keen to diversify beyond core businesses.

From portfolio diversifying to prioritising, preserving and growing wealth, for baby-faced tech trailblazers, film and sports stars, or freshly minted IPO billionaires — Janakes of Marikand Pharms, Ola Electric's Bharish Aggarwal, to Zomato's Deepinder Goyal — these 'super-rich', to quote cultural critic Peter York, are omnipresent.

What is the secret sauce FOs have that VCs or growth equity funds lack?

● **Experience factor** FOs are headed by professionals with deep relationships with the promoter family. Their transition from managing to creating wealth becomes that much more organic. They can, if need be, even fix the plumbing of their portfolio companies.

● **Name tagging** Over time, FOs are also getting sensitised to doing a smaller number of bigger-ticket transactions for a better bang for the buck. Getting 'wet and sweat', much like a turnaround PE shop, is more productive than the VC model of spray and pray for the best outcome.

A polarising geopolitical environment has also had hardwired MNCs like Coca-Cola, Hater and Amazon to seek out seasoned partners like the Bhartias of Jubilant, N R Narayana Murthy; possibly even a Sunil Mittal or Punnet Doshi, to provide regulatory and political cover. For them, patient, multi-generational capital that comes unencumbered and with no finite timelines is far more valuable than a fund manager with the fastest cheque book and limited business knowledge.

The perpetual pool of capital of FOs is more attractive to fund life structures, even for late-stage companies primed for listings. Name-lending by blue-blooded businesses props up their credentials, or acts as an endorsement of governance. ● **Closing the loop** When Binny and Sachin Bansal reinvest their money, they are seeding back into the same ecosystem that nurtured them. Entrepreneurs begot entrepreneurs. Their mental makeup is similar; and their syntax is the same. Newer cohorts find it easier to deal with them than strat-jacked bosses or external wealth managers, especially in the build-out stage to scale up fast.

Home is where the stash is

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Before proceeding to the cell, enjoy our signature welcome punch!

Sept 2-12, May 24, July 30, Mar 18-Apr 30, May 10-13

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TOP 10 TRENDS IN THE US, CHINA, INDIA

Economy 2025: Here's what to expect

Investor and author Ruchir Sharma speaks to economist and psephologist Prannoy Roy — connecting the dots, looking at the year ahead

Prannoy Roy: Hello and welcome to *deKoder*. If there's one show on the economy and what lies ahead, it is this annual program with investor and writer Ruchir Sharma. We will look at the 10 major factors that will affect each one of us in 2025, the research and insights for which are those of Ruchir and his team.

You start with the biggest trend — that there's going to be a reversal in the recent pattern of American dominance. America is said to underperform the rest of the world. It's overperformed the rest of the world by 6.6% per year for the last 15 years.

Ruchir Sharma: This trend is very extended. The American stock market's out-performance has been going on really on a trend basis for 15 years. If you look at the historical pattern, typically when the American stock market does well in one decade, then in the subsequent decade, it at least gives back some of the gains.

We're halfway through this decade, the American stock market has been way outperforming the rest of the world. The American economy today is just under 30% of the global economy. But the share of the American stock market in global indices, like the MSCI Global Index, is now approaching 70%.

It's almost suggesting there's no other country worth investing in. And this has been boosted a lot with the fact that the dollar has been so strong, and that you've had tech companies in America earning extraordinary profits. Donald Trump's victory has given a further boost to this because there's a feeling that if he imposes tariffs, it's going to be good for America and bad for the rest of the world.

But this has become such a group-think and I'm very wary... In my 30-odd years of watching markets and investing, I've never seen such a strong group-think, which is that everyone expects America to be the only place to invest. This trend could reverse itself for reasons including America's fiscal flaw, its fiscal deficit, and also this economic concept of creative destruction...

Roy: Could you expand on this TINA — there is no alternative — factor that investors are mesmerized by?

Sharma: There is a feeling among investors that Europe is in bad shape, Japan is still facing such a big demographic challenge. Emerging markets in general are too small or too insignificant to invest in. China has not been doing well. There's so much money sloshing around and if there's any place we want to put this capital in, it's only America.

Roy: If you look at the top 10 firms in the world, there's been massive churn for decades. But there's been no churn in the first five years of this decade. It is dominated by American companies. Now you're saying there's going to be a churn and American companies will not dominate as much.

Sharma: This domination seems to have reached a peak. These companies have now become household names and they're in a way basic essentials, whether it's Apple, Amazon or even Google, Facebook.

But there are the laws of creative destruction, which is that new companies are supposed to come and take the place of old companies. Otherwise, the same companies will keep dominating, which is not the way capitalism is supposed to function.

In the last five years, the same companies that ended the decade dominating are still at the top; in fact, their dominance has only increased in the last couple of years.

But I feel they're sowing the seeds of their own demise by spending so much on AI, and the returns may not be commensurate. I see the trend of group-think shifting this year.

Roy: Fiscal deficit is a league of its own in America. It's been 8% of GDP for this decade on average. It's twice as high as Europe, higher than India, and almost twice as high as other emerging markets. That is a fatal flaw.

Sharma: In the last three to four years, America seems to have just blown past all historical records on fiscal deficit. It's been able to get away because it has the world's reserve currency. It's able to print as much dollars as it takes.

And because of the AI mania, people are willing to fund these deficits, saying that they have no other place to go.

Roy: The US debt is highly inefficient. It is more and more public debt to achieve dollars of GDP growth. It used to be 70 cents to get one dollar growth. Now it's 1.8 dollars to get one dollar.

Sharma: Yeah, the American economy has done so much better also because of the amount of debt it's taken up. What is public debt? It's the government which is spending a lot, just look at the number of jobs now being created by the government in America. This is supposed to be a capitalist economy and now nearly 20% of all jobs being created in America are being created by the government.

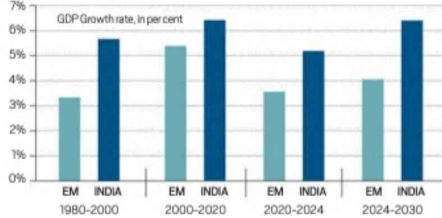
It shows you the role of government, how it's increased... More than 50% of the countries in America are now reliant much more on transfer payments from the government. That number used to be not even 25% a decade or two ago.

Roy: So now Trump and Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy will change all this and cut down government jobs?

Sharma: We don't know how much they'll succeed. A lot of this government spending is on very sensitive areas like

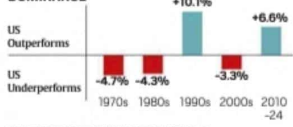
SOME KEY TRENDS TOWATCH

INDIA WILL CONTINUE TO GROW FASTER THAN OTHER EMERGING MARKETS ON AVERAGE



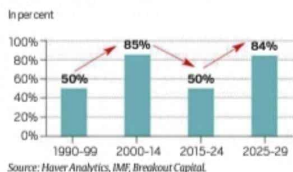
Source: National Sources, Haver, IMF, Breakout Capital.

REVERSAL OF RECENT PATTERN OF US DOMINANCE



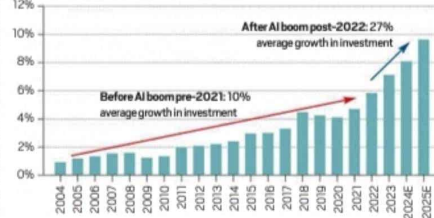
THE CHART PLOTS THE RELATIVE AVERAGE ANNUAL STOCK MARKET RETURNS IN REAL USD TERMS
Source: Deutsche Bank, UBS, DWS Database 2024, Copyright © 2022 Einy Dimson, Paul Marsh and Mike Stuart.

MAJORITY OF KEY EMERGING MARKETS GROWING FASTER THAN THE US



Source: Haver Analytics, IMF, Breakout Capital.

BIG-TECH FIRMS ARE INVESTING HEAVILY TO WIN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RACE



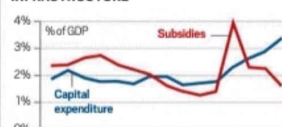
Source: Bloomberg, Breakout Capital. As of December 10, 2024. 2024 & 2025 figures are estimates.

INEFFICIENT US DEBT: MORE & MORE PUBLIC DEBT NEEDED FOR A \$ OF GDP GROWTH



Source: IMF, Haver Analytics, Breakout Capital.

INDIA SEES INCREASED FOCUS ON INFRASTRUCTURE



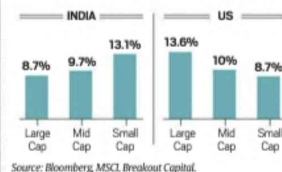
Source: Budget Documents, Breakout Capital. Note: This is shown for the FY 1 Apr - 31 Mar

CHINA IS NOW CHEAP & ATTRACTIVE FOR INVESTMENT



Source: Bloomberg, MSCI, Breakout Capital. * Next 12 months earnings

IN INDIA, SMALL WILL NO LONGER BE BEAUTIFUL 2014-2024



Source: Bloomberg, MSCI, Breakout Capital.

PREDICTIONS SUMMARY

1 REVERSAL IN RECENT PATTERN OF US DOMINANCE: American stock market could have the first year of underperformance in a long time.

2 FISCAL DEFICIT IS AMERICA'S FATAL FLAW: Politicians are not focused on cutting back; market may put more pressure on them.

3 AMERICA WILL LOOK LESS EXCEPTIONAL: Growth rates will come off the boil rather than remain close to 3% like it's been for the last couple of years.

4 NEW STARS ARE GOING TO EMERGE: If something goes down, something else will come up. There are many large economies with minuscule investment weights.

5 CHINA IS BECOMING INVESTABLE: Its economy may not be booming or even doing fine, but it's become so cheap that it's investable. Several 'diamonds in the rough' there.

6 IN INDIA, SMALL WILL NO LONGER BE BEAUTIFUL: Small and mid-cap stocks have had a

great run. The performance-valuation gap will narrow between the small- and mid-cap companies and the large caps.

7 OVERSPENDING ON AI WILL HURT BIG TECH FIRMS: They're overdoing it; returns may not be commensurate with spend on AI. Valuations may be questioned if profits don't grow as significantly.

8 GLOBAL TRADE WILL GROW WITHOUT AMERICA: It's already been happening, but with Donald Trump's election, it's likely to accelerate. India and others are signing more bilateral trade agreements.

9 PRIVATE FUNDING WILL SLOW DOWN GLOBALLY: Public funding will increase again, mainly by the US. India is still at a nascent stage; private funding may or may not slow down.

10 NO MAGIC SOLUTION TO OBESITY EPIDEMIC: There are many benefits to drugs like Ozempic. But there are side effects too, and the idea that it is a magic pill will be questioned.

cerned when views become too one-sided. Everybody has become very bearish on China. Everyone is telling you the same thing. I'm trying to say that, it's still the world's second largest economy, still the second largest stock market, if you look at China, Hong Kong combined. And there are some companies there, what we call diamonds in the rough. If you objectively look at some of the companies in China, they are doing relatively OK. They have some cutting edge technology.

Roy: One company that you pointed out, that's BYD. Basically, you're saying China's investable and some Chinese companies are very undervalued. The number of cars BYD has sold is 4 million compared to Tesla's 1.8 million. And their market value is 100 billion and Tesla's 1.2 trillion, that's 12 times higher.

Sharma: This is just an example that there are cheap companies in China with good quality products. And you look at these stock prices, which have been pumped. Some stocks, especially in the tech space, are down 70%, 80% in dollar terms. That's my point, that there are diamonds to be found in the rough in China, even if you're structurally bearish on the economy as I am.

Roy: You're saying there's overspending on AI, and that'll hurt big tech firms. They used to spend an average of 10% of a year for many years; now they're spending an average of 27% investment in AI.

Sharma: There's a massive amount of spend which is going on. Some of these companies, they're called the hyperscalers in America — the Microsofts and the Alphas and Facebook, etc., even Tesla — the amount they're investing in this is quite incredible. These big tech firms in America have been making extraordinarily high profits, but if they're going to spend so much on AI, some of those profits are going to come down. And investors and other people are going to ask, who's going to benefit from this?

If you look at past such revolutions, whether it was the Internet revolution that took place in the 2000s, or the shale oil revolution, the established firms were never the big winners. In fact, the established firms ended up spending a lot, but the consumer, or some new firms benefited. Again, I think that AI is the future. It's here to stay. I'm not debating that. I think it's this entire triangulation, which is that you have a lot of hype being created by these hyperscalers who are spending so much on AI. And then you have expectations, which are very high. And yet, in terms of what the product is being able to deliver, that's still taking a lot of time to materialise.

So all this effort, I think that this could be something which could hurt the profitability of these big tech firms that are spending so much on AI.

Roy: You're saying in eight out of 10 fore-

casts that trade will grow without America now. Eight out of the 10 hottest trade corridors currently do not include the US.

Sharma: There are signs that this trend is likely to accelerate. We just saw the European Union signed a deal with a bunch of Latin American countries to bring tariffs down by 90%. Regional trade agreements are accelerating; bilateral trade agreements are accelerating.

If you look at the trade corridors around the world, the maximum growth is taking place between countries which don't involve America. In fact, eight out of these 10 don't involve America.

So the world is moving on — and when someone asks me how the world should adapt to a Trump world, my point is, start thinking about how to do things outside of America.

Roy: India has also signed, is signing, more regional trade agreements than before.

Sharma: There was a big hiatus. Last decade, India barely signed any new trade agreements. But in the last three to four years, there have been trade agreements without America. With countries like the UK, Oman, trade agreements are being currently negotiated.

I wish we'd do more to trade with our neighbours, though. That remains one of India's weaknesses — if you look at the big success stories around the world, including China, they have very good trading relationships with their immediate neighbours. Cost of transport is so much less, regional hubs are much easier to create, the synergies are much easier to create...

Roy: You're also saying that private funding is going to slow down globally. Between 2000 and 2019, it grew from 1 trillion to 7 (trillion). And from 2019 to 2024, in the last five years, it's gone from 7 to 14.

Sharma: We were sort of conditioned to think about all funding mainly happening through public markets. But in the last 10-15 years, particularly after the global financial crisis, you've seen a big explosion take place in the private markets. One is private equity, which is where people take a stake in companies that are not listed on the stock market. Or even when lending happens, it takes place outside of the traditional banking system, on a private basis.

Roy: Your graph says private equity, from being well below public funding, has now overtaken public funding. Public capital is — 5% growth, private equity + 10%, and private equity from being way behind public is now ahead of public.

Sharma: I'm trying to say that a strength taken too far becomes a weakness, which is that this may have gotten a bit too far and now you're seeing a lot of retail people wanting to participate in it. At the end of the day, if you throw too much money at something indiscriminately, there are negative consequences.

Roy: In India, private funding is growing fast, but still at an early stage. It's only 120 billion right now.

Sharma: Very small. The global number runs in trillions of dollars. We are still not even running in hundreds of billions of dollars. Whether it's private equity, private equity, whether it's got to do with public markets in terms of their domination, it's very US centric. I'm not that concerned about what's happening in India as yet. But globally, I do expect the growth in private credit, in private lending and in private equity to slow down, particularly in the US.

Roy: Your final forecast is about obesity — that there is no magic solution. America is at a different level of obesity — 44% — about the highest in the world for any major country.

Sharma: And like nearly three times the global average. That's why in America there's also this big craze for finding a magic solution to this. Some of these weight loss drugs, for some people, are beneficial. But the whole idea [seems to be] that you can just sit there and pop Ozempic and keep popping ice cream as well. And watch television and don't do any exercise.

Roy: Look at the massive increase in sales of obesity drugs, GLP-1, Ozempic and various others. From \$3 billion four years ago to \$324 billion now.

Sharma: My point is that there is no magic solution to this, it can't be so simple. And how long can you sustain this and what side effects will you have?

Roy: You've got this interesting graph of a side effect. People who have side effects of various types are searching on Google what to do about it, and they're gone up by 300%.

Sharma: These drugs, for curing diabetes and other stuff, they're very beneficial. But to expect that we have found the magic drug, I'm very suspicious of that.

Studies show that when you are on these drugs for over a year or so, you can expect your weight to come down possibly on average of around 18%. But the moment you give it up, then your weight starts to go back up and your net weight loss is closer to 5-6%. Not 18-20%.

Edited excerpts from interview by *deKoder*, in collaboration with *The Indian Express*. Ruchir Sharma is founder of Breakout Capital and chairperson of Rockefeller International. He is a contributing editor of *The Indian Times* and author of several books, including *What Went Wrong with Capitalism* (2024).

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China bracing for tougher US sanctions



JAYADEVA RANADE
MEMBER, NATIONAL SECURITY
ADVISORY BOARD

WITH barely a fortnight before Donald Trump takes over as US President, Chinese President Xi Jinping is bracing for some tough years ahead. China is anticipating a marked deterioration in bilateral relations, toughened by more sanctions. Beijing's riposte promises to be a blend of hard and conciliatory measures. It has, in fact, been preparing for a period of very strained ties since at least June 2020.

While there has lately been a noticeable softening of rhetoric in statements by Chinese leaders and in China's official media, Chinese analysts and military think tanks assess that the country will confront a period of very strained ties. As Xi Jinping told China's top communist leadership on the last day of 2024, "the journey of Chinese modernisation" wouldn't be just sunny skies, but also "choppy waters, and even dangerous storms".

Earlier, China's Ministry of Commerce had declared it

would hit back at sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. In early December 2024, China announced a ban on exports of three minerals — gallium, germanium and antimony — to the US, thereby escalating tech trade restrictions between the two countries. The three minerals are essential for a range of military applications. Last week, it imposed sanctions on 10 US companies, including Lockheed Martin and Raytheon.

At the same time, quite visible in recent weeks has been the change in the tone and tenor of statements made by Chinese leaders.

The People's Daily, official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has published articles highlighting the benefits of good relations for both countries. On December 31, it published a special commentary calling for increasing the areas of cooperation. It welcomed the renewal of the bilateral agreement on sci-tech cooperation and asserted that this "not only serves the interests of both peoples but also facilitates their joint efforts in addressing global challenges". It emphasised that "China-US cooperation can lead to fruitful results that are beneficial to both countries and the rest of the world".

Separately reinforcing this message, Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan sent New Year's greetings to teachers and students of a Washing-



TRUMP POLICIES: Beijing's riposte promises to be a blend of hard and conciliatory measures. Reuters

ton state school. Their message highlighted that "during the Second World War, China and the United States fought together for peace and justice, and the friendship between the two peoples stood the test of blood and fire and is growing ever stronger".

Other Chinese leaders, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Ambassador to the US Xie Feng, have recently expressed similar sentiments. China has also sought to maintain bilateral linkages, like sister city and academic ties, despite the sharp downturn in relations.

Assessments by prominent Chinese academics, however, reflect that China's leadership is preparing for

Assessments by prominent Chinese academics reflect that China's leadership is preparing for US pressure on multiple fronts.

US pressure on multiple fronts. Wang Yong, Professor at Peking University's School of International Studies, said that US Secretary of State-designate Mark Rubio may "do everything in his power to suppress and curb China's development" and could play up the Taiwan issue and form military alliances in the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific regions.

Wu Xinbo, Director of the Centre for American Studies at Pudan University, suggested that the US may "challenge China's national interests more often, and even breach our limit on many important issues".

Zheng Yongnian, an expert in international relations and Dean of the Qianhai Institute

for International Affairs at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen), wrote that Asia faced an "unprecedented" danger of war and that the strong US desire to pivot to Asia and NATO's strategic shift toward China had destabilised Asia.

In reality, though, Beijing had begun preparing for a serious confrontation with the US since at least July 2020. In an unusual and revealing article, Zhou Li, a former career diplomat and Vice-Minister of the CCP's important International Liaison Department, has listed six measures that China requires to take to respond to the anticipated "full escalation of the struggle". These include decoupling from the US dollar and internationalisation of the renminbi, rapidly boosting food production to prepare against reduction of food exports, like soybean, to China, preparing for medical contingencies, etc.

The latest confirmation that China is prepared for a confrontation with the US is the article by People's Liberation Army (PLA) Colonel Wen Weiying, Associate Professor at the Military Management College of the National Defense University (NDU). It warned: "As the US strategic suppression of China becomes more severe, US sanctions against China will enter a more 'crazy' stage."

Colonel Wen Weiying asserted that "China must coordinate and integrate resources

from all parties", step up independent innovation and R&D and "break the unjust attempt of the United States to isolate and block the Chinese economy with sanctions." He noted that US sanctions against China focussed on areas of cutting-edge technology, such as electronic information, ships, aerospace, nuclear, satellite, electronic technology, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing and unmanned facilities. He acknowledged that the US sanctions in recent years had seriously damaged China's national security, national interests, economic security and development.

Colonel Wen Weiying recommended opposing US sanctions and protectionism. He said that Beijing must be prepared to respond to the imposition of further sanctions by the new Trump administration with hard-hitting retaliatory measures. He said countries with close ties to the US and which have advanced and hi-tech technology would be the targets and pointed out that China had huge cash reserves.

Sanctions against China will likely be accompanied by a sharp deterioration in China-US relations. It will not only have deleterious economic repercussions for China but also impact China politically. China's global ambitions will be adversely affected and Xi Jinping's authority could be severely undermined.

Manipur needs 'truth & reconciliation', not political apologies



LT GEN BHUPINDER SINGH (RETD)
EX-ACTING GOVERNOR OF ANDAMAN
& NICOBAR AND PUDUCHERRY

OFFICIAL apologies can be powerful instruments to heal societal wounds, rectify policies and rekindle hope for future unity. They can conclusively redress and reassure the disaffected to invest in another chance to normalise. However, for an apology to work, it needs to be sincere and not political.

One of the most restorative apologies in modern history is Kniefall von Warschau or the 'Warsaw Knee', with West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's sudden and spontaneous gesture of genuflection before a war memorial in Poland to symbolically atone for Germany's past with Poland. Brandt reflected on the poignant moment: "At the atavism of German history and under the weight of millions of murdered people, I did what people do when language fails."

The impact of the sincere apology without any unnecessary context or defensiveness was immediate. The clear courage and dignity in

Brandt's apology overcame the murky past and ushered in a new era of trust.

Recently, the deeply fractured, polarised and largely unacknowledged realm of Manipur re-entered the national imagination with a supposed apology by its Chief Minister, who has presided over its slide since violence erupted in May 2023.

Questions about the sincerity of the apology abound. Did it tantamount to taking ownership and accountability? Was it unequivocal? Did it resort to rote whataboutery and blame-shifting? Did it include acknowledging missteps and, therefore, rectification of outlook? Or was it just a mealy-mouthed political statement, essentially implying more of the same, going forward?

The CM's statement clearly lacked both personal ownership (as it pandered to generalities) and empathy, as he said perfunctorily, "Whatever happened has happened. We have to forgive and forget the past mistakes and make a new beginning." As if on cue, and seemingly oblivious to reality, he added incredulously: "The Centre provided enough security personnel and funds!"

This begs the question that if there was no shortage of support from the Centre, why has the situation deteriorated dangerously? Was it then, shortage of governance intent or capabilities? Either way, an



INEFFECTIVE: The Manipur CM's apology lacks both personal ownership and empathy. PTI

unforgivable shortcoming, if any sincerity was implicit. The final straw came with the CM blaming the previous governments (from opposition parties) for the prevailing situation, thereby effectively absolving himself and his governance from the need for any remorse.

Weeks earlier, the Union Home Ministry had issued its annual report on Manipur which highlighted a laundry list of measures taken, including personnel, financial, material, and detailed an earlier visit by the Home Minister to end the strife and disaffection. The language was almost self-patting. "The central government took a series of immediate and sustained actions to handle the situation."

But what was not mentioned in the report or in the CM's purported apology was the

Manipur needs moral leadership and genuine outreach by the highest offices, and not political and insincere apologies.

fact that the societal divide has only worsened and the resultant violence increased.

As the face and perception of Meitei majoritarianism (against minority Kukis), the CM could have been more specific in defining who he sought to 'forgive' and what he wanted others to 'forget' in his ostensible 'apology'. After all, it was only a political apology.

With no major restructuring or reimagining of the governance structure in Manipur envisaged, what it needs desperately to heal the societal divide (beyond more security personnel and fencing of borders, which must be done, in any case) is some honest soul-cleansing, a la "Truth and Reconciliation", as was done in the aftermath of the ended Apartheid (White Rule) in South Africa, when portents of bloody revenge were inevitable.

With a complex, polarised and contested past (much like Manipur), South Africa, too, could have regressed to an explosive us-versus-them rhetoric, but for the sagacity and wisdom of the leadership under Africa's Gandhi, ie Nelson Mandela.

Like the inclusive spirit of unity-in-diversity, as enshrined in the constitutional "Idea of India", the South African leadership had chosen to valourise and posit their own civilisational concept of 'Ubuntu', which is predicated on the interconnectedness of humankind. This approach is especially important as it offers a fresh and real chance to come clean by seeking forgiveness over prosecution, unlike the spirit prevailing in a solely militaristic approach, as is visible in Manipur.

If one comes from a more unbiased and progressive outlook that in any conflict, excesses or wrongs are committed by all sides (as opposed to binary othering, as is the wont in India these days), then a sense of restorative justice prevails.

Importantly, in the South African experiment under "Truth and Reconciliation", the corrective action was not implied for 'Whites' only, but also onto ANC (African National Congress) cadres, who, too, had committed excesses. Individuals seeking amnesty came clean on human rights violations that they had perpetrated with the aim of restoring the

victim's dignity and seeking forgiveness.

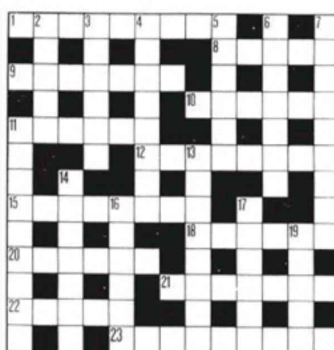
A natural outcome of 'bringing out the truth' has a reconciliatory and forward-moving effect that cannot be achieved with retributive justice, as there are layers after layers of 'truths' in such places. A majoritarian spirit of victor's justice is avoided. In Manipur, one side definitely imagines the State to be favouring the other. Importantly, this process does not preclude justice from running its course if the magnitude and brutality (and also non-acceptance) prevails amongst parties on specific instances.

What Manipur needs is a total reconstruction of its society (and narratives). That can only emerge if the recent past is opened to inform the distraught populace on both sides about what really happened in order to accept, forgive and heal the same for a collective future.

As only a wise statesman and not just a politician, Nelson Mandela could say: "All of us, as a nation that has newly found itself, share in the shame at the capacity of human beings of any race or language group to be inhuman to other human beings. We should all share in the commitment to a South Africa in which that will never happen again."

Manipur needs such moral leadership and genuine outreach by the highest offices, and not political and insincere apologies.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Petty (5-4)
- 8 Pale purple (5)
- 9 A culinary herb (7)
- 10 Slain (6)
- 11 Provoke (4,2)
- 12 Line of descent (8)
- 15 Huge (8)
- 18 South African seaport (6)
- 20 Displace from normal habitat (6)
- 21 Traveller to sacred place (7)
- 22 Henhouse (5)
- 23 Ambitiously competitive person (4-5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Pass out, 4 Punch, 7 Turn, 8 Fair play, 10 Hand-picked, 12 Detach, 13 Supine, 15 Eyewitness, 18 Free hand, 19 Visa, 20 Label, 21 Exigent.

Down: 1 Pitch, 2 Serenity, 3 Trance, 4 Perpetuity, 5 Null, 6 Haywire, 9 Apocryphal, 11 Lifeline, 12 Doleful, 14 Twinge, 16 Smart, 17 Verb.

DOWN

- 2 Had in mind (5)
- 3 Sheen (6)
- 4 Make unwarrantable intrusion (8)
- 5 Supreme dominion (6)
- 6 Distinctive attribute (7)
- 7 Sloth or envy for example (6,3)
- 11 Place of refuge (9)
- 13 Afoof unemotional person (4,4)
- 14 French aviation pioneer (7)
- 16 Without lumps (6)
- 17 Sparing (6)
- 19 Originate (5)

SU DO KU



V. HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JANUARY 10, 2025, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Posh Shaka 20
- Posh Parvatisht 27
- Hijari 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 11, up to 10.20 pm
- Shukla Yoga up to 2.37 pm
- Krikla Nakshatra up to 1.46 pm
- Moon in Taurus sign

FORECAST

SUNSET: 17:39 HRS

MOONRISE: 07:20 HRS

CITY MAX MIN

Chandigarh	17	07
New Delhi	21	06
Amritsar	14	05
Bathinda	21	05
Jalandhar	14	05
Ludhiana	16	05
Bhawan	20	05
Hisar	19	04
Sirsa	20	04
Dharamsala	21	06
Manali	12	-01
Shimla	14	06
Srinagar	06	-04
Jammu	17	05
Kargil	-01	-04
Leh	01	-10
Dehradun	23	12
Mussoorie	16	05

Source: IMD

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Courting Taliban

India takes Afghan route to rile Pakistan

It has taken India a while to realise that the Taliban are going nowhere. They are here to stay, for better or worse, and it's worthwhile to engage with them rather than wait interminably for the restoration of democracy in Afghanistan. New Delhi is no longer insisting that the regime should protect the rights of all sections of the Afghan society, especially women, children and minorities. Such lofty aspirations don't really matter when there are geopolitical points to be scored. There is a lot of catch-up to be done as China and Russia have been quick off the blocks on the Afghan front. The Taliban, though still deprived of international legitimacy, are making their presence felt by gaining the support of key regional players. Every ally counts as Pakistan has upped the ante against Afghanistan over alleged sheltering of terror groups.

The meeting between India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai marks a pivotal moment for bilateral ties as well as multilateral equations. New Delhi has signalled that its strategic and economic interests will take precedence over everything else. Last year, India had thumbed its nose at the US-led West by signing a 10-year deal with sanctions-hit Iran to operate the Chabahar port. The move was aimed not only at boosting India's trade links with Afghanistan and Central Asia but also bypassing the ports of Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan. Chabahar figured in the Misri-Muttaqi talks too, with its potential use for sending humanitarian aid to Afghanistan being vital for New Delhi's goodwill mission.

For all intents and purposes, India has granted recognition to the Taliban regime, though it will not say that in so many words. What's more, New Delhi has pulled off a diplomatic triumph by pushing an insecure Islamabad into a corner.

Online lies

End of Meta fact-checking a setback

META's announcement of abandoning its fact-checking programme, starting with the United States, comes as a setback to the global campaign against misinformation and disinformation online. The dramatic policy shift marks an end to the independent, third-party fact-checking programme launched by the social media giant in 2016. It cannot be mere coincidence that the decision comes ahead of US President-elect Donald Trump — a vocal critic of Meta for censoring right-wing voices — assuming office. CEO Mark Zuckerberg's pitch that the key motivation is a desire to embrace free speech is hard to swallow. A reluctant proponent of content moderation, a series of controversies attributed to fake news led him and other social media leaders to take aggressive steps to police discourse. Zuckerberg's move to mend the rocky relationship with Trump may make business sense, but on all other counts, it is irresponsible. It does not bode well for information integrity worldwide.

Instead of relying on professional fact-checkers to moderate content, Meta is going X's way, that banks on volunteers writing content notes to be added below misleading posts. Serious concerns are being raised about the implications of loosening controls. Watchdogs warn of the ripple effects of removing strong guardrails, and how it could enable misinformation to thrive unchecked on Facebook, Instagram and Threads. The proliferation of falsehoods and in India's case, hate speeches as well, not only weakens people's access to trustworthy information, but also the ability to confront their political leaders.

The notion of a 'WhatsApp university' that consistently misrepresents facts and twists history has come to denote the pitfalls of giving free rein to social media platforms. Toxic floods of lies need more fact-checkers, not less. Their absence can only mean an open invitation to spread falsehoods and misinformation, with zero accountability.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JANUARY 10, 1925

Lord Lytton's speech

IT is not inconsistent with our genuine satisfaction at the rejection of the Ordinance Bill by the Bengal Legislative Council to admit that the speech which Lord Lytton made with reference to it in opening the session was a fine performance, entirely worthy of the historic occasion. Barring one single point, it had in an eminent degree one characteristic note of free oratory, persuasiveness. The exception is as regards His Excellency's unjust and ungracious reference to the Indian Press, which, he said, had "studiously fostered a spirit of distrust of the government". This attack upon a class of men who try their best to serve their people in the face of great odds, and often at no small risk to themselves, was the least defensible, because His Excellency himself admitted that "the deep-seated distrust of the government" that existed in this country was "due to the fact that the government has so long been without an element of responsibility to the representatives of an electorate." If this is the true explanation of the distrust, as it undoubtedly is, is it difficult to see that the Indian Press is only the natural purveyor of a widespread feeling and by no means its deliberate fomentor? Of course, His Excellency implies that the distrust is no longer either natural or reasonable because the government now has an element of responsibility. This, however, is a matter in respect of which the vast majority of politically minded Indians hold a contrary opinion, and the Indian Press can scarcely be blamed for constituting itself as the organ and mouthpiece of this majority.

OPINION

The Tribune JALANDHAR | FRIDAY | 10 JANUARY 2025

Dr Singh deserves a befitting memorial

In a country where nepotism is an accepted evil, he was beyond such weaknesses



TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

RESUMING my column after the Xmas break, I look back at the happenings in our country during the past few weeks. The distinct brand of democracy that is taking root in India was on display within the new Parliament building and outside. Elected members came to blows, a feature of some parliaments in the Far East.

Outside the building's precincts, a Virat Kohli-like shove was attempted by Rahul Gandhi on a BJP elder. Virat's target on the cricket ground resumed his innings after the encounter. Rahul's opponent found himself in a hospital, chatting about the strength of the younger man pitted against him.

While the country watched the antics of our elected representatives, their party bosses got into a slanging match in poll-bound Delhi. The verbal duel has graduated to a poster war between the BJP and AAR with the two opponents denigrating each other in print. We are amused and disgusted simultaneously, and in equal measure.

Equally, there was the proverbial silver lining. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra delivered her maiden speech in the Lok Sabha. In fact, she opened the Opposition's arguments on disrespect to the Constitution. She also mentioned the vituperative attacks on her great-grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, the bête noire of the present dispensation. She spoke well and sensibly too. She resurrected a flicker of hope for the return of decency and substance to proceedings in Parliament, as was prevalent in the times of Pandit Nehru.



HUMBLE LEADER: Mannohan Singh's decency sometimes worked against him, m

An extremely decent human being, who was our Prime Minister for a decade, breathed his last in a hospital in Delhi. Dr Mannohan Singh was truly respected not only in Punjab and the North, from where he hailed, but also in other parts of the country where perceptive citizens ferreted out decent and credible leaders when they perceive the existence of such a rare specimen.

It was not as a Sikh but as a Congress leader and the Prime Minister that Mannohan Singh apologised to the Sikh community for the injustices heaped upon them after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Such a gesture of humility and contrition was not attempted by the Congress government in Maharashtra after the slaughter of Muslims in Mumbai in 1993 or by the BJP in Gujarat in 2002.

I had occasion to interact with Dr Singh during my years in service and later. Two such occasions remain etched in memory. The first arose when the IPS Officers' Association asked me to meet the PM to plead its case when the Pay Commission's recommendations were being considered by the Union Government.

I had retired by then and set up

The scams reported during his second term in office were a result of his reluctance to discipline colleagues.

home in Mumbai, the city of my birth. I asked the officer who had spoken to me on the phone why that was necessary when the PM's own son-in-law was a member of our service. The officer replied that the son-in-law would not dare to broach the subject to the PM. In a country where nepotism is an accepted evil, the thought that the PM was beyond such weaknesses was certainly exhilarating.

After the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, famous lyricist and screenwriter Javed Akhtar and influential Marathi journalist

Kumar Ketkar asked me to accompany them to Delhi to meet the PM to discuss the repercussions of this incident for the polity. Dr Singh listened carefully to each of us. I spoke about inter-community relations and how civil society in my city was involved in finding acceptable solutions. He obviously took my suggestions to heart because when I arrived back at Mumbai's airport, the Chief Minister sent an emissary to request me to drive straight to his residence to discuss with him the suggestions I had made to the PM.

Dr Singh was an attentive listener. He acted on ideas if he perceived some merit in them. He was not merely humble; his credibility was high. It is true that his sense of decency sometimes worked against him. The scams that were reported during his second term in office were a result of his reluctance to discipline colleagues, especially those from other political parties which were part of the coalition government. Narendra Modi scores much better than him in the ability to manage coalition partners.

An unseemly row has erupted between the Congress and the BJP about the site of a memorial

to honour the former PM's contribution to the country and its people. Dr Singh was the only non-politician to rise to this pedestal. He did not command a following among citizens like other Prime Ministers did to a larger or smaller degree. But he deserves a monument in marble to remind us of the man who opened our economy and lifted crores of Indians to the ranks of the middle income groups from near-poverty levels.

In Maharashtra, the BJP-led coalition is wrestling with the financial downside of the Ladki Bhain project, which literally took Mahayuti over the finishing line in the 2024 Assembly elections. A massive exercise is afoot to ascertain the eligibility of crores of applicants whom the scheme was not supposed to cover. Half of the would-be beneficiaries will find themselves deprived of the promised largesse. They are bound to grumble. In the meantime, the Agriculture Minister is finding it hard to pacify farmers who were promised loan waivers, which the treasury cannot accommodate at present.

'Grumbling' was the word most in evidence when the state's Cabinet was to be formed. The number of aspirants for ministerial status exceeded the figure permitted by law. The 41 MLAs belonging to Ait Pawar's NCP faction and the 57 from Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena had a tough time concluding who should be in and who could be left out. This is a common occurrence that has been experienced earlier, but this time around, the aspirational levels had risen so sharply that it took a month after the election results to arrive at a solution.

The police establishment will be forced to part with many more personnel to provide security (status, really) to the 40-odd Ministers. Status and importance are what they all crave for. Some, of course, are in search of 'creamy' portfolios. It will be difficult for CM Devendra Fadnis to please them all. I reckon it will be the test of his leadership skills.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The legacy of heroes is the memory of a great name and the inheritance of a great example. — Benjamin Disraeli

The magic of a restful sleep

RAJIV SHARMA

EVERY time a patient suffering from a chronic disease like diabetes, hypertension, thyroid disorder, or, for that matter, obesity consults me, I always ask, "At what time do you go to bed?" And the reply usually starts me. Most of my patients tell me that they go to sleep after midnight, some even as late as one or two o'clock.

Next morning, they have a hectic day ahead of them. With no time to spare for exercise and meditation, they are caught in a vicious cycle. Their erratic lifestyle takes a toll on their health. Thus, sleep deprivation has become a serious scourge of the modern times. Many people are suffering its serious consequences.

As I listen to the tales of sleep-deprived patients, I am reminded of my childhood days, when we would usually be in bed by 9 pm. Hardly a soul stayed awake after ten o'clock. Our cots were spread under the canopy of a starlit sky, and we drifted into the dream world in no time. The first rays of the sun would awaken us to begin our day with renewed vigour and vitality. But, alas, those days are long gone and we are paying a heavy price for the progress we have made by cutting down on our sleep hours.

Recently, my wife and I visited New Delhi to attend the marriage of my cousin's daughter. Complying with the laws, the din of the DJ stopped exactly at ten o'clock. At 10.30 pm, the bar was closed. Used to the high-decibel music and non-stop flow of liquor well past midnight at marriage functions, we were mesmerised by the serenity at the outdoor venue. We had dinner in the company of our relatives and friends, whom we had met after a long time, and chatted freely without straining our vocal cords. The marriage ceremony was over well in time, and we woke up mint-fresh the next day to congratulate the newly wedded couple with wide smiles at the breakfast table. Such is the power and magic of a restful sleep.

Studies show that if you are sleep-deficient, you may have trouble making decisions, solving problems, controlling your emotions and behaviour and coping with change. Children and teenagers who are sleep-deficient may feel angry and impulsive and lack motivation. They may get lower grades and feel stressed.

Patients often ask me that even though their health parameters are normal, they don't feel fit. I tell them to follow the time-tested adage of having adequate exercise, sunlight, sleep and mindful eating. Sadly, our hectic pace of life is straining the physical and mental limits of our body, but to what purpose?

Meanwhile, I have rephrased the popular quote displayed on a board in the waiting area of my clinic. Now it reads: Eat less, walk more; Watch less, read more; Scroll less, sleep more.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Disservice to RTI spirit

Apologies of the editorial 'RTI on its knees', the RTI Act was enacted in 2005 by the Mannohan Singh-led government to facilitate a greater flow of information from public authorities to the common man as a weapon of empowerment. It was a revolutionary legislation that had placed huge powers in the hands of the ordinary citizen to demand a transparent and accountable administration. But successive governments have chipped away at the Act, making their actions less accountable and transparent to the people. There are a huge number of cases pending with information commissions nationwide. Everyone should remember that democracy is not just about seeking benefits but also about contribution to nation-building.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROHAR

Dilution is anti-democratic

The RTI Act is not only about getting information but also about getting it as a 'right', something which goes a long way in strengthening democracy through transparency. Opaqueness in governance is a recipe for disaster. The Act needs to be strengthened to take the country in the right direction by adding checks and balances as inbuilt safety measures. The strength of a democracy is directly proportional to the strength of its citizens. Dilution of the Act in any manner is anti-democratic and unacceptable.

JAGVINDER SINGH BHAR, PATIALA

Strengthen the law, don't stifle it

Refer to 'RTI on its knees', the Right to Information Act is a crucial law that gives people the right to access information in a time-bound manner so that they can make informed decisions. It promises transparency in government functioning and a bulwark against corruption. But the Act can't deliver the desired results unless it is implemented in a wholehearted manner. The Central Information Commission and many state information commissions are understaffed. No wonder the pendency of appeals is rising day by day. Letting off evasive public authorities with minor admonishments and not imposing heavy fines is another impediment.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

Address govt school crisis

Refer to 'Teacher crisis', the editorial rightly highlights Himachal Pradesh's crumbling school education system, marked by severe teacher shortage and the dominance of private English-medium schools. Even the poorest parents avoid Hindi-medium government schools as attractive names like 'Schools of Excellence' cannot compensate for inadequate staff and facilities. Moreover, staffing schools with zero enrolment while ignoring understaffed ones worsens the crisis. Recruiting an adequate number of qualified teachers with a focus on the English medium, a global language of opportunity, is crucial to reversing this trend.

CHANCHAL S. MANN, UNA

Prioritise quality education

Refer to 'Teacher crisis'; education and health are not among our national priorities as we invest minimum resources in them, in contrast to many other developing or developed nations. Himachal Pradesh's education scenario is pathetic as vacancies of teachers are not being filled. Many other states, particularly in the Hindi-speaking belt, are nearly sailing in the same boat. During a visit to China a decade ago, I asked my guide, "How has your country developed so fast in a short time?" She replied with a smile, "Six: it happened due to three things: Education, Education, Education. Our leadership has accorded priority to quality education."

BM SINGH, AMRITSAR

Trump's dangerous rhetoric

Apologies of 'Trump doesn't rule out force to take Panama Canal, Greenland', Donald Trump's alarming rhetoric on using force or economic means to acquire the Panama Canal, Greenland and even annex Canada echoes dangerous expansionist ambitions of dictators like Hitler and Mussolini. Such aggressive policies, masked as national interest, risk destabilising international relations and undermining global peace. His call for prioritising military dominance over diplomacy is equally troubling. History has shown that unchecked territorial ambitions lead to conflict and devastation. It is vital for global leaders to reject such authoritarian tendencies and uphold principles of cooperation and mutual respect.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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



C.R. Sasikumar

Protesting farmers are demanding a legal guarantee for MSP. Will price assurance give an impetus to farmers to diversify crops or does it go against a liberalising economy?

Add a new layer to MSP: PDP

A price assurance mechanism, just like GST, will spur formalisation and digitisation of farm trade



HARISH DAMODARAN

SHOULD THERE BE a minimum support price (MSP) guarantee, legal or otherwise, for crops produced by farmers? Two decades or less from now, we wouldn't be debating this at all.

The reason is simple: Agriculture is seeing a haemorrhaging of the best lands as well as human resources.

The most fertile farmlands — be it on both sides of the Grand Trunk Road, the Ganga-Yamuna Doab riverine plains or the Krishna-Godavari, Cauvery and Mahanadi alluvial delta basins — are getting diverted for real estate development, if not for building infrastructure, factories and smart cities. Andhra Pradesh's capital, Amaravati, is coming up on 33,000-odd acres of what used to be lush paddy, banana and turmeric-growing fields on the right bank of the Krishna.

The same goes for farmers. India officially has 146.5 million "operational holdings" (2015-16 Agriculture Census) and 105-115 million beneficiaries under the PM-Kisan

Agriculture is the only business where both production and price risks are high. Price risk is something that can and should be addressed. It is a strategic imperative and in enlightened consumer self-interest to make our farmers to farm today, tomorrow and beyond.

The challenge before Indian agriculture isn't just one of feeding 1.7 billion mouths by the early-2060s. It's about retaining the best available agricultural lands and human talent in farming.

How do we ensure that farmers remain in business, rather than look to exit and sell their land for converting acres into square yards and feet?

It is instructive to note that agricultural growth during the first two decades post the economic reforms was primarily driven by improved terms of trade for farmers and new technologies — from hybrid seeds in vegetables and maize, genetically-modified Bt cotton, tissue-culture and high-density planting in fruit crops, drip irrigation and laser leveling, fast-growing broiler chicken and commercial layer breeder birds.

The last decade, however, has witnessed a reversal of sorts. The official farmers' terms of trade index (base: triennium ended 2011-12-100), which rose from 87.82 in 2004-05 to 102.95 in 2010-11, has fallen to 97.21 in 2022-23. Also, the flow of innovations has slowed, with more promotion of traditional *pampapangari* *krisht* than cutting-edge agricultural research.

The experience of the Green Revolution, and agriculture's robust growth performance over the first one-and-a-half decades of this century, tells us that farmers invest in their land and in technologies for boosting yields and reducing cultivation costs only when there is some assurance of price — between the time the crop is sown and is ready for marketing.

Agriculture is the only business where both production and price risks are high. Yield losses can happen at every stage of the crop — from dry weather impacting germination and vegetative growth, pest and disease attacks, frost, hail storms, temperature spikes and unseasonal rain around harvesting. There are lessons in minimising production uncertainties, which will only increase with climate change. But price risk is something that can and should be addressed. It is a strategic imperative and in enlightened consumer self-interest to make our farmers to farm today, tomorrow and beyond. The world cannot feed us; only we can.

"Legal MSP" is the least we can give to our farmers, who one must assume to be as rational and risk-averse as any businessman. The way to do it is by paying the price difference when a crop is sold below its government-declared MSP.

A price deficiency payments (PDP) system will spur formalisation and digitisation of the farm produce trade, which is still largely cash-based. Farmers once aware of PDP will start

demanding receipts from buyers, detailing both the quantity and price at which their crop has been sold. Just as with GST — where the buyer makes sure the seller has paid the tax charged on the goods or services purchased in order for him to claim input credit — farmers would insist on recording of their sales transactions through digital payments. PDP will also incentivise states to set up APMC mandis or even electronic trading platforms outside the physical market yards, where farmers can sell their produce. The farmer only needs the sales invoice to claim the legal MSP via PDP. The onus for creating the market infrastructure for recording of transactions lies on the state governments. Any payment of price difference by the Centre should be conditional upon the states enabling the generation of the necessary sales data.

We want the Punjab farmer to grow soyabean, cotton, maize or arhar, instead of paddy. But we also know that Maharashtra farmers sold soyabean in the current marketing season at Rs 4,000-4,200 per quintal, way below the MSP of Rs 4,892. One wouldn't be surprised, then, to see them plant more area under sugarcane for the next season.

Without basic price assurance, it is unrealistic to expect any crop diversification by farmers. We mustn't wait for the day when they opt to sell their land rather than even grow rice or sugarcane.

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It would be a folly

How much government can buy, for how many commodities, and at how many places, is a question that needs serious analysis



ASHOK GULATI

LET ME START by saying that my heart bleeds when I see farmers agitating over prices for their produce. I have spent my entire professional life working for the betterment of agriculturists. But rational policy-making requires much more than compassion. It requires a better understanding of how the economy functions, especially the market economy. Having worked on the agriculture of various Asian and African countries, I can confidently say that legalising minimum support prices (MSPs) would be a folly — it would throw a spanner in the working of the economy. Making MSPs effective is different from making MSPs legal. Let me elaborate.

In a market economy, the price of any product is decided by the forces of demand and supply. Suppose the production of a commodity in any year is 100 units and its demand is 75 units. In such a situation, the price of that commodity would fall. With reduced prices, demand expands, supply shrinks, and finally, the market clears. If MSP is made legal and is high, creating a situation of supply exceeding demand by 25 units (100-75), no private player will come forward to offer a price lower than MSP as it would be illegal to do so. In that case, farmers would be saddled with these extra 25 units that no one is willing to buy at the declared MSP. The entire excess supply will become the responsibility of the government. How much the government can buy, and for how many commodities, and at how many places is an open question that needs serious thinking and analysis.

Some activists suggest price deficiency payments. Several cost estimates of such a scheme are being floated. The problem with such a scheme is that if MSP is declared legal, then there would be no real market price below MSP. Then the government becomes the open-ended buyer of all commodities for which MSPs are declared, which are 23 as on day. If one argues that MSP is not legal, and agri-markets do exist and price discovery is possible, but farmers need to be compensated for the difference between MSP and lower market prices as price deficiency payments to farmers, we are talking about a different policy — making MSP more of an income instrument. The downside of such a policy is that the moment traders know that the government will compensate the farmers by the difference in MSP

and market prices, they are likely to push market prices even lower, and there is a high probability that farmers and traders will collude in showing market prices much lower than the MSP. That would make it very difficult to estimate the hit to the financial exchequer. The price deficiency mechanism was tried earnestly in Madhya Pradesh, and just after one season, the government had to give it up precisely because of this reason. If the government wants to make MSP more effective (not legal), it can create a stabilisation fund of about Rs 25,000 crore, especially focused on pulses and oilseeds of which India is a net importer.

It may be worth noting that the 23 MSP crops constitute roughly 30 per cent of the value of agriculture. Within these 23 crops, MSP is properly implemented in the case of rice and wheat, that too in a few states. The Centre's latest Situation Assessment Survey revealed that not more than 10 per cent of farmers sold their produce at MSP. It may also be noted that this MSP policy is an offshoot of the acute grain deficit in the mid-1980s. It won't be economically prudent if the same policy is applied when India is surplus in basic staples.

Now, let us turn to the non-MSP segment of agriculture which is facing free markets. During 2010-11 to 2022-23, for which we have the latest data, fishery has been growing at 8.2 per cent per annum, meat

at 7.3 per cent, eggs at 6 per cent, milk at 5.3 per cent, and horticulture at 4.7 per cent per annum. None of these agri-commodities have MSP, and they are more perishable than wheat and rice. But wheat has grown at 3.2 per cent and paddy at 2.5 per cent over the same period. This clearly shows that market-based systems have performed much better than the government-controlled MSP regime for wheat and rice.

However, this does not mean that markets are perfect. They are often distorted by the government through export bans, stocking limits on private trade. They are often distorted by the government through export bans, stocking limits on private trade, suspension of futures and options at the drop of a hat, and so on. All this is done in the name of keeping agri-inflation low for consumers. So, there is an inherent consumer bias in the agri-price policy, which implicitly becomes anti-farmer. Amongst the G20 countries, as per OECD, India is the only country that has negative Producer Support Estimates (PSEs), meaning that India implicitly taxes its agriculture by suppressing market prices. What Indian farmers need is freer markets, building of agri-value chains — like the AMUL model in milk — where farmers can get 75 to 80 per cent of what consumer pays. Making MSP legal will be going backwards, which is not in line with the liberalisation of the economy.

Gulati is Distinguished Professor at ICRIER. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Whether in terms of investment, trade, or supply chain integration, the highly complementary economies of China and the US require mutual dependence and coexistence, with significant potential for collaboration in the tech sector. These cannot simply be 'blocked' by a Pentagon mandate." — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

A more empathetic justice

Treatment of survivors of sexual and gender based violence lacks sensitivity, denies dignity. Delhi HC verdict is a welcome intervention



PRATIKSHA BAXI

IN S V State, Justice Pratibha M Singh and Justice Amit Sharma (December 10, 2024) held that all hospitals are required by law to provide free medical treatment for victims of rape, child sexual abuse and acid attacks. The Delhi High Court reiterated that Section 397, BNSS, and Section 357C, CrPC makes it mandatory for all hospitals, public or private, whether under the jurisdiction of the central government, state government, local bodies or persons to provide free first-aid and medical treatment. Further, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Guidelines (2014) also directs that survivors of rape must receive all services such as OPD/inpatient registration, pathology tests, radiology investigations and medicines for free.

In an important act of co-governance, the court issued guidelines to all hospitals and medical establishments to sensitise doctors, nurses, paramedics, and administrative staff that denying free medical treatment to survivors of rape, child sexual abuse and acid attack is a criminal offence. It directed that prominent signs be put up stating that free medical treatment to survivors shall be provided. Denial of free medical treatment is punishable by imprisonment for one year or with fine or both.

This order is critical to the development of "therapeutic jurisprudence" because it focuses on providing medical care and the statutory right to therapeutic access. Importantly, the court explicitly states that "the word 'treatment' would include first aid, diagnosis, in-patient admission, continued out-patient assistance, diagnostic tests, lab tests, surgery if required, physical and mental counselling, psychological help, family counselling, etc." And when brought to the emergency, the hospital shall not insist on ID proof in order to admit the victim, but first provide immediate treatment to the victim.

The Delhi High Court's (HC) order when read from the right to health, dignity, privacy and life perspective allows us to think about the right to "therapeutic access" for all survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Surely, the medical profession can also ensure free treatment for survivors of domestic violence, or women raped or beaten in marriage?

Doctors and judges have much to learn from the recent French court verdict punishing mass rape of Gisèle Pelicot who shifted the blame to the husband who raped her. Her husband drugged her, engaged 70 men over a decade to rape his wife, and filmed other men raping his wife while he put her in a chemically induced sleep.

Adopting a right to health perspective, one hopes that doctors and judges will learn from Gisèle Pelicot's testimony to develop systems that allow therapeutic access, recognise the harm of sexual violence and enable medical care to women raped and beaten in marriage, irrespective of

whether marital rape is criminalised or not. Marriage does not give men the license to rape their wives. Gisèle Pelicot's case is important for the medical profession to root out bias against women patients and end medical gaslighting. By blaming women patients and making them doubt their experience, symptoms of trauma are misrecognised and wrongly labelled as malingering.

The Delhi HC by noting that hospitals continue to deny free treatment while courts hear rape and child sexual abuse cases "routinely", and "in large numbers", points our attention to a grave crisis of governance. However, the political class is not interested in thinking of sexual violence as a public health issue.

There is scarce rape over victims being denied medical treatment, or the fact that victims are often forced to borrow clothes from relatives, or wear dirty blankets loaned by the police or flimsy hospital gowns after the medico-legal examination. Or that the costs of labs to purchase containers to conserve evidence (such as foetal matter) may be passed to the victim's family. It is a scandal that women and children are still not given clothes kits in hospitals and police stations. In each rape case, clothes which include undergarments, sanitary napkins, dress, socks, and other personal items such as shoes, or spectacles are seized by the police for forensic analysis. However, these clothes and items are not replaced by the state. In light of earlier orders and circulars, the court's reasoning must be extended to argue that the state has an obligation to provide a new pair of clothes (and other personal items) to rape survivors, when such things are collected for forensic analysis.

Clothes may be seized at police stations or hospitals. Often victims are made to wait in blood-soaked clothes for hours, before medico-legal procedures start. These procedures are highly intrusive, and often re-traumatising. And then stripped of their clothes, the victims borrow clothes from relatives, policemen or wear hospital gowns. And in this state of trauma, they navigate public spaces to return home, be this a house, hut, shelter or a street.

Vasudha Dhagamwar, eminent feminist law teacher and one of the signatories of the Mathura Open Letter had first raised this issue in the 1980s, in an essay in *Mainstream*. Dhagamwar wrote about the case of a working class rape survivor who owned only one sari — and this too was seized as evidence. Surely the state is liable to replace such items, without passing on the costs to the victim.

The state has an obligation to provide a new pair of clothes (and other personal items) to rape survivors, when such things are collected for forensic analysis. By not providing clothes, rape survivors are stripped and made unsafe yet again. It amounts to state sanctioned violence to take the clothes of a victim (stripping is an offence in the BNS and IPC). Under the constitutional scheme, this is a specifically gendered harm done to rape survivors. Surely, law, state and society can make provisions to provide clothes kits to rape survivors.

The writer is professor, Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HMPV CHALLENGE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Precaution is key' (IE, January 9). The HMPV virus poses significant health challenges. India has ramped up surveillance. Laboratories are now better equipped to test for HMPV. There are cases in children and infants with no travel history, underscoring that the virus could already be in local circulation. We lack the vaccines for HMPV, making supportive care and preventive measures essential. Inexpensive, accessible diagnostic tests are still unavailable, limiting early detection in vulnerable populations. Vigilance, preparedness and public cooperation are imperative to curb HMPV's impact.

Sankar Paul, Nadia

RETHINKING GROWTH

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Spending and growing' (IE, January 9). The present government's ambitious goal of Viksit Bharat demands a coherent plan aligned with India's demographic reality. Our country's massive population means there is scope for economic growth. We need to empower our low-skilled labour, instead of putting all the focus on high-skilled capital-intensive sectors like semiconductors — the workforce and technology of which is yet to be fully developed. For a credible path, a rethink of India's growth strategy is essential.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

AAP-BJP FACE-OFF

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Fight for capital' (IE, January 9). The AAP came to power in the backdrop of the anti-corruption campaign launched by Anna Hazare. Arvind Kejriwal became popular for his simplicity and clean image. But his arrest and that of other top AAP leaders in corruption cases have disillusioned the people. The BJP won't lose any chances to corner and discredit the AAP. Indeed, the election will be a popularity contest between PM Narendra Modi and Arvind Kejriwal, and the latter's future may hinge on Delhi Election 2025.

Atul Thakre, Nagpur

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Fight for capital' (IE, January 9). Ahead of the elections, there is intense political drama around the "sheesh mahal" of the former Delhi CM. It is, however, important that the contenders are grilled about the feasibility of their electoral promises. Specifically, whether plans on women's safety, pollution control and cash transfers are well-planned or mere words on manifestos to be forgotten once the elections are over. Parties must also keep in mind the status of New Delhi as the national capital, and must not engage in any campaigning that erodes its dignity.

Anany Mishra, Bhubli

Amplifying misinformation

Meta's decision will harm public interest

The decision by Meta (which owns Facebook and Instagram) to end its fact-checking programme and replace it with "community notes" like X (formerly Twitter) was triggered by imminent change in America's political order. Meta faces antitrust investigation, and President-elect Donald Trump claimed he was "very probably" responsible for Meta initiating the change. Mr Trump has, on multiple occasions, expressed anger at fact checkers. Meta Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Mark Zuckerberg also said the platform would reverse its 2021 policy of reducing political content. This means more content on hot-button subjects like immigration, gender, and religion will be posted. The change will start in the United States (US). Meta may find it harder to switch in places like the European Union, which have more stringent regulations about hate speech and misinformation than the US. This decision alters how misinformation will be treated on two of the largest platforms. It also impacts the financials of 80-odd fact-checking organisations that work with Meta globally.

Fact checking was initiated after the 2016 US elections and the Brexit referendum, which were both influenced by rampant disinformation on Facebook. The decision to reduce political content was in response to user feedback. Third-party fact checkers were asked by Meta to verify content. Content rated "false" is downgraded in news feeds. If someone tries to share a false post, they are shown a note explaining why it is misleading. Twitter used a similar system until it was bought by Elon Musk, who replaced it with community notes. This allows users to collaboratively add context to misleading posts on X, relying upon a reader consensus rather than moderation.

While third-party fact checkers by no means perfect, the X experience suggests that it was better than community notes. This move to supposedly enable free speech has led to an explosion of hate speech, abuse and harassment, and violent content. The first Transparency Report released by X after Mr Musk took over says 5.3 million accounts were banned for abusive behaviour between January and June 2024. This is over three times the 1.6 million accounts banned in the same period of 2022, before Twitter changed hands (October 2022). X also shares ad revenue with "premium posters". The combination of community notes and revenue sharing is a recipe for disaster. Controversial posts receive higher engagement, and posters that generate controversy get more revenues. The community notes system may also lead to content from and about public figures being mislabelled through concerted action by their opponents, which contradicts basic principles of free speech.

Misinformation on social media about the pandemic contributed to the crisis, with many individuals seeking out quack medication and avoiding vaccination. Similarly, climate-change deniers receive louder megaphone in the absence of fact checks. Mr Zuckerberg admits Meta will "catch less bad stuff" after removing fact checkers. He hopes this will enable more free speech about topics that are mainstream discourse, and reduce censorship and prevent "fake positives" leading to the ban of innocent posters. However, conflating fact checks with censorship of free speech is usually done in bad faith by those who stand to gain. The two are not the same. Unfortunately Facebook, Instagram, and X dominate the social-media landscape, and with Meta falling in line with Mr Trump's wishes, the change may lead to an amplification of misinformation and hate speech across all three platforms.

Local, not global

Indian brands are rare in foreign marketplaces

News that several global private equity firms are queuing up to buy a stake in snack-food major Haldiram's is a reminder of the relative rarity of Indian brands in the global marketplace. Ever since the Indian economy opened up to global competition in 1991, it is foreign names that have come to dominate Indian homes. Many Indian brands have either disappeared or ceded space to foreign competition. Where Onida and Videocon once dominated the domestic market for TVs, washing machines, and household appliances, Japanese, Korean, and, increasingly, Chinese brands now rule the showrooms. In cars, the Premier Padmini and Ambassador vanished when Japan's Suzuki set up its joint venture to launch the Maruti, an Indian brand only in name. Here, too, it is the Japanese, Koreans, Germans, and Chinese that offer consumer choices, with Tata and Mahindra & Mahindra being the only indigenous exceptions. In fast-moving consumer goods, brands such as Anchor, Nirma, Uncle Chippies, and Binny's, which once gave multinational players a run for their money, have all vanished or receded to the margins of the market.

Haldiram's, in contrast, is one of the handful of Indian-owned and -developed brands that not only grew but held its own against the snack foods flood from multinationals such as Lay's, Nestlé's, Kellogg's, and Haribo's. More to the point, it took its brand global, with factories and restaurants in the United Kingdom, North America, Southeast Asia, and West Asia. Amul, the flagship brand of the Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF), is another notable exception. The pride of India's White Revolution, it is now a \$80,000 crore brand that strongly expanded its core business of milk, dairy products, and chocolates, against growing competition from both the unorganised sector and entrenched global brands. Apart from exporting to over 50 countries, including the United States and European Union, Amul is now a member of the Global Dairy Trade, a platform where only the world's top six dairy players sell their products. In the main, however, indigenous brands overseas are thin on the ground. Bajaj's two-wheelers, with their decades-long presence in Africa and West Asia, and Airtel, with its pan-African mobile telephony network, are others that have entrenched markets overseas.

The abdication of Indian brands to global competition — with many of them converting themselves into contract manufacturers — reflects the lack of long-term thinking and strategic imagination, which are critical to brand-building. These shortcomings demonstrate how the habits of the protective licence raj have weakened corporate competitive abilities and thinking. This is not to say that Indian business is not capable of parrying global competition. Many of those that have been successful at doing so have evolved in the crucible of open competition. For instance, airlines such as Jet Airways (until it imploded), IndiGo, and Vistara (until it merged into Air India) have carved a space for themselves in international skies in the face of formidable competition from the world's biggest airlines. Now, with single malt brands such as Amrut, Rampur, and John Paul's making heady inroads into a space dominated by Scots breweries, there may be reason to raise a glass to the ability of young Indian brands to become truly world-class.

Budgeting in the time of Trump

For the uncertain times ahead, the Budget must balance growth, jobs, and governance — and the recipe is distinctly unglamorous



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Economic policymaking must always reckon with uncertainty. There are times when the uncertainty is acute. The biggest challenge in recent years was the Covid-19 pandemic. It was hard to tell how long it would last. The policy response to it was, however, quite clear — fiscal and monetary stimulus, although nations came up with varying degrees of stimuli.

What looms ahead of the Union Budget for FY26 is, perhaps, even more challenging. Nobody quite knows how the US President-elect, Donald Trump, will proceed with his plans and how other nations will respond. Also uncertain are his stance on the two geopolitical hotspots at the moment, Ukraine and West Asia, not to mention his own additions, Greenland and the Panama Canal. The only known is that the world economy must brace for major shocks. The focus in the coming Union Budget must be to keep the growth momentum going so that the economy is better placed to withstand any such shocks at large.

Going by the latest estimates of the National Statistics Office, the government is likely to fall slightly short of the nominal growth target of 10.5 per cent for FY25. It may still meet the fiscal deficit target of 4.9 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) because capital expenditure will fall below the budgetary estimate.

For FY26, the priority must be to contain the central government expenditure at the FY25 level of 34.4 per cent of GDP, at the very least. This must not happen at the expense of capital expenditure by public sector undertakings (PSUs). Total central public expenditure (central government plus central PSUs) must be maintained at the FY25 level of 4.5 per cent.

This could well mean exceeding the fiscal deficit target of 4.5 per cent of GDP for FY26 indicated in last year's Budget. So be it. The imperative is to aim for GDP growth of close to 6.5 per cent in the coming year. It is hard to see any big rise in private investment driving

growth in the face of looming uncertainties.

The finance minister had indicated in her speech last year that, from FY27 onwards, the government would focus on ensuring a fall in the central government debt-to-GDP ratio rather than on the fiscal deficit itself. In blunt terms, this means letting go of what has turned out to be a futile two-decade quest to meet the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) fiscal deficit target of 3 per cent.

A strong fiscal stimulus is especially required because the scope for monetary easing may turn out to be less than what analysts had hoped for. The issue may not

just be the persistence of domestic inflation. Mr Trump's position on tariffs spells higher inflation in the US and a strengthening of the dollar, at least in the short-run. The US Federal Reserve has indicated that rate cuts in 2025 will be fewer than previously anticipated. Post-Trump, other economies may find it more difficult to delink their policy rates from those of the Fed.

FINGER ON THE PULSE

T T RAM MOHAN

The second priority in the Budget must be the issue of unemployment, especially educated unemployment. Last year's Budget had announced three schemes aimed at incentivising employment in the private sector, along with an internship programme. It projected an expenditure of ₹2 trillion over five years, or ₹400,000 crore annually. However, the discernible allocation in the Budget was only ₹12,000 crore.

The coming Budget should tell us what the outcomes have been. It is unlikely that the private sector has met the government's expectations for job creation, or that it will in the future. Manufacturing has not taken off as expected, and it cannot be relied upon to generate large numbers of jobs in the near future. The services sector generates jobs but many are of low quality.

To alleviate educated unemployment on a crash basis, the government must go all-out to fill vacancies in government. It must also offer the promised inter-

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2025: India's tech transformation year

In 2025, India will reach two key milestones — becoming a \$4 trillion economy and surpassing Japan to become the fourth-largest globally. Its future progress towards becoming the third-largest economy will depend on effectively harnessing emerging technologies, with McKinsey's 2024 report identifying 18 tech-areas that could add \$29 trillion to \$48 trillion globally by 2040.

The economic potential of new technologies can be maximised in two key areas: Production and usage. Producing technologies fosters innovation, creates jobs, and reduces dependency on imports. In a connected world, where network effects are significant, innovation leads to global dominance and huge economic gains, as exemplified by the dominance of a few players in sectors like semiconductors and e-commerce.

This year should be a watershed year, transforming India into a "Product Nation", with ₹1 trillion allocated for Research & Development to the private sector. Finalising its governance and implementation modalities would be of foremost importance. Other policy areas include: Opening up of R&D across all sectors, including defence, atomic energy, and deep-water technology while removing hurdles from legacy institutions; government procurement policy to foster innovations; greater priority to creating highly skilled workforce in emerging technologies viz., quantum, cyber-security and space; global branding and export of indigenous industry products through bilateral and multilateral initiatives; reforming standard-making so that it is industry-led and supported by a legislative framework.

The use of new technologies enhances efficiency, boosts productivity, and stimulates innovation, generating multiplier effects throughout the economy. Government actions — creating infrastructure, providing financial support, reducing adoption costs, and enhancing skills — are critical for promoting technology adoption. The success of Aadhaar and UPI showcases the power of government policies in driving widespread tech adoption. A road map for 2025 for a few key technologies is outlined below:

Artificial intelligence: AI, including generative AI, is vital for India to leapfrog development in healthcare, education, and agriculture. The ongoing empanelment of vendors for 10,000 graphics processing units should be expedited. AI infrastructure must be prioritised for defence and security, with a focus on promoting startups and developing foundational models in agriculture, healthcare, education, and sanitation at subsidised rates. API-based access to India's diverse data assets will enable startups to build localised AI models.

Cybersecurity and forensics: India's swift digital adoption has outpaced its cybersecurity preparations, increasing risks. Threats from AI misuse, quantum technologies, and emerging tools like cryptomarketing, satellites, and drones only intensify these challenges. Stringent cybersecurity regulations, with penal provisions, must be enacted across critical sectors such as power, transportation, aviation, oil and gas, and health care. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA), 2023, should be implemented early in 2025. Expanding the use of digital forensics in businesses by notifying private labs as examiners of electronic evidence, along with supporting the development of indigenous tools, is crucial.

OFF THE GRID
AJAY KUMAR

Quantum technologies: A nodal ministry should be notified to roll out quantum technologies in key sectors like defence, healthcare, telecommunication, space, and finance. A time-bound action plan for adopting quantum key distribution and post-quantum cryptography solutions, leveraging existing indigenous capabilities, should be implemented. Also, quantum-safe satellite communication capabilities must be developed.

Exploiting data wealth: Tech giants like Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon have become trillion-dollar enterprises leveraging data. India, as a top data producer, can harness the account aggregator (AA) model to monetise data. In 2025, the focus should be on expanding and universalising the AA model in finance, while adapting and rolling it out in education and healthcare.

ship stipend of ₹5,000 to all those who apply for internship through the government's portal and fail to secure one within six months. There will be much hand-wringing over unproductive jobs in government and freebies. Critics will say that the government must instead invest more in education and healthcare or in infrastructure. The latter would create conditions for the growth rate to move to over 7 per cent.

We have seen, however, that faster growth does not automatically create sufficient jobs or the right quality of jobs, not just in India, but also in other parts of the world. A large swathe of the population needs relief. With both the Centre and the states announcing hand-outs in various forms, we are moving towards an Indian version of a universal basic income. Like it or not, that is the consensus across the political spectrum. If we can, nevertheless, sustain GDP growth at around 6.5 per cent in an adverse global environment, investors will view India's growth-with-inclusiveness model as no mean achievement.

Lastly, the government must focus on improving governance and performance at PSUs and public sector banks (PSBs). The imperative is even stronger now that privatisation and asset monetisation have been put on the back burner.

The Financial Services Institutions Bureau (FSIB) has turned out to be a good model for making top-level appointments. The Bureau comprises professionals, a representative of the Reserve Bank of India and a representative of the finance ministry. It recommends whole-time directors and non-executive chairpersons for financial institutions. The government takes a call on the recommendations made by the Bureau.

The Bureau's mandate should also be extended to the appointment of independent directors. The responsibilities cast on independent directors by the RBI have increased considerably. Compensation for independent directors at public sector entities needs to be improved — it is eminently affordable today. A graded scheme can be introduced, depending on the size and performance of a bank.

The Public Enterprise Selection Board, which performs similar functions at public enterprises in the non-financial sector, needs to be reconstituted along the same lines as the FSIB. It too must be mandated to appoint independent directors, and on better terms. A separate panel could be created to evaluate the performance of boards at all public enterprises.

A growth rate target of around 6.5 per cent, a high level of public capex, increased government spending on job creation, a relaxed view of the fiscal deficit target, and a greater focus on performance at PSUs/PSBs — the recipe may seem distinctly unglamorous. Well, that is what is required in the uncertain times that the arrival of Mr Trump holds.

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A mensch from Ludhiana



BOOK REVIEW

KANIKA DATTA

The name Kundanlal doesn't figure on the list of "Righteous among the Nations," the Holocaust Memorial's designation for those who helped victims of the Third Reich's Final Solution. To Vinay Gupta, author of *A Rescue in Vienna*, Kundanlal, a former Provincial Civil Service officer of the Raj and later Ludhiana-based machine tool manufacturer, is a hero. One survivor of the Jewish families he saved from certain death described him as a *mensch*, the Yiddish term for a person of honour and integrity. Yet nothing was known of his acts of humanity until his grandson chose to research casual family lore.

Brijmohanl Munjal, himself a prominent Ludhiana businessman, remembered him as an innovative businessman who didn't achieve much success.

True, Kundanlal (his real name), though a vivid personality, would not have merited a biography for his admittedly far-fetched but poorly managed businesses. Indians know of the Maharaja of Jamnagar's offer of refuge to about 500 Polish children, Jewish and non-Jewish, orphaned in the Soviet gulags in 1942, but as the author points out, that humane act was done at the behest of the Polish Consul General. Kundanlal did not risk life or livelihood to save Jews. He stumbled on a way to help them when he travelled to Austria in 1938 for surgery and visited a premier European trade fair for business opportunities. By 1938, Austria had been annexed to Hitler's Greater Reich and the process of driving out Jews had begun in earnest. Kundanlal probably got the first hint of this crisis when he arrived at the renowned hospital at which he had arranged to have surgery only to find that

Dr Gustav Singer, the famous specialist who was to treat him, had been dismissed for being Jewish.

Kundanlal went ahead with the surgery, and during his recovery he met the first of the families he was destined to rescue: Alfred Wachser, who ran an upmarket furniture business, and his wife Lucy, then expecting their first child. There were no complications with Lucy's pregnancy but both were spending inordinate amounts of time in the hospital. Later, recovering in a sanatorium, Kundanlal met Fritz Weiss, a barrister, who had been admitted with serious injuries. These had been incurred after being attacked by a gang from the Sturmabteilung, the Nazi's paramilitary organisation, and then imprisoned. Barred from practising, his assets confiscated and lacking an exit visa, Weiss was sheltering in the sanatorium to review his options.

Kundanlal, whose big-heartedness was legendary back home, offered Weiss the post of general manager in a new company he planned to start trading wood products

and carpentry supplies called Kundan Agencies. That would give him a reason to get a visa to India. Once he recovered, he approached Wachser, now a father but facing ruin because of boycott of Jewish enterprises. Kundanlal offered him a job as master craftsman for his bespoke furniture in the same company. He was willing to sign the unrestricted guarantee the Raj required to provide for the maintenance of any refugees before they were granted an Indian visa.

Kundanlal then placed a "help wanted" ad in a local newspaper asking for experts on wood working and textile weaving (he owned a cloth mill) who were willing to work in India. The unwritten condition was that the applicants must be Jewish. That yielded a response from Hans Leiser, a textile designer who had lost his job after the anti-Jewish laws were passed. Also responding to the ad was Alfred Schafraque, who ran a plywood business with his brother but had to

"voluntarily" surrender their property. A third rescue and perhaps the best fit for his core business was Siegmund Retter, owner of a machine tool factory that had been Aryanised.

Neither Fritz Weiss nor Hans Leiser stayed in Ludhiana long. Instead, they found lucrative jobs with foreign-owned firms through the Bombay Jewish Relief Agency.

A RESCUE IN VIENNA: The Story of an Unlikely Saviour
Author: Vinay Gupta
Publisher: Bloomsbury
Pages: 228
Price: ₹599

would have added to the difficulties of adjustment. Mr Gupta speculates that they never intended to work for Kundanlal and used his offer to exit Austria. He believes them no ill-will towards lost family in the death camps. The JR also found work for Retter, who arrived when Kundanlal could no longer afford to hire him because his

fortunes had dipped owing to war-time controls on essential supplies. The two families who did work in Ludhiana were the Wachsers and Schafraques, and the book has some interesting family photographs of the wives posing in saris. But their stay was cut short after the British interned all German citizens, Jews and Gentiles. The account of their internment is one of the most interesting parts of the book, revealing the Raj in all its inhumanity. It comes as a surprise to learn that Kundanlal, a freedom fighter close to Nehru and a saviour of Jews, was a member of the RSS, unabashed admirer of Hitler. He was arrested for a spell after Gandhi was assassinated and the RSS banned.

The clear-eyed, scrupulous historian extraordinary man that should remind Indians and Israelis of the values of disinterested humanity. The lack of an index and poor proofreading — the spellings of some Austrian names vary, for example — detract from the narrative. It is also a pity that the author chose imaginary dialogue to posthumously "rescue" via the "assiduous interview" he says he conducted and careful documentation would have yielded just as fascinating a story with a more authentic ring.

OUR VIEW

GUEST VIEW



Wealth tax: Let's judge it by principles of taxation

Tax canons laid down by Adam Smith remain relevant, though his list has been extended. Test the idea of a wealth tax against these, lest we get carried away by progressive idealism

The trouble with taxation is not its inevitability, nor its comparison for that reason with mortality, but its susceptibility to being viewed through lenses tinted by the viewer's own tax liability. Evidence of this rises and falls in waves, peaking around budget time. For a steady view of the broad idea, one must turn to first principles. These were set out by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) as "canons of taxation." They still serve as a good test for tax ideas.

The first canon is that of 'equity.' The tax burden must be proportional to the taxpayer's ability to pay. As Smith put it: "The subjects of every state ought to contribute towards the support of the government, as nearly as possible, in proportion to their respective abilities; that is, in proportion to the revenue which they respectively enjoy under the protection of the state." Second is the canon of 'certainty.' One's liability must not be arbitrary. In Smith's words: "The tax which each individual is bound to pay ought to be certain, and not arbitrary. The time of payment, the manner of payment, the quantity to be paid, ought all to be clear and plain to the contributor and to every other person." Third is the canon of 'convenience.' Taxes should be easy to pay. As Smith said, "Every tax ought to be levied at the time, or in the manner, in which it is most likely to be convenient for the contributor to pay it." Fourth is the canon of 'economy.' This is about efficiency. "Every tax ought to be so contrived as both to take out and to keep out of [people's pockets] as little as possible over and above what it brings into the public treasury of the state." In other words, the exchequer's cost of tax collection must be kept minimal.

As the concept evolved, later economists added to Smith's list. Alfred Marshall, for example, proposed a canon of 'elasticity.' Taxes should be flexible enough to adapt to flux in the economy, serving as a policy tool if need be. Arthur Pigou and others came up with the canon of 'neutrality.' Taxes should not needlessly distort the economy—by altering incentives, for instance, unless that's the goal. And then, there's the canon of 'simplicity,' backed almost universally by economists on popular demand. Taxes must always be easy to understand and comply with, so that there is very little scope for error and paying them is not a burden. This principle is often violated flagrantly across the globe, with Indian taxes notorious for their complexity, due partly to a palimpsest effect: our tax codes have been overwritten over and over. Meanwhile, a canon that has been edging its way onto the list is that of 'feasibility.' If a particular tax is not feasible in practice, even if it is ideal on other counts, such as equity, it's best not to levy. This has been the rationale for not levying a wealth tax, an idea aimed at making taxation steeply progressive. It fails not just the feasibility test, but a few others too. Since wealth is a stock (a pile-up), not a flow (like income), reliably updated market data on it is available only for very few kinds of assets. Share ownership in listed firms is visible wealth, but taxing it to the exclusion of off-market holdings (unlisted shares, land, gold, etc), or even crypto stashes, would not only be unfair to those who get taxed, it would bend incentives away from a key allocator of capital in the Indian economy: the stock market. And then, there's also the risk of capital flight. Let's face it: Taxing wealth is high on idealism but low on pragmatism.

Hacked in 2024? India's privacy rules require you to take action

Draft digital personal data protection rules demand that data breaches be reported retrospectively



SAJAI SINGH
is partner, JSA Advocates & Solicitors

Last year, did any of your employees use a co-worker's computer and read files without authorization? Maybe the access was unintentional and no information was shared. But because it was viewed by an unauthorized person, the data is considered breached. What if someone with legitimate authorization purposely accesses and/or shares data with the intent of causing you harm? This malicious insider also caused a data breach. Did any employee lose an office device last year? It could be an unencrypted and unlocked laptop or external hard drive—anything that contained sensitive information. Again, a data breach has occurred. Finally, were you hacked?

All these constitute data breaches. It occurs when the personal data for which an organization is responsible suffers any unauthorized processing or accidental disclosure, acquisition, use, sharing, alteration, destruction or loss of access that compromises the confidentiality, integrity or availability of such data.

If you suffered a data breach last year, would you have needed to report it to an authority? 'No' may be your guess, since India did not have a data protection authority in place. But will you need to report such occurrences, retrospectively, once the envisaged Data Protection Board of India (DPBI) is set up?

The draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025 (Privacy Rules), require such retrospective reporting. It covers data breaches occurring in the interim period from the notification (11 August 2023) of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDPA Act), to its full implementation sometime later this year. The window between the two dates may not be considered a holiday or safe harbour. As the erstwhile IT minister had advised, this just means that data breaches will accumulate. The DPBI is expected to start adjudicating on cases as soon as it is able to. Unless the privacy rules explicitly provide otherwise, which they don't, the DPDPA Act is in force for all data fiduciaries vis-à-vis their interactions with data principals. The former need to implement appropriate technical and organizational measures to avoid possible data breaches. And if such breaches happen, then notification and other triggers may apply to them retrospectively.

So, what actions do data fiduciaries need to take in the interim? First, map the personal data being collected/processed. Then, implement security safeguards. Various data security measures could be adopted, such as encryption, obfuscation and mapping personal data onto virtual tokens to secure personal data from breaches. Should data processors be involved, ensure that the

contract includes a requirement that processors implement 'reasonable security standards' for their processing activities.

Now, if you did suffer a data breach, who do you call? The DPBI, as soon as it is set up. In the interim, did you inform the affected data principals? This will be one of the first questions the DPBI will ask. So it should be done now.

What if you don't inform the DPBI of a data breach you suffered in the interim period? Failing to report a data breach could lead to fines of up to ₹200 crore. And, just in case you didn't put in place 'reasonable security safeguards' during this period, you may incur a further liability of ₹250 crore.

If you do decide to inform the DPBI, how much time do you have to make this call? Since nothing has been prescribed on breaches in the interim period, it may be safely assumed that it would be within 72 hours of the DPBI being able to receive reports. If you need more time, just ask the DPBI. It may allow more than 72 hours if the data fiduciary sends in a written and well reasoned request for an extension.

Do the draft privacy rules treat all breaches uniformly? Unfortunately, all the examples listed earlier would qualify. Shouldn't minor breaches have had fewer compliance obligations? Would a risk-based approach be a fair way of dealing with breach consequences? It's possible the government will consider rule changes if public comments raise these questions before 18 February.

One last point. If the data breach also involved a cybersecurity incident, the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) also needs to be informed.

Now that the much-awaited privacy rules are out in draft form, if we offer our comments, not only will we help strengthen the legal shield for digital personal data, but also address the loose threads around breach notification, especially the potential retrospective reporting requirement with its cut-off date of 11 August 2023.

QUICK READ

Organizations that use and process personal data, called data fiduciaries, may need to report all data breaches that occurred once India's privacy law was notified on 11 August 2023.

This may prove burdensome for minor breaches that entail little risk. Thankfully, there is still time to offer the government feedback so that it can review rules that need amendment.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

We have a system that increasingly taxes work and subsidizes non-work.

MILTON FRIEDMAN

THEIR VIEW

Let's take cues from Piketty to raise India's tax revenue

MADAN SABNAVIS



is chief economist, Bank of Baroda, and author of 'Corporate Quirks: The darker side of the sun'

When it comes to budgeting, there are some revenue streams that are linked with broader growth in the economy. These include the goods and services tax (GST), which is a consumption-based tax, corporate tax, which is linked to the profitability of companies, and customs duty, which is driven by imports. The actual flows are contingent on how these elements perform and are thus beyond the government's control. True, better compliance has been witnessed in the past, thanks to better systems being put in place. But beyond a point, such flows tend to plateau out.

Therefore, the government needs to look at new avenues of taxation within this framework. Surcharges and cesses, levies that have often been used, could be applied to these new areas. Three ideas, borrowed partly from Thomas Piketty's dogma of taxing the rich more, can be pursued. Two of them follow that logic, while the third would leverage the success of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) to garner revenue.

The first idea is in the realm of luxury. Today, it is well accepted that while there may be rural or urban distress, the rich are never affected by economic conditions. So, can we think of a luxury tax or surcharge that will not burden the taxpayer nor reduce demand for the product or service taxed? To be fair to the affluent, income and wealth are generated with progressive taxes paid along the way. Hence, it would not be right to tax the same directly again. But all new purchases can be brought under a 'luxury surcharge,' which may be analogous to the income tax surcharge on incomes above ₹50 lakh per annum. It can be imposed at the time of purchase (and not on income).

Hence, a house costing more than, say, ₹10 crore could carry a surcharge of 5%. This rate can go higher as the price crosses ₹20 crore. It is not uncommon to hear of business executives and celebrities purchasing luxury homes priced above ₹100 crore. While it is true that the stamp duty on these purchases is paid on a progressive scale, the luxury surcharge would go to the Centre, unlike the former, which goes to states.

Similarly, a stay in a hotel room costing above ₹50,000 per day can be subjected to a similar surcharge of 5-20% depending on the underlying value. Air travel by business

class or first class could bear a luxury tax besides GST, as these services are usually used by the affluent or on business accounts. This logic can be extended to celebrity endorsements, where deals can exceed ₹100 crore. As this is about brand marketing and goodwill generation, a luxury surcharge would not deter companies from signing such deals. A surcharge could also be levied on sportspeople who have been earning large sums in tournaments that do not involve playing for the nation.

The second idea is one that has been spoken about for long but was never implemented: taxing agriculture. Here, picking up from Piketty, it would be easy to target affluent landholders. An annual cess can be levied on large holdings of 10-20 hectares (and above) based on the value of the property as defined by the state (circle rates are an example in urban areas). This will not affect small farmers and only cover rich landlords.

As per the Agriculture Census of 2015-16, there were around 146 million holdings in the country, of which 838,000 were classified as large, adding up to just 1.4%. Bringing this class under a large-holding cess would augment government revenues.

The third idea that could be looked at involves leveraging UPI data. This platform has become a favoured mode of payment for even small transactions. Payments through this digital system are accepted more or less everywhere in India, including by street vendors. All UPI transactions are linked to bank accounts, which in turn are identifiable by people's PAN numbers.

By running an algorithm, the government can procure information on the earnings of all UPI payment recipients. This can help draw up a list of those who received payments above a specified threshold of say ₹20 lakh in a year (this would broadly put them in the bracket of income tax payers after adjusting for expenses).

A progressive luxury tax, say on houses priced over ₹10 crore or business-class air travel, can be explored. Small businesses with sizeable top-lines may also be tracked via UPI data trails.

Intuitively, this group of UPI users with high receipts could be sent tax notices.

It should be noted that several street vendors do business which could cross ₹5,000 a day, but may not be in the tax net as they are in the unorganized sector. The Indian tax system has evolved over the years, with Form 26AS and AIS capturing virtually all transactions via bank accounts, including ones as little as ₹1 earned by way of a share dividend. UPI data can be analyzed in detail to assess potential tax liability.

GST has helped bring about greater formalization in the economy, which in turn has resulted in higher tax collections. But there is still a large segment of informal businesses that could potentially pay its fair share of taxes. This is a project that the government should take up.

It is important for the government to keep exploring new avenues for earning revenue. There are several segments that remain outside the tax dragnet's reach and should be included. A tax based on the UPI database may not result in large collections, but will ensure that a trail is established and would lead to higher collections in the future. It is not what Piketty had in mind, but if combined with a luxury surcharge, it could add to the country's budgetary resources.



Opinion

FRIDAY, JANUARY 10, 2025

GLOBAL VOICE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Today's India not only firmly asserts its own point but also strongly amplifies the voice of the Global South



Start-up travails

Scaling up has seen many hurdles; sharp decline in seed-stage funding complicates things further

REPORTS THAT HINDUSTAN Unilever is looking to acquire Minimalist, a start-up in the beauty and personal care (BPC) space, for about \$350 million is evidence of the difficulties direct-to-consumer (D2C) brands face in scaling up. This is not the first time that consumer giants are showing interest in buying out brands; about two years back ITC had picked up a big stake in Yoga Bar, with an intention to buy more from the promoters in due course. At the time Yoga Bar was available in 6,000 retail outlets across the country and boasted gross margins of about 45%. But revenues were just about ₹100 crore. As the Yoga Bar promoters said in an interview to this paper, the support from ITC in terms of cash investments and a distribution network of four million outlets had prompted their decision to sell out. Building an offline presence, a channel that most start-up managements acknowledge is now critical to reach more buyers, can be quite challenging as Honasa Consumer has discovered. The revamping of the company's offline distribution, entailing a shift to the direct distributor model from the super-stockist model, didn't go down too well. The cost of the adverse impact on the inventory of about ₹40 crore has been significant for a business that posted an operating profit of ₹137 crore in FY24.

Even where there is no plan to build an offline distribution channel and D2C brands can get traction online, both on their own sites and also on platforms such as Flipkart or Nykaa, it is not easy to make money. Minimalist, one of the few profitable firms in the BPC space, did fairly well in FY24 to post ₹374 crore in revenues but its profits were just ₹10 crore. For their part, legacy offline players across sectors appear to be willing to pay top dollar for a strong online brand offering promoters a deal they simply cannot resist. That probably explains the sale of a 27% stake in Caratlane by promoter Mithun Sacheti to Titan for ₹4,621 crore sometime back.

For all the success stories of top companies buying out start-ups, however, investments in seed-stage funding fell to less than \$1 billion in 2024 with the number of rounds plummeting by 40% to 925. To be sure, the total investments in 2024 were up only by 6% at \$11.1 billion. But even in FY24, investors didn't seem to be as risk-averse; they put in more than \$1 billion in seed-stage investments across 1,545 rounds. In 2024, though, there was a fair bit of reluctance to support yet untested businesses. Just about 395 start-ups got first-time funding rounds compared with 665 in 2023. One doesn't blame the investors for turning cautious; more money was being made available to businesses than was probably needed and at valuations that were clearly unjustified. However, the fall in seed-stage funding is somewhat disappointing because that is what keeps innovation alive. It's possible that there are not too many good ideas out there, but the few promising ones shouldn't lose out for want of capital. That could hurt the ecosystem at a time when a new breed of entrepreneurs is working on some exciting business models. While valuations have corrected hurting returns, initial public offerings have given investors handsome exits. Some of the dry powder could perhaps be ammunition for seed-stage ventures.

BY SCALING UP EFFORTS, STATES CAN SAFEGUARD RESOURCES, ENHANCE AGRI-PRODUCTIVITY

Make groundwater sustainable

AMIT KAPOOR

Chair, Institute for Competitiveness



INDIA IS AN agricultural power-house and dominates the production of essential food grains such as rice, wheat, and pulses. This also places India at the forefront of producing water-intensive crops. In particular, paddy production in India caters to domestic demand and serves as a significant export commodity. However, the country's agriculture sector is thriving at the cost of its finite extractable groundwater resources that are used for irrigation.

Between 2016 and 2024, the global population increased from 7.56 billion to 8.2 billion, and India's population increased from 1.29 billion to 1.45 billion. Meanwhile, according to the Central Groundwater Board (CGWB) Report on Groundwater Assessment, the groundwater used for irrigation increased from 38% in 2016-17 to 52% in 2023-24. The situation is expected to intensify further in the coming years.

As a result of the current farming practices and the increasing population, most districts of the top paddy-producing states such as Rajasthan (19), Punjab (19), and Haryana (14) have over-exploited their groundwater for irrigation purposes. This has numerous repercussions such as the over-exploitation of groundwater, its salinisation, and the concentration of pollutants that adversely impact the quantity and quality of extractable groundwater. Notably, most districts in Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan over-extract their groundwater for irrigation purposes. In addition to this, excessive use of fertilisers, especially for paddy cultivation, deteriorates the groundwater quality.

First, over-fertilisation results in increased soil salinity, which can leach into the groundwater. Rainfall is the main source of recharging groundwater and between Rajasthan, Punjab, and Haryana, Rajasthan received the highest average rainfall (608 mm) in 2023-24. Yet, its groundwater experienced the highest

salinisation at 22%. This can be attributed to the fact that Rajasthan has an arid and semi-arid climate, and thus experiences a higher evaporation rate, causing higher groundwater salinity. Meanwhile, Punjab and Haryana experienced lower groundwater salinity at 2.77% and 0% respectively. This is due to their extensive canal irrigation network and adoption of micro-irrigation that avoids waterlogging and reduces their reliance on groundwater compared to Rajasthan.

Moreover, fertilisers can seep under the ground, resulting in the concentration of chemicals and metals like nitrates and uranium in the groundwater, beyond their permissible limits. For instance, nitrate contamination caused by runoff of nitrogen-based fertilisers in the groundwater is a key concern in paddy-producing states such as Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Similarly, phosphate fertilisers used in Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu seep into the groundwater and cause uranium contamination. Such issues adversely impact the health of the crop and population. The groundwater becomes unfit for consumption, heightening the risk of chronic illnesses such as blue baby syndrome in infants, thyroid disorders, dental fluorosis, and cancer. Polluted groundwater also leads to lower soil health and crop yield, further

reducing agricultural productivity and income. The CGWB thus cautions that if the current farming and irrigation practices continue, more than half of the districts of Punjab will potentially have no groundwater available for future use. The same scenario could be experienced in 21-23% of the districts in Haryana and Rajasthan.

Considering the prevailing issues concerning sustainable groundwater management for irrigation, India must urgently take steps to secure its agricultural future. Projections of the world population touching 8.95 billion by 2036, out of which India's population is expected to hit 1.52 billion, underline the need to improve India's irrigation and farming practices. This is necessary to

ensure water security and agricultural sustainability in the country. The government of India has already taken a few steps in the right direction. It introduced the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture in 2014 to promote sustainable agricultural practices like zero tillage, cover cropping, and micro-irrigation for prudent management of water resources, chemical usage, and improvement in soil health. It also announced the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana in 2015 to promote drip and sprinkler irrigation for reaping "more crop per drop". Likewise, the Atal Bhujal Yojana announced in 2019

encourages efficient irrigation methods for judicious groundwater management specifically in Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. According to the CGWB, 23% of the districts in the country had unsustainable groundwater levels in 2016-17, which reduced to 19% in 2023-24. This improvement can be attributed to the effectiveness of ongoing central government initiatives.

Furthermore, as agriculture is a state subject, the state governments should ramp up their efforts to address groundwater mismanagement in agriculture in a time-bound manner. Governments of states that have unsustainable groundwater levels should proactively take measures to remedy the situation. Moreover, states such as Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Telangana, and Odisha that have safe groundwater levels could be encouraged to practise resource-efficient agriculture for water-guzzling crops. Some states have already taken cognisance of this. For instance, Odisha's Integrated Irrigation Project for Climate Resilient Agriculture emphasises irrigation efficiency and climate-smart agricultural practices in the state that has already extracted about 48% of its groundwater. The project is funded through World Bank assistance at a 70:30 (Centre:state) cost-sharing basis. Such initiatives can serve as a blueprint for sustainable water management in agriculture, offering the dual benefit of preserving India's critical groundwater reserves while ensuring long-term agricultural resilience. By scaling up these efforts, especially across the water-stressed districts, states can safeguard their water resources, enhance agricultural productivity, and bolster their contribution to global food security in an era of mounting climate challenges.

With inputs from Ananya Khurana, senior researcher, Institute for Competitiveness

US-China tech break-up is a race to the bottom

AMESSY, ONGOING tech break-up between the US and China is forcing a rethink about what the industry might look like for consumers in a decoupled world. On Monday, the Pentagon blacklisted internet and gaming giant Tencent Holdings for alleged links to the People's Liberation Army. On Friday, TikTok ban will make its final arguments to the US Supreme Court as it faces an unprecedented ban due to national security concerns.

The news greeted attendees this week at one of the industry's biggest extravaganzas in Las Vegas, where companies typically convene to lay out their dreams of a techno-utopian future filled with laundry-folding robots, flying cars, and other idealistic visions. And despite the tensions, more than 1,200 Chinese firms at the CES trade show are vying to enter the US market, the largest foreign representation and more than a quarter of the about 4,500 exhibitors.

Nvidia chief executive officer Jensen Huang headlined opening night with an impassioned speech and a wide range of product updates. Last month, China's market regulators opened a probe into the US chipmaker amid the recent escalations. I wondered what companies might get caught in the middle next as Huang laid out his vision for a robot and autonomous vehicle-filled future — or how these machines would be built without supply chains and materials from China.

Washington's latest move to include Shenzhen-based Tencent on its blacklist of Chinese military companies doesn't come with any sanctions or penalties. But it still sent shivers falling and deals a major reputational blow to the world's largest game publisher that has invested in major American start-ups from Reddit to Epic Games.

Tencent's blacklisting also risks backfiring in other ways. The US has been throwing around perceived national security risks as reason to come after Chinese tech companies, but leaders haven't always been very forthcoming about what exactly that means. Lawmakers voted to ban TikTok after classified briefings supposedly identified it as a major threat due to its parent company ByteDance, but have heavily redacted the smoking-gun evidence.

The Department of Defense also hasn't offered any public receipts that Tencent works with the Chinese military (it doesn't have to). But it has become harder to understand how national security intersects with consumer technology. Back in 2021, Xiaomi reached an agreement with the US government to remove it from the same blacklist after the former filed a lawsuit.

Tencent said that its inclusion on the list was "clearly a mistake". And it will likely sue to reach its own deal with the government for removal. Either the US will end up sharing more information about why it sees China's most valuable tech firm as a threat, or it will amount to a legal headache and temporarily hit the stock while really ticking off Beijing.

Washington has made clear that it doesn't want its adversary to get ahead in innovation, but its itchy a-mole approach to holding China's tech sector back is spurring a race to the bottom. Policymakers should be much more strategic, especially when pulling out the national security defense.

There's another irony on display at CES right now. Chinese companies are flocking to the show as a display of might, and state-backed media has forcefully fought for them to attend amid reported visa issues. But they're also eager to come due to mounting woes at home that have nothing to do with Washington's curbs. A government crackdown on the internet sector and fresh macroeconomic headlines have been devastating for start-ups. And incentives for entrepreneurs don't seem to be advancing, especially amid consumer belt-tightening.

America was already on the way to showing the world its free-market tech ecosystem is the superior innovation engine. Opaque, porous attacks on Chinese tech under the increasingly broad banner of national security undermines that.

The incoming administration should assess what they're hoping to achieve before making matters worse with tariffs and finger-pointing at China for the country's working-class woes. A messier, America First-focused break-up will only embolden Beijing while inhibiting its own consumer-tech industry.



CATHERINE THORBECKE

Bloomberg

Time to turn to currency options



JAMAL MECKLAI

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US equities are not a good bet at this point. This could turn into a blessing for the rupee, if investors turn their attention to other markets

SINCE JULY LAST year, the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) efforts to squeeze out volatility from the US\$INR market resulted in the formation of a crumbling cliff, and, when push came to shove — as it did with Trump's victory in the US presidential election — the rupee keeled over falling sharply to yet another all-time low.

Tragically — and as was pointed out by myself and many other analysts — the approach, so obviously flawed, had several core negative impacts: the RBI's foreign currency assets (FCA) fell dramatically (USD 100 billion and counting since October 2024, if we include its forward sales); volatility in the domestic money market increased, making it difficult for banks and corporates to plan their cash flows (which limited growth); and the rupee's real exchange rate climbed (rendering exports less competitive).

Fortunately, the change of guard at the RBI — the new governor was sworn in on December 11 — appears to have prompted some fresh thinking in the area and (see table) the rupee is now already more closely linked with the global market, as we had recommended. The correlation between dollar (DXY) strength and rupee weakness has increased from 23% or so to over 50% in the past three weeks, and there also appears to have been a reduction in the rate of decline in the FCA (certainly compared to October 2024), despite an increase in the pace of USD appreciation.

Of course, the big question that

CURRENCY CORRELATION

Till Jan 8 from	Change in DXY	Pace of DXY appreciation	Change in rupee	Correlation
Sep 1, 2024	6.79%	0.05% per day	-2.24%	31.0%
Nov 6, 2024	3.37%	0.05% per day	-1.95%	24.6%
Dec 17, 2024	1.68%	0.08% per day	-1.07%	51.0%

remains — particularly given that the rupee is now (hopefully) more closely linked to the dollar — is what is going to happen to the dollar. Currently, the DXY is nearly 20% higher than its last 20-year average, and while it is still about 10% below its all-time high, it is worth remembering that high was set in 1985 (during the time of the Plaza Accord).

While forecasting is generally a mug's game, it seems to me that the upside for the dollar is now relatively limited. To be sure, the US economy is still strong and inflation remains a major issue, ensuring US interest rates will not be coming down anywhere near as rapidly as the optimists hope. But markets are not like electric switches and just because US rates remain high it does not automatically follow that the dollar will continue to climb.

Indeed, it is conceivable that the dollar rally may be approaching an end, and we could see a turnaround on Trump's inauguration day (January 20) in a classic case

of "buy the rumour, sell the fact".

US equities are showing quite a bit of nervousness. Many analysts are pointing out that the Dow has enjoyed two consecutive years of 20+ gains, something that's never happened before. More importantly, the bond markets are clearly not comfortable with 10-year yields climbing steadily. Further, recent data shows inflation remains a continuing threat and it is now looking possible that we may see only one rate cut from the Fed in 2025 (from an expected four just a few months ago).

Thus, it would appear that US equities are not a good bet at this point. This could turn into a blessing for the rupee, if investors turn their attention to other markets — Indian equities have corrected quite nicely over the past three-four months and are now about 10% below their peak. This could offer the RBI an opportunity to rebuild some of its lost reserves, although I'd hope it recognises that it

needs to allow some two-way volatility into the market as a shock absorber.

On the other hand, once Trump is inaugurated, and his compulsiveness becomes more manifest, we could see a "risk off" mood build in global markets. This could lead to another dramatic round of outflows from emerging markets (including India) with investors opting to hold cash. I note that a few weeks ago it was reported that Warren Buffett was holding more cash than he had since before the dot-com bubble burst.

As I said before, forecasting markets is well-nigh impossible, particularly with Mr. Volatility about to step up to the plate. Companies need to educate themselves about options, how to choose them, how to use them, and what instruments to avoid like the plague.

USDINR volatility is still very low, and, while it does appear that it will start to rise soon, as it should, now is a very good time to enter the options market.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

High stakes in Delhi

The upcoming Delhi Assembly elections are crucial for all major political players — Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Congress. However, the stakes are highest for AAP, as a poor showing could significantly harm Arvind Kejriwal's national political ambitions. Kejriwal's decade in power has seen both successes and growing dissatisfaction. While his anti-

corruption stance and improvements in education and healthcare were initially popular, governance challenges like water shortages and rising pollution are now tarnishing his image. The liquor scandal further complicated his position, despite the BJP's role in targeting him. The BJP, delighted by past gains, sees a chance to capitalise on AAP's vulnerabilities. This election is not just about past performance or promises but will reflect voter sentiment on

local and national issues.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Budgeting for agriculture

Appropos of "Tidings for agri-budget" (January 9), "agriculture in recent times has been seriously exposed to the vagaries of monsoons. The Centre has been taking several measures to help the farmers tide over their constraints and to improve their lives. The Centre, meanwhile, is also walking a tightrope in a bid to

transition to sustainable farming. Thus, steps must be taken in eliminating the use of chemical fertilisers through the adoption of natural farming. The FY26 Budget must make necessary provisions to assist farmers in their transition to natural farming and compensate for the likely crop or financial loss at the initial stages.

—RV Baskaran, Chennai

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

THE ASIAN AGE

10 JANUARY 2025

UGC can't deny states say in selection of V-Cs

The new draft regulations the University Grants Commission (UGC) has issued introducing subject fluidity and easing rigidity in an academic world that is increasingly becoming interdisciplinary are a welcome step but the move to do away with the national-level test for appointment of faculty to colleges and universities is a regressive move that is bound to downgrade the quality and standard of higher education in India. And the worst and most dangerous part of the new package is the attempt to strip the state governments of their say in the appointment of vice-chancellors to state universities. It is a naked transgression that amounts to abuse of power, violation of federal principles and specific constitutional provisions and gross negation of natural justice.

The farmers of the Constitution put education in the State List in Schedule 7 (as Entry 25) realising and recognising the fact that states, with which the Union is built, will have a major say in educating and shaping their future generations. At the same time, they also recognised the need for some kind of a mechanism to ensure quality of higher education and hence Entry 66 in the Union List, which has entrusted the Union government with the task of the "co-ordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions". The UGC Act is framed accordingly and says the agency was formed "to make provision for the co-ordination and determination of standards in universities".

The Constitution and the law do empower the UGC to set standards in higher education, and it is very well within its power to issue norms on the appointments of faculty at various levels. It is also legally permissible to coordinate the efforts of various entities, which includes universities, at bringing the best to the students. But the "incorporation and regulation of universities" is specifically on the State List, even after education has been put on the Concurrent List, and hence the UGC has no constitutional or legal mandate to regulate the functioning of the universities, which are formed by the acts of the state legislatures. Setting the norms for the selection of the vice-chancellors, who are the administrative heads of the universities, is much beyond the legal domain of the central government's agency.

While seeking to override the state laws through its rules, which are a form of subordinate legislation, the UGC has thrown every sign of respect for democratic governance and federal principles to the wind and arrogantly vested the chancellor, an appointee of the Union government, with the power to decide the vice-chancellor while the state government will be reduced to be a mere spectator.

It has also threatened with stoppage of grants and funds should a university dare overrule the UGC.

The Union government must intervene and direct the UGC to withdraw the draft rule which has no place in a federal structure. The unitary character of the country which a section of the Hindutva brigade had advocated is gaining traction in several critical areas including finance and law and order and is now making major steps into the field of education. This must stop if we are to thrive as a democracy. A country of unimaginable diversity cannot be run by decrees and rules; it must be through cooperative federalism which Prime Minister Narendra Modi also happens to espouse.

Make Tirupati darshan safer

The stampede that occurred at special ticket counters established by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) in Tirupati for Vaikunta Ekadashi darshan, killing six people and injuring 15 others, is unfortunate. It marred the excellent record of the Tirumala temple administration in crowd management for several decades.

Vaishnava temples, especially in southern India, open special northern gates for Vaikunta Ekadashi and devotees believe that having darshan of their deity passing through the northern gate will give salvation. In the wake of this legend, most Vaishnava temples witness large crowds on Vaikunta Ekadashi.

In an attempt to reduce the crowd at the Tirumala hill, the temple administration started issuing special darshan tickets for Vaikunta Ekadashi and set up in downhill Tirupati in 2022. The urge to secure darshan of their favourite deity led to jostling in queues of the ticket counters in 2022 and also 2023. However, neither the district administration nor the temple administration had anticipated that the situation in queues could get as worse as it did this year.

Law and order is the responsibility of IAS and IPS officers heading the district administration. It is their duty to envisage different scenarios developing out of a situation and prepare the administration to handle it. Nevertheless, it appears that the district administration had outsourced their duty to the TTD.

While the TTD's intent behind special counters is commendable, it is difficult to fathom why it did not take lessons from the stampedes that occurred in 2022 and 2023.

It is also inconceivable that the state government led by tech-savvy chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu had allowed the TTD to adopt such a primitive way of forcing devotees to stand in queues for a day to secure the darshan tickets of Lord Venkateswara. If the TTD had allowed devotees to register through a web portal or a mobile app and later selected a predetermined number of devotees through a lucky dip or computer-based random selection, the festival of Vaikunta Ekadashi would have been more fulfilling.

THE ASIAN AGE

KASHISH MEHTA

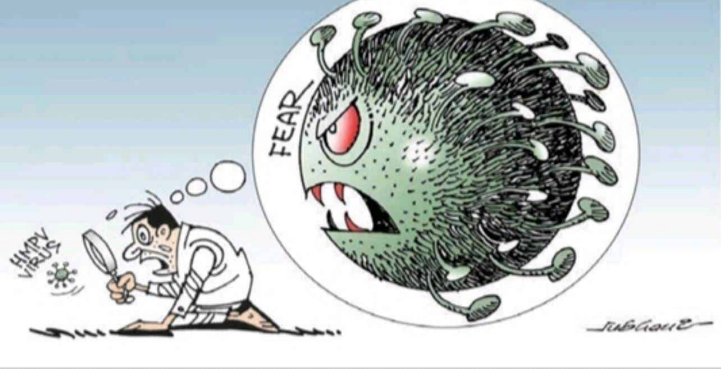
Editor

The Asian Age office is located at:
New Delhi: Janshakti Nandan National Youth Centre, 219 Dena Deyal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 011-23111214.

Published and Printed on behalf of and for:

Devas Chandra's Holdings Limited, Janshakti Nandan National Youth Centre, 219 Dena Deyal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002 at 011, India. Tel: 011-23111214, 011-23111215.
London: Quicksands Ltd, 8th Floor, Block 2, Elizabeth House, 29 York Road, London, SE1 7YQ.
ISSN Registration number: 57350594

Subhani



Past, present and future: A Vietnamese takeaway

Patralekha Chatterjee
Dev 360

I kicked off 2025 with an unforgettable ride in Ho Chi Minh City's metro line. The city, formerly Saigon, inaugurated its metro line just a few days earlier after more than a decade of delays. The rides were free for the first month. I have never seen so many people eager for a metro ride anywhere in the world. Nor such determination and ingenuity coalescing into a mix of celebration and chaos.

That morning, when I arrived at the historic Ben Thanh Market station in the city's District 1, there was already a mile-long queue of women, men, and children. It took me several hours in the queue, using the huge dollops of patience and skills I had acquired while boarding buses in Kolkata, to finally clamber aboard.

Heart-warmingly, the journey was a delight. I specialise in Vietnam. A few years ago, I vacationed in Hanoi. What kept out at each time was the enormous progress this war-torn country had made and how it dealt with its "past".

"The past is the past. We are a young nation. There is no time to lose. We look to the future. The future is about more trade, collaboration, and learning from each other. And, with the United States as well," said a young Vietnamese information technology professional sitting next to me in the metro.

Many older Indians still see Vietnam through the prism of its war with the United States. But today's Vietnam feels light-years removed from the images of war.

It is not that Vietnam has forgotten its past or the horrors inflicted on it. Every bit of memorabilia from its protracted war with the United States — which ended in 1975 — is meticulously memorialised in its

monuments and museums.

The War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, which attracts many visitors, including foreigners, showcases photos, documents, and objects manifesting consequences of the toxic Agent Orange sprayed by the US military during the Vietnam War. Vietnam continues to deal with its long-term impacts: health issues, birth defects, and environmental damage. There are walls of photographs documenting the horrors of war, including torture. There are also proud displays of captured US military hardware — including planes and tanks. Clearly, Vietnam remembers. To a casual visitor, however, it does not come across as a country obsessed with its past, waging memory wars, or seeking to relive painful wounds. Just the opposite, in fact. Vietnam is firmly fixated on its future, catching up and getting richer.

What can India — the world's fifth-largest economy, with a young population, growing clout and ambitions — learn from Vietnam, a war-ravaged nation which pulled itself up by its bootstraps and is now a global manufacturing hub and one of the fastest growing countries in the world? The short answer: Plenty. Both countries have dominantly young populations. Both are hugely aspirational.

Most Vietnamese are too young to remember when the US-backed government in Saigon fell in 1975. The median age in Vietnam is around 33. In India, it is around 28.

As an Indian used to frequent flaming wars of words over what happened centuries ago, who said and did what to whom, Vietnam strikes a chord about how we could do it only we put our minds to the present and did not fritter away national energy relentlessly discussing the past and

Vietnam has invested a lot not only in infrastructure but also in human development. The adult literacy rate is approximately 96%. India's adult literacy rate is around 77%.

trying to erase parts of it.

Vietnam remains a one-party Communist state. Markers of Communism are everywhere. Walking around the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, one spots French luxury goods conglomerate Cartier's flagship store. Right in front, flies the red flag of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In short distance away is the statue of iconic revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh, who led the Vietnamese nationalist movement for more than three decades, fighting first against the Japanese, then the French colonial power and then the US-backed South Vietnamese. He was President of North Vietnam from 1954 until his death. But Vietnam now has the US as its biggest export market.

Undoubtedly, Vietnam's approach to its past with the United States, particularly regarding the Vietnam War, is complex and multi-faceted. Over the decades, the country has navigated a delicate balance between the traumatic effects of the war and engaging with the US. The changes that one now sees took a long time. Vietnam's economy struggled in the years following the war.

"The current honeymoon lies between the two and Vietnam did not happen overnight," says a Vietnamese academic who currently lives outside the country. There were harsh sanctions (1975-1986). It took nearly two decades for bilateral ties to be normalised.

This was not an easy period. Rebuilding a society is very tough. But Vietnam did it. Its GDP per capita is \$4,347. India's GDP per capita hovers around \$2,465.

As a woman, what also

impressed me hugely about Vietnam was the safe feeling I got while walking around. Even in extremely crowded places, no one stalks or harasses women, much like in most parts of Southeast Asia.

The Asian Street is hugely seductive. That explains why so many tourists, including from India, are visiting countries like Vietnam and Thailand. But the street's charm does not hinge only on street life and street food, it is also about offering a sense of safety.

Which brings me to a very important issue — the status of women, how they live and work. A key cultural factor which works to Vietnam's advantage is the high proportion of dual incomes. Vietnam's male and female labour force participation rates were 71.8% and 68.2% last year, according to International Labour Organisation estimates. In India, women's labour force participation rate is 25% compared to 77% for men, the World Bank said in 2023. No Indian state has a female labour force participation rate above 51%.

Vietnam has invested a lot not only in infrastructure but also in human development. The adult literacy rate is approximately 96%. India's adult literacy rate is around 77%. The maternal mortality ratio was 97 per 100,000 live births in 2019-20. Vietnam was 46 in 2020. Despite recent progress, India's maternal mortality ratio was 97 per 100,000 live births in 2019-20.

Today, Indian tourists, young and old, are flocking to Ho Chi Minh City, now the thriving commercial capital of Vietnam. A holiday in the country is affordable and it is an attractive destination. It also offers a compelling message on how to process the past, its pain and trauma. Vietnam shows that bitter enemies can become strategic partners.

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.

LETTERS
BETTER EDUCATION

To check the rate of dropout in schools, the education minister of Bengal requested the Central government to extend the midday meal scheme up to Class X. Today students get the meal only till Class VIII, the cost of which is shared by the Centre and states in 60:40 ratio. Children are unable to learn optimally when they are hungry. A country cannot progress if it neglects the health and education of its future citizens. The Centre should introduce breakfast along with midday meals and extend it not just to Class X but up to Class XII to minimise the high dropout rate at secondary and higher secondary levels. It will help students from underprivileged families to complete school education and bridge the nutrition gap.

Sujit De
Kolkata

RTI DEFEATED

AMENDMENTS to dilute RTI's efficacy and attempts to defeat the law by delaying or denying information have been under common for years with the Supreme Court questioning the large number of vacancies in the Central and some state information commissions. 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. An institution can be of no use if it doesn't have persons to perform the required duties under the law.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

LOW-TECH IAF

AIR CHIEF Marshal A.P. Singh has hit the nail on its head, indeed if we do not meet the timeline, technology is of no use. If government companies are not capable of catering to the need and manufacture the latest technology equipment and ammunition, then private players should be allowed and a collaborative approach should be the order of the day. Tejas was conceived in 1984 and it took 32 years to have the first induction. Today, too, the Air Force has not got its first 40 Tejas aircraft. It has put even tortoiseshells in today's era, wars are not fought on conventional methods and techniques, so investment in R&D is paramount. Hopefully, his words will reach the right people and changes would be made to their approach.

Bal Govind
Noida, UP

Dilip Cheria
Dilli Ka Babu



Transfer, cancel: Delhi top cop won't let OSD go before elections

Even babu reshuffles seem to carry a whiff of drama when it comes to the political theatre surrounding the Delhi Assembly elections. The recent back-and-forth on IPS officer Manish Chandra's transfer is a case in point.

Last month, the Union home ministry announced Mr Chandra's transfer from his position as Officer on Special Duty (OSD) to the Delhi police commissioner to Mizoram. Fast forward two weeks, and a notification last week did a complete 180, cancelling the transfer "with immediate effect." Officially, Mr Chandra stays put in Delhi for now.

According to the grapevine, Delhi police commissioner Sanjay Arora wasn't exactly thrilled about losing Mr Chandra during this critical pre-election period. Rumour has it that he stood his ground, refusing to relieve Mr Chandra for Mizoram, and managed to get the decision reversed.

The explanation? Mr Chandra's presence in Delhi was deemed "essential" ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections. But here's where it gets interesting — or perhaps, amusing. Elections in Delhi are held on a staggered basis, with the calendar for months. If Mr Chandra's role was so vital, why was he transferred in the first place? The logic doesn't just stretch thin; it snaps! Was the transfer a misstep, or was it a calculated move reversed under pressure? Whatever the

case, this isn't your run-of-the-mill reshuffle; it's a vivid reminder of how even the smallest bureaucratic decision can ripple through Delhi's charged political waters.

As the polls approach, every move, whether administrative or political, is being watched like a hawk. And sometimes, the script flips faster than anyone can keep up.

THE WAITING GAME: WHY MANIPUR'S CHIEF SECURITY APPOINTMENT MATTERS

Manipur, which has been dealing with an ongoing crisis for over a year, is waiting for Vinod Joshi, the chief secretary of the state, to go to New Delhi, more than ten days after the Centre confirmed his departure. Everyone is wondering who will take charge of the state's administration at such a critical time because of this delay.

While some perceive this as indecisiveness, insiders suggest otherwise. They argue it's part of a larger strategy, especially given the Centre's recent appointments — former Union home secretary A.K. Bhalla as Manipur's governor and ex-Army chief Gen. V.K. Singh as governor in the neighbouring state. Clearly, the Centre is orchestrating a unique framework to manage the region's challenges.

But regardless of the grand plan, appointing a new chief secretary is essential. The process, however, seems to have turned into a complex guessing game. Over the past ten days, several names

have surfaced, each sparking speculation. Among the contenders are K. Moes Chalai, whose candidature gained traction after the Naga People's Organisation (NPO) petitioned Union home minister Amit Shah for his appointment. This move raises intriguing questions: Is this a straightforward demand, or does it carry a deeper agenda — perhaps sidelining other potential candidates?

Adding to the intrigue is Sriram Taramkanti, currently heading the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration. As names pile up, the odds for some seem to diminish. What's striking is that all these contenders are currently serving at the Centre, further complicating the decision-making process.

Each passing day without a chief secretary only deepens the uncertainty — and Manipur can hardly afford that right now.

WHEN ACCOUNTABILITY PLAYS FAVOURITES It seems the Centre has finally decided to put the spotlight on Kumar Rajeev Ranjan, the revenue secretary of Jammu and Kashmir, in connection with the arms license scam. The CBI now has the green light to prosecute him for allegedly issuing arms licences to the wrong kind of applicants — those who probably shouldn't have been armed to the teeth in the first place.

Back when Mr Ranjan was the deputy commissioner of Jammu, he was one of nine IAS officers accused of making the arms license approval

process less about merit and more about, well, monetary considerations. Fast forward to now, and the department of personnel and training (DoPT) has granted prosecution sanctions against him. The case is already a hot potato in the high court of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.

But here's the real kicker: "The high court isn't too thrilled with what it calls a "pick-and-choose" approach in deciding who faces the music. On November 23, the court expressed its discontent, essentially asking, "Why him and not the others?" It's a fair question — and one that many are asking, too.

Is this about justice, or is it just damage control? Prosecution is a great way to show you mean business, but it loses its shine when it's only selectively applied. If all nine officers were part of this alleged racket, why is Mr Ranjan the only one being put in the crosshairs?

The optics here is troubling. Selective accountability creates the impression of scapegoating rather than systemic reform. Either prosecute everyone involved or be transparent about why some are spared. Otherwise, this so-called fight against corruption is nothing more than a performance. And the audience, well, no one is buying it.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the babu guarantee and Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com.



In Delhi, a poll on perceptions

With the announcement of a single-phase election in Delhi on February 5, the stage is set for the country's first key electoral fight of the year. Campaigning had started before the official declaration of the date and over the next three weeks, Delhi will see an intense run-up to the polling day. Elections in the national capital come with a political heat not indicated in the size of the electorate. The BJP, India's most impactful political party, has been marginalised in the state Assembly elections in the past. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the country's youngest party, has dominated state elections in the recent past. While the main contest is between the two parties, the Congress which ruled the state for three consecutive terms before 2013, is also in the fray, though it does not have a single member in the outgoing Assembly.

The elections are crucial for AAP which has been in power for 10 years. A defeat will seriously damage the party, and even a drop in the number of seats will trigger questions. The party has to battle anti-incumbency of the last two terms, though it claims that there is no negative sentiment against it. The AAP has a popular leader in Arvind Kejriwal and claims that it will win on the strength of its governance record. The BJP started its campaign for the elections many months ago, following the arrest of Kejriwal and senior AAP ministers and leaders on corruption charges. While it hopes that the charges will stick and hurt the AAP, the latter sees the harassment and persecution of its leaders as electorally beneficial. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is himself leading the BJP's campaign. All parties have made promises of jobs to the voters, especially women — these promises have emerged as critical to electoral narratives of welfare, with each party trying to better the others with the sops on offer.

The Congress and the AAP are said to be constituents of the I.N.D.I.A bloc but there is no love lost between them in Delhi. The Congress had denied accommodation to the AAP in the Haryana election and the AAP is returning the favour in Delhi. Both have traded charges and the AAP has sought expulsion of the Congress from the Opposition alliance. The Congress wants its presence felt in the capital, but it will end up splitting the anti-BJP votes. The election in Delhi is likely to expose the fissures and weaknesses in the Opposition ranks, though the AAP will still be enjoying the support of the other I.N.D.I.A partners.

Decades after disaster, some action

Forty years after the gas leak at Bhopal's Union Carbide plant which killed thousands and impacted the health of successive generations, legacy issues of the disaster are still being addressed, and not efficiently. If the gas leak and compensation for the loss of lives and damage to health and environment were not handled well, the evolving issue regarding the clearing of toxic waste from the chemical factory's premises is also being addressed poorly. Last month, the Madhya Pradesh High Court ordered the clearing of the waste with this week set as the deadline. The state government has started shifting the waste to Pithampur, a town in western MP, 250 km from Bhopal, where there is a facility for incineration of hazardous waste. The plan is to incinerate the waste and bury the ash in landfills. However, there is strong opposition to the plan by the residents of Pithampur and the nearby city of Indore.

In the first place, it has taken 40 years for efforts to be made to remove the toxic waste. A petition was filed in the court in this connection, in 2004. Hazardous materials that have lain in the factory's premises all these years have seeped into the earth and contaminated soil and groundwater. Many surrounding residential areas have reported this contamination.

A trial run for the incineration was done at Pithampur a few years ago after the Supreme Court ordered the waste disposal. This is the first sign of action since then. It was reported that 358 tonnes of waste were escorted to Pithampur with police escort. According to reports, 1.1 million tonnes of contaminated soil and tonnes of chemicals have to be moved and disposed of. The process is estimated to take many months to complete.

Protests by the residents of Pithampur and surrounding areas, and workers of the industrial hub have continued. The police had to use force to counter the resistance. There were also reports of people fleeing their homes. Even if the incineration is done at Pithampur, many residents want it conducted at a new plant, in a remote area. The government has promised that it would monitor people's health and test the soil, air, and water but the residents are not convinced. The waste disposal process called for utmost care and caution because it involved contaminated materials. Decades of apathy have left the residents with strong misgivings about the government's assurances regarding the disposal. There has been a serious lack of transparency about the government's action — no consultations were held about the disposal procedures, further deepening this mistrust.

Misgivings prevail about the MP govt's disposal of waste from the 1984 Bhopal gas leak

The complex pursuit of quality in higher education

Metrics-based approaches can be inherently subjective, and skew perceptions of quality

FURQAN QAMAR AND NAVNEET SHARMA

The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP 2020) underscores "quality education" by referring to "quality" 154 times across its 66 pages. Its exhortation for universal access to quality education by 2030 to make it in sync with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-4), however, seems an antithesis because equitable access to all learners, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, cannot be accomplished through private schools, colleges, and universities, however public spirited. This aside, quality has long been intensely debated in education, notably higher education. Conventionally, quality in education has been associated with equipping students with the essential knowledge and skills and preparing them for lifelong learning. Since economic liberalisation, the idea and concept have been mainly shaped by commercial considerations and the demands of intense competition, which often conflict with the old established notion of quality. Consequently, defining and achieving quality has become elusive and increasingly complex in the contemporary context.

The definition of quality in education is inherently ambiguous. Should it be defined in terms of physical facilities and infrastructure? Or be indicated by the effectiveness of managing the admission and examination process? Should it be determined by the curricula, content syllabi or pedagogy, or the quality of lectures or lecturers? It could mean all of these, making its measurement all the more complicated and equally contestable. How much technology should be integrated into pedagogy and curriculum to enhance quality? Is human development, i.e. transforming individual beings into evolved human beings, possible without a human touch?

Quality is, at its core, an internal aspiration. Supported by suitable systems and processes, facilitated by adequate infrastructure, teaching-learning resources, and liberal funding, and free from excessive administrative burdens, faculty members will likely focus on improving teaching, innovating their pedagogy, and bringing rigour to the classroom. This would undoubtedly improve quality. Conversely, even the best teachers would fail to deliver without a conducive work environment and lack of resources. Quality is not merely about teaching itself but about ensuring all enabling factors are in place.

Arguing that the prevalent approach to quality cannot capture the essence

of quality in education, Van Kemenade et al. pitch for a quality concept based on four constituents: objects, standards, subjects, and value. These dimensions underlie the multifaceted and contextual nature of quality, raising essential questions about its scope and implications and highlighting control, continuous improvement, commitment, and breakthrough to explain quality and management of quality in the contemporary context. Even then, determining and measuring quality in higher education remains a challenge. Metrics-based approaches often rely on a series of parameters. On the face of it, they might appear objective but are inherently



subjective in their inclusion or exclusion of criteria. Such approaches can skew perceptions of quality and inadvertently disadvantage institutions or students.

The relationship between higher education and career outcomes complicates the discourse on quality further. Poor career progression and graduate unemployment may not necessarily reflect deficiencies in higher education. It could also be attributed to broader economic challenges, such as insufficient job creation to accommodate the growing number of graduates.

While expanding access to higher education is crucial, the twin concerns of equity and affordability must be noticed. Today, students and families do not only seek access to higher education but aspire to receive quality higher education at an affordable cost. The lack of a reliable and objective mechanism to assess quality often forces people to base their choices on perceptions and proxy indicators. Such reliance can lead to uninformed decisions and make individuals susceptible to market manipulations. Moreover, the increasing tendency to create false perceptions of quality, driven by marketing and rankings, exacerbates these challenges. Policy interventions to improve quality often result in isolated "islands of excellence" amidst a "sea of mediocrity", failing to drive systemic improvement.

The question of privilege
Quality is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a simple formula

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The karma yogi

She was writing because writing felt like breathing

SHANKAR VEDANTAM

The emergency came, like emergencies do, without warning.

One moment my mother was finishing her column for this newspaper. The next, she was feeling deeply unwell. She reached out to her family doctor.

When he came, he feared she was having a heart attack — like many other elderly people during the Covid pandemic. He rushed her to the hospital. She was taken to the ICU. Tests were performed, and more tests followed (as tests do). Soon, the doctors were hypothesising about what was wrong and what she should do.

My mother, meanwhile, was wracked by growing anxiety. It wasn't her heart she was worried about. She remembered she hadn't yet hit "send" on that

column for the newspaper. The deadline was looming.

She politely explained to the doctors that she needed to leave. When they inquired why she wanted to go home, she explained she had a column to submit. The bewildered physicians told her that she needed to focus on saving her life. She assured them she was happy to do that — after she met the deadline.

My mother, Varsada Vedantam, was what they call a natural. Journalism wasn't what she started out doing, nor what she was trained to do. She spent years as a teacher, administrator, and college principal. But writing was always her passion, and when the opportunity for a career change opened up at this paper in the 1980s, she seized it.

For years, readers of this paper enjoyed her columns and "perspectives on education" and other topics. She became something of a celebrity, with people coming up to tell her how much they enjoyed her work. She had a guilty look

when she received such compliments — the truth was she wasn't writing for anyone else; she was writing because writing felt like breathing.

My mother died this past weekend. She learned early what many of us discover too late: The reason to follow your passions is not because they always work out. It's because when you follow your passions, all your anxieties and ailments — the "organ recitals" that consume so many conversations among adults of a certain age — fade away. The thing you are doing becomes more important than you.

At the age of 92, my mother wrote a biography of her own mother. Days before she died, even as she was gasping for air following a lung infection, she was outlining the chapters of an autobiography.

In 2024, my mother compiled 55 of her profiles of India's foremost artists and writers into a book, *The Achievers*. By my count, she missed one.

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As a former advisor for education in the Planning Commission and a professor of management at Jamia Millia Islamia, Navneet is a faculty at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh

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SPEAK OUT

Nitish Kumar will remain in NDA... We believe that the NDA government will be formed with a two-third majority and Nitish Kumar will become the Chief Minister of Bihar again.

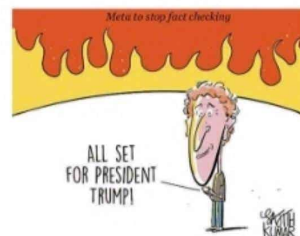


Jitan Ram Manjhi, Union Minister

The constant assertion of belief is an indication of fear.

J Krishnamurti

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

United state of antipathy

The Right and Left converge in opposition to H-IB. Can the US afford to listen?

ALOK RAY

A controversy on H-IB visa holders (of which the major chunk are Indians) taking away American jobs is raging in the US. This is bothering educated Americans more than the illegal immigrants from Latin America (who take up mostly unskilled, low-paying jobs), though the number of undocumented immigrants entering the US each year is many times more than the legal H-IB workers. The political opinions of both the extreme right and the radical left are converging to the same conclusion.

However, this sentiment of Indians taking away well-paying American jobs is nothing new. In the early 2000s, I was teaching at a US university as a visiting professor. At the end of the course, when students fill out the course evaluation form, an American student wrote: "After outsourcing jobs to India, our university has now started importing cheap professors from India. This must stop in the interest of protecting our jobs." The student knew that I would read the evaluations. Yet, his dislike of Indian-imported "cheap" professors was so intense that he took the risk of stating his opinion.

A major plank of the Trump campaign was that, if elected, he would deport millions of illegal immigrants. Nothing was said about legal H-IB workers. Elon Musk who enjoys enormous influence in the present Trump administration is himself a beneficiary of the H-IB visa and a strong advocate of the H-IB path to citizenship. But the extreme right in the Republican camp, represented by Steve Bannon (an influential Trump advisor in his earlier Presidency who has since fallen out of favour) and followers argues that H-IB should be a guest worker programme (like for Mexican workers) and should not provide a pathway to citizenship.

H-IB supporters would mention names of people like Elon Musk (a South African), Sundar Pichai and Satya Nadella (both Indians) as examples of the "best and the brightest" who have become CEOs of top US companies and tech startups, creating jobs for Americans and helping the US retain its technological leadership, after getting citizenship through the H-IB route. The extreme right-wing opponents would point to thousands of "diploma holders", cooks and housekeepers who have also used the H-IB route to become US citizens and are

certainly not the "best and the brightest".

On the left, leaders like Bernie Sanders have openly joined the opposition to the programme, arguing that it provides US capitalists the opportunity to import cheap foreign labour and depress US wages which increases their profit and worsens the income and wealth distribution.

Moving jobs to India

What the opponents of the H-IB programme do not realise is that in its absence, American companies would be forced to shift a much larger part of their operations to countries like India to make use of the huge pool of high-quality engineers, scientists, and finance experts available at lower wages. The process has already started with many well-known US tech and finance companies opening GCCs (Global Capability Centres) in India doing research, design, and innovation instead of outsourcing simple, low-value jobs to Indian companies as was the earlier practice. If high-skilled Indians are not allowed to migrate to the US (or the UK for that matter), US hospitals (and the NHS in the UK) would face a crisis.

In some cases (especially in social media posts), the opposition to Indian H-IB workers is taking a racist colour with mention of the "curry smell", and with Musk's picture painted in black to make him look like an Indian. This, probably, comes from the resentment of white American supremacists over the increasing influence of Indian-Americans in the "corridors of power" in the present Trump administration — like billionaire Vivek Ramaswamy in charge (along with Musk) of the high-profile Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Tulsi Gabbard as Director of National Intelligence (who oversees FBI, CIA, NSA), "Kash" Patel as FBI Director, Sri Ram Krishnan as AI advisor to the President, and many others of Indian American origin as governors, senators and House representatives. The Indian-American community in the US is also the ethnic community with the highest median per capita income.

The irony, of course, is that all Americans are immigrants at some point. But once someone becomes a citizen, he or she takes an anti-immigrant position, to prevent competition. (The writer is a former professor of economics, IIM, Calcutta, and Cornell University, US)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TN governor must mend his ways

Appropos your editorial "Governor and the politics of spite" (Jan 9), TN Governor R N Ravi's blatant display of partisanship is disturbing. He is accusing the government of not singing the national anthem at the beginning of the Assembly session, Ravi has exposed his true colours. His refusal to read the customary address and walking out of the Assembly hall only serves to underscore his bias towards the Centre, rather than

upholding the Indian Constitution. Ravi's actions are a clear indication that he is acting on behalf of a particular ideology, rather than the constitutional duties. His confrontational attitude is not only unbecoming but also detrimental to the smooth functioning of the state government. As governor, it is his duty to respect the customs and conventions of the State Assembly.

JAN Nathan, Bengaluru

Provide tax relief

Appropos "Income tax exemption should be hiked to Rs 5 lakh: EY" (Jan 9), the Union budget for 2025-2026 should indeed prioritise providing tax relief to taxpayers by increasing the basic income tax exemption limit from Rs 3 lakh to Rs 5 lakh. Further, deposit insurance should cover the entire deposit amount of senior

citizens, who rely heavily on bank deposits for their financial security.

K Lakshman Rao, Bengaluru

Revenue vs purpose

The recent fare hikes have sparked significant public discontent, raising questions about the government's priorities. While the hikes are expected to generate additional revenue

to offset rising costs, the 45-50% increase in Bengaluru metro fares is staggering. Would it not be prudent to introduce periodic fare revisions to avoid such steep increases?

Chaitanya Kandpal, Bengaluru

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

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

ENGAGING TALIBAN

Drift towards normal relations with Kabul points to enduring geopolitical realities. But Delhi must underline concerns

GOVERNMENTS MIGHT COME and go in Kabul, but India's ties with Afghanistan have largely retained their strategic character. India's stepped-up engagement with the Taliban — marked by the recent meeting of Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri with the acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai — underlines this basic geopolitical reality of the Subcontinent. When the Taliban stormed back into power in August 2021, it was widely lamented as a major setback to India's regional policy. After all, India had been a strong partner for the government led by anti-Taliban forces. The return of the Taliban was also viewed as a major gain for Pakistan, which was deeply hostile to the regime that fell in Kabul. Yet, since its return, the Taliban consistently signalled its eagerness to improve relations with India. Delhi has been cautious in its interaction with the Taliban. That policy has changed now with the elevation of the engagement to the level of foreign secretary. Delhi has responded to requests from Kabul for Indian support for humanitarian assistance and developmental cooperation.

The slow but certain drift in Delhi towards normal relations with Kabul underlines an enduring geopolitical reality of the Subcontinent. Irrespective of the nature of the regime in Kabul — monarchical, communist or Islamist of different kinds — there has been a natural warmth between Delhi and Kabul. That India and Afghanistan do not have any bilateral dispute is one factor; that they share cross-border problems from Pakistan is another. Kabul has long resented the Pakistan army's brazen meddling in its internal affairs and its treating Afghanistan as its backyard. Kabul has looked to Delhi to balance the pressures from Rawalpindi. Pakistan has sought to break this paradigm by conscious efforts to promote radical Islam in Afghanistan and groom the Taliban as an anti-Indian force. That policy has failed one more time. The tensions between Kabul and Rawalpindi have not disappeared.

Although the logic of geopolitics is moving Delhi closer to Kabul, there are two issues of concern for India. One, the domestic orientation of the Taliban regime — its repression of the population and intolerable oppression of women in particular, who are being denied basic rights such as education and minimal personal freedoms. To be sure, India does not have the power to alter the internal politics of Afghanistan; realism suggests that Delhi must deal with whichever government is in power in Kabul. Yet, India cannot give up its core values, it must nudge the Taliban towards political and social moderation. That the meeting with the Taliban officials took place in Dubai is a reminder that India can work with the United Arab Emirates and other moderate Arab states in promoting positive changes inside Afghanistan. The second issue is Delhi's unfortunate abandonment of its previous allies in Afghanistan since the Taliban returned to power. This included a heart-breaking refusal to give visas to many Afghans who had actively supported India over the decades. Winning new friends in Kabul might be smart; but losing old friends is not wise.

MUSK AND ZUCKERBERG

As Meta follows the X model on free speech, growing alignment between two Big Tech leaders sparks questions beyond US

LOOK TO SILICON Valley to see how the winds have shifted in the United States since the re-election of Donald Trump. On January 7, two weeks before the inauguration of the second Trump presidency, Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, announced sweeping changes to its fact-checking programme, starting with the US. Describing the recent elections as a "cultural tipping point towards once again prioritising speech", CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in a five-minute video that the company's platforms would switch to a Community Notes model, along the lines of X and would be less restrictive on topics like immigration and gender. This was, he said, a step towards greater freedom of expression — a reiteration of the "anti-censorship" argument frequently made by Elon Musk, owner of X, and a key figure in the incoming administration. Notwithstanding Musk's monosyllabic response to Zuckerberg's announcement — "cool" — what is clear is a growing alignment between two of the most influential tech leaders in the world.

This has huge implications, not only for the US, where an antitrust case against Google has shaken Silicon Valley, but also for the rest of the world. Any changes to user experience and safety in Big Tech, which may emerge as a response to the politics and policies of the new regime in Washington DC, are bound to ripple beyond the borders of the US, thanks to the global nature of the platforms that they've built. Facebook, for example, has over 3 billion users, most of whom are outside the US, in countries like India, Brazil and Indonesia. For many users, these platforms don't just serve as a way to connect with other people; they're sources of news and information, shaping their world views. The danger posed by mis/disinformation cannot be overstated, as seen during the Covid-19 pandemic when rumours about vaccines being used by governments to track people contributed to vaccine hesitancy. Musk and his use of X perhaps best exemplify the far-reaching impact of a social media post today: Raking up the years-long "grooming gangs" scandal and calling for the removal of Prime Minister Keir Starmer in the UK and throwing his weight behind a right-wing party in Germany, where snap polls are to take place soon, Musk has caused much disquiet across the Atlantic in the first week of 2025 alone.

If there is a solution to the challenges of the present moment, it lies in strengthening institutional media. The tech business is, first and foremost, a business — regardless of its larger role in global politics and policymaking. What is clear, as Silicon Valley scrambles to adjust to life under a new president, is that Big Tech cannot be trusted to be the sole and accurate source of news and information.

OLD AND WHOLE

In Demi Moore's Golden Globes win, hope and the assurance of fuller representation

CAN A WOMAN, successful or otherwise, ever be enough? At the Golden Globes Award ceremony, receiving the best actress award for her turn as the fading protagonist of Coralie Fergat's *The Substance*, actor Demi Moore revealed the self-doubt and the male gaze that has framed her life and choices. They fetched her success, but never an acknowledgement of her talent. In a career of nearly five decades, the Golden Globe was her first award. "In those moments when we don't think we're smart enough or pretty enough or skinny enough or successful enough or basically just not enough, I had a woman say to me, 'Just know you will never be enough, but you can know the value of your worth if you just put down the measuring stick,'" the 62-year-old said.

Moore's career — from her breakout role in *Blame It on Rio* (1984) to *Ghost* (1990) to *Indecent Proposal* (1993) to her photo shoots, pregnant and in the nude for *Vanity Fair* — has built up to this inflection point. But it could not have come at a more exciting time or with a more interesting project. *The Substance* is a hard look at Hollywood's veneration of youth and the body dysmorphia that afflicts women such as Moore, made to believe that in show business that is the capital they have to live off. But it is only one of a series of layered stories that women, older and ageing, are telling about themselves. From *Girls* to *True Detective* to *Jean Smart* in *Hacks* to Nicole Kidman in the erotic thriller *Bodygirl*, new shows and films are making a case for better representation, not as accessories in a male-dominated industry but as "markers of wholeness", wrinkles and sagging skin firmly in the spotlight.

Yet, power asymmetry still exists, some of the gains of MeToo have been undone and pay disparity continues to be a barrier. Women still have a long way to go but the journey might just be a little less intimidating. Hope is a powerful elixir, especially when one is not alone.



SUJAN CHINYO

INDIAN FOREIGN SECRETARY Vikram Misri's meeting with the Taliban's acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai on January 8 is not just part of the engagement of the regime in Kabul but a significant elevation in the level of dialogue. India, like the rest of the international community, has yet to accord formal recognition to the Taliban regime which saw off US forces from Kabul in August 2021 amidst chaotic scenes reminiscent of the helicopter evacuation of thousands from Saigon in 1975, only much worse.

Since the transition in Kabul, India has kept alive channels of communication with the Taliban at the functional level. Misri's meeting took place against the backdrop of considerable geopolitical ferment. Two days earlier, the Indian foreign ministry spokesman had roundly condemned the Pakistani airstrikes against Afghanistan that resulted in the loss of "several precious lives", including women and children.

Pakistan's claim that the target was the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) camps has not cut ice with Kabul, which has labelled these brazen acts as "aggression against Afghanistan". The TTP is fighting to evict all Pakistani forces from Pashtun tribal lands across the so-called Durand Line. Mortimer Durand's eponymous line of 1893, a colonial cartographic caper, is regarded as an "imaginary line" by the Taliban, whose sympathy for the TTP's pan-Pashtun ambitions has set Pakistan's teeth on edge. In February 2024, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, Taliban's acting deputy minister of foreign affairs, categorically stated that Afghanistan will never recognise the Durand Line. Pakistani demands for "border" crossings using consular documents have also been dismissed.

In Pakistan's case, there are some ironies. First, Pakistan has always considered Afghanistan to be a weak and vulnerable hinterland to be exploited and dominated in order to achieve "strategic depth" against India. Now, an emboldened Taliban is threatening Pakistan's western flank, which it has always taken for granted. According to a US Security Council report, there are an estimated 6,000-6,500 TTP fighters waging war against

A reason to talk

India's dialogue with the Taliban is based on realism, set in a complex geopolitical situation

Following the Misri-Muttaqi tête-à-tête, India has committed to 'provide further material support in the first instance to the health sector and for the rehabilitation of refugees' by way of humanitarian assistance. Pakistan has expelled more than 5,00,000 refugees, creating a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Given that Iran too has had border skirmishes with Pakistan on account of the latter providing sanctuaries to separatists, this is an opportune moment to work in tandem with Iran, using Chabahar Port to expand trade and send assistance to the refugees.

Pakistan, operating from Afghanistan. The Taliban's support for the TTP remains strong amidst mounting instances of TTP attacks against Pakistan.

Second, as the saying goes "as you sow, so shall you reap". Pakistan has harboured many terrorist groups as part of its insidious policy towards India. It was a key progenitor of the Taliban during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Now, the chickens have come home to roost. The TTP's Pashtun nationalism haunts Islamabad.

Links between the Taliban, TTP and al-Qaeda remain resilient. The Taliban and al-Qaeda make common cause in dealing with the virulent Islamic State (Khorasan Province). Just as the Taliban's return had proved a boost for terrorist networks, not far away, Syria has recently been overrun by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), still regarded by the UN and US as a terrorist organisation. The revocation of the \$10 million bounty on the head of HTS leader Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa on grounds of expediency gives rise to the question of whether there is scope for similar rehabilitation of the current regime in Afghanistan.

Top UN, US, EU, Turkish and Jordanian diplomats, as well as the foreign ministers of Germany and France, are dealing with the new regime in Damascus but not with the Taliban. This is despite the fact that the Syrian groups that have come together under the HTS umbrella have also been egregious in their violation of human rights and the treatment of minorities.

India has done well to engage the Taliban at a senior level. China and others such as Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Pakistan were quick to interact with Taliban 2.0 including through their local diplomatic missions. After the Taliban's takeover, India had recalled all its personnel but later restituted its presence in Kabul by dispatching a "technical team" to its embassy in 2022.

The "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" yearns for recognition. The UN Credentials Committee has turned down its request for the fourth consecutive year. However, the current situation does provide an opportunity for India to deploy a new *modus vivendi* in its

dealings with the Taliban even if international recognition, for now, remains a chimera. The Afghan cricket team's dizzying rise has led to players like Rashid Khan being auctioned for hefty sums in the Indian Premier League (IPL). It augurs well that India has also offered to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the popular game of cricket, which is a way of reaching out to the Afghan youth.

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India has supplied essential medicines, Covid and polio vaccines, anti-tuberculosis medicines, surgical items, drug de-addiction hygiene kits, blankets, winter clothing, pesticides, stationery for students as well as large consignments of wheat to Afghanistan. In the Union Budget for 2024-25, India allocated assistance for Afghanistan to the tune of Rs 200 crore.

Keeping in mind the complex geopolitical chessboard, India should enhance humanitarian assistance and resume development projects in Afghanistan. Capitalising on traditional friendship, there is scope for Afghanistan to figure even more prominently in India's "Act West" policy. The Taliban, after all, is here to stay.

The writer is the director general of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. Views are personal



SUDHIR MISHRA

IMAGINE YOU HAVE to write a film script on the life of Pritish Nandy.

Where do you begin? Anyone who knew him even slightly knows that he would've hated a hagiography. How would you approach it? How would you market it? What would be the poster? He could be sitting at the desk writing an opinion piece.

Many times, I sat in his office, sipping a cup of tea as he finished an article. I can still picture him at the peak of his concentration, pausing now and then and suddenly typing furiously. Or, the poster could be a picture of him looking at the sunset through a window as if a poem was wafting through the air and entering his head: *A thousand desires such as these/A thousand moments to sit this right on fire/ Reach out and you can touch them/ You can touch them with your silences/ You can reach them with your last/ Rivers, mountains, rain/ Rain against the torrid hills/ Cape/ A thousand/ A thousand desires such as these.*

Or, he could be with his gloves on banging away at a sandbag, totally focused. He was, in a sense, one of the last of the breed of men who could be soft and macho at the same time, a poet and a boxer.

Suddenly, another image comes to my mind: A graceful man who sat and listened to you and made a couple of really sharp observations. He could encapsulate an entire argument into a couple of perfectly structured lines. That's the hallmark of a poet.

Now, for a moment, let's forget the marketing and the poster. First, you have to

FIRST CAME THE POET

Pritish Nandy — journalist, writer, curator — kept his creative honesty throughout

write the script.

He was born in Bihar. The son of a middle-class official, he had two other siblings. He was the middle one, I think. The elder one is the great Ashis Nandy. Pritish adored his mother. I heard him speaking about her very warmly at times. They shifted to Calcutta with his family, and this is where the poet Pritish was born. Was his mother, the first Indian vice principal of La Martiniere College, Calcutta, who turned him towards literature?

What turns a man into a poet is too difficult to capture in a few lines. But the fact remains that the young Nandy burst into the Kolkata literary scene and took it by storm. However, he didn't just want to be a poet. In that sense, he was like the Latin American literary figures who wanted to be more than just novelists and poets. They wanted to influence their world more directly, sometimes even politically.

He might have also wanted to be some kind of a facilitator for other poets, filmmakers and all artists. Suddenly, he became one of the most powerful people in Mumbai, the publishing editor of the *Times of India* group and the editor of the *Illustrated Weekly*. It was a tough role as he stepped into the shoes of Khushwant Singh. A lot of people remember his interviews from those days. The poet became a journalist, an editor, a man whose opinion on all things mattered.

This is the Pritish Nandy I first met: The journalistic powerhouse, the art curator and the poet all rolled into one.

He could see through people. He knew the man you were. Often, he would tell you some of your flaws. He could be very critical in a strangely positive way. He told me many things about myself, which were not always very pleasant to hear. But they were brilliant, and I was grateful that somebody thought about me in such great depth. There were many people who liked Hazareen Khwastehin Ais, but I felt content when he approved the film. It's also because he knew about that time in Kolkata when radicalism was at its peak.

Perhaps it was one of the reasons why he left Calcutta: He saw the best of his generation killed, destroyed, exiled, or merging into the crowds. He chose to step away and found them again in various places around the world. I think that's how he rediscovered himself.

Some decisions in his life earned him a lot of criticism. However, I know that even though he was very close to power, he was never its slave.

That sharp mind never gave up. He refused to submit to the notion that others had about him. He went into film directions that neither got popularity among people nor amongst us. He dared to leave his admirers behind and walked towards another path. There was nobody like him.

It's difficult to imagine a Mumbai where Pritish Nandy isn't there.

The writer is a filmmaker

JANUARY 10 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

BHAJAN LAL ON SIKHS

HARYANA CHIEF MINISTER Bhajan Lal said the government had always protected Sikhs and would continue to do so. Property worth Rs 2 crore was estimated to have been destroyed in the violence in Haryana. Answering a question about his resolve to end corruption, Lal said strict-level meetings would be held to ensure a clean administration.

PROPOSAL REJECTED

COMMENTING ON THE proposal made by the Akali leader, Surjan Singh Thelardar, the AICC (I) general secretary Srikanth Verma said the

people had already given a verdict on the secessionist nature of the demand. Verma said that in any case, courts were not the forum to decide such issues.

CARTOON ON PM

IN RESPONSE TO a report in *The Indian Express*, January 9, 1985 edition, 'Rajiv's guidelines on administrative reforms', cartoonist Ravi Shankar created a graphic. On the left is a speech bubble drawn, words being said by the government, that says, "Sikh is in a meeting." Lined up outside are the Indian people who spell out the word "Grievances," which has been capitalised. On the top of the graphic are

cut-outs of the report's headlines and sub-headlines that read "guidelines on administrative reforms" and "ministries reorganised."

MOB BURNS BUS

A HARYANA ROADWAYS bus was burnt, and its driver was severely beaten up by a mob outraged at the death of a middle-aged man in an accident near Majnu Ka Tila on the outer ring road. The bus was coming to SBT from Hisar and a middle-aged man was crushed under the fast-moving vehicle. Soon, a crowd collected there from nearby slum dwellings. First, they beat up driver Ram Gopal, and then they burnt the vehicle.



Frozen in time: The Places of Worship Act's unrealised potential

BASIL GUPTA

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, was a landmark law designed to protect India's secular fabric by freezing the religious identity of places of worship as they stood on August 15, 1947. Introduced during a period of heightened political tension, especially the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the Act sought to prevent the transformation of one religious place of worship into another and communal unrest and destruction of religious structures. Its goal was clear: to maintain peace and prevent future religious disputes by legally stopping any changes to the religious character of these places, with a notable exception of the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. However, despite its well-intentioned goals, the Act has largely failed to fulfil its purpose and remains underutilised in addressing India's religious diversity and tensions.

When enacted, the Act was seen as a necessary step to halt the contentious practice of changing the religious identity of places of worship based on historical disputes. By preserving the *status quo* as it existed at Independence, the legislation aimed to prevent communal violence and bring an end to long-standing disputes over religious sites. Late Ram Vilas Paswan, who introduced the Bill, emphasised its role in securing peace, warning that repeated demands to reclaim religious structures could reignite tensions. The Act's purpose, therefore, was to freeze history at a point where future political or religious movements could not alter it.

However, despite the Act's clear purpose, its implementation has been hindered by legal and political challenges, leaving it mostly unused and its goals unachieved. A closer look shows that the Act's purpose has been contested and has not adapted to India's changing social and political realities. One key provision, Section 4, prohibits changing a place of worship's religious character, while Section 3 prevents any legal actions related to the conversion of these places. These sections were meant to solve religious disputes by stopping future claims about converting religious sites. But the Act's restriction on legal action has faced serious constitutional challenges.

The constitutionality of the Act has often been questioned, with critics arguing that it violates fundamental rights, particularly the right to access justice. They claim that by preventing the courts from hearing cases about the religious character of places of worship, the Act denies individuals or communities the right to seek legal redress. In cases like *Anita Kushwaha vs Pushap Sudan* (2016), the Supreme Court of India recognised that access to justice is a fundamental right under Article 14 of the Constitution. The Act, by denying legal recourse for certain communities, is seen as violating their rights and weakening the principle of equality before the law. The lack of judicial intervention also goes against the democratic spirit of India's judicial system, which serves as a check on possible injustices.

Furthermore, the Act's blanket ban on legal action leads to unfair outcomes, especially for communities whose places of worship were historically destroyed or changed. The Gyanvapi case is a prominent example where the religious character of a site is in dispute, but the Act limits the legal options to resolve the issue. The Act thus fails to consider the complicated nature of many religious sites in India, which often have both religious and historical significance. By limiting communities' ability to challenge the religious status of such places, the Act unintentionally creates a sense of injustice and neglect.

The Act also overlooks the socio-cultural aspects of religious identity and history. India's history includes numerous instances of religious and cultural oppression, and for many marginalised communities, reclaiming religious sites is a way to restore dignity and address past wrongs. The Act, by denying judicial recourse, prevents these communities from seeking justice for historical injustices. In this way, the Act can be seen not as a tool for peace but as a form of historical denial that ignores the lived experiences of disadvantaged communities. The principle of non-retrogression, as seen in *Naveed Singh Johar vs Union of India* (2018), states that rights should progress, not go backward. The Places of Worship Act, by blocking legal action, effectively regresses the rights of communities to address historical wrongs. Without its application in some of the most high-profile religious disputes, the Act has not fulfilled its role in preventing the reopening of old conflicts. While it was meant to promote secularism and a balanced understanding of India's religious diversity, it has not succeeded in these goals. The Act does not provide a clear way to resolve disputes over places of worship that have both religious significance and a history of political and religious conflict.

Mark Zuckerberg is positioning his company for a second Trump term — and revealing the hollow identity at its core

KEVIN ROOSE

For years, Mark Zuckerberg tried to keep his social network above the fray of partisan politics. And why not? Meta's flagship apps — Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp — were rowdy nation-states unto themselves, with billions of users, fragile internal politics, skittish advertisers, perpetually aggrieved influencers and a sprawling, uneven enforcement regime (known as "content moderation") that was supposed to keep the peace. Given the headaches associated with running his quasi-governments, the last thing Zuckerberg wanted was to become too enmeshed with actual governments — the kind that could use the force of law to demand that he censor certain voices, thumb the scale on politically sensitive topics or threaten to throw Meta executives in jail for noncompliance.

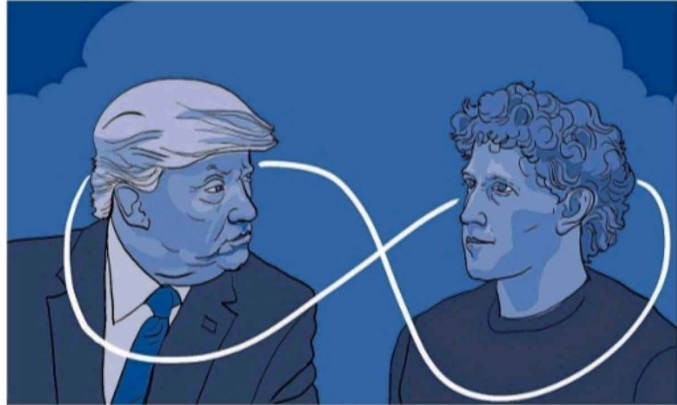


ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

But that was then. Now, on the eve of a second Trump term, Zuckerberg is giving his company a full MAGA makeover. In the process, he is also revealing that Meta — a shape-shifting company that has thrown itself at every major tech trend of the past decade, from crypto to the metaverse to generative AI to wearable computing — has a fundamental hollowness at its core. It is not quite sure what it is, or where its next phase of growth will come from. But in the meantime, it will adopt whatever values Zuckerberg thinks it needs to survive.

What's behind Meta's MAGA makeover?

In reality, Zuckerberg changed his views on speech many times, usually in the direction of the prevailing political winds. And the details of the latest changes (a laundry list of right-wing speech demands) as well as the method of delivery (Kaplan went on "Fox & Friends" to announce them) made it clear what the real purpose was.

The most popular theory about Zuckerberg's motives is that he is just doing the politically expedient thing: cozying up to the incoming Trump administration, the way many Silicon Valley CEOs have, in hopes of getting better deals for himself and Meta while Trump is in office. A different theory — one supported by conversations I've had with several friends and associates of Zuckerberg's in recent months — is that the billionaire's personal politics have shifted sharply to the right since 2020, and that his embrace of Trump may stem less from cynical opportunism than real enthusiasm.

I can't prove or disprove this theory. Zuckerberg, unlike Elon Musk, doesn't broadcast his unfettered political opinions dozens of times a day. But I find it plausible. I've spent a lot of time studying the right-wing conversion narratives of disaffected liberals, and Zuckerberg's recent arc fits the bill surprisingly well: A wealthy 40-year-old man with a sullied public reputation starts listening to Joe Rogan and develops an interest in mixed martial arts and other hypermasculine hobbies, grows annoyed by the woke left and angry at the mainstream media, rebrands himself as a bad boy, and adopts the label of a "classical liberal" while quietly supporting most of the tenets of MAGA conservatism.

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

Havanur suspended from party
Bangalore, January 9
Karnataka Backward Classes Mission Chairman L. G. Havanur has been suspended from the primary and active membership of the Congress "for his act of indiscipline," according to a press release issued today by PCC General Secretary C. K. Jeyaraj. Mr. Havanur has been served with a notice asking him to show cause within two weeks as to why he should not be expelled from the party. Mr. Havanur accused PCC President K. H. Patil of trying to subvert the Congress.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2000

Set up inter-state authority, CM tells Vajpayee
New Delhi, January 9
Taking serious objection to attempts of Andhra Pradesh to utilise the surplus waters from Krishna river, Chief Minister S M Krishna today urged Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to initiate urgent steps to set up an inter-state authority to implement scheme B of the Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal. The Chief Minister asked the Prime Minister to prevent Andhra Pradesh from carrying out its "sinister plan" of illegally utilising excess water of the Krishna.

OASIS | SUDHA DEVINAYAK

The virtue of moderation

In a world seething with extremes of emotion, moderation is a virtue. A balance, the moral courage to face the truth and negotiate the middle road. The wars we witness between Israel and Palestine, Russia, and Ukraine without hope of cease fire or truce and denial of sinner voices are an expression of aggrandisement and delusion of power where they refuse to tread a middle path. In a world beset with impermanence that permeates all aspects of life including inanimate objects and the ultimate powerlessness of man what place do tightly held beliefs and fundamentalist notions have? History has taught us that empires have

fallen and regimes have disappeared on account of the hubris of man and civilisations when they granted rights to its people and accepted their heterogeneousness, endured Lord Buddha who was born a prince sought answers to the questions of life: the processes of pain, grief, ageing and ultimate departure. He subjected himself to self abnegation and self denial but discovered neither indulgence nor deprivation as the key to life. He discovered the middle path or the golden mean the *Madhyama Pratipada* to life, shunning extremes.

The man who walks the middle path has a sense of proportion and equilibrium, that helps him to avoid the passions and pleasures of life on the one hand and extreme self mortification on the other. The eight fold middle path of Buddha comprises right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation. An adherence to these values would surely give us a sense of moderation. The middle path we need to tread is by no means a compromise of our values but a negation of extremes that is a virtuous life. At extremes of action and thought result in rigidity and firmly entrenched views of anger, resentment and hatred leaving no room for understanding, forgiveness or regret. It is only when we can see the point of view of others with empathy we arrive at moderation. One of the great examples of moderation comes to us from Christ to whom a coin with the emblem of Caesar was brought and asked to whom the coin should be given, Caesar or God? Christ's reply was "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's."





GUEST VIEW

Financing India's future growth is a challenge that must be met

Policy should aim to boost private investments and deepen a corporate bond market in need of long-horizon participants



RAJIV MEMANI
is chairman and CEO, EY India

The robust economic growth of the past few years has placed India in a strong position to fulfil its aspiration to be a developed country by 2047, the year Independent India turns 100. Apart from human capital, which we have in abundance, the country will also need to ensure that it has the required financial capital needed to grow at a real rate of 7%-7.5% per annum to reach this goal.

Many sectors of the economy will require high levels of capital during this period. The investment requirements of the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) alone are estimated to be \$1.3 trillion. The Economic Survey estimates that our energy transition journey will need \$250 billion annually till 2047. MSMEs will require \$1.5 trillion to scale up and achieve a digital transformation, of which only a fraction is available from the formal sector. The chief economic advisor estimates that India's gross fixed capital formation needs to go up from the current 28% of GDP to at least 35% on a sustained basis.

Much of the recent years' economic growth has been powered by increased capital expenditure by both the Indian and state governments; combined, it has risen from 3.6% of GDP in 2019-20 to 5.6% in 2023-24. Much of this capital spending has been in infrastructure—budgetary support accounts for 40-45% of total infrastructure spending. However, given the need for fiscal consolidation of government finances, there is limited room for expanding public investment at such a large scale. The private sector will need to play a bigger role in the future.

Raise the share of private investments: Public-private partnerships (PPPs), divestments and policy nudges that incentivise private investment, especially in manufacturing, can lead to significant benefits. Indian corporates have strong balance sheets. Their debt-equity ratio has reduced from 1.2% to 0.9%, while equity fund raising has risen. Equity funds raised via initial public offers (IPOs), qualified institutional placements (QIPs) and rights issues surpassed the ₹3 trillion mark in 2024, a 64% jump from ₹1.88 trillion in 2021.

While corporate India is well positioned for the next capex cycle and there are signs of capital expenditure picking up, the question is whether this pool of capital available is enough, or would it need to be supplemented?

We need foreign capital plus domestic investments: India's growth over the last 30 years has largely been funded by domestic savings, the bulk of which comes from what households save. However, overall household savings have declined from pre-pandemic levels of some 20% of GDP to about 18% of GDP. People are investing more in physical assets and taking on more debt. With a large part of savings being used to fund fiscal deficits, there is less available for private investments.



Thus far, overseas financing has had a limited role. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in India has been stagnant at around \$70-\$85 billion. Similarly, private equity (PE) and venture capital (VC) investments have stayed at around \$50-\$55 billion. Given the strong interest among foreign investors in the India story, much can be done to turn intent into action. Measures such as further improvement in the ease of doing business, better contract enforcement, better-targeted marketing of opportunities in the country and greater clarity on long-term import tariffs can attract higher FDI.

Deepen India's corporate bond market: Debt funding is another avenue that can play a larger role in meeting India's capital requirements. The market for corporate bonds—at present largely driven by commercial banks and non-bank finance companies that fund only a handful of companies—has been growing, but is far below the level in advanced economies. In India, this market represents about 16% of GDP against the global average of over 40%.

A deeper corporate bond market could help finance both private infrastructure development and capital-intensive manufacturing. Its potential can be unleashed by making available high credit-quality paper on the demand side and a larger pool of investors on the supply side.

Review norms for insurance and pension funds: Greater participation by global funds like insurance and pension players can help scale up India's bond market. However, attracting them

would require a review of investment norms. In the US, pension funds typically invest 40-50% of their corpus in equity markets, 20-30% in bonds, 10-15% in PE and the balance in VCs, real estate, etc. In contrast, life insurance funds in India are required to invest a minimum of 50% of their corpus in Union and state government securities. Under the National Pension System, people above the age of 55 need to have 75% of their allocation in government securities. Insurance and pension funds in India could be allowed to

deploy greater capital in other assets, especially corporate bonds that offer consistent long-term returns. Higher allocation to public markets and to PE or VC funds could draw greater capital to different types of financing and deliver better returns to investors. Historically, Indian policy-making has kept a prudent watch on the level of foreign debt capital flowing in. The country's foreign exchange reserve position is comfortable and its current account deficit is in structural decline, thanks to rising remittances and service exports. This gives us the confidence that India's capacity to absorb foreign capital would be higher in the future.

A long-term capex cycle is needed to keep India's economic growth in the fast lane. It is therefore crucial to implement policy measures that facilitate more private investments, FDI inflows and a better developed corporate bond market with insurance and pension funds as participants.

QUICK READ

Measures such as further improvement in the ease of doing business, better contract enforcement and greater clarity on long-term import tariffs can help India attract more FDI.

A long capex cycle is needed to keep India's economic growth strong. India must aim for more private investments and a deeper corporate bond market open to insurers and pension funds.

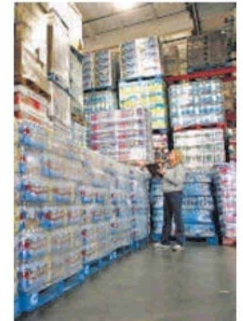
MINT CURATOR

A boycott of Costco for its DEI efforts is not likely to succeed

The US retailer has a loyal base of shoppers that it's unlikely to lose



BETH KOWITZ
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering corporate America.



Costco thrives on diversity and is defying the anti-DEI wave for it. **BLOOMBERG**

Costco Wholesale Corp has made a business out of doing things its own way. It pioneered and perfected the high-low formula, selling bulk toilet paper and \$1.50 hot dogs alongside gold bars, diamond rings and more wine from Bordeaux than any other retailer. It keeps its profit margins low while requiring a membership fee for the privilege of shopping at its no-frill warehouses. It's a discounter that pays employees some of the highest wages in a retail industry notorious for squeezing its workforce.

Costco has made another bet on zigging while the rest of the sector zags. As retailers like Walmart how to pressure to reverse their commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), Costco has stayed the course. The company's board last month recommended that shareholders vote against a proxy proposal from conservative think-tank National Center for Public Policy Research, which would require the company publish a report on 'risks' associated with its DEI programmes.

The proxy proposal has little to do with forcing Costco to publish mundane facts and figures; it's about killing Costco's DEI efforts. The board put it bluntly: NCPPI's "broader agenda is not reducing risk... but abolition of diversity initiatives." Rather than back away meekly, Costco goes on in its reply to make a strong business case for its DEI efforts. To the retailer, diversity is a critical business imperative, not a PR initiative, something that companies bowing to the anti-woke mob may have forgotten—or perhaps never really understood.

Since Costco's response got picked up by the media, the backlash from a faction of conservatives has been predictable. There have been calls for a boycott, with right-wing activist Robby Starbuck suggesting on X that consumers spend their money elsewhere. Starbuck has been on a crusade to wipe DEI out of America Inc through social media boycott threats, a strategy made more effective by an incoming Trump administration likely to go after companies it deems left-leaning.

But it's apparent that Starbuck doesn't think Costco will be as easy to turn as some of his past targets. In his X post, he made clear that he wasn't behind the Costco campaign, saying that he hasn't yet focused his attention on it because it doesn't fit with his "meticulously" planned timeline of how and when he goes after companies to maximize impact. The replies to Starbuck's post indicate he's smart to distance himself from the Costco fight if he doesn't want to tarnish his "100% flip rate." His post has

plenty of cheerleaders, but the responses to the suggestion of a boycott exude more dissent and hesitancy than he's used to.

"Costco is the best run retail store I shop at. Why would I abandon that for an inferior experience at another store? If their policies start to degrade the shopping experience I will begin considering other options but not a second before then," said a Starbuck follower. "I am sure Robby and his Org can have an impact, but the Costco leadership prob feels almost impervious to cancel culture! They are that special," said another. Who wants to tell them that part of what makes Costco special is its diverse workforce and supplier base? Costco does a stellar job of making that connection in its proxy, writing, "A diverse group of employees helps bring originality and creativity to our merchandise offerings, promoting the 'treasure hunt' that our customers value." The company also notes that it has an increasingly diverse customer base that wants to see itself reflected in its stores.

This is not just a hypothetical. The week after Walmart walked back some of its DEI initiatives, it launched a holiday ad featuring Nia Long and Larenz Tate, stars of the 1997 romcom *Love Jones*, that targets African-American shoppers.

Some of the comments on the ad's YouTube page are brutal, with posters calling out the hypocrisy of trying to capitalize on such consumers even as it retreats on efforts to support its African-American employees. "Walmart has probably fired everyone who conceptualized this ad by now," went one comment. "They won't hire you to work in the store but they will use you in ads," was another.

Costco is probably more willing to stick up for its policies and values because it has more faith that they work. It's a beloved brand with a cult following—93% of customers renew their membership. Walmart, on the other hand, has become the largest retailer in the world because of its ubiquity and low prices, but I'm not sure it can say it dazzles and delights customers the way that Costco can.

The real test comes now, as Costco tries to withstand whatever boycott customers muster. I doubt that we're going to see more than a handful of shoppers burning their membership cards in the Costco parking lot. **BLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Working for women leaders: An invaluable privilege

RAHUL JACOB



is a Mint columnist and a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

Arriving 30 minutes late for a job interview three decades ago had left me out of breath, sweaty and close to a panic attack. Yet, my first impression of *Fortune* magazine's chief of reporters was of her coming down the corridor, loudly proclaiming that New York's metro system would drive prospective job applicants away. She had just heard from her assistant that I had been stuck in a malfunctioning subway train between 34th Street and 42nd Street and empathetically flipped the burden of being late on the phone down to circumstance. I would put the phone down on my eldest brother without saying goodbye if she appeared at my door. She specialized in witty one-liners. I didn't want to miss a word.

Fifteen years later, I was working from home one Tuesday when an email from a long-time contributor to the *FT Weekend* landed. It was an 800-word screed of protest that felt like a grenade being detonated against the changes I was making to make

articles more international. While I was fretting, my phone rang. It was the *FT Weekend* editor, backing me between peaks of laughter about the writer's sense of entitlement. In much of the superb research that outlines the pay gap that persists between men and women despite advances in the workplace by women, little has been written about how women manage differently, and perhaps even less about how employees and organizations benefit from this. I was recently sent an amusing and affectionate blog by a gifted woman food writer who had started at *Fortune* as a fact-checker, as I had. She had written about Ewy Benjamin, the then chief of reporters at the magazine who hired me as well, attributing to Benjamin the habit of meticulously double-checking facts. It depicted Benjamin as a larger-than-life personality, capturing her intelligence and charm.

What it didn't say was that Benjamin was among a group of women researchers who about five decades ago were part of a class-action lawsuit against Time Inc, then the owner of *Time*, *Fortune*, *People* and *Sports Illustrated*. She was among the first generation of women promoted to senior management roles at the media giant. As Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin observes in *Why Women Won*, of the 155 critical moments in women's rights history in the US between 1905 and 2023, almost half occurred between 1963 and 1973. Decades on, much has changed for the better. The editors-in-chief of *The Economist*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Financial Times* are all women. I am fortunate to know and admire two of them. Emma Tucker, was *FT Weekend* editor when I worked in London in the early 2000s.

Despite this progress, it is hard to find articles that examine the implications of a wider dispersion of talented women in management and how well suited their skills are to the knowledge economy, which needs managers much less hierarchical than those of the command-and-control industrial economy of yesteryear. I have been lucky to work for women bosses most of my

career. More truthfully, from that first interview weeks before my student visa in the US expired, my career has been crafted by charismatic women. A former colleague this week reminisced about Benjamin sending her bottles of champagne and theatre tickets decades after they had worked together for helping her find a consultant for her husband's medical claims.

Tucker has a tough brief, as she seeks to make *WSJ* more readable and more focused on readers, while making difficult decisions to lay staff off. Even so, a profile of her in the *New York Times* observed in 2023, "In interviews with nearly a dozen former and current staff members, Ms. Tucker was almost universally described as personable and reasonable." Long before work-from-home was even a phrase in the early 2000s, she allowed me to do so on Tuesdays in London. Tucker's irreverent humour made workdays fun. I once pre-

sented her with a garish pen with a fake pink flamingo feather at one end of it and jokingly suggested she take it to all her meetings. She did for months afterwards.

To say that women bosses are more empathetic and more attuned to a work-life balance is to state the obvious. When my parents visited New York, it seemed natural that Benjamin meet them, even though she was working in a different organization by then. I recall discussing with Tucker, the mother of three sons as my working mother had been, what parenting was like in such circumstances. It was a memorable conversation to have at work, precisely because it had nothing to do with work.

Fast forward to Bengaluru today. Kamini Sawhney, former director of Museum of Art and Photography, and Hardika Shah, who heads Kinara Capital, became friends during interviews because they regarded the process as more than publicity. Kavita Gupta Sabharwal, founder of Neev Academy, sat in on online classes she had devised that I conducted on the media and covid during the pandemic. Goldin underplayed one aspect of having more women leaders: They selflessly create a foundation for many employees to build careers upon.

QUICK READ

The gender pay gap has been well studied but little has been written about how women manage differently and perhaps even less about how employees and organizations benefit from this.

Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin underplayed one aspect of women leaders: They selflessly create a foundation for a large number of employees to build their careers upon.

Tragedy in Tirupati: A Failure in Crowd Management and Safety Protocols

It is deeply shocking that the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) failed in its crowd management, leading to a tragic incident that claimed the lives of six people and left over 30 injured. The devastating event has sent shockwaves across the region and within the alliance government. The State government acted swiftly, with Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan and several ministers taking immediate action and travelling to Tirupati.

This heart-wrenching tragedy, which unfolded in a city renowned for its religious significance, could have been prevented had there been proper planning, management and adherence to safety protocols. There is clear evidence of human failure, raising serious questions about the efficiency of

local police, the negligence of the District Collector and the Joint Collector, and the failure of senior TTD officials, including the Executive Officer (EO), to plan the event adequately.

What has particularly shocked the Chief Minister is TTD's decision to deviate from the established practice of providing Vaikuntha Dwara Darshan at Tirumala. Was this change in protocol permissible according to Agama Sastras? Secondly, why didn't the TTD and the district administration utilise technology to avoid this preventable disaster?

Both Naidu and Pawan Kalyan expressed deep sorrow over the incident, taking full responsibility for what occurred. They asked for people's forgiveness and assured the public that steps would be taken to

ensure such a tragedy would never occur again. This gesture, though a small comfort to the grieving families, was a positive reflection of the government's willingness to take accountability. Sadly, the opportunity, particularly the YSRCP, has tried to turn this into a political issue, accusing the alliance government of failing in administration. They should remember that the people have not forgotten their five years of consistent failure across various sectors, during which they never took responsibility.

A significant factor contributing to the disaster was the lack of coordination and the absence of a robust emergency response mechanism. There were no well-trained personnel, timely medical assistance, or clearly marked evacuation routes in place. The

local authorities, who should have anticipated the logistical and security challenges posed by such a large influx of visitors, displayed a negligent attitude that led some to question whether there was a deliberate conspiracy behind the tragedy. The judicial probe must get to the bottom of this.

As Tirupati is one of the world's most visited pilgrimage destinations, it is imperative that the government and the local bodies concerned regularly review and improve crowd control strategies, especially during peak seasons and special events. Not only was there a lack of crowd management and safety infrastructure, but the authorities also appeared ill-prepared for an emergency of this magnitude.

The presence of law enforce-

ment officers, emergency medical teams and crowd control barriers could have mitigated the risk and, potentially, saved lives. Furthermore, a real-time monitoring system to alert officials of potential dangers, such as overcrowding or unsafe conditions, could have allowed for timely interventions before the situation escalated.

This tragedy also highlights the need for TTD to focus more on the facilities for common pilgrims, rather than prioritising VIP treatment. In fact, the visit of VIPs and VVIPs should be banned during such critical periods. Pilgrimage cities like Tirupati must invest in technology to monitor crowd density in real time, enabling timely intervention to prevent overcrowding from reaching dangerous levels.



LETTERS

Stampede deaths could have been averted

IT is unfortunate that despite modern technology, the TTD is still using the push-pull type of reservation system. Keeping 90 counters for 1,00,000 devotees means forcing 1,000 devotees at each counter. It becomes a task for the security staff to monitor all 90 counters. The devotees reach from all corners of the world. Some come with their kids and elders, who need physical assistance. Stampedes are certain when a large number of people are confined to one area in a specified time. After the accidents, it is routine to shower sympathies with compensations, but it is impossible to heal the mental agony of the suffering. The TTD Board immediately shall get rid of those long queues and shift to 24x7 digital method of distributing tokens for darshan. These tokens shall be distributed in a spacious hall with large number of chairs. AP Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu is requested to introduce darshanam only through the token number system!

G Murali Mohan Rao, Secunderabad

At least six devotees lost their lives, and dozens sustained injuries in a stampede on Wednesday night in Tirupati while waiting for the issue of tokens for the Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam of the Lord Venkateswara Swamy on Tirumala Hills on Mukoti Ekadashi Day. Hundreds of devotees from across the country gathered for tickets of the annual Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam. Religious places are becoming a death trap for the devotees.

C K Nikhil Subramaniam, Mumbai

Tax relief may boost consumption

IT refers to the editorial: "Slowdown blues for Indian economy". It is not surprising to learn that the Indian economy will go from fourth gear to second gear in the current financial year as all pointers are indicating this. Public capex is way short of target. Private sector is dragging its feet on new capex. RBI's tough monetary stand is making the task all the tougher. Services sector is doing reasonably well; it is the manufacturing sector which has hit a big hurdle and we all know that it is crucial for not only job and income growth but the economy, too. It should not be forgotten that GoI has provided relief in terms of corporate tax as well as PLI schemes to attract investment into manufacturing and boost this sector. So, providing income tax rate cuts in the forthcoming budget may drive consumption boost and in turn forcing private companies to invest into new capex.

Bal Govind, Noida

Pranab memorial an honour to his services to nation

PRANAB Mukherjee's daughter had expressed anguish for not erecting a memorial in honour of her father and central government informed her that a memorial would be erected in Delhi in honour of Mukherjee, which can be called an error rectified. In this regard, the Union government has chosen a site for it at the Rashtriya Smriti Sthal in Raigah where other memorials had been erected. His daughter rightly reminded the government over the oversight in honouring a past President who had served the nation for more than four decades in various capacities. It is worth mentioning how the issue had been politicised over a spot to cremate Dr Manmohan Singh and such anxiety in the case of P V Narasimha Rao was not adopted.

Yash Pal Rathnan, Jalandhar

AAP stands a fair chance in polls

IN a bid to counter the BJP's jibe, the AAP asked the party to throw the doors of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Rajmahal' open to the public and publish its pictures. The AAP also questioned the moral authority of a leader who spent Rs 2,700 crore for himself, travels in a Rs 8,400 crore plane and wears a Rs 10 lakh suit to hurl the 'Sheesh Mahal' jibe at it. The AAP government implemented several welfare schemes benefiting the city's impoverished and improved education and health care for the Delhiites. To its credit, the AAP, unlike the BJP, does not relegate the bread-and-butter issues of politics to the back-ground of its campaign. It runs a positive campaign on issues that matter to the lives of people. The AAP stands a fair chance of scoring a hatrick.

G David Milton, Maruthancode, TN

Clarity is more crucial than knowledge

IN this age of misinformation and disinformation, we must remain vigilant in extracting authentic information. In 2025, we, as techno-humans, will become data gatherers due to the overconsumption of data, which leads to unnecessary hoarding of data on our mobile devices, laptops, and computers. As the famous historian from Israel, Yuval Noah Harari, once rightly said, the 21st century is not the century where knowledge is power, but where clarity is power.

Dr Jitesh Mori, Kutch

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Bengaluru Peripheral Ring Road: HC directs BDA to acquire pending land

BENGALURU: The Karnataka High Court has upheld the land acquisition process undertaken by the Bengaluru Development Authority (BDA) for the construction of Peripheral Ring Road-2 connecting Hosur-Mysore Road and Tumkur Road. It has also directed it to acquire the pending land.

A single-judge bench of Justice ES Indresh, examining the petitions filed by M Vanitha of Kengeri and others, upheld the preliminary notification issued in 2005 and both the notifications issued in 2011 by the BDA under the Land Acquisition, Resettlement and Right to Just Compensation Act, 2013.

After hearing the arguments, the bench accepted the petitions and ordered, "If the BDA has not acquired the land, it should immediately acquire it and announce compensation within six months."

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

Get set for quantum leap

2025 will see huge advances in quantum computing. So what is a quantum chip and how does it work?

MUHAMMAD USMAN

IN recent years, the field of quantum computing has been experiencing fast growth, with technological advances and large-scale investments regularly making the news. The United Nations has designated 2025 as the International Year of Quantum Science and Technology.

The stakes are high – having quantum computers would mean access to tremendous data processing power compared to what we have today. They won't replace your normal computer, but having this kind of awesome computing power will provide advances in medicine, chemistry, materials science and other fields.

So it's no surprise that quantum computing is rapidly becoming a global race, and private industry and governments around the world are rushing to build the world's first full-scale quantum computer. To achieve this, first we need to have stable and scalable quantum processors, or chips.

Quantum chip
Everyday computers – like your laptop – are classical computers. They store and process information in the form of binary numbers or bits. A single bit can represent either 0 or 1. By contrast, the basic unit of a quantum chip is a qubit. A quantum chip is made up of many qubits. These are

typically subatomic particles such as electrons or photons, controlled and manipulated by specially designed electric and magnetic fields (known as control signals).

Unlike a bit, a qubit can be placed in a state of 0, 1, or a combination of both, also known as a "superposition state". This distinct property allows quantum processors to store and process extremely large data sets exponentially faster than even the most powerful classical computer.

There are different ways to make qubits – one can use superconducting devices, semiconductors, photons (light) or other approaches. Each method has its advantages and drawbacks. Companies like IBM, Google and Qeura all have roadmaps to drastically scale up quantum processors by 2030.

Industry players that use semiconductors are Intel and Australian companies like Dingo and SQX. Key photonic quantum computer developers include PsiQuantum and Xanadu.

Qubits: quality versus quantity

How many qubits a quantum chip has is actually less important than the quality of the qubits. A quantum chip made up of thousands of low-quality qubits will be unable to perform any useful computational task.

So, what makes for a quality qubit? Qubits are very sensitive to unwanted disturbances, also known as er-



The pushback from the rich countries is that fast-growing economies such as China, which is now the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases

in the world, should also pay their share. At COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, a breakthrough of sorts was made, with the adoption of an agreement to triple the amount of climate finance paid to developing countries, to \$300 billion per year, by 2035. The deal is a definite step forward, but the final sum is far less than the \$1.3 trillion that climate experts say these countries need in order to adapt to the crisis

rors or noise. This noise can come from many sources, including imperfections in the manufacturing process, control signal issues, changes in temperature, or even just an interaction with the qubit's environment.

Being prone to errors reduces the reliability of a qubit, known as fidelity. For a quantum chip to stay stable long enough to perform complex computational tasks, it needs high-fidelity qubits. When researchers compare the performance of different quantum chips, qubit fidelity is one of the crucial parameters they use.

How to correct the errors?

Fortunately, we don't have to build perfect qubits. Over the last 30 years, researchers have designed theoretical techniques which use many imperfect or low-fidelity qubits to encode an abstract "logical qubit". A logical qubit is protected from errors and, therefore, has very high fi-

delity. A useful quantum processor will be based on many logical qubits.

Nearly all major quantum chip developers are now putting these theories into practice, shifting their focus from qubits to logical qubits. In 2024, many quantum computing researchers and companies made great progress on quantum error corrections, including Google, Qeura, IBM and CSTRQ. Quantum chips consisting of over 100 qubits are already available. They are being used by many researchers around the world to evaluate how good the current generation of quantum computers are and how they can be made better in future generations.

For now, developers have only made single logical qubits. It will likely take a few years to figure out how to put several logical qubits together into a quantum chip that can work coherently and solve complex real-world problems.

'NOT THE NEW NORMAL'

2024 one of the worst years for children

KUSHAN SARKAR

SYDNEY: As Indian cricket deals with the fading form of its two stalwarts in captain Rohit Sharma and senior batsman Virat Kohli, head coach Gautam Gambhir and his support staff's role in handling a team in transition has also come into focus. The ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy has been a difficult ride for the side as they have struggled to get the right combination in the face of an aggressive and highly-driven Australian team.

The visitors will be playing the must-win fifth and final Test here on Friday. The on-field roller-coaster is causing some off-field issues as well with murmurs of unrest in the dressing room beginning to grow. It is learnt that Gambhir is not on the same page with most of the players in the team and the communication isn't as good as it used to be during the time of Ravi Shastri and Rahul Dravid. Skipper Rohit Sharma has maintained that he speaks individually to the players about selection issues. But after Gambhir took charge in July, Rohit, it is said,

hasn't actually given clarity to some of the not-so-junior players about why they were being excluded at times from the side. His own poor form hasn't helped Rohit's cause. But it is also reliably learnt that Gambhir, who is considered a more assertive person, hasn't earned a lot of confidence from the group of players, who aren't as old as Kohli or Kohli but are also not rookies like Harshii Rana or Nitish Reddy. "There is a Test match to be played and then there is Champions Trophy. If the performance doesn't improve, even Gautam Gambhir's position wouldn't be safe," a senior BCCI official told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

Gambhir's equation with the selection committee is also not particularly clear at this point. There are players in the team, who are feeling insecure because of his proximity to experiment with the playing eleven. In the ongoing BGI, a punt like Nitish Reddy has worked out brilliantly but the handling of Shubman Gill is still being debated. BCCI secretary Jay Shah has now been elevated to the ICC



Over 473 million children – more than one in six globally – now live in areas affected by conflict, with the world experiencing the highest number of conflicts since World War II. The percentage of the world's children living in conflict zones has doubled – from around 10 per cent in the 1990s to almost 19 per cent today. The situation for women and girls is particularly concerning, with widespread reports of rape and sexual violence in conflict settings

chief's position and the Board will have his full-time successor only after January 12. Once that administrative stability is in place, the BCCI brass will have some thinking

to do. Till Shah was in charge of BCCI, he called the shots. Former India seamer Roger Binny, who is the current president of the Board, hasn't been seen taking any policy

related calls. But if India's performance is not drastically better in the Champions Trophy in February-March, Gambhir will certainly have his wings clipped. "He was never BCCI's first choice (it was VVS Laxman) and some of the well-known overseas names didn't want to coach all three formats, so he was a compromise. Obviously, some other compulsions were also there," the official said.

Gambhir has already been asked a few tough questions after the 0-3 defeat at home to New Zealand and if the Border-Gavaskar Trophy is also lost, it can all go downhill for the feisty former opener from Delhi's Old Rajinder Nagar. Already there is a school of thought that Gambhir should only be given charge of the T20 team, a format in which he has been a successful captain and then mentor for both Kolkata Knight Riders and Lucknow SuperGiants. One question that is being asked in the corridors of power is whether he has been able to offer any solutions to Virat Kohli with regard to his

never-ending dismissals on the outside off-stump channel? By the look of things, the answer to that seems to be an emphatic no.

"Gautam, all his life, while playing in England and Australia, would dab the ball towards slip and gully. So, he knows exactly what Kohli's problem is. He has seen that as a player (in 2014) and as a commentator and now as a coach. If he knows what is wrong, he should tell him," a former India great, with the experience of more than 90 Tests, said.

The BCCI mandarins are also keeping a tab on certain other developments about one of the key members of the support staff, who is being accompanied at all the venues by his personal assistant. It is learnt that the person in question used to have FOP (Field of Play) access during the IPL where he would stride into the playing arena after games in a franchise jersey. In Australia, his presence in the box dedicated to BCCI members hasn't really been appreciated, according to a top source.

Empower small farmers

Ensure sustainability and scale with land pooling

S Raghavan

India's agricultural landscape is a tale of stark contrasts. On one hand, large landowners thrive with access to resources and capital; on the other, small and marginal farmers struggle to sustain themselves on fragmented plots of land. These farmers are caught in a vicious cycle of diminishing landholdings, lack of resources, and predatory moneylenders.

However, holistic collective farming aims to pool fragmented landholdings and empower small farmers through collective efforts.

In many farming communities, land inheritance traditions have led to a steady reduction in farm sizes over generations. Small plots of land, often less than an acre, are insufficient to sustain a family. Without access to reliable water sources, quality seeds, or market knowledge, these farmers struggle to make ends meet. Many fall prey to moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates, pushing them deeper into debt. The result is a cycle of poverty and despair, which has contributed to India's agricultural distress.

COLLECTIVE FARMING: This model seeks to transform the lives of small farmers by addressing their most pressing challenges. The approach involves:

Pooling Land: Farmers retain ownership of their land but agree to pool their plots into a collective unit. This creates larger, contiguous areas for farming, which improves efficiency and scalability.

Collaborating with Social Entrepreneurs: A non-exploitative social entrepreneur provides initial capital, access to water resources, seeds, and marketing channels. They also bring in agricultural experts to train farmers in sustainable practices.

Natural Farming Techniques: Farmers are taught to prepare organic fertilizers using cow dung, cow urine, jaggery, lentil flour, and virgin soil, to enhance soil fertility and reduce dependency on expensive chemical inputs.

Revenue Distribution: Farmers receive daily wages for their labour, ensuring financial stability. After the harvest, revenue from the sale of produce is distributed. Operational expenses are deducted, and the remaining profits are shared among farmers based on their land contribution.



COLLECTIVE FARMING. Halting fragmentation

Education and the Future: To arrest further fragmentation of land, the model encourages farmers to document their children's names in land records. Earnings from the collective farming initiative can fund their education, enabling them to pursue careers outside agriculture.

THE BENEFITS
Economic stability: By earning both wages and profit shares, farmers experience immediate and long-term financial benefits.

Sustainability: Natural farming practices improve soil health and reduce environmental harm, creating a sustainable agricultural system.

Social Empowerment: Collective farming fosters community cooperation, reduces dependence on moneylenders, and gives farmers greater bargaining power in markets.

Prevention of Land Fragmentation: Joint ownership through a pooled model halts the physical division of land, ensuring its viability for future generations.

Focus on Education: Redirecting farm income toward children's education creates opportunities for upward mobility and diversification of livelihoods.

The holistic collective farming model is not just an economic initiative; it is a vision for social transformation. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern sustainability practices, it offers a way to rejuvenate India's farming sector.

To scale this initiative, government bodies, NGOs, and private stakeholders must come together. Financial incentives, such as subsidies for natural farming inputs or tax benefits for social entrepreneurs, could accelerate adoption.

The writer is former Director Petroleum Indian Oil Corporation (BPF Unit), Mumbai

Why TN irrigation has stagnated

DRY STORY. Tamil Nadu's area under canals and tanks has fallen, while groundwater use has its limitations and problems



A NARAYANAMOORTHY

Farming without assured water supply can be risky, especially for cost-intensive crops. Irrigation not only helps increase crop yield and cropping intensity but also encourages farmers to adopt the yield-augmenting technologies and inputs required for the crops.

Studies from various countries in South Asia including India have shown that irrigation has helped in increasing farm wages, employment opportunities and reducing rural poverty.

It is for these reasons that the government has been investing heavily in irrigation development since the First Five-Year Plan. But, while India's irrigated area continues to grow, its growth in Tamil Nadu has stagnated for more than three decades now. So why does Tamil Nadu lag in irrigation development?

STATE OF IRRIGATION
Tamil Nadu was India's top-ranked State in terms of irrigated area in the sixties and seventies. It accounted for 11.56 per cent of India's total irrigated area in 1960-61, but its share declined to just 3.24 per cent in 2021-22 due to inadequate importance given to the irrigation development.

Tamil Nadu has underperformed not only in terms of share of irrigated area but in terms of actual irrigated area as well. For example, the gross irrigated area of Tamil Nadu (see graph for definition) has increased from 32.35 lakh hectares (lha) in 1960-61 to only 38.94 lha in 2021-22. During the same period, the irrigated area in neighbouring Karnataka increased from 9.77 lha to 60.85 lha and in undivided Andhra Pradesh, from 34.72 lha to 95.03 lha.

Tamil Nadu is the only major State, which has not registered any increase in gross irrigated area in terms of growth rate during 1960-61 to 2021-22 (see, Figure 1).

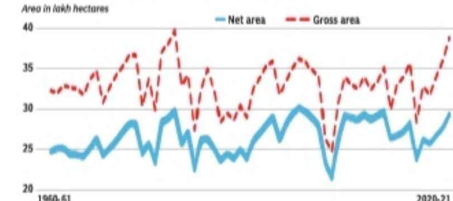
There are several reasons why Tamil Nadu could not expand irrigation as much as other States. Most of the northern States rely only on canals and groundwater for their irrigation development.

However, Tamil Nadu has been relying on canals, groundwater and tanks for its irrigation development over time. Unfortunately, the irrigated area from tanks and canals has decreased drastically over time.

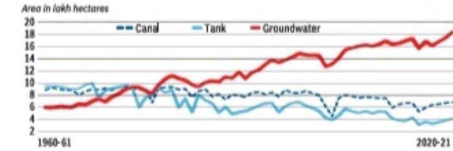
While the canal irrigated area has declined from 8.82 lha in 1960-61 to 6.84 lha in 2021-22, the tank irrigated area declined from 9.36 lha to 4.10 lha (see, Figure 2).

Although the area under groundwater has increased from 5.98 lha to 18.31 lha during this period, the drastic decline in canal and tank irrigated area has pulled

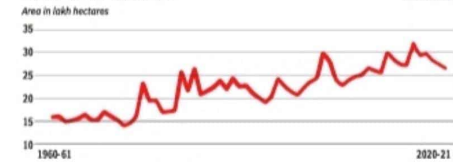
Trends in net and gross irrigated area in Tamil Nadu, 1960-61 to 2021-22



Trends in source-wise irrigated area of Tamil Nadu, 1960-61 to 2021-22



Trends in fallow land in Tamil Nadu, 1960-61 to 2021-22



Net irrigated area = Area irrigated only once in a year
Gross irrigated area = Net irrigated area plus area irrigated more than once in a year

down the overall irrigation development of Tamil Nadu.

During the same period, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh also experienced a sharp decline in tank irrigated area, but a massive expansion in canal and groundwater irrigation helped to increase their net and gross irrigated area significantly.

The poor growth in irrigated area has had a deleterious impact on Tamil Nadu's agriculture sector.

First, the net cultivated area (see graph for definition) has massively declined from 61.69 lha in 1970-71 to 49.09 lha in 2021-22, a loss of 12.60 lha. Such a large reduction has not happened in any of the major States.

Second, the area under fallow land has

increased from 15.38 lha to 26.64 lha during this period (see, Figure 3).

Third, due to the reduction in low-cost irrigation sources (canal and tank), the cost of cultivation has increased impacting farmers' income. According to the Situation Assessment Survey of Indian Farming Households 2018-19, published by the National Statistical Office in 2021, Tamil Nadu ranks 23rd in terms of monthly crop cultivation income per household (₹2,129).

Research reports from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank confirm that irrigation is a driving force not only for increasing agricultural production and raising farmers' income but also for eradicating rural poverty.

Studies from Maharashtra and other States suggest that poor availability of irrigation caused unemployment, forcing the villagers to migrate to cities.

Therefore, considering the increased water requirements due to the intensification of agriculture and other reasons, the Tamil Nadu government

must take steps to increase the irrigated area.

First, according to the estimate of the Central Water Commission, the total potential irrigated area of Tamil Nadu is 55.32 lha, of which only 38.94 lha are currently in use. That is, about 30 per cent of the total potential irrigated area remains untutilised. Urgent measures are needed to use the untutilised irrigation potential.

Second, the total water storage capacity of 41,127 tanks located in Tamil Nadu is estimated at 347 TMC, which is more than the total storage capacity of all the dams in the State. But, about 5.26 lha tank irrigated area has disappeared during 1960-61 to 2021-22.

The 16th report of the Central Government's Standing Committee on Water Resources and the First Census on Water Bodies released by the Ministry of Water Resources in 2023 have stated that the increased encroachments in water spread area and poor maintenance of tanks are the major reasons for the drastic reduction of its area. Schemes with adequate funding need to be introduced to remove the encroachments and to carry out maintenance works periodically to increase the tank area.

About 63 per cent of the net irrigated area (29.25 lha) of Tamil Nadu currently comes from groundwater sources. But, the contribution of groundwater to the total irrigated area has been decelerating in recent years.

Data published by the Central Groundwater Board in 2020 show that the exploitation of groundwater is more than 80 per cent in 23 out of 37 districts.

If this situation continues, the groundwater area may decrease drastically in future. By increasing the adoption of water saving methods such as drip and sprinkler irrigation techniques, groundwater exploitation can be curbed.

The water use efficiency is generally low in canal command areas in India. By introducing the water accounting method in canal irrigation, Maharashtra, which has the largest number of dams in India, increased its water use efficiency and irrigated area considerably.

Tamil Nadu may also think of introducing a water accounting method in canal irrigated area.

The Compendium on Sedimentation of Reservoirs in India (2020) underlines that the water storage capacities of the dams are reduced due to sedimentation, causing a reduction in irrigated area. A special programme should be introduced to remove the silt from dams and other water sources.

Sluggish irrigation development will not only affect the farming families but also reduce agricultural output, raising their market prices and overall inflation.

All of these will create hardships for common people and the government. Therefore, the policymakers should take adequate measures to accelerate the irrigation development.

The writer is former full-time Member (Official), CACP, New Delhi. Views are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 10, 2005

Anil Ambani meets Kamath

The Vice-Chairman and Managing Director of Reliance Industries, Mr Anil Ambani, had a two-hour meeting on Sunday with Mr K.V. Kamath, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of ICICI Bank and a friend of the family. Mr Anil Ambani went to the ICICI headquarters at Bandra-Kurla complex to meet Mr Kamath, but nothing was said publicly about what transpired at the meeting.

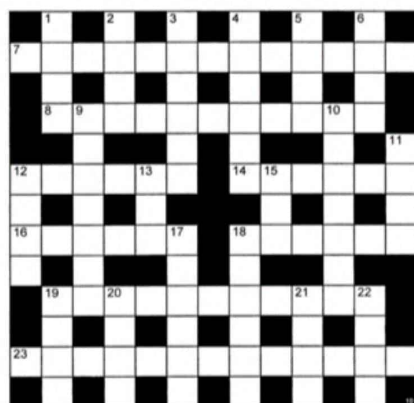
Disaster management body soon

In order to tackle the challenges posed by natural calamities such as the December 26 tsunami, the Government has decided to set up a National Disaster Management Authority shortly and install an Early Warning System.

Rating upgrades stay ahead

In a sign that the financial health of India Inc is continuing to improve, rating upgrades have outnumbered rating downgrades in the first eight months of the financial year 2004-05. Data relating to rating changes from April to November for all the rating agencies indicate that rating upgrades outnumber rating downgrades by a ratio of almost 3 to 1.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2608



EASY

ACROSS

07. Defer to a future time (13)
08. Intricate difficulty (7,4)
12. Disposition, inborn character (6)
14. Move out in all directions (6)
16. Costing (6)
18. Curb, restrain (6)
19. One telling another's story in print (5,6)
23. At which bleeding may be controlled (8,5)

DOWN

01. Amphibian (4)
02. Mark of hurt (4)
03. A send-up in writing (6)
04. Tripods (6)
06. Remove correction; let it stand (4)
09. Flightless bird (7)
10. Behind schedule (7)
11. Doing nothing (4)
12. Back part of neck (4)
13. Fish eggs (3)
15. Number of strokes allowed (3)
17. Circuitous diversion (6)
18. Trade by exchanging goods (6)
19. Wound, as bull (4)
20. Drying-oven (4)
21. Accepted (4)
22. Ladder step (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

07. Caption 'Arrest' incorrectly to defer things (13)
08. Drain go wrong? End of sink not making intricate tie (7,4)
12. Nakedness: its debt is death (6)
14. Quite a feast - it will make one grow larger (6)
16. Was inquisitive about cheer-leader having a sale ticket (6)
18. Show how amiss one feels it taking a restraint (6)
19. One whose spirit is moved to put pen to paper? (6,5)
23. Newspapers rue change to indicate where thumb may stop flow (8,5)

DOWN

01. Ornamental fastening found under horse's hoof (4)
02. Steep, bare place showing where one was hurt (4)
03. It ridicules folly as rite is sorted out (6)
04. Puts up with the accommodation for spectators (6)
05. Soon, or immediately who wrote it is not known (4)
06. Don't make the correction in haste: think! (4)
09. Bird so upset at head of table is wealthy (7)
10. Bowling is expected - it's late (7)
11. Nothing to do that is about five hundred pounds (4)
12. Part of the pancreas turns up at the back of the neck (4)
13. Eggs of a sort, deer of another sort (3)
15. Knock up the number of strokes allowed for the hole (3)
17. A circuitous route one may take, having toured around (6)
18. Exchange of goods will precede a half of butter (6)
19. Pierce the triangular piece that's let in (4)
20. Drying kiln as used in occupational therapy (4)
21. Graft was successful to sanction (4)
22. Having telephoned, gets a step up the ladder (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2607

ACROSS 1. Hoodwinking 7. Precise 9. Over 11. Cadet 12. Plural 14. Permutation 18. Treaty 20. Meant 22. Ream 23. Earring 24. Centrifugal
DOWN 2. Overdue 3. Idem 4. Never 5. Spice 6. Grill 8. Intimate 10. Old-timer 13. Sty 15. Ocarina 16. Storm 17. Stage 19. Erase 21. Peri



Ambedkar is considered very wise not only because of his erudition and intellectual acumen, but because his learning and ability are being used for the good of the common people

Periyar EV Ramasamy

newindianexpress.com

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

— Ramnath Goenka

DELHI SIGNALS NEED FOR DEMONSTRABLE, SOBER GOVERNANCE

WHAT is the primary issue before Delhi's citizens as the three main political parties solicit their votes for the assembly election on February 5? It is much more than roads, hospitals, schools, clean air and 'bjil-pani'. It is responsive governance that Delhi yearns for. Cynics would not hesitate to say the capital city-state is at the mercy of an imposed 'double-engine sarkar'. There is the Aam Aadmi Party, elected to govern. There is the lieutenant-governor, who is said to interpret rules to expand the Raj Niwas's say in governance. The Supreme Court plays the arbiter, dragged into the governance mess between the two sarkars, to keep the administration moving. Former Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud observed with some exasperation in 2023 that "every dispute, all and sundry between the government of the National Capital Territory and the LG is coming here".

The court still hears complaints about feuds between bureaucrats and ministers and interdepartmental disputes over postings and allocations. The Supreme Court recently intervened even in a Centre-state dispute over pending lawyers' bills. The judicial advice to the warring sides in the new year was to "make peace with each other". The advice should be for each institution to mind its business. The result of this disputed or excessive governance is a lack of development. Many projects have stalled, or the progress is snail-paced. Rote bureaucracy is at work everywhere. It takes a leader's visit these days to repair poorly-maintained roads.

Elections are times when the underlying hopes of the people rise to expect better treatment from politicians. The campaigns are already on. The AAP has exhibited no introspection of what it failed to do. The Congress and the BJP have not done their homework to critically appraise the current term. Instead, other than promoting ideologies, the campaigns are about optics like noises made over luxurious 'mahals' and welfare handouts that have expanded from free power and water to a cash dole for registered women voters. The least that Delhiites deserve are manifestos listing appropriate governance solutions and, importantly, explaining how the parties propose to deliver on them. The next government coming good on its assurances would depend on how the Centre and the state respect Delhi's unique statehood status and execute their joint responsibility for accountable governance unencumbered by the politics of one-upmanship.

ROSE CASE: ACT WITH SAME SPEED FOR COMMONERS

SENDING out a strong message against bullying on social media platforms, the Kerala police arrested celebrity businessman and philanthropist Boly Chemmanur a day after actor Honey Rose filed a complaint against him and a few others for making lewd comments online. The case was registered under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita's Section 75 (sexual harassment) and the IT Act's Section 67 (publishing or transmitting obscene material in electronic form). The court has remanded the businessman to 14 days' judicial custody.

Rose's complaint and authorities' swift action have been welcomed by most people. Even the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists, which has been accused of exhibiting a patriarchal mindset at times, promised her all support. The few who said Rose herself "invited" the obscene remarks by the way she appeared in public should be strongly condemned for re-victimising someone clearly abused on a public forum. First, a woman's right to dress the way she wants is her own; second, it's inherent in the acting profession to invite attention by projecting an alluring image. Above all, Rose has not appeared at any public function wearing a dress not permitted by Indian law.

In a way, the actor's complaint was a declaration of war against all those who indulge in sexual innuendos on social media, on behalf of all women who go through similar ordeals. Abuse and insults hurled at women are rising as more women are making their mark in the public domain. A growing section of the society seems disturbed by it, and they use social media—often anonymously—to vent their frustration. Psychologists say that many of these abusers exhibit an online 'disinhibition syndrome', a loss of control driven by male chauvinism and an urge to assert dominance. Women in politics, too, are singled out for online mob-lynching by opposing operatives; all political parties are equally culpable in this. The arrest of a well-known businessman should act as a warning to all those who harass women on social media. While the swift action of the state police is indeed welcome, the same alacrity should be extended to all women who are victims of similar bullying. Only then will these laws effectively empower society to fight back against abusive sexism online.

QUICK TAKE

MIND 'RAT HOLE' MINERS

THREE workers have died and six others are trapped in a 'rat hole' mine in Dima Hasao, the Assam district abutting Meghalaya with numerous coal, limestone and granite quarries. Despite several deaths reported over the last two decades and a legal ban a decade ago, tens of thousands of these illegal miners still operate in the Northeast. A thorough audit of these operations is needed with the help of local and satellite intelligence. All of India heaved a sigh of relief when some rat-hole miners rescued 41 construction workers trapped in Uttarakshi just over a year ago. We should nab the corrupt mine operators and use these miners' skills in legal pursuits.

THE recent controversy in parliament about a demeaning reference to B.R. Ambedkar by the home minister and the extraordinary spectacle of both Congress and BJP MPs holding duelling protests outside the House—brandishing his posters and screaming "Jai Bhim"—offer the most recent and most dramatic confirmation yet that Ambedkar is the one Indian political figure who has grown in stature since his death.

He is among the most revered of Indians, his birthday the occasion of a five-night vigil by his devoted followers, his statues across the country second only in number to those of Mahatma Gandhi. Every village and every junction appears to have one, a stocky balding figure in a suit and tie, clutching a book meant to represent the Constitution. When India's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna, was conferred upon him posthumously in 1990, the only criticism was of why it had taken so long.

Today, the Left parties, the right-wing BJP, the centrist Congress and the non-ideological Aam Aadmi Party all express their admiration for Ambedkar. The decision of the AAP government in Punjab to display Ambedkar's portraits in government offices was one more example of the iconic status he has now attained. As the social scientist Badri Narayan has observed, "If Babasaheb Ambedkar were alive today, he would probably have been quite amazed to see how political parties with completely different ideologies are vying with each other to associate themselves with his persona."

Indeed, Ambedkar's life and work has been reinvented and reimagined to occupy a larger space in the public imagination than ever before. Narayan attributes this to Dalits becoming more politically aware than in the past and political parties using their proclaimed commitment to Ambedkar's vision as their instrument of outreach to Dalit voters, who account for some 16.6 percent of the electorate.

The young Dalit writer Yashica Dutt argues that it is precisely because he opposed them so bluntly, with critiques too dangerous for the upper-caste establishment to absorb, that it was safer to neutralise Ambedkar by appropriating him. Parties needed Dalit votes without engaging with his bold ideas; commandeering his image without its content was the solution.

The attitude of India's newly dominant Hindu movement towards Ambedkar is a case in point. Initially dismissive of him for his savage remarks on Hinduism and his mobilisation of the Dalits—which

Every political party today pays obeisance to Ambedkar. It's debatable whether it's to commandeer his image for votes, or to genuinely engage with his bold ideas

COMPETITIVE ADULATION OF B R AMBEDKAR

SHASHI THAROOR



Fourth-term Lok Sabha MP from Thiruvananthapuram and the Sahitya Akademi-winning author of 24 books, most recently *Ambedkar: A Life*



SUDARSHAN

went against the RSS's emphasis on Hindu unity—the Hinduva movement was relieved when he chose to convert to Buddhism, an Indic faith, rather than to Islam or Christianity and began speaking of him with respect after his death. Two prominent RSS ideologues, Dattopant Thengadi and Krishna Gopal, even authored books on Ambedkar. The RSS duly celebrated Ambedkar's birth centenary in 1990, praising him for his efforts to reform Hindu society and rid it of discriminatory practices and injustices.

By the time of his 125th birthday, the BJP was in full celebration mode. Their attempts to appropriate him have proceeded apace, with PM Modi frequently invoking Ambedkar in his speeches and BJP grandees conspicuous by their presence at

local Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations each year. Of late, the BJP has extended its observance to an entire 'social justice week' commencing on Ambedkar's birthday.

Many public institutions in India are named in his honour, including such diverse entities as the Babasaheb Ambedkar International Airport in Nagpur; the B R Ambedkar National Institute of Technology, Jalandhar; and Ambedkar University in Delhi (with a second one on the anvil with the proposed renaming of Jawaharlal Nehru University).

Ambedkar statues continue to proliferate around the country, getting bigger and more majestic as the competitive adulation of Ambedkar in statutory proceeds apace. The Statue of Knowledge, a 70-ft statue of his, was unveiled in Latur, Maharashtra, in

BUILD ON MOMENTUM OF AUSSIE TRADE PACT

CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE



Director General, CE

technical barriers that historically limited bilateral trade. A dedicated annexure on pharmaceuticals, for example, paves the way for mutual recognition of pharmaceutical products, reducing bureaucratic hurdles for Indian pharma companies. Additionally, Australia's commitment to amending domestic tax laws to prevent double



NEW ZEALAND PORT AUTHORITY

The pact with Australia was India's first free-trade agreement with a developed nation in over a decade. Though bilateral trade dipped in 2023-24, it reflected global trends. The opportunities should bloom in a year, when an overwhelming majority of items traded will become tariff-free. A comprehensive economic cooperation pact is the next step

taxation on offshore income of Indian IT firms is expected to save these businesses up to \$1 billion—a game-changing move for the tech industry.

The ECTA will benefit India and Australia in various ways. Firstly, it will enhance services trade between the two nations. The commitments align with India's current settings or obligations under other trade agreements. Australian service suppliers will gain full or partial access to over 85 Indian services sectors and subsectors, with India also benefiting from enhanced access to the Australian services market.

Secondly, the ECTA includes provisions on mobility that will open opportunities for Indian students and professionals, promoting trade and business ties. The agreement ensures access for skilled professionals, investors and business visitors from both nations, facilitating smoother investment processes and providing greater business certainty.

Australia's mobility commitments to India uphold the integrity of its visa system, aligning with existing visa policies and previous free trade agreements. These commitments cover categories of entrants, duration of stay, and provisions for spouses and dependents.

Finally, the ECTA will establish a professional services working group to streamline the recognition of qualifications, licensing and registration procedures through mutual recognition arrangements between professional bodies. Both countries have committed to encouraging their professional services organisations to negotiate agreements on qualifications, licensing, and registration. This initiative creates a strong platform for professional collaboration, building stronger ties between counterpart organisations.

The India-Australia agreement represents more than a policy document; it is a vision for shared prosperity. With ECTA as the bedrock, India and Australia are poised to redefine not just their trade ties, but their role as economic powerhouses in the Indo-Pacific region.

The momentum does not stop here. Negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) are already underway. CECA aims to build upon ECTA's foundation, with a broader scope and deeper economic integration. We look forward to its early conclusion that will further elevate bilateral economic relations and take it beyond trade and investment.

(Views are personal) (cb@cei.in)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Humanities education

Ref: Don't drop humanities when we need them most (Jan 8). As someone who was a teacher educator at Alagappa University for 35 years, I agree that ethics should be interwoven as part of the curriculum at all stages of education. When Anna University introduced Btech degrees, both the teachers and the first batch of students had to suffer, especially those in the self-financed colleges, because the teachers were fresh engineering graduates themselves without much skill in teaching. They were tensed up and could not manage the classrooms. They showed their anger and anxiety in the classroom itself. So, I wrote a letter to the university's first vice-chancellor, E Balagurusamy, to introduce ethics as a subject for engineering students. I was happy to learn that the vice-chancellor implemented the idea and ethics was introduced soon after. Developing values, a positive attitude and a desirable demeanour are not skills, but fall in the affective domain of emotions. Like intelligence quotient, emotional intelligence is also important for success. The slow and subtle changes in students learning subjects while being instructed on emotional intelligence shape them into more refined human beings. If space is to be established in personal and public life, then everyone should learn appropriate humanities subjects. That's why our ancestors treated peace or shanti as an important value.

P.Prem, Thanjavur

Securing data

Ref: Data safety must be balanced with free flow of info (Jan 9). It is helpful to see data security be taken more seriously. With many instances of leaking of private information, this initiative will prove to be beneficial.

Padala Keerti, Bengaluru

Space future

Ref: Growing plants in space key for future missions (Jan 9). Germinating seeds sent by Isro in space marked a significant milestone. This achievement is pivotal for India's future space endeavours, including developing life support systems for long-term human habitation in space.

Nabin Panigrahi, Rayagada

Entrance exams

Ref: UGC's rules for college admission don't suit all (Jan 9). I fully agree with most of the points the author has mentioned. The idea of entrance exams for UG/PG programmes will not be suitable for any state, as many students are from a mofussil background while seeking opinions in polity formation is welcome, giving a short window for reaction is a futile exercise.

Sarla Achuthan, Ottapalam