



Building capacities

India can gain from accelerated trade diplomacy in Europe

The security breach where a Khalistani protester approached External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's car in London overshadowed the headlines on his week-long visit to the United Kingdom and Ireland. And the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) made its displeasure clear to the Minister's British hosts. The scheduled visit, however, was not changed and Mr. Jaishankar side-stepped the scare, announcing that India-U.K. relations were set for a "very big pickup" despite their "complex history" and current problems. India is building its capacities in the U.K., with two consulates, in Manchester and Belfast, while Mr. Jaishankar's extended talks with U.K. Foreign Secretary David Lammy focused on the much-delayed conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The Agreement, which was due to be finished after U.K.'s 'Brexit' in 2020, has missed deadlines. Talks over an FTA dominated discussions in Ireland too, and came days after India and the European Union (EU) committed to concluding their Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) – for which talks began in 2007 – by the end of 2025. Bilateral trade with the U.K. (\$52 billion) and Ireland (\$17 billion) are underpowered, and discussions on enhancing collaborations, especially in high-tech trade, were on the agenda in both capitals. The FTA talks, India-U.K. (restarted last month) and India-EU (another round this week), will benefit from India's more conciliatory position on import duties with the U.S., which have been a sticking point for them as well. The government's decision to reduce tariffs on wines and spirits, motor and electric vehicles, in deference to U.S. President Trump's demands, is a case in point, and more cuts are expected in negotiating an India-U.S. BTA.

In that sense, Mr. Trump's reordering of U.S. alliances and trade policy may well have been the wind in Mr. Jaishankar's sails. The trip followed visits to Delhi by a high-power EU delegation led by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and a senior ministerial and business team led by Belgian Princess Astrid, that imparted the sense that Europe is looking for new, more dependable friends. Mr. Jaishankar's visit also came close on the heels of the dramatic showdown at the White House between Mr. Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which led to an urgent summit of non-U.S. NATO countries being held in London, where U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer committed to support Ukraine with a "Coalition of the Willing". As geopolitical and geo-financial calculations are being reworked across the Atlantic, India stands to gain by accelerated diplomacy and offering a hand of friendship to both sides.

Second chance

Iran has reason to be wary of Trump's dialogue proposal

It was Donald Trump who sabotaged the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal. When Mr. Trump, in his first term as President (2017-21), unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the agreement in May 2018, Iran was fully compliant with the terms. Mr. Trump then adopted his "maximum pressure" policy aimed at forcing Iran to renegotiate the deal – a move which Tehran rebuffed. Last week, Mr. Trump said he had sent a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, asking him to reopen dialogue or risk military action. While the letter's details are still private, it took only two days for the Iranian leader to reject the outreach. Mr. Khamenei said "some bullying governments" insist on talks not to resolve the issue but to impose their deals. Iran's reaction is not entirely surprising. In 2013, Tehran had taken Barack Obama's overtures quite seriously. Mr. Khamenei had fully backed the Hassan Rouhani presidency's bid to negotiate with the West. And they had reached a result-oriented agreement which cut Iran's path towards nuclear weapons in return for the lifting of international sanctions. Now, when the American leader who demolished the functional agreement reaches out to them, the Iranians are sceptical for obvious reasons. Yet, there is a compelling argument to retake the path of diplomacy.

In 2018, when Mr. Trump imposed maximum pressure, Iran responded with maximum resistance. This mutual brinkmanship escalated regional tensions – Saudi Arabian oil facilities came under attack, Iran shot down an American drone, the U.S. assassinated Gen. Qassem Soleimani and Tehran retaliated with a missile strike on an American base in Iraq. While Mr. Trump's White House exit in 2021 ushered in the hope that the nuclear deal could be revived under the Biden administration, it did not happen. Over the four years, the region has seen dramatic developments. Today's Iran is weaker than what it was in 2020. Israel's war against Hamas and Hezbollah has weakened the 'Axis of Resistance'. Last year saw Israel and Iran exchange attacks. The fall of Syria's Assad regime, Tehran's only state ally in West Asia, in December 2024, shrank Iran's strategic depth in a hostile region. The country is also in deep economic pain, and the Israelis seem willing to take greater military risks, provided they have American backing. Amid challenges, Iran reportedly possesses enough high-grade fuel to produce weapons – Mr. Trump has acknowledged this with his 'we are reaching a critical point'. The U.S. wants to resolve the nuclear problem and Iran wants lasting economic and diplomatic reprieves. Beneath the hostility, there is a strategic possibility to resume dialogue. There is no harm in the Iranians giving it a second chance.

The empowerment of India's women with bold policies

In the context of International Women's Day on March 8, it is pertinent to note that India is making notable strides in empowering women, with government policies playing a crucial role in transforming women's access to sanitation, clean water, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurship. These initiatives, paired with broader social and economic changes, are reshaping women's roles in governance, in the workforce, and community leadership across the country.

On sanitation and clean water missions

The journey towards women's empowerment in India took a significant step forward with the launch of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), an initiative that was aimed not just at building toilets but also at improving the dignity, the safety and the well-being of women across the country. The mission focused on ending open defecation, especially in rural areas, where women faced heightened risks and challenges. According to government data, over 116 million households have benefited from the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), leading to safer, healthier environments and giving women greater freedom and security in their daily lives.

In Rourkela, the Maa Tarini Self-Help Group (SHG) took the initiative to address the sanitation needs of leprosy patients, a marginalised group often excluded from such efforts. By constructing community toilets with enhanced water supply, they provided a safer space for women, improved menstrual hygiene, and promoted dignity. The initiative also incorporated composting activities, generating income for the community while supporting sustainable waste management practices.

Building on the SBM's success, the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) was introduced to ensure that every household had access to safe and reliable drinking water. Prior to the mission, only 17% of India's rural households had tap water connections, leading to long hours spent by women fetching water – time that could have been used for education, work, or other pursuits. With the JJM, over 150 million households now have tap water, helping to lighten the daily burdens that women face.

The benefits extend far beyond convenience. Studies show that access to water has led to a 74% increase in women's participation in agriculture and allied work, particularly in States such as Bihar and Jharkhand, where female labour force participation was historically low. Between 2017 and 2023, rural female participation in the workforce jumped from 24.6% to 41.5%, with the JJM cited as a key driver of this positive change. By freeing women from the daily chore of water collection, this initiative



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Government-led policies have transformed women's access to sanitation, clean water, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurship: the focus now should be on sustaining the momentum

is unlocking new opportunities for economic independence and helping local economies thrive.

India's efforts in empowering women through targeted policies and initiatives are not just improving daily life. They are also creating a foundation for future progress. With continued focus on accessible resources, financial inclusion, and breaking down social barriers, India is paving the way for a generation of women to lead and succeed in every area of life.

Women-led businesses, financial inclusion

India's economic transformation is increasingly being shaped by women entrepreneurs and financial inclusion initiatives, reflecting broader shifts in digital access, policy support, and economic empowerment.

Over 73,000 startups with at least one female director have been recognised under the Startup India Initiative, highlighting a growing presence of women in business leadership. Government-backed financing programmes, such as the Stand-Up India Scheme and Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, have played a key role in this expansion. The Stand-Up India Scheme has sanctioned over ₹53,609 crore in loans for 236,000 entrepreneurs, while Mudra Yojana has sanctioned ₹23.36 lakh crore for 51.41 crore loans, with 68% of the loans going to women.

The rapid expansion of digital connectivity is also enabling greater financial inclusion. Initiatives such as BharatNet and the Prime Minister Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM-WANI) have brought high-speed Internet to 199,000 villages and 2,14,000 gram panchayats, with over 2.47 crore Wi-Fi hotspots established. These digital advancements are giving women greater access to banking services, e-commerce platforms, and business opportunities. Under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, more than 300 million bank accounts have been opened for women, fostering financial independence and economic participation.

Women-led enterprises are also making inroads into e-commerce and government procurement. On the Government e-Marketplace (GeM) portal, women entrepreneurs now make up 8% of the total seller base, with over 1,00,000 Udyam-verified micro and small enterprises (MSEs) securing contracts worth ₹46,615 crore.

Digital platforms are proving to be game changers for small-scale women entrepreneurs. Reena Kiran, an entrepreneur from Madhya Pradesh, runs the Girja Devi Jan Kalyan Samiti, a self-help group producing clothing, food products, and household goods. By leveraging the GeM portal, her business expanded beyond

local markets, illustrating how technology is bridging the gap between small enterprises and national opportunities.

As India's economy continues to grow, women-led businesses are playing an increasingly significant role, not just in entrepreneurship but also in reshaping the country's economic landscape.

Women's representation in governance

The representation of women in political decision-making has significantly increased over the years. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has witnessed significant reform, i.e., the implementation of a 33% reservation for women in legislative bodies, which will redefine the corridors of power. Today, women are not merely participants. They are key decision-makers, steering the nation toward a more inclusive future.

At the grassroots level, women have become catalysts for growth, constituting approximately 46% of elected representatives in panchayat raj institutions (PRIs), with over 1.4 million women serving in rural governance roles. The impact of this shift transcends mere numbers. With more women in leadership positions, policies have become more attuned to the priorities of families and communities. Areas such as health care, education, and public safety have seen significant improvements, driven by the unique perspectives and solutions that women leaders bring to the table. This evolution in leadership highlights a broader discourse: when women lead, societies thrive. India's commitment to empowering women in governance not only strengthens democracy but also paves the way for sustainable development and social equity.

India has seen significant progress in women's participation across various sectors, from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and sports to governance and entrepreneurship. Today, women make up nearly 43% of STEM graduates, contributing to the country's growing technical workforce. In 2023, Mr. Modi aptly stated at the G-20 Ministerial Conference on Women Empowerment, "When women prosper, the world prospers." By empowering women through entrepreneurship, education, and financial inclusion, we unlock new opportunities for growth, innovation, and societal progress, driving global transformation. Policies supporting women-led businesses, political representation, and skill development continue to shape economic and social progress. The focus now is on sustaining this momentum, ensuring that progress translates into lasting change for future generations.

India, Mauritius and a visit to deepen long-standing ties

In our current era of geopolitical churn and uncertainty, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Mauritius (March 11-12, 2025), will be a celebration of the deep and long-standing ties between the two countries. Mr. Modi had last visited the island country in 2015, but on this occasion, he will be the guest of honour at its Independence Day celebrations on March 12. India-Mauritius relations have enjoyed political consensus, irrespective of the party in power in either country. Mauritius has a new government in power led by Navinchandra Ramgoolam of the Labour Party, whose coalition won a landslide victory in the elections held in November last year. While India-Mauritius relations will continue to be positive and stable, the visit provides an opportunity for Mr. Modi to establish a personal connect with Mr. Ramgoolam and reassure him of India's continuing support to the island's security and prosperity. It was during the latter half of my tenure as India's High Commissioner to Mauritius (1992-97) that Mr. Ramgoolam was Prime Minister. India-Mauritius relations saw significant growth under his leadership and he was particularly sensitive to India's security concerns. I have no doubt that he will prove to be a trusted partner for India and will open new vistas for our cooperation.

The strong link of history

Mr. Ramgoolam's father, Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, had led the struggle for his country's independence and was its first Prime Minister. Not many people know that Sir Seewoosagar worked closely with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose during Bose's stay in Britain between 1919-21. They were part of the Indian students' movement in London working for Indian independence. Ramgoolam led the proof-reading for Bose's famous work, *The Indian Struggle*, and received an autographed copy in appreciation.

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Shyam Saran

is a former Foreign Secretary and was India's High Commissioner in Mauritius (1992-97)

The Indian Prime Minister's forthcoming visit is a reminder that India-Mauritius ties need to remain firm in today's uncertain world

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There are strong people-to-people ties between the two countries. Nearly 70% of the population of Mauritius is of Indian origin, being the descendants of Indian indentured labour who were brought by the colonial rulers to work on sugar plantations. About 50% trace their ancestry to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and still speak the Bhojpuri dialect. There are smaller communities of Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi-speaking communities who have preserved their languages and traditional culture. Mauritius appears like a microcosm of India.

However, the country is home to other ethnic groups including African and mixed populations, which create its proud rainbow culture. Though only 2% of the population, the island's French population is wealthy and influential, still owning its large sugar plantations, dominating its banking and financial sector and other commercial business.

The challenge for India's diplomats lies in maintaining links with all segments of the Mauritian population, even while celebrating the kinship and cultural ties that exist with its India-origin population. India has done much to nourish the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Indian-origin population. In 1976, it inaugurated the Mahatma Gandhi Institute as a premier institution for promoting Indian languages and culture. The Indian Cultural Centre in Mauritius is the largest of anywhere in the world and is one of the most active. The island hosts the World Hindi Secretariat that is supported by India.

A business gateway

India-Mauritius bilateral trade has expanded rapidly over the past few years, reaching \$554 million in 2022-23. Mauritius is a part of the African Union and has preferential trade agreements with African countries. It is bilingual, with most of its citizens being fluent in English

and French. With its well-developed finance and banking sector and reliable laws and regulations, Mauritius has become a preferred platform for doing business with Africa particularly Francophone Africa. Thanks to a favourable Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) with India, Mauritius is also a major channel for foreign investment into India. Mauritius has emerged as a successful international financial centre, mainly on the back of the DTAA.

Crucial to India's maritime security

Mauritius is the sentinel of the western Indian Ocean and maritime security cooperation between our two countries is critical to enhancing India's maritime security. The Colombo Security Conclave brings together India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and Bangladesh to work together to make this ocean space safe and secure. Mauritius is a small island but its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is 2.3 million square kilometres. India has set up a chain of coastal radar stations, redeveloped the Mauritius island of Agalega to serve as a joint surveillance facility and given Mauritius access to the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram, India, to significantly advance domain awareness in its vast EEZ. India's oceanographic survey ship, INS *Sarvekshak*, has just completed the survey of 25,000 sq km of Mauritius' ocean territory.

At a time when China's footprint in the Indian Ocean is expanding, India-Mauritius maritime security cooperation has assumed special importance.

Beyond the ceremonial honours bestowed upon him, Mr. Modi will have much substance to discuss with his Mauritian counterpart. India-Mauritius relations must remain a strong and stable anchor in an uncertain and potentially risky world.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

On the hot again

It is unfortunate that even after the imposition of President's Rule in Manipur, normalcy still eludes the riot-ridden State. How can the free movement of vehicles be possible without the cooperation of the Kuki-Zo people? Before enforcing any plan, the government should take the Kuki-Zo people into confidence. The government should arrange for a meeting of the two communities and try to

solve the problems.
D. Sethuraman,
Chennai

The photographs of dismantled militant bunkers in Manipur are alarming and highlight a certain level of military training and capabilities. The structures mirror those used by professional armies for defence, indicating that militants pose a significant challenge to Indian security forces. The situation needs to be analysed and a

solution thought of that safeguards the sovereignty of India.
Rahul Singh,
Secunderabad

Student life

Though scuffles and substance abuse have become prevalent among school students, the killing of a schoolboy by a gang of students in Kerala is very disturbing as it poses a serious question about the well-being and safety of students in the days ahead.

It is difficult for teachers and parents alike to keep a tab on the activities of students/children always. This tendency can be attributed to media content – the viewing of films with excessive violence and vengeance and the use of

Corrections & Clarifications

A sentence in a report, "130-day TB elimination campaign far from achieving main objective" (Science page, March 9, 2025), read, "Yet, only 3.8 lakh of the over 10 crore (100 million) individuals were screened using X-rays." It should have been 38 lakh.

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modern electronic gadgets which enable this. The profound influence on young minds cannot be dismissed as inevitable. The successful running of educational institutions has become a challenge as rowdiness is being reported

more frequently ("Ground Zero" page, March 8).
V. Lakshmanan,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

In Dubai

The way Team India played in Dubai to clinch the Champions trophy was befitting for a champion team. The ICC title is a feather in India's cap.

Jiji Panicker K.,
Angicalad, Chengannur, Kerala

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

Closing the gender gap in the higher judiciary

Women in law have seen great progress over the last 100 years in India. The first woman lawyer, Cornelia Sorabji, was entitled to practice in 1924. Since then, the number of women lawyers has increased, several women have been designated Senior Advocates, and there have been many women judges in the lower judiciary.



Jayna Kothari
Senior Advocate,
Supreme Court of
India

Inequality at the top
However, there remains a glass ceiling for women in the higher judiciary. The share of women judges in the High Courts is only 14.27% (109 out of 764). In eight High Courts, the number of woman judges is limited to just one. The High Courts of Uttarakhand, Meghalaya, and Tripura have no woman judge. The Allahabad High Court, which is the largest High Court in the country with 79 judges at present, has only three women judges (2%). Not only is there a disproportionately low number of women judges in the High Courts, but they are also appointed later than men. The average age of appointment of men is 51.8 years, but for women it is 53 years. Thus, women judges do not reach positions of seniority. Out of 25 High Courts, only the Gujarat High Court has a woman Chief Justice. The numbers for the Supreme Court are much worse, with only two women judges serving at present — Justice B.V. Nagarathna and Justice Bela Trivedi. With Justice Bela Trivedi due to retire in June 2025, the top Court will be left with just one woman judge. The last woman judge appointed to the Supreme Court was in 2021. Since then, 28 judges have been appointed to the Supreme Court, and not a single one of them is a woman. Over the last 75 years, the Supreme Court has elevated nine men from the Bar directly to the Supreme Court, but only one woman has been elevated directly from the Bar to the Court.

We have to ensure that women's appointments to the Supreme Court and High Courts are so normalised that it does not seem out of the ordinary at all

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women candidates, not enough women with seniority, or that women do not want to become judges. All of this is merely top dressing, when the underlying factor is one of deep inequality, to borrow the analogy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. One of the main causes for the exclusion of women from the higher judiciary is deep-rooted and systemic inequality, where women are seen as inferior within the legal profession. Women lawyers nominated for judgeship face heightened scrutiny. Far from compromising on merit, women are almost always required to prove merit more than men.

We also have the collegium system of appointments, which is opaque and non-transparent. There are no clearly stated criteria for eligibility or merit and there is no transparency in the process. This also works against women. The collegiums almost always comprise men and little or no effort is taken to get names of meritorious women lawyers for elevation. This is not the only hurdle. Even when names of women are recommended by the collegium, women are disproportionately not confirmed by the government. Since 2020, nine women's names were recommended by the collegium for appointment to the High Courts, but were not confirmed. Of these, five were the only names to be rejected.

This year, as we celebrate International Women's Day and 75 years of the Supreme Court, we need a transformation of our courts. Constitutional courts have to be gender equal in the true sense, where women are working, serving and leading in equal measure, especially on the Bench.

Steps towards equality
Women's representation in the judiciary is key to ensuring that courts represent their citizens and hand down sound judgments. Having an equal number of women on the Bench will enhance the legitimacy of courts and give a

signal that our judiciary is inclusive and representative of the people whose lives they affect.

First, the collegium could frame a transparent process and provide clear criteria for appointment. This must include a process for lawyers to express interest in being considered for appointment, such as through applications. There must be clear criteria based on the highest standards of excellence and integrity, and a specified time frame during which the recommendations are made.

Second, there has to be a focus on gender diversity while making appointments. Diversity and merit are not contradictory; rather, in a pluralistic society such as ours, diversity makes the judiciary more representative, thus fostering impartiality and enhancing the moral legitimacy of the institution.

There is, at present, a clear consideration of State-wise representation of judges, as well as of caste and religion. Gender diversity also needs to be taken into account to ensure that at least one-third of our higher judiciary, if not half, is composed of women.

This will mandate the appointment of a competent, independent, and impartial judiciary capable of upholding constitutionalism and the rule of law in the country, through a process that ensures selections solely based on merit and encourages diversity in the range of persons appointed, so as to enhance public confidence in the institution. Most importantly, gender balance needs to be a stated objective of the judiciary in making appointments.

Justice Indra Banerjee, a former judge of the Supreme Court, famously said in one of her interviews that she did not want any fanfare when she was appointed just because she was a woman. We have to ensure that women's appointments to the Supreme Court and High Courts are so normalised that it does not seem out of the ordinary at all.



The road to safety

Communication campaigns along with strict enforcement can make roads safer

STATE OF PLAY

G. Gururaj
Vaishakhi Mallik



The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Government of India, declared January 2025 as Road Safety Month, calling on all stakeholders to collaborate to make roads safer.

Every year, globally, approximately 11.9 lakh people die in road traffic crashes. In India, between 2009 and 2019, road traffic crashes were the 13th largest contributor to the health burden (Road Safety in India Status Report 2023, IIT Delhi). In 2022, Karnataka alone accounted for 8.6% of the road fatalities in India. As per the Karnataka State Police's annual report, in 2023, the share of crashes increased by 9%, fatal crashes increased by 7%, and cases of grievous injuries increased by 18% as compared to 2022.

Road safety is a public health issue. Crashes not only cause emotional, mental, and financial trauma to the loved ones of victims, but also place an immense healthcare and economic burden on the State and the country. According to a World Bank report, Traffic Crash Injuries and Disabilities: The Burden on Indian Society, about 75% of lower income households and 57% of higher income households reported a decline in total household income after a crash.

The United Nations Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021-2030 aims to halve deaths by 2030. Often dubbed a silent pandemic, road deaths and injuries are unacceptable since they are largely preventable.

Studies suggest that even a single, well-designed, evidence-based road safety campaign can reduce crashes from 8.5% to 9%. Mass media

campaigns have long been used to change attitudes, raise personal risk perceptions, and shape social norms to promote safer behaviours. The World Health Organization reaffirms the value of such targeted mass media campaigns.

One of the ways to reduce road traffic injuries is to focus on key risk factors, such as speeding, helmet and seat belt use, and drink driving. To ensure road safety, communication campaigns along with sound legislation and law enforcement have the most influence. For example, Bogotá, Colombia, implemented four campaigns on speeding paired with enhanced enforcement operations to intensify speed management efforts between 2018 and 2019. The campaigns were also supported by media strategies such as journalist workshops to help build the narrative on the importance of these actions. This contributed to a decrease in speeding from 39% to 21% during that period and helped prevent an estimated 73 deaths.

These results resonated with citizens, who realised that the lives saved could have been their own or their loved ones. In India, Karnataka adapted the global best practices by pairing a mass media campaign to reduce speeding with enforcement by the police. Between December 2023 and January 2025, the Karnataka State Road Safety Authority implemented three mass media campaigns. In December

2023, the mass media campaign addressed speeding by sharing the moving story of a crash survivor who was left permanently disabled because of a speeding driver. The campaign reached an estimated 2.3 crore adults in Karnataka. An evaluation of it revealed that for over 90% of the respondents, the campaign generated the intended concern about speeding and motivated them to comply with posted speed limits.

The second campaign, launched in January 2024, focused on correct helmet wearing. The third, implemented from December 2024 to January 2025, was an instructional-style mass media campaign explaining the science of a crash. It focused on how even a slight difference in speed can decide the chance of a crash and its severity. The Karnataka police conducted targeted enforcement drives on speeding while disseminating the key message at checkpoints and through social media.

While these results are positive, one campaign is not enough. The culture around road safety in India must shift from unavoidable accidents to unacceptable tragedies. Repeated messaging on the need to follow speed limits set by the government, and other risk factors, such as correct helmet use, can drive long-term behavioural change. Enforcement should continuously focus on the risk factors and strategies to improve compliance. A public narrative must be built to portray enforcement as a preventive measure rather than a punitive one. In doing so, roads can be safer for all.

Dr G. Gururaj is an epidemiologist, public health consultant, and road safety advisor, and Vaishakhi Mallik is Director, Communication, India at Vital Strategies

As imports of semiconductor chips rise, India eyes local production

In FY24, the total value of monolithic integrated circuits imports was ₹105 lakh crore, a 2,000% increase compared with FY16

DATA POINT

Kushal Varma J.V.

At the World Economic Forum in January, Minister of Electronics and Information Technology Ashwini Vaishnaw announced that India's first domestically manufactured semiconductor chip will be rolled out this year. Through domestic production, India aims to reduce its increasing import dependency.

Five manufacturing facilities are under construction for the manufacturing and assembly of semiconductor chips, backed by the Semicon India Programme. These include the Tata Semiconductor Assembly and Test facility in Morogao and the Dholaera semiconductor fabrication facility (fab) by Tata Electronics in collaboration with the Taiwan-based Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation.

The Semicon India Programme, launched in 2021, aims to develop the semiconductor and display manufacturing ecosystem. However, the actual spending on the four schemes listed under the Semicon India Programme has consistently fallen short of budgeted allocations. In FY23, expenditure was ₹13 crore, significantly lower than the revised estimate (RE) of ₹200 crore that year. In FY24, the budgeted ₹3,000 crore was revised to ₹1,503.36 crore, with only ₹681.11 crore ultimately spent. In FY25, the RE of ₹3,816 crore was nearly half of the originally budgeted ₹6,903 crore (Chart 1). However, the good news is that the RE for FY25 has doubled compared to FY24, suggesting that the government is making efforts to improve the programme's implementation.

This is important to note in light of India's increased import reliance for semiconductor chips. Data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry show that in the last 10 years, imports for semicon

iconductor chips such as monolithic integrated circuits (ICs), memories, amplifiers, and other ICs have increased significantly.

Monolithic ICs are used in the CPUs of computers and smartphones, automobiles, medical devices and industrial automation systems and are imported the most. In FY24, the total value of Monolithic IC imports was ₹105 lakh crore (Chart 2), a 2,000% increase compared with FY16.

Memories refer to memory chips, which include non-volatile memory chips (such as NAND flash used in Solid State Drives and pen drives) that retain data permanently and volatile memory chips (such as RAM) that store data temporarily. In FY24, import of memory chips increased by 4,500% compared with FY16. Imports of amplifiers, which are utilised in wireless communication and audio equipment, increased by 4,800% in FY24 from FY16.

Even as a percentage share of total imports, the share of semiconductor chips has increased over the years. Monolithic ICs constitute nearly 2.09% of India's total imports in FY25 (April-November), a considerable jump from 0.19% in FY16 (Chart 3). The share of memory chips in total imports has also increased significantly.

In the past 10 years, except FY19, China has been the major supplier of semiconductor chips to India, accounting for nearly one-third of the import value every year (Chart 4). Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan have also been major suppliers to India.

With the new facilities, India will be able to add value in the assembly, testing, and packaging, and fab segments of the global value chain for semiconductors, but it is yet to make major strides in EDA (software used for designing chips), Core IP (patents), wafers (semiconductor materials), fab tools and ATP tools (machinery), and design of chips.

Building blocks, chip by chip

The data for the charts were taken from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry

■ In the past 10 years, except FY19, China has been the major supplier of semiconductor chips to India, accounting for nearly one-third of the import value every year

Chart 1: The chart shows the Union Budget allocation for the Semicon India Programme (in ₹ crore)

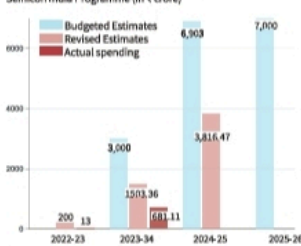
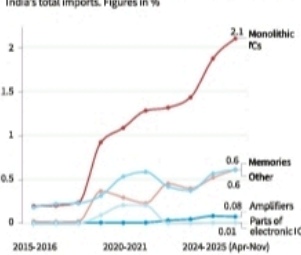


Chart 3: The chart shows the share of semiconductor chips in India's total imports. Figures in %



Kushal Varma J.V. is writing for The Hindu

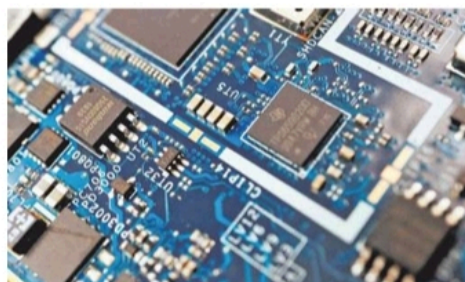


Chart 2: The chart shows the value of import of semiconductor chips in India (in ₹ lakh crore)

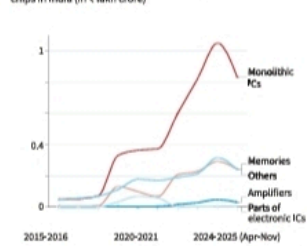
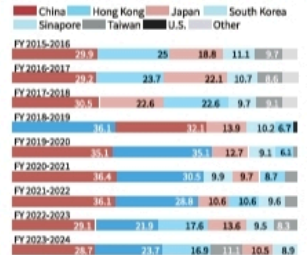


Chart 4: Year-wise share of import value of chips. Figures in %



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindustan

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 10, 1975

Some schools in Kerala not getting enough students

New Delhi, March 9: Primary schools in a few pockets in Kerala are facing a unique problem — there are fewer children for enrolment.

This phenomenon in a State with a high literacy rate was attributed by family planning authorities to a fall in the number of fresh births. The Family Planning programme in the State got started in 1955.

Officials, however, could not provide a party of visiting newsmen with up-to-date statistics of this situation. But it was stated that a situation existed in areas around Ernakulam where mass sterilisation camps were an overwhelming success.

Census figures revealed a slight reduction in the proportion of those belonging to the 6-14 age group in the State. It dropped from 42.63 per cent in 1961 to 40.25 per cent in 1971.

Despite the decline in birth rate (now standing at 31 per 1,000 population), improvement in general mortality has contributed to keeping Kerala the most densely populated State. Consequently, the growth rate and the structure of the population have not been favourably altered.

Family planning achievements in Kerala were due in a large measure to the status of women who, outnumbering the men population since 1901, enjoyed a literacy rate of 54.22 per cent as compared to the all-India figure of 18.7 per cent for females. Another healthy trend was that at marriage, the age of Kerala women over the years has crossed 20. This would help reduce the fertility rates of women in the 15-19 age group.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 10, 1925

Indians in colonies

London, March 10: In the Commons, Mr. Lansbury asked which British Dominions and Colonies prohibited or restricted the entry of Indians and whether India restricted the entry and domicile of Britishers.

Colonel Amery gave particulars, whereupon Mr. Wedgwood asked whether Kenya was only Crown Colony that restricted immigration of British Indians.

Colonel Amery replied that Kenya did not impose any restrictions.

SCIENCE

Indian team makes doubly secure ink to thwart counterfeiting

Scientists from INST Mohali and BARC Mumbai have made an ink using strontium bismuth fluoride nanoparticles. While existing fluorescent inks are visible only under ultraviolet light or infrared light but not both, the scientists said their ink fluoresces in light from both parts of the spectrum, making it more secure

Unnati Ashar

Governments and financial institutions take painstaking efforts to consolidate banknotes, cheques, and passports with a variety of security features to protect them from counterfeiting. Yet ever so often a counterfeiter emerges who can recreate these features and pass off fake documents as real ones. In response, institutions constantly develop newer and better components that are even harder to falsify.

Now, scientists from India have come up with an ink they say can make counterfeiters' jobs harder.

Security printing

Counterfeiting is a serious threat to a range of enterprises. Spurious medicines packaged to look like the real thing can delay proper treatment or even kill. Branded consumer goods these days have tamper-resistant packaging to prevent cheats from selling low-quality replicas.

The printing of items with safeguards against counterfeiting is called security printing. It implements features that humans can detect by themselves or using simple tools. Examples include optically variable ink (whose colour appears to change when viewed from different angles), watermarks, holograms, and security threads. Features like raised shapes and shifting textures are security-printed features a person can check using the sense of touch.

Security printing can also incorporate more complex features that only machines can detect. Some modern passports include a small radio-frequency identification chip that only a scanner can read. Other examples include invisible barcodes, digital watermarks, and holograms.

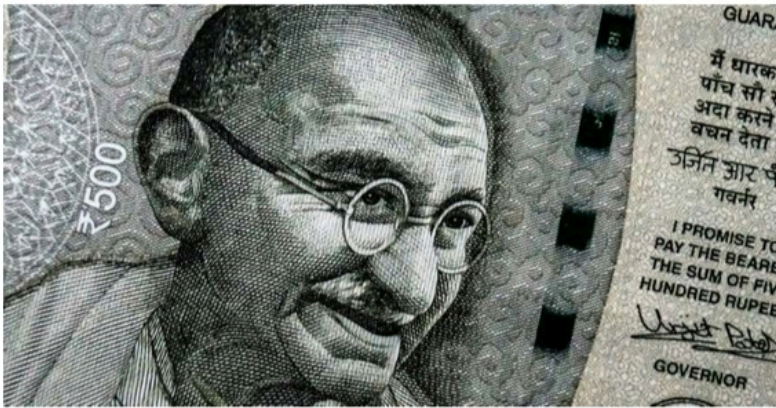
A nanoparticle solution

An important security-printed feature on Indian banknotes is a number panel in fluorescent ink located at the lower left corner. The numbers here are visible only in ultraviolet light.

Scientists from the Institute of Nano Science and Technology (INST), Mohali, and the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Mumbai, have now reported a new ink they have made using nanoparticles. Nanoparticles are objects less than 100 nm (nanometres) wide. Because of their small size, they have properties that don't appear in larger objects: they interact differently with light, respond differently to magnetic fields, and are chemically more reactive.

That the discovery of ways to manufacture semiconductor

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A close-up view of a 500-rupee note showing the security thread feature in the form of a series of polygons running across the note's breadth. SHANT MISHRA/UNSPASH

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nanoparticles with unusual properties won three scientists the 2023 Nobel Prize for chemistry speaks to nanoparticles' transformative effect on the world.

A simple recipe

In the new study, the nanoparticles were made of Sr-BiF₃ (strontium bismuth fluoride) doped with lanthanide ions. Doping is the process of deliberately adding impurities to an existing crystal to give it properties it previously didn't have.

Scientists used the coprecipitation technique to make the particles. "To do this, all the metal salts in the required quantity are dissolved in a suitable solvent. Once you get a clear solution, the required amount of precipitation agent is added while stirring," INST scientist and study coauthor Sanyasinaidu Boddu said. Then they used a centrifuge to separate the deposited material out.

"The proposed compound is a new composition and is the first time we have synthesised it by a simple coprecipitation method at just above room temperature, which is very easy to scale up," Boddu added. The team then doped the Sr-BiF₃ nanocrystals with ions of erbium and ytterbium, both lanthanide elements, and blended them with easily available polyvinyl chloride (PVC) ink. Finally, they used the screen printing technique to print some letters and numbers. Screen printing uses a stencil and a squeegee to transfer an image onto paper.

Two-light trick

When the researchers shone 365-nm wavelength ultraviolet light on these symbols, they emitted a cool blue glow.

Counterfeiting is a serious threat to a range of enterprises. Spurious medicines packaged to look like the real thing can delay proper treatment or even kill. Branded goods have special packaging to prevent cheats from selling low-quality replicas

This process is called fluorescence: when an object absorbs light of one wavelength and emits light of a longer wavelength. Under 395-nm light, the letters glowed magenta. And when the researchers directed near infrared light of 980 nm at the letters, they fluoresced with an orange-red colour.

According to the team, currently available fluorescent inks are visible only under ultraviolet light or infrared light but not both, adding that their ink stands out because it fluoresces in both the ultraviolet and the near-infrared parts of the spectrum. This, they contended in their paper, makes their ink more secure.

This low-cost ink also remains effective under varied brightness, temperature, and humidity conditions.

The study was published in *ACS Applied Materials and Interfaces* in September 2024.

Towards practical use

Bipin Kumar Gupta, senior principal scientist and professor at the CSIR National Physical Laboratory in New Delhi, who wasn't involved in the study, said the paper didn't report the quantum yield of the system. Quantum yield specifies how well the system converts

incident light into fluorescence.

"Quantum yield is crucial for applications such as light emitting diodes and display devices. However, a very high quantum yield is not necessary for security applications. ... From our report, it is very clear that the material is showing very good brightness under different excitation wavelengths, and that is sufficient for practical applications," Boddu said.

Gupta received an Indian patent for a bi-luminescent security ink on January 30, 2025, after a US patent for the same object in February 2022. This ink is composed of gadolinium vanadate (GdVO₄) doped with europium and emits red and green light under ultraviolet light of two wavelengths.

"To print security features on, say, currency notes, generally offset printing and not screen printing is used," Gupta said when asked about the applicability of the ink developed at INST.

Offset printing uses a system of three rollers. One cylinder 'offsets' the image from a metal plate to a rubber blanket. The image is then transferred to the printing surface. Offset-printed images are sharper and capable of printing smaller letters.

"I agree that screen printing is not used for currency notes. However, there are many other places where you can use screen printing ... We are [also] working towards offset printing," Boddu said. "There are a few more steps to take this material to direct practical applications, and we are working on these steps."

(Unnati Ashar is a freelance science journalist. unnati_a@yahoo.com)

THE GIST

Security printing can incorporate features that only machines can detect. Some passports include a chip that only a scanner can read. Other examples include invisible barcodes, digital watermarks, and holograms

Nanoparticles interact differently with light and magnetic fields and are chemically more reactive. The discovery of ways to manufacture semiconductor nanoparticles won three scientists the 2023 Nobel Prize for chemistry

Researchers say, 'The proposed compound is a new composition and is the first time we have synthesised it by a simple coprecipitation method at just above room temperature, which is very easy to scale up'

BIG SHOT



A general view shows erosion on Miami Beach in Queensland, Australia, after the sand was washed away by Storm Alfred on March 9. After days of hovering off the coast as a category 2 tropical cyclone generating heavy weather across the region, Alfred weakened into a tropical depression before making landfall in the evening of March 8. AFP

WHAT IS IT?

Preprints: papers but by name

Vasudevan Mukunth

A preprint paper is a scientific paper made available to read before it has been sent for consideration by a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

Once a group of scientists finishes conducting a study and has collected its findings, it writes up the study's methods and conclusions in a paper and publishes it in a journal. If the journal is peer-reviewed, the journal's editor will share the manuscript with a few independent scientists working in the same field. If their comments are encouraging, the editor accepts the paper for publishing.

A preprint is a paper scientists have written up and uploaded to a preprint repository; if the repository is on the internet, anyone on the web can read it. After uploading a paper as a preprint, the authors may or may not send it to a journal as well.

The quality of science in preprints varies depending on the field and the repository. arXiv (pronounced 'archive') is the world's largest and oldest repository, hosting preprints on mathematics, physics, astronomy, engineering, etc. Since it was launched in 1991,



Today, preprints are popular among open-access advocates. ANANI DEL OLMO/UNSPASH

other repositories like bioRxiv, chemRxiv, medRxiv, PsyArXiv, and SSRN Electronic Journal have also come up.

Today, preprints are popular among open-access advocates because they are free to read whereas many journals often charge readers a hefty fee to read papers. Critics have also pointed out that peer review — which remains the main difference between preprints and published papers — fails to catch research that has been deliberately faked.

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THE IDEAS PAGE

The challenge of change

Amid delayed elections and economic churn, promise of a 'new liberation', following overthrow of Sheikh Hasina government, seems to be fizzling out in Bangladesh



PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTY

THE IDIOM FROM Greek mythology — between Scylla and Charybdis — best represents Bangladesh's current political landscape, as the country continues to grapple with lawlessness, violence, and a tanking economy. Mobs seem to feel empowered and continue to flout the law. Banned Islamist organisations like Hizb ut Tahrir (HuT) are openly demonstrating on the streets, joined by other radical Islamists, in defiance of the security authorities. A student leader of the agitation and an adviser to Mohammad Yunus, who heads the interim government (IG), is known to be a member of the HuT. This adviser had hit the peak of nationalist rhetoric when he tweeted about annexing parts of West Bengal and other states in India's northeast. Meanwhile, the student leaders have launched a new political party, hoping to take advantage of the fluid political situation. One of the leaders of the students' agitation resigned from the IG to become the convener of the new party named Jatiyo Nagorik Party (National Citizens Party or NCP). Their declared mission is to adopt a new constitution and build a firewall against "constitutional autocracy." Their promise to reshape the political framework of governance and build a new Bangladesh is yet another spike in political rhetoric. Yunus has reportedly played a role in promoting this party. History is witness to such parties born out of turmoil failing to make the grade.

Yunus lacks popular support. He has no experience in leading a national government but is known to have nurtured political ambitions after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. In 2007, under the army-backed caretaker government, he floated a political party, "Nagorik Shakti," hoping to induct honest politicians and reform Bangladesh's political culture. The party wound up after it failed to receive much support. As India's High Commissioner from 2007-2010, I had to engage with the army-backed caretaker government. I met Yunus a few times and quizzed him about his political party. He was convinced that Bangladesh needed a new, honest political culture, which the "corrupt" mainstream parties were incapable of providing.

As the head of the IG, Yunus has failed to curb violence. In fact, he has been criticised for "justifying" the violence as legitimate and for rationalising violence against minorities as "political" and not "communal." His detractors also blame him for giving a free hand to Islamists to capture institutions and ousting appointees of the Hasina government. The economic situation has increased the frustration among the people, who are struggling with rising living costs. Hundreds of factories have been closed because of the violence, investment has dried up, credit volume has declined, and employment has shrunk. The promised dividend of the so-called "revolution" and a "new liberation," touted by the Yunus-led IG, has fizzled out. The people's patience is running out.

In an unprecedented public statement, the army chief warned that infighting and violence would lead to a civil war. Join FREE WhatsApp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VR6GQK16d0d0F>



C R Sasikumar

Yunus had to stop, as it posed a threat to the country's sovereignty. His remarks came after the demolition of Mujib's house, a historic landmark in Dhaka. The IG failed to stop the bulldozer, and Yunus again seemed to justify the anger that led to this outrageous act. The army chief also ominously said that later no one should say that he did not warn them. He has supported the holding of early elections, which directly challenges the desire of the student leaders who want to retain power for an extended period of time to consolidate their position and chalk out a plan for their participation in the elections. The student leaders have pegged their position on the argument that reforms in the electoral system and governance will require time. The army is worried about its image and the perception that it has become ineffective at a time when the country is facing several challenges. A variety of domestic and international pressures have had their impact, and Yunus has announced that elections will be held between December 2025 and March 2026, 17-20 months after Hasina's downfall. Yet, there is no definitive roadmap with dates. Procrastination seems to be the preferred policy option.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, a close friend of Yunus, has made public his concern about the turmoil in Bangladesh. His family's origins are in East Bengal, and he maintains a soft corner for Bangladesh. Sen believes that Yunus is trying his best but has warned against any action to ban the Awami League (AL). The student leaders had wanted to ban the AL, blaming it for all the ills that had struck Bangladesh. The real purpose, however, was to remove the oldest and strongest political party from electoral politics to ease their path to power. The opposition to such a policy from important domestic institutions and political parties ensured that it did not fructify. Rhetoric has failed to overcome reality. It is clear that neither the Awami League nor the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) will enter into any coalition arrangement with the NCP. The BNP and several political parties have come out strongly

Rhetoric has failed to overcome reality. It is clear that neither the Awami League nor the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) will enter into any coalition arrangement with the NCP. The BNP and several political parties have come out strongly in support of an early election, which has challenged the Yunus regime's vacillation.

in support of an early election, which has challenged the Yunus regime's vacillation. In contrast, the Jela and Hefazat-e-Islam have clearly indicated their reluctance toward early elections and have advocated local elections to be held first. Ideologically, the radical outfits are focused on their agenda to make Bangladesh a Sharia-compliant Islamic state.

For India, Bangladesh is a major issue for its neighbourhood policy. Bilateral ties have gone downhill because of unwarranted rhetoric from the IG, catalysed by India's support of the Hasina government. Hatred and rhetoric cannot replace the reality of geopolitics and geoeconomics. The Yunus-led regime has climbed down from the rhetorical height to a more realistic level. It is not clear if Donald Trump's assumption of office in the US has changed America's equation with Bangladesh.

There is rising anger in Bangladesh over India cutting the number of visas issued to Bangladeshis. This anger is being directed at the IG. Thousands of Bangladeshis travel to India for medical treatment and tourism. Financial pressure is mounting regarding the upkeep of over a million Rohingya refugees, as the UN has halved its food aid to the Rohingyas. While both Yunus and the foreign adviser have voiced support for good relations with India, they have also upgraded ties with Pakistan. Islamists in Bangladesh have yearned to embrace their "long-lost" brother Pakistan. China has been wily, wooing the IG and the Jela, indicating its perception of which way the political wind is blowing and its policy of containing India. These ongoing challenges for India's neighbourhood policy are not new but have implications for India's security. Bangladesh should be careful about crossing red lines.

The writer is a former Indian diplomat who served as Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs. He has served as the Deputy High Commissioner and later as High Commissioner to Bangladesh.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Mr Trump can only do so much to bend reality. Administration failures, U-turns and the costs of policies such as tariffs will probably temper voters' enthusiasm."

— THE GUARDIAN

Economy in search of roadmap

With structural transformation stalling, private investment cycle yet to take off and upward mobility restricted, Modi 3.0 has its work cut out



ISHAN BAKSHI

BOTH MODI 1.0 and Modi 2.0 had clear strategies to deal with the economic challenges of the time. Whether they succeeded in resolving the issues facing the country is another matter now. The question, almost one year into this government's third term, is: What is Modi 3.0's economic strategy?

Modi 1.0 began by placing paramount importance on ensuring macroeconomic stability. The lessons from UPA's mismanagement of the economy had been internalised. During the final years of UPA's second term, the economy had lost momentum while inflation soared. The Centre's fiscal health had also deteriorated sharply as it stepped up its support to the economy during the global financial crisis, and thereafter. And while the deficit did decline later, it remained elevated. Alongside, as savings fell, without a commensurate fall in investments, the current account deficit also widened significantly, raising concerns over financing. There was also the worry that banks were masking the true extent of the bad loans in the system. Investor sentiment was also hit by the issue of retrospective taxation. And the rupee came under pressure during the infamous taper tantrum when India, along with Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa and Turkey, was dubbed as one of the fragile five.

Modi 1.0 began by addressing these issues. In the Union Budget 2014-15, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley committed to bringing in a policy framework that would result in "higher growth, lower inflation, sustained level of external sector balance". The budget unveiled a roadmap to lower the deficit to 3 per cent of GDP by 2016-17. It spoke of ushering in a "modern monetary policy framework" which resulted in putting in place an inflation targeting framework. It also sought to attract investor concerns, committing to "provide a stable and predictable taxation regime". During this term, the government ushered in reforms such as the IBC and GST. It even tried to push through the contentious land acquisition bill. Alongside, the central bank took steps to clean up bank balance sheets.

Modi 2.0 began with the realisation that, despite the steps it had taken in its first term, growth wasn't picking up. That private investments continued to languish. Hoping to spur investments, in September 2019, the government cut the corporate tax to 22 per cent, and lowered the tax for new firms making fresh investments to 15 per cent. In the months thereafter, it also launched the production linked incentive scheme to further incentivise firms to invest in a range of sectors. And alongside, the government also increased its capital expenditure quite sharply in this term, hoping that it would crowd in private sector investments.

Modi 2.0 also had the difficult task of managing the economic fallout of the pandemic. It launched a host of measures to support the economy, including emergency steps such as the provision of free food, cash transfers and credit for small and medium-sized firms. As a result, its debt/deficits rose sharply, and despite consolidation in recent years, remain well above the levels prescribed by the Finance Commission.

But, despite the steps taken during both Modi 1.0 and Modi 2.0, the continuing weakness in the economy was apparent. The pain points were clear. One, the structural transformation of the economy had stalled. Rather than exiting agriculture, more workers were entering the sector. Two, the private investment cycle had not taken off despite the use of all fiscal levers. Three, goods exports had stalled, while services exports held steady. This had implications for employment. Four, the jobs crisis, especially among the less skilled, was evident. Millions more were now self-employed. Fifth, real wages for large sections of the labour force had barely registered a rise. This impacted household consumption. Sixth, the combination of limited job creation and subdued wages meant that upward mobility was further restricted.

Modi 3.0 took charge against this backdrop. But, two budgets later, there is still no clear articulation of a strategy to address the issues plaguing the economy. Nor is there a clear roadmap of how the country will transition to upper middle income status and then to the high income category over the next two decades. There is little mention of the PLI scheme and considerable scepticism on the economic growth which the income tax cuts can boost economic activity.

Based on the pronouncements so far, there appear to be two broad areas that could be the focus of Modi 3.0. One is trade where the government is hoping to stitch up agreements with the US, EU and the UK. However, as these talks have been going on for some time, the question is whether the agreements can be finally clinched. Another area could be deregulation. The Economic Survey had talked about it in great detail. The budget followed that up by proposing to set up a high-level committee for regulatory reforms to enhance ease of doing business.

Deregulation is, however, not just an India-specific theme. In the US, Donald Trump has established the Department of Government Efficiency or DOGE to streamline government, with Elon Musk vowing to slash federal regulations. Employees across agencies have already been fired. In the EU, the Draghi report on competitiveness talks in detail about the regulatory burden facing companies, especially smaller firms, and how to reduce it. In Argentina, Javier Milei has taken a chainsaw to the government, signed a decree to reduce the number of ministries from 19 to nine. As per the Cato Institute, between December 2023 and December 7, 2024, there have been 672 regulatory reforms in the country. In Vietnam, the parliament recently approved a plan for radically rehauling the government. As per reports, five ministries are being "abolished", the bureaucracy is being "radically streamlined" and "thousands of jobs" are being cut as the government pursues "ambitious growth targets". In comparison, in India, the high-level committee is expected to make recommendations "within a year."

Ishan.bakshi@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A SPECTRE, A FEAR

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Widen the frame' (IE, March 7). It appears Tamil Nadu CM Stalin has developed an unbecoming penchant for opposing all that the BJP-led NDA government does in the exercise of its constitutional mandate. First, he opposed the new NEP's three-language formula on the spurious ground that it was a façade to impose Hindi in the South. He has now changed track and continues to fear salvas against the government's move for delimitation, again on the flimsy ground that it would put sparsely populated southern states like Tamil Nadu at a disadvantage in terms of the number of seats in Parliament. He seeks a freeze on delimitation for another 30 years. The Lok Sabha seats were already frozen earlier by the 84th Amendment until the year 2026, and it is now time to conduct a fresh Census to recalibrate parliamentary and assembly seats in accordance with the law. This is an unwarranted interference by a state in the exclusive prerogative of the Union government, disguised as an onslaught on federalism, and should be rejected.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Widen the frame' (IE, March 7). The key question is: Why is the proposed delimitation exercise post-2026 becoming so contentious compared to the 1952, 1962, and 1972 delimitations? If the number of MPs is based on population,

the relative imbalance between states will remain even after 30 years. Notwithstanding southern CMs advising people to have more children, studies have shown that low TFR cannot be reversed. One can't blame Tamil Nadu CM Stalin if he is capitalising on delimitation for next year's assembly election. The BJP's assertion of dominance through its language policies, the use of central agencies, and the appointment of Governors who hold up important Bills even when the BJP is heading a coalition government at the Centre — has led to growing concerns in the South about what could happen in case of a supermajority after delimitation.

L R Murmu, New Delhi

PROMISES TO KEEP

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Movement to party' (IE, March 7). Students who started an uprising to oust then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have now formed the Jatiyo Nagorik Party, promising to bring political reforms. Neither Khaleda Zia's BNP nor Sheikh Hasina's Awami League governed in fair and just manner. No alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami is planned. The party has a tough road ahead to establish a firm footing. Their mission to reshape the polity may be achievable if they work towards unity, justice, and progressive, inclusive politics for the prosperity of the people of Bangladesh.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi



DEVAPRIYA ROY

Black letters, green birds

What it means to be a writer — and a mother

IN 2022, WHEN I still had the bandwidth to run a fortnightly column, I remembered an acerbic piece on International Women's Day: "Writers and Women Writers". I was tired of being a woman-writer. I just wanted to be a writer, please and thank you. Also, could the listfests do something about the women-writing panels they stuffed with brilliant women and subsequently consigned to basements or ill-advised lawns?

A couple of weeks later, I received an email from a reader. She was a 70-year-old retired ophthalmologist from Vellore, and even though to send me her copy of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. With charming hesitancy, she asked for my postal address, assuring me that this was not a scam.

We owned two copies of the book. But there was no way I was going to say no to this, this talisman that had appeared unbidden. Especially because, most appropriately, the sender's name was Mary — Mary Verghese. Through her, I felt a renewed connection to Mary Beton-Mary Seton-Mary Carmichael, the Marys who walk in and out of A Room of One's Own, whose radiant prose and logic I had learnt to love, first as a literature student, then an apprentice-writer, and, finally, a teacher of critical thinking. Indeed, so powerful was its impact on my life, that, even today, when I walk across the grass on campuses, I feel a mix of guilt (is there a Beadle

who will come and tell me I am not allowed to?) and thrill (I can raise, in minutes, an army of feminists to stare him down).

A couple of weeks ago, my editor asked if I would write a piece around women's day for her.

I retrieved the slim, elegant Mary had sent me, covered carefully in cellophane, from the bookshelf. "It is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction," I fingered the familiar words on the page, as though surprised they had remained unchanged, even though my own circumstances had changed. I said yes to my editor.

I think of myself as a writer even though I haven't written much in the last two years. Not a shred of fiction; a smattering of personal essays — though I doubt that two short essays and one semi-long essay can constitute a "smattering"; two book reviews; a couple of academic writings; and in my translation, I am so shockingly behind that the characters appear in my dream, ghosts trapped between their two worlds.

I have a toddler in the house. And if the distancing quality of the previous statement is to make a point, you must know that it falls on both counts. The toddler is mine. And its QED only seems to suggest a banal truism: Women with small children can't write.

But every cell in my body opposes that

thought. There must be writers with small children who are so disciplined that they write. There are certainly women with small children who do so many other difficult jobs — they cook and run labs, analyse data and write legal briefs, come up with copy for soap and deliver soap, they swab floors, they report from war-torn areas, they act. My mother had only six weeks of maternity leave and had gone back to her college, to teach young men engineering, before her scar had healed.

There is, for me, some comfort in the collective gains of feminism. And so, counter-intuitively, I feel much better if the fault is my own: I have a toddler and I can't write.

My husband sent up my laptop. Privileges cushion my material life and — at least theoretically — safeguard my work. Other bodies have cushioned Masha, other arms have cradled her — when I have sat up sending feedback on my students' essays. Apparently, you need a village (I am grateful to the villagers; I am also, occasionally, sharply jealous).

The problem is elsewhere. To write, one needs to pursue each thought to the ends of the earth and back to the page; to lay out a line of words, and, through them, imagine many different possibilities, many different outcomes. Then delete them all, though they have left slight impressions on the page, the dust of their elision persisting, like gentle shadows, upon the words you will eventu-

ally let stand.

To be a writer, you need a great deal of stamina. Across the locked door, I hear a little giggle. I hear the squeak of small shoes. The squeals now become a symphony, she begins to race, will she fall?

Everyone falls, I expect my husband to say calmly. He is already out of the door.

Instead of writing in the morning as Woolf would have, when one's energy is yet un-depleted, when it is possible that much can yet be made of the day, I potter around her. While the mountain of unfinished tasks increases an inch, I find great delight in a new word she has learnt — cinnamon.

If you think the location of the room is the problem, I have tried to put 60 km and a two-hour commute — at peak-traffic between us, when I hide in my college library, to write. But halfway through the pursuit of an elusive idea, I still hear the giggle, the squeak, the cry.

I unlatch the door of the room in my head and step out. Some days, like today, I am able to step back in.

I pick out another line of words. The black letters become green birds and fly to her through the locked door, while I stay at my desk.

Roy is a Delhi-based author and assistant professor at Ashoka University

**EXPERT
EXPLAINS**

BASHIR ALI ARRAS

Almost a decade ago, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Germany, the European Union, and Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, which lifted Western sanctions on Iran in return for Tehran severely limiting the scope of its nuclear program.

Trump also justified his decision based on the deal's alleged failure to curtail Iran's ballistic missile program, and the lack of checks on Iran's regional proxies — two aspects that were central to Saudi and Israeli opposition to the JCPOA. But the withdrawal met with international backlash. The IAEA said that Iran was complying with JCPOA-related restrictions and UNSC Resolution 2231, and the European countries of the

In 2021, the Joe Biden administration began indirect negotiations with Iran in Vienna. But despite coming "closer than ever" in 2022, according to Tehran's then top nuclear negotiator, Ali Bagheri, a decisive outcome

Indeed, Iran's possible closeness to nuclear weaponisation necessitated the regional lobbying for de-escalation during the two months after the Iranian nuclear embargo.

But despite Iran's economic difficulties and recent Israeli military successes — including the killings of Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah and Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas — Tehran's ability to wield influence through its proxies remains significant. The Islamic

Bashir Ali Abbas is a Senior Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi.

threatened or coerced "would be entitled to move the courts and seek a refund of tax deposited by them. The department would also take appropriate action against the officers in such cases." The apex court also directed the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs to form guidelines to ensure that no taxpayers are threatened with arrest.

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM of the arrestee, and the right of an arrestee to have an advocate present in the vicinity of the Customs Act, for instance, classifies serious offences, such as evading customs

The three requirements
The requirements under Section 19 of

REASONS TO BELIEVE: The SC in *Kirpal* held the officer must record in writing powers of arrest for CGST and Customs Act officials as sought by the petitioners.

the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs to form guidelines to ensure that no taxpayers are threatened with arrest.

LAW

REASONS TO BELIEVE: The SC in *Jirwal* held the officer must record in writ-

The court refused to strike down the

CACHE



GETTY IMAGES

How scammers use Gen AI, and what you can do to protect yourself

With AI-generated videos, attackers can orchestrate intricate scenarios or even circumvent system tests designed to verify the user's humanity. It is best to be cautious of unexpected requests for money, even from your loved ones

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far: In December 2024, the U.S. FBI issued a warning, stating that criminals are increasingly exploiting generative artificial intelligence (AI) to commit fraud on a larger scale, making their schemes more convincing. Enterprising criminals exploit generative AI-powered text, images, videos, and audio to trap victims who lack technological proficiency or time and are too exhausted to thoroughly assess potentially hazardous content.

How is generative AI used to carry out financial fraud?

Today, a variety of unregulated or even illegal generative AI tools are available on the web. These tools enable the creation of scams from start to finish, resulting in a web of multimedia tricks that separates victims from their money. Attackers can use text generators alone to craft grammatically correct messages that threaten or deceive victims in their native languages. They can also generate malicious code to create websites that compromise victims' systems.

Criminals can exploit AI images to create convincing deepfakes of victims, fooling their loved ones. They can also fabricate false photos of crucial documents, produce sexually explicit images for extortion, establish fake social media or dating app profiles, and even

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portray celebrities endorsing services and scams they would never support in real life, as per the FBI's recent release. Malicious users can exploit the voice cloning technology in generative AI audio tools to create fake recordings of real people in distress. These recordings can be sent as voice messages or even as fake yet complex telephone calls to force their contacts into transferring money.

When AI-generated videos enter the scene, attackers can orchestrate intricate scenarios or even circumvent system tests designed to verify the user's humanity. For instance, by capturing just a few seconds of video from your social media account, an attacker could create a convincing deepfake video call where you appear to have been involved in an accident and are desperately seeking financial assistance.

What are some warning signs of AI-generated financial fraud?

It is best to be cautious of unexpected requests for money, even from your loved ones. Additionally, be wary of surprise requests to carry out various financial activities, including redeeming gift cards, claiming prize money, paying fines, repaying loans, paying customs officials, or paying bail. Be extra cautious when receiving texts or media files from unfamiliar users. Unless you have a secure device or environment, refrain from opening such files.

When video scams, like the prevalent

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'digital arrest' scheme, target a victim, the caller will likely resort to aggressive or intimidating tactics to force compliance. They might create a sense of urgency, claiming that time is running out and/or that the victim needs to act urgently. Additionally, they might emphasise the importance of keeping the matter a secret from others. It is crucial to avoid sharing any financial information or transferring money through unsecured channels to prevent yourself from falling for such scams. Instead of believing a caller who shows you their uniform and police ID (since this could be a deepfake), reach out directly to the police for guidance. Cease all communication and contact the person involved directly.

How can users keep themselves safe from AI-enabled crime?

One way to safeguard yourself and your family from AI-generated financial fraud is by using a family password. This is a unique word known only to you and your immediate family members. You can use it to verify the identity of others whenever you want. For instance, if you receive a phone call from your child or parent requesting a large sum of money, ask them for the family password to ensure that their voice hasn't been cloned by a stranger. Agree on a strong and difficult-to-guess password. Regularly updating your password is also recommended. If your family has minors or vulnerable elders, ensure that their

devices are safeguarded. Lock and set their social media accounts to 'private' mode to prevent the misuse of their personal photos and audio. Educate your children about online safety and help them distinguish between genuine and AI-generated content.

When using dating apps, users should report any matches who use AI-generated media. Never share personal financial information with romantic matches, and never agree to transfer money, invest in cryptocurrency, pay customs charges for parcels, or accept gift cards. Until you completely trust the person and have met them in person, stay on the app's messaging platform and avoid switching to other apps like WhatsApp or email.

When donating to charities, ensure that the featured images of different causes and team members are genuine. Give to groups or individuals you trust deeply, those whom you know personally, or those with high transparency levels. Additionally, you can use Gen AI image detectors to review photos.

Finally, do not implicitly trust calls from users whose profile pictures include police or military-related accessories, as these can be easily generated using AI. Real police officers never arrest or make demands of you through video calls. If you encounter such a call, report it and submit the evidence to a genuine police station. Alternatively, you can report malicious content generated by AI through the national cyber-crime portal.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

The funds are earmarked for the school tour

I hope the new hires are not a bunch of sad-sacks like the previous time

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of 'earmark'? (J. Tara, Mumbai)

In India, this is a word that is frequently heard on television news channels when experts are invited to talk about the budget that the Finance Minister is likely to present. When the Government earmarks a certain amount of money for a particular project – for example, it could be for road widening or for cancer research – it sets aside funds to achieve its objective. This amount it puts aside is to be used only for the specified project, and not for anything else. Earmarking lets people know how the funds will be used. With the passage of time, the word has begun to be used in contexts other than finance – in everyday contexts, 'earmark' is used to mean 'characteristic' or 'distinguishing mark'.

Most people were sad to note that only two percent of the budget had been earmarked for education.

Several hundred crores have been earmarked for cancer research. The hearing Minister said that the newly launched car had all the earmarks of a classic.

The word 'earmark' is a combination of two words – 'ear' and 'mark', and when it began to be used in the English language, it had nothing to do with finance; believe it or not, it had more to do with farming. In the past, in order to identify his livestock – sheep, cattle, pigs, etc. – a farmer would cut or mark the ear of every animal he owned. Every farmer used a different mark, and this helped him avoid unnecessary arguments with his neighbours.

Why are some people called 'sad sacks'? (T.V. Harish, Kochi)

First of all, not all dictionaries list this word. The ones that do, spell the word differently – some spell it as one word (sadsack), some as two (sad sack), while others hyphenate it (sad-sack). One thing that all dictionaries agree on, however, is that it is a word that is always used in informal contexts to refer to a clumsy individual – usually, a man. When you refer to someone as a sad sack, what you are suggesting is that the person is boring and is incapable of doing anything well. Watching the blundering fool in action, you feel pity for him because you realise that he is unlikely to succeed in life. The word can be used both as a noun and an adjective.

I was shocked to note that the new appointees were nothing more than a bunch of sad sacks.

Given our talent, don't expect anything great. It's likely to be a sad-sack performance. upendrankye@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on movements which countered the rise of fascism in different parts of the world

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

What is the name of the movement (1936-1939) that anticipated many of the characteristics of World War II, including the cross-ideological opposition to fascism as a state ideology. In the former, however, the anti-fascist forces lost, paving the way for a controversial 36-year dictatorship. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 2

What is the two-word label given to the ideology that draws from both Stalinism and fascism? The label, whose use is controversial, originated when social democrats, liberals, and other similar political groups used it to describe the regressive aspects of Stalinism.

QUESTION 3

While the X movement shares its name with that of the organisation founded

during the Weimar republic, it has different roots – including, from the late 1880s, the practice of squatting in West Germany. Name X.

QUESTION 4

A particular miners' strike in March 1921, in the Istrian peninsula is often regarded as the world's first anti-fascist uprising. On March 7, workers in many mines in the area assumed control of their management and proclaimed the area to be a new republic. What was this republic called? It existed for one month.

QUESTION 5

In 1945, four countries established a joint tribunal that conducted the event known popularly as the Nuremberg Trials. It lasted from November 1945 to October 1946, and among other things helped delegitimise fascism as a 'criminal ideology'. Fill in the blanks.



Visual question:

This is the seal of the U.S. Senate. Name the symbol at the bottom depicting a pair of bound bundles of wood with an axe passing through and emerging from the top. The word 'fascism' came from this symbol's name because of its frequent use by Mussolini.

Questions and Answers to the March 7 edition of the daily quiz: 1. This event, was started by a massive women-led protest on March 8, 1917, in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg), Russia. Ans: February Revolution

2. This Indian social reformer and educationist co-founded the first school for girls in Pune along. Ans: Savitribai Phule

3. This West Asian country saw tens of thousands of women protest against newly imposed compulsory veiling laws. Ans: Iran

4. This pioneering scientist became the first woman to win a Nobel Prize. Ans: Marie Curie-Skłodowska

5. This person, a Kenyan environmentalist and women's rights activist, became the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Ans: Wangari Maathai

Visual: This Chinese writer and feminist was a leading figure in 20th-century Chinese literature. However, her activism later led to persecution during this Chinese political event. Ans: Ding Ling, Cultural Revolution

Early Birds: Siddhartha Viswanathan| Akshay Kumar Khanna| Debarati Kar| Adya Upasana Routray| Rhythm Jain

Word of the day

Insouciant:

marked by blithe unconcern

Synonyms: casual, nonchalant

Usage: It is an utterly insouciant financial policy.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/insouciantpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ɪnsʊˈsiːənt/

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The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

INDIA & 'AMERICA FIRST'

Delhi is better prepared than many to engage with Trump's America, based on give and take

IN HIS REMARKS in London last week, External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyan Jaishankar suggested that US President Donald Trump's "America First" policy is something Delhi could work with. At the root of Jaishankar's optimism is the fact that under Trump, America focuses on self-interest rather than the pursuit of global leadership. Although India's post-independence elites fully shared the values of liberal internationalism, they were never comfortable with Washington's claim to be its self-appointed champion. Representing a newly sovereign state with a strong commitment to choose its own path, the Indian elites rejected the idea of the US acting as the judge of other nations, assessing their democratic credentials, and punishing them for deviating from the presumed standards of liberal internationalism. If the Indian left was traditionally the most vocal in denouncing American meddling in the affairs of other nations, today it is the right that makes that case most loudly. Delhi, which was unsettled by the Biden Administration's support to anti-Modi groups in India and its support for ousted Sheikh Hasina from power in Dhaka, is pleased that Trump is not looking to use American power to promote internal change in other societies.

India also welcomes Trump's departure from the idea of a unipolar world dominated by the US to a recognition that today there are many consequential powers, constituting the so-called "multipolar world" that Delhi has long preferred. Washington's allies in Europe and Asia that have long relied on the US for their security are shocked by Trump's demand that either they contribute more to collective defence or forego American protection. India's strategic partnership with the US, in contrast, is not one-sided but based on shared interests. As a non-ally with independent foreign policy, Delhi is much better prepared to engage with America First, based on give and take.

For India, a transactional engagement with America comes amid Trump's plans to re-arrange the global order. What Trump and his team have in mind is nothing short of restructuring modern capitalism that emerged out of the 1929 global economic crisis and remaking the post-war international system led by the US. There is a strategic premium on getting this right for major countries like India. Delhi has begun the engagement with Trump on a sensible note with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the White House last month. At the core of the new understandings between Modi and Trump is the agreement to negotiate a free trade treaty. But negotiations with the Trump Administration are not pretty. Delhi will have to hold its nerve and focus on securing its interests and avoid being distracted by comments at the highest level in Washington. The prickly egotism of the Indian political class, the temptation to sacrifice national interests in the name of ideology, and a tendency to posture rather than seek concrete outcomes in external negotiations, are hurdles that will need to be sidestepped. The Modi government's capacity to turn the Trump challenge into an opportunity to revitalise India's trade policy — a long overdue task — will significantly improve if it takes the Indian public into confidence on the trade negotiations with the US and makes the political case for a new relationship with America.

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GAINING WIDER CURRENCY

A strategic reserve signals a shift in how US views cryptocurrencies, calls for a reassessment by others

IN 2019, DONALD TRUMP, wrote on a social media platform that he was "not a fan of bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies, which are not money, and whose value is highly volatile and based on thin air." However, thereafter, Trump has reversed his position. In 2024, he promised to appoint crypto-friendly regulators and make the US the "crypto capital of the planet". Days ahead of his inauguration, he launched a meme coin called Trump. Last week, he went a step further. The president signed an executive order to establish a Strategic Bitcoin Reserve and a US Digital Asset Stockpile. And on Friday, the White House hosted a crypto summit.

As per the executive order, the reserve will be capitalised with bitcoin possessed by the Treasury department, "forfeited as part of criminal or civil asset forfeiture proceedings". Other government agencies will also "evaluate their legal authority" to shift bitcoin to the strategic reserve. There has, however, not been a complete audit of the US government's bitcoin holdings which are spread across various agencies. As per David Sacks, the White House AI and cryptocurrency czar, the US government owns about 200,000 bitcoin. The executive order raises several questions. It says that the bitcoin deposited will not be sold. So what purpose will it serve? Strategic reserves are created by countries — for instance, the US has a petroleum reserve while Canada has one for maple syrup — so as to be able to intervene during times of need, in order to smoothen out market imbalances. The executive order also states that the government will not acquire additional assets for the stockpile, and that any further additions to the reserve will be budget neutral. This implies that as of now there will be a new large buyer in the market. However, if that changes, the US government could become a major player with the ability to influence prices. But, if not, will future additions be limited to the bitcoin that are forfeited? And what about the four other coins that Trump mentioned would be included in the stockpile?

A US strategic reserve does, however, signal a major change in how Washington views cryptocurrencies. And with more countries ushering in regulatory frameworks, given the borderless nature of such assets, it will be difficult to have a regulatory stance that is an outlier. A more carefully considered approach is thus required. In this regard, recent reports that the Indian government is reexamining its discussion paper on cryptocurrencies are welcome. Navigating this increasingly complex and rapidly growing area requires regulatory clarity and coherence and the institutional mechanisms that safeguard the interests of investors and ensure the integrity of markets.

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FREEZE FRAME

EP UNNY



Rough weather, unsteady ship

In Maharashtra, scandals and dismal state finances will test Mahayuti government's navigation skills



GIRISH KUBER

HEAVY SHIPS DON'T rock much. The analogy, if applied to Maharashtra's three-party Mahayuti government, doesn't quite work. Almost four months since coming to power, the strongest-ever ruling combine in the state — with a strength of 235 in the 288-member assembly — is anything but steady. As the Devendra Fadnis government presents its first budget today, on March 10, it is lost on no one that the challenge to the BJP-Shiv Sena-NCP alliance is not from the Opposition but from within.

The first, as-yet-unresolved, issue that hit the BJP-Shiv Sena-NCP government was regarding the constitutionally unrecognised posts of "guardian ministers". Way back in 1972, the then Maharashtra chief minister Vasantrao Naik had assigned some cabinet colleagues as point-persons for underdeveloped districts to help accelerate their growth. Subsequently, it became a practice to appoint a "guardian minister" for each district, who de facto controlled fund allocation in local development planning. Naik and a few chief ministers who followed ensured that no cabinet member was appointed as the guardian minister of his/her home district. However, like many good practices, this too was given the go-by.

Now, ministers are assigned their home districts, putting them in a far more advantageous position vis-à-vis their political rivals. This explains the no-holds-barred public spat between members of the three ruling parties, all jostling to "guard" their respective districts at the public's expense. The situation turned so ugly that Fadnis was compelled to stay some of the appointments. But the damage had been done. Not only did the issue expose cracks in the ruling combine, it also highlighted the fragile unity amongst the three parties running the state. It also painted the sulking Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, who could

The ramifications go beyond politics, as these issues along with regular rumblings, seem to have impacted the state government's efficacy, with Fadnis being forced to intervene in altercations between alliance partners. With public displays of incompatibility, the Maharashtra government looks far from being united in governance and, as a result, is yet to get down to business. How bad is the situation? One can only guess from Fadnis's recent statement, made to assure investors, that "political extortions" won't have any place in his government.

barely hide his displeasure, in poor light.

Then came the Dhananjay Munde episode that badly dented the government's image. After a three-month drama, he finally resigned from the cabinet last week. Munde, a former BJP leader and nephew of late BJP veteran Gopinath Munde, had played a crucial role in bringing Ajit Pawar, the powerful nephew of Sharad Pawar, closer to the BJP. Until last week, he was considered indispensable to Ajit and his NCP. So when a close aide of Munde from Marathwada was implicated in the murder of sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh, the BJP leadership initially tried to look the other way. However, the local BJP MLA's relentless attacks and media exposes on Munde Jr finally compelled Fadnis to seek his resignation. There is now a clamour for the resignation of another minister, Manikrao Kokate — also belonging to the Ajit Pawar-led NCP — following his indictment by a local court in a cheating case. With one minister forced to quit and another likely on his way out, the situation has, expectedly, rejuvenated the Opposition.

The ramifications go beyond politics, as these issues along with regular rumblings, seem to have impacted the state government's efficacy, with Fadnis being forced to intervene in altercations between alliance partners. With public displays of incompatibility, the Maharashtra government looks far from being united in governance and, as a result, is yet to get down to business. How bad is the situation? One can only guess from Fadnis's recent statement, made to assure investors that "political extortions" won't have any place in his government.

For, Fadnis knows how precarious the state finances are. Maharashtra's debt mountain is close to Rs 8 lakh crore, with a fiscal deficit of Rs 1 lakh crore. In addition, the state is staring at an outgo of Rs 46,000 crore this fiscal, thanks to the Ladli Bahin scheme announced ahead of the elections. In the last two

years, Fadnis's predecessor Shinde had gone into overdrive, announcing one populist scheme after another. Shinde's intention was to prove that he is not an accidental chief minister and that he can get the combine re-elected. Although he succeeded in his mission, the state ended up footing the bill. And despite proving his mettle, Shinde was relegated to the post of Deputy CM, sharing it with Ajit Pawar, while his former deputy Fadnis became the leader of the three-party coalition.

Fadnis's biggest challenge now is ending all financial profligacy and bringing Maharashtra back into the reckoning. With signs of an industrial sector slow-down and Mumbai's much-touted services sector looking worn out, Maharashtra is in search of the missing investment. Although Fadnis is seen making every possible effort, the Rs 15 lakh crore investment agreements he signed in Davos last December are yet to materialise on the ground.

How daunting is the task before the Maharashtra government? A comparison with Tamil Nadu (TN) can explain. Once far behind Maharashtra, TN, which is half its size, has overtaken the richest state in per capita net state domestic product. Although Maharashtra, with Rs 42.67 lakh crore GDP tops the list, its per capita GDP is Rs 2.89 lakh, whereas Tamil Nadu with Rs 31.55 lakh crore GDP has Rs 3.50 lakh per capita GDP. Simply put, a Tamilian today is relatively richer than the Marathi monog.

With the going getting increasingly tough as more and more states get competitive, Maharashtra can ill afford its business-as-usual attitude. No one knows this better than Fadnis, the man in the hot seat. His government's first budget today will test his navigation skills as well as his ability to steady the large ship he is in charge of steering.

The writer is editor, Lokstatu



D RAJA

MORE THAN A century ago, Vladimir Lenin described imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, an outcome of the latter's decay. His analysis stands the test of time when we see a crisis-ridden capitalist order, which has failed to improve lives globally, resorting to desperate measures to ensure its survival.

The consolidation of right-wing and far-right political forces globally was accompanied by blaming regulations and diverting the popular anger against neoliberal policies to immigrants and minorities. The neoliberal order, as it failed, oscillated between right and centrist positions and failed to check the growth of the far-right. Now, the situation has worsened as there are signs of a global right-wing alliance, which is aggressive in its disdain for democratic norms. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to the US and his meeting with President Donald Trump gave hints of this consolidation.

PM Modi's meeting with Trump has two kinds of outcomes for us. First, we can examine what his visit signified back home, before moving towards the implications at a global level. While the visit was marked by grand displays of bonhomie between Modi and Trump, beneath the glittering optics of joint statements and celebratory events, remain deep-seated issues that expose the exploitative nature of the current global order.

While Modi and his supporters back home have dubbed the visit a great triumph, Trump's protectionist policies continue unabated. The Trump administration is trying to impose a series of tariffs and trade restrictions against India. These measures will harm Indian exporters, particularly in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, textiles and automobile parts. Further, Trump's attempts at concentrating manufacturing in the US will be detrimental to Indian manufacturing. Despite

NEEDED: A PRO-PEOPLE POLITICS

The emerging alliance of global right-wing forces has disdain for democratic norms

these overtly aggressive trade practices, Modi has refrained from taking a strong stance or even publicly addressing the issue. This is the outcome of reducing diplomacy to handshakes and hugs.

One of the most glaring failures of Modi's visit was his complete silence on the appalling treatment of Indian deportees by US authorities. Under the Trump administration's immigration policies, hundreds of Indians — many of them skilled workers and asylum seekers — have been subjected to humiliating treatment. Reports of detainees being held in inhumane conditions, denied legal rights and deported in shackles have emerged, yet Modi chose not to raise these concerns during his meeting. By not standing up to Trump's trade war and the gross human rights violations, Modi has demonstrated a troubling willingness to appease Washington.

Trump's aggressive economic and foreign policies indicate a concerted effort to dismantle multilateral alliances like BRICS, which were conceived to stand up to US hegemony. Trump's administration is threatening this coalition through economic coercion and diplomatic manoeuvring. By forcing trade deals that isolate BRICS members, slapping sanctions on nations that challenge US economic supremacy and using tariffs as a weapon, Trump is attempting to push the world towards a unipolar order dominated by the US.

While Modi and Trump's interactions may seem like an exercise in diplomacy, they also signal the growing consolidation of global right-wing forces. It found clear expressions in the words of Italian PM Giorgia Meloni who sees a new "collaborative conservative movement" emerging globally with Trump, Argentine President Javier Milei, her-

self and PM Modi as global representatives. This alliance shares a common vision: Protectionism for capital, suppression of labour rights and a disdain for migrants and minorities. Championing the free movement of capital, these right-wing forces are aggressively restricting the mobility of labour. Trump's anti-immigration policies, coupled with Modi's silence on visa restrictions affecting Indian professionals, demonstrate a shared contempt for workers while enabling corporate profit-making.

If this right-wing coalition continues to strengthen, workers in the Global South will face shrinking job opportunities, and migrants will continue to be scapegoated. Moreover, right-wing leaders like Trump and Modi have shown little commitment to tackling climate change. Trump's withdrawal from international climate agreements and Modi's focus on pro-corporate environmental policies indicate that the interests of big business will always take precedence over sustainable development.

The world must look to a pro-people alternative that challenges exploitative capitalism and US-led imperialism. Countries in the Global South must strengthen regional cooperation, invest in worker-centric policies and reject neoliberal frameworks that serve Western economic interests at the expense of local development. A renewed focus on strengthening multilateral institutions such as BRICS, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and regional trade agreements outside US influence is necessary. Global trade policies must be restructured to prioritise fair labour practices, environmental protection and economic justice for developing nations.

The writer is General Secretary, Communist Party of India

MARCH 10, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

CHANGE OF GUARD

THE CONGRESS (I) high command has decided to change its chief ministers in only two of the eight states — Rajasthan and Bihar — where it retained power in the recent assembly polls. While Rajasthan — where the party's strength in the assembly dropped by 20 — will have Harilal Joshi as the chief minister instead of Hiralal Devpura, it seemed certain that the party leadership, Chandrashekhar Singh,

technology to India in a move seen here as indicating a significant development in relations between the two countries. Included in the deal are American technology parks to be set up in India to facilitate the easy transfer of technology, and the so-called "super computers".

HIJACKERS ON TRIAL

FIVE SIKH HIJACKERS of an Indian Airlines plane pirated in 1981 were produced before a special court in Lahore for trial proceedings as it became apparent that the trial in the second instance of last July has been deferred. Looking fit and nearly dressed, the five hi-

jackers raised "Khilafat zindabad" and pro-hindurawal slogans as they were brought to the court premises.

IRAQ STRIKES IRAN

IRAQI JETS and missiles hit six Iranian towns, leaving hundreds dead and wounded, the national news agency INA reported. There were at least 500 casualties in a missile attack on Khorramabad in western Iran and another 100 in another missile strike on Dezful further south. Iraqi warplanes also bombed the southern oil city of Abadan and three border villages in north-west, west and south-west Iran.



Disclosures and regulations

New Sebi chairman has made a promising start

The new Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) chairman, Tuhin Kant Pandey, made some encouraging remarks in his first public appearance after taking office last week. Emphasising transparency in the market, Mr Pandey noted it extended to the regulator as well. The regulator, he noted, needed to be transparent on various measures, including conflict of interest in the board. Interestingly, this bit was not in the speech uploaded on the regulator's website. However, irrespective of whether the remark was part of the prepared text, the views are now in the public domain and should be welcomed by all stakeholders. Sebi must follow this norm as quickly as possible.

The remarks on disclosures must be seen in the context of the term of Mr Pandey's predecessor, Madhabi Puri Buch. A US-based short-seller Hindenburg Research, which has since shut down, had accused Ms Buch of a conflict of interest in relation to an ongoing investigation of the Adani group, against which the firm had previously made several allegations. In response, both Ms Buch and the regulator had issued statements. Sebi has then said it had a robust mechanism for disclosures. Given the nature of the allegations, it was suggested, including by this newspaper, that Sebi adopt better norms. An August 2024 editorial, for instance, argued: "To strengthen the disclosure norms for key persons, and to quell any speculation in the future, the regulator should consider making the financial interests of such persons public." In modern financial markets, where funds — including foreign — can move in and out very quickly, all relevant disclosures must be in place for regulated entities and key persons in the regulatory body. Such disclosures will boost trust in the system.

Aside from the disclosure issue, Mr Pandey made some other important points worth highlighting. The regulator will be looking for optimum regulation. If some statutes have become redundant and are not serving any purpose, Sebi will be open to reviewing them. This is a positive statement and is in sync with the government's overall thinking. Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently spoke about the idea of a Deregulation Commission to address redundant laws and regulations. Sebi can do a lot internally, which will make things easier for regulated entities. To its credit, the securities-market regulator has been working on adapting regulations to the evolving market and economic conditions. Such changes, for instance, have allowed new technology companies to raise capital from the Indian equity market. Continued improvement in regulations will make the Indian market an attractive place to raise capital and list. This financial year till January, firms have raised a record ₹4 trillion in equity capital, which is double what was raised in the full year 2023-24. Over the years, Sebi has helped increase the penetration of mutual funds, which has helped deepen Indian capital markets.

The Sebi chairman further noted the regulator was conscious about creating a conducive atmosphere to attract foreign capital and was willing to engage with stakeholders. This is again a healthy sign. If India has to grow in a sustainable manner at a higher rate, it is important that capital markets function smoothly and are in a position to channel savings into investment with minimum friction. Although Sebi has been working in this regard, it is time to streamline processes further to enhance prospects for both Indian capital markets and the economy.

Resetting trade

Govt should inform how trade negotiations with US are going

Recent statements on economic and trade relations between the United States (US) and India by senior American officials may provide some insight into what is being planned for the supposed "trade deal" that the two countries have promised to negotiate. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the US in February, he agreed with US President Donald Trump that the first tranches of a multisectoral trade agreement would be negotiated by the fall of this year. However, intervention over the past week from both the US President and his commerce secretary underlines the difficulties involved. Mr Trump reiterated his concern that Indian tariffs were so prohibitively high that "you can't even sell anything into India". He added that India had agreed "to cut their tariffs way down now because somebody's finally exposing them for what they've done". Whether or not this is the case, it indicates that New Delhi's efforts to claim that its trade-weighted average tariffs are quite low are not helping. It would perhaps be better to focus on those sectors that are particular irritants to the US, and identify the tariff reductions that might be required there.

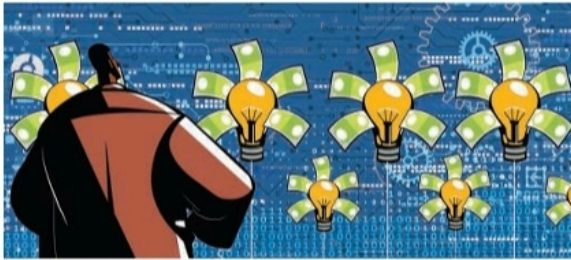
US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, however, has a slightly different approach in mind. The US, he said, requires "a macro, large-scale, broad-based trade agreement that takes everything into account". Mr Lutnick has been given a very tough job by his President — to try and identify the relevant tariffs every country imposes on every American import into its markets, in order to ensure reciprocity. It is no wonder that Mr Lutnick would prefer his job made simpler by broad-based cuts across tariff lines. Even when it comes to particularly politically sensitive areas — such as agriculture — the commerce secretary would like to see more openness, although he acknowledged that some quotas and some limits might continue to be required.

It is now incumbent upon the Indian government to design a strategy to cope with these demands. There is no question that lower and stable tariffs are in India's interests — not just with the US but with most of its trading partners. The negotiations with the US, as well as the proposed free-trade agreement with the European Union that is supposed to be closed by the end of this year, should be seen as an opportunity to do precisely this. But India's counter-offers cannot be designed and made behind closed doors. The Union commerce minister has just concluded a visit to Washington, and the government should share with the public what steps have been taken. Given the importance of the deal and of major revisions to India's trade policy, the government should inform the citizenry about how negotiations are going, how it proposes to move forward, and what sectors may need to continue to receive protection. Openness of this sort does not come naturally to any administration, but it is worth remembering that some positive acts of economic reform in recent years — such as to agricultural procurement — have been held up because of the failure to build a domestic consensus in advance. Resetting trade with the US and the European Union would be a step forward for India, and the government must work on building domestic approval of deals as quickly as possible.

India's tech startup boom

Are policy tweaks needed?

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY



"We have to be careful that we don't blow things up," said my stumbling, white-haired friend, long retired from the civil service but who had served in almost all our government's top industrial-policy entities. Though he can barely speak and almost cannot walk without stumbling, I often tap his fertile brain when policy issues confound me.

I asked him: "Do you think the super-enthusiasm our central and state governments are displaying about start-ups will result in something big for us as a country?" He posed this question to him because I remember back in the 1990s, when I was passionately running my internet startup, Rediff.com, Indian government policymakers greeted me with polite but disbelieving faces.

"Of course, tech startups are terrific for the Indian economy," he said, warning my heart, but then his face started looking grim, "but I hope it's not like the 'import substitution' fever, which turned out to be a disaster." He was referring to a period up to the 1990s, when the government heavily promoted policies aimed at replacing imported goods with domestically produced ones, often through high tariffs and other protectionist measures. This was blamed for India's slow growth in that period compared to the rest of the world and was abolished as disastrous when Manmohan Singh became finance minister in 1991.

This got me thinking: Could anything trigger a disaster in our tech-startup boom and create a disaster like the import-substitution policies did?

Considering the scale of our enthusiasm for startups, I struggled to imagine whether that was even

remotely possible. For example, a report from the World Economic Forum says, "In the last 10 years, over 120,000 startups have been registered in India, making it the third-largest startup ecosystem in the world," with only the United States and China higher than us. Furthermore, practically every IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) and IIM (Indian Institute of Management) has startup incubation centres, and technology parks in many cities. Then, institutions like AITL Incubation Centres and Nasscom run multiple innovation centres throughout India. These efforts have even reached schools, with institutions like AITL Tinkering Labs established in about 10,000 schools to foster student innovation.

Reflecting on the impressive scale of India's startup efforts, I wondered whether these could face any major challenges. After all, I have heard it being said externally, both by scholars writing in their journal papers and by visiting venture-capital firm partners, that the Indian domestic market for new technology inventions is meagre. The exact words used for this are: "India has a minimal number of early adopters, and this makes life for a tech startup very tough in India."

When I polled more venture-capital experts, I got this for why it's so hard for tech startups in India to achieve any significant scale: First, a large portion of the Indian population is highly price-sensitive (*paisa vasool*). Even if they are interested in new technology, affordability is essential. Then there are cultural factors, they say, like some segments of Indian society may be more cautious about adopting innovative technologies until they are proven and widely accepted. In other words, they adopt a "wait

and see" approach. And finally, a "value for money" mindset: Indian consumers often prioritise value for money. This means that even if they are willing to adopt innovative technologies significantly better than existing solutions, they expect these solutions to be priced at "Indian market prices".

Others asked me: What about the statistics that say 90 per cent of all startups worldwide fail? How do we plan to help startups deal with this? Do we have enough Indian venture capital to enable this enormous pool of startups to be created in India? Are our income-tax policies supportive of startup investment?

Listening to all this and having personally experienced some, if not all, of these challenges in my life as an entrepreneur, I can't help but think of an example of hi-tech success in India: Unified Payments Interface (UPI). When I stroll down lanes in Colaba, where I live, I see rickshaw drivers and fishermen from Sanku Dock pull out their mobile phones, scan the QR code of a street-side fruit seller, and pay for the fruit they buy. I rub my eyes to confirm that I am not merely imagining this.

The success of UPI in India is a fascinating case study in the intersection of technology, policy, and socioeconomic factors. It's not just a technological triumph but also a significant achievement in political economy, and its case study has a lot for us to learn from. It appears that having the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), which developed and operates UPI, as a not-for-profit entity established by the Reserve Bank of India and the Indian Banks' Association was the key. It's not a private company seeking profit maximisation.

Secondly, UPI is part of a broader "India Stack", a set of government-backed interoperable digital infrastructure initiatives: Aadhaar, e-KYC, and Digital Locker. Then, the government actively promoted UPI adoption through various mandates (eg linking bank accounts to Aadhaar) and incentives (eg cashback offers and merchant discounts), which also helped. These efforts have been built on an open API (Application Programming Interface) architecture that lets any bank or fintech company create applications that connect to the UPI system, fostering competition and innovation. The government initially mandated zero charges for UPI transactions below a specific value, making it extremely attractive for merchants compared to card payments involving fees. All this helped a gradual cultural shift towards digital payments in a country traditionally relying heavily on cash.

Isn't there something significant in the UPI example for all of us to learn from and execute to enable world-scale success for our startups?

The author (ajit@rediffmail.com) is devoting his life to unravelling the connections between technology and society



AJIT BALAKRISHNAN

Trump's tariff tantrums

American President Donald Trump was known to be unpredictable. But what he has unleashed since he became President has shocked even hardened policymakers, businessmen, traders, investors, politicians, and bureaucrats. And he has 46 months still to go. I have been anticipating this for a while. Last October and early November, I wrote three articles pointing to a clear economic slowdown in India, which also indicated a weaker stock market. A fourth article in mid-November was titled "More dark clouds gather". Mr Trump had just won the election, and I pointed out: "It would be suicidal to assume that his promised actions would be tempered by reality or get bogged down in the Washington 'swamp' or the 'deep state'. Even if a part of Trumponomics is implemented, it will hit the rest of the world like a tidal wave from which no major economies will be spared." This is how it has turned out — so far.

After imposing punitive tariffs on Canada, Mexico, and China, America's top trading partners, his next targets are the European Union, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and, of course, India. Whatever one can understand of Mr Trump's policy — from a recursive stream of consciousness — is combative, simplistic, unstable, nativist, and improvised. Any country that has a large trade surplus with America, he believes, is "cheating us". They need to pay a big tariff to sell to the United States (US). Coming next from Trumpland are reciprocal tariffs, which will match, item by item, the duties that American exporters face. By one estimate, this would create 2.3 million individual levies. How serious are Mr Trump's antics, and how will they affect us? The intellectual basis for Mr Trump's tantrums comes from Stephen Miran, now the chief of the Council of Economic Advisors. In a paper written in November last year, Miran suggests the Trump regime aim for a weak dollar to boost exports, high tariffs to boost domestic manufacturing, and make other countries pay for

holding US debt or even make them swap short-term debt for lower-yield 100-year bonds.

Killing the goose

As Mr Trump takes a wrecking ball to global trade linkages, the impact will be devastating. Economist Dani Rodrik, who specialises in globalisation, growth, and development, wrote: "The world economy has achieved unprecedented levels of growth since World War II. Nothing in history comes even close — not the Industrial Revolution and not the nineteenth-century era of globalization." The basis for this remarkable growth is surging global trade among Asia, the US, and Europe, and regional trade within Europe and the Americas, made possible by low transaction costs, including low tariffs. As East Asian countries like Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore started working hard to exploit their low-cost advantage, their exports to the developed world surged. China joined this gang of exporting nations in the late 1990s and took it to a different level, becoming the workshop to the world, especially after it joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. Next, exporters set up bases near their markets (China in Mexico to serve the US market) or simply to exploit lower costs (China in Vietnam or Thailand; South Korea and Japan in Malaysia).

Parallel to the surge in global trade, the post-war period also led to a rise in the US dollar as the global reserve currency. Almost half the global trade is invoiced in dollars. Since the bulk of the Asian exports went to the US, the trade surplus they generated was reinvested by Asian countries in US government bonds, allowing the US to continue issuing more debt and financing its imports from these countries without disturbing the exchange rate. Hence, when Mr Trump intends to uproot the current network of global trade linkages, the dollar will

become extremely volatile, getting pushed upwards due to tariffs and downwards due to reduced growth from the same high tariffs, among myriad other push and pull factors.

A third factor adding to the volatility is the stunning brawl that Mr Trump has got into with every ally of the US. The dollar's role as the world's reserve asset allowed America to project its strength, visible in its military bases across the world and invisibly through its ability to impose crippling financial sanctions on rogue regimes. Mr Trump has chosen to rip off the security cover that the US provided to countries from Japan to Europe, while openly siding with Russia. And he has decided to cut off China, North Korea, and Iran. In other words, he intends to upend global trade, global investment, the dollar, and US security cover (which are all tightly interlocked), all at the same time.

The consequences will be nothing short of catastrophic, especially for smaller and weaker nations such as India. The US is the most important market for India, as it is for many developing countries. India's exports to the US make up 9 per cent of its exports, and as for merchandise exports they are 18 per cent. Tied closely to Mr Trump's new trade policy is national security in all forms. He wants to achieve self-sufficiency in several critical sectors, one of them being pharmaceuticals. India exported pharmaceuticals of more than \$10 billion to the US in 2023. Finally, the country exported \$50 billion of software services to the US in 2023. Although the "tech bros" that make up Mr Trump's team are supportive of the H1B visa, which allows Indian software engineers to work in the US, Mr Trump's core anti-immigrant supporters are not. These are India's two of the biggest job-creating export sectors. That aside, the best of Indian companies are exporters, mostly to the US. They all will be under threat. Unless something changes, Mr Trump is a huge threat right now, which is perhaps not being recognised fully.

The author is editor of moneyoffliners and a trustee of the Moneyoffliners Foundation. @Moneyoffliners



IRRATIONAL CHOICE

DEBASHIS BASU

Every breath you take



BOOK REVIEW

ROBERT SULLIVAN

At the start of 2020, a small team of scientists tried and failed to convince public health organisations that Covid-19 was spread through the air we breathe. Why they failed, and how they ultimately won, is the subject of Carl Zimmer's new book, *Air-Borne*.

Until 2020, explains Zimmer (a New York Times science columnist), scientists thought that respiratory diseases like Covid spread through droplets, and that those droplets had a limited range. Coughed up, they fell quickly to the ground — like "soggy raisins," to use the vivid if disgusting terminology of a 1990s health official

speaking about tuberculosis.

Thus the recommendation offered by the World Health Organisation (WHO): "Maintain at least one meter (three feet) distance between yourself and other people, particularly those who are coughing, sneezing and have a fever."

Air-Borne shows us how the scientific community came to understand that Covid-19 transmission was less akin to shots from a gun, and more like smog in a valley. To explain, Zimmer takes us through the history of aerobiology, and in his detailed and gripping account, he ascribes the reluctance of both the Centers for Disease Control and the WHO to a bias born of an ancient battle between two factions known as "miasmatisms" and "contagionists."

According to miasmatisms, bad air destroyed health. In the Middle Ages, swamps meant fever. And when Benjamin Rush looked for the cause of 1793's deadly yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia, he smelled bags of spoiled coffee. "Their sickness commenced with

the day on which the coffee began to emit its putrid smell."

In the 1800s, when contagionists began to see germs as culprits, their theories gained ground — partly because tools had been invented to see their postulated micro-organisms. Starting in the 1870s, Robert Koch identified the bacterium that caused anthrax, then tuberculosis and cholera.

At the same time, still more micro-scopic organisms were shown to be airborne. The United States enlisted Amelia Earhart to track them by plane, while on the ground William Firth Wells and Mildred Weeks Wells, a brilliant if cranky couple, not known for winning over colleagues to their unorthodox way of thinking, mapped out the ways contagions spread through public spaces like schools. Their work indicated that tuberculosis was airborne. Ditto measles, still among the most common contagious diseases on record.

The Wellises hoped their research could protect the troops, warning that respiratory diseases killed more men than the Germans did in World War I. Their colleagues ignored them. The Army, however, became interested in weaponising airborne contagion, and

the Wellises had shown how droplet nuclei could spread diseases over long distances.

"The bearing of these findings on bacterial warfare is far-reaching," wrote Theodore Rosebury (in a report written with Elvin Kaba), a dentist recruited to run the Army's secret Airborne Infection Project. Rosebury later renounced his work, which violated the Geneva Protocol's biological weapons ban, but

This writings, per Zimmer, encouraged the Soviets to build up their biological arsenal, further encouraging the United States to build up theirs. It was a Catch-22 that endangered the world and coloured the way America managed public health threats. Bill Clinton, stoked in part by a fictional plot in *The Cobra Event*, took bioterrorism as a reason to further connect public health and national defence.

Under the George W Bush administration, Zimmer writes, billions

of dollars went to fight abstract threats at the expense of actual ones — like HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, measles and cholera — that annually kill millions.

Through the 1990s, viruses were described in terms of war — the "single biggest threat to man's continued dominance on the planet," in the words of the Nobel laureate Joshua Lederberg. Slowly, researchers like Linsey Marr

returned to the Wellises' work, which was rooted in community.

An environmental engineer, Marr had shifted her focus from smog to the spread of influenza in 2009, a change inspired by her son, who regularly

brought home sicknesses from day care. Marr was surprised at how little we knew about how viruses were transmitted, and she worked out the math. "Every year," Zimmer writes, "she would turn to the chalkboard in her lecture hall and derive equations to show her students that particles such

as bigger than five microns can readily stay in the air for a long time." Winds, for instance, carry grains of sand.

The resistance to work like Marr's was fierce: As Covid spread, *The New England Journal of Medicine* rejected her work, while Anthony Fauci discounted a warning by Lydia Bourouiba, an engineer at MIT who studied turbulence and whose research showed how breath followed the physics of aerosols, or clouds.

Miasmatisms could seem like miasmatisms versus contagionists all over again. But researchers like Marr and Bourouiba were reframing public health generally, balancing the warlike defeat of a pathogen with a focus on building safe environments. "The Covid-19 pandemic made the ocean of gases surrounding us visible," Zimmer writes. *Air-Borne* shows us the ways seeing where we live and how it is shaped deeply — and being prepared to see what's perhaps never been seen.

The reviewer is the author of the recently published *Double Outrage: Resurrecting the West With Timothy O'Sullivan, America's Most Mysterious War Photographer* ©2025 The New York Times News Service



OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION



US crypto reserve: Odd idea with a silver lining

Trump's proposal last week wasn't the crypto boost that fans of digital tokens expected. Its market impact must always stay neutral. If CBDCs gain US approval, that will be a bonus

If any other owner of a cryptocurrency platform had announced a national reserve of cryptocurrencies, howls of protest over conflict of interest would have rent the air. When President Donald Trump declared that the US would create a Bitcoin reserve and a separate crypto stockpile, his fan base took it as a move to fulfil a campaign promise. But the proposal he unveiled last week seemed like a bit of a con. For Bitcoin, the US government will merely rename its existing holdings as a strategic reserve. No additional tokens will be bought. No federal funds being deployed also goes for the multiple-crypto stash to be held alongside. What's already in the US crypto vault had fallen into state ownership as a result of legal proceedings against wrongdoing. Trump's pro-crypto stance remains, though. He has a stake in World Liberty Financial, a crypto venture that launches tokens, plus lends and sells them without intermediaries. His wife Melania owns a crypto token, \$Melania, while close associate Elon Musk is the owner and champion of several meme coins and tokens. Trump's embrace of the concept during his campaign had enthused crypto-happy voters and his win set off a crypto bull run.

Last week's news of a Bitcoin reserve was expected to justify and strengthen its rising price. It dropped, instead, once it became clear that the proposal was 'budget neutral' and would not support prices through government demand. These digital tokens have value only because people ascribe value to them, not because they have any intrinsic worth. Just as the works of Van Gogh and MF Husain are valuable assets because a large enough number of people agree, and no fresh supply is possible since these artists are dead, digital tokens ride

on market perception and supply limits. The number of Bitcoin that can be mined, for example, has an upper bound set by the algorithm used to generate it. Eventual scarcity in relation to demand is what other tokens count on too. Since their market prices lie in the eyes of beholders, price volatility is a given, which explains why it's a high-risk investment. All sorts have proliferated and gained varying degrees of market legitimacy. Globally, regulators have been wary of giving them official validation. So too in the US under earlier administrations. Its Securities Exchange Commission under Joe Biden had agreed to regulate spot trades in exchange-traded products (ETPs) whose portfolios included Bitcoin on the ground that ETP rules had to be asset agnostic. Under Trump, if a central treasure chest were to make arbitrary crypto picks and/or venture into active trading, it would be scandalous. As a concept, crypto arose as an alternative to fiat currencies open to state manipulation, so it would also be ironic if the state itself began to move crypto prices. The proposal's market neutrality is thus a relief, but this policy must hold firm.

That said, there may actually be a silver lining to Trump's crypto policy. Acceptance of the blockchain ledgers that underlie these tokens could plausibly inspire a US central bank digital currency (CBDC). Say, a Fed-run token pegged to the dollar. Similarly regulated and kept stable, other CBDCs linked to it globally could go a long way to protect the dollar's global role as a medium of exchange and store of value—a major Trump aim. Quick, efficient and low-cost payments across and within borders would work in favour of all involved. The Bank for International Settlements has such a system being chalked out. It needs a push.

India has some weighty cards to play in negotiations with Trump

New Delhi does have leverage but should wait for Trump's moves to gain a bargaining advantage



NITIN PAI is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy

Trump: "You're not in a good position. You don't have the cards right now. With us, you start having cards."
Zelenskyy: "I'm not playing cards. I'm very serious, Mr President. I'm very serious."
Trump: "You're playing cards. You're gambling with the lives of millions of people. You're gambling with World War III."

Donald Trump told Volodymyr Zelenskyy that the latter had no cards no fewer than five times in the last 10 minutes of their infamous meeting at the Oval Office last week. The US President likes to think in terms of cards (both metaphorical ones used for negotiating deals and literal ones to gain permanent residency in the US). As much as I dislike reducing international relations to a game, realism demands that we deal with the world as it is. India is a swing power between the US and China, and to a lesser extent between the US and Europe. Without overstating the case, India's choice can determine which side feels greater pleasure or pain on several geopolitical and geo-economic issues. Also, we are among the few countries that view closer ties between the US and Russia favourably. If a transactional Trump only recognises cards and how to leverage them, then India needs to

strengthen its hand and play its own cards well. What might be those cards? Let me list 13 cards of a suit, with a joker to go along with them.
Three: Cooperate on illegal immigration. Let Washington repatriate verified Indian nationals at its expense.
Three: Support the US dollar as the world's reserve currency.
Four: Support the use of Swift as international payments infrastructure.
Five: Reduce tariffs on a wide range of imports, and on some high-profile items, bring duties down to zero.
Six: Emphasize India's support for a peaceful settlement of West Asian conflicts through the India Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC).
Seven: Purchase more crude oil from the US, exceeding \$25 billion this year.
Eight: Clear the decks for private investment in nuclear energy, enabling US energy companies to install small modular reactors in India.
Nine: Permit Elon Musk's Starlink services regulated access to the Indian market. Make an exception for the import of Tesla cars.
Ten: Opt for Western equipment over China's in next-generation telecommunications infrastructure.
Jack: Conclude a bilateral preferential trade agreement with the US.
Queen: Purchase as much military equipment as prudent considerations allow from the US. Do not rush to conclude a deal on F-35 aircraft, though.
King: Ensure that the military balance in the Indian Ocean region is not in China's favour.
Ace: Participate in a countervailing coalition against China in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously supporting a US-Russia alignment in world politics.
And the Joker? Encourage a grand deal between the US and Iran, especially one that can get Tehran to distance itself from Beijing.

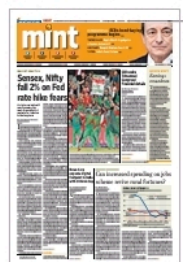
Some of these cards might appear cynical, some naive and some unrealistic. They probably are. Even so, the test

of leverage is the extent to which playing them will create pleasure or the absence of it in Trump's mind. This brings us to an important point. The strength of these cards depends on policies and actions that India undertakes to make them effective. This calls for, well, duplicity. For instance, India's support for Swift is meaningful only if there are viable substitutes available. All cards need to be hedged. If the China card is our Ace, then it needs to be hedged the most. If Trump were to abandon Taiwan and make a deal with China's President Xi Jinping, the Ace will see rapid devaluation. But this is unlikely. There is a strong bipartisan consensus in Washington on the need to confront China, and a number of officials in the Trump administration have been strongly opposed to Beijing's rise. China's leaders, for their part, are unlikely to accept Trump's supremacy. Furthermore, it is unclear what Xi can offer Trump that will cause him to give away Taiwan. Despite all this, we cannot ignore the possibility that Trump will prefer to make a grand bargain instead of risking military confrontation with China. Japan, Australia and India could be left holding the baby, having to deal with a vengeful Beijing.

Some of the things Trump wants from India are in our own interests to give. Lower tariffs are likely to boost manufacturing exports and lower consumer prices. Buying fuel from the US adds to supply security. Small reactors are part of the solution to India's energy needs.

But New Delhi should not make anticipatory concessions. Trump is proceeding with tariffs on Canada and Mexico despite their yielding to his demands on countering drug smuggling and illegal immigration. It may be better to see what Washington does and respond accordingly. Over the next few months, the consequences of most of Trump's policy upheavals will be felt by the American people. That would be a much better time to negotiate.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Unpopular but true: Bitcoin is the most significant monetary advance since the creation of coinage.

EDWARD SNOWDEN

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoded'

What promoters of hard work don't get about workers

week system. Over 1,200 employees had signed a petition asking for more flexible working hours. In an address to the bank's employees that was leaked on the internet, he is heard saying that they were too distracted on Zoom. "...looking at your mail, sending texts to each other... I call a lot of people on Friday... not a goddamn person to get a hold of... I can't stand it anymore... I come in and I'm like, 'Where's everybody else?'... We didn't build this great company by doing that. By doing the same semi-dis- (Morp) that everybody else does."

Now and then, an Indian business patriarch would say Indians should be working long hours in office. Infosys founder N.R. Narayana Murthy said Indians should work 72 hours a week. S.N. Subrahmanyan, chairman and managing director of Larsen & Toubro, said people should work 90 hours, including Sundays. Founders and other stakeholders who ask their workers to work long hours offer themselves as examples—see how much we work, they say.

This is baffling because they appear to miss something simple about work. Entrepreneurs, like artists, love what they do, or most of it, or why they do what they do. They suffer when they are on vacation. They have to apply discipline to stop working some

days. In fact, that is what discipline is. It is a preventive mechanism that the world has misunderstood. It never works if you need it to do something; discipline helps in stopping you from doing something you love too much. People who are forced to exercise cannot be helped by discipline; runners addicted to running use discipline to reduce runs.

What many business leaders don't seem to understand is that their passion is not the same as what workers call 'work'. Work is usually so dreary and repetitive that no one will do it if they are not paid for it. As salaried people can only take it in moderation. Many of them like their home only because they have an office to compare it with. Whenever they are in office, they want to be elsewhere.

Time and again, there's a rebellion against the very idea of office. Now and then, technology promises to abolish it. And each time, the office wins, because bosses like the office and they want everybody to show up, because it is through the physical presence

of the others that they fully understand what they are the boss of.

People keep rebelling against the office, but the rebellion never gets them freedom. It just makes slavery more lucrative. You may argue that work-at-home is a major blow to the idea of office and businesses are struggling to get workers away from what's actually a compassionate idea. The fact is, a compassionate idea does not triumph because it is compassionate. Instead, it triumphs when it makes economic sense.

Work-from-home began to take shape long before covid. Big companies wondered if they needed to maintain huge expensive office spaces in expensive business districts. In fact, about 20 years ago, IBM gave its employees financial incentives not to come to work. The idea was that the company would save money per employee if many of them shared a seat by making their presence scarce. After covid, the idea of work-from-home appeared to be the future, but this column had predicted even

then that the office will finally prevail.

Many entrepreneurs seem to think there is a correlation between long hours and output. I find that naive. Maybe most of them have never really been worker ants before. Salaried people who spend long hours in an office are usually of three kinds. A city like Mumbai has a lot of the first kind, especially at the bottom rungs. They come very early; they even go to work a day after, say, a bomb blast. But that's because most of them live in such tiny crowded homes that their office offers relief. It is a leap in the quality of their life.

I used to work in an office where the peons, guards and even clerks clocked in very early to have a bath and use the toilets, for which they would otherwise have to stand in queues back home. Also, singles spend a lot of time in office because they don't have a home life—the reason I got to know that people came early to have a bath.

The third group of people spend a lot of time at work because they are doing other work. For instance, there was a place where I was clocking 16 hours every day because I was working on my novel. There is a fourth category, which includes most Indians. They clock long hours but don't do any work. They just drink a lot of *chai* and chat. They can even do 90 hours a week.

Bangladesh's National Citizen Party: A new dawn or fleeting revolution?

Breaking Free from Cloth Clutter

On February 28, 2025, Bangladesh witnessed the birth of the National Citizens Party (NCP), or Jatiya Nagorik Party (NJP) in Bengali. Emerging from the embers of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement (ADSM)—the very force that toppled former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024, the NCP represents both hope and uncertainty

The National Citizens Party (NCP) or Jatiya Nagorik Party (NJP) in Bengali, was born in Bangladesh on February 28, 2025. It is a progeny of the student leaders who spearheaded the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement (ADSM) that ousted former prime minister Sheikh Hasina from power on August 5, 2024, and the National Citizens Committee (NCP) or the Jatiya Nagorik Committee (JNC), that emerged from the same political cradle on September 8, 2024.

The country was pregnant with it for almost seven months. A report by Reuters, dated August 16, 2024, and issued under the heading 'Student protesters plan new party to cement their revolution', quoted Mahfuz Alam, who then chaired a committee charged with liaising between the interim government, which had assumed office on August 8, and groups like teachers and activists, that the decision to form such a party would be known in about a month. It further quoted Alam, who had been a key leader of the ADSM and is now an adviser to the interim government, as saying, "People are tired of the two political parties (obviously the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party). They trust in (sic) us."

According to the report, Nahid Islam, another of ADSM's important leaders, who resigned as an adviser on February 25 and is now the convener and leader of the NCP, said that the spirit of the students' movement was to build a new Bangladesh where no fascist or autocrat could return. He had added, "To achieve that, we need structural reforms, which will undoubtedly require some time." Nahid further stated that the government was not heeding calls by the Awami League and BNP to hold new elections as early as the fall (of 2024). Another Reuters' report by Ruma Paul, Krishna Kausik, Devjyot Ghoshal and Krishna N Das, carried under the headline 'Insight: Bangladesh student protesters eye new party to cement their revolution' and dated August 16, 2024, however, cited Alam as having said on Facebook that his statement to Reuters "had come out wrong" and that "We are not thinking about political organisations right now."

The main focus was to maintain the spirit of the mass uprising and to consolidate the government. Others also expressed the same view.

Statements, denials and volte faces—nothing new in politics—often reflect tensions and conflicts kept under wraps. Was Alam under pressure to retract or deny his statement? One does not know. There, however, have been indications of differences among both leaders—called coordinators—and rank-and-file of the Students Against Discrimination (SAD), the moniker given to the organisation emerging out of the ADSM, even in the heady immediate aftermath of the formation of the interim government led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus.

Thus, a report in The Daily Star, dated August 16, 2024, stated that a coordinator and four assistant coordinators of Chittagong University's ADSM had resigned from their posts, alleging that the central coordinators took unilateral decisions and ignored their demands. According to another report in the Daily Star dated January 3, 2025, eight persons were injured in Khulna town in a clash among ADSM supporters.

There have been several reports of internal conflicts and tensions. According to a report in Prothom Alo English, archives of the ADSM blocked the Dhaka-Aricha highway for an hour on February 24, 2025, demanding the dissolution of the organisation's new district committee announced earlier in the month. Not surprisingly, though a consensus was subsequently achieved, there have been reports of growing influence in the Asia-Pacific, making India a crucial ally.

US Demands and India's Position

US Commerce Secretary, Howard Lutnick has stressed the necessity of India opening its agricultural market, asserting that this sector could not be "off the table" in trade negotiations. He advocates a broad, macro-level trade pact rather than product-specific agreements, arguing that aligning India's tariff policies with the US would be more beneficial for both nations.

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal recently concluded productive trade discussions in Washington with US counterparts, including Trade Representative Jamieson Greer and Secretary Lutnick. The talks hold significance as both nations move towards negotiating a bilateral trade deal. During Prime Minister Modi's recent US visit, India and America committed to doubling bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030, targeting the completion of the first phase of a trade pact by fall 2025.



committee. Wrangling and power struggles seem programmed into the genes of all political parties. In the case of the NCP, however, factional fissures are accompanied by the presence of incommensurate ideologies.

The NJP includes alumni of the Shibir, Jatiotabadi Chhatradal (Bangladesh Nationalist Students Party) affiliated with the BNP several students' organisations of both leftist and fundamentalist Islamist outfits and those without any political involvement prior to joining the ADSM. They seem to be sticking together because they feel that the future belongs to the new party. What would happen when the latter loses its sheen with time? Signs of trouble are already manifest.

Questions have been asked as to how the enormous amounts of funds needed to mobilise for the gargantuan rally that marked the NCP's formation were found. According to a report in The Daily Star dated March 2, 2025, the Pirojpur district administration had requisitioned several privately owned buses to facilitate local students joining the NJP's inaugural rally on February 28.

It was a partisan act and a grim pointer of this becoming a regular affair if the NJP comes to power. Besides, the declaration of the party's vision for Bangladesh raises questions. It talks of a "crude fascist" regime—obviously referring to Sheikh Hasina's—ruling for 15 years, destroying state institutions and democracy, and making all-encompassing corruption and money laundering a part of state culture.

A lot of what it says—relief to marginalised and disadvantaged communities, the protection of fundamental rights, preserving ethnic, social, gender, and cultural diversity, and ensuring strong safeguards against poverty, inequality, and abuse of power—is unexceptionable.

One, however, wishes that it said more about the "Second Republic", which, and the enactment of a new constitution, are the party's overarching goals. Also, one wonders as to how seriously are pronouncements to



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

be taken, particularly because it says that the party is committed to a culture where justice replaces vengeance. It is liable to make the dead rise up laughing given the interim government's relentless and savage persecution of Awami League leaders and supporters, conducted in blatant disregard of all juridical fairness.

Will the NCP come to power following the next parliamentary elections? It might have enjoyed a sweeping victory if an election had been held immediately after Sheikh Hasina's ouster, when its popularity was at its peak.

Since then, issues like a steep decline in the law-and-order situation, runaway inflation and economic instability have been eroding the public's confidence in the interim government. Given the latter's links with the founders of the new party, they too have started attracting a measure of cynicism, which is bound to be transferred to the NCP.

The latter will also meet growing challenges from parties like the BNP, which had their backs to the wall during Sheikh Hasina's second innings as prime minister but are now flexing their political muscles. Further, the NCP lacks a nationwide, grassroots-level political infrastructure and a leader with charisma and gravitas. Its leaders' demands for not holding parliamentary elections until the reforms are completed and Sheikh Hasina is on the gallows are obviously plays to gain time to build up its organisation. Time, however, takes its own toll even on the most resplendent of shrines. It cannot be otherwise with the NCP. Its leaders will do well to remember the saying, "Sis transit gloria mundi", which literally translates as "thus passes the glory of the world" but is generally meant to convey that earthly glory is fleeting.

Bangladesh: A backgrounder

A 17-member interim government, led by Nobel laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus as its chief advisor, took charge in Bangladesh on August 8, following the ouster of Sheikh Hasina. Hasina resigned as prime minister on August 5, following weeks of deadly student-led protests. Her ouster was followed by a chaos in Muslim-majority country of over 170 million people and it reverberated in neighbouring India.

Sheikh Hasina's departure from Dhaka to neighbouring India resulted from months of growing anger in Bangladesh. After the January 2024 general election, perceived as flawed, critics accused Hasina's government of becoming increasingly arrogant and serving its minions.

The turning point came in June 2024, when Bangladesh's High Court re-instated a quota reserving 30 per cent of government jobs for relatives of veterans from Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence. With government jobs in high demand due to elevated graduate unemployment, students protested the quota, which they also viewed as favouring supporters of Hasina's Awami League party.

The Supreme Court eventually reduced the quota in late July to 5 per cent. The reversal was too little, too late. Violence between the protesters and the police increased, further fuelled by Hasina's refusal to release detained student leaders.

The protesters, viewing Hasina as responsible for the deaths of some 600 people killed in the clashes with the police, began seeking her overthrow.

To control the protests, Hasina announced a curfew, repeatedly shut down internet and jailed over 11,000 protesters. The army eventually withdrew its support after refusing Hasina's order to open fire on civilians to enforce the curfew. On August 5, 2024, with a large number of angry protesters heading to her official residence, Hasina resigned and fled to India.

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

In today's fast-paced and consumer-driven society, the accumulation of clothing has become a significant issue, leading to what is commonly referred to as cloth clutter. The ease of online shopping, the rise of fast fashion, and the influence of social media have all contributed to an excessive and often unnecessary collection of garments.

Unlike previous generations who have always valued durability and longevity in clothing, today's generation – the Gen Alpha born between 2010 and 2025, is caught in a cycle of overconsumption, leading to cluttered wardrobes, financial waste and severe environmental consequences.

Cloth clutter or fashion hoarding refers to the excessive accumulation of clothing, often resulting in disorganised spaces filled with unused or rarely worn garments. With trends changing rapidly, many individuals feel pressured to keep up with fashion, leading to impulsive purchases contributing to a growing pile of clothes.

Unlike past generations who owned fewer but high-quality garments, today's generation is surrounded by cheap, trendy options that encourage frequent buying. Moreover, the convenience of online shopping, where clothes are just a click away, has made it even easier to accumulate unnecessary clothing. The result is overcrowded closets, confusion in outfit choices, and a constant feeling of having nothing to wear despite an overflowing wardrobe. There is no denying that the fast fashion industry thrives on quick production cycles, offering new styles almost every week at an affordable price.

This rapid turnover has created a sense of urgency among consumers to buy more before trends change, leading to excessive clothing accumulation. Above all, online shopping platforms such as Amazon, Myntra, Meesho and many more offer constant discounts such as buy-one-get-one-free, and fast delivery, making it incredibly tempting to buy clothes even when they are not needed. Subscription-based shopping models and exclusive online sales have also encouraged unnecessary purchases, filling wardrobes with items that may never be worn.

Today, with the increased stress, boredom or emotions imbibed among many individuals, the concept of mindless shopping is being used, leading to impulsive buying decisions. This has resulted in wardrobes filled with clothes that were purchased out of momentary excitement but have no long-term use.

Various studies and research have shown that a cluttered environment negatively affects mental wellbeing, making it harder to focus and feel at ease. Today, the textile industry is one of the largest contributors to pollution.

Overproduction of clothing has led to increased carbon emissions, water consumption and waste. Many discarded clothes end up in landfills, as most fast fashion items are made from synthetic fabrics that take decades to decompose. Constantly buying new clothes without fully utilising existing ones results in unnecessary expenses.

As a result, many individuals end up spending large amounts on fashion while struggling to save money for essential needs. Adopting a minimalist approach to fashion will encourage owning fewer but high-quality, versatile pieces that can be mixed and matched.

This will not only reduce the clutter but also promote mindful consumption. Choosing sustainable brands, buying second-hand clothes, and donating unused garments can significantly reduce the impact of fashion waste.

Supporting ethical fashion brands that prioritise durability over trends can help break the cycle of overconsumption. Donating, selling, or repurposing clothes instead of hoarding them can also free up space and prevent unnecessary purchases.

Asking questions like "Do I need this?" or "Will I wear this at least 20 times?" before making a purchase can help in avoiding impulsive buying. Cloth clutter is a growing problem among today's generation, fuelled by fast fashion, digital influence, social media influencers and impulsive shopping habits.

While the allure of trendy and affordable fashion is strong, it comes at a high cost—both personally and environmentally. By embracing mindful consumption, adopting sustainable fashion choices, and prioritising quality over quantity, individuals can break free from the cycle of cloth clutter, leading to a more organised, stress-free, and eco-conscious lifestyle. There are various reasons for it.

Cloth clutter can arise from various factors, such as: Buying more clothes than needed, holding onto clothes that no longer fit or are out of style and above all reluctance to ward off the old clothes.

It may look innocuous but cluttering can have a negative impact on your well-being and mental state. It also has practical issues arising from the problem of plenty.

One can have reduced storage space and difficulty accessing clothing and one can experience the sense of being overwhelmed and disorganised. It often leads to stress and anxiety which can impact your overall wellbeing. But there is solution to it. To combat cloth clutter, you may start declutter your wardrobe regularly and get rid of the items you no longer wear or need.

Besides, organising your clothing storage, using bins, shelves, and drawers effectively declutters your storage space.

One of the easiest way to declutter is to avoid mindless purchasing and buying only what you need and love. Indeed it is not a big problem or something which cannot be dealt with but it must be acknowledged and taken into stride.

It is a lifestyle problem arising from our inability to be mindful of our actions. And don't forget there are people who need your clothes so why not give it to people who need them and experience the feeling of gratitude.

Let your wardrobe smile!

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)



SHAINY SHARMA

A trade deal between India and the US remains a strong possibility

The strategic partnership and geopolitical compulsions of both India and the United States could significantly contribute to clinching a long-awaited trade deal, laying the foundation for future cooperation. While President Donald Trump has positioned himself ideologically closer to Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un—thus isolating European nations—his administration saw the need to counter Chinese growing influence in the Asia-Pacific, making India a crucial ally.

US Demands and India's Position

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Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal recently concluded productive trade discussions in Washington with US counterparts, including Trade Representative Jamieson Greer and Secretary Lutnick. The talks hold significance as both nations move towards negotiating a bilateral trade deal. During Prime Minister Modi's recent US visit, India and America committed to doubling bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030, targeting the completion of the first phase of a trade pact by fall 2025.

In 2023, US-India trade in goods and services reached \$190.08 billion, with India enjoying a \$43.65 billion trade surplus. Trump, echoing Lutnick's optimism, emphasised that a trade deal is within reach, underlining its strategic importance.

The Indian Diaspora's Growing Influence

Reports suggest that the Indian diaspora in the US has emerged as a significant economic and political force, subtly shaping US-India trade policies. Indian-Americans, one of the most prosperous and educated ethnic groups in the US, have wielded considerable influence in strengthening bilateral ties. In a shift, a notable portion of the Indian diaspora supported Trump in the November elections, affecting the political calculus. As of 2021, the average household income for Indian-Americans was \$123,700—surpassing all other ethnic groups.

Between 1995 and 2005, they founded more technology and engineering companies than immigrants from the UK, China, Taiwan, and Japan combined, contributing significantly to innovation and job creation.

trade deal dialogue.

Trump's Foreign Policy and Its Impact on India Trump's foreign policy has been defined by the "America First" approach, often at the cost of traditional alliances. His controversial actions—isolating European allies, supporting Russia in the UN by refusing to name it as an aggressor, and potentially attempting to pull Russia away from China—signal a major shift in global geopolitics. These moves could have far-reaching consequences, impacting not just Europe and Asia but also India's strategic positioning.

If Trump successfully distances Russia from China, India stands to benefit. Moscow has historically been a key defense and energy partner for New Delhi.

Europe's Strategic Shift under Trump Trump's presidency has been marked by tensions with European allies over defense spending, trade policies, and multilateral agreements like the Paris Climate Accord. His criticism of NATO and demands for Europe to shoulder more security costs have strained US-Europe ties. Trump's questioning of NATO's Article 5 (the

mutual defense clause) could leave Eastern European nations vulnerable. Europe might be forced to increase defense spending and coordination, but a lack of American support would weaken the alliance's deterrence against Moscow.

Indo-Pacific Security Dynamics

In the Indo-Pacific, key US allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia rely on Washington to counterbalance China. If Trump reduces support for alliances like AUKUS and Quad, these nations may strengthen security ties with India and European powers like France and the UK. Trump's retreat from alliances could create a vacuum that China might exploit. Beijing has been expanding its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering economic and military incentives to countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. If US allies feel abandoned, China might step in, further eroding American influence.

Trump's Alignment with Russia

On the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, US support for Moscow at the UN exposed a growing rift with European allies. Washington sided with Russia, North Korea, and Belarus in opposing a Europe-backed resolution condemning Moscow. The motion still passed 93-8, with 73 abstentions, including China. Furthering this shift, the US pushed a UN Security Council resolution calling for an end to the war—conspicuously avoid-

ing any reference to Russia's invasion.

Trump's alignment with Moscow signals a potential unravelling of America's transatlantic security commitments. His pivot to Russia, ostensibly to end the war, side-lines Kyiv and Brussels, making last-year, unlike, though pressure tactics may yield results. Meanwhile, China sees a strategic advantage in this shift, hoping to mend its strained ties with Europe and Washington as the global order tilts towards an authoritarian axis.

The Future of India-US Trade Relations

While Trump may attempt to realign US-Russia relations, Russia's deep economic and strategic ties with China make a complete pivot unlikely. However, his policies could still reshape global trade and security dynamics in ways that affect India. A trade deal between India and the US remains a strong possibility, driven by economic and geopolitical imperatives.

The Indian government will need to carefully navigate these complexities to safeguard its trade interests while ensuring strategic autonomy. As the global power balance shifts, India's ability to leverage its relationships with the US, Russia and China will determine its long-term geopolitical and economic standing.

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



KS TOMAR

Editor's TAKE

A promise is a promise!

Delhi Government approves financial aid for women, seeking to set it apart from what has now come to be widely perceived as political freebies

The Delhi Government, powered by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, has approved the Mahila Samridhi Yojana, a scheme aimed at providing financial assistance of ₹2,500 per month to women from economically weaker sections. The initiative, a key promise made during the BJP's election campaign in Delhi, is expected to cost the exchequer ₹5,100 crore. The eligibility criteria for the scheme include an annual income cap of ₹2.5 lakh and an age range of 18 to 60 years.

The Delhi Chief Secretary, along with other officials, has finalised these conditions, ensuring that the financial aid reaches the most deserving beneficiaries. However, the announcement understandably will not come over a period of time as no date for disbursement has been declared yet, despite earlier promises of payments beginning on March 8. Besides, it has also been pointed out that the eligibility criteria were not communicated to voters during the election campaign. In its layout, the Mahila Samridhi Yojana seeks to ward off any criticism of the so-called 'freebie culture,' which political parties across the spectrum accuse each other of.

Indeed, Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has often warned of excessive populist schemes that could burden State finances and harm long-term economic stability. He has advocated for welfare measures that promote self-reliance rather than direct cash benefits. It is hoped that the Delhi Government would acknowledge the Prime Minister's warning and ensure that welfare measures are not just a tool to secure electoral victories.

BJP national president JP Nadra himself launched the scheme, congratulating the Chief Minister for allocating the funds for its execution. Ms Rekha Gupta has a tight financial rope to walk on, considering she bemoaned the appalling fact of Delhi's empty coffers when she assumed office. Admittedly, Delhi has already allocated itself subsidies which are worth thousands of crores, a probe into which the Government must initiate post haste. The subsidies given by the Kejriwal Government in the past decade have increased manifold, inquiries into which ought to be the present Government's utmost priority. The highest subsidies have been allocated to the power, water and transport sectors. Delhi's power subsidies rose from ₹292 crore in 2014-15 to a shocking ₹3,600 crore by 2024-25. The free water provided by the Kejriwal Government was another big drain on the exchequer. The past decade has spawned an invincible Water Mafia culture in Kejriwal's erstwhile strongholds which merits an independent action. Water subsidies rose from ₹21 crore in 2014-15 to ₹500 crore projected for 2024-25. Free bus travel for women cost a whopping ₹115 crore in 2019-20. In 2014-15, the total subsidy doled out was ₹1,555 crore. This figure nearly doubled in 2015-16, soaring to ₹3,018 crore. While it remains to be seen how Ms Gupta delivers on her promise to fellow women citizens, what needs to be clearly factored in is the figure of ₹5100 crore and how best to manage the resources for it.

The approval of the Mahila Samridhi Yojana initiative is expected to strengthen the BJP's party appeal among women voters, a crucial demographic in electoral politics. Therefore, the real success of the scheme will depend on its swift and transparent implementation. With opposition parties already raising concerns over delays and additional conditions, the Delhi Government must ensure that the scheme does not remain a mere electoral promise and delivers tangible benefits to the intended beneficiaries.

As the political landscape of India continues to evolve, the implementation of welfare schemes such as this will play a pivotal role in shaping the public's perception of the ruling party. The question remains whether the BJP can balance its ideological opposition to freebies with the electoral necessity of welfare measures. Indeed, the politics is the art of possible.

Leaderspeak



I urge the CM of Tamil Nadu to draw inspiration from other states that have taken steps to offer medical and engineering education in their native languages. It is my sincere wish that Tamil Nadu also introduce such courses in Tamil.

AMIT SHAH, MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRS, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

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Letters to the Editor

Unique ID for voters

Madam — India's democracy is set to create a new milestone in its journey toward becoming more robust and transparent. Under the initiative of the Election Commission, nearly one billion voters in the country will now be assigned a unique identifier, making the electoral process more transparent, secure and error-free. This step will not only simplify voting but also eliminate issues like fraudulent voting and duplicate voter names. In today's digital era, it was essential to make voter identification more effective. By adopting a digital system, the Election Commission is ensuring that duplicate names are removed from voter lists and each voter is assigned a distinct identity, thereby strengthening the democratic framework. This initiative will enhance voter credibility, ensuring fair and impartial elections.

Eliminating the problem of duplicate EPIC numbers will provide every voter with a unique identity, preventing any misuse of voting rights. Moreover, this initiative will pave the way for future advancements such as e-registration and digital voting, making the electoral process more transparent and convenient. This historic step will further deepen public trust in democracy. Now, every citizen will be able to exercise their voting rights without any doubts or obstacles. This initiative will serve as a milestone in steering Indian democracy towards the digital era.

RK JAIN | BARWANI

Russian strikes on Ukraine

Madam — US President Donald Trump on Friday, March 7, 2025, threatened serious sanctions against Russia for attacking Ukraine. Russia launched a wave of aerial bombings early Friday, hitting Ukraine with 67 missiles and 194 drones, according to Kyiv. Most of them were intercepted, but some did make it through, hitting gas and power facilities. These threats were the first strong warnings from Russia from Trump, who had, during the election campaign 2024, claimed the war would be over on the day he took office and even before.

He had then, as now, also claimed Russia would have never invaded Ukraine if he was still president. The second claim cannot be tested, but the first, his confidence in finishing the war, is being tested, as the war has been on for two months now after the start of his second term. Trump has managed to strong-arm Ukraine into getting ready for a ceasefire and a final settlement. After a heated exchange with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at an Oval Office meeting, he announced a pause in all US aid to Ukraine, stopping even the exchange of intelligence. Mollified by a "regret" letter from Ukraine, Trump has said he is ready to work with Zelenskyy towards peace. Officials of the two sides are to meet next week for talks, including on US-Ukraine agreement that will grant Washington rights in Ukraine's rare earth minerals.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Unfair criticism of Shami

Madam — The statement from the All India Muslim Jamaat President Maulana Shahabuddin Razvi Bareilly's criticism against the Indian cricketer Mohammed Shami is quite shocking. The cleric stated that fasting during Ramadan is an obligatory duty in Islam, and anyone who deliberately avoids it is committing a sin. The Indian cricketers have been held in high esteem worldwide not just for their passion towards the game but also for their patriotism towards the nation when it comes to delivering their best on the field. I can bring up the incident of the past when Mohammed Siraj lost his father in November 2020 while he was with the team on his tour of Australia. Though he was given the option of returning home, the pacer chose to stay back with the team for the series.

It was such an emotional moment even for the fans when he shared later that he went to his father's graveyard straight after landing in Hyderabad. The traumatic state was fought out by Siraj then because of his commitment towards national duty. The same is the case here with Mohammed Shami, whose commitment towards the game is well known and who is delivering his might in the absence of Jasprit Bumrah in the ongoing ICC Champions Trophy. When the game of cricket unites all religions, it is unfortunate that the cleric, by his remark, has brought out unreasonable division among religions and is unparagonable as per Islam.

AP THIRUVADI | CHENNAI

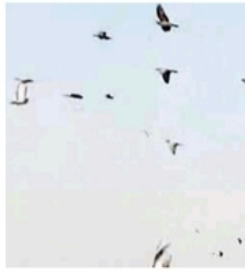
Judiciary under malicious attack by influential groups

In a democracy, some criticism of the judiciary is inevitable. However, unless there is a measure of restraint, judicial institutions will be damaged and judicial integrity stand debilitated

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked, "Events crowd in upon us in such quick succession that we are apt to miss their true significance." This is particularly true of the unhealthy drift of recent events in the Supreme Court of India. The customary reverence formerly paid to judges of the Supreme Court is being systematically deflated. Pernicious attacks on the judiciary have become commonplace. Many are made by political parties and politicians. Some politicians who are distinguished members of the Supreme Court Bar, see enormous mileage in pursuing that course. But even beyond politicians, the attacks have been made with impunity by the media, academicians and limbs of the law. The recent spate of malicious attacks on our former most respected Harvard educated Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud, particularly after he hung up his gloves on November 10, 2024, has shocked the conscience of all right thinking people who cherish and value democracy, the rule of law and the independence of the Judiciary. All I can say is that that the vicious attack of calumny and vilification set in motion against Chief Justice Chandrachud in the print, visual, broadcast and internet media, and that too without any cogent basis or tangible evidence, by vested political interests and vented by unscrupulous lawyer politicians (who ostensibly owe their allegiance to the Supreme Court) is a most ignominious development that deserves to be condemned by one and all in the strongest possible language. It is indeed lamentable that such personal and political attacks, led by politicians, politician lawyers and lawyers, have gone too far, may cross the 'Lakshman Rekha'.

They have sometimes been devised to undermine the fundamental independence of judges of the highest judiciary, even to attempt to dangle judges or to sway the outcome of cases and to depreciate their irrepressible impartiality and integrity. The unconquerable power of democracy and the Rule of Law are being sought to be subverted and subjugated in a most sinister and malicious manner.

Behind the façade of the attacks on the judiciary, I see the evil hand of certain political parties (even invisibly supported by foreign forces inimical to India's interests) to dislodge the smooth functioning of the highest court of the land by means foul rather than fair. In a democratic society, some criticism of the judiciary is inevitable. This is especially so at a time when there is a grow-



ANOOP BOSE

ing understanding of the inescapable choices which are open to judges, just as decisions of the other branches of the government attract criticism, important and controversial decisions of the courts will inescapably do the same.

Into this ambience has been impregnated the technology of the modern media of communications. Unless there is a measure of restraint, the judicial institutions will be damaged and judicial integrity debilitated. The following features of the recent attacks on the judiciary have been distinctly temperate. The personal targeting of identified judges. The attempt to intimidate them or to deflect them from fidelity to their oath of office to decide each case strictly on its merits. The unrelenting character and partisan political aspect of the attacks. A censurable feature of the barrage which cannot pass unnoticed is how a woman judge, who was the first lady judge to have been honoured with a well-deserved elevation straight from the Bar to the Bench, was singled out for a studied attack by a senior lady member of the Bar in April, 2018 before her swearing in. In April, 2018, there was also an unholy attempt to impeach another former Chief Justice of India supported by seven disgruntled opposition parties. Targeting judges, identifiable because of their sex, race or other minority considerations, attacking them by over-simplified and inaccurate generalisations, caters to public prejudice.

Such conduct is unworthy of our country that indefatigably claims to uphold fundamental rights and the rule of law. In the face of the onslaught, and under fire, there are a few strategies available to the judiciary. It would be a reprehensible judicial response

to cave in to the pressure and to do exactly what the politicians, editorialists or other powerful interests desire. This would be a complete abdication of the judicial system. It, therefore, rests increasingly on the organised legal professionals to defend the judiciary, to correct blatant misinformation and to remind politicians, the media and others of the precious heritage of judicial neutrality and independence which we have enjoyed so proudly. In India, independence and conscientiousness are cherished features of the judiciary. Institutional protection for those features must be sustained.

Political attempts to undermine them should be spurned. Leaders of the legal profession, irrespective of their personal political leanings, should speak up where judges are unjustly assailed by politicians and others for carrying out their independent role. The increasingly adversarial and belligerent nature of our public discourse should not become contagious to the erosion of the balanced relationship of the judiciary with other branches of the government.

Legislators, members of the Executive Government and the judiciary should realise that each branch has its distinct part to play, without which constitutional government would falter and fail. But a genuine desire to protect and preserve the rule of law and the dignity and majesty of the highest court of the world's largest working democracy. In this context, it would not be out of place to men-

tion that our first President Dr Rajendra Prasad, himself an outstanding lawyer, described this "noble edifice" as the 'Temple of Justice' on the occasion of the inauguration of the new Supreme Court building on August 4, 1958 in the august presence of Prime Minister Nehru, Vice President Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Chief Justice Sudhi Ranjan Das, his son-in-law Asoke Kumar Sen, the Union Law Minister and my senior and guru, Lok Sabha Speaker Ananthasayanam Ayyangar, and Attorney General Motilal Chimanlal Setalvad.

In conclusion, I am highly emboldened to commend to readers the stern message delivered by Justice Jashodh Burjor Pardivala of the Supreme Court at the Second Justice HR Khanna Memorial Symposium on July 3, 2022, "Personal attack on judges for their judgements lead to a dangerous scenario where the judges have to think about what the media thinks, rather than what the law says."

This puts the rule of law on the burner, social and digital media are primarily resorted to expressing personalised opinions more against the judges, rather than a constructive critical appraisal of their judgments. This is what is harming the judicial institution and lowering its dignity. This is where digital and social media need to be regulated throughout the country to preserve the rule of law under our Constitution in India, which cannot be defined as a completely mature or defined democracy, social media is employed frequently to politicise purely legal and constitutional issues."

(The author is an internationally reputed senior lawyer practising in the Supreme Court of India and various High Courts and Tribunals in India. Views expressed are personal)

Whither the women of this country?

SECOND Opinion

Accelerate Accelerate action is a call for urgency, inclusion, and transformative change. It underscores that equality cannot wait and that all sectors of society must work together to hasten progress toward women's rights and empowerment. The responsibility for accelerating this change primarily lies with institutions, particularly the government. Effective policy changes and awareness campaigns that challenge deeply ingrained societal norms are crucial.

While the Government of India has placed women's education and empowerment at the forefront of its agenda — an effort worthy of commendation — the critical question remains: What about their security? According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a total of 4,32,256 cases of crimes against women were registered across India in 2022 — an alarming statistic that translates to nearly 51 FIRs being filed every hour. These cases include rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, and dowry-related violence, marking a four per cent increase from the previous year. However, the NCRB also clarified that the rise in registered cases does not necessarily indicate an increase in crime but rather a greater willingness among victims to report incidents.

While urban areas have witnessed increased awareness



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and reporting, rural regions still struggle with underreporting due to social stigma and a lack of support systems. A report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) revealed that 151 sitting MPs and MLAs have declared cases related to crimes against women in their election affidavits.

West Bengal has the highest number of lawmakers (25) facing such cases, with 16 sitting MPs and MLAs accused of rape. While the BJP leads in such cases, Congress and other parties are not far behind. These numbers are not just statistics; they represent silent battles fought daily by women at home, on the streets, in workplaces, and even within political corridors.

Protecting the dignity of women is the Government's duty, yet it is deeply ironic that political parties, both at the State and Central levels, sometimes shelter individuals accused of crimes against women for electoral gains. Whether it is Sheikh Shahjahan of TMC or Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of BJP, such instances raise serious concerns about political accountability.

The BJP Government claims significant progress in empowering women, yet the party itself has 134 sitting MPs and MLAs facing charges of crimes against women. Congress follows with 25, with AAP close behind. India ranked 128th out of 177 countries in the 2023 Women, Peace, and Security Index, which assesses women's status based on three dimensions: Inclusion (economic, social, and politi-

cal), Justice (formal and informal discrimination), and Security (individual, community and societal levels). This ranking reinforces the urgent need to accelerate action. In response to growing concerns, the Central Government has extended its flagship

women's security scheme until 2025-26 to curb crimes against women. However, ensuring women's safety requires a multi-pronged approach, including stringent laws, robust security measures, swift justice, timely redressal of complaints, and accessible institutional support for victims.

At its core, the persistence of gender-based violence is deeply rooted in India's complex social fabric, where patriarchal norms, economic disparities and cultural traditions intersect to perpetuate inequality. This systemic injustice not only denies women their right to live with freedom and dignity but also hinders societal progress. Meaningful change requires a shift in mindset, starting at home. As the saying goes, "Gender equality begins at home," and by fostering a culture of respect and equality, we can empower the next generation to build a fairer world. According to the World Economic Forum, at the current pace of progress, achieving full gender parity will take until 2158 — approximately five generations from now. The question we must ask ourselves is: Can we afford to wait that long, or will we take action now to accelerate change?

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TRUMP IMPOSES RECIPROCAL TARIFF

The United States of America is all set for rolling out the reciprocal taxation policy for the world. And his particular taxing targets are China, Brazil and India, all the major BRICS countries, along with Canada, the EU and Mexico.

Donald Trump claims their tariff rates are unfair for US products. Trump claims that India charges more than 100 per cent tariff rates, whereas South Korea charges four times higher tariffs on the USA. This is a clear indication of the fact that this time Trump 2.0 is actually trying to establish fair trade conditions, at least from the American domestic perspective. His wish to play fair on the tariff ground towards those nations that have charged tremendously higher amounts of tariffs on America will become a costly affair for the respective targeted countries. Although Trump achieving this trade fairness is definitely a challenging task. As the nation will feel, it is challenging to adjust themselves to the new reciprocal tariff system.

The opinion of Trump to achieve this trade fairness is welcoming, as every country has the right to bargain, compete and charge

the tariff for protecting their local businesses. But at the same time, the US must not forget that the world is still on the juggernaut of unfair competition, resource and income divide. Still, the developing countries stand nowhere in comparison to the trade figures of the developed nations. In such a trade paradox milieu, the ideas of tariff fairness and equity seems a little vague. Trump must pave the way for fair trade opportunities before introducing the idea of tariff fairness and reciprocity.

Trump must understand that no nation can grow unilaterally; we all need each other for our holistic development altogether. Trump must understand that America is a hegemonic state, and it holds its accountability for setting a balanced world order. It just can't do it for tat with the world, calling it fairness. At the same time, Trump must stop taking help from Elon Musk, a smart capitalist. Since the administration of America is not like the running of a company, where risk-bearing is conditioned for profit only. Sometimes, our loss is the gain of others, and we have to do so to pave the way for an equivalent just society.

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