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Data protection and missing guardrails

The release of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules, 2025, for public consultation is a step towards the implementation of a data protection system. The idea of protection of personal data has a long history in India. After the Supreme Court declared the Right to Privacy as a fundamental right in 2017, the idea has gone through many stages. The Justice Srikrishna Committee drafted a bill that attracted much attention but after years of dilly-dallying, the government brought forward the law. Some parts of the rules relating to the proposed Data Protection Board of India (DPBI) will come into force upon their publication. The rest of the rules will come into force at a later date, to be specified in the final rules.

The stated aim of the rules is to give data principals, who are individual digital users, better control over their personal data than what exists in practice now. The digital age has brought a large amount of data in the public realm, leaving individuals more vulnerable.

Some basic ground rules have now been laid down and they also pertain to communication and consent for the use of data. Explicit personal consent of data principals is needed for collection and use of their data, and they should be told of the purpose of collection. They will have the right to demand deletion of data, and the data cannot be held indefinitely either. The rules are more stringent in the case of data relating to children and persons with disabilities. While these interventions are welcome, the bill is weak and its design flawed in some ways. The rules propose the setting up of DPBI as an independent body, but its composition and powers have raised concerns. The members will be appointed by a committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary and the terms of service will be decided by the government. It will have no regulatory powers. These will limit the stature and influence of the board.

The government and its agencies are granted wide-ranging exemptions under the law; this could lead to surveillance of citizens and privacy violations. These agencies can collect and use personal data for purposes that are not clearly defined. The government can call for information from data fiduciaries – entities that collect data – without a written justification. This can violate individuals' Right to Privacy. There is also no timeline stipulated for informing individuals about data breaches or redressal of their grievances. These issues need to be attended to when the rules are finalised.

DPDP Rules stress on consent but a few concerns on privacy need to be addressed

Lost momentum, looming concerns

The first advance estimates of GDP growth for 2024-25, released by the National Statistics Office (NSO), show the economy losing momentum to an unexpected extent. The estimates have projected growth at 6.4%, which is a steep fall from last year's 8.3%. It marks a four-year low, and is the lowest growth after the contraction during the Covid period. The first half of the year saw a growth of 6%, with the second quarter showing a sharp dip to 5.4%, which was a seven-quarter low. The NSO's estimate is marginally lower than the RBI's revised forecast of 6.6%. The Centre had expected a growth of 6.5%. In nominal terms, the growth may be 9.7% against the budgetary assumption of 10.5%.

Among sectors, only agriculture showed growth significantly higher than last year, thanks to a good monsoon. It is likely to rebound from 1.4% last year to 3.8%. Most negatives are seen in the industrial sector, particularly in manufacturing. The sector is expected to grow at a low 5.3% against the 8.9% last year. Construction and electricity, gas, and water supply segments will see decelerating growth. The services sector is also likely to see a slowdown. Private consumption is expected to improve to 7.3% this year from 4%.

There were worries about the trends in spending, but rural demand is likely to look up because of the better kharif performance. The outlook for the rabi crop is also good. But urban demand may not see much of an uptick. The government has attributed the demand slowdown to the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy stance and other measures. But the central bank had to respond to inflation as it is a part of its mandate.

It should be noted that much of the investment that boosted growth in the post-Covid years came from the government's capital expenditure. It may be difficult to sustain that in the coming months. Revenue collection estimates are unlikely to be met this year. The first advance estimates are likely to be used for preparation of the budget. The estimates are also likely to be revised, going forward. But they show that there are challenges ahead for the economy. There is even a view that the actual growth rate this year may be less than the present estimates. Uncertainties on the global scene can also impact the domestic situation. The Union Budget will have to respond to these concerns, because that is the most important policy instrument available to the government in the near future.

Sluggish manufacturing raises apprehensions as GDP growth hits a four-year low

India's growth dilemma: Skyscrapers or social equity?

Infrastructure push comes at the cost of investments in healthcare, education, and social welfare

RAJESHWARI U R

India stands at a critical juncture in its development journey, grappling with the challenge of how best to allocate its limited public funds. The debate over prioritising infrastructure, such as highways, railways, and airports, versus investments in the social sector, including healthcare, education, and welfare, has become increasingly pressing. Both are crucial for national progress, but recent spending trends reveal a disproportionate focus on infrastructure. This imbalance risks undermining equitable and sustainable growth in the long run. Infrastructure development has long been regarded as a cornerstone of economic prosperity. To address its infrastructure deficit, India has initiated ambitious programmes like the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP), which aims to invest Rs 111 lakh crore between 2020 and 2025. This includes substantial allocations for transportation, energy, and water and sanitation. Schemes like the PM Gati Shakti seek to modernise logistics and improve connectivity, ultimately targeting a reduction in India's logistics costs from the current 14% of GDP to the global average of 8-10%. Such initiatives align with the government's goal of becoming a \$5 trillion economy.

However, the Union Budget for 2023-24 reflects a stark disparity in priorities. Of the Rs 45 lakh crore total expenditure, Rs 10 lakh crore was allocated for capital expenditure, primarily for infrastructure, representing a 33% increase from the previous year. In contrast, healthcare and education – sectors directly tied to human development – received far smaller allocations of Rs 89,155 crore and Rs 1,21,143 crore, respectively. Compared to countries like Brazil, which spends 6.5% of its GDP on education and 9% on healthcare, India's investment in these areas appears insufficient.

The emphasis on infrastructure, while essential for GDP growth, comes at the cost of social investments that have a more profound and sustainable impact on human well-being. India's low Human Development Index (HDI) ranking of 134 out of 193 countries in

2023 underscores the urgency of addressing gaps in healthcare, education, and social welfare. Despite the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proposing that public spending on education should reach 6% of the GDP, current levels hover around 3%. The situation is reflected in poor learning outcomes, with the 2022 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) revealing that only 20% of Class 5 students in rural areas could read a Class 2 text. Healthcare fares no better, with spending stagnating at 2.1% of the GDP, far below the global average of 6%. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed severe inadequacies in India's healthcare system, including shortages of hospital beds, medical



staff, and equipment. Poverty and inequality exacerbate these challenges. Nearly 10% of India's population lives below the international poverty line of \$2.15 per day, according to the World Bank, and the country faces one of the highest levels of wealth inequality globally. Programmes designed to address food security, rural employment, and affordable housing remain underfunded when compared to large-scale infrastructure projects.

A skewed development model
The preference for infrastructure spending is not purely economic but also deeply political. Large infrastructure projects generate immediate, visible benefits such as job creation and economic activity, making them attractive for governments seeking electoral gains. In contrast, the outcomes of social investments, such as improved literacy rates or better healthcare metrics, take longer to materialise and are less conspicuous. This short-term focus

neglects the long-term economic dividends of social spending. A 2022 study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) found that increasing public health expenditure by just 1% of the GDP could boost GDP growth by up to 0.7% in the long run.

Ignoring the social sector while prioritising infrastructure creates a hollow foundation for growth. A population that is undernourished, poorly educated, and unhealthy cannot fully harness the benefits of advanced highways or industrial parks. India's labour force participation rate, particularly among women, remains alarmingly low due to inadequate access to education, healthcare, and skills training.

To address these challenges, policymakers need a more integrated approach that links infrastructure investments directly to human development. For instance, expanding digital infrastructure could play a transformative role in enhancing access to education, healthcare, and government services.

The declining school enrolment rates provide a stark warning about the state of the education system. Recent data from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) reveals that school enrolments fell from 26.02 crore in 2018-19 to 24.8 crore in 2022-24, a decline of 6%, or 1.22 crore students. States like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra recorded the sharpest declines, with Bihar alone losing over 35.65 lakh students. While a part of this drop can be attributed to improved data accuracy under the revamped UDISE+ system, it also reflects deeper issues such as inadequate school infrastructure, poor learning outcomes, and rising economic pressures on families.

India's development cannot rest solely on skyscrapers and highways; it must also nurture its social fabric. Infrastructure and social investments should not be seen as competing priorities but as complementary pillars of progress. A robust infrastructure network can enable social mobility, while an educated and healthy workforce strengthens the economy. Policymakers must recognise that social sector spending is not merely an expense but an investment in the nation's future. Only by striking a balance can India achieve inclusive and sustainable growth, ensuring that no one is left behind in its march towards progress.

(The writer is an associate professor at the Department of Economics, Christ University)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

School beyond the classroom

A small act of kindness can change not only one life but the generations to come

SANJEEV GANDHI

As I returned from my native village, I couldn't shake off the thought that a small act of kindness can change not only one life but also the generations to come. A few days ago, I had visited my village, where I spent my childhood. While wandering through the familiar streets – on the road to nostalgia – I hoped to meet someone I knew, but most people from my generation had left the village. Suddenly, a person greeted me, and as I struggled to recognise him, he introduced himself as the younger brother of Zareena, my classmate from middle school.

I was thrilled to hear about Zareena and asked about her whereabouts. Her brother told me that Zareena was settled in Delhi, her husband had retired from a reputable company, and her two sons were working abroad. She

was living a very prosperous life and I was genuinely happy for her. My mind flashed back to the day I passed the middle-class examination. My father took me to our teacher's house to discuss my admission to a new school as our village only had a middle school.

We met Zareena and her father, whom our teacher had invited to persuade him to allow his daughter to continue her studies. Zareena's father adamantly opposed sending her to the next village to study, but our teacher and my father convinced him that she was talented and good at studies and deserved higher education. Zareena's father had planned to marry her off within six months. In a last ditch effort, our teacher suggested that she study at a private student for the matriculation examination. He assured Zareena's father that his wife would accompany the girl during the examination in a nearby town. Eventually, Zareena's father agreed and she was allowed to chase her dreams.

Zareena is the only student from our village to secure a first division in

the Matriculation examination. After that, my family moved to the city and I lost touch with my friends and others in the village.

Years later, while I wandered the streets of our village, Zareena's brother told me that after Matriculation she was admitted to a junior teachers training programme and she secured a scholarship from the state government and became a primary teacher. She got married into a good family, continued her studies and eventually worked as a post-graduate teacher in a Delhi government school.

As I listened to Zareena's story, my mind kept drifting back to our teacher, who had selflessly helped her family and paved the way for future generations to escape poverty and darkness. I realised that a good teacher is not only good in words or deeds but also in heart. Their good relationships and concern for students are genuine reflections of their kindness, not mere strategies to win friends or influence people. I hope Zareena is a teacher like ours, inspiring and guiding future generations.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Delhi's real issues take a backseat

I refer to 'In Delhi, a poll on perceptions' (Jan 10). Delhi is currently embroiled in a bizarre situation where campaigning commenced before the Election Commission announced the dates, with the Prime Minister himself kicking off the campaign. The sheer number of Central ministers involved, coupled with the allegations and twisted rhetoric, suggests a concerted effort to unsettle the AAP. One cannot help but wonder what the BJP and Congress have actually done to serve the people of Delhi

over the past decade. The Lieutenant Governor's approach has also been questionable. Meanwhile, the BJP has been churning out allegations, including the dubious claim about a gold-plated commode. The real issues facing Delhi's citizens have taken a backseat, overshadowed by allegations, twisted truths, and sexist remarks. One expects the Election Commission to remain vigilant, alert, and fair.

Hemachandra Basappa, Bengaluru

Disband I.N.D.I.A

The Delhi election campaign is heating up, with the Congress, BJP, and AAP leaving no stone unturned in their bid for power. Interestingly, some constituents of the I.N.D.I.A bloc, such as the TMC, SP, and Shiv Sena (UBT), are supporting the AAP over Congress. This highlights the alliance's fragility. The parties supporting the AAP are those that do not perceive the party as a threat in their respective states and view Congress as a competitor. The alliance lacked common programmes, even during the Lok Sabha polls, beyond their op-

position to the BJP. Given their failure to achieve this goal, it is questionable whether the alliance has any raison d'être. As Omar Abdullah suggested, it might be best to bid adieu to the alliance, at least for the time being.

K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Public transport

I refer to 'Public transport not only about revenues' (Jan 9). The recent fare hike in Karnataka's public transport raises concerns about prioritising profitability over social equity. Public transport should be designed to enhance accessibility

for all, rather than burdening commuters, especially marginalised groups. Innovative funding strategies and targeted initiatives like Karnataka's Shiksha scheme can strike a balance between financial sustainability and inclusivity. A comprehensive approach can transform public transport into a tool for social equity, environmental benefits, and improved quality of life.

Zohra Tus Saraf, Bengaluru

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

SPEAK OUT

Congress is a national party; they should have held a meeting and discussion regarding the I.N.D.I.A bloc. Yesterday a one-sided statement came that this was an alliance till the Lok Sabha election and there will be no alliance after that, if this is so then Congress should come among the people and clarify about the I.N.D.I.A bloc...



Priyanka Chaturvedi,
Shiv Sena (UBT) MP

We have to distrust each other. It is our only defence against betrayal.

Tennessee Williams

TO BE PRECISE

PM unveils genome sequencing data of 10,000 Indians



IN PERSPECTIVE

Forces behind the falling rupee

It is more about a strengthening dollar and no developing country escapes the impact

T K JAYARAMAN

The Indian rupee has been depreciating since October 2024. On January 8, the third day of the first full working week in the new year, the fall in its value remained unabated. The rupee opened at Rs 85.82/US\$ and touched the lowest-ever level of Rs 85.89. The irony is that India's foreign exchange (forex) reserves touched the highest of \$705 billion in September 2024, with the exchange rate at Rs 83.79/US\$.

The fall commenced after a big bang cut of 50 basis points (bps), on September 18, by the United States (US) Federal Reserve (the Fed) in its policy interest rate.

The Fed implemented two subsequent cuts before the end of the year – by 25 bps on November 7, just after Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election, and by another 25 bps on December 18. The markets were pleased with the cuts, raising hopes of recovery. Meanwhile, the economists started debating whether the US economy was nearing a neutral interest rate, where growth has been commendable at 2.7% with inflation (2.7%) above the Fed target rate of 2%. Is the US economy closer to taster the fairytale Goldilocks soup, "neither too hot nor too cold"?

A very optimistic picture of the US emerged after Trump entered the election with his 'Make America Great Again' slogan and a slew of campaign promises that included a big reduction in the rate of corporate tax and bringing back from China the US-owned manufacturing companies.

Threats of high tariffs on imports followed – 100% on imports from China, and 60% on those from India, which he called "the king of tariffs." These utterances instigated the 'hot money' outflows from the emerging economies to America.

Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) were highly impressed with Trump's campaign promises. As a result, FPIs are only in short-term gains, they pulled out investments in stocks and bonds from emerging economies.

We've often heard how if America catches a cold, the less developed countries get pneumonia. Now, we have seen if the US is hale and hearty, the developing economies will face the outflows of capital, leaving them high and dry and pushing other currencies down. Yet,

the rupee performed well in 2024. It went down only by 2.8% when currencies of other emerging economies, including Brazil's real (24%), Mexico's peso (18%) and Korea's won (12%) reported severe depreciation against the dollar.

Navigating man-made shocks

An effective tool systematically employed by India in similar situations earlier has been the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s foreign exchange market intervention. It was resorted to, again – the selling of dollars to reduce the volatility. Critics say that under the floating exchange rate regime, India should permit the exchange rate to be determined by market forces. In 2023, the IMF advised India that instead of intervening, "a flexible exchange rate should set as the first line of defence in absorbing external shocks."

However, the Indian economy is not as diversified as the US or China. These shocks are not natural; they are created by policies that are not in the global interest: protectionism, threats of tariffs, and inducing manufacturing units shifting to the US to produce behind a tariff wall. It is less about a falling rupee than it is about a strengthening US dollar. Furthermore, all the emerging and developing countries were impacted by the dollar's rise and their capital outflows because inflows to the US. Theoretically, a depreciation of the rupee renders Indian exports cheaper to the importers outside. However, Indian exports are in a relatively price-inelastic. Hence, Indian exports do not have a reasonable chance of translating to big money.

In 2022, the narrow range within which India's exchange rate fluctuated led to the impression that India intervened excessively, aiming at a particular exchange rate. The RBI assured that it did not target any specific exchange rate. Its intervention in the forex market is "both ways only to tackle undue volatility." In October 2023, the then RBI Governor Shaktikanta Dastid IMF officials that market intervention should not be viewed in black and white – "the term is more nuanced, as emerging market economies have to deal with consequences of policy actions of the countries in the developed world."

The time has come for India to place a much greater emphasis on export-oriented growth. Trade is the engine of growth in a globalised world and a closer integration with global value chains becomes imperative.

(The writer is a former senior economist, Asian Development Bank)

Trump is on a collision course with the US Budget



JOSEPH E STIGLITZ

There has been endless speculation about the chaos that may (or may not) await America and the world following US President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration on January 20. No one knows how much of Mr Trump's stated agenda is "for real," and how much of it is political posturing for his base, a show of power for his enemies, or part of a negotiating strategy vis-à-vis Congress and

various foreign friends and adversaries. But for all his bluster and bravado, Mr Trump cannot repeal the laws of arithmetic, as much as he may try in the weeks ahead, when the government hits the federal debt limit.

Government deficits are the difference between annual revenues and expenditures, and the national debt is the sum of past deficits. These facts have real political implications, because the United States has a statutory debt ceiling (by law, there is a limit to how much it can borrow). On December 28, Janet Yellen, the outgoing Secretary of the Treasury, provided official notice that the ceiling would be hit "between January 14 and January 23".

By taking "extraordinary" measures, President Joe Biden can pass the problem

on to the incoming Trump administration as a parting gift in return for Mr Trump's refusal (supported by Elon Musk) to go along with the deal that had been made earlier. With a \$367 billion monthly fiscal deficit in November and a 2024 fiscal deficit averaging \$150 billion per month, it won't be long before the current debt ceiling is breached. Meanwhile, extremists in the Republican Party are insisting that the ceiling should be increased, even means that the deficit would have to be eliminated entirely.

If Mr Trump cannot bring all Republicans along, he will need to secure some support from the Democrats by reaching a new agreement on the debt ceiling and future deficits. But why should the Democrats agree to increase the debt ceiling if it merely enables Mr Trump to reward Mr Musk and other oligarchs for

their support by giving them a massive and unjust tax cut? All this congressional politicking over the deficit and debt represents only one horn of the budget trilemma that Mr Trump will face on day one. Taxation is the second horn. If there is only one thing that Mr Trump and his cronies are truly committed to, it is cutting taxes for corporations and billionaires. Their guiding "principle" is to make permanent the reckless tax cuts that Mr Trump signed during his first administration (many of which are set to expire at the end of 2025), and to lower still more taxes on US corporations. Most estimates suggest that doing so would add \$7.5 trillion to the national debt, though the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget's top-end estimate is double that amount.

Of course, the Trump administration will promise some growth miracle, trotting

out the old canard about tax cuts paying for themselves. Never mind that this has never happened — not after the 2017 tax cuts, and not after Ronald Reagan's tax cuts in the 1980s. That brings us to the third horn of the trilemma: Expenditure cuts. It is well known that most US government expenditures are not discretionary; they are committed to programmes like Social Security, which even most Republicans are loathe to cut. Moreover, nearly half of discretionary spending goes to defence — another budget item dear to Republicans. That leaves only around \$750 billion in non-defence discretionary spending to account for. To eliminate the deficit, Mr Trump would have to eliminate all non-defence discretionary government programmes. Even then, he would be left with a \$1 trillion annual hole before getting his tax cut, which becomes mathematically impossible if only a handful of Republican lawmakers keep their promise not to increase the deficit.

Of course, a bipartisan compromise is still possible. That would entail a progressive tax reform and provisions to strengthen the government programmes that have played such an important role in millions of Americans' lives.

Judging by Mr Trump's record, such a compromise will not come easily. There will be chaos, as we already saw with the near-shutdown of the federal government days before Christmas. The solution on that occasion was to kick the can down the road until Mr Trump is in the White House. But what will the solution be next time? Hundreds of millions of people's lives and well-being will depend on how smoothly and quickly this quandary is resolved. Mr Trump and his supporters may want to overturn the world order, but first they must get America's own house in order, and it is far from clear how they will do it.

The author is a Nobel laureate in economics
@Project Syndicate, 2025

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Fun, harm, and the fine line



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

The Enron Egg has been viral on social media for a while. This white egg-shaped tabletop device is touted as a microcurrent reactor that can power a home for 10 years.

It's fake, of course. After Enron went bankrupt, its name and logo were purchased by a content creator who specialises in satire, and clearly says so. The device was "launched" by Connor Gaydos, chief executive officer of the new Enron. Mr Gaydos is also the co-author of *Birds Aren't Real*, a book that debunks online conspiracy theories.

The name itself triggers doubt since Enron suffered a spectacular bankruptcy. A passing knowledge of nuclear power is enough to tell you the Egg is pure science fiction. Dozens of fact checkers pointed this out, and lots of posters have crafted jokes and memes about it. But thousands of credulous folks did assume it was true. The new Enron will presumably monetise this.

This is the fun side of social media's amplification of "fake news". Nobody got hurt. Someone built a campaign around an admitted hoax and deserves to reap the rewards. However, six months ago, we saw the dark side of social media's amplification of fake news. On July 29, a teenager ran amok at a dance class

In the small English town of Southport. He stabbed many children. Three died.

The perpetrator was Axel Rudaubana, a 17-year-old British citizen born in Cardiff. He is of Rwandan origin, from a Christian background. He is now being tried on charges of murder, attempted murder, and terrorism-related offences.

The names and backgrounds of minors are normally withheld. But the UK government was forced to release the details due to what followed in the wake of the stabbing. Individuals associated with the far right promptly claimed the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker. Their incendiary social media posts triggered race riots across the UK and Northern Ireland in August. The Asian Muslim community and their places of worship were targeted.

Some of the rioters and instigators have been arrested and sentenced to varying jail sentences. Some social media posters have also been charged with criminal offences. Others have gone scot free.

At least some of the far-right individuals involved in whipping up the violence may have made money out of it. In the aftermath of the riots, journalists looked at the earnings patterns of several prominent posters from the far right, neo-Nazi British fascists. Many of these individuals benefit from the revenue-sharing model on X, where the platform shares ad revenue with "premium posters."

The connection is straightforward. The more engagement a post can generate, the more likely the ad revenue. The more controversial the tweet, the more likely it is to generate engagement.

Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, who goes by the name Tommy Robinson, and runs the extreme-right English

Defence League, is supposedly worth well over a million sterling. Mr Robinson is serving an 18-month sentence for defying an injunction to post misinformation about a 15-year-old Syrian refugee.

He has over a million followers on X and a thriving presence on Facebook. He was kicked off Twitter in 2018, and reinstated by Elon Musk, who has also campaigned for his release. Mr Robinson is not only perpetrating an ideology based on lies and misinformation, he's made a good living out of hate posts.

Contrast these two examples of exploiting the features of social media for personal gains. You get a sense of where the current free-speech versus fact-check debate could lead in terms of real life consequences.

Peddlers of misinformation often demand a suspension of fact checks "because it may impede free speech". But a fact check doesn't impede free speech. Indeed Enron was upfront in fact-checking itself and "Flat earth physicists" are free to post "theories" as they please.

But shouting "fire" where there isn't one can trigger a stampede. Misinformation about a murderer's antecedents can trigger riots. Recommending a drug used for deworming horses as a Covid-19 treatment can exacerbate a pandemic.

Free speech shouldn't be curtailed merely for conveying misinformation or expressing unpalatable or hateful opinions. It should be limited only when it has the potential to cause harm. Unfortunately, fact-checking misinformation doesn't stop its spread on social media. But does provide a filter that can reduce aggressive harm. As fact-checking mechanisms are removed, we can expect more in the way of Southport-style riots.

of water. Great players always innovate and find ways to get out of the slump. Over the years, Sachin Tendulkar's unbeaten 241 in Sydney in 2004 has gained mythical proportions. It was a fascinating innings of restraint, one in which the master set aside his ego and the cover drive to roar back into form.

Despite the lack of a cover drive, Tendulkar more than made up for it by unfurling the straight drives, the goosy flicks and the emphatic cut shots. The 241 not out was as aesthetically pleasing as some of his other career-defining innings.

Kohli does not have Tendulkar's discipline, nor his envious repertoire of strokes that can bail him out of his travails. Former Test India coach Ravi Shastri believes that Kohli, at 36, still has another three years of cricket left in him. But numbers don't lie.

In the past five years, spanning 39 Tests, Kohli has registered only three centuries, with an average of 30.72. The Sharma and Kohli called time on 720 in last year, but it is unlikely that they will retire from Test cricket on their own. Chief selector Ajit Agarkar and head coach Gautam Gambhir will have honest discussions with the two ageing superstars on the road ahead. If they intend to carry on, they need to step away from the limelight, put in the hard yards in domestic cricket to overcome their glaring inadequacies.

Sharma last turned up for a Ranji Trophy game in 2013. Virat did so in 2012. Do they have the zeal to stage a turnaround so late in their careers?

An open letter to Prof Mohd Yunus

Hasina took away your bank, and you've now served revenge. Here's the test: Now that you have public office, it implies public trust. Can you have it and do nothing with it? And if you would, what would it be?

Respected and dear Prof Yunus,

At the very outset, I am conflated about whether I should congratulate you or commiserate with you. Usually, one wouldn't need to qualify such a brilliant ascent to power with caution. But the challenge of leading a large, populous, and still largely poor nation in the subcontinent cannot be taken lightly.

Nevertheless, congratulations first. When I had the privilege of spending a couple of days with you, at a large philanthropy conference in Hubble-Dharwad in early 2016, I was awed by your sincerity, gentle manner, and yet a firm belief in your ability to master the odds.

In a video interview we recorded, you told me the story of how Sheikh Hasina had taken away your bank, and you responded by taking your bank overseas.

You refused to take the bait of what was probably a too-clever-by-half response from me that her government took away your bank, and you took revenge by building one overseas. You said you were not seeking revenge, but just doing the right thing. I could see then that you were angry, hurting, and holding back.

The opportunity came last August in an incredibly dramatic meltdown of the Hasina government. You were brought back from overseas to head the new administration, though you still haven't given yourself an executive or political title. You've stayed with "Chief Adviser", and will probably go with that to Davos later this month.

Can I round off this part of my letter by suggesting that Hasina took away your bank from you and you've now served revenge by taking away her government?

I say this with no judgement. She was obviously deeply unpopular—the latest election was an even bigger sham than the one before it. In fact, it was almost like what the Pakistanis conjured up earlier by keeping the leading party and its leader (Imran Khan) out of the contest.

Can I suggest that while you may have been nursing your wounds, you weren't prepared for this dramatic turn? Unless you believe in astrology like most politicians do, and have the services of a brilliant astrologer. Certainly, one better

than L. K. Advani's, who failed him completely on the promise to take him back to the prime ministership. Dr Manmohan Singh taunted him during the debate on the nuclear deal that he was trying to topple him because his astrologer had promised him the prime ministership.

Dr Singh also used to make another important point. He said he had told Musharraf in their first meeting, "You and I are both accidental leaders of our countries. Public office is like public trust. We can't have it and do nothing with it." His message to Musharraf was that "we" should engage seriously and resolve the chronic India-Pakistan issues. These conversations were published in his lifetime.

Can I humbly beseech you to apply the same test to yourself? Your situation is not in your dramatic rise — is far more akin to Dr Singh's than Musharraf's. Musharraf's rise wasn't accidental or dramatic to that extent. In Pakistan, every army officer thinks he can be the president from the day he gets commissioned. You've been even more fortuitous than your economist peer's in India. So, here's the test: Now that you hold public office, it implies public trust.

Can you have it and do nothing with it? And if you would, what would it be?

Restoring democracy, rebuilding and re-legitimising the institutions, and then walking away, leaving behind a grateful nation, you might say is what you want to do. And this is an excellent list of KRAs. Question arises: How much time do you give yourself to achieve this? Do you have a finish-by date? Or what, in our business, call a deadline — which, by the way, I am struggling to meet right now as I type this letter to you.

You've talked about setting different commissions to formulate reforms. Good idea. Just that in our countries such commissions tend to be self-perpetuating. I noted in your recent interview to Al Jazeera that you aren't giving any finish date. In fact, in that conversation, you even mentioned that this could take up to four years.

Do you really have that much time? We can all see you are in excellent health, and may you live a long and even more fulfilling life. Continuing on in power in this kind of makeshift



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Corridor of uncertainty

EYE CULTURE

VISHAL MENON

With a microphone in hand, Rohit Sharma delivered his most memorable performance in the recently concluded Border-Gavaskar Trophy in Australia.

During a 15-minute interaction with Star Sports at the lunch break on day two of the Sydney Test, the 37-year-old extolled his selfless virtues and brushed off speculation about retirement.

"Life won't change by what people with a mic, pen or laptop write or say. They won't decide when we should retire, when we should call it out, or when we should captain. I am a sensible man, father of two kids. So I know what I need in life," Indian Test team's captain proclaimed.

Sharma is indeed a sensible man, and the decision to retire ultimately remains a personal one. But anyone who has watched him bat in the last six Tests will agree that he is a player past his prime. Since the Bengaluru Test against New Zealand last year, he has scored 122 runs in 11 innings. His defensive game has deserted him, he is abysmally low on confidence, and he lacks the mental fortitude for the rigours of long-form cricket.

Sharma's loss of form and captaincy status has been under intense scrutiny, especially after India's 3-0 loss to Australia.

Like Sharma, Virat Kohli has done precious little with the bat in this ill-fated tour. Kohli, the modern-day batting great, has solutions to

the most complex cricketing issues. But he had no answers to the deliveries outside his off-stump. On eight occasions in this series, he was caught fishing at deliveries in the corridor of uncertainty.

The recurrent theme in his mode of dismissal illustrates a deep-rooted technical deficiency that has left him and his fans exasperated. Kohli has built his game on the forward trigger movement, which has served him well on placid wickets at home.

On pitches with a bit of seve, as we witnessed in this series in Australia, Kohli looked out of his depth because he does not have the back-foot game to neutralise the extra bounce and the prodigious seam movement.

For the past 15 years, the cover drive has been Kohli's signature shot. It's a shot he can play in his sleep, something that is ingrained in his muscle memory. Against Australia, Kohli was unable to execute it. When that happened, his scoring opportunities were diminished because, unlike some of his peers, Kohli does not have a cut shot, and his off-side game is surprisingly limited.

In this series, Australia packed the off-side field and kept feeding Kohli on the fifth, sixth, and sometimes even the seventh stump line. This stranglehold curtailed the free-flowing stroke play he was known for, resulting in him nicking the ball either to the slips or the wicket-keeper.

You take the cover drive away from Kohli and he looks like a fish out

of water. Great players always innovate and find ways to get out of the slump. Over the years, Sachin Tendulkar's unbeaten 241 in Sydney in 2004 has gained mythical proportions. It was a fascinating innings of restraint, one in which the master set aside his ego and the cover drive to roar back into form.

Despite the lack of a cover drive, Tendulkar more than made up for it by unfurling the straight drives, the goosy flicks and the emphatic cut shots. The 241 not out was as aesthetically pleasing as some of his other career-defining innings.

Kohli does not have Tendulkar's discipline, nor his envious repertoire of strokes that can bail him out of his travails. Former Test India coach Ravi Shastri believes that Kohli, at 36, still has another three years of cricket left in him. But numbers don't lie.

In the past five years, spanning 39 Tests, Kohli has registered only three centuries, with an average of 30.72. The Sharma and Kohli called time on 720 in last year, but it is unlikely that they will retire from Test cricket on their own. Chief selector Ajit Agarkar and head coach Gautam Gambhir will have honest discussions with the two ageing superstars on the road ahead. If they intend to carry on, they need to step away from the limelight, put in the hard yards in domestic cricket to overcome their glaring inadequacies.

Sharma last turned up for a Ranji Trophy game in 2013. Virat did so in 2012. Do they have the zeal to stage a turnaround so late in their careers?

Fifteen wasted years



TICKER

MIHIR S SHARMA

Cities that are at the cutting-edge of national development are also, very visibly, the sites of change. Their physical, social, and intellectual infrastructure is transformed in 15 years. If you compare Seoul between 1970 and 1985, or Shanghai between 2010 and 2025, they appear to be two completely different cities. This was also the case, in fact, for Delhi between 1995 and 2010. The Delhi that hosted the Commonwealth Games in 2010 was unrecognisable as the town I arrived in as a kid a decade and a half earlier.

Since then, Delhi has stood still. As the city state goes to the polls next month, it is worth reflecting on how the past 15 years have been wasted. Nothing of importance has been built, other than a new complex at what was once Pragati Maidan and some largely cosmetic changes to the Central Vista. Even these are in response to specific demands from the highest levels of the

Union government, and do not basically represent a transformation of the average city-dweller's experience of the capital.

This period has also been the period of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)'s ascendancy in local politics. The Commonwealth Games kicked off the serial winters of protest that we saw in this city between 2011 and 2014, the political movements that birthed the party that then dominated politics at the state level in Delhi.

AAP and Arvind Kejriwal must answer the question: How have they transformed the lives of the people of Delhi in this period in power? They must answer this without detection and transference. Yes, of course, the Union government has made their life difficult. But it has done so for all state governments, many of which have nevertheless been able to work to improve their citizens' lives. Delhi has been the location of economic growth and entrepreneurial energy since 2010 at a level unprecedented in its history, surpassing Mumbai and Bengaluru in many ways. How has that been reflected in the city's urban fabric or its governance? If the answer is "not at all", then how does AAP justify its very existence today?

To be fair, when it first came into power, AAP and Mr Kejriwal did in fact have a different and unique vision for local governance that set them apart from the traditional parties — even if

one that was somewhat naive. Mr Kejriwal's book on "Swara" in politics spoke of radical decentralisation as the answer.

Some of us, no friends to the anti-corruption movement, nevertheless thought that this component of AAP ideology could make it appealing for an emergent urban middle class in places beyond just Delhi. The promise of new schools with local input and of more clinics seemed to be a genuine implementation of this decentralisation agenda. If implemented properly, it could lead to improvement and accountability at the most local level of the Indian state, the sphere of governance where this country has traditionally been a greater failure than all its peers.

But these clinics have not worked as planned. Many are shuttered for lack of staff; others have witnessed a shortage of medicines and other necessities, and have even been the location of fights between residents and employees. Schools do not seem to have been improved to the degree required. Meanwhile, the focus on clinics should not mean that large hospitals are not built, but it seems that has been the major consequence.

Neither have new traffic management systems made a difference except, once again, in the areas of central Delhi spruced up for the G20 meetings. Drainage and air quality have gotten

steadily worse. If the second is not entirely the Delhi government's fault — part of the blame must be shouldered by the government of the state of Punjab, which as all know has no connection whatsoever to the government of Delhi — the first certainly is. Existing attempts at restructuring drainage in the city, as planned by IIT Delhi, were abandoned by AAP and new schools and tenders floated. As a consequence, floods in the city have been getting worse every year.

Instead, the party has puffed itself up, tried to pretend it is a national player and the Prime Minister's main Opposition. By doing it, it has just made itself look ridiculous.

Nor, in the end, can we defend this government on the basis of its social policies. We cannot say that at least it has a vision of Delhi as a world city — liberal, inclusive, and multicultural. One of their Lot Salsala floated. As a consequence, floods in the city have been getting worse every year.

What could be expected, anyway, from a party whose senior leader once led raids against Africans in Delhi? AAP has failed as comprehensively as the anti-corruption movement did. In 15 years, Delhi looks little different, perhaps worse. Without an answer to how it intends to improve the city in the coming years, it is hard to see why it should be re-elected.

By special arrangement with ThePrint

CHHATTISGARH



The road that Mukesh and his colleague had profiled in the story that ran on their YouTube channel Bastar Junction and on NDTV. SHUBHOMY SIKDAR

Darkness descends on Bastar

With all the praise his body of work in a decade-long eventful career is drawing, the murder of 33-year-old Bijapur journalist Mukesh Chandrakar has also left a trail of questions on the future of journalists and journalism in Chhattisgarh, finds **Shubhomoy Sikdar**

There is a shop called Tea and Coffee at the centre of Bijapur, a city in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region, nearly 400 kilometres from Raipur. It is enveloped in the aroma of freshly brewed ginger tea. Bubbling saucers fuel conversations at what was once the Old Bus Stand. In the shopping complex that now stands here, one unit is shuttered, opening only occasionally.

Just 10 days ago, it would burst into life around 10 a.m. every day, with a steady stream of visitors from across the country. Tea and Coffee owner Kapil Jhadi was kept busy with orders here. "Journalists, politicians, social workers in remote villages, even policemen in uniform, would come," Jhadi says.

But that was before January 1, the day Mukesh Chandrakar, 33, who occupied the space as an office, disappeared. On January 3, Mukesh's body was found in a septic tank, about 3 km from here. A journalist who began the YouTube news channel "Bastar Junction" — which now has 1.59 lakh subscribers — Mukesh had run a report on the poor condition of a road in Bijapur. Police say he was murdered by three brothers, all construction contractors, Mukesh's distant relatives: Suresh Chandrakar, Dinesh Chandrakar, and Ritesh Chandrakar. The three, and Mahendra Ramteke, an employee, were taken into custody.



Soon after people heard the news of Mukesh's murder, there was an outpouring of emotion on X, with journalists from across India speaking about how he was the go-to person for anything related to the Naxal-prone region. There were also conversations on how grassroots journalists never got their place in the sun, and about their safety. Memorial meetings were held, from Raipur to New Delhi. For Jhadi, who followed his work, "His reports touched the core issues of interior Bijapur and the whole of the Bastar region."

Mukesh, who was a freelancer with NDTV, had worked on the story of road-construction corruption with Bastar Junction's correspondent Nilesh Tripathi. The video, released on December 25, exposed the poor quality of a 52.4-km-long stretch, connecting Gangoal and Nelamar villages in Bijapur. A day later, the Chhattisgarh government had announced an inquiry into the matter.

Capturing stark realities

Mukesh's journalism captured the stark realities of life in Bastar's conflict-ridden zone, where left-wing extremists have waged a decades-long war against the Indian state. His stories tracked villagers risking their lives to source basics like salt, risky makeshift bridges and crumbling roads, parents losing children to blasts, children sustaining bullet wounds in encounters between the police and Naxals. These were documentaries of the everyday struggles of tribal communities caught in the crossfire. A teary-eyed tribal woman who attended Mukesh's funeral said he was like a god for her. "He had helped me get a job. I appeal to the government to find his killers and arrest them as soon as possible," she told TV cameras, before the alleged killers were arrested. Nearly 2 km away from the office is Mukesh's



Financial security is always a challenge for us here, but the larger question of security for journalists remains unanswered. Even my family, based in Kanker, has asked me to quit the profession and return home

PINAKI RANJAN DAS
Bijapur-based journalist

modest home: a one-BHK (bedroom-hall-kitchen) that he rented with a cousin and a colleague. Mukesh's older brother, Yakesh, 36, a TV journalist, who is married with two children, lives in an adjacent house within the compound.

It was in this compound that the brothers had their last conversation on January 1, between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. The chat was about celebrations. "Mukesh and I had planned to have a little celebration of our own on December 31, but he had to go to Dantewada. I went back home and slept," says Yakesh, as he attends to a stream of visitors, including State Congress president Deepak Baj and Bijapur's Congress MLA Vikram Mandavi.

On January 2, Yakesh learnt from his son that Mukesh — Bittu for the family — had gone out. Given his inconsistent schedule and knack of breaking stories, no one suspected anything initially, assuming that he had left to cover a story. "I dialled his number, but it was switched off. Even that wasn't unusual. Around 1 p.m. my older (step) brother (Purushottam) called me to ask if all three of us brothers could drive to our village Basaguda, as the paddy procurement season was on and our crops had to be sold. Mukesh was still unavailable," says Yakesh.

The search

In his complaint to the police, Yakesh noted that he had called Nilesh, the journalist with whom Mukesh had prepared the report on the Gangoal-Mirtur stretch. "Nilesh told me that he had spoken to my brother around 6.30 p.m. the previous day, and Mukesh had told him that Ritesh (one of the now-arrested men) was to visit him," the complaint notes. Yakesh says it was Nilesh who suggested that the police be informed.

Yakesh began the search, followed by other Bijapur journalists, like Ganesh Mishra and Pinaki Ranjan Das, who were close friends. "Mukesh's laptop showed his last location near a shed owned by Suresh (another of the now-arrested men)," says Mishra. The shed has nearly 17 rooms in which the contractor's labourers reside and a badminton court where outsiders, including Mukesh, played sometimes.

Suresh Patragiri, 30, who works for a web

news portal "Lalluram", says he accompanied a police team to the shed on January 2, and while the rooms were searched, nothing was found there. Patragiri and another journalist, Pushpa Rokde, 40, from "Prakhar Samachar" recounts that the journalists noticed a newly constructed concrete slab that covered a septic tank.

"The next day (January 3) I asked two women who lived there about the slab. They told me it had been constructed around 8, the previous morning. We cross-checked with some badminton players, who confirmed they had not seen the cover earlier," says Rokde, who has been a journalist for a couple of decades. The contractor had allegedly told the police that he wanted to construct a bathroom over it. "But the septic tank underneath would have needed an outlet for the gas. It only added to our suspicion," Rokde adds.

While they informed the police, journalists claim it took nearly a day and intense pressure from the community to get it broken open on January 3 evening. Mukesh's body with injury marks all over was retrieved then.

As soon as the news of the death spread, the spotlight shifted to other aspects: the story Mukesh and Nilesh had done against the backdrop of the overall risks journalists face in Bastar, where the alleged nexus between officials and construction contractors often escape scrutiny amid stories of conflict.

Following the outcry over the death, a special investigation team (SIT) was formed. Suresh's properties were demolished by the government. On January 7, the Chhattisgarh Public Works Department (PWD) suspended his registration as a construction contractor.

Vested interests at play

The news report Mukesh and Nilesh had worked on was aired on NDTV's regional (Madhya Pra-

desh-Chhattisgarh) network on December 25. The project, initially tendered at ₹50 crore, ballooned to ₹120 crore despite no changes to the scope of work, the report said. Chhattisgarh government's PWD is the agency dealing with such contracts.

Nilesh says that he and Mukesh were travelling to interior Bijapur for a different story when he noticed the poor quality of the road and got curious. The Hindu visited the road which remains potholed, despite what appears to be some recent patchwork on certain stretches.

After the report was aired, there was a State raid on Suresh's premises apart from the inquiry, according to local news reports. After the recovery of Mukesh's body from Suresh's shed, older stories about the contractor's meteoric rise from a cook to a multimillionaire who travelled in luxury cars and had a grand wedding, where he had travelled in a helicopter to receive the bride, started doing the rounds.

Nilesh, who has worked as a journalist for a decade and knows the perils of practising the profession in India's interiors, feels burdened by the death of his colleague. "But there was a need for people to see the story, because Mukesh had continuously raised the issue of corruption and irregularities," he says.

Of the three brothers who are now in police custody, Ritesh was a friend of Mukesh's, says his brother. After the murder was unearthed, Bastar Inspector General P. Sundarraj said that the duo was having dinner together in the shed when the two had an argument over Mukesh being a "hindrance" in Ritesh's work despite them being family. Ritesh and Ramteke allegedly attacked Mukesh with an iron rod.

However, the police is looking at Suresh, who was arrested in Hyderabad on January 5, as the person behind the conspiracy, as he is now the 'prime accused'.

"We are collecting all the technical and material evidence in the case," says Mayank Gurjar, the head of the SIT now probing the case.

The journey to journalism

Mishra says that Mukesh's confidence in his reportage was rooted in his well-oiled network. The duo had travelled to all but 50 of the 650 villages in Bijapur. "He had empathy for last-mile villagers," he says.

One of Mukesh's earliest reports that made a mark was about the incarceration of an innocent youth for over a year and how his life had been ruined by this. Then there is the more popular story about how he was a part of a team that secured the release of a Central Reserve Police Force jawan abducted by Maoists in 2021.

In a conversation last May with this reporter, he had said that his sensitivity towards the tribals was rooted in his past, which was full of hardship, but also had stories of kindness.

Mukesh was born in Basaguda, a village nearly 50 km from Bijapur. His father passed away when he was just two and a half years old, leaving his unlettered mother, an anganwadi worker with a meagre salary, to raise him and his brother in a tribal area without land or rights to forest produce. They survived on the kindness of tribal neighbours who would give them a part of their crops or produce.

One of the stories that he recalled was how he would sleep outside a Vizag hospital where his mother Kaushalya (now deceased) was being treated for cancer because he could neither stay inside the women's ward nor afford accommodation. "On days it rained, there was no sleep," he had said.

To begin with, Mukesh had worked in a garage as a mechanic to make ends meet. The family's struggles worsened during the Salwa Judum movement, a counter-insurgency force, which displaced them to a relief camp. The inspiration to join journalism came from his older brother, and after spending nearly eight years in mainstream national media, he decided to start his own channel.

A Raipur-based journalist of a national daily said she had encouraged Mukesh when he discussed it with her. "I told him that it was a good move, as Bastar journalists often remain anonymous or exist as footnotes in reports filed on the region despite their groundwork. The cloak of anonymity would go, and he could tell his own stories," she says.

Besides his daily reports, Mukesh provided regular explainers, breaking down the complexities of a long struggle and the implications of it for those living in the area. Mukesh knew Bijapur district — a large area of which is covered in the dense Abujhmad forests — like the back of his hand, and often ventured beyond to travel the larger Bastar region.

According to his friends and fellow journalists, the monetisation of his YouTube channel, his recent car purchase, and tests with operating drone cameras in and around his office were to take his reportage to the next level. But these were cost-intensive exercises.

Das says Mukesh had exhausted his savings. He had bought a patch of land nearby, spending a major chunk of his savings, with the thought of constructing a home there some day.

"Financial security is always a challenge for us here, but the larger question of security for journalists remains unanswered. Even my family, based in Kanker, has asked me to quit the profession and return home," says Das. These views were echoed in meetings of press people in Delhi and Raipur.

Mukesh's office is opened sometimes. The set-up remains the same: books on tribals, land rights, Bastar, the Constitution, Karl Marx. There is an empty chair on which he sat, a poster of a skyscraper behind it, and the computer on which he edited his videos. On January 6, after eight security personnel and a driver were killed by Naxalites, Das, Mishra, and a few other journalists finish their day of reporting and sit here. They discuss Mukesh and the need for Bastar journalists to stay united. "If Yakesh is okay, we will pitch in to pay the rent and continue running this office. *Bhai ke office ko marne thodi na denge* (We won't let our brother's office die)," says Das.



The house where Mukesh lived in Bijapur city, where his older brother Yakesh (right) is seen. SHUBHOMY SIKDAR

KARNATAKA



Changing times: Residential pockets are increasingly being converted into commercial or mixed-use developments, often resulting in higher property prices and changing the neighbourhood's character. A view of the Jayanagar Extension on May 11, 1983 (left) and that of a commercial complex (right) at Jayanagar today. THE HINDU ARCHIVES AND K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



Old residential hubs are no longer neighbours' envy

Once sought-after residential localities, these prime old areas of Bengaluru are seeing rapid redevelopment, turning them into bustling commercial spaces. **K.C. Deepika** writes about the implications of this move from central business districts to secondary business districts

For many Bengalureans, Indiranagar is their weekend leisure date at its many well-known pubs, restaurants or shops. But for Jayalakshmi Srighu, now 62, it has been home for almost half-a-century.

When she moved into their house off Indiranagar 12th Main from Ulsoor in 1977, many people asked her family members why they had chosen an area so forsaken. "I was in class 10. We didn't know that roads were going to come up around us. This was part of a village called Doopanaahalli and a laidback place. We were scared to come home after 6 p.m.," she recalls.

The tuition teacher says she has seen the area grow before her eyes, remembering how people would marvel at the many beautiful houses being built on 100 Feet Road.

"As we were building our house, the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) planted so many trees. In the 1980s, the cross roads came up and plots were sold. I got married in 1984 and moved out of the country. When I returned in 1997 too, there were quite a few empty plots. In 1999, I bought a plot 10 doors away from the house where I grew up," she said.

A bygone era

She reminisces about how residents would play badminton on the road and on empty plots, and how they could see flights land and take off from HAL airport, and even the Public Utility Building — then the tallest in the city. "The BPO culture changed everything. Around the mid-2000s, it just crept up under us and things just ballooned. I still don't understand how 12th Main became a commercial access road. I still know a lot of people here, but there are very few locals. We are struggling to keep at least our road residential. I tell people this is the only place I have. It is unfortunate what it has become despite our fight. Even if it was commercial, it would have still worked if the basic rules, such as parking facilities, were followed," she says, while recalling how she battled sewage backflow in her house only a few days ago.

Once a sought-after residential area, Indiranagar today is among the prime commercial hubs of Bengaluru. Its story is the same as many other prime old residential hubs. With land parcels becoming scarce in the core areas of the city, real estate players across the board report massive redevelopment taking place in these prime areas.

Digbijay Das, Senior Director, Valuation Services, Colliers India, said apart from the Central Business District (CBD) region, comprising M.G. Road, Richmond Road, Residency Road, Infantry Road, Cunningham Road, Sankey Road, Vittal Malya Road, and Ulsoor, standalone residential developments in Koramangala, Indiranagar, Jayanagar, J.P. Nagar, etc., are being redeveloped into commercial office, retail, and mixed-use development areas. "The increase in commercial activity has led to a rise in land prices and this has prompted the redevelopment. Redevelopment is taking place to fulfil the burgeoning demand for commercial office space, retail, and mixed-use real estate in the CBD region which is starved of vacant land for new development," he said.

The densification of the area is leading to more traffic, and a strain on water, electricity, sewage network, and other resources

G.N. KUMAR
Resident of Jayanagar



Today's scene: Indiranagar was once a popular residential area. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



Cause and effect: Increase in commercial activity has led to a rise in land prices. SUHAKARA JAIN



Growth pains: Old-time residents say the transformation of their living areas has come at a cost. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

Sudhanshu Mishra, Principal Partner, Square Yards, an integrated platform for real estate and mortgages, noted significant redevelopment across areas like Indiranagar, Koramangala, and parts of Whitefield, driven by rapid urbanisation and the growing demand for modern infrastructure. "Many older neighbourhoods, once dotted with independent houses, are transforming into high-rise apartments, tech parks, and retail complexes. This shift is largely fuelled by the city's robust IT ecosystem and the promise of higher returns for property owners and developers."

Increasingly, residential pockets are being converted into commercial or mixed-use developments, often resulting in higher property prices and a change in the neighbourhood's character, he said, offering Mumbai's Lower Parel and Bandra-Kurla Complex as examples.

Natural progression

"CBDs remain the cornerstone of urban economic activity, serving as pivotal hubs for commerce and corporate operations. However, the emergence of secondary business districts (SBDs) offers a complementary solution, addressing rising commercial space costs and easing congestion. This shift does not signal the end of CBDs but rather complements their role. In Bengaluru, areas near the CBD have evolved into mature commercial markets. With land availability becoming increasingly constrained, redevelopment emerges as a natural progression. By optimising land use and revitalising ageing structures, redevelopment maximises the potential of the floor area ratio (FAR), enabling the creation of taller buildings or additional usable space, aligning with the city's growing demand for modern infrastructure," he added.

But this transformation has come at a cost, rue

old-time residents of these areas who continue to live there.

Sneha Nandihal from I Change Indiranagar, a federation of RWAs, has been at the forefront of a fight against illegal commercialisation of residential areas. "In Indiranagar, there are roads that have been categorised as commercial accesses. However, they shouldn't change the predominant nature of the residential lane. Trade licences are being issued indiscriminately. The process mandates that the officials check the place of trade for sufficient parking, fire safety, and ensure there are no building or zoning violations. If these places are found to be in violation, trade licences should be null and void. But no inspections are happening," she said, adding that there are establishments that do not have parking space for even a bicycle or have come up in setback areas [the minimum amount of open space surrounding a building that must be maintained] and basements.

She also pointed to the many rooftop bars and restaurants that the BBMP had admitted were illegal and had issued notices to them, but there had been no follow up since.

Violation of sanctioned plans

C.N. Kumar, a resident of Jayanagar, said the situation is progressively getting worse in this old residential area too. "There are blatant violations of sanctioned plans. Independent bungalows are being converted into multiple floor dwellings. The densification of the area is leading to more traffic, and a strain on water, electricity, sewage network, and other resources. These are all old layouts and there is additional pressure on the resources now. The government should start looking at stricter implementation of existing rules," he said.

Property developers like Anil R.G., Managing Director, Concorde, acknowledged that residential-to-commercial redevelopment in areas like Indiranagar and Koramangala has led to significant transformations. "For instance, Indiranagar's 100 Feet Road has evolved into a bustling commercial hub, with rental values reaching ₹100 to ₹150 per sq ft. This redevelopment has pushed up property prices by 50% to 70%, making it a lucrative opportunity for investors. However, long-term residents often face challenges such as increased traffic congestion. Indiranagar has seen a 30% rise in traffic over the past five years, and noise pollution, altering the quiet residential charm of the area. But, redevelopment has also brought modern infrastructure, better public amenities, and increased footfall, turning these neighbourhoods into thriving urban spaces that cater to a younger, tech-savvy demographic," he added.

A. Mohan Raju, Managing Director and CEO, Kalyani Developers, also said such residential-to-commercial redevelopment in areas like Whitefield typically leads to rising property prices and a higher cost of living. "While this boosts the local economy, it can displace long-term residents as land values and rental rates increase. The neighbourhood may undergo significant changes, with more commercial activity, infrastructure development, and population density, potentially disrupting the peaceful, residential environment. Over time, these areas may become more vibrant and economically prosperous, but the shift could result in the loss of cultural identity and challenges like traffic congestion and sustainability issues. Urban planning will be essential to balance growth with the needs of the community."

No master plan in place

Ironically, the city does not have a master plan in place after the withdrawal of the draft Revised Master Plan (RMP), 2031, though the High Court of Karnataka in May, 2023, clarified that its withdrawal would not "negate all actions taken in pursuance of it, and the actions already taken as per the provisional RMP-2031 before withdrawal must be given due effect to."

In addition, in October, 2022, the High Court of Karnataka directed the BBMP to submit a report on the exercise carried out on the use of residential premises for commercial activities in violation of the law in various parts of the city.

The Division Bench was hearing a PIL petition filed by the Wilson Garden Residents' Welfare Association complaining that several basement floors, silt floors, and parking areas in the residential zone are being allowed to be used by flower vendors in violation of laws.

BBMP officials were unavailable for comment. The BBMP, this financial year, revised the property tax of 15,731 properties, as the tax being paid was for residential properties despite the buildings being operated under the commercial category. The total pending amount estimated after this revision was ₹398.49 crore. The civic body has so far recovered ₹114.82 crore from 9,260 properties.

'NIMBY' phenomenon

However, Mathew Idiculla, an urban policy expert, said different kinds of cities across the world undergo what is termed redevelopment, urban renewal, or gentrification, but in the Indian context, this process hasn't been as stark or disruptive as seen in other parts of the world. This, he said, could be owing to multiple factors, such as complicated ownership titles and land records having multiple claimants, as well as social and emotional factors.

"There's also resistance from old owners for their neighbourhood not to change. If you look at the regulatory side, the master planning system basically prevents any kind of commercialisation. Planning regulations are highly inconsistent with the realities on the ground, though they are made with good intentions. So, there are blatant violations and everyone wakes up when there is a disaster. There is huge dissonance between the plan of what the city should be and what the character of the city is. There is also the not in my backyard (NIMBY) phenomenon that comes into play," he explained.

What is needed, he said, is to have practical norms with some sort of consensus that are implementable, and have enforcement mechanisms. "All interest groups should be considered before forming norms," he added.



A file photo of Mantri Mall at Malleswaram.



Chasing truce

Israel's Netanyahu is keener on his government's survival than on peace

President Joe Biden's remark that there is real progress in talks between Israel and Hamas on a ceasefire and hostage deal offers a rare ray of hope in ending the 15-month-long war. Mr. Biden said he was confident that his administration, which has only some more days left in office, could secure a deal. However, experience suggests that there is no deal unless an actual deal is reached, irrespective of the progress in talks. Even now, there are conflicting narratives on the remaining bottlenecks. Mr. Biden says Hamas is an obstacle, while Qatari and Egyptian officials, who were involved in the talks, say Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's refusal to agree to anything more than a temporary ceasefire is the main hurdle. Mr. Netanyahu does not want to bring the war to an end as his far-right government could collapse. But he is ready to accept a temporary halt in fighting in return for hostages. Hamas, fearing that Israel would resume fighting once the hostages are released, demand a permanent ceasefire. While talks drag on, the plight of over two million people in Gaza is nearly forgotten. Israeli strikes have already killed 46,000 Palestinians. Most of Gaza's population lives in tent cities without enough food, drinking water, medicines and electricity.

When Israel launched the war, after Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack, it had three objectives — destroy Hamas, secure the release of hostages and bolster the Jewish state's long-term security. Fifteen months later, while Israel has destroyed much of Hamas's military infrastructure and killed its top leadership, the group has survived and transformed itself as an insurgency. Israel has managed to release very few hostages and its long-term security risks remain. While a ceasefire with Hezbollah brought relative calm to the northern border, the Houthis of Yemen are now firing missiles and drones to Israel. The country is also facing international isolation. The International Court of Justice is hearing a genocide case against Israel, and the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants against Mr. Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. Rights organisations, from Amnesty International to HRW, are accusing Israel of genocide. Mr. Netanyahu seems unperturbed, thanks to the military, political and diplomatic support that Israel still enjoys from the Biden administration. But its inability to meet its objectives even in the tiny Gaza Strip, its disregard for international law and norms and the barbarity with which it is attacking the Palestinians should shock anyone interested in the country's physical and moral well-being. It is already too late. Israel's leaders and their backers in the West should not prolong this aimless war. Mr. Netanyahu should leave Gaza in return for the release of all hostages.

Local power

Local self-governments make a difference to the lives of people

Instead of signalling its intention to hold elections to rural local bodies, the Tamil Nadu government has appointed special officers for these bodies in several districts of the State. Elections were due in 9,624 village panchayats, 314 panchayat unions, and 28 district panchayats where the term of office of the RLs came to an end on January 5. These government officers will function for the next six months. In support of its decision, the government has cited the ongoing re-organisation of rural and urban local bodies, which will result in a delimitation of wards of the local bodies — a step that the government considers a prerequisite to the conduct of polls to local bodies. It had given an undertaking to the Madras High Court in December 2024, that no poll notification would be issued without completing delimitation and putting in place a quota of seats and offices for women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Apart from creating four more municipal corporations by accommodating village panchayats, the stage is set for the expansion of the limits of municipal corporations, municipalities and town panchayats by taking in other village panchayats. It has proposed the merger of least 140 village panchayats with municipal corporations. Though there is nothing final about the reorganisation, the government is of the view that rapid urbanisation in village panchayats adjoining bigger cities such as Chennai and Coimbatore necessitates a fresh look at the local bodies.

In *Suresh Mahajan vs State of Madhya Pradesh*, the Supreme Court had held that the delimitation or formation of ward "cannot be a legitimate ground to be set forth by any authority much less the State Election Commission — to not discharge its constitutional obligation in notifying the election programme" at an opportune time and ensure that an elected body was installed before the expiry of the five-year term of the outgoing body. It had also stipulated that in undertaking delimitation, which the Court regarded as a continuous exercise, it "ought to be commenced well-in-advance" so that the elections were notified on time. Sections of residents in a number of village panchayats have opposed the proposed reorganisation of local bodies as they are apprehensive of the cessation of rural development schemes such as the MGNREGA if there is a merger with urban local bodies. Tamil Nadu is not the only State that has failed to hold local body polls on time. Bigger cities such as Mumbai and Bengaluru are on the list. It is time that the States realise the importance of the space that local bodies occupy in the democratic structure. Despite shortcomings, local self-governments do make a qualitative difference to people's lives.

Forging leadership with India's youth power

Every year, January 12 is celebrated across the length and breadth of India as 'National Youth Festival', a day which is also the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. The Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue is an innovative one, launched with the vision of engaging India's youth in the developmental journey of the nation. The programme seeks to harness the collective energy, creativity and leadership potential of young minds to contribute towards realising a Viksit Bharat, i.e., a Developed India.

In line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's belief that the youth of the country are central to India's growth, the dialogue provides a platform for young leaders to engage in discussions, exchange ideas, and collaborate on solutions to the nation's challenges. The competition and its stages are designed to inspire the youth to think critically and contribute in a proactive way towards India's progress.

A dialogue, its competitive nature

The dialogue is a dynamic, multi-stage initiative, designed to engage and empower India's youth in the country's developmental journey. The competition has four stages, the first being a Viksit Bharat quiz held digitally on the My Bharat platform. This stage tested a participant's knowledge about India's achievements, challenges, and vision for a developed future, covering areas such as sustainable development, technology, and national policies. The top scorers moved on to the second stage, i.e., essay and blog writing, where they had to write on themes such as tech for Viksit Bharat and empowering youth for Viksit Bharat, reflecting on their vision for India's future. These submissions were evaluated for originality.

In the third stage, the Viksit Bharat Vision Pitch Deck, participants at the State level presented innovative ideas for India's development through a compelling pitch deck. The best teams from each State advanced to the fourth and last stage of the Viksit Bharat National Championship, which will be held at the Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi on January 11-12, 2025.

In the final, the selected teams will pitch their visionary solutions to the Prime Minister. This in itself is a unique opportunity to influence national policy and contribute to India's vision of a Viksit Bharat. The competition is structured to



Raksha Khadse

Union Minister of State for Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India

test not only a participant's knowledge and creativity but also their leadership and communication skills.

The features this year

The National Youth Festival is an annual celebration of India's youth, fostering a spirit of national integration and promoting the ideals of youth empowerment and creativity. However, this year's festival stands out in several ways.

The focus this year is on Youth for Sustainable Development, a theme that resonates with growing recognition of young people as the drivers of global change. In line with India's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the festival has incorporated workshops, seminars and cultural activities that align with the vision of a greener, more inclusive future. Additionally, there is a greater emphasis on the role of technology and innovation in achieving national goals, with specific sessions dedicated to Tech for Good and Innovation for India's Development.

Another unique feature this year is expanded virtual participation. With digital platforms having been integrated into the festival, young people from remote corners of the country can participate in discussions, workshops, and showcase their talents and ideas online. This inclusivity broadens the festival's reach and ensures that youth, regardless of location, has the chance to contribute.

The 2025 National Youth Festival will feature: workshops and panels on leadership and innovation. With a focus on topics such as youth leadership, digital entrepreneurship, and sustainable living, these sessions will equip participants with the skills necessary to drive change in their communities.

Second, cultural programmes. The festival will celebrate India's rich cultural heritage through music, dance, theatre, and folk art performances. These will provide youth with opportunities to express themselves creatively and appreciate the diverse cultural landscape of the nation.

Third, tech and innovation showcases. With the theme, Tech for Viksit Bharat, the festival will include exhibitions and presentations from young tech innovators and entrepreneurs who are building solutions to real-world problems in sectors such as health, education, agriculture, and urban development.

Fourth, engagement with leaders. The festival will facilitate direct engagement between youth and key leaders as pathbreakers from various sectors, which include government, business and academia. These interactions will provide participants with insights into leadership, governance, and the path to national progress.

Fifth, recognition of youth contributions. Awards and recognitions will be presented to young individuals and organisations that have demonstrated exceptional leadership, innovation and service. This will motivate others to take active roles in shaping India's future.

The role of MY Bharat

The Mera Yuva Bharat (MY Bharat), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, plays an instrumental role in shaping and guiding the direction of the National Youth Festival. As a platform that empowers youth by promoting engagement, knowledge sharing, and participation in nation-building activities, it is crucial in curating the festival's programmes and ensuring that they align with the aspirations of India's youth. Through MY Bharat, young people can gain access to resources, mentorship, and opportunities that will enhance their ability to contribute meaningfully to the country's development.

In this year's festival, MY Bharat will facilitate the digital integration of youth, enabling participation from across the country. It will also actively support youth-led initiatives, helping them navigate the complexities of social and technological challenges and encouraging them to find innovative solutions for a better India. In totality, India's youth is indeed its most precious asset. As the country progresses towards its vision of becoming a Viksit Bharat, it is the boundless energy, the ideas and the ambition of young people that will power the nation's transformation. The initiative of the Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue will not only open a new chapter but will also shape the mobilisation of the political leadership.

The future of India is bright, and it rests in the able hands of its youth. This resonates with the belief expressed by Swami Vivekananda in the historical silken words of the aged when he had said, 'Give me one hundred 'believing' young men... I will transform India as the number one nation in the entire world...'

India's journey so far on the AI military bandwagon

As the world has begun utilising and developing artificial intelligence (AI) for military purposes amidst debates of ethical concerns, India also appears to have hopped on the bandwagon. Last year saw a defence Budget of ₹76.21 lakh crore (\$75 billion), with an emphasis on modernising and upgrading India's military. India has begun to make strides towards integrating AI systems with their military and using them across various systems. Products such as the Indrajit autonomous drone security system have been developed. India has also attracted investments from numerous foreign tech giants for its AI ecosystem — Microsoft, for example, has committed approximately \$3 billion to building data centres in Telangana.

On track but there are hurdles

Multiple government figures have made statements about the utility of AI for military purposes, including Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who remarked that "artificial intelligence or AI has the potential to revolutionize military operations, from predictive analytics to autonomous decision-making systems".

Additionally, India is a part of multiple joint initiatives internationally that focus on AI. All these steps indicate the pouring of money and manpower into developing AI systems for military purposes. India is on track to fully utilising the potential of AI. However, there are some obstacles. Once addressed, they will ensure that India's adoption of AI will be even better.

A lack of digitised data to train systems on as well as a dearth of funds are the obvious factors. The biggest issue is the fact that the data centres required to run AI systems are expensive. India's military already has to focus on replacing legacy systems such as older aircraft with newer models, which is an expensive endeavour in itself. India's legacy hardware is no longer competitive in the global sphere, and significant resources are being directed towards replacing and upgrading it.

However, more general hurdles which are



Adya Madhavan

research analyst at The Takshashila Institution

harder to overcome exacerbate the problem. One such issue is that India's policies on AI are still fragmented or lack guidelines for implementation. For instance, the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence outlines India's vision for deploying AI. However it provides little insight on actual mechanisms for deployment.

Similarly, the responsible AI for All paper outlines the importance of accountability and transparency and puts forward principles for responsible AI use, but falls short in making military-AI-specific recommendations. Major strides have been made through these documents, but, as of now, arguably more robust frameworks need to be put in place for the deployment and the regulation of AI in the military. The Defence Artificial Intelligence Council (DAIC) and the Defence AI Project Agency (DAIPA) have been set up, and their objectives will bridge these gaps. However, there have not been any recent updates available to the public from these bodies.

The international picture

AI is also a technology that is a must based on the alacrity with which other countries have been focusing on integrating it with their militaries. Israel and China have focused on rapidly developing and deploying military AI and their technologies are already far ahead. India needs clarity of vision in its attitude towards AI, to make it possible to roll out AI systems faster and catch up with the global AI wave. There appears to be some degree of inconsistency within the government regarding sentiments towards military AI. This is reflected in remarks made by notable figures that underscore resistance or mistrust regarding the new technology. For example, the Minister of External Affairs compared AI to nuclear weapons — "AI will be as dangerous for the world as nuclear bombs once were" — in terms of their potential dangers to the world.

During the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) in 2023, the Prime Minister

also remarked that there must be a focus proceeding with extreme caution and warned of the darker sides of AI. While there is clarity on the fact that AI will be critical in the coming years, especially military AI, there appears to be less clarity on how to roll it out.

The specific problems in India

One of the biggest challenges that must be addressed, even when India is at the stage where technologies are ready to be widely deployed, is the historically siloed nature of the armed forces. The Indian Army, Indian Navy, and Indian Air Force have separate doctrines, systems and communication practices. This will likely significantly hinder interoperability and the procurement of systems for joint operations.

Finally, when it comes to the procurement of systems themselves, one of the issues with developing AI for defence is the reliance on public sector units (PSUs), which has prevailed in India for many decades. Despite the misconception that most of India's defence manufacturers are public sector companies, many private entities and startups produce advanced, high-quality systems. To equip the military with the best systems at a large enough scale, there will have to be public-private partnerships (PPPs) or an introduction of private competition. As seen with the space sector, this can significantly change the state of affairs.

India has already begun harnessing AI's potential to bolster its defence ecosystem. However, these multiple impediments serve as a reminder of the measures that need to be taken. Strategic alignment is paramount, and robust frameworks and policies are necessary to ensure AI's effective and ethical deployment. India needs to make systemic changes to tackle issues such as the inter-service silos and an overreliance on PSUs. Finally, collaboration and innovation internationally and in terms of PPPs will accelerate AI adoption and innovation. With a cohesive strategy, India will be able to maximise the utility of AI.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Diapora, global journeys

The journeys of the Indian diapora, who are scattered across the globe, are a remarkable chapter. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, to document these journeys, achievements, and contributions, is a timely reminder of the unique role Indians play in connecting nations, cultures and economies (Page 1, January 10). From excelling in academics, business and politics on the one hand to preserving and propagating India's rich cultural heritage on the other, their efforts form an indelible bond

between India and the world. By highlighting their stories of triumph and struggle, India can offer the world a deeper understanding of its global footprint. Acknowledging the contributions of the diapora will strengthen India's global partnerships. This initiative should be supported through academic studies, cultural exhibitions, and collaborations with overseas communities.

Pavithra M.,
Truvchi, Tamil Nadu

The history of the Indian diapora is a part of India's

rich tradition and culture. Indian history needs to be highlighted globally.

V. Rajesh Mohan Rao,
Dharmadam, Thalassery, Kerala

Managing crowds

Whenever a stampede occurs, numerous questions arise regarding the precautionary measures and crowd management strategies. Be it music and dance shows, festivals and processions, fairs and miscellaneous functions, the organisers and officials in charge should have a 'risk avoidance' plan in place. Appropriate measures can be taken using technology such as artificial intelligence, drones and stamped monitoring alarms.

M. Pradyu,
Thalassery, Kannur, Kerala

Trump's threats

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's plans to expand America's territorial boundaries have been denounced as 'crazy', 'outlandish' and 'insane'. His 'plans' will have global repercussions. It is almost as if the real estate developer in Mr. Trump has come to the fore. Perhaps we can look at his rash statements as nothing more than a 'political theatre of the absurd' and feel at ease. Mr. Trump will soon be in the White House and one hopes that he will act sensibly and sagaciously for humanity's sake, especially

as he will have access to the nuclear button.

G. David Milton,
Maruthanadu, Tamil Nadu

The deleterious and expansionist agenda of the President-elect of the U.S. is concerning. Mr. Trump should respect the sovereignty of other nations and consider the ramifications of his actions. It is once again a reminder of how destructive and dangerous power can be.

Balagopal Gopinath,
Keevilad, Alappuzha, Kerala

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

FIRST COLUMN

HOMESCHOOLING: AN OPTION WORTH EXPLORING

While it comes with challenges, its benefits make it an increasingly compelling choice



SAKSHI SETHI

Childhood is a short season, and homeschooling gives a child more time to truly enjoy it. In recent years, homeschooling has seen a significant rise in popularity as parents increasingly opt to educate their children at home rather than through traditional schooling systems. This shift reflects a combination of concerns about conventional education and the desire for more tailored learning experiences. One of the primary reasons parents choose homeschooling is the ability to customise education to suit their child's unique needs.

There is no denying that curriculum is a valuable tool but at the same time a terrible master. Traditional classrooms often struggle to accommodate different learning paces and styles, whereas homeschooling allows parents to tailor lessons, fostering deeper understanding and engagement. Many parents cite dissatisfaction with public or private school systems as a motivator for homeschooling. Issues such as overcrowded classrooms, underfunding, and lack of individual attention can negatively impact the quality of education. Additionally, concerns over bullying, peer pressure, and exposure to harmful influences prompt parents to seek alternatives.

Homeschooling allows families to integrate their cultural, ethical, or religious values into the curriculum. Parents can teach their children in alignment with their personal beliefs, creating an educational experience that reflects their family's principles. Unlike traditional schooling, homeschooling offers flexibility in schedules and teaching methods. Families incor-



porate travel, extracurricular activities, or non-traditional subjects into their routine, enhancing the learning experience. This adaptability appeals to families seeking a more balanced lifestyle.

Unlike traditional schooling, homeschooling offers flexibility in schedules and teaching methods. Families can incorporate travel, extracurricular activities, or non-traditional subjects into their routine, enhancing the learning experience. This adaptability appeals to families seeking a more balanced lifestyle. While homeschooling offers many benefits, it is not without its challenges. Parents often need to dedicate significant time and effort to planning and teaching. Additionally, concerns about socialisation can arise, as homeschooled children may have fewer opportunities for peer interaction. However, many families address this by participating in extracurricular activities, and community events. Homeschooling is not a new phenomenon.

In older times, education often took place at home, with parents or private tutors guiding the learning of their child. The rise of formalised schooling in the 19th and 20th centuries shifted education to institutions, but homeschooling remained a choice for families who sought alternatives. Modern homeschooling driven by educational reformers and parents seeking greater control over their children's education began gaining traction in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, it continues to evolve, integrating technology and innovative teaching practices. Technology undoubtedly has played a pivotal role in making homeschooling more accessible and effective. It has also enabled collaboration and connection among homeschooling communities. Online learning platforms, virtual classrooms, and educational applications such as Scholastic Kids, Udemy, Duolingo, Funbrain and many more provide parents with resources to create comprehensive curricula. The shift to homeschooling reflects a broader desire among parents to take control of their children's education and provide a more personalised, values-driven learning environment. While homeschooling comes with its challenges, the benefits of flexibility, individualised attention and alignment with family priorities make homeschooling an increasingly appealing choice for families worldwide.

(The writer is an educator, views are personal)

Junta faces collapse amid escalating defeats

Losses across key regions, coupled with mass defections and severe military setbacks, suggest a crumbling grip of Military on power in Myanmar



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

By all indications, 2025 is going to be, militarily, a dismal year for Myanmar's ruling junta. It is clearly losing its war against the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) and its armed wing, the People's Defence Force (PDF), ethnic armed organisations (EROs), and the Three Brotherhood Alliance (Henceforth the Alliance). Comprising the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), active in the Kokang Special Region of northern Shan State, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), also active in the Shan State, and the Arakan Army (AA), based in the Rakhine State in the country's western part, the alliance has been acting in close cooperation with the PDF and other ethnic armies.

Crystal-gazing is a hazardous business. Nevertheless, a fling at it is warranted by the unfolding events in that star-crossed country. A report under the headline, 'Junta's Writ Only Runs in One-third of Myanmar: NUG' (dated January 6, 2025), in the news website The Irrawaddy, cited the NUG as stating that the military regime controlled only 107 of the country's 330 townships. The PDF and EROs fully or partly controlled 144 townships or 44 per cent of the country. The website, which enjoys a high-measure of credibility, carried an article by Maung Kavi (dated January 8, 2025) under the headline, 'Myanmar Junta Boss warns resistance as Regime Loses Ground Nationwide', saying that the NUG had further claimed that nearly 1,500 of the junta's soldiers and police personnel had defected to the civil disobedience movement and 480 of them had taken up 'revolutionary duties'. The report titled 'Junta's Writ Only Runs in One-third of Myanmar: NUG' further states that 315 officers were killed and 127 injured in course of the last year. In the same period, 53 senior officers ranging in rank from colonel to major general, were either killed, injured, or taken prisoner. Among the rank and file, 14,093 soldiers and border guard policemen were killed and 7,363 injured. Anti-regime groups seized 741 junta



THE ODDS ARE NOW RAPIDLY STACKING UP AGAINST THE JUNTA. NO DOUBT, THE LATTER HAS TANKS AND OTHER ARMoured VEHICLES, ARTILLERY AND AIR FORCE. TANKS AND ARMoured VEHICLES ARE VERY DIFFICULT TO DEPLOY IN THE AREAS DOMINATED BY THE ETHNIC FORCES

positions. They were mostly captured by ethnic armies, but 162 were taken by PDF and People's Defence Force in Sagaing, Magwe, Mandalay, Bago and Tanintharyi regions.

The military lost in 2024 some 140 battalions and two regional commands - Northern Shan State Command in northern Shan State and Western Command in Rakhine-plus one regional operations command, five military operations commands, six operational bases, two airbases, 17 border guard police bases, as well as many infantry and light infantry battalions, and artillery, logistics, signal, and military engineering units.

While one should not take the NUG's claims at face value reports from the ground indicate the fall of the Sit-Tat (as the junta's army is called) has suffered severe body blows during the last year. The Three Brotherhood Alliance has gained significant ground since launching its offensive, code-named Operation 1027, on October 27, 2023. The AA had established control over almost the entire Rakhine State by April, 2024. In a major development, the MNDAA claimed on July 31, 2024, that it had captured Sit-Tat's military base in Lashio, a city in Shan State close to the border with China, and its airport. This was a major loss for the junta.

As Vivek Shankar has pointed out in a piece in The New York Times dated August 5, 2024, the city of Lashio and its airport lie on a crucial trade corridor to Yunnan Province in China, which is spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a high-speed rail link and other infrastructure projects on both sides of the border.

Besides gains in the north, the anti-junta forces had captured four towns in northern Mandalay.

According to a report by Andrew Natchemson published in Al Jazeera dated September 23, 2024, their capture had placed them within striking distance of the city of Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest urban centre, with a population of nearly two million.

On October 8, 2024, the Sit-Tat suffered a serious reverse with the fall of the township of Pinlebu to the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), an important part of the coalition of forces fighting the junta and its allies. Located on the border of the Sagaing Region and Kachin State, its capture opened up to the opposition forces the routes leading to the Kachin townships and the surrounding areas.

Besides its geo-strategic significance, the township's fall is important for what it revealed of the Sit-Tat's state. A report by Saw Lin, published in the news website, The Irrawaddy, on October 14, 2024, cites the NUG as claiming that the junta's troops, numbering 800, were defeated despite 670 airstrikes and the dropping of over 5,000 bombs, that around 70 junta soldiers were killed, 275 were missing, 225 were wounded, 48 surrendered and 102 captured during the fighting. Around 400 firearms and other military equipment were seized.

In keeping with the trend, the Junta had ceded three townships and the Western Command headquarters in Rakhine State in December, 2024, as the ethnic Arakan Army gained control over 14 of the 17 townships in the westernmost state. On January 1, 2025, the Sit-Tat retreated from a heavily-fortified police station in Sagaing Region's Budalin Township after a yearlong siege by regional resistance forces, making it easier for the latter to operate in the region.

According to Maung Kavi's report

cited earlier, the junta, which has been losing towns and bases to EROs in Rakhine, Chin, Kachin and Karen states, has not been able to launch any military operation to retake the northern Shan State, almost the whole of which it had lost in 2024. The Sit-Tat is in a bad way.

Its morale is low. There is internal discord. Several three-star generals have been removed. Many younger officers are unhappy as they recognise that almost the entire country is against them. According to a piece by Ye Myo Hein (dated May 4, 2023) featured by the United States Institute of Peace, it was found the Sit-Tat, whose "head-count," showed a "strength of a total 300,000-400,000 before the coup," showed that it currently "had a strength of about 150,000 personnel."

Roughly 70,000 are combat soldiers. At least 21,000 service members have been lost through casualties, desertion and defection since the coup. At this troop level, the Sit-Tat is barely able to sustain itself as a fighting force, much less a government.

The odds are now rapidly stacking up against the junta. No doubt, the latter has tanks and other armoured vehicles, artillery and air force. Tanks and armoured vehicles are very difficult to deploy in the areas dominated by the ethnic forces. With densely forested mountainous terrains, deep gorges and steep climbs, these are ideal for staging ambushes. Moreover, air-strikes and artillery do not win wars, even when backed by heavily armed and trained infantry. Otherwise, the United States would have swept to a victory in Vietnam.

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

Real-time travel assistance: Transforming the Indian travel experience

From the integration of cutting-edge technology to the emergence of unique destinations, the way we explore has been redefined

The travel industry in India has undergone a significant transformation in the past decade. The advent of technology, the emergence of unique destinations, and travellers' shifting preferences have reshaped the way we experience travel. While convenience and connectivity have expanded exponentially, so have the challenges that come with travelling through this vast and diverse country.

In such a scenario, the idea of real-time travel assistance is much more than a luxury, gradually becoming a necessity. India is a land of incredible diversity, which often presents challenges for travellers, both domestic and international. With 28 states and countless languages, customs, and tradi-



HARISH KHATRI

tions, exploring India can be as overwhelming as it is enriching. A misplaced document, a language barrier, or a medical emergency in an unfamiliar city can turn a dream vacation or a crucial business trip into an overwhelming ordeal. This is where the concept of real-time assistance steps in, bridging the gap between exploration and ease.

The Need for Immediate Support: Travellers today demand solutions that are immediate, efficient, and humanised. The expectations from travel experiences are no longer confined to curated itineraries and luxury stays. Safety, comfort, and resolution to unexpected issues are just as critical to creating memorable journeys. Whether it's assis-

ing in locating a nearby pharmacy late at night, navigating bureaucratic hurdles in a foreign environment, or finding reliable medical aid during emergencies, travellers increasingly rely on services that ensure a smooth journey. Real-time assistance goes beyond static travel guides or pre-recorded helplines. It operates as a different system where timely, empathetic, and accurate support becomes a part of the travel experience. It is this proactive approach that helps mitigate common traveller challenges and allows for a seamless journey, irrespective of the destination.

Empathy in Travel Assistance: A game-changer at its core, real-time travel assistance is about offering humanised solutions. Travellers often find themselves in vulnerable situations where a touch of empathy can go a long way. Imagine being stuck at a remote train station with no one to guide you to your next stop or dealing with a sudden health scare in a busy urban centre where you don't know the language.

These are moments when an empathetic, knowledgeable professional on the other end



of a call or chat can provide not just solutions, but also reassurance. It is this empathy paired with technology that is revolutionising travel assistance in India. Real-time support services aim to address the emotional and logistical needs of travellers in equal measure.

Utilising Technology to Enable Seamless Experiences: The amalgamation of technology and travel assistance has unlocked possibilities previously deemed unattainable. Advanced algorithms, live

tracking, and geo-location services now enable assistance providers like India Assist to respond with precision and speed. Right from helping a traveller recover a lost wallet, guiding them to the best transport options, or facilitating emergency care, technology serves as the backbone of real-time assistance.

Moreover, AI-powered systems can predict and preempt potential challenges, ensuring that travellers are equipped with solutions even before they face a problem. Combined with human expertise, such systems provide an unprecedented level of service that adapts to the ever-changing needs of travellers.

A Vision for the Future of Indian Travel

As India continues to grow as

a preferred travel destination for global tourists and a thriving market for domestic explorers, the need for reliable, real-time support systems will only increase. From first-time solo travellers to seasoned professionals on the move, everyone stands to benefit from a travel arena where assistance is no longer a reactive measure but an integral part of the journey.

The impact of such assistance goes beyond individual convenience. It enhances the overall travel ecosystem, fostering trust and confidence among travellers. When individuals feel supported, they are more likely to venture into less-explored destinations, bolstering local economies and creating new tourism opportunities. Real-time assistance also

aligns with India's vision of creating a more inclusive and welcoming travel environment. Addressing the unique needs of every traveller, be it accessibility, safety, or cultural understanding — opens the doors to a more diverse and enriching travel experience. As we move forward, the travel industry must imbibe the ethos of real-time assistance, not as an add-on service but as a core pillar of the travel experience. After all, the most unforgettable journeys are not just about the destinations we visit — they are about the challenges we overcome and the moments of human connection that transform challenges into memories.

(The writer is founder and MD of India Assist; views are personal)

Trump 2.0 and H-1B hubbub

GVANENDRA KESHIRI
DH NEWS SERVICE

Elon Musk, born in South Africa, moved to Canada in 1988 at the age of 18, hoping to migrate to the United States someday. As his mother was born in Canada, he got a passport issued by the North American nation's government. The passport finally helped him migrate to the US as a student. The rest is of course history.

Most of the 4.4 million Indian Americans residing in the US have a story similar to that of the Tesla CEO, who turned into a US citizen in 2002. They migrated to the US as students or temporary workers on H-1B visas. Indians make up at least one in every four international students in US universities and play an outsized role in the US economy, and now in politics too.

A report by IndiaPost, a US-based non-profit, shows that Indian Americans occupy over 4.4% of the senior public service positions in the US, while they make up just around 1.5% of the country's population. Out of 648 unicorn startups in the US, 72 have Indian origin founders, making up around 11% of the total. 16 of the Fortune 500 companies are led by chief executives of Indian origin. Indian Americans contribute over \$300 billion in tax revenues to the US federal treasury annually, higher than the total direct tax collections in India - \$235 billion - in 2023-24. As of 2023, Indian companies have invested a cumulative \$40 billion in the US and created 426,000 jobs.

Like Musk, who built a business empire in the US, tens of thousands of people of Indian origin have contributed significantly to the American economy and have created jobs for Americans.

One of the key planks of Donald Trump in the US presidential election was Make America Great Again (MAGA). The far-right supporters of this movement have been demanding sweeping changes in US immigration policies, including banning H-1B visas, which they

allege allow foreigners to take away the jobs of Americans. They argue that companies exploit the programme to hire foreign workers at lower wages, bypassing qualified Americans.

The row over the H-1B visa scheme within the MAGA camp erupted after Trump picked Sriam Krishnan as policy advisor on Artificial Intelligence (AI). Krishnan, a supporter of liberal immigration policy, wrote on X in November arguing for removing country caps for green cards.

Musk has staunchly defended the H-1B visa programme despite backlash from the nativists. "The reason I'm in America along with so many critical people who built SpaceX, Tesla and hundreds of other companies that made America strong is because of H-1B," Musk wrote on X, but also called for overhauling the 'broken' visa scheme.

New Delhi stressed that the movement of skilled professionals was an important part of the India-US relations, and it benefitted both countries.

Nagesh Kumar, the former director of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific, says that the US is unlikely to drastically change the H-1B visa programme and the issue looks more like "election rhetoric".

Out of the total 265,777 H-1B visas issued by the United States in the fiscal year ending September 30, 2023, 78% went to Indians. The majority of them are employed with Information Technology companies. Indian IT firms - Infosys, TCS, HCL Technologies and Wipro - have been among the biggest beneficiaries of this programme. A ban or drastic change in H-1B visa policy would significantly impact their businesses.

"While potential H-1B visa reforms under the Trump administration could pose challenges for Indian IT professionals and companies, they may also present opportunities to adapt and strengthen the offshoring model to mitigate the impact of such changes," says Bipin Sapra, Tax Partner, EY India.

★ THE TALE OF A VISA ★

• The H-1B is a temporary (nonimmigrant) category of visa issued by the US government.

• This category of visa was introduced in 1990.

• Universities and related nonprofit entities, nonprofit research organizations and government research organizations are exempt from the cap.

• It allows US employers to hire highly educated foreign professionals to work in "specialty occupations", like in fields such as mathematics, engineering, technology, and medical sciences. The initial duration of an H-1B visa is three years but may be extended for six years.

• The cap for issuing H-1B visas is currently set at 65,000 visas in a fiscal year from October 1 to September 30.

• 20,000 additional visas are issued for foreign professionals who graduate with a master's degree or doctorate from a US institution of higher learning.

Citizens of 5 countries received most of the H-1B visa approvals (October 1, 2022 - September 30, 2023)

Country	Number of H-1B visas (initial and continuing employment)
India	279,386 (72.3%)
China	45,344 (11.7%)
Philippines	4,619
Canada	3,852
South Korea	3,603

• Indians received 72% of H-1B visas, followed by the Chinese, who received 12%. More than 7 of every 10 H-1B visa holders are Indians

SOURCE: US CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES (USCIS), EMBASSY OF INDIA IN US, INDIAPOST

April-September, 2024

• Out of 130,000 H-1B visas issued between April and September 2024, around 24,766 were allocated to companies with origin in India

• Amazon topped the tally with 9,265 visas, while Infosys came second with 8,140 visas

• Infosys received most of the H-1B visas among companies with origin in India, followed by TCS which received 5,274 visas and HCL America which received 2,953 visas

Indian Diaspora
4.4 million Indian Americans/Indian origin people reside in the US

Contribution to the US economy
Indian Americans contribute over \$300 billion to US tax collections annually

3.18 million Persons of Indian origin constitute the third-largest Asian ethnic group in the US

Indian diaspora makes up 1.5% of the US population

• As of 2023, Indian companies have invested a cumulative \$40 billion in the US leading to the creation of 426,000 jobs.

TRUMP 1.0

• President Donald Trump in 2017 signed an executive order for enhanced scrutiny of the H-1B visa applications.

• 24% of the H-1B visa applications, an all-time high, were rejected in 2018.

TRUMP 2.0

• Trump promised that he would build on the measures taken during his first term to drastically bring down both legal and illegal migration to the US.

• The President-elect's core MAGA supporters, led by Steve Bannon and Laura Boomer, want the H-1B visa scheme scrapped.

• Tesla CEO Elon Musk and entrepreneur-turned-politician Vivek Ramaswamy, both key members of Team Trump, defended the H-1B visa programme. Musk called for its overhaul.

• Trump sided with Musk and Ramaswamy.



DH ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

India needs a dynamic migration policy

SAJNAY BHATTACHARYA

Seeing new opportunities in distant lands has been human nature since ancient times. In modern times, migration policy is used as a governance tool to balance labour market requirements as nations pursue economic development, technological advancement and demographic challenges.

The Indian diaspora of 32 million spread over 180 countries is the largest migrant community. 14 million NRIs live overseas as highly skilled professionals, semi-skilled workers and students, while 18 million PIO/OCIs are political, business and community leaders in their adopted countries. Around 2.5 million Indians migrate annually. Their remittances, \$129 billion in 2024, are the highest in the world. India is in a sweet spot as a source country whose professionals and workers are valued globally.

The 21st century has seen growing protectionism and parochialism in destination countries that impede the free movement of migrants. The OECD data reveals migrant stock represents a relatively stable proportion of the local population, annual flows are modest at around 3% and migrants contribute substantially to economic growth. Yet, unplanned or poorly designed migration policies can lead to labour market imbalances and weak integration of migrant communities.

There is a need for consultation and coordination at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. The Global Compact on Migration, negotiated between source and destination countries at the United Nations, provides a framework for safe, orderly and regular mobility.

India has been working on a governance model prioritising safe and legal migration. Its migration and mobility policy is emerging from negotiations with key partners and consultations at regional and multilateral levels.

For vulnerable workers, nurses and seamen, many of whom go to Gulf countries and Southeast Asia, the digitised e-Migrate platform

provides transparent and safe mobility. Old labour agreements are being updated for improved working conditions, better compensation for certified skills and integration with migration platforms of GCC countries for transparency. New migration channels have been opened up in East Asia and Israel that provide higher wages and remittance potential. Improving the soft and hard skills of workers, especially for the future of jobs, is an urgent priority. A new and progressive Emigration Act, to replace current laws, is necessary.

At the same time, discussions on the Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility with the European Union gave assurance on our priority for safe and legal migration and secured leverage on India-preference for

professionals needed in the West. India entered into new generation Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreements with Germany, France, the UK, Denmark, Austria and Portugal to secure an edge in employment with better mobility conditions

for Indian professionals, access to jobs following graduation for students and new opportunities for youth exchange and short-term new era jobs. Similar skill-focused agreements were concluded with Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Israel and Mauritius. Traditional destinations such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, which have relatively transparent migration policies based on labour market determination, skills and quotas saw better access through government and corporate interventions.

Today, in many parts of the world, there is a preference for India's highly skilled professionals and workers who are seen as major contributors to a technology and competency-based economy. A dynamic and comprehensive migration policy, aligned with national priorities, is the key to retaining an edge in this era of transformation.

(The writer, a former Secretary at the Ministry of External Affairs, is now a Professor of Diplomatic Practice at Jindal Global University)



SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

The science behind cold waves and pollution

Low pressure formed over the Mediterranean travels to northwest India and gets blocked by the Himalayas, trapping moisture, writes **BK Singh**

Cold waves have impacted northern India since the last week of December, with heavy rains contributing to a sharp drop in temperature. Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) issued yellow alerts and warned travellers to be prepared for road, rail and air transport disruptions.

Winter rains in north Indian plains are caused by western disturbances, which originate from the low-pressure system formed in the Mediterranean and then travel eastwards across the country. In the Indian subcontinent, the Himalayas block these disturbances, causing widespread rains in the northwestern plains and snow in the west of the Himalayas. Further, northeast trade winds prevailing in India bring dry weather to most regions, including the peninsula, which experiences less defined cold weather due to the moderating influence of the seas. At the same time, retreating monsoons cause rainfall on the Tamil Nadu coast.

World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has said 2024 was the warmest year on record based on global average temperature. It has breached a 1.45-degree Celsius average rise above the pre-industrial temperature recorded in 2023. Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) also came up with a report on 1st January 2025 that 2024 was the warmest year since 1901, breaching the Indian record 2016 by 11 degrees Celsius. The sea surface temperatures have risen relatively high during November and December.

The warm and moist air over the ocean's surface moves above it, lessening less air near it and thus creating a low pressure area. High-pressure air in the surrounding area pushes in the low pressure already developed, and the new air also becomes warm



Wintry mornings in Delhi always bring pollution and smog with them. PTI PHOTO

and moist and rises. So long as warm air continues to rise, the surrounding air swirls in to take its place. The warm and moist air rises and cools off, and the formation of clouds takes place.

Storms originating from seas are natural phenomena caused by violent atmospheric disturbances on land and sea. They are formed when the centre of low pressure develops with a high-pressure system around them. These storms develop between 50 and 300 N latitudes in the northern hemisphere and south of the Tropic of Cancer. If the wind velocity is less than 60 km per hour, the storm is a tropical depression; if it is between 60 and 120 km per hour, it is a

tropical storm; and if it is more than 120 km per hour, it is a tropical cyclone.

Western disturbances are low-pressure systems bringing snow and rain in the monsoon winter season across Pakistan and northwest India, contributing 5 to 10% of annual rainfall in the region. They are helpful to wheat crops grown in the season. As against cyclonic storms occurring in the tropical region south of the Tropic of Cancer, western disturbances develop in the mid-latitude region and north of the Tropic of Cancer.

These are low-pressure systems embedded in the western winds from west to east. The low pressure formed over the Mediter-

anean travels over Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and enters the northwest region of India. These disturbances eventually come up against the Himalayas and get blocked, causing moisture to get trapped and precipitation in rain and snow.

Easing the pollution?

Since the western disturbances have arrived, the region is locked in a cycle of fog, heavy showers, drizzle and low clouds. Before the arrival of western disturbances, the Delhi NCR region annually grapples with severe pollution due to several anthropogenic activities. During November and December, when vertical air circulation ceases, a high concentration of PM 2.5 is reported in the region, leading to the Air Quality Index (AQI) registering an inferior and severe category.

The leading causes of high pollution have been the transport sector, industrial emissions, biomass burning, road dust, residential emissions, brick kilns, and stubble burning in the states surrounding Delhi. So long as the dry winter prevails, the pollution in the region is a significant health hazard for humans, especially children and old persons.

Currently, the weather has caused a big relief from pollution. AQI has improved, and the suspension of activities like schools, construction works, movement of vehicles, etc., has been eased. The planners and the policymakers in the government sector would not have to scratch their heads for cloud bursts. IMD has already predicted slightly more rainfall than normal rains for January 2025, especially in north India. Thus, cold wave conditions will likely persist.

Pollution is a more significant health hazard than cold-wave conditions. The annual cycle of pollution in Delhi NCR is a bigger worry, and authorities have failed to find a workable solution. The only feasible solution is to entirely phase out fossil fuel burning and wholly depend on renewable energy.

(The author is a retired principal chief conservator of forests, Karnataka)

Pluto may have caught its biggest moon

Some 4.5 billion years ago, the dwarf planet Pluto was suddenly joined by a companion. For a very brief period — perhaps only hours — they danced as if arm in arm before gently separating, a grand do-si-do that resulted in Pluto and its quinter of moons orbiting the sun together today.

Astronomers have long wondered how Charon, the largest of those moons, came to orbit Pluto. A paper published Monday in the journal *Nature Geoscience* described a possible sequence of events that may resolve the question.

"The reason that Pluto and Charon are so interesting is because Charon is 50% the size of Pluto," said Adeene Denton, a planetary scientist at the University of Arizona who led the paper. "The only comparable system is Earth and its moon."

Charon is about 750 miles across, while Pluto is nearly 1,500 miles in diameter. That proportion in sizes suggests that a number of conventional scenarios explaining how moons form are unlikely, including theories that Charon formed from debris around Pluto or was captured by its gravitational pull. Could Charon's existence instead be explained by the kind of collision that is believed to have formed Earth's moon?

The sizes of Pluto and Charon meant that it was difficult to work out how they "didn't just merge like two blobs of liquid," the most likely outcome of such an explosive scenario, said Erik Asphaug, also a University of Arizona planetary scientist and a co-author on the paper.

Pluto and Charon are in a region of the outer solar system beyond Neptune called the Kuiper belt, which makes them both very rocky and icy. By including these properties in their model, the research team devised a scenario where the two bodies collided and became ensnared without merging.

If Charon hit Pluto at a relatively sedate speed of about 2,000 mph — 10 times as slow as the Earth's moon-forming impact — the two would have remained in contact for about 10 hours before gradually separating but remaining together. The researchers described this encounter as a "kiss and capture."

Denton said the toughness of the two bodies prevented them from breaking apart. Pluto would have been rotating once every three hours at a time (the length of a day on Pluto today is some 150 hours), so the two would have swung around three times while joined together. The angular momentum of the spinning Pluto would then have pushed Charon slowly away but, crucially, left it trapped in Pluto's orbit.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

A mother on a rescue mission in Yemen

Nimisha Priya's is a tragedy of immense proportions. Convicted in Yemen for murdering her Yemeni business partner, who, Nimisha's mother says, was abusive and vile, the 36-year-old nurse from Kerala is on death row. It's a race against time and the odds for Nimisha's mother to pay blood money and save her daughter's life, report
Hiran Unnikrishnan and G. Krishnakumar

The New Year was just two days away. But for Premakumari, waking up in Yemen's capital Sanaa, a heritage city scarred by a relentless civil war, hope felt like a distant, fleeting dream. Her fragile optimism shattered when she received the devastating news: Mahdi al-Mashat, president of Supreme Political Council of Houthis, had approved the execution of her daughter, 36-year-old Nimisha Priya. A nurse from Kerala, Nimisha has been imprisoned in Sanaa's central jail since 2017, convicted of murdering Yemeni national Talal Abdo Mahdi, her business partner.

"We thought everything was finally falling into place when her lawyer informed us of the President's decision," Premakumari said over the phone, her voice trembling with grief. "Time is slipping away. I beg everyone to come together for a final effort to save her life. I can't bear the thought of her execution, not even for a moment."

Purpose of action council

The 57-year-old woman's fight to save her daughter has been long and gruelling. From Kizhakkambalam village in Ernakulam, where she worked as a domestic help, she embarked on an arduous journey to Sanaa to meet Nimisha in the central jail on April 24, 2024.

Since then, she has found shelter with the family of Samuel Jerome Bhaskaran, a key member of the Save Nimisha Priya International Action Council. The collective, comprising elected representatives, lawyers and human rights activists, was formed to ensure Nimisha's access to justice and raise funds for blood money – the compensation paid to the victim's family in accordance with Shariah law – should the victim's family agree to pardon her. She then met her daughter again in September, accompanied by two nuns who offered prayers for her at the central jail.

Nimisha, a native of Kollengode in Palakkad district, left for Yemen in 2008 with dreams of securing a better future for her parents, who worked as domestic helps. Determined to overcome the challenges of working abroad, she landed a job at a government-run hospital in Sanaa. She worked there until 2011, before returning to Kerala to marry Tommy Thomas, a native of Thodupuzha in Idukki district.

Hopes dashed by civil war

The civil war that resulted in the Houthi rebels with links to Iran gaining control over Sanaa in September 2014 shattered her dreams. The Government of India issued an advisory in April 2015 asking Indian nationals not to travel to Yemen owing to the adverse political and security situation triggered by the rift between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition forces in Yemen.

"I was preparing to join her in Yemen with our two-year-old daughter when the civil war erupted," Tommy recalls from his single-room rented house in Thodupuzha. "Nimisha had left for Yemen a month and a half earlier. By the time we secured visas and arranged travel expenses, everything had changed."

He vividly remembers the moment Nimisha called to warn him not to travel. "She told me a war had broken out. At first, I didn't believe her because there were no reports confirming it. Then, news started pouring in through international media. Before I could fully comprehend the situation, Nimisha became almost unreachable," he says. Now 48, Tommy works as an auto-rickshaw driver to make ends meet.



Time is slipping away. I beg everyone to come together for a final effort to save her life. I can't bear the thought of her execution

PREMAKUMARI
Nimisha Priya's mother

In 2015, Nimisha quit her low-paying hospital job to start her own clinic. However, Yemeni law required nationals to own and operate businesses, forcing her to partner with Talal Abdo Mahdi to set up the venture. The same year, Mahdi accompanied her to Kerala when she came home for a month-long holiday. A petition filed by Premakumari in December 2023 before the Delhi High Court, seeking the Centre's permission to visit her daughter, alleges a sinister twist. According to the petition, Mahdi allegedly stole a wedding photograph of Nimisha during their visit to Kerala and later doctored it to claim that he was married to her.

"Over time, the relationship between Nimisha and Mahdi deteriorated. He began torturing her and siphoning off all the clinic's revenue. When she confronted him about the embezzlement, he became increasingly hostile," the petition states.

The document further alleges that Mahdi seized her passport to prevent her from leaving Yemen and subjected her to physical and mental torture under the influence of drugs. "Unable to endure the abuse, Nimisha lodged a complaint with the Sanaa police. However, instead of taking action against Mahdi, the authorities arrested her and detained her for six days. Upon her release, the intensity of the torture escalated dramatically," it claims.

Desperate measures

In July 2017, desperate for a way out, Nimisha sought advice from a jail warden near her clinic where Mahdi had previously been imprisoned for various offences. The warden suggested sedating Mahdi to recover her passport. On her first attempt, the sedation failed due to his substance abuse. She tried again using a stronger sedative, but Mahdi died within minutes from an apparent drug overdose, the petition says.

Nearly a month later, Nimisha was arrested near Yemen's border with Saudi Arabia after Mahdi's dismembered body was discovered in a water tank.

The incident received extensive media coverage, with local television channels labelling her as the prime suspect. In 2020, a trial court sentenced Nimisha to death, a verdict upheld by the Supreme Judicial Council in 2023. Efforts by the Save Nimisha Priya International Action Council and her family to save her gained traction after her lawyer revealed a potential lifeline. The appeal court had kept open the possibility of blood

money. However, the travel ban imposed by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to Yemen on September 26, 2017, in view of the fragile political and security situation in the country came as a stumbling block in the family's efforts to travel to Sanaa.

"The obstacles to her mother's repeated attempts to travel to Yemen were finally cleared when the Delhi High Court, acting on her plea, directed the Centre in December to relax its 2017 notification barring Indian passport holders from entering Yemen due to the ongoing civil war," explains Subhash Chandran, who represented Premakumari in the case.

The court had asked the Centre to consider the clause in the notification that the travel ban can be relaxed by the Centre for specific and essential reasons of travel.

It had stated that a limited period may be granted by the Centre on the request of the applicant, who was required to travel at his or her own personal risk without any liability to the Government of India or any State Government concerned.

Hefty fee for negotiations

Premakumari reached Sanaa on April 23, 2024, but negotiations soon hit a roadblock. The lawyer engaged by the Indian mission in Sanaa demanded a hefty fee of \$40,000 for pre-negotiations. As per Yemen's laws, Nimisha's family could not contact the victim's family members, and they needed to hire negotiators to reach out to them.

"We managed to raise the first instalment of \$20,000 through crowdfunding in May," says Chandran. "However, after the payment, there was no clear communication about the progress of the negotiations. Given the enormous amount, there was disagreement within the council about releasing the second instalment. Eventually, we decided to release it on December 27 to expedite contact with the victim's family."

Despite the Houthi Supreme Council president's approval of Nimisha's execution – Sanaa is controlled by the Houthi rebels – her family and the Save Nimisha Priya International Action Council remain hopeful.

"The death penalty can still be waived if the victim's family agrees to pardon her in exchange for blood money," says Samuel, an aviation consultant who has been based in Yemen since 1999. He acknowledges that the delay in releasing the second instalment stalled progress in the negotiations but insists efforts are ongoing. "We are working to re-establish contact through the lawyer," he adds.

Diplomatic efforts appear to have gained momentum after the MEA announced on December 31, 2024, that the Government of India "is extending all possible assistance to Malayali nurse Nimisha Priya, who is on death row at the central prison in Yemen's capital, Sanaa." The Ministry acknowledged, however, that the case posed significant challenges due to India's lack of official ties with the Iran-aligned Houthi rebels. Adding a twist to the unfolding drama, reports emerged suggesting that Iran might intervene on Nimisha's behalf.

Though uncertainty clouds Iran's mediation effort, her husband views it as a flicker of hope. "There is hope," he says, his voice steady yet tinged with anticipation. Officials of the MEA have been in regular contact with him, offering updates and reassurances.

Frantic efforts continue

"Over the years, my daughter and I have met every political leader in Kerala we could reach out to. The Union government has been supportive, though I understand their constraints. Iran's involvement, given its sway over the Houthis, is a glimmer of hope," he adds.

For their daughter, who has not seen her mother since she was two, the reality remains hazy. Now in Class 7 and studying at a boarding school in Kothamangalam, Ernakulam, the young girl doesn't seem to know the gravity of her mother's situation.

"I've told her that her mother is in jail for something she didn't do," says Tommy, his voice choking with emotion.

"She only knows her mother through voice notes and the rare video calls. Whenever she gets a message from her, she replies, urging her to come home soon. I hope her wish will soon become a reality."

Tommy Thomas, husband of Nimisha Priya

ILLUSTRATION:
SATHESH VELLINEZH

EXPLAINED TECHNOLOGY

WHY FACT-CHECKERS HAVE BEEN DUMPED BY META, HOW NOTES WORK

KARAN MAHADIK
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 10

META, the company behind Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, recently announced changes to content moderation across its apps in the US. It will eliminate fact-checking labels from fact-checkers, replacing them with a 'Community Notes' system similar to X (formerly Twitter). The decision has ignited a broader debate over the most effective strategy to combat misinformation on social media.

Behind the change

Nine years ago, Meta began flagging fake news with help from external fact-checkers. Its independent fact-checking programme was expanded after reports said Russian disinformation campaigns had targeted American voters during the 2016 presidential election campaign.

So far, fact-checkers and experts certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) would independently review and rate potential misinformation by citing their original reportage, interviewing primary sources, consulting public data, and analysing media. Meta would ensure that content rated as "false" was less visible to users.

Meta has now changed tack. It says that this approach is flawed, and experts may have biases — which "showed up in the choices some made about what to fact check and how".

IFCN has pushed back. "The fact-checkers used by Meta follow a Code of Principles requiring non-partisanship and transparency," IFCN director Angie Holan said in a statement. She said that Meta's decision "comes in the wake of extreme political pressure from a new administration and its supporters".

US President-elect Donald Trump has

been critical of big tech companies for allegedly censoring conservatives online.

Community Notes

Community Notes was first piloted as a programme called Birdwatch by Twitter in 2021, that is, before Elon Musk purchased the platform and renamed it. It allows users to add facts and context below a specific post. A Community Note shows only if enough contributors vote that it provides helpful content. Anyone on X can add Notes if they meet certain criteria, like having a six-month-old account, a verified phone number, and no violations of X rules.

Initially, contributors are only allowed to rate Community Notes as helpful or not. Over time, they are allowed to write and attach their own Notes. All contributions are publicly available, allowing anyone to download the data and flag issues. Meta's model will likely be similar.

Crowdsourcing concerns

Given its crowdsourced nature, Community Notes could be vulnerable to coordinated manipulation. To address this challenge, X uses a bridging algorithm to determine whether a Note appears below a post. This means that a Note will be shown only if it has been rated as 'helpful' by people who have tended to disagree in their past ratings.

X claims this helps "prevent a single group from being able to engage in mass voting to determine what notes are shown". It also claims to proactively invite the inputs of contributors offering different perspectives.

But challenges remain. Community Notes may not be as effective in stopping the spread of misinformation from one platform to another. Their ability to capture the nuance that goes into fact-checking political news has also been questioned.

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 10

THE YEAR 2024 has now been confirmed to have breached the 1.5 degree Celsius global warming threshold, becoming the first calendar year to do so.

The annual average temperature of Earth's surface in 2024 was 1.6 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial times (average of the 1850-1900 period), according to data from the Copernicus Climate Change Service run by the European Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (ECMWF).

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) used six datasets, including the one used by ECMWF, to conclude that 2024 was 1.55 degrees Celsius warmer than pre-industrial levels. Each of the six datasets found 2024 to be the warmest year ever, but not all of them recorded the warming to be in excess of 1.5 degrees Celsius.

An arbitrary mark

The 1.5 degree mark is an arbitrarily decided threshold. In terms of climate change impacts, there is nothing new that will begin to happen once this threshold is crossed. Science only says that the climate impacts are expected to become more severe and frequent as warming increases.

The 2024 breach does not mean that the 1.5 degree target is over. This target, mentioned in the 2015 Paris Agreement, refers to long-term temperature trends, usually over two to three decades, not annual or monthly averages.

The breach does not come as a surprise. The WMO has been saying for more than two years now that this threshold was almost certain to be crossed before 2027.

As a result, this new data is unlikely to trigger any fresh response measures from countries to deal with the problem of climate change — something that has so far been severely inadequate.

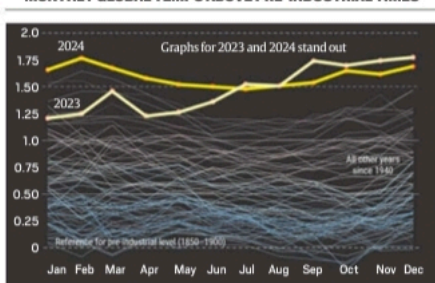
Global emissions are still on the rise, and the 2030 emission cut targets are almost certain to be missed. Therefore, there is every likelihood that the breach that has happened in 2024 would become a norm within the next decade.

"One or two years that exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial level does not imply that the Paris Agreement has

EXPLAINED CLIMATE CHANGE

It's official: 2024 was the first year to breach the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold. With global emissions continuing to grow, this was very much expected. The planet will only get warmer in the coming years

MONTHLY GLOBAL TEMPS ABOVE PRE-INDUSTRIAL TIMES



Source: Copernicus

RIISING AVG ANNUAL TEMPS ABOVE PRE-INDUSTRIAL TIMES



Source: WMO

been breached. However, with the current rate of warming at more than 0.2 degrees Celsius per decade, the probability of breaching the 1.5 degree target of the Paris Agreement within the 2030s is highly likely," the ECMWF said in a statement.

2023, 2024 exceptionally warm

The year 2024 has now become the warmest year ever, taking over from 2023 which was 1.45 degrees Celsius warmer than pre-industrial levels. Together, these two years were exceptionally warm, and

witnessed several record-breaking temperature events. Every month since July 2023, with the exception of July 2024, has been more than 1.5 degrees Celsius warmer than the corresponding monthly average of pre-industrial times.

The years 2023 and 2024 stand out even in the rapidly warming trend witnessed in the last decade, ECMWF said. For instance, the previous warmest year, 2016, which was 1.29 degrees Celsius warmer than pre-industrial levels, was influenced by a very strong El Niño — a periodic oceanic phenomenon in

the eastern Pacific Ocean that has a big impact on global weather. El Niño has a general warming effect, while its opposite phenomenon, called La Niña, has a cooling effect.

There was an El Niño prevailing during 2023 and 2024 as well, but it was mild compared to the 2015-2016 event. ECMWF said the unusual warming of 2023 and 2024 could be because of several other factors, though there was no one dominant reason. It cited "unprecedented" El Niño-like systems in multiple other ocean regions as one of the possible reasons.

An underwater volcanic eruption near Tonga in the southern Pacific Ocean in January 2022, and lower sulphur dioxide emissions from the shipping industry in 2024 could also have contributed to the warming, ECMWF said. Sulphur dioxide in the atmosphere reflects some solar radiation, thus preventing it from reaching Earth.

The unusual warming could also be because of the Sun, which was in its solar maximum phase in 2024 during its routine 11-year solar cycle. During the cycle, the magnetic poles of the Sun flip from one end to the other. ECMWF said an increase in the solar energy reaching the Earth during the solar maximum phase could have contributed to the warming.

But these are only possibilities. A more definitive analysis of the potential causes of the 2023-24 warming will come later.

Looking at 2025 and beyond

The exceptional trends seen in 2023 and 2024 are unlikely to continue this year. As of now, 2025 is not expected to emerge as the warmest year. However, it is unlikely to be substantially cooler either. In the last decade, annual temperatures have been between 1.1 and 1.4 degrees Celsius higher than pre-industrial levels, and this year is expected to fall in the same bracket.

Incidentally, the UK Met Office, in a forecast issued last month, said 2025 could very well emerge as the third warmest year ever, after 2023 and 2024.

According to a WMO report released last year, there is a possibility of annual average temperatures reaching as high as 1.9 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels in one of the years before 2028. The report also said that there is a 50% chance of the five-year average of annual temperatures up to 2028 exceeding the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold.

COFFEE IS GOOD FOR YOU — BUT ONLY IN THE MORNING: LARGE STUDY

PEOPLE WHO drink coffee in the mornings reap benefits that are not seen by those who consume the beverage later in the day, a study published in the *European Heart Journal* on Wednesday found.

Morning coffee drinkers were 16% less likely to die of any cause, and 31% less likely to die from cardiovascular disease than those who did not consume the beverage. There was, however, no significant reduction in mortality for all-day drinkers compared to non-drinkers.

These benefits came irrespective of how much coffee one drank. "It's not just when you drink coffee or how much you drink, but the time of day when you drink coffee that's important," Lu Qi, one of the paper's authors, and an expert in nutrition and epidemiology at Tulane University in New Orleans, told *The Guardian*.

The analysis was based on data collected from 40,275 adults who participated in the US National Health and

Nutrition Examination Survey between 1999 and 2018. It was verified using data from the Women's and Men's Lifestyle Validation Studies (2010-13) which included the seven-day dietary record of 1,463 American adults.

Although this study did not explain the rationale behind these findings, previous research has highlighted the deleterious impact that the consumption of caffeine — the main stimulant in coffee — has on human sleep. An oft-cited 2013 study found that caffeine consumption even six hours prior to bedtime can have major disruptive effects on sleep, which in turn has harmful effects on the heart, and overall health.

Prof Thomas F. Lüscher, in an accompanying editorial to the study, referred to the growing body of evidence suggesting that coffee drinking is indeed beneficial to human health. He wrote: "Drink your coffee, but do so in the morning!"

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE



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City	Batch	Start Date	Admission Open
Delhi	7 months	10/01/2025	Admission Open
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Jaipur	10 months	10/01/2025	Admission Open
Prayagraj	10 months	10/01/2025	Admission Open

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ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 10

AT LEAST 10 people have been killed in the wildfires that continued to rage in Southern California on Friday, powered by Santa Ana winds that gusted to 112 mph in some places.

The fires have destroyed thousands of acres of land, entire streets, and thousands of buildings in the Los Angeles area, forcing the evacuation of more than 200,000 residents.

How many fires?

This is not the annual fire season in this part of the United States. But as of Friday afternoon (in India), at least five gigantic fires were burning to the north, east, and west of the Los Angeles area.

The Palisades fire, the largest and most destructive, had destroyed more than 17,000 acres in the Pacific Palisades neighbourhood to the west of LA. It was only 6% contained as of Friday afternoon, *The New York Times* reported.

The next biggest fire, the Eaton fire, is burning to the east of LA. It has so far burned 10,000 acres in the San Gabriel Mountains to the north of Pasadena. It has not been contained at all.

The Hurst fire, Lida fire, and another fire



Firefighters trying to contain a wildfire in California on Wednesday. Reuters

that broke out in LA's West Hills neighbourhood had burned through between 300 and 1,000 acres so far.

The Santa Ana winds

These winds blow when high pressure builds over the Great Basin — the area between the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada — and pressure is low over California's coast. The difference in pressure triggers powerful winds that move from the Basin's inland deserts east and north of Southern California towards the Pacific Ocean.

As the wind comes down the mountains, it compresses and heats up, and its humidity falls — sometimes to less than 10%. The hot, dry wind dries out forests, and fuels wildfires.

Santa Ana winds are a natural part of California's climate pattern, and usually blow from October to January. "Winter weather patterns allow high pressure to build near the surface of the Great Basin, which then interacts with low-pressure air over the Pacific," Rose Schoenfeld, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Oxnard, California, told Bloomberg.

Role of climate change

California experienced its hottest ever June and July, and the second hottest October in 2024. Much of Southern California has had no rain since July, even though half the normal rainy season has already passed. This is the second driest spell in the region in 150 years.

The excessive heat and absence of rain had already turned the vegetation very dry when the Santa Ana began to blow, making the forests even drier and vulnerable to fires.

California's wildfire season has become longer in recent decades. The state now has

twice as many fire weather days (when weather conditions are favourable for wildfires) than in the early 1970s, according to *Wildfire Weather: Analyzing the 50-year shift across America*, a report published by the nonprofit Climate Central in May 2023.

A 2021 study in the *Journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, reported that warmer and drier conditions have caused a 66% to 90% of the increase in California's fire weather days over the last few decades.

The fires have also become more intense. According to a 2023 study published in *PNAS*, 10 of the biggest California wildfires have occurred in the last 20 years — five of them in 2020 alone.

Another 2023 study published in *Nature*, which analysed wildfires between 2003 and 2020, noted that the frequency of extreme daily wildfire growth (>10,000 acres) has increased by 25% in California compared to pre-industrial times.

All of this is primarily driven by climate change. The rise in global temperatures has led to warmer springs and summers, and earlier spring snow melts. Together, these conditions lead to longer and more intense dry seasons, putting more moisture stress on vegetation and making forests more vulnerable to fires.

Space crunch, threats, a natural tendency: Why tigers go on long walks

JAY MAZOOMDAR
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 10

LAST MONTH, a tigress ventured east from Odisha, walking 300 km to West Bengal. Another tiger was recently found to have made its way from Uttarakhand to Himachal Pradesh, and possibly even Jammu, reaching just a few kilometres from the Line of Control.

As India's tiger population bounces back in certain well-protected pockets, big cats walking out of tiger reserves are making headlines. But dispersal is natural for the tiger — a solitary, territorial animal that must create its own space with exclusive hunting and reproductive rights.

Going far, under the radar

Anecdotal evidence suggests that tigers have been testing the limits of their subcontinental range for quite some time. Consider:

In 2016, conservationist and hotelier Balendu Singh hosted the Pakistani human rights activist Arna Jahangir and her indus-

trialist husband Tahir at Ranthambhore. As they exchanged stories, Tahir Jahangir mentioned occasional sightings of tigers near their holiday home in Murree, across the LoC.

"There is no recorded history of tigers in Jammu. I was naturally incredulous but didn't contest the guest's claim. I remembered when I heard that a tiger was photographed by an Army patrol above Rajouri, less than 100 km from Murree," Singh said.

Despite their size and lazy gait, tigers are adept at negotiating non-forest landscapes, while remaining mostly out of sight — even small green patches can help them travel through landscapes dotted with villages.

Tiger dispersals are mostly exploratory — they do not follow linear paths, and find their way around barriers such as highways, railways, canals, mines, and human habitation.

In 2019, wildlife biologists documented a male tiger's journey within Maharashtra, from Tapeswar to Dnyananga sanctuary. To cover a linear distance of 315 km over 225 days, the tiger walked 3,000 km

through a mosaic of forest and agricultural landscapes. During the journey, it used 89 resting sites — 73 in forests and 16 outside — stopping for durations ranging from seven hours to a week. Some of these pit stops were made barely 300-500 metres from human settlements.

Males tend to disperse more

A study of 29 tiger cubs between 2005 and 2011 in Ranthambhore found that males showed a greater probability of dispersal (92.3%) than females (36.4%). Males also dispersed further (4.5-148 km) than females (4.6-25.8 km) from the area of birth.

Over the last two decades, long-distance dispersals of male tigers have been well documented:

2003: Broken Tail, the firstborn of Ranthambhore's iconic tigress Machhi, travelled a linear distance of 150 km to Darga sanctuary near Kota, where it was run over by a train.

2008: A tiger walked a linear distance of 197 km from Bhadra tiger reserve to Dandeli sanctuary in Karnataka.

2018: A tiger from Ratapani sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh moved to Mahisagar in Gujarat — a linear distance of over 300 km.

2023: A tiger from Maharashtra's Brahmapur travelled 2,000 km across four states to reach Rayagada in Orissa — a linear distance of 650 km.

That said, tigresses too have been recorded walking long distances. In 2015, a tigress travelled a linear distance of 99 km to reach Ranipur sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh from Panna in Madhya Pradesh.

Looking for territory, mates

Typically, a male tiger's larger territory encompasses smaller territories of multiple female tigers. While related tigresses may concede space to one another in adjacent ranges, every male tiger must establish its own territory when it comes of age.

Within the finite limits of shrinking forests, this leads to frequent duels between young pretenders and the mature males already in control of prime plots. If lucky to survive the face-offs, the vanquished flee the victor's territory. For old tigers, such displacement would signal impending death.

Young felines, however, must keep exploring for vacant slots and accessible tigresses. A tiger forest reaching its carrying capacity is not the only scenario when individual tigers wander outside.

In Madhya Pradesh, for instance, the first tiger that was shifted to Panna from Pench in 2009 started walking south, looking for its former home. It had to be recaptured. Last month, tigress Zeenat showed the same restlessness after being packed away from Tadoba (Maharashtra) to Simlipal (Odisha).

Tigresses may also disperse to protect cubs. In 2011, a tiger walked out of Ranthambhore with her two cubs after the male that sired them was afflicted to reproduce. Sired by new males looking to kill the cubs and mate with her, the ti-

gress took refuge in the ravines and mustard fields by the Chambal river. The cubs did not survive.

Not a zero-sum game

Surplus tigers from 'source' reserves must fan out looking to reach low-tiger-density areas. When they succeed, the fresh gene flow revitalises isolated populations. When they don't, they die.

Also, without adequate monitoring, tiger dispersals through non-forest areas and human habitations may fuel man-animal conflict, eroding the goodwill the national animal banks on. Dispersal routes popular with tigers indicate the potential for developing and protecting new habitats so that the big cat may reclaim lost ground.

According to the latest all-India tiger estimate, one-fifth of India's tiger area spanning 16 tiger reserves harbours only 25- less than 1% — of India's 3,682 tigers. There are enough forests for dispersing tigers to fill up.

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THE IDEAS PAGE

Where daughters can't play

The world has failed Afghanistan's girls and young women.
No wonder its women cricketers fled their homeland



SANDEEP DWIVEDI

GURINDER CHADHA'S MUCH-ACCLAIMED and charmingly funny 2002 movie *Bend It Like Beckham* starts with the football-crazy teen Jess imagining herself as David Beckham while watching England's set-piece superstar on television. But then, that's not what girls in families with Indian roots settled in Hounslow, West London are "supposed to do". They can't play ball, it's Barbies for them. Not training partners, they are supposed to look for life partners. Good Indian girls also don't get coached to master free-kicks, they are taught to get that perfect brown on their alao-gobi.

Jess's elder sister is getting engaged, her mother, the highly-inflammable Mrs Bhama, is in a tizzy. Losing her temper over her daughter's indifference to festivities at home, she shouts: "Football, shootball... Your sister's getting engaged, and you're watching this sheikhead boy!" That's when Jess says something very important but is lost on her mother — and might have gone over the head of most parents of a girl-child across the globe, world leaders, especially the Taliban. "Mum, it's Beckham's corner!" Jess says in helpless exasperation, underlining what the sport and the sporting star mean to her — the world.

It's a short dialogue that captures the essence of the film, explaining why one sees more boys than girls on sporting fields and also the staggering male-female gap in athletic endurance that gets used to undermine women's sport. A Beckham corner, even for a girl, can be an event to switch off from the world around her and get inspirationally transfixed. Jess and other sporty girls too who have what are viewed as unreasonable sporting dreams and work towards making them come true.

The fact that young girls, like boys, too want to rush out of their homes, run in their lanes, allow the breeze to hit their faces and have dirt on their feet, is surprisingly lost on those who set the rules, and make the big calls. If half of this world is encouraged to kick a ball, jump over a hurdle, shoot an arrow and wrestle on the mat, why can't the other half do the same? It's elementary and thus fundamental to any human's right to equality.

In Afghanistan, women have historically been systematically ostracised. Things got worse when the Taliban returned to power in 2021. Among the many tribal doctrines they put in place was to ask women to cover themselves from head to toe and keep away from public spaces besides education. It was a blow for the women's movement. If shattered dreams made a sound, Afghanistan could have heard their loudest blast around the time the Taliban were settling in Kabul.

Those defying the rules would be arrested, imprisoned or stoned. Of late, things have turned worse. Under the new bizarre infra-policy, no new building can have windows through which a passer-by can see women. The windows of existing buildings needed to be bricked or permanently covered. "Seeing women working in kitchens, in courtyards or collecting water from wells can lead to ob-



C.R. Sasikumar

scene acts," the Taliban government spokesperson is said to have announced. The Afghan women cricketers had seen it coming and that's why they fled their homeland.

Nahida Sapan was the Afghanistan team's all-rounder and would also do scoring duty during games. Days after the Taliban takeover, when she was at the university, her professor told them the class was over and they all needed to go home for good. On the depressing trip back, the girls would see Kalashnikov-toting Taliban guarding the streets. Sapan knew that her days of playing cricket were over. In a matter of days, women's cricket was reduced to ashes.

That wasn't enough for the Taliban, they wanted to track down each woman cricketer. "If we catch one, we will catch all of them," they would proclaim. Sapan and other cricketers changed houses for days before deciding to cross the border to Pakistan, hiding behind their face-covering burqas. From Pakistan, with international support, the brave Afghan women would fly to Australia.

Since then, the "runaway" women cricketers from Afghanistan have been in Australia as refugees. While covering the Border-Gawaskar Trophy, *The Indian Express* reporter Sriam Vreya would meet one of them — 21-year-old Benafshi Hashimi. Her heart-rending story of courage is about Hashimi going to impossible lengths and breaths, to keep the cricketer in her alive.

Not very different from Sapan's moment of panic, Hashimi too got an overwhelming scent of fear within days of the regime change. Her family sent her out to withdraw cash where the teenager would hear gunshots fired by Taliban soldiers near the bank. She knew it was time to leave, there was no chance she could play the sport her late father encouraged her to play with his brothers in the street.

Hashimi's home in Kabul was very different from the Bhama household, the one created by Gurinder in her movie. The feisty Afghan girl proudly shared how her father wasn't like most Afghan males who longed for sons. "He treated me like a little princess... distributing laddoos when I was born. He wanted me to study. I am a special one I could do whatever I want" — he

Nahida Sapan was the Afghanistan team's all-rounder and would also do scoring duty during games. Days after the Taliban takeover, when she was at the university, her professor told them the class was over and they all needed to go home for good. On the depressing trip back, the girls would see Kalashnikov-toting Taliban guarding the streets. Sapan knew that her days of playing cricket were over. In a matter of days, women's cricket was reduced to ashes. That wasn't enough for the Taliban, they wanted to track down each woman cricketer. "If we catch one, we will catch all of them," they would proclaim.

would tell me."

Not just the family, it takes a village to raise a child with sporting dreams. But not in a country with regressive anti-women decrees and a world not truly committed to wiping out gender discrimination. That's why Afghan sports women couldn't do what they willed all their life and though the blame falls squarely on the Taliban this time, there are broader issues. Women only have seasonal and not fully committed backers who mostly offer lip service and practice double standards.

Once again "Support Afghan women cricketers" is trending. International cricket will come to Pakistan with the Champions Trophy and this is another chance for the world leaders to launch into the chorus of hollow moral support.

The other day UK prime minister Keir Starmer appealed to the ICC to follow the book and ban Afghanistan cricket. Next was South Africa's Sports Minister Gideon Makhanya adding his two bits. "As a man who comes from a race that was not allowed equal access to sporting opportunities during Apartheid, it would be hypocritical and immoral to look the other way today when the same is being done towards women anywhere in the world," he would say.

It's a valid and timely shout-out for the Afghan women but why have the influential global leaders allowed the Taliban government to implement anachronistic policies, starting with barring education? And in a case of terrible timing, India, disregarding Afghanistan's gender apartheid, has extended a helping hand to the war-torn country and met officials of the Taliban government. The irony is hard to miss. While the political class continues to remain blind to the Taliban way, it wants ICC to come down heavily on Afghanistan cricket.

It's a pity that we live in a complex world that is governed by many-layered geopolitics. The world has failed Afghanistan's girls and women. All that the Sapanas, Hashimis and their cricketer sisters wanted was to run in their lanes, let the breeze hit their faces, dirty their feet and swing the ball like Megan Schutt. Or simply, "Bend it like Beckham".

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Nepalis were caught unaware by the 2015 earthquake; awareness programmes gained momentum in its aftermath. Predictably, complacency has crept in with the passage of time. Not only has reconstruction of earthquake-resilient houses slowed, even basic safety measures are ignored." — THE KATHMANDU POST

A destination and journey

Kumbh Mela is not just a religious congregation but also a place to consider the challenges that humanity faces



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

INDIA IS THE land of festivals. The Maha Kumbh Mela, set to start in the Prayagraj city of Uttar Pradesh in the coming week, is the festival of festivals. Over 40 days, this massive festival of religion and spirituality attracts hundreds of millions of devotees from all across the world, including tens of thousands of non-Hindus.

Swami Vivekananda had described India as "Dharma-Praana Bharatat" — "Bharat with dharma as the soul". Everything, including the festivals, revolves around dharma. For ease of understanding, we tend to use the word religion for it. But where religion is defined as a set of "beliefs" in a given god or a book, dharma is a path of continuous exploration for self-discovery and purification of one's soul.

The religion of Hindus, which is more a creed than a faith, insists on search and inquiry about noble and sacred truth rather than blind belief. In the Hindu creed, there are no believers in religion; there are only seekers of truth. Mahatma Gandhi encapsulated this aspect so beautifully by saying "If I were asked to define the Hindu creed, I would simply say: Search after truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe in God and still call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after truth. Truth is God. Denial of God we have known. Denial of truth we have not known."

All festivals in Hindu tradition are occasions for soul-searching and truth-seeking. The Kumbh Mela, a 12-yearly mega spectacle, is also one such occasion. Religions in the world were born mostly through prophets and sacred books. But the creed of Hindus was born through a "Bhadra Icha" — "be-nign wish" of the sages for "Abhyudaya" — "wellfare and wellbeing in this life and hereafter". Hindu history tells that the sages of yore had come together, again and again, to contemplate and deliberate on the meaning and purpose of "existence", and out of those deliberations emerged the "benign wish" for creating a worldview based on principles of universal good. That became the Dharma or creed of Hindus.

Kumbh Mela too began millennia ago as one such occasion where the sages and sages came together for weeks to deliberate on the dharma. Like in any other religion, myths abound in Hinduism too. The word "myth" sometimes evokes negative reactions in India, whereas in the sphere of religion globally, myths are the stories of yore, not viewed from the binary of truth and falsehood. Mythology is story and history too. One such mythological story explains the significance of Kumbh Mela in the context of the battle between Devas — gods — and Asuras — demons — for owning "Amrit" — the holy elixir. At the end of "Samudra Manthana" — churning of the oceans, jointly undertaken by the gods and demons, when the holy elixir emerged — a competition erupted between the two groups to capture it. To pre-

vent the Amrit from falling into the hands of the demons, the divine bird Garuda lifted the pitcher and flew away. As the Asuras and Devas clashed with each other in pursuit of the Amrit, which lasted for 12 divine days equal to 12 human years, a few drops of Amrit fell at four places on earth: Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nashik, and Ujjain. The Kumbh Mela is held at these four places once in 12 years. Kumbh means the pitcher, a reference to the orb from which the elixir had dropped.

Although it began as an assembly of holy men, Kumbh Mela acquired the character of a massive human congregation over centuries due to the patronage of successive rulers across the country like the Nandas, Gupta, Cholas and Pallavas. Huen Tsang, the famous Chinese traveller, had recorded in his travelogue about attending the festival in the seventh century. Even some Mughal and British rulers too were said to have patronised the massive spiritual congregation over centuries. In 2017, UNESCO inscribed it in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Western worldview looked at nature as an avenue of exploitation for human good, whereas in Hindu tradition, nature is considered divine and integral to the existence of the universe. The *Atharva Veda*, one of the four Vedas, dedicated one sukta or chapter to the praise of the earth, called "Prithvi Sukta". Seeking to instil reverence about Mother Earth and nature, the *Prithvi Sukta* declared: "Atma Prithivi (Mother Prithivi)" — meaning, "this earth is my mother, and I am her offspring". All Hindu festivals, including Kumbh Mela, are designed to rekindle that sense of sacredness about nature in the human consciousness.

Mega festivals like Kumbh Mela are not just religious congregations meant for divine blessings for individuals. They are supposed to be the occasions for contemplation and inquiry into the challenges that humanity faces and finding answers to them. Over the last few centuries, the Hindu religious and social order has become lethargic and increasingly confined itself to rewalling in rituals and the past. As a result, India's contribution to the world's contemporary world became increasingly small.

Today, when the world is faced with economic challenges, answers are sought from institutions like the World Economic Forum; and when it comes to challenges of climate, we turn to the COP series of conferences. The solutions that these Western-dominated institutions offer are not very different from what traditional Indian wisdom can offer. For example, the WEF is promoting the idea of "stakeholder capitalism" as an answer to present-day challenges. It is not much different from the concept of "dharma-karta" in ancient Indian thought. Similarly, India can offer better answers to humanity's challenge of climate than the COP summits that focus more on setting limits on climate destruction and settling demands for climate financing.

The UP government deserves praise for hosting the "Kumbh Global Summit on Sustainability and Development" as part of the Kumbh Mela. It is an offer an India vision for climate mitigation. India should take the lead in offering guidance to the world in shaping the future on the basis of Eastern wisdom. Festivals like Kumbh can be a great occasion for that.

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

The fallen tree on Akbar Road

As the Grand Old Party gets a new house, tales from its old address



RASHEED KIDWAI

IN MAY 1999, a storm brought down a large tree on the premises of 24 Akbar Road, killing an eight-year-old boy and demolishing a makeshift temple inside the Congress party office. The tree and the temple held a special significance for the thousands who thronged 24 Akbar Road, seeking election tickets. Old-timers recalled the tree had been there when the Congress office moved to 24 Akbar Road in 1978 after the split in the party. The temple had been constructed by a holy man from Karnataka after he had been given a party ticket. Many ticket aspirants believed that the temple deity and the tree had the power to grant the fulfillment of one's political aspirations.

Most AICC general secretaries rushed out of their offices wondering how the tree had fallen in a storm that had lasted a mere 10 minutes. When the news reached Sonia late that night, the then-AICC chief was visibly upset. She was told the tree had a "weak foundation" — its roots had been decaying for long. Some disgruntled party men drew a parallel between the fallen tree and the Congress, claiming that the tree and the party were probably of the same age. The tree had appeared invincible till it had suddenly collapsed. The Congress under Sonia in 1999 looked good, but its roots were decaying as the party was then hopelessly pinned in big states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. However, 24 Akbar Road proved the cynics wrong when the Congress marched

forward onto two back-to-back electoral successes in 2004 and 2009.

24 Akbar Road was not India's choice on January 1, 1978, when the then Congress president, K. Brahmananda Reddy announced that she had been expelled from the party. Reddy had the support of many powerful leaders such as Y.B. Chavan, Vasantdas Patil and Swaran Singh. The CWC met at the residence of Maragatham Chandrasekar at 3 Janpath. Twelve out of 24 members sided with Indira, but the AICC chief was not in an accommodating mood. Buta Singh, A.P. Sharma, G.K. Moopanar, Syed Mir Qasim, Maragatham Chandrasekar and Budhi Priya Maurya, marched to Reddy's house to challenge Indira's expulsion. Buta, who was formerly with the Akali Dal, spoke harshly to Reddy, demanding to know how Nehru's daughter could be expelled from the Congress.

Though she was greatly pained to lose her party's invaluable archives, when she returned to power with a thumping majority in 1980, Indira refused to stake a claim on 7 Jantar Mantar. "I have built the party from scratch, not once, but twice. The new office premises would rejuvenate the party rank and file for decades," she told her politician son Sanjay who beseeched the subject of returning to 7 Jantar Mantar.

This was not 24 Akbar Road's first brush with history. For two years beginning in 1961, it had played host to Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel laureate and leader of the non-violent move-

ment for human rights and democracy in Myanmar (the erstwhile Burma). Suu Kyi was barely 15 when she arrived at 24 Akbar Road with her mother, Daw Khin Kyi, Aung San's widow, who was appointed Myanmar's ambassador to India. 24 Akbar Road was named Burma House by Jawaharlal Nehru in recognition of Daw Khin Kyi's special status. The house built by Sir Edwin Lutyens between 1911 and 1925 was regarded as a singular example of British colonial architecture and a masterpiece of early modernism.

Suu Kyi was a young girl when she chose for herself the room that was later occupied by Rahul Gandhi in his capacity as general secretary of the All India Congress Committee (AICC). She picked the room because it had a huge piano. Years later, while under house arrest in a dilapidated lakeside habitation on Avenue Avenue in Rangoon, Suu often played the piano for long hours to relieve the depression of her confinement.

During Narasimha Rao, Sitaram Kesri and Sonia Gandhi's tenures as AICC head, 24 Akbar Road changed in appearance. Its eight rooms expanded to thirty-four. While the main bungalow remained more or less intact, it had five ancillary portions added to it. Office-bearers lounge about by a nearly-depleted library. At the back of the house stands a row of more than a dozen rooms constructed during the P.V. Narasimha Rao regime. Then there are two blocks of outhouses, a square of 10 rooms that accommodates most of the secretarial staff,

and the residential block, which has dozens of low-roof structures that house the party *karmacharis* and their families.

Most of these constructions should have been declared illegal, but successive political regimes have looked the other way. Each time Congress ruled Delhi, the urban development or housing minister made it a point to prove his loyalty by bending and flouting rules even further to let 24 Akbar Road expand from within. The period between 1978-1980 was tough for Congress. But Buta's innovative thinking helped. All visiting party leaders were requested to "donate" money to the new party. Buta also took the lead in organising meals when visiting party members were hungry. If he was short of cash, Buta would quietly leave for Gurdwara Bangla Sahib and bring *langar*. Often, Buta would walk across the road to 24 Akbar Road, the residence of Khurshed Alam Khan, son-in-law of former president Zakir Hussain and father of Salman Khurshid, who later served as AICC office-bearer at 24 Akbar Road. This mild-mannered management graduate from University of Pennsylvania and his family were always willing to help. Normally they had elaborate, non-vegetarian meals, replete with kebabs, stews and shorbas, but they would add vegetables freshly grown in their kitchen garden to cater to the vegetarians.

Kidwai is a journalist and author of 24 Akbar Road

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DELHI & KABUL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Engaging Taliban" (IE, January 10). Last year, India signed a 10-year deal with US sanctions-hit Iran to export the Chabahar port. The move aimed to boost India's trade links with Afghanistan and Central Asia and bypass the ports of Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan. Chabahar also figured in the talks between Vikram Misri and Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttapi. It appears that India has realised that the Taliban is going nowhere. For better or worse, it's worthwhile to engage with them.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Engaging Taliban" (IE, January 10). Afghanistan is geopolitically important, and India's nuanced engagement with Kabul reflects the new regional realities. The talks pave the way for cooperation in humanitarian aid, connectivity and financial support. However, any attempt to normalise relations must not come at the cost of India's security, human rights, and the Taliban's ties to insurgent groups operating in Pakistan. India's commitment to helping the Afghan people remains strong. But we should not forget that this is a regime that has shown little regard for the rights of women and minorities.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

WAIT AND WATCH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Fight for capital" (IE, January 9). AAP may find it self on a sticky wicket vis-à-vis the BJP. Congress is independently contesting and is likely finishing at the bottom, as was the case in 2015 and 2020. The BJP had managed to win all seven Lok Sabha seats during the 2024 general elections despite Congress and AAP putting up a joint fight. All we can do now is watch how the parties campaign and wait for the Delhi voters to decide who will govern them.

S.K. Gupta, New Delhi

BJP'S DOUBLESPEAK
THIS REFERS TO the article, "Terms of capital" (IE, January 9). Projecting PM Modi's participation in Christmas Day celebrations as an outreach to the Christian community is a ploy to attract minorities in light of the Sangh Parivar's continued campaign against minority communities. It is reflected in reports of harassment and assaults on nuns and priests, vandalism of places of worship, and disruption of prayers, all of which occur more in BJP-ruled states. These incidents have risen since 2014, when the Modi-led BJP came to power. It would be wise for the BJP to address this misregard for minorities before claiming to support them.

I.R. Murmu, New Delhi

THE ASIAN AGE

11 JANUARY 2025

Cong is mainly to blame for crisis in INDIA bloc

The INDIA bloc is facing a threat of extinction because it may have outlived its usefulness. The alliance formed with the sole purpose of defeating the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections and continued at least into Maharashtra elections where reasons for disbanding the alliance came aplenty in the results. Most of the problem is of the bloc's own making as its big component of regional parties was bound to go for the delete button after the general elections.

The Congress Party, which sees itself as the natural leader of the group as the only national party among a bunch of units of regional satraps, was bound to struggle to retain its hold. It was never in such a strong position as to dictate what the ideological thrust or a common minimum programme should be. It was always unlikely that any of the regional parties would wish to encourage the Congress as a national political force beyond its current spheres of influence in some states.

The very idea of INDIA is being challenged now by at least four major allies in the SP, TMC, the Shiv Sena (UBT) and NC. All of them may have seen the Congress move to contest the Delhi Assembly elections as not being in conformity with the idea of a united Opposition. Given the AAP's strength in Delhi where it has ruled for 10 years and is seeking a third term, it was a misadventure on the part of the Congress to have put its own in the water to test the tide of public opinion.

The very idea of INDIA is being challenged now by at least four major allies — SP, TMC, the Shiv Sena (UBT) and NC. The Congress move to contest Delhi polls separately may have irked all of them.

The Congress had more gains from the Lok Sabha polls than its allies as it also landed the post of Leader of the Opposition in Parliament after gaining seats from below 54 to near 100. It is clear enough then that leaders like Omar Abdullah and Tejashwi Yadav, who see the Congress as a junior ally in their states, are calling for disbanding the INDIA bloc or reviving it only before the next general elections in 2029.

Stung by being abandoned by allies ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls in which it is expected to finish behind the AAP and the BJP, which are the principal contestants in the national capital now, the Congress might have to reconcile to a lesser role, not only in an essentially opportunistic alliance but also in a consensus approach to the bigger national issues that are bound to come up in Parliament.

The differences that cropped up in the bloc over whether to let Parliament function, the question of criticism of EVMs rather than accepting the results and latent resentment against the role of Rahul Gandhi as LoP have gone to show how quickly cracks can develop in such an alliance that was based primarily on electoral aspirations. The Congress' ambition to seek a higher place as a national party by contesting the Delhi elections has led to this existential crisis in the INDIA bloc.

Subhani



To Kumbh or not to Kumbh: 12 years, 3 rivers, 1 holy dip



Shobhaa's Take

To Kumbh or not to Kumbh — that is the question. 12 years, 3 rivers, 1 holy dip. That's what a full-page newspaper ad for the winter months, with the standard visual of an elderly sadhu blowing a conch, eyes shut, beard flowing, rudraksha malas around his neck and wrists. He is clearly mid-dubki, and entirely immersed in a meditative trance.

Around him a bunch of men are getting ready to take the plunge in the ice-cold waters of the three rivers at Prayagraj. The Maha Kumbh is here! And for the next month, the media will be in overdrive featuring similar images of holy men in saffron converging at this historic site to experience something so profound and inspiring, the watching world gasps at its enormity. I am in two minds — to go or to skip? My memories of being at the last Maha Kumbh remain vivid and enthralling. No matter how much you read up on the Kumbh, no matter how many documentaries you watch or what others tell you, to understand and appreciate Kumbh, you have to be there yourself. And when you do make it, remember not to judge anyone or anything. Just surrender. Tell yourself how blessed you are to be a tiny, tiny, entirely obscure part of a life-transforming event that demonstrates the power of faith in motion.

Looking back, I feel my Kumbh love affair was complete and deeply fulfilling. To go back after nearly a quarter century, that much older and far more jaded, would dilute the romance. I'd rather stick to the images imprinted on my imagination.

tion, even if they are overromanticised and exaggeratedly dramatic. The Kumbh does that to you. And you don't have to be a religious freak to appreciate its magnificence.

On a more mundane but certainly alarming note, I am keying in this column with two masks covering my mouth and nose. Mumbai has been in the grip of the weirdest weather during the last fortnight — cold and drizzly one day, hot and sultry the next. This has resulted in a sharp spike in respiratory conditions, with everyone coughing and complaining of acute breathing problems. Now comes this scary report that the toxicity in the air in Mumbai has worsened from what it was before the Covid-19 pandemic. The PM2.5 levels peak during the winter months, leading to major emergencies in the megacities. Mumbai is reeling right now. Combine that with the unwelcome arrival of another unknown demon — HMPV. In our family alone, hardly anybody has been spared. We have been suffering long bouts of symptoms that suggest HMPV, but could be something less terrifying. Just another friendly Chinese virus attacking our throat and lungs! Who knows? The prohibitive cost of the Respiratory BioFire test is between 25K and 30K. Since young children are the ones most affected by the deadly virus, parents are in panic mode, rushing kids to hospitals if they sniffle or sneeze.

Dr T. Jacob John, medical virologist and vaccine expert from Vellore, insists that there should be no comparison between HMPV and Covid-19. The good doctor says that HMPV has an extremely low fatality rate and pri-

Looking back, I feel my Kumbh love affair was complete and deeply fulfilling. To go back after nearly a quarter century, that much older and far more jaded, would dilute the romance.

marily affects the very young and the elderly. Well, after the mass devastation caused by Covid-19, it's understandable that nobody wants to take a chance.

I am shakily leaving to attend the most wonderful AKLF Lit Fest in Kolkata, and wondering which polluted city will be worse for my health — mental and physical — Mumbai or Kolkata. If some obscure virus does not fell me in my own city, will Kolkata reverse my fate? The vaataavan in Didi's "City of Smog" is a downer, but I so love my short trips to "Cal". Funny how one automatically shifts gears on landing and gently walks into another era. Lovely how the folks in Kolkata are in no hurry to catch up with the rest of India, forget the world. They happily live in a time warp that lulls them into believing "Aas! Eeeez Wolf", when it so obviously isn't! Delulu Didi — how do you do it???

In Mumbai, Zeeshan Siddiqui, son of slain political leader Baba Siddiqui, is demanding answers to some significant questions about the brazen murder that left people fuming over the so-called "investigations" by the cops. Zeeshan wants to know how and why the Crime Branch ruled out the SRA (Stun Rehabilitation Authority) angle and arrived at misleading conclusions about his father's killing at the paint-blank range, allegedly by the Bishnoi gang. The three motives of the killers, say the cops, were primarily Baba Siddiqui's close association with actor Salman Khan, the

gang's aim to establish supremacy in Mumbai, and finally to extort money from Bollywood bigwigs and business people. Nobody believes the cops. That's how low their reputation has fallen. Zeeshan has not publicly named the builders he suspects are behind the assassination, but all of them are named in his state-memo. Citizens with Zeeshan on this — it is widely believed the Crime Branch is protecting the powerful builders' lobby. The theories about the rounds are hair-raising, leaving open the question of how blatantly compromised our cops are. And if the cops are indeed shielding the builders, we also know who the political patrons of these builders are — has Zeeshan dared to name them? Cops do not work in isolation. They follow orders. Those orders were their following in this case?

Never a dull moment in Manik Mumbai. Which is something I love about my city. It keeps us all on our toes, wondering which calamity may catch us off guard and when. The next case of two vehicles with identical number plates being intercepted in front of the iconic Taj Mahal Palace Hotel has us all wondering. The version put out by the cops does not add up. Apparently, one of the drivers was shocked to find an identical car with the same number plate cruising past. He alerted the cops who showed up and marched off both the drivers to Colaba police station. The cops claim it was nothing more sinister than a car loan gone wrong. Really? What are the odds of these two "identical" cars being in the exact same area, and wonder of wonders, getting caught? Who was in those two cars, besides the drivers?

More drama coming up. The Theatre of the Absurd never disappoints a hungry audience!

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS

NATURE'S WARNING

The fire in Los Angeles has gone out of control and spread to five areas in California, namely Palisades, Eaton, Kenneth, Hurst, and Lidia. It has destroyed 10,000 structures, including celebrity homes, and taken 10 lives thus far. Even after the deployment of 961 fire-fighting trucks and 40 helicopters, the fire is spreading rapidly. Incidents of looting of houses have made the task of the authorities even more challenging. According to the European C3S scale, the observed temperature has eclipsed the 1.5°C warming barrier for the first time.

R.S. Narula
Patiala, Punjab

LOCAL EDU NEEDS

I WOULD like to address the recent suggestion in the UGC Draft Guidelines 2025, which states that the UGC has the authority to override state governments in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors in universities. From an academic perspective, this policy raises concerns regarding the autonomy of state governments and their role in higher education governance. University administration is inherently linked to regional governance, and state governments often possess a nuanced understanding of local educational needs and challenges. Therefore, the centralisation of such appointments could undermine the decentralisation of power, potentially disregarding regional interests and perspectives. Academic institutions thrive on a balance of autonomy and cooperation between state and national bodies.

Ahmed Raza Manu
Hyderabad

SELFISH ALLIANCE

THIS REFERS to the news report "Wind up INDIA bloc if only for LS be polls: Omar" (January 10). The comment made by Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah warrants serious consideration. If the AAP and Congress continue to fight with each other and show no signs of cordiality, the INDIA bloc is better wound up for it unnecessarily shakes the confidence of voters. Ever since it was formed, these stresses and strains have been occurring as the parties lack solidarity. The INDIA bloc, I am very sorry to say, is making itself a laughing stock because it is clear that it is not united by either a common agenda or ideology.

Arun Gupta
Kolkata

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KAUSHIK MITTAL
Editor

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R. SINGH
Senior Editor

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Farukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



"Birds they sing and twitter
Their sounds to me are music's litter
Animals roar and roar
Communication's disproof
The wind makes leaves go swirl
Vegetation making a wish?"

— From Haq-Kal Baddi-hapteen, by Bachchoo

Why is Elon Musk giving support to sexual predators & 'groomers' in UK?

Perhaps Elon Musk in his dreams alters his name to Elon Musketer and, like those valiant before him, goes charging at windmills, calling them giant devils — or hang on — was that Elon Muskwithote? Sorry, I get my literary references mixed up nowadays. It's not surprising — in the age of Twittering on X we don't write books to make a point. We use a few words of abuse which suffice.

Musk says he's the free-speech bull-shitter extraordinaire. True. When last year deranged teenager in Stockport murdered three girl children in a dance class, right-wing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim provocateurs urged people to attack and even burn down the refugees where the government housed asylum seekers. They also urged attacks on all Muslims.

Riots resulted and brave Elon, thousands of miles away in the United States, characterised the fascist riots as "civil war". Maybe he has never heard of Oliver Cromwell and prefers to read tweets on X rather than, say, Dostoevsky's novels. To each his own.

Musk has no business or stake in Britain's present or future but he audaciously assumes to not just express mendacious and meddling opinions, but to resort to the illiterate abuse of a pioneering MP and attacking the Labour government and Prime Minister.

That he is against the Labour Party government of Britain is not surprising. Over the last year, having endorsed Donald Trump for President, he has kept the company of Nigel Farage, leader of UK's far-right Reform Party. It began life as the Brexit Party but now has ambitions, using its anti-immigrant and underclass and clandestine, anti-Muslim stance, to overtake the Tories, now led by Kemi Badenoch, the daughter of Nigerian immigrants, in the forthcoming elections.

Musk declared that he would help Farage do this by giving him and the Reform Party a billion dollars. That was a few weeks ago. Since then, however, their cosy relationship has ruptured. Why? Because Musk, again from the other side of the Atlantic, had declared that one Tommy Robinson, a British fascist thug who has been jailed for contempt of court after lying accusations against a teenage Syrian youth, is a "political prisoner" and should be immediately released.

Even supporters of Farage's Reform Party would balk at this description of Tommy R, whose real name is Stephen Vassell-Lennon, and so Farage was quick to distance himself from Musk's nonsensical demand.

Musk, this self-anointed apostle of free speech, doesn't like to be contradicted and he immediately denounced Farage as unfit to be the leader of Reform, intending that such a post on X would mobilise Reform members to ditch his former friend. As P.G. Wodehouse would say: "O the troops of Midian moved and prowled."

So, gentle reader, to the latest tying conceit of this megalomaniacal, delusional American billionaire. He has publicly called Jess Phillips, one of Britain's most conscientious MPs and a champion of women's rights and a courageous defender over decades of victims of sexual and domestic abuse, a "rape genocide apologist". Why? Well, since about 2010 or so it came to light that in Rotherham, Tefford, Oxford and other cities in England and parts of Pakistani origin were grooming mostly white, vulnerable girls — drugging and using them in ways that can be called, under any definition, rape. The girls were exposed and the then head of the Crown Prosecution Service, Keir Starmer, appointed a Muslim to investigate, pursue and prosecute these "grooming gangs".

Consequently, several of the gangs in several towns were apprehended, prosecuted and jailed. There were numerous enquiries initiated by local government councils in the towns where the gangs operated enquiring into the possible nature of the care of these victims and the failure of the police to prevent or apprehend the criminal groomers.

The most significant of these enquiries was led

by Prof. Alexis Ray, whose comprehensive report in 2022 made over 20 recommendations to prevent and tackle such abuse. The Conservative Party was then in government. They did absolutely nothing about the Ray enquiry recommendations. Nothing!

Now Elon Musk, again from some retreat in the US, and again inspired by his conviction that "Muslims" are criminally responsible for this sort of behaviour, calls for a national inquiry into British grooming gangs. The current leaders of the Tories and of Reform back up his calls for such a national inquiry.

Consequently, Prof. Ray's steps forward and categorically says that any new inquiry would be procrastination and demands that the recommendations of her inquiry, which the Tory government absolutely ignored, should be implemented now! Musk has then resorted to the absolutely false claim that Keir Starmer, when he was Crown Prosecution Service, had instructed the police not to pursue the grooming gangs as this would alienate Muslim votes. This is as true as the "fact" that Elon Musk, Donald Trump and Nigel Farage have all convoked to call the Tories agents of ISIS. Jess Phillips has, after Musk's nasty epithets and deranged demand that she be sent to prison, suffered renewed threats to her person and life. Her response was that Musk should concentrate on getting himself to Mars and staying there — instead of pretending to be concerned about the welfare of British rape victims.

EDITORIAL

A burning reality

California is notorious for its fierce wildfires, but the fires raging through Los Angeles county this January appear like a new kind of nightmare. Hitherto, fires in winter have conventionally been scarce in the region. But now the trend seems to be on a reversal path, taking the form of a grimmer reality. The death toll has touched the double-digit figure and is still counting. Over 10,000 homes and buildings have been gutted in flames, and nearly 1,80,000 people are forced to evacuate, with lakhs others awaiting the same fate. Behind this highly lethal chaos lies a dangerous blend of climate change, human negligence, and unpredictable weather patterns.

The Santa Ana winds—dry and hot winds commonly associated with wildfires in the region—have been stronger than usual this time around, whipping flames across parched landscapes at speeds of up to 100 mph. Though a direct link has not been established between the fires and Santa Ana winds in the present case, they are the most likely causal factor. Add months of drought to the equation, and the lush greenery from last year's rains has turned into dry fuel. This phenomenon, where extreme wet spells are quickly followed by dry ones, has become alarmingly frequent in the US. Some scientists have termed it "weather whiplash". It is, in fact, yet another sign of the havoc climate change is wreaking on planet Earth. The link to climate change is undeniable. Rising global temperatures are drying out the air and the soil, making fires more intense and harder to control. According to certain experts, the idea of a "fire season" no longer applies in California because fires have now become a year-round threat.

Human actions, too, have played their part. One of the fires, the Kenneth Fire, is believed to have been caused by arson. Other fires in the past have been started by faulty power lines or sparks from poorly maintained infrastructure. It is also notable that anthropogenic factors themselves are the biggest trigger behind climate change which is exacerbating such fires and a host of other disasters. However, it is not just about how the fires start—it is about how prepared the concerned authorities are to fight them. Low water pressure in fire hydrants has reportedly hampered efforts to save homes, leaving communities angry and firefighters frustrated.

The cost of these fires transcends far beyond the destruction they leave in their wake. The economic damage is immense, with insured losses expected to hit billions. For families that have lost their homes, the trauma of displacement is only the beginning of a prolonged crisis. Despicably, incidents of looting in evacuated neighbourhoods have added to their distress. How humanity responds to a crisis—compassionately, coldly or adversely—defines the trajectory of recovery. Negative responses from fellow humans bring the morale down and compound the challenge of rebuilding lives from scratch. Making matters worse, politicians are already trading blame. President-elect Donald Trump has criticised Los Angeles' fire preparedness, while state officials are struggling to mobilise enough resources to tackle the crisis. With at least 7,500 firefighters already battling the flames and reinforcements arriving from other states, it is evidently clear that the system is already stretched thin in California.

It won't be wrong to say that California's wildfires are far more than mere natural disasters—they are a warning for a devastating future. If humans don't act on climate change, invest in resilient infrastructure, and rethink how to build and live in fire-prone areas, these tragedies will only become more frequent and routine. The fires tearing through the region are a painful reminder that humans are running out of time to confront the crisis starting them in the face.



SHRUTAPA PAUL

The digital age has been a double-edged sword — while it has democratised the broadcast of news ensuring that more people watched real stories, it has also heightened the lack of safety of independent journalists

Ensure safety of the Fourth Estate

Press safety continues to be an area of concern in India highlighted once again by the unfortunate killing of independent journalist Mukesh Chandrakar

Here's an untold secret of mainstream journalism — much of the compelling ground reports that shock and awe the audience happen due to the tenacity of local reporters or as they are called, "stringers". These freelancers are independent journalists who liaison between the behemoth media house reporter and the news story. They have a mix of the inquisitive, tips, leads, as well as know-how to traverse tricky terrain and unsafe ground. More often than not, it's these free agents, with a grip over hyperlocal happenings, who actually "break" a story. The credit however, is taken by the media house and its well-paid, swashbuckling journalistic representative. Mukesh Chandrakar, from Bastar, was one such independent journalist; his life tragically cut short while doing his job.

The advent of the digital age came as a boon to journalists such as Mukesh. They could run their own YouTube channels highlighting issues that were of import. In spite of casual dramatics, several of these YouTube news channels feature impactful news stories, many that would never make it to a mainstream news channel. Between advertisements, celebrity anchor-driven shouting fits, and national news, is there ever air-time for issues that affect the common man? As the ever-increasing tussle plays out between editorial and marketing departments for publishing space, independent media has emerged as a breath of fresh air. And while many of these journalists may be missing the finesse of trained professionals, they rarely omit on journalistic ethics and tenets of reporting.

India has consistently fared poorly on media freedom and journalist safety indices. As per the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, released by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), India ranks an abysmal 159 out of 180 countries (It has improved



As per the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, India ranks an abysmal 159 out of 180 countries

its previous year's score by two ranks). In July 2024, global press body, the International Press Institute (IPI) urged the Indian government to prioritise press freedom and safety. The IPI stated that press freedom had "deteriorated dramatically" in the last decade highlighting the weaponizing of Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and Information Technology (IT) Act to censor and event arrest journalists while also noting the proliferation of nefarious spyware such as "Pegasus" to snoop of journalists. Worryingly, India ranks as the 12th worst nation in the Committee to Protect Journalists' (CPJ) 2023 impunity index; wherein journalist murders and attacks are mostly likely to go uninvestigated. CPJ notes that India has been on this list every year since the commencement of the index, along with Somalia, Iraq, Mexico, the Philippines, and Pakistan.

Today, the influencer journalists may be bigger than the story; a fact that violates the traditional precepts of journalism. While they often face vitriolic attacks via online trolls and rampant threats, we hear little about the abuse faced by reporters in tier II and III India, and hear most about their deaths; in many senses, they never get a second chance or live to tell their tale. Mukesh, for instance, was found dead in a septic tank for reporting about alleged corruption involving a road construction project. That's how dangerous life can be for reporters in small town India. These independent journalists may not get the coveted journalistic awards, but in my opinion, they are most deserving for their relentless reporting on topics that don't rake in TRPs (Television Rating Points). The digital age has been a double-edged sword — while it has democratised the broadcast of news ensuring that more peo-

ple watched real stories, it has also heightened the lack of safety of independent journalists, who now thanks to the expansive reach of digital platforms are able to make a greater dent.

Of course, we know that law and order is a state subject. And obviously, when people like Mukesh are mercilessly killed, it's for the state government of the day (in this case the Chhattisgarh government) to intervene and avert the threat. As per fellow journalists, Mukesh had been receiving threats and criticisms from various factions including administrative officers, and just a few months later, he is no more. The ugly reality is that Mukesh is not the first one and he won't be the last. There have been numerous instances of independent journalists reporting from our Indian districts who have paid for their courageous journalism with their lives. We need better protection of the Fourth Estate and especially those who oper-

ate in the far-flung territories of India. As a former journalist, when I look back at my reporting assignments in tier II and III India, I am filled with both wonder and gratitude. Even on those brief reporting jaunts, one could feel an air of unsafety and uncertainty — and that was just for a few days on the field; while the undaunted independent journalists spend lifetimes reporting on contentious subjects without the protection of influential media houses and even the law. From the outskirts of Haryana, to deep inside Rajasthan's Dausa, to Telangana's Karimnagar (erstwhile in Andhra Pradesh) — I remember this unshakeable feeling of being vulnerable. And always, always, there was someone like a Mukesh, helpful and resourceful, assuaging our minds to tide over the uneasiness.

The writer is an author and media entrepreneur. Views expressed are personal



NABANITA GHOSH

Aligning the stakeholders

There is a pressing need for updated, NEP-aligned curricula, value-added courses, and collaborative corporate-academia initiatives to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and workplace skills

Today, the question brought to the table is, "Can a student be trained from the mother's womb to cater to corporate needs?" The world is reeling under the pressure of producing for the corporate sector; the tech giants, the accounts executives, the smart programmers, and whatnot. The learning institutions, specifically the undergraduate and postgraduate ones, are predominantly responsible for disseminating adequate domain knowledge to aspirants who are spending their valuable three to five years grooming themselves for a sustainable future.

With the rise in demand for value-added and professional courses, students are invariably enrolling in the same and are blessed with opportunities to undergo extensive internships in firms or entities. In a few spectacular cases, they even land positions in some big companies. Looking at the scope of the general category of learners, quick internships, conservatively spanning only a few weeks, can at best justify the concept of internships for students without adding significant productivity to their academic bank or accelerating their career graph. These non-professional qualified interns are at the mercy of their institutions and, therefore, cannot be strong contenders in the job market. Comparisons push such candidates to the back burner, and consequently, leveraging their qualifications becomes a steep proposition.

According to data from Worldometer, India's total population as of today is 1.45 billion, with a median age of 28.4 years, essentially calling for active and continued employment. Corporations are setting stringent criteria for graduates to join the workforce. A student typically



Traditional classroom-centric pedagogies and theoretical curricula inadequately prepare students for corporate expectations, which increasingly require job-ready candidates

joins an undergraduate program at the age of 18, spending three years (or, with recent NEP amendments, four years) being moulded theoretically rather than practically for the job field. For the working professionals, the drastically changed over time; they are now hunting for tailor-made recruits who can immediately handle industry challenges without intrinsic "on-the-job" or "off-the-job" training.

This creates a stark disparity as budding professionals gain an edge over the mass of non-professional graduates, challenges continue to exist for the learning terms in modifying the curriculum to make it fit for the working requirements. The Indian system of education which demonstrates vehemently in classroom approaches almost across all the disciplines will be finding slightly difficult to transform their pedagogies at 180 degree to suit the industrial demands. The attention is also to be given for the level of learners in the universe. For a slow learner the adaptability is way much behind in contrast with the average and advanced learn-

ers and this creates the stumble blocks for the learning partners to design differentiated learning models. The fundamental knowledge is the pillar for the working life to rest upon. Time on the other hand is the demon to cast a shadow on the acquisition of domain knowledge and employability skills. The core competency of the Institutions lies in the delivery of updated subject knowledge duly keeping in mind the dynamism of the industry needs.

Just as banks are nationalised to promote national welfare, industries are meant to provide employment to graduates after scrutinising their candidates. If recruitment focuses solely on trained and experienced candidates, the inexperienced will remain unemployed or need to find ways to align their educational achievements with corporate thresholds.

The Indian primary and secondary education system, irrespective of the board, typically rests on the quantum of learning with considerable trust in its inbuilt traditional quality. Enrolled learners are expected

to be adequately equipped with knowledge streams before being prepared for job requirements. While the age-old shackles of learning styles have been modified by many institutions and universities to avoid obsolescence, corporate demands still necessitate a realistic approach.

Benchmarking NEP-centric syllabi with those of competent institutions and making significant modifications in pedagogies, assessment patterns, and examination structures compel institutions to adopt versatile program structures. However, whether these changes are reflected in course outcomes remains uncertain in the long run. Various value-added courses, micro-credential programs, and courses focused on employable and entrepreneurial skills are now being mapped by educational institutions to enhance the absorption of their students in the demanding corporate world.

It should be borne in mind that if all learners simultaneously seek hands-on opportunities in the corporate sector, provisions to accommodate all

may fall short. Furthermore, educationists lack sufficient navigation into the knowledge pool and need to inculcate modern teaching skills. At this juncture, the corporate sector must invest its time, money, and resources to extract real talent.

Reality bites; organisations often remain conservative in their approach, believing that newly hired freshers are unable to yield results and instead incur costs. Significant savings in time, training, and supervision are areas where companies place their utmost trust and confidence. The onus lies on the government and organisations to rationalise their requirements to overcome fluctuations in the recruitment process. Institutions are not able to solely responsible for preparing learners for the job market.

The gap between book knowledge and practical exposure should be mitigated by an appropriate proportion of effort from the corporate sector, as the workplace emerges as the centre for future learning, development, and sustainability. It has been repeatedly observed that companies refuse to support learners seeking data for their research or case study-based assignments. Big Four firms and large-cap companies, standing at the helm of industrial hierarchy, often accomplish their stereotypical agendas by exploiting the intellectual capabilities of budding graduates.

In some cases, interns end up negotiating with small-scale entrepreneurs, compromising their expected learning needs. It is imperative to sketch a reasonable collaborative methodology for nurturing skilled youth under a Corporate-Academia hand-holding initiative.

The writer is Assistant Professor, Dept of Commerce, Christ University, Bangalore. Views expressed are personal

Dear Editor

A PIVOTAL MOMENT

This refers to the news report "Afghanistan no threat to any nation, its FM tells India". It has taken India a while to realise that the Taliban are going nowhere. They are here to stay, for better or worse, and it's worthwhile to engage with them rather than wait interminably for the restoration of democracy in Afghanistan. And the Taliban, though still deprived of international legitimacy, are making their presence felt by gaining the support of key regional players. Against the backdrop, the meeting between India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misra and Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai on Wednesday marks a pivotal moment for bilateral ties as well as multilateral equations. New Delhi has signalled that its strategic and economic interests will take precedence over everything else. Last year, India had thumbed its nose at the US-led West by signing a 10-year deal with sanctions-hit Iran to operate the Chabahar port. The move was aimed not only at boosting India's trade links with Afghanistan and Central Asia but also bypassing the ports of Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan. Chabahar figured in the Misra-Muttaqi talks too, with its potential use for sending humanitarian aid to Afghanistan being vital for New Delhi's goodwill mission.

— KHOKHAN DAS, KOLKATA via email

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The
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[OUR TAKE]

Ensure justice to queer people

Apex court shuts door on legalising same-sex marriages. Political class must reset the rules

If there was a semblance of hope for queer people after the Supreme Court had refused to accord legal status to same-sex unions two years ago, that door was firmly shut on Thursday. A five-judge bench, comprising justices Bhushan R Gavai, Suryakant, BV Nagarathna, PS Narasimha and Dipankar Datta, concluded in chamber proceedings that petitions asking for a review of the 2023 Constitution bench verdict lacked sufficient merit. The bench — which comprised only one judge who was part of the 2023 judgment — said it didn't find any error apparent in the earlier decision and said no interference was warranted. More importantly, since this was a unanimous decision of a five-judge bench that confirmed a 3-2 verdict by a Constitution bench, the possibility of a successful curative petition — the only legal recourse left for the petitioners — appears slim.

This is a moment imbued with disappointment, especially for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) communities who continue to battle bias in structural and everyday situations. Their lives hang in a bizarre if extraordinary liminality; their existence is legal, but their relationships are not. This means battling bias and helplessness in everyday situations — opening a bank account, admitting a loved one in a hospital, buying a home together, or planning a future together. That the courts, and the government, have chosen to do little to remedy this situation is disheartening.

Still, as this newspaper has noted before, the world over, the journey from decriminalisation of queerness to recognition of marital rights has been arduous. If successful, India would have become among the quickest to allow same-sex unions.

Therefore, granting full marriage rights to the community was always an outlier, especially due to the tangle of secular and faith-based laws that regulate marriage, divorce and inheritance in India. It is in the realm of limited rights — akin to the civil union arrangement that is considered a stop-gap between decriminalisation and marriage rights — that immediate progress seemed more realistic.

Unfortunately, the progress on that front is far from satisfactory. In 2023, the Union government promised to set up a committee headed by the cabinet secretary to investigate these issues. But progress has been slow and deliberations not wide-ranging. As a consequence, a bouquet of rights — the minority judgment in 2023 by the then Chief Justice of India Dhananjaya Y Chandrachud and Sanjay Kishan Kaul had specifically mentioned medical, jail visitation and financial rights, in addition to questions of succession, maintenance, and pensions — hang in limbo. Even the encouraging moves — some changes in government forms, passport applications and recognition of transgender people — have come after judicial nudges.

In many ways, the question of queer rights is one of the litmus tests of modern democracy because these communities don't form a numerical majority. Therefore, fulfilling the promise of dignity and respect made by the Constitution to every citizen — including queer ones — needs authorities to rise above myopic considerations and election-focussed politics. The ball is in the court of the political class which populates the executive and the legislature. It must do all it can to ensure queer people are not treated like second-class citizens in any walk of life.

Between the rich and the poor, the middle is stuck

The income-tax-paying Indian — the even smaller fraction that pays a meaningful amount within the already small pool of those filing returns — has become the cash cow for the government

As yet another budget rolls up, the usual expectation of a tax cut has faded. It's hard again among the Indian middle-class that continues to seek a cut in the burden that they carry disproportionately for all those who don't. Personal income taxes, paid by less than 5% of the total population, pulled 19% of the almost ₹45 trillion total budget burden in 2023-24, or just over 30% of the total tax revenue and over half the direct taxes collected. But other than a small tinkering with slabs and rates, don't expect anything drastic in this budget or future ones, and from this government or future ones.

Because if you don't pay, who will? And because you don't vote as a block, get ready to keep paying no matter who is in the seat of power. There is no alternative for middle India. We are the Boxes of Animal Farm who will work harder to keep paying for all those who don't. For those who persistently stay outside the tax net. For those who don't receive the recipients of subsidies and State largesse — of cash handouts, free electricity, free water, free bus rides, free and more free. For all the *behan, didi, mahila, akka, amma* or whatever schemes that are the flavour of the season. But there is never a free lunch — you and I are disproportionately paying for all that. And in return, other than when a crisis hits, we get subpar government services. So, pay.

You need to pay for those with free electricity and water. One study (tinyurl.com/yusj8f8f) puts the direct tariff subsidies from state and Union territory governments at ₹1.1 trillion in

2018-19 with cross-subsidies adding at least another ₹75,027 crore. This number is likely to be higher as the report says that not all states report their subsidies. With three quarters of the subsidies going to agriculture, the rest goes to select focus groups who might vote as a group in urban areas.

But enough pay for the farmers — even rich SUV-driving ones — who are exempt from income tax. Why, you also pay for those who identify as farmers and manage to turn their taxable income into untaxed gains. Recent data is hard to come by, but a study by the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (tinyurl.com/Sxrryrfh) put the tax revenue foregone of the non-poor farmers at over ₹85,000 crore for 2015-16. At that time this was 11% of the direct tax base. If we take 1% of the gross direct tax revenue for FY2024, that number is upwards of ₹21 trillion today.

Pay for the judiciary that works less than 190 days a year and takes holidays that school children can only dream about. The summer, winter, Dussehra, Diwali, Holi and other smaller breaks are, of course, in excess of their annual leave that they are entitled to. Does that have an impact on justice delivered? Newspaper reports put the number of case backlogs as over 50 million.

Pay for the schoolteachers, doctors and nurses, who you fund, to not turn up to work, or if they do, for some of them to not work. Karthik Muralidharan, in his book *Accelerating India's Development*, documents his research where he found that 25% of teachers and 40% of doctors absent on any given day. Another 25% were present but not teaching. He writes: "At any given point in time, 50% of government teachers across India were not teaching." (page 74 of the book).

Pay for the pensions and medical benefits of the government employees. See the getting inflation-adjusted annuities even as you struggle to save from the half income that is left after all taxes (direct and indirect) are paid. You tiny cohort of around 5% of Indian population, who file income tax returns and even smaller fraction that actually pay any mean-



Monika Halan

Draft rules suggest DPDP Act is a work in progress

The new year indeed brought good tidings with the draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025 being unveiled. The rules augur the possible implementation of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDP Act) shortly. Privacy was and continues to be our fundamental right, but we needed the instrumentality of law to ensure its effective enforcement. That which the Justice Puttaswamy privacy judgment of 2017 mandated, was finally enacted under the DPDP Act in 2023 but the same could not be implemented for want of rules to enumerate modalities. Now the DPDP Rules have been opened for public consultation in January 2025, a year and four months since the DPDP Act was passed. The hope is that the DPDP Act will become effective without further delay.

With technology permeating every second of our lives, there is deep and constant surveillance of our actions on digital platforms, which results in individuals being targeted and profiled. An enactment that regulates personal data is, therefore, required to protect the fundamental right of privacy of individuals, against government and corporate surveillance, whilst enabling businesses to use the personal data they collect without infringing such privacy rights. The test

of a sound personal data law, therefore, lies in the balance it brings to protecting our privacy, ease of implementation and the scope of its application.

The DPDP Act was made into a simple barebones draft with the promise of ease of implementation and clarity through rules, which were to spell out the privacy protections and lay down modalities for availing the same. This benchmark appears to be still elusive with the draft rules. The rules ought to not only set out specific modalities for consent and implementation of the DPDP Act but also enumerate limitations and restrictions that the Act mandates to ensure the effective protection of rights.

The rules under the consent and accountability-based DPDP Act spell out modalities for notice for consent and consent managers. It elaborates purpose limitation such as for personal data of children under the fourth schedule. The rules also make a feeble attempt at laying down modalities for personal data handling by the State but these lack clarity and specificity. The same rules that explicitly set out category-wise time limitations for e-commerce, online gaming or social media for intermediaries, fail to enumerate purpose and time limitations or restrictions for the State, in the usage of personal data collected. This is a critical



NS Nappinai



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THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE FOR MIDDLE INDIA. WE ARE THE BOXES OF ANIMAL FARM WHO WILL WORK HARDER TO KEEP PAYING FOR ALL THOSE WHO DON'T. FOR THOSE WHO STAY OUTSIDE THE TAX NET

ingful tax on the already small base, are the cash cow of the system.

But that is not enough. Pay between 10% to 35% of project cost of any business you want to do as bribes. Because the salaries and perks are not enough for the state. Its agents need more. The gouging continues. Pay higher prices for homes because the cost of corruption adds layers and layers to the final cost of the home in hand. Why do you think rent is a fraction of the EMI in India and not adjacent as in most other countries?

Pay for the parkland accompanying colonial-style bungalows in prime locations in capitals of the nation and states for the new masters — the politicians, bureaucrats and judiciary, while you wait in endless jams on the crowded roads of the urban mess we live in. And then pay for adorning them with acres worth of TV consoles, bars, curtains, silk carpets and state-of-the-art gadgets. Pay for the dear departed who look out to a river view in memorial after memorial while the living

commute long distances to work.

While the State gets away with not doing its job, you pay for the smallest of infractions — like jumping a red light. Pay when the municipal local goon comes to "examine" the cooler for mosquito larvae, doesn't find even a cooler, but anyway wants ₹1,000 for his troubles. Run a small unit that is legitimate, still pay. Pay because the State has the power to harass the life out of you. Taxes are not enough. Either a bribe or the fine. Pay for it all but ignore the crime of a potholed road or stray cattle claiming the life of a commuter. Whoever heard of making the public master (why use the word work here — servant is too unflattering) accountable? Ignore the State dysfunction on irregular water supplies that are anyway not drinkable. Pay for choked sewers. Pay for broken roads. Pay for the toxic air. Pay. Pay. Pay.

Pay because you don't have street power. To run tractors around in the capital of the nation. To block roads for months. To riot in the streets for reservations. To vote as a block to do a deal with the politician to benefit your narrow slice of population. The good news is that while middle and rich India have begun to vote more than the poor (tinyurl.com/y20ceddm), they are not all income taxpayers, nor do they vote as a block. Dear Indian income taxpayer, you are really on your own no matter which government is in power.

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

THE DPDP ACT WAS MADE INTO A SIMPLE BAREBONES DRAFT WITH PROMISE OF EASE OF IMPLEMENTATION AND CLARITY THROUGH RULES, WHICH WERE TO SPELL OUT THE PRIVACY PROTECTIONS AND LAY DOWN MODALITIES FOR AVAILING THE SAME

gap that needs to be addressed. For instance, in 2023, the government publicly reported a revenue of about ₹100 crore from the sale of Vaahan and Saarthi data. This was personal data collected by the government to issue vehicle registration and driving licences; i.e., data that an individual entrusted to the government in furtherance of its regulatory function. Hence, restricting such acts through not only purpose limitation but an explicit restraint against exceeding purpose is critical when it comes to personal data collected by State agencies.

Age gating for children through parental consent and exemptions is well enumerated. However, the illustrations and the minister's public statements indicate the use of both the child's and parents' verifiable information to determine age. Given the suggested options for age verification, it is equally critical to provide protective measures against corporate surveillance and restrain the use of data submitted beyond the purpose, including for deletions upon age verification and restraining profiling.

The possibility of data localisation by a committee of the Union government was a bit of a goody for technology companies. The clarification that has come from the ministry in this regard is that such localisation is likely to be sectoral and that the committee may comprise representation from industry. Such specificity, including the constitution of the committee and category for data localisation, must be captured in the rules to obviate uncertainty for the industry.

The absence of rules with respect to enforcing penalties does not in any manner dilute the same, as has been voiced by some. With the parent Act providing the penalties, the message is clear and unequivocal. The board is likely to set out further modalities. That which needs to be addressed in the rules, however, concerns compensation to victims.

One aspect that certainly needed specificity and clarity in the rules was for explaining the opt-out option for users i.e., that users would not be refused a service merely because they may refuse consent for being tracked or profiled. Such clarity would have ensured parity in protections for Indians on par with European Union citizens. This is a criticism that should be addressed under the ambit of Section 6 of the DPDP Act. These rules are not likely to be a catch-all, and there will be more to come from the board as well through further rules. But ensuring specificity and clarity under these rules before notification would further the cause of privacy and victim rights.

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Voices that represented the golden era of romanticism

Within the span of two weeks, Malayalam has lost two illustrious artists who were the finest representatives of the romantic tradition that greatly defined popular taste in the 20th century. Madathil Thekkapattu Vasudevan Nair, who died on Christmas day, was arguably the most popular fiction and scriptwriter in Malayalam in the last century. He also directed a handful of landmark films, among them *Nirmalyam*, which is counted among the significant films of the 1970s New Wave cinema. P Jayachandran, who passed away at 80 on Thursday, was a singer who started his career in films in 1966 and sang close to 16,000 songs mostly in Malayalam and Tamil, under all the major composers of his time. His popularity was eclipsed, perhaps, only by KJ Yesudas and the late SP Balasubrahmanyam (SPB), who ruled films and radio waves in southern India.



Amrith Lal

MT, as Vasudevan Nair was popularly known, found his characters mostly from rural Kerala, especially the Valluvanad region he hailed from, and chronicled the transition in social and economic relations as the joint family system and feudalism collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions and the coming of a new urban modernity. MT's novels, short stories, and over 50 film scripts captured the transition in social time and the alienation of young men mostly bewitched by — and lost in — this transition. His idiom mirrored the nostalgia for a lost time and culture, though not always endorsing it but the language of fiction and films bore the disintegration of a world of innocence, social and natural, in the face of relationships defined by transactional norms. Jayachandran was often the screen voice of this romantic era in Malayalam. His velvety

voice suited the handsome heroes of the time, among them Prem Nazir, Kamal Haasan, and Madhu. His style was malleable to singing all kinds of songs in an effortless manner and with exemplary diction. His 1966 debut song from the film *Kuthuvil*, *Manjulaayi manji (north handu manji chandrika sunni)* (Butted in the wave of mist, the winter moon arrived), with a beautiful humming prelude turned out to be the signature song of his career — those lines encapsulated the romantic *bhava* he would produce in song after song (*Anuraga gamanale, Karinakkal kuthile, Suprabatham, Karinakkal kuthile, Karinakkal kuthile*). For AR Rahman, he won a National Award and multiple Tamil Nadu and Kerala state awards. The romantic age in Malayalam fiction made way for the modernists in the 1960s — MT, as the editor of *Madhukavi* Weekly, incubated and nurtured much of it — who forced a transition in reader sensibilities. However, such a transformation eluded Malayalam

film music, which stayed true to its classical melody base. The musical revolution that Ilaiyaraaj unleashed in Tamil in the 1970s did not find an immediate resonance in Malayalam. One reason could be that Malayalam cinema music and listener sensibilities were too enamoured by the melodious tunes of the 1940s that it could look beyond their sound worlds.

In many ways, Jayachandran was like his peer, SPB. Both were untrained in the classical tradition but could surprise listeners (and music directors, of course) with their ability to evoke *bhava* and take the voice to rare realms of imagination. There is exceptional ragam *raaga* he sang for MB Sreenivasan in an MT film (*Bandhanam*) — *Raagam Sree ragam* — that fetched him his Kerala state award. Both Jayachandran and SPB worshipped Mohammed Rafi but had the playfulness of Kishore Kumar in their personalities and singing styles. The classical training is evident in the songs of Rafi Saab and Yesudas but SPB and Jayachandran, like Kishore Kumar, never even once made listeners feel its absence. The romantics always found their way into the canon. Jayachandran — and MT — were no exceptions. And they will survive the challenge of Time.

The views expressed are personal

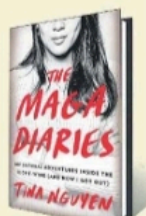
[EDITOR'S PICK]

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

KNOW THE MAGA BASE

Tech mogul Elon Musk's support for easing restrictions on H-1B visas and Steve Bannon's criticism of the programme that allows immigrants to work in the US based on specialty talents as "a total and complete scam" exposed divisions within Donald Trump's MAGA base. The *MAGA Diaries* by Tina Nguyen, a reporter and turned the spotlight on the right-wing nationalist political movement.

This week, we recommend journalist Tina Nguyen's *The MAGA Diaries* which chronicles the movement's rise. Nguyen, who received the conservative movement's scholarships and grants in college, was drawn to right-wing student activism swept up by pro-America rhetoric. The *MAGA Diaries* tell the story of Nguyen loving and quitting the movement, and the history of right-wing politics. It shows how the movement recruits, trains, and indoctrinates young people and shapes them into the leaders of the Republican Party. The book details the movement's ruthless burning of power networks even if it means demolishing rights.



The *MAGA Diaries*: Tina Nguyen Year: 2024



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

My friend Manmohan

His life reflected his concern with values.
His example endures

JAGDISH BHAGWATI

WHEN MANMOHAN SINGH passed away last month, India lost a statesman who had the unusual distinction of having been Prime Minister for 10 years, Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, head of the Planning Commission, and then leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha.

But for me, the loss was profoundly personal. I had known him for over half a century ever since we first met in 1954 at St. John's College in Cambridge, our paths crossing intermittently thereafter. We met again at Oxford where he took his D.Phil. with a celebrated thesis on India's exports under the distinguished economist Ian Little (also a tutor of mine), and in Delhi when I was at the Indian Statistical Institute and then at the Delhi School of Economics.

St. John's College in Cambridge was the home of the great Alfred Marshall, the doyen of British economists. I was admitted to study Economics. On the other hand, Makarand Dehejia, also from Bombay, had broken all records in science and was therefore admitted to study engineering. We came after earning our Bachelor's degrees, since we had parents who could afford to send us to England. Manmohan came from a very modest family in Punjab and had to wait for financial support from the vice-chancellor of his university to come to Cambridge.

Unlike other students such as myself, who attended debates or pursued in the river, Manmohan concentrated on his studies. I was impressed also by the fact that, before settling down to work through his assignments, he took a cold shower in the early morning while his roommates shivered under several blankets. I speculated that Manmohan would go far, but little did I think that one day he would be our Prime Minister!

Later, especially when he joined the United Nations in New York in his first job after completing his doctorate in Oxford, I discovered that Manmohan also had a large heart. Those were the days when Indians were given a pittance by way of foreign exchange when they went abroad. So, numerous friends and even their friends from Punjab arrived in New York and descended on Manmohan, seeking dollars and even expecting him and his wife, Gursharan, to put them up in their home. And they obliged, unwilling or unable to say no.

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Manmohan's generosity was legendary. I saw it on display often as our paths crossed occasionally in Delhi. I recall a striking instance when Rajiv Gandhi was giving an Endowed Lecture at Columbia University. Sonia Gandhi was standing by herself alone, while the students flocked around Rajiv. Manmohan then approached my wife, Professor Padma Desai, and asked her to talk to Sonia. Padma told me that Sonia had told her that she was worried about the safety of her children in the United States, and would shift them to study instead in England where she thought they would be better protected (which she did but lost Rajiv to a LTTE terrorist later).

I went often to Delhi when Manmohan was the Prime Minister. Every time, he graciously wanted to invite me to tea or lunch. But I was hesitant because he was the Prime Minister and his time was surely more important than mine. I would often sneak in and out, not bothering to call him. But I recall that once I got caught spectacularly. I was on a panel and Manmohan turned out to be also on it! I apologised for not calling him; and he turned around, looking at me and asked me to do so. Amusingly, the newspapers the next morning had a photograph of the two of us

talking on the panel, with the caption: The Prime Minister consults Professor Bhagwati on the economy!

No one can become the Prime Minister without overwhelming good luck. Manmohan was no exception. He was lucky twice. First, he became the Finance Minister in 1991 when Narasimha Rao was the Prime Minister. P.C. Alexander, a senior bureaucrat, had been consulted and had recommended I.G. Patel and Manmohan as possible candidates, with IG being the senior candidate and also, like Manmohan, a Cambridge First in Economics. But IG (as everyone called him) apparently decided; it seems that he was cautious because India was in the middle of a balance of payments crisis and the prospects of a successful tenure as the Finance Minister were dicey. Manmohan accepted.

Second, he became the Prime Minister when Sonia Gandhi was looking for someone who would take on the role and hold it until her own son was ready, leaving the position without fuss when asked. So, he lost autonomy to the "dynasty" and his tenure this time around would be more controversial.

No reminiscence of Manmohan would be complete without my recalling that he once told me that, while economists were taught to get prices right, it was equally important to get values right. His life reflected his concern with values. I saw this when, despite his gratitude to his vice-chancellor who had financed his education at Cambridge, he sided instead with the Class IV workers who were striking to unionise. His humane voice is silenced with his passing. But his example endures.

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CRUMBLING FORETOLD

Delhi election frames the key question for INDIA: What remains of it, should it even exist?

THE CRUMBLING OF the INDIA bloc is unsurprising and, in all likelihood, it will go unlamented with Delhi's electoral wind. After all, even when it was being put together in the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha election, it seemed to be a last-minute patchwork of short-term calculations and compulsions, egos and ambitions, against the dominant BJP, lacking a stitched-together story or theme. The LS results in June 2024 — with the alliance getting 234, restricting the BJP to 240, and Congress nearly doubling its own tally to 99 — gave it an appearance of coherence. But that impression proved to be shortlived. It was dispelled all too soon following the setbacks to INDIA constituents in Haryana and Maharashtra and the BJP's victories. Now, as the Delhi election approaches, as Congress takes on the AAP which is fighting off the challenge from the BJP, and the TMC and SP throw their (symbolic) weight behind the AAP, the Opposition alliance faces an existential question that has been raised both within it and outside: What remains of it, and should it even continue to exist?

The central problem with the INDIA bloc is that the party at its centre is weak and pretends not to know it. Congress, the largest member of the alliance, does not command the respect of its regional allies because its hauteur is not matched by its performance. It did well in the Lok Sabha polls but that was in comparison to its own unchecked waning, and by all accounts, its regional partners in different states contributed to its tally. In Delhi, where it once ruled for a straight three terms, in the last two elections, both assembly and parliamentary, Congress did not win a single seat, and its vote share has been in steep decline, dipping from 40.31 per cent in 2013 to 4.26 per cent in 2020. It does not take much political acumen to see why the AAP, which has weaned away most of the Congress vote in Delhi, would not want to cede any ground to it, especially after Congress refused to give it any quarter in the Haryana assembly poll most recently. If in Delhi it is the AAP which is the face of the fight against the BJP in Bihar, the only other assembly election this year, it will be the RJD. In both elections, Congress is barely in the reckoning.

In the absence of a larger conviction or binding commitment, the INDIA alliance may not withstand the strains of a hardheaded politics. Even if it does, however, the space that it occupies will arguably continue to exist. The BJP's dominance has received a dent or two but it is undoubtedly the primary pole of the polity, which shapes and structures the political terrain and contest. A national alternative to it remains a democratic imperative. But for it to be enduring and persuasive, it will need its main pole, the Congress, to be bigger and stronger. Or more generous and humble if it has to get anti-BJP parties to come together and pool their strengths, not on the basis of short-term convenience, but to tell a thought-through and shared story. That, from the evidence so far, is hardly evident.

CEO CAN'T SEE

Asking employees to put in more hours at the cost of health, family life, recreation shows a lack of empathy — and ideas

THERE IS A crisis of imagination and no amount of perks, ESOPs or staggering six-figure salaries seem to square up to it. The future of productivity, if industry bros are to be believed, lies not in work-life balance but in work-work sublimation. After Narayana Murthy's prescription of a 70-hour work week in 2023, Larsen and Toubro (L&T) chairman S.N. Subrahmanyan has urged employees to put in 90 hours at work every week and to even forgo weekends in the pursuit of professional excellence. In between, corporate leaders of all stripes — from Bhavish Aggarwal of Ola to Bombay Shaving Company's CEO Shantanu Deshpande — have advocated harsher work regimes for a variety of reasons, ranging from character building to nation building. After all, as Subrahmanyan said in the annual company meeting, "How long can you stare at your wife, how long can the wife stare at the husband?" He could well be saying, "Who wouldn't want to sacrifice their health, relationships, and interests in exchange for more targets?" To a work force struggling with high stress, low income, fewer opportunities and inadequate support systems, the hard bottom line and cold condescension could not be clearer: Turnover above all.

Of course, this hasn't exactly been a secret from employees at the receiving end of HR's exhortations to colour-coded festive celebrations, attendance regularisation, impractical targets and support for little else. As it is, employees in Asian countries work an average of nearly 49 hours a week in contrast to 37.9 hours per week in North America and about 37-odd hours in Europe. But when it comes from those at the top of the pyramid, such statements show a shocking lack of consideration for the human cost of such benchmarks. The suggestion that more hours translate to greater productivity and success has no basis in facts. It overlooks employee well-being, both physical and mental, familial demands, and long-term sustainability. A 24/7 work culture presupposes the luxury of a structure of support and care in homes, out of the realm of possibility for a majority on account of income or availability.

In a country where even the prime minister valorises working for 22 hours, bucking the trend is hard work. It requires an intuitive acumen to align individual needs with corporate demands and the ability to internalise what the International Labour Organisation highlights in its Preamble: "Labour is not a commodity". That's a bottom-line most CEOs fail to read.

A SONG SUNG TRUE

Untrained, but with an innate understanding of melody, P Jayachandran's voice transcended the limits of time and language

IT CAN'T HAVE been easy being a singer at the same time as K.J. Yesudas, a vocalist who has towered over the various South Indian film industries, especially Malayalam, for over half a century. How did P Jayachandran manage to create a niche for himself, with the bittersweet notes of songs sung by him in the 1960s, like "Manjalayil mungi thorthi", still resonating with listeners? What helped Jayachandran, who died at the age of 80 this week, establish himself as Kerala's "bhava gayakan" (soulful singer) was his naturally light yet expressive voice, which flew from note to note with remarkable grace.

Over the course of his career, Jayachandran won fans across the Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu film industries, as well as a National Film Award (1985, for Sree Narayana Guru) and several state film awards in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. His debut in 1966 was the result of a chance encounter with filmmaker A. Vincent. Jayachandran was not trained, but his voice captivated all who heard it. From G. Devarajan and M.S. Baburaj, to M.S. Viswanathan and Ilaiyaraaja, composers credited some of their biggest hits to his melodic voice. His innate understanding of what each composition demanded resulted in sometimes astonishing results, like when he recorded three songs for Ilaiyaraaja for the 1983 Tamil film *Vaidhi Kathirumthai* in a single day — with all three becoming huge hits.

A story that is often shared about Jayachandran involves one of the songs, "Rasaathi unna", that he recorded that day. It is said that when the song was playing at a theatre in Cumbum, Tamil Nadu, a herd of wild elephants emerged to listen, quietly returning to the forest after it ended. This may or may not be true. But Jayachandran's voice, as it transcends the limits of both time and language, continues to echo in many hearts.



RAMA V BARU

THE SIREN OF a speeding ambulance has become part of urban life across India. The only time uncaring drivers are willing to give way to a fellow citizen is in response to the wailing of an ambulance. An increase in chronic diseases and road accidents has spurred the demand for emergency services and hospitalisation. Ambulance services are an important link for transporting patients who require emergency care.

For long, ambulances were available only at a hospital. In the 1980s, non-government organisations stepped in, particularly in southern India, to provide voluntary and free ambulance services. Over the last decade, several state governments have provided ambulance services for women in the reproductive age group and for children below five years. Ambulance services were introduced to transport expectant mothers to healthcare facilities mostly in urban areas. Under the National Rural Health Mission, ambulance services were introduced in a public-private partnership mode.

More recently, several private ambulance services have been introduced both by corporate hospitals and companies. Blinkit, an online delivery service, has recently launched a "10-minute" ambulance service in Gurgaon. A press release says that their ambulances will be equipped with life-saving facilities for patient transport.

A "10-minute" ambulance service, like the 30-minute pizza delivery offers, sounds far-fetched given the bumper-to-bumper traffic in urban India. It exerts enormous pressure on the ambulance driver, as is the case with delivery service providers. There is no mention, however, of the cost of Blinkit services and how it compares to other ambulance services available in the market.

According to recent reports, the Indian ambulance market, valued at \$1.5 billion in 2022, is projected to grow by over 5 per cent com-

SYMPTOM OF A LARGER MALADY

Blinkit's '10-minute' ambulance highlights critical gaps in healthcare delivery

ounded annual growth rate in the 2024-2028 period. Despite this, the focus remains largely on patient transport rather than critical emergency care. Out of 17,495 operational ambulances currently, only 3,441 have Advanced Life Support (ALS) units.

Moreover, there is much variation in the availability of ambulance services across states. Western states, including Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Goa, followed by southern Indian states with a large private healthcare sector, dominate the market for ambulance services. There is, however, a significant shortage in northeastern states.

There is much variation in ambulance services offered. These range from just transporting of patients, with no support services, to those that have Basic Life Support (BLS) to ALS units. Each is designed for specific medical needs. While BLS ambulance services are equipped for immediate care like cardiac-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and oxygen therapy, ALS units offer advanced interventions with cardiac monitors, defibrillators, and ventilators. Additionally, there are specialised ambulances such as air ambulances for swift long-distance transport and ICU ambulances equipped for critical care.

A recent study by Niti Aayog shows that not all these services have the required infrastructure, equipment and technical staff to qualify as ambulance services. It revealed that 88 per cent of the hospitals had in-house ambulances but only 3 per cent of them had Emergency Medical Technicians. Only 12 per cent of all the hospitals have provisions for specialised care during transportation.

Studies evaluating some of these services have suggested a range of policy issues that need to be addressed. First, one must recognise that a large number of the so-called ambulance services are nothing more than patient transport facilities. Even in the case of well-equipped ambulances, poor planning of

roads and traffic congestion in metros make navigating ambulances in emergencies problematic and delay timely treatment.

More expansion of ambulance services does not ensure quality. In fact, the lack of regulation of quality is a serious concern. Several studies have shown that the lack of availability of assured ambulance service, required and functioning equipment, trained staff and Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) are serious gaps. The non-availability of a standard pan-India toll free number, along with the lack of a systematic plan for monitoring and accountability to ensure timely and optimal care are some of the other areas needing action.

The unregulated growth of private ambulance services is a serious shortcoming in the provisioning of services. There is a need for investment in developing standard protocols for general and specialised ambulance services. Skilling and certification of paramedics for ambulance services is essential. Weak regulatory provisions affect service standards, operational efficiency and liability issues. The regulatory landscape is fragmented with central and state level regulations, guidelines and licensing requirements. This leads to bureaucratic hurdles, inconsistencies and corruption for licensing of ambulance services.

Given increased longevity, contributing to the need for elder care, as well as increasing incidence of health emergencies, the provisioning of efficient and modern ambulance services will remain an attractive field for private investment. However, publicly-funded services, public-private partnerships and civil society sponsored services have a critical role in a society that can ill-afford high cost private services.

The writer is retired professor, Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi



JANUARY 11, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

SLOW ON TALKS

ALTHOUGH PRIME Minister Rajiv Gandhi appointed a cabinet committee on Punjab about a week ago, a lot of spadework is yet to be done before starting a dialogue with the Akalis. It appears that any further progress in this regard may be made only after the Parliament session beginning next week, which will be only for about 10 days. There has not been any direct contact between the Government and the Akalis so far, according to reliable sources.

LALDenga IN DELHI

LALDenga is scheduled to fly back to New

Delhi from London on or around January 15 to resume negotiations with the Indian government on the future of Mizoram within the framework of the Indian Constitution. His family members have been living in London's suburb of Woking since he arrived here nearly two years ago after his abortive negotiations, first with Morarji Desai's and then Indira Gandhi's government.

THE US VIA USSR

PRIME MINISTER Rajiv Gandhi will visit the Soviet Union before he goes to Washington in June. While the dates of his visit to the Soviet Union are yet to be finalised by the two governments, it is possible that the PM will visit

Moscow in either April or May, mainly because of, by that time, will be free from assembly elections which are likely to be held in early March. The Centre's budget would also have been presented by that time.

GAS LEAK CHAOS

MORE THAN 108 people were affected when sodium hydroxide sulphate gas leaked from four drums kept in a transport company's godown in the Baldev Baug area in Jabalpur. People in the area were running helter-skelter and leaving their homes in panic. Those who inhaled the gas complained of intense irritation in their eyes and throat. They were treated at different hospitals.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF KL RAHUL

Shuffled Roles & Unrealized Potential in Test Cricket



Siddhaarth Mahan

The writer is a specialist on Sports and Cinema who works as an actor in the Hindi film industry



MENTAL GAME

Observers of the game suggest that his mindset may be playing a larger role than acknowledged. Cricket is as much a mental game as it is a technical one, and for Rahul, this aspect may be affecting his performance. He has admitted to grappling with self-doubt and dealing with criticism, which have possibly added to his struggles on the pitch.

Moreover, Rahul's perceived "excess potential" may ironically be the very thing hindering him. The knowledge that he possesses technical skills, elegance, and a range of shots can create a subconscious pressure to perform to an unrealistic standard every time he bats.

Even in this series, Rahul started with a lot of brilliance, leaving balls outside off stump and bidding his time, while all others were falling prey to attacking batting. Experts felt that Rahul will finally make this tour worth remembering, one that will mark a milestone in his career. But after hitting 2 half centuries in the first 3 Tests, he scored just 41 runs in the last 4 innings of the series.

The great American cartoonist Charles M Schulz had once said, "There is no heavier burden than an unfulfilled potential." The quote sits perfectly well for a very talented Indian cricketer who has sadly missed reaching the heights that his talent guaranteed - KL Rahul. As the Border Gavaskar Trophy ended with India's defeat, Rahul had once again promised a lot but delivered little!

Rahul's journey in international cricket is one of unfulfilled potential, inconsistent form, and an almost relentless shuffling across batting positions. Originally intended as a middle-order anchor, he has now been pushed up the order to open again - a position from which he has been moved repeatedly in recent years. With over a decade in Test cricket and a modest record to show, Rahul's career stats tell a story of a talent who, despite flashes of brilliance, has yet to settle into a role that maximizes his potential.

Since his debut in 2014, Rahul has been seen as an adaptable batsman, capable of stabilizing the innings or accelerating when required. This versatility, however, has often worked to his detriment in Tests. With the Indian team constantly



The great American cartoonist Charles M Schulz had once said, "There is no heavier burden than an unfulfilled potential". The quote sits perfectly well for a very talented Indian cricketer who has sadly missed reaching the heights that his talent guaranteed - KL Rahul. As the Border Gavaskar Trophy ended with India's defeat, Rahul had once again promised a lot but delivered little

seeking balance in its batting lineup, Rahul has been alternated between the opening and middle-order positions more frequently than any player in his era. The recent India-New Zealand series saw Rahul positioned in the middle order, with the team management saying that his role would remain unchanged. But, in a surprising turn, he was moved back to the opening slot for the BGT series in Australia.

Later, to accommodate captain Rohit Sharma back at the top of the order, Rahul had to bat at number 3 in the 4th Test. This chaos doesn't end here. In the 5th Test at Sydney he was back at the opening slot, as Rohit had "opted out" of the Test owing to a dip in bat-

ting form. What is apparent is that these shifts in his role have made it difficult for Rahul to establish himself in any particular batting position, leading to inconsistency and perhaps lack of confidence.

For a player with Rahul's raw talent and technical proficiency, an average of around 33 after 50-odd Tests is significantly short of expectations. When compared to his peers who debuted around the same time, his record appears modest. Players like Joe Root, Steve Smith, and even Mayank Agarwal, who came later, have all achieved solid averages well over 40. For Rahul, breaking through the 40-average barrier now seems like an uphill task, and barring a miracu-

lous run of form, it may remain elusive.

In the cricketing world, an average of 33 is typically viewed as underwhelming for a top-order batsman. Given that Rahul has spent nearly a decade to establish himself, this statistic speaks volumes about his struggles. He has shown sparks of brilliance - such as his hundred at the Oval against England in 2021 and his debut hundred in Sydney. But they have been interspersed with long patches of low scores and failures to convert starts into substantial knocks. This lack of consistency can be traced back to both technical and mental issues that have prevented him from reaching the heights once predicted for him.

Observers of the game suggest that his mindset may be playing a larger role than acknowledged. Cricket is as much a mental game as it is a technical one, and for Rahul, this aspect may be affecting his performance. He has admitted to grappling with self-doubt and dealing with criticism, which have possibly added to his struggles on the pitch. Moreover, Rahul's perceived "excess potential" may ironically be the very thing hindering him. The knowledge that he possesses technical skills, elegance, and a range of shots can create a subconscious pressure to perform to an unrealistic standard every time he bats.

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As always, Rahul has done just enough to stay in contention for a spot in the Indian 11 for the Test series in England later this year. But it's obvious that Rahul's journey might benefit from mental conditioning or sports psychologist's support. With introspective players like Rahul, this type of support can often unlock greater self-belief and clarity, which is crucial for overcoming mental blocks. If that happens, Rahul will finally live up to the potential that has long marked him as one of India's most promising yet perplexing cricketers!

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY THE AUTHOR ARE PERSONAL

IN-DEPTH

L&T CHIEF GIVES NEW TWIST TO WORKING HOURS

The recent remarks by Larsen & Toubro Chairman SN Subrahmanyam, advocating a 90-hour workweek for corporate employees, have sparked an impractical and unnecessary debate. This comes on the heels of Infosys founder Narayana Murthy's controversial suggestion of a 70-hour workweek, which was already met with significant criticism. Subrahmanyam's proposal not only pushes the boundaries of human endurance but also disregards the importance of work-life balance, a cornerstone of modern corporate culture.

Industrialist Harsh Goenka's satirical jab—suggesting the day off become a mythical concept—aptly highlights absurdity of such ideas. While longer work hours might boost productivity temporarily, they also risk employee burnout, declining mental health, and diminishing returns in long run. Instead of fixating on borrowed notions of hard work, leaders should prioritise efficiency, innovation, and employee well-being. Unrealistic expectations like 90-hour workweeks only alienate workforce and ignore human element. Copying ideas from China won't help.

A WRONG MOVE ON FACT-CHECKING



Meta's decision to remove fact-checkers, citing the preservation of free speech, is a deeply troubling move with far-reaching consequences. Fact-checking has served as a crucial tool to combat the rampant spread of misinformation and hate speech on social media platforms. By abandoning this safeguard, Meta is not only abdicating its responsibility as a global communication giant but also enabling the weaponisation of its platforms for harm.

In today's polarised world, misinformation spreads faster than facts, often leading to real-world consequences—ranging from communal tensions to public health crises. Without fact-checkers, divisive narratives and hate messages can flourish unchecked, threatening social harmony. Meta's claim of supporting free speech appears hollow when it prioritises profit over truth, leaving users vulnerable to the manipulative tactics of bad actors. The absence of fact-checking will undermine trust in digital platforms, which are already grappling with credibility challenges. Users rely on social media not just for entertainment but for news and information. If platforms are flooded with unchecked falsehoods, their utility diminishes, and their role in democratic discourse becomes toxic.

Meta must reconsider its stance and strike a balance between promoting free expression and curbing the spread of harmful content. Freedom of speech does not mean freedom to harm, and tech giants like Meta bear a moral responsibility to protect users from the corrosive effects of misinformation and hate.

Meta's decision to remove fact-checkers, citing the preservation of free speech, is a deeply troubling move with far-reaching consequences

TOP TWEETS



As we celebrate the achievements of our Pravasi Bharatiya family, let us also look forward to the future with hope and determination. Together, we can build a Viksit Bharat, a nation that stands tall on the global stage and continues to be a beacon of light for the world.

President of India
@rashtrapatiibhvn



The passing of legendary playback singer Shri P. Jayachandran marks a great loss to Indian music. With over 16,000 songs across multiple languages, his soulful renditions touched millions. Heartfelt condolences to his family and admirers. His legacy will live on.

Om Birla
@ombirtakota

SPIRITUAL SPEAK

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

BIBLE

HR disaster It's nobody's case that hard work isn't necessary but no CEO can expect crazy working hours to be the norm

YET ANOTHER VENERABLE name in corporate India has come out in support of a culture that blindly worships overwork and promotes an environment where employees internalise crazy working hours as the norm. Larsen & Toubro Chairman SN Subrahmanyan's comments that he would like people to have 90-hour work-weeks and that he regrets not being able to make his employees work on Sundays were bad enough. What made it worse was his misogynistic statement: "What do you do sitting at home? How long can you stare at your wife?" One had expected the head of one of India's largest companies to have had better etiquette training and a better mindset.

The problem is that many leaders like him genuinely believe overwork is a credential of prosperity and grinding out 70- or 90-hour weeks helps people think of themselves as more dedicated than everyone else. It's surprising that these leaders fail to recognise that the world has changed, and there are hardly any takers for their heads-down, work-hard theory. It's nobody's case that hard work isn't necessary — of course it is. But it's equally true that hard work has been defined for far too long. Quite rightly, Subrahmanyan's comments sparked a backlash, with many pointing out his salary being 500 times more than that earned by an ordinary employee at L&T. But the question is not entirely of the salary gap. Even the highest paid employee has the right to seek a work-life balance to recharge her batteries.

There is just no point in having people moving like a launched missile throughout the working days as no boss would like to be surrounded only by multi-tasking, fast-forwarding zombies, who are always banging the lift button till it stops working. In an only work-hard regime, supervisors and staff implement a template and repeat the same steps. Smart work, on the other hand, is about increasing quality and flexibility; it's about testing new ideas and methods, and may result in greater outcomes at a lower cost than hard work. Management theorists also tell us individual hard work doesn't scale. There comes a time in the careers of hard-working managers and leaders in high-growth companies where they hit the wall of their own limitations. This experience is painful in part because it is a challenge to their identity. If your superpower has always been an ability to work hard, it may be difficult to let go of the satisfaction of delivering a result or the adrenaline of being the hero who comes through in crunch times. Leaders should realise that growth happens through scaling the team and creating the conditions for others to execute and succeed.

There is absolutely no point in treating hard work as a security blanket, a fallback that prevents us from actually figuring out what is wrong or why we are not achieving our goals. When the marker of work, be it miles run or pages written, gets mistaken as the barometer of success, the company is doomed to fail. Subrahmanyan's predecessor AM Naik would often say L&T faces a problem of getting good quality engineers who prefer air-conditioned offices rather than sweating it out to build roads or bridges. It's a valid concern, but the current chairman's unfortunate comments would only make the L&T recruitment manager's job even more difficult.

CHALLENGES IN 2025 CAN INDIA ADVANCE ITS INTERESTS AS TRUMP TRIES TO MAGA IN A CHANGING WORLD?

A complex world order

MULTIPLE WARS, CONFLICTING national interests, economic competition with a rising China, the wish of some countries for multi-polarity and beneficial ties with the US under President-elect Donald Trump (who wants to Make America Great Again) will dominate world politics in 2025. The ongoing war in Ukraine, stemming from Russia's old ambitions, and unresolved enclaves in Gaza, Red Sea, Lebanon, Iran, and Syria, have caused humanitarian catastrophes and threatened to break up the existing international order without offering a due to creating a new one.

Additionally, the US-China rivalry persists, with China challenging the US' global primacy. China's rise since 2008 has resulted in a rebalancing of economic, military, and strategic power, but America's superpower remains intact.

Multipolarity — to which China and emerging economies subscribe — cannot replace the US' post-1990s position as the sole superpower. Any rising power must contend with both globalisation and "de-globalisation", supply chains, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence (AI). China and India share common ground for advocating multipolarity, even as their border dispute remains unresolved. But for New Delhi, there is more to China's economic and military rise than the problem of it having a far higher gross domestic product (GDP) and GDP per capita.

In part, that is because China's advances in the areas of science and high technology threaten not only other Asian countries but also the prosperous countries of the European Union (EU). Those advances enhance the phenomenon of "China power".

China is no longer merely the world's factory or workshop. It is even challenging



ANITA INDER SINGH Founding professor, Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, New Delhi

the US in technological innovation and design, and in technology areas like AI. These, in turn, are transforming international power equations.

Despite China's economic sluggishness over the last few years, many foreign companies are returning to China after trying out India. Its ability to develop technological skills that rival those of the US and Europe stem from the fact that unlike India, it has educated its people in the area of manufacturing.

Where does India stand in the frontier and emerging areas of science and technology? Although India is the fifth-largest global economy, its gap in these areas is growing not only with the West, but also China.

Many, but not enough Indians, have a high level of tech skills. As a result, India has failed to keep up with China. This is one of the main reasons why it is hard for India to become a strong and convincing pole in a multipolar world.

At another level, some countries, including India, challenged by the changing world, invoke traditional cultures to claim socio-economic superiority. However, cultures are always in a state of flux from factors as varied as migration to scientific achievements. So, talk of racial or communal superiority of particular com-



Views are personal

munities or countries reflects the orthodox thinking of those who propagate it in the 21st century. For example, backward-looking leaders include Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who sees himself as the rebuilder of Russia's 17th-century empire, the victor over decadent Americans on the battlefield in Ukraine, and more influential in Europe than the US.

Significantly, when China's President Xi Jinping states, "The East is rising", he means China, not the rest of Asia — and certainly not India.

The democratic US is the only country that can counter China in the scientific and AI-driven technological innovation while maintaining a free and open world order. That is why most countries prefer to have the US as the world leader, whatever their differences may be with it.

The US economy and its GDP continue to rise and China's equality with it remains on an infinite horizon, as does India's wish for equality with China.

Russia and China are actually vulnerable because the reputations abroad depends mostly on their economic strength and military adventures. The outcome of Putin's Ukrainian war is unclear. And there are fears among South-east Asian countries that China's eco-

nomic slowdown could spur it to embark on an analogous gamble in Taiwan.

Ukraine also has significance for Asia. China is a party to the conflict through its military support for Putin's war. Beijing would view his defeat as a defeat for China. But South-east Asian countries, threatened by China's territorial expansionism, see Ukraine as a test of the US commitment to allies and its willingness to counter China.

Trump, in his second innings, will therefore find that he cannot MAGA if he follows an isolationist foreign policy. The US' superpower is the only counterpoise to expansionist China and Russia.

As Trump prepares to take office, the US economy has the highest growth. Its leadership in finance and AI is unchallenged. This economic news reinforces the international perception of its superpower.

Trump 2.0 should realise that developing countries want greater access to American technology and markets. Meanwhile, lacking military strength of their own, European allies are dependent on the US' military capabilities and want it to reach an agreement with Russia in Ukraine from a position of strength.

The problem is not Trump's transactional approach, the question is what he will do with that approach and with the US' economic strength to help his friends — while also putting China and Russia at a disadvantage.

Like several countries, India hopes that Trump will not harm their interests with MAGA's protectionist edicts. Generally, emerging economies will need to find new ways of dealing with an America with which they often disagree but want good relations and friendship. This year will show what India can do to strengthen its ties with the US to advance its own national and international interests.

Splinternet: A new world for Facebook, Instagram

WHEN MARK ZUCKERBERG earnestly looked at a camera and told the world (or President-elect Donald Trump) that he was shutting down all fact-checking on Facebook and Instagram, he left out some important context. His changes would only apply to US users of Instagram and Facebook, just as the European Union rolls out a law to target disinformation. There's a couple of ways to look at that. If you believe that Facebook's work on content moderation has been a form of censorship, then Americans will be blessed with new freedom in Zuckerberg's vibrant public square. If you think it's protected people from toxicity, you'll pity the Americans. Either way, you'll experience social media differently, depending on which side of an ocean you're on.

Meta's fact-checking policies, of course, had problems, illustrated by these examples the company provided my colleague Dave Lee. But the cause wasn't "political bias", which Zuckerberg cited without evidence as the reason for shutting the operation down. It was inept decision-making. It would have been more sensible for Zuckerberg to order an upgrade of his fact-checking systems to allow for more nuance, and invest more money in the effort. But the Facebook founder is an opportunist at heart; he jumps on new fads and copies his rivals, and he was bound to take the most politically expedient action when Trump was elected.

With the fact-checkers leaving, along with the "false information" labels they slap on the occasional post, American users of Facebook and Instagram will be able to join a voluntary system, similar to X's Community Notes feature, and fact-check each other.

Community Notes isn't a terrible idea, but does the system work? It depends who you ask. While academic research has shown it can counter some vaccine misinformation and help users distinguish misleading posts, the notes themselves can be slow to implement, and half-truths can go viral by the time they're debated and posted.

What's more certain is that the experience of Facebook and Instagram will become more geographically fragmented, and not just because of the fact-checkers. Meta AI assistant, which had close to 500 million monthly active users last September, has been delayed in the EU because of concern from the region's top privacy regulator about using people's data to train its AI models.

Zuckerberg apparently pities Europeans for missing out. "It's sad that I basically have to tell our teams to launch our new AI advances everywhere except the EU at this point," he said in a Threads post in December. Meta said it represented a "step backwards for European innovation".

Of course it doesn't. European innovation isn't defined by a large Silicon Valley company giving consumers a widget in exchange for their data. Chatbots collect far more personal details than Google queries ever did, and Meta collects the prompts that people type into its AI. Maybe it's not the worst outcome for Europeans to miss out on another data-mining operation, until it's set up to handle their details appropriately. What Zuckerberg frames as a regulatory barrier is a foundation for building public trust in AI systems.

Meta likely won't apply the EU's new rules on disinformation, known as the Digital Services Act, on Americans, several legal experts tell me. Doing so would be politically costly for Zuckerberg, particularly when Trump lashes out (and you know he will) at EU officials for fining companies like Meta or Google that breach the new law.

That may mark a new era for how social media giants follow European rules. Back in 2018, when the EU launched its General Data Protection Regulation to protect online privacy, many companies made changes globally because running separate systems was too complex and expensive. But the so-called "Brussels effect" may now be weakening, as leaders like Zuckerberg find it more valuable to run their platforms in a more fragmented way and placate government officials on opposite sides of the ocean.

Meta's changes won't be quite as dramatic as the Great Firewall, which has seen China develop a completely siloed internet culture. But they could spell a decoupling of relations between US and European internet users. At a time of growing tensions over trade and territory, that may not be the healthiest direction to go.



PAMY OLSON Bloomberg

DRIVEN BY GOVERNMENT initiatives, India's digital economy is growing by leaps and bounds. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) has been in the forefront in supporting these initiatives. Many measures they have taken oriented to secure telecom services by combating the swelling menace of unsolicited commercial communications (UCC) and fraud. The innovative measures include items like distributed ledger technology or DLT (popularly known as blockchain technology), artificial intelligence (AI), and comprehensive sender registration systems. However, the basic structure of SMS has remained unimproved for 30 years and hence the inherent vulnerabilities remain a big challenge. To address this comprehensively, India must transition to a more secure messaging service, and rich communication services (RCS) is a modern and secure messaging platform developed by the GSMA and readily available to transform mobile communication.

With the Telecom Commercial Communications Customer Preference Regulations, 2018, Trai introduced a robust framework to regulate UCC. This included the use of DLT, digital consent acquisition (DCA) by subscribers, AI/machine learning-based UCC detection, and telemarketing chain binding which ensures traceability and accountability. However, the structural limitations of the messaging backbone, SMS — essentially a technology designed in the early 1990s for basic text communication — struggles to meet the demands of today's digital ecosystem.

Firstly, "spoofing" of SMS — the act of disguising a communication from an unknown source as being from a known,



TV RAMACHANDRAN President, Broadband India Forum

Securing the future of messaging

SMS heydays are long over, but it remains a weak link in India's digital ecosystem. Rich communication services offer a much-needed solution

trusted source — is one of the most prevalent threats to it. Fraudsters can easily forge sender identities, mimicking legitimate enterprises or institutions. This has led to fraudulent SMS alerts which have been used to trick consumers into sharing sensitive banking credentials under the pretext of RCS (know your customer) verification. Investors have been targeted with spoofed SMS, leading to phishing attacks and financial losses. The simplicity of SMS headers makes it easy for malicious actors to bypass detection and exploit user trust.

Secondly, SMS does not offer end-to-end encryption, leaving messages vulnerable to interception. This is particularly concerning for one-time passwords (OTPs) and sensitive data used in financial transactions and e-commerce. Besides, while Trai has mandated preference registration and spam reporting, SMS design limits their effectiveness. Fraudsters often categorise deceptive messages as transactional to evade detection. Further, SMS vulnerabilities lead to reputational damage, reduced consumer trust, and potential financial losses. Spoofing not only harms consumers but also tarnishes the credibility of enterprises.

RCS offers several advantages. RCS business messaging (RBM), the corporate messaging platform of RCS, enables enterprises to register verified sender IDs, complete with logos and brand names, making spoofing virtually impossible. RBM can apply a consistent set of rules

and policy enforcement without blockchain. Consumers can instantly identify RBM authentic messages, restoring trust in messaging. For example, a bank's verified logo and sender name displayed in RCS messages eliminate ambiguity and prevent fraud. The user can click a checkbox to find out who verified the brand. Unlike SMS, enterprises must have a direct relationship with the service provider and provide the requisite business information and credentials to be verified, before being issued with a unique chatbot identity which cannot be reassigned. Person-to-person RCS messages as well as those between an RBM platform and an RCS client can be suitably encrypted by firms that adopt this standard. Irrespective of device or system, the encryption and platform structure, when combined with a unique identity assigned through a direct enterprise relationship, subsequent sender verification, and robust content policy enforcement, enables businesses to safely deliver messages such as OTPs and account-sensitive updates to customers. All mobile operators use one platform for RCS A2P (agent-to-person) messaging — this is RBM. It contrasts with SMS where each carrier has its own platform and there are multiple entry and exit doors. This is where blockchain is used to distribute a common set of firewall rules.

RCS also supports rich multimedia content, such as images, videos, and interactive buttons. Enterprises can provide

seamless customer experiences. For example, banks can offer interactive buttons to secure KYC updates and service requests. Consumers can take control of messaging experience through features such as built-in spam detection, reporting tools, and easy preference management, and get empowered to align with the regulatory framework. Last but not the least, RCS ensures backward compatibility with SMS, allowing a smooth transition without disrupting existing messaging services.

India needs to urgently address messaging vulnerabilities to drive innovation and security across sectors. Verified senders, encrypted messages, and user-friendly tools can provide peace of mind and a superior experience to consumers. Institutions such as banks can use RCS to securely communicate with users, eliminating spoofing risks and ensuring authenticity of messages. Businesses can rebuild trust and reduce fraud-related losses with branded, interactive, and secure messaging.

Trai's efforts to secure messaging service have resulted in one of the most comprehensive frameworks to deal with spam and scams. The heydays of SMS are long over, but its continued presence constitutes a weak link in India's digital ecosystem. RCS offers a much-needed solution, combining enhanced security, interactivity, and reliability; and, by adopting it as a national standard, India can safeguard its citizens and set a global benchmark for secure communication.

Research inputs by Sundep Kuthuria, senior deputy director general, BIF

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

All work, no play L&T India Chairman SN Subrahmanyan's suggestion to work 90 hours a week reflects a flawed perspective that disregards the adverse long-term effects of such an intense work culture. Instead, business leaders must prioritise employee well-being, recognising its role in enhancing productivity and organisational success. A sustainable work culture thrives on work-life balance,

innovation, and creativity. Rather than encouraging excessive working hours, leaders should focus on supporting employee growth and well-being. Strategies like flexible work arrangements, wellness programmes, and incentives promoting work-life harmony can cultivate a motivated, healthy workforce. This approach drives organisational success, fosters sustainability, and strengthens employee engagement. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Hollywood burning The pictures of the wildfires raging across Los Angeles show their inconceivable scale and magnitude and overwhelm us. Firefighters are still battling to put out the devastating fires. Gusty winds fan the flames and scatter the embers far and wide, leading to more fires breaking out, and rendering it that much more difficult to contain the wind-whipped fires. Climate experts link the wildfires,

an extreme weather event, to climate change and "whiplash" conditions boosted by it. Climate change causes about wet-to-dry and dry-to-wet swings creating conditions for severe wildfires. The wildfires underscore (and constitute a dire warning of) the terrible cost of climate change and it should be a wake-up call for the international community to combat it. —G David Milton, Maruthacode

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Transforming defence

The 'Year of Transformation' can give necessary momentum for defence manufacturing and innovation

India's defence landscape is set to undergo a transformative shift in 2025, as the Ministry of Defence (MoD) embarks on an ambitious overhaul aimed at modernising procurement processes, expanding indigenous manufacturing capabilities and boosting research and development (R&D). The year has been declared as the 'Year of Transformation,' with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and other top officials outlining a vision to address long-standing challenges while positioning the country for greater self-reliance and competitiveness in defence. One of the key focus areas for the government is to revamp the Defence Acquisition Procedures (DAP). These procedures, which have been criticised for their complexity and inefficiency, are set to be replaced with a more streamlined, lighter, and faster version. The aim is to cut down delays in procurement timelines and eliminate bureaucratic hurdles that have long impeded defence modernisation. The new framework will not only make the system more efficient but will also create a level playing field for both established players and newcomers in the defence sector. In addition to reforming procurement, the government has placed a strong emphasis on boosting indigenous manufacturing and R&D.

While India is the world's fifth-largest manufacturing economy, its defence manufacturing capacity remains relatively small in comparison to its overall economic standing. To address this gap, the government plans to allocate more resources to defence R&D, with the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) targeting an increase in R&D spending from 5 per cent to 15 per cent of the defence budget in the coming years. One area that has garnered particular attention is the development of aero engines. India has faced challenges in developing these critical technologies domestically, and the government has signalled that joint ventures with foreign Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) will be essential for progress. With significant investments required—potentially as high as Rs 50,000 crore—the government is determined to make the necessary commitments to build the infrastructure and expertise required for successful co-development of aero engines and related technologies. Another significant initiative is the creation of a more competitive defence industry ecosystem. Currently, India's defence sector is largely dominated by Public Sector Undertakings. The government aims to level the playing field by encouraging the participation of startups and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises through policy changes. Despite these ambitious plans, India's defence ecosystem still faces several challenges. One of the most significant hurdles is the relatively small manufacturing base in sectors like aerospace, where India's ability to scale production and develop cutting-edge technologies has been limited. Besides, archaic policies, delays in preparing Requests for Proposals and overly complicated procedures have often led to extended timelines. This must change if defence sector is to become competitive and innovative.



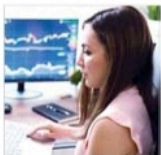
Deviests carry 'kalash' during 'Hindu Rashtra Seva Meli' at Goregaon

PTI

Breaking barriers: The rise of women investors in India's equity markets

Among the most notable trends in the equity market is the surge in women investors, whose participation has grown 6.8 times since 2015

The Indian equity market has radically transformed over the past two decades. The advent of smartphones, digital trading platforms, and increased financial literacy has ushered in a new era of investors—young, financially aware, and open to taking calculated risks. Recent data from the National Stock Exchange (NSE) reveals that women now constitute over 22 per cent of equity market investors in India, a 6.8X surge since 2015. This surge in female participation is particularly noteworthy given the tepid adoption of demat trading in its early days. It could be attributed to women enjoying greater financial independence, a growing interest in equities, and a disciplined approach to sustainable wealth creation. The rise in women's financial awareness has also been a critical driver of this growth. A study by CRISIL and DBS found that 47 per cent of women now make independent financial decisions. This newfound autonomy is reflected in the increasing number of women investing



in mutual funds. According to AMFI data, women's share in India's AUM rose to nearly 21 per cent by the end of December 2023, against 15.2 per cent in March 2017. Importantly, this trend is not limited to major cities; women in smaller towns show equal enthusiasm for capital market investments. However, the same CRISIL and DBS study revealed that women still allocate 51 per cent of their investable assets to fixed deposits and savings bank accounts, 16 per cent to gold, 15 per cent to mutual funds, 10 per cent to real estate, and just 7 per cent of their investible corpus—being the least preferred option. Given the proven potential for substantial market returns, women's risk-averse attitude towards equities is particularly perplexing.

Over the past five years, benchmark indices have delivered over 100 per cent returns. For instance, based on a daily rolling return analysis, the Nifty 50 Total Returns Index has shown positive returns of approximately 93 per cent over three years. These double-digit returns from long-term equity investments have far outpaced the single-digit interest rates offered by traditional savings accounts and fixed deposits. However, women tend to be cautious when it comes to equities. The potential impact of increased women's participation in equity markets is substantial. A BCG study found that women contribute \$5 trillion annually to the global wealth pool. Encouraging more significant equity investment among women and prudent risk management practices is crucial for building a stronger financial future for individuals and the nation. Regulators are already implementing measures to create a safe and transparent market environment for women investors. For instance, initiatives like the Women's

ARUN CHAUDHARY

Investor Awareness Programme actively educate and empower women by simplifying stock market concepts and encouraging them to take control of their financial futures. Simultaneously, the industry complements these efforts by developing accessible and informative content in regional languages and diverse formats, such as podcasts and video tutorials, to make complex financial concepts easier to understand. Women themselves must actively participate in the stock market by engaging in discussions, seeking knowledge, and taking the initiative to invest. Starting with a systematic investment plan is a smart approach to building wealth over time. Additionally, consulting financial experts can help women navigate the market with confidence. It is time for women to seize this opportunity, take control, invest wisely, and contribute to rebuilding a more equitable and financially robust India.

(The writer is Director & Chief Business Officer at m.Stock by Mirae Asset Capital Markets; views are personal)

There is a general feeling that if something is committed on paper, with other things being equal, it is reliable evidence that it will be carried out. If it is on a legal document, the credibility quotient is still higher, and if there are clauses that recognise the punitive element of violation, the feeling of reliability further goes on. This, like many truths, goes a certain distance.

This cannot be the place to explore the veracity of such belief, but there is an occasion to look at certain other aspects of reliability, especially the temperament of the people involved. Some people take their words seriously, and others casually. This attitude permeates their entire behaviour, and in certain matters, it becomes even more evident that they take their words seriously. Other types of people are quite figuratively the opposite, and they take their own words so lightly that when they utter them, they are not sure what conviction they carry. Between these two extremes, the larger part of the population rests with varying degrees of reliability and different levels of conviction.

This simple truth makes the entire range of human conviction open to many shades of possibilities and makes dealing with each other either at a direct level or at a group level, an extremely dubious proposition wherein liability is concerned. This even affects official interaction as indeed it does personal interaction. It is therefore necessary in a group culture to inculcate the correct values of interpersonal dynamics. People cannot be 'taught' to be reliable. This is because the fundamental principles of values, like eternal values, remain the same. Every domain of human life talks about what is right, what is beautiful, and what is essential to keep groups sustainable and harmoniously together. In such circumstances where it is recognised that observing pristine standards

may be difficult, many people practice silence. They simply do not talk about values at all. This may or may not work because silence and lack of communication would allow each one to create his norm and use his interpretation. What matters most then is how the leader of the group behaves as an exemplar and what other members of the group see as the essence of acceptable behaviour.

Positive or negative recognition then follows. For this, the informal and formal leaders of the group must agree on certain examples and set an example collectively. It is difficult, especially when there is no clear reference point and no way of verifying what rules the roost.

If the group has a powerful man, his behaviour is noticed and others try to imitate him. If the powerful man acquires power by formal position, it is one story. If, however, he acquires power through organising cliques and factions and through manipulations, there are always dangers of somebody calling the bluff or indeed power slipping out of his

IF THE POWERFUL MAN ACQUIRES POWER BY FORMAL POSITION, IT IS ONE STORY. IF, HOWEVER, HE ACQUIRES POWER THROUGH ORGANIZING CLIQUES AND FACTIONS AND THROUGH MANIPULATIONS, THERE ARE ALWAYS DANGERS OF SOMEBODY CALLING THE BLUFF



hand. All this is not conducive to organisational stability or, for that matter, even clarity. It makes the job of a new entrant particularly complex. The complexity would be enhanced if the new entrant could not navigate his way intelligently with perspicacity and shrewdness. If the group has a large number of turnovers, then the complexity is further compounded. Under the circumstances, it's perhaps best to recognise that, like all truths, simplicity is the best approach. Being truthful, simple, and straightforward is the foundation of sound behaviour, stable relationships, and the achievement of goals constructively and dependably. Like all foundations of a sound civil society, positive thinking, straightforward action, and dependable follow-up is the way to go forward. It is the human mind that creates complications. Legality and other elements that try to substitute the basic character of dependability, without the right ambience, will remain halfway houses. It can lead to

quibbling, litigation, and, at times, disappointment. However, stability will remain a matter of character, and that is where civil societies need to pitch. Whether this is in a formal organisation or an informal civil setup, it would hardly make a difference. Truth remains the truth and for the best way, it is important to follow it up relentlessly with simplicity and dignity. Like many tales, this too has a tall tale. There is a Sanskrit dictum "Satyam bruyat, priyam bruyat naa bruyat satyam apriyam". A free translation of this shall be "Speak the truth, speak the pleasant; do not speak the truth which is unpleasant". There can be many views on this, and each will have its assumptions and derivations. If assumptions vary, as do the derivations, conclusions would be also varied. That is the nature of truth: multifaceted, each appearing right in its way. One has to navigate one's way. (The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TWO TIER SYSTEM IN TEST CRICKET

Madam—There are talks between Australia, England, and India and the International Cricket Council's (ICC) new chair, Jay Shah to split Test (cricket) playing nations into two tiers, with Australia, England and India in one tier and the rest in a different tier. The concept has gained impetus post the BGT series, where the attendance and TV-viewership touched new records. If agreed upon by the ICC council, this will come into effect post-2027 after the present commitments are met by these nations. The objective is that these three nations will play against each other twice in three years as against the present four-year schedule. While the idea may have sprung up from the revenue point of view, ICC must focus on its unwritten objective of improving the quality and skill level of the weaker member nations and making all the members play competitive cricket.

The choice of three nations—India, Australia, and England—also in the upper tier, is arbitrary if it is on the basis of the quality of cricket displayed. If it is so, India has not displayed quality cricket, both in the home series against the Kiwis and down under in the BGT series recently. Also, the Windies have stunned the Aussies in Gabba in a pink ball Test in 2024. The recent returns to the test-playing nations, like Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan have also displayed talents and enthusiasm. Hence such an idea of an arbitrary split must be shunned. If the ICC is serious about splitting, it must be based on the performance in a given time period, say between 2025-28, on the number of points scored by each nation on the number of test wins/losses and can consider having two or three divisions amongst the twelve member countries. Having done that on the basis of points scored, one can consider promotion or demotion of the first and last two, respectively, which will also instill a sense of competitiveness and thereby sustain interest in the test cricket.

Gopalaswamy | Chennai

A policy shift for Afghanistan



In a major and surprising development, India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met Afghan Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai on Wednesday. Though its relations with Afghanistan had nosedived after the Taliban seized power in the mountainous, landlocked republic in 2021, New Delhi, in a smart move, kept providing humanitarian and economic assistance to Afghanistan. The Taliban also requested the Indian delegation to reopen its diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. Now, Misri's meeting marks a major shift in New

HONOURING INDIAN DIASPORA

Madam—The city of Odisha turned out to be the venue for the 18th Pravasi Bhartiya Divas this year. In order to honour the immense contribution of the Indian diaspora, it is particularly required to appreciate the exceptional contribution of Indians overseas. For many decades, millions of Indians have paid visits to foreign countries to grab vibrant opportunities in different spectrums of life. Indians made exceptional contributions to the economic success of the different nations, assisting India to create its own niche soft power on the basis of its people settled overseas. Indians are globally renowned for contributing to the world's highest remittance back to India with 129 billion USD in 2024. The spirit of the Indian diaspora is ever vibrant and zealous, and this celebration at Odisha's Bhubaneswar for appreciating Pravasi Bhartiya is a welcoming initiative. Let's take a moment to thank & appreciate the Indian diaspora, who are continuously extending the legacy of India all around the world.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

MAHAKUMBH MELA IN PRAYAGRAJ

Madam—The Great Mahakumbh Mela 2025, set to take place in Prayagraj, which is held only once in a period of 144 years, which is beginning from January 13 to February 26, is much more than a religious gathering—it is a profound celebration of spirituality, culture, and cosmic alignment. This ancient festival, rooted in the Sanatan tradition, is believed to influence not only human affairs but also cosmic and terrestrial energies. The event is centred on the holy confluence of three rivers—the Ganga, Yamuna and the Saraswati. The Mahakumbh exemplifies India's rich cultural diversity, drawing millions of devotees, ascetics, and pilgrims from all walks of life. Through practices like ritual bathing, chanting, meditation, and spiritual discourses, it becomes a unifying force, blending traditions and beliefs into a harmonious whole.

Anushka Bohra | Ujjain

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