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[OUR TAKE]

Declogging the country's courts

Centre's blueprint to curb avoidable litigation is a welcome step; effective execution will be key

The Union government's move to streamline its litigation practices and prevent unnecessary legal battles marks a welcome step towards responsible governance. The latest set of guidelines issued by the Union law ministry, under the title "Directive for the Efficient and Effective Management of Litigation by Government of India", aims to overhaul the manner in which the government, the largest litigant in the country, handles its cases before courts and tribunals. This is a much-needed corrective, given the alarming pendency of over 46.6 million cases across all levels of the judiciary.

The document lays out a comprehensive blueprint for ministries and departments to curb avoidable litigation, avoid mechanical filing of appeals such as special leave petitions in the Supreme Court, and foster better inter-departmental coordination. Notably, it stresses measures such as root-cause analysis, rationalisation of appeals, case classification based on sensitivity, use of alternate dispute resolution (ADR), improved case tracking through Legal Information Management and Briefing System (LIMBS), and performance-based review of panel counsel. These are thoughtful and pragmatic interventions that, if implemented in letter and spirit, could significantly reduce the burden on India's courts. Even better, it could enhance the ease of doing business in India.

However, good intentions have not always translated into action. Over the years, the Supreme Court and several high courts have repeatedly pulled up government departments for pursuing frivolous, repetitive, or unnecessary litigation — a practice that has not only clogged the courts but also drained public resources. The failure to adopt a uniform litigation policy despite repeated proposals is a telling example. So, while the current guidelines are laudable, the real challenge lies in compliance. Ensuring that ministries adhere to the norms, panel lawyers are held accountable, and unnecessary appeals are weeded out will require sustained political will and bureaucratic discipline. Monitoring mechanisms must be put in place to ensure regular audits and accountability for litigation decisions. Periodic reports on adherence and success metrics could help build transparency.

If genuinely enforced, the directive could pave the way for a more responsible litigation culture, allow the judiciary to focus on matters of constitutional and public importance, and increase India's attractiveness as an investment destination. Reducing government-induced litigation burden is not just an administrative necessity but also a test of the commitment to efficient governance and justice.

Much ado about a film title in the name of faith

What's in a name? Lots, according to the Central Board for Film Certification (CBFC). So, this august body, which has assumed the role of a censor even though its mandate is to only certify films, found the title of a Malayalam film starring Union minister Suresh Gopi, *Janaki v State of Kerala*, objectionable. It contended that Janaki referred to Goddess Sita, and that the title, in the context of the film's content, could hurt religious sentiments. The film charts the legal battle of a young woman character, Janaki Vidhyadharan, who takes her rapists to court. On Thursday, the film's producers told the Kerala High Court, where they had challenged the CBFC decision, that they were willing to rename the film as *Janaki V v State of Kerala* and mute a trial scene so that a theatrical release was possible. The CBFC originally demanded 96 cuts, but was finally satisfied with two.

This case is disturbing for multiple reasons. One, the premise that CBFC invoked to deny certification was silly — and dangerous. Janaki is one of the many names of Goddess Sita, and a very common pan-Indian name. People are named after gods and goddesses, and they also undergo hardships in life. Two, CBFC's regional panel had cleared the film, which was then objected to by its apex body. The presumption of hurt among the faithful and fear of the mob can't be the criteria for film certification. This is not the first time the CBFC has acted on these lines — in 2017, it objected to the word *sex* in the title *Sex Durga* and forced its producers to rename the film as *S Durga*. When institutions prefer to censor artworks on the presumption of hurt, it has a chilling effect on art production. It emboldens the mob to enforce its writ on creative industries such as cinema, which rides on capital investment and is vulnerable to mob pressure in the absence of support from State institutions.

Preparing for the next Y2K moment

Amaravati Quantum Valley Declaration anticipates a trillion-dollar opportunity. Rest of India should log in

The government of Andhra Pradesh issued the Amaravati Quantum Valley Declaration earlier this week, committing to transform the state capital into a global hub for quantum innovation. The plan includes installing an IBM Quantum System Two by early 2026, building India's largest open quantum testbed (QCHIPIN), supporting the launch of 100 quantum startups, and training 5,000 specialists annually by 2030. The goal is to test 1,000 quantum algorithms a year and achieve 1,000 effective qubits by 2029.

This is a smart move because a trillion-dollar opportunity is opening up.

In the late 1990s, a booming crisis galvanised the Indian technology industry like nothing before: the Y2K bug. As the world braced for computer systems to fail when the calendar flipped to 2000, companies and governments scrambled to fix outdated software written decades earlier. What followed was a windfall for India. Tens of thousands of young engineers, fresh from university or retraining boot camps, stepped in to debug code and modernise systems.

Now, a quarter-century later, the world is headed toward another such moment — a problem of breathtaking complexity, urgency, and scale.

Only this time, it won't be about two-digit dates. It will be about quantum computers and their ability to shatter the cryptographic codes that underpin nearly every system we rely on — from banking and e-commerce to messaging apps and government databases.

This will be the mother of all Y2Ks. Made possible by a radically new type of computer.

Unlike classical computers, which store data in bits that are either 0 or 1, quantum computers use qubits, which can be 0 and 1 at the same time — a property called superposition. They also take advantage of entanglement, a quantum phenomenon that links particles so the state of one instantly affects the other. These properties allow quantum machines to solve certain problems exponentially faster than classical ones, especially those involving complex patterns or massive search spaces.

At the heart of the current threat lies Rivest-Shamir-Adleman (RSA) encryption, a technology that secures online banking, emails, Wi-Fi routers, and even cryptocurrency wallets. Its security comes from the mathematical difficulty of factoring large prime numbers.

Today's classical computers would take thousands of years to break it. But quantum computers, with their ability to perform parallel calculations at massive scale, could theoretically crack RSA in hours or minutes using an algorithm known as Shor's algorithm — once they reach sufficient scale and stability.

Until recently, this danger seemed

comfortably far off. Experts estimated that it would take a quantum computer with 20 million error-corrected qubits to break RSA-2048 encryption. No one had anything close. But a new study this year showed it might be possible with just one million qubits — a number that suddenly feels within reach.

Google's latest 100-qubit "Willow" chip demonstrated exponential error reduction, a crucial step toward fault-tolerant computing. IBM has already built a 1,212-qubit processor to large-scale, modular quantum systems by 2029. Microsoft is experimenting with topological qubits that could make error correction far more efficient.

These are still early days, but the trajectory feels eerily familiar when you look at what happened with artificial intelligence (AI). As recently as 2020, most people — outside a handful of research labs — had never heard of large language models.

The idea that a machine could generate essays, summarise legal contracts, create lifelike videos, or simulate entire conversations felt like science fiction. Then came the breakthroughs: GPT-3, ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Claude, and more. Suddenly, AI wasn't decades away — it was everywhere, transforming industries in real time.

The same may be true for quantum computing. We may not see it coming until it is already here — and by then, it may be too late to react.

When the first organisation, whether a corporation, a rogue nation, or a hacker collective, dem-



Vivek Wadhwa



The latest advances in quantum computing aren't just a mega IT project. They represent a global infrastructure overhaul that will touch every major company, government, and connected device.

onstrates the ability to break RSA encryption, the world will be thrown into a frenzy. Every secure system will need to be upgraded, digital certificates replaced, encrypted datasets reprotected, and network protocols rewritten.

This isn't just a mega IT project. It is a global infrastructure overhaul that will touch every major company, government, and connected device. In complexity, it will make the Y2K bug look small.

To make things worse, most companies are still unaware of what cryptographic algorithms they use, let alone whether they are quantum-safe.

In the Y2K era, Indian engineers built trust by solving hard problems at scale. Now, with millions of trained coders, hundreds of thousands of cybersecurity professionals, and a rising ecosystem of quantum researchers, cryptographers, and startups, India is better prepared than any other nation to take the

lead. Imagine what will happen when a global quantum alert is triggered — when banks, telecom companies, and governments race to upgrade their cryptographic systems. They will need trusted partners who can move fast, understand both legacy software and next-gen cryptographic libraries, and operate across borders.

India needs to have ambulances and fire trucks ready — training a new generation of software developers in post-quantum cryptography, upgrading tools, contributing to open-source frameworks, and preparing global response teams. That is why the Amaravati announcement matters. If the rest of the country follows Andhra Pradesh's lead — investing in talent, infrastructure, and startups — India can save the world again.

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In Air India's flight path: One airline, many legacies

That the country witnessed in horror and disbelief on June 12, has been far from adequate no matter which angle one looks at it is a gross understatement. But that matter will have to wait.

Over the past month several aviation industry and Air India officials have reached out to this writer to express their concern and air their fears. The most alarming (and hopefully, alarmist) one is that there could be more accidents. Alarmed as this fear may be, Air India and the aviation regulator would do well to take it seriously since the people involved are privy to the system and its fault lines.

There has been a mixed response to news that Tata Sons chairman N Chandrababhan has decided to get more involved with the management of Air India.

Still, there's no denying the fact that the chairman of Tata Sons might find his task harder than managing some of his other companies. While onlookers have no doubt that he can fix what's broken, it is by no means going to be easy as this entity needs a total cultural makeover. There is a long and hard road ahead to be traversed, no matter who the navigator.

Let me elaborate with some background. In their original avatar, while Air India and Indian Airlines were both owned by the government, they had very distinct cultures and identities even though both suffered the malaise of many State-owned firms.

Of the two, Air India had a far more centralised system of operating, with each department under one departmental head, who were all powerful and more often than not ran it as a personal fiefdom.

Indian Airlines had a more decentralised system: a divisional structure with regional heads responsible for their regions and with far more functional autonomy. While petty rivalries at the top often guided the agenda at both, most of the regional heads in Indian Airlines worked in the larger interests of the airline.

This showed in the generally healthier economic performance of Indian Airlines

despite it facing more competition (Jet Airways and others) whereas Air India faced practically none (not too many bilateral had been granted and the access of foreign airlines to Indian traffic was limited).

But what was disconcerting for the two carriers was the constant change in leadership, which primarily comprised senior bureaucrats pulled in from diverse fields and backgrounds. These individuals had different working and leading styles and their own idiosyncrasies.

As one joke that circulated at the time of the merger went: One XX wants a mega airline and the other XX couldn't care less as long as his elevation to additional secretary proceeds without any hiccup (the XXs stand for the common initials of two top managers at the time of the merger and post it).

The larger point was that with two very distinct cultures and systems of functioning, the merged entity that emerged suffered from a deep identity crisis and was in some senses doomed from the word go. That is what Tata Sons inherited at the time of the acquisition.

Then there was the well-run Vis-tara, Tata's own airline, but an altogether different creature with its own ethos, values, culture and personality.

It is this cocktail of split personalities that Chandrababhan has the unenviable task of reconciling and fixing. In addition, he also has a top management team that may not be equipped to handle this. The results of this have already shown up in incessant troubles, operational glitches and safety concerns the airline has faced for the last three years, even as it managed to avoid a catastrophic accident.

One cannot therefore help but sympathise with the chairman who now has the task of developing a brand-new corporate culture in a multipolar entity while dealing with the fallout of the crash. It's probably a lot more than what he or the Tata group bargained for and is likely to take Herculean effort, commitment and time.

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Anjali Bhargava



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MARCO RUBIO | UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF STATE

The Indo Pacific region remains a focal point of US foreign policy... The story of next 50 years will largely be written here

At the Asean Post Ministerial Conference

Why the GST regime has been such a game-changer

The rollout of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in July 2017 marked a tectonic shift in India's fiscal architecture, unifying the country into a single economic market for the first time since Independence. The genesis of GST dates back to the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, which set up an empowered committee of state finance ministers to explore the idea. The Modi government introduced the GST Bill in Parliament in December 2014. Within two years, the 101st Constitutional Amendment was passed with broad support and ratified by more than half the states. The GST Council was instrumental in shaping the consensus. There have been 55 meetings of the Council, and all but one decision was reached unanimously. This isn't just a legislative triumph, but also a case study in cooperative federalism.

GST replaced over 17 taxes and 13 cesses with a single, harmonised system. It ended the cascading effect of indirect taxes, dismantled the border check-post system and brought formal and informal economies together. Logistics improved dramatically — trucks now travel 44% more daily than before and inter-state trade has jumped to 35% of GDP in FY22 from 23.5% in FY18. Over 1.4 crore registered taxpayers, GST has significantly expanded India's tax base and reduced the effective tax burden. The average pre-GST indirect tax rate was 15% by March 2023, it had dropped to 12.2%.

A recent PwC study quantified total GST-induced tax savings at over ₹4.3 lakh crore in a single year. Nearly 60% of consumer items now fall under the 5% or lower tax slab, while less than 3% face the highest 28% rate. Far from being a "Centre's tax", GST exemplifies federal cooperation. States retain 10% of GST, around 50% of GST, and receive 42% of the Centre's CGST via Finance Commission transfers. Over 70% of GST collections go to states. From FY18 to FY24, states collected ₹46.5 lakh crore under GST — far higher than the ₹37.5 lakh crore they would have earned under the old tax regime, despite lower average rates and the pandemic shock.

Revenue buoyancy — a measure of tax responsiveness to GDP — rose from 0.72 pre-GST to 1.22 post-GST. Even after the end of the pandemic shock, it has remained a healthy 1.15.

India's GST design aligns with global systems but stands out for its technological back-

bone. The e-way bill, e-invoicing, and faceless compliance mechanisms make GST one of the most advanced digital tax systems globally. Moreover, India's average GST rate (12.2%) is among the lowest in the world, especially for a country with such developmental diversity. This makes India a far more attractive investment destination, offering a predictable and transparent tax regime.

GST has achieved what decades of fragmented policymaking could not — a unified Indian market. Today, 85% of Indian firms — up from just 59% in 2022 — view GST positively, with MSME satisfaction climbing to 82%. Ninety-nine per cent of companies are now digitally or semi-digitally prepared for audits and notices, proof that mandatory e-returning and auto-populated returns have hard-wired compliance into everyday business. Crucially, 67% of taxpayers (versus 55% last year) say clarifications now settle disputes faster, while sectoral voices celebrate new freedoms: Consumer-goods executives laud "hassle-free" inter-state expansion; energy majors cite stronger balance-sheet planning; life-science firms link

lower prices and better debt management to GST-driven efficiencies.

These micro-wins echo in macro numbers: Truck productivity has jumped 44% since check-posts vanished, inter-state trade has risen from 23.5% to 35% of GDP, and a PwC study reckons annual GST-induced savings at ₹4.3 lakh crore. With almost 60% of consumer goods now in the 5% slab (and barely 3% subject to the top 28% rate), the tax is both broad-based and progressive. Contrast this with the pre-2017 regime of cascading duties, corrupt border "chokepoints" and "one nation, many markets": a model that wasted economic potential and entrenched informality. By replacing 17 taxes and 13 cesses with a single digital spine, the Modi government has delivered tangible transparency and mobility — turning India's largest tax gamble into a quietly compounding growth dividend. GST stands as a testament to the Modi government's political resolve, administrative capability and commitment to "Sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka Vishwas, and sabka prayas."



Shehzad Poonawalla

Shehzad Poonawalla is a national spokesperson of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The views expressed are personal.

SPOTLIGHT



A booth-level officer verifying documents during the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in Purnia district, Bihar. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

The struggle to be counted

Even as political parties gear up for the Bihar Assembly election, due later this year, the Election Commission of India has announced a drive to revise the voter list in the State. With just a month's time for 790 crore adults to fill in the enumeration forms, the entire State machinery has been deployed to carry out this exercise. **Sobhana K. Nair** finds that on the ground, people are angry, confused, and worried about the implications of not 'making it' to the list

It is not yet noon, but the tracks at the Jogbani railway station are shimmering in the heat. Jogbani in Bihar's Araria district is the last station on the Indian side. The Indo-Nepal border is just a few metres away. Across the railway line, in the cram-jam of run-down semi-urbanisation, the stench from the black refuse gurgling in the open drain overwhelms. The drain runs along a narrow, uneven brick street, down which women and men hurry. They are on their way to meet the booth-level officer (BLO), who sits in a home with the largest courtyard. He has brought enumeration forms issued by the Election Commission of India (ECI) for the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls.

On June 24, the ECI announced the SIR in Bihar. There are 790 crore electors in the State, all of whom must fill in the enumeration forms if they want their name on the electoral rolls. The Assembly election is due in the last quarter of 2025. All enumeration forms must be submitted by July 25. The exercise, however, is primarily aimed at those whose names were not recorded in the 2003 electoral rolls, the last time that an intensive revision of the voter list was carried out in the State. An estimated 2.93 crore people fall into this category.

At Jogbani, as people line up in front of Ijaz Ashraf (name changed to protect privacy), the BLO assigned to their ward, the anxiety is about documents. They have questions. In the crowd of over a dozen, only one person has a matriculation certificate, one of the 11 documents that the ECI has listed as proof of identity and place of birth for the SIR. Others have only ration cards, Aadhaar cards, or election photo identity card (EPIC) or voter ID cards, government documents that are so far not listed by the poll body.

A Bench of the Supreme Court is currently hearing at least 10 petitions filed by Opposition leaders, activists, and non-profit organisations challenging the SIR. The Supreme Court has asked the ECI to consider including these documents that are widely available with people.

Academics and activists say a majority of Bihar's population does not possess any of the 11 documents. Many face possible disenfranchisement. They argue that updated electoral rolls were published in January 2025 under the Special Summary Revision. The rush has caused confusion among the electorate and put stress on the governance system, they say. Many are calling it "votabandi after notabandi", the 2016 demonetisation drive that caused similar chaos.

An electorate, anxious and panicked

Ashraf tells people that they only need to show their Aadhaar cards and fill in the enumeration form. The panic eases. "We got a message on June 5 from the block-level authorities that no documents are needed. We were told to look at the Aadhaar cards of people and fill in the forms," he says. Ashraf is a Shiksha Sahayak, a post created in the 2000s by the then Nitya Kumar government to address teacher shortages in primary and middle schools. Kumar is still in

Authorities say they will withhold my salary and seek a written explanation if I don't finish the task quickly. A booth-level officer in Purnia district

power in Bihar. These positions are mostly on contract basis. Many BLOs say they got oral instructions between July 5 and 8 to fill the form just on the basis of the EPIC and Aadhaar cards.

Ashraf's phone rings endlessly, with residents asking for directions to his location. There is no house-to-house verification taking place that the ECI had said there would be. As of July 8, he had filled only 40-50% of the over 1,000 forms due from the area he covers. He must get at least 90% of the work done over the next two days. "I have been told that my salary will be withheld if I don't meet the target," he says.

The ECI said the SIR was needed because of "rapid urbanisation, frequent migration, young citizens becoming eligible to vote, non-reporting of deaths, and inclusion of the names of foreign illegal immigrants". The poll body's aim was to ensure "all eligible citizens are included" and no "ineligible voter is included" in the rolls.

Over the next few minutes, almost seamlessly, electors are handed over enumeration forms, which they take to the two ASHA (accredited social health activists) workers sitting at a table next to Ashraf's to get them filled. Once the details are filled in, people sign or put a thumbprint on their forms. The process is over in less than five minutes. No documents are attached; no difficult questions are asked, given that several women here were born in Nepal and married men across the border. Some have brought new passport-size photographs; these too are not taken.

On July 6, the office of the Bihar Chief Electoral Officer published an advertisement on the front pages of newspapers in Patna. "Yadi avyashak dastavez tatha photo uplabdh nahai ho, to sirf ganana pratapra bhar kar BLO ko uplabdh karaa de (If you do not have the necessary docu-

ments, then just submit the enumeration forms to the BLOs)," it had stated. Later that day, the ECI issued a clarification that there was no change in the instructions to carry out the SIR.

Bihar Chief Electoral Officer Vinod Singh Gungyal says, "Go through the orders please. There is no change in orders of the commission."

The ECI order of June 24 allows those who cannot produce the necessary documents now to submit them during the "claims and objections" period between August 1 and September 1.

The fact that the documents are still needed and the requirement has only been delayed is yet to percolate to the electors. At Jogbani, 26-year-old Alam Mohammad Raza fishes out his smartphone to show everyone a news clipping from a leading Hindi newspaper on ECI's "no change" clarification. But the relief of not having to supply the documents is stronger than the doubt. The fear that many migrant workers will be left out of the voter list has also been dulled for now as many BLOs are allowing wives and fathers to sign the enumeration form on their behalf.

Raza must produce proof of date and/or place of birth of himself and one parent, since he was born between July 1, 1987 and December 2, 2004. Those born after December 2, 2004 must produce documents that show proof of date and/or place of birth of themselves and both parents.

The reactions to the SIR vary. For each, the significance of having their name on the electoral roll varies. For some, it is about the right to choose their representative; for many, it is about access to government schemes and subsidies; for the minority, it is the fear that if their names are struck off, they will no longer be deemed citizens and sent to detention camps.

At Jogbani, Imtiaz Ansari, 58, who runs a readymade clothing shop, says he spent two days turning his house upside down looking for the school leaving certificate that shows he completed Class 10 in 1982. He hasn't needed it in a while. "Didn't we vote just last year [in the Lok Sabha election]? Didn't we elect this government? Now the very people whom we elected and placed in the high office are probing us, asking whether we are citizens of this country or not."

Ansari's anger pours out in a jumble of questions. "I didn't come from America or Hong Kong. My grandfather died here, my father is buried here, and I too shall be," he says.

Those born before July 1, 1987 must show a document with proof of date and/or place of birth. These documents must be attached to the enumeration forms. At least five of the 11 documents listed by the ECI do not indicate the applicants' place or date of birth.

BLOs, overworked and frustrated

The filing of enumeration forms has gathered pace over the last few days. As per press state-

ments issued by the ECI, on July 5, only 13.19% of nearly 7.9 crore electors filled and returned their forms. This figure has been steadily growing. By July 9, it was at 57.48%. The ECI has not revealed how many of these forms have documents attached to them.

There is a narrative that repeats itself across the districts that *The Hindu* visited. At Kamalpur, on the outskirts of Purnia district, BLO Ramesh Sahu (name changed) says before the advertisement appeared asking people to submit forms without documents, only 50 forms were filled over two days because no one could produce the necessary documents.

Diligently rifling through the documents of the restive people surrounding him, Sahu's anxiety is peaking. He throws his hands up in frustration. He says he got the enumeration papers only on July 5 at 2 p.m. There are almost 900 electors in the booth under him.

"For the first three days, I could manage to process only 25 forms per day, since we needed to attach the documents. On June 7, I was told I need not ask for those documents; I could get the forms filled just on the basis of an Aadhaar card. Now each day, I am managing to process 50 to 60 forms," he says. But the pressure is high. Every day he gets three or four calls from his supervisor. "They say they will withhold my salary and seek a written explanation if I don't finish the task quickly," he says.

The entire State administration has been deployed to carry out this exercise. There are 98,498 BLOs at work, assisted by ASHA workers. With patchy Internet coverage, the work of uploading the forms is happening at the block office, where the BLO sends in the signed forms.

Hurrying through the enumeration forms without the documents pushes the onus of verification on to the Electoral Registration Officer. "When the draft electoral rolls are made public on August 1, thousands and thousands of names will be missing. My apprehension is that many won't read the draft rolls too, considering they are working far away from home. It is only when they return home on election day to cast their vote that they will find themselves out of the rolls," says Jagdeep S. Chhokar, founder of the Association for Democratic Reforms, a non-profit working on electoral and political reforms.

Dalits, angry and worried

At 2.30 p.m. in Jalalgarh, on the outskirts of Purnia district, paddy saplings are being planted by women in fields with shin-high water. A clutch of women takes a break from bending over through the day. They have just finished lunch and are sitting on their haunches.

The government's insistence on documents has the group riled up. "There is a rate list for each document. An Aadhaar card costs ₹200 per person; a birth certificate anything between ₹1,000 and ₹2,000, depending on whether our children were born in hospital or at home. It also means moving work for that day to chase after these," Puja Devi, who is in her early 20s, says of the bribes she must pay through the system. She is a Mahadalit belonging to the Rishidev community, one of 20 Scheduled Castes that are the most marginalised of the Dalit group. The category was created by the Bihar government during Kumar's earlier term as Chief Minister in 2007.

Everyone clings in with their travails. Rambha Devi, the eldest in the group, well into her 60s, intervenes. "I have this big pile of documents," she gesticulates. "When they come asking for votes, I will slam it in their faces." Her bluster invites guffaws from the group. How would their daily lives be affected if they are not on the voting list? The answer is unanimous: they will lose all benefits from both Central and State government schemes. "It is as good as being dead," says Parvati Devi, in her 30s, speaking the sobering truth. Naveen Kumar, 35, at Thariya Badya village in Supaul town, in a district of the same name, is from the Rishidev community. "This looks like the government wants to drive us out. Isn't this NRC (National Register of Citizens)? Aren't they asking for the same documents that people would need for NRC?" he says.

Naveen is a graduate, the only one in his village to have been to college. "I have every document that the government needs. But at least 50% of people won't," he says. He is annoyed at the government for sending everyone into this document-hunting spree. As per Bihar's 2022 caste survey, only 14.7% of adults in the State have completed Class 10.

At Kamalpur in Saran district, Mohammad Mazhar, 28, says he has been trying to make sense of the ECI's order. His worry is that though he has the school leaving certificate, the elderly at home do not. The worry is further accentuated by the ECI's decision that failure to produce proof of birth and place could lead to not only disenfranchisement but also deportation.

"If the existing electoral roll was good enough to elect the country's Prime Minister, why is it not good enough to pick the Chief Minister? If the existing voter list is unreliable, let the Prime Minister resign," he says, angrily.

Dilip Kumar Yadav, a private school teacher in Phulparas, Madhubani district, has stopped at a wayside stall in the main chowk for his evening cup of tea. As the conversation veers towards SIR, he declares, "I will not get all this done. I am working towards getting citizenship of a different country. I don't want to stay in Bihar." The group around him laughs. "One man rules this State for 20 years, but does nothing. I have voted for the BJP twice. What have we got in return?" he says.

In the Bihar Assembly, of the 243 seats, the BJP has 79 and the Janata Dal (United), which is part of the National Democratic Alliance at both the Centre and in the State, has 45.

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A van spreading awareness of the ECI's Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in Bihar's Purnia district. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP



Widen the net

The ECI must heed Court's view on including more accessible documents

The Supreme Court of India's pointed observations on Thursday regarding Bihar's ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls are a crucial course correction for the Election Commission of India (ECI), which it must heed immediately. By urging the ECI to consider including the Aadhaar, the Elector Photo to Identity Card, and the ration card among the acceptable documents for identity verification, the Court has acknowledged the critique of the SIR that the 11 documents listed for verification are a restrictive and unnecessary barrier to voter registration. The Court has nudged the ECI toward inclusivity in a way that could help resolve the core issues with the SIR. The Court rightly observed that "the entire exercise of SIR is about identity only", that none of the 11 documents currently listed are "telltale ones for citizenship", and that they are all meant to prove identity. It also rightly went on to question why Aadhaar, which is "considered basic for getting other documents", is excluded while dependent documents such as caste certificates are accepted, exposing the inconsistency in the ECI's position. The ECI's objection to Aadhaar as merely proving residence rather than citizenship reveals a misunderstanding of the practical realities of Bihar, besides legal precedents. For example, data show that while 87% of Bihar's population have an Aadhaar card, only 45%-50% are matriculates and close to just 2% have passports.

The Court's earlier judgments remain relevant too, having decisively rejected putting the "onus of proof of citizenship" on voters already enrolled in previous elections. This precedent contradicts the SIR's approach of treating every voter as a potential non-citizen unless proven otherwise and which risks significant disenfranchisement of electors despite their having valid identification. While not staying the SIR, the Court also listed the judicial review of the whole process, including its timing and nature, which "goes to the very roots of our democracy [and] is about the right to vote". The Court has reminded the ECI that its mandate, under Article 324, is to facilitate democratic participation, and not to create obstacles. There has been enough confusion on the ground following a more liberal reading of the ECI's SIR rules on document submission and verification by the Chief Electoral Officer, which was overruled by the Chief Election Commissioner. With its suggestion on expanding the list of verifiable documents, the Court has provided the ECI an opportunity to transform the SIR from a dangerously exclusionary exercise — one that could affect marginalised citizens — into a genuinely inclusive process.

Bridge too far

A regular audit of all major infrastructure projects is a must

On July 9, a span of a 40-year-old bridge in Vadodra in Gujarat caved in, sending half-a-dozen vehicles into the Mahisagar river below. On Thursday, 18 people were confirmed dead. Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel has ordered an investigation into the cause, which locals have alleged to be the long-standing neglect by local authorities. On June 15, an iron pedestrian bridge over the Indrayani river in Pune district collapsed due to overloading, leaving four dead. In May, a concrete slab being hoisted by a crane at the site of the construction of a bridge over the Kathajodi river in Cuttack fell on workers below, killing three. Similarly, in 2024, the Ghatkopar boarding collapse in Mumbai resulted in 17 fatalities. And in 2023, there were more accidents — a girder failure at an under-construction railway bridge in Mizoram left 26 workers dead; a rooftop billboard collapse killed two women in Lucknow; and a pillar collapse at a metro construction site in Bengaluru killed a mother and her toddler. In 2022, the Morbi suspension bridge over the Machhu river, again in Gujarat, failed, killing more than 140 people. These are only some of the hundreds of incidents involving the catastrophic failure of public infrastructure. They are accompanied by road accidents and deadly fires in crowded areas, both of which regularly claim many lives.

Even if they are isolated, they are not entirely accidental: they are symptoms of India's ageing infrastructure that is being tested, especially in peri-urban areas, as industrial growth and urban populations expand. Facilities such as bridges, roads and hospitals that were designed for some number of users, are progressively giving way under the weight of more. So also are the departments responsible for their upkeep, many of which remain underfunded, understaffed or complacent. While the authorities have ordered investigations into these incidents, few have yielded failure analysis reports into the public domain. Some also prompted audits but they were restricted to infrastructure of the same type. Given the evident ubiquity of the problem, India must modify asset-creating initiatives such as the Urban Infrastructure Development Fund to have additional priorities and adjust the incentives of rehabilitative schemes such as the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation to help regularly maintain ageing urban assets in all centres, with greater frequency to those peopled by 10 lakh or more. Second, while baseline audit frameworks for municipal bridges exist, they must be enforced more uniformly and transparently. Finally, until then, accidents must trigger a probe by a statutory body plus a mandatory audit of all major infrastructure, and States must endeavour to publish the findings at the earliest.

Aiding India's progress with choice, control and capital

With the world's population having crossed the eight billion mark, looking at the macros is all but natural. However, there has to be an equal focus on the micro-vulnerable groups, key populations and individuals on the fringes. We must endeavour to ensure that the promise of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) is kept, and that every person gets the right to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health, free from coercion, discrimination and violence.

This year, the United Nations has announced its theme for World Population Day as "Empowering young people to create the families they want in a fair and hopeful world". It highlights the ICPD's special focus on youth, by affirming their right to accurate information, education and services in order to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. It also reflects a simple but pressing need: of bringing youth to the centre when envisioning the future, ensuring their freedom of choice and opportunities.

Home to the largest youth population

UNICEF reports there being 371 million youth in the age group of 15 to 29 years in India, making it the world's largest youth population. This is a number that stretches existing resources and systems. But with the right investments in education, skills and also access to health, nutrition, and family planning services, it can become a powerful driver of national progress. Unleashing this youth potential in India could boost its GDP by up to \$1 trillion by 2030, unlocking a demographic dividend as projected by the World Bank and NITI Aayog, while significantly reducing unemployment and improving social outcomes.

India has made significant strides with initiatives such as 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' and the National Adolescent Health Programme, reducing child marriage and adolescent fertility rates. Yet, there is still room to do more as a nation in order to address persistent challenges such as limited reproductive autonomy, socio-cultural barriers and gender inequality. These continue to restrict many young people (especially young women) from realising their true potential.

For instance, the prevalence of child marriages in India has reduced by half since 2006, but is still reported at 23.3% (National Family Health Survey-5, 2019-20). Further, teenage childbearing among women in the age group of 15 to 19 years was pegged at 7% nationally. But in some States, the rate was reported to be more than double, highlighting stark regional disparities (National Family Health Survey-5). In addition, the recently published State of World Population Report 2025 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) underscores the lack of reproductive autonomy

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With the right investments in education, skills and access to health, nutrition and family planning services, India's youth population can boost national progress

and the crisis of fertility aspirations, particularly among women. More than a third of Indian adults (36%) face unintended pregnancies, while another 30% reported unmet reproductive goals, i.e., an inability to exercise their choice about the number of children they have. Almost 23% of Indian adults face both.

Issue of child marriage

The need is for a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy which includes education, contraception access, nutrition, mental health support and community empowerment to tackle the root causes rather than addressing symptoms.

UNICEF reports that each additional year of secondary education can reduce the likelihood of child marriage by up to 6%. Project Udaan (implemented by IPE Global in Rajasthan between 2017 and 2022), used this as its basis; it became an example of how a streamlined, 360° approach can drive meaningful change for young people.

The initiative addressed the challenge of early marriages and teenage pregnancies by keeping girls in secondary school through the strategic use of government scholarship schemes, improving their awareness of sexual and reproductive health, and improving access to modern contraceptives for young women, which helped bolster the voice and reproductive agency of girls and women. The initiative led to almost 30,000 child marriages being prevented and nearly 15,000 teenage pregnancies being averted, while also ensuring an education and a bright future for these girls.

Similarly, the Advika programme, launched by the Government of Odisha in partnership with UNICEF-UNFPA in 2019-20, has made strides in preventing child marriage through strategies which include strengthening state systems, fostering awareness about child protection issues, and empowering adolescents through education, skill development and leadership training. Its youth-focused approach has enabled about 11,000 villages to be declared child marriage-free; in 2022, nearly 950 child marriages were stopped.

Addressing child marriage and early pregnancy is essential, but true empowerment means going further — equipping adolescents, especially girls, with the skills, the education and the opportunities they need to lead independent and meaningful lives, while also fostering enabling environments that support their agency, voice and participation in decisions that affect them. This includes the timing of their marriage, reproductive freedom (whether or not to have children, the age at which they have the first child, the number of children they wish to have), or how they choose to live meaningful lives on

their own terms. At the heart of this empowerment lies economic independence. When economically empowered, women gain the resources, the confidence and the voice to shape their futures and contribute meaningfully to society.

To address the issues surrounding women's economic empowerment and the low female labour force participation, Project Manzil is being implemented by IPE Global in collaboration with

the Government of Rajasthan in six selected districts (2019-25). The programme which utilises a human-centred design approach, understands the aspirations of young women, then aligns skill training with these aspirations, and enables them to have unhindered access to dignified employment opportunities at gender-friendly workplaces. As with all effective programmes, this

has been complemented with addressing harmful social norms through consistent behaviour change communication strategies. The project has made families prosperous and has also transformed communities. For instance, it helped 28,000 young women (ages 18 to 21 years) to complete skill training at government skill training centres — 16,000 were employed, making them the first generation of women from their communities to enter skilled professions. Empowered by financial stability, these young women exude better negotiation power to delay or get married.

Accelerating progress

The State of World Population 2025 report aptly focuses on rights-based, multi-sector investments and underscores that progress hinges on expanding universal access to contraception, safe abortion, maternal health and infertility care, and also in removing structural barriers such as education, housing, childcare and workplace flexibility. It also emphasises that investing in girls' education, life-skills development, conditional cash transfers, community mobilisation and health services delivers measurable gains. Programmes such as Udaan, Advika and Manzil showcase how these investments can be brought to life and improve the future of youth everywhere.

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has rightly called for this World Population Day to celebrate the potential and the promise the largest-ever generation of youth holds. It is important to remember that they are entitled to shape their futures by making informed choices about their health, families, careers and lives. India stands at a defining moment on its development journey, and its success will depend on how well it can understand the aspirations of its youth, amplifying the voices of young women, and helping unlock opportunities for them.

Population decline and an ill-informed chorus

Demographic thinking has always been intertwined with public discourse and, at times, poorly informed. With every passing 'Population Day', we see a shifting discourse: from a Malthusian cry about runaway growth and ecological strain to an animated fear of fast-falling fertility rates.

The two sides

A rising chorus of voices is warning the world of population decline and civilisation "dwindling to nothing". Yet, much of this alarmism is premature, analytically flawed, and ethically troubling. While there is no ambiguity that the fertility rate is falling, the implications drawn are often ill-informed. Pro-natalist movements are gaining currency among nation-states with varying degrees of urgency. For the last few years, the self-identified 'demographer' Elon Musk has been 'concerned' about falling birth rates and predicted a 'population collapse' within the next 20 years. The Musk Foundation even made its biggest donation to a higher education institution — about \$10 million, to the University of Texas — to establish the 'Population Wellbeing Initiative'.

juxtaposed with Mr. Musk's claims are the data by the United Nations World Population Prospects (WPP), released every two years. The world's population is predicted to increase during the next 50 years, from 8.2 billion in 2024 to a peak of about 10.3 billion in the mid-2080s, according to WPP 2024. The world's population is expected to steadily decline after a peak of 10.2 billion by the end of the century; 10.2 billion people is proof that the population collapse is a hoax, even though it is predicted that the world's population in 2100 will be 6% smaller, or roughly 700 million fewer people than it was predicted 10 years ago.

A large portion of the alarmism misses two points. First, projections are not predictions. The underlying assumptions regarding future vital



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The fertility rate is falling but much of the alarmism is premature, analytically flawed and ethically troubling

rates drive these projections — the farther the projection, the less accurate it is. Second, there is a lag effect in demographic change; in other words, the time lag between change in vital rates (survival and reproduction) and their apparent implication on the age distribution and population size. When a population reaches below-replacement fertility (total fertility rate or TFR value of less than 2.1), it can continue to have increments for decades. This phenomenon is known as population momentum. In other words, growth is maintained because a significant portion of the reproductive-age population continues to produce children, albeit fewer than in the past. No population shrinks overnight or reaches stationarity (zero growth) linearly.

The 'real fertility crisis'

In the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report, 'The Real Fertility Crisis: The Pursuit of Reproductive Agency in a Changing World' (2025), around 14,000 people from 14 countries were asked whether they 'feel able' to have children, to which one in five responded that they would not be able to have the number of children they desire. Nearly 23% of respondents desired having a child, which went unfulfilled at the preferred time.

And, 40% of these respondents ultimately had to forgo their desire to have a child. Irrespective of whether the surveyed country had higher or lower fertility rates, people are either over/under realising their desired fertility, indicating ubiquitous barriers to achieving their ideal family size. When asked about the factors that influenced people to have fewer children than they desire, unsurprisingly, infertility (13%), financial limitations (38%), housing limitations (22%), lack of quality childcare (8%) and

unemployment (21%) stood out for the Indian respondents. The Republic of Korea spent more than \$200 billion to boost its population over the last 20 years. Ending a nine-year declining trend, for the first time births in South Korea are showing a slight rebound of 7.3% in the first quarter of 2025 when compared to the same period last year. This uptick in births seems to be backed by a rise in marriages and a positive outlook on marriage and children. Despite this optimistic trend, respondents in the Republic of Korea cite financial (58%) and housing limitations (31%) as factors leading them to have fewer children.

Need for societal changes

The panic over falling births and an ageing population has unjustly targeted women who have opted out of childbearing, curbing their rights to safe abortion and other means of contraception. The homogenisation of women as a single entity, shedding the idea of childbearing, is absurd. Most people want to have children, on average, around two, yet they are shut out of parenthood. It is a reminder that the focus should shift to those women who want to have children and are unable to do so — not to the ones who are voluntarily childless. Be that as it may, target-driven pronatalism, such as baby bonuses and one-off benefits, often reinstates traditional gender roles and ignores men's contribution, and does more harm than good.

Countries facing declining fertility need to let go of their ethno-nationalist discourse and support significant societal changes in favour of women and families. The associated fear of a shrinking workforce should not be addressed through forcing women to have more babies, but through hiring them in the paid workforce and not penalising them for motherhood.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bridge collapse

There are incidents in India, of late, of bridges collapsing even as they are being built. But the collapse of a portion of a 40-year-old bridge in Vadodra needs closer inspection. The reason for the collapse is not far to seek. For several decades, trucks have had four wheels at the rear and two in front. Such trucks

with a total of six wheels are now obsolete. The bridge was probably one of many constructed with these trucks in mind. But now a number of trucks have 10 wheels to carry double the cargo, thus exponentially increasing the weight of the trucks. When such countless and slow-moving loaded trucks cross such bridges, the

durability of the bridges comes into focus. In future, it must be ensured that bridges are constructed keeping this factor in mind (Page 1, July 10). V. Lakshmanan, Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

This is not an isolated incident but a growing symptom of a nationwide epidemic: ageing

infrastructure, shoddy repair work, and officials asleep at the wheel. Bridges are not supposed to tremble under traffic. They are supposed to stand strong. Yet, time and again, weak design, poor oversight and sheer apathy turn them into traps. Our infrastructure is not the only thing crumbling. So is our governance. And people are

paying for this with their lives. K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

End the wars

As a peace-loving citizen, a nonagenarian and as one who has lived through both the First and Second World Wars, I find it distressing that the Russia-Ukraine war and the Palestine-Israel

conflict are leaving a trail of suffering. It would be my earnest and humble plea to the United Nations to earnestly get these warring nations to sit together and make a sincere attempt to usher in peace.

Mani Natarajan, Chennai
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

Are existing mechanisms effective in preventing custodial violence?



Anup Surendranath

Professor and Executive Director of The Square Circle Clinic, NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad



M. Srinivasan

Professor of Criminology at the University of Madras

PARLEY

The gruesome death of security guard Ajith Kumar, 27, while in police custody in Tamil Nadu's Sivaganga district last month, is yet another grim addition to the long and growing list of custodial deaths in India. In response, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has ordered a CBI probe to ensure a transparent investigation, and the Madras High Court has directed the agency to complete its inquiry and submit a report by August 20. Are the existing institutional mechanisms effective in preventing custodial violence? M. Srinivasan and Anup Surendranath discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Aaratrika Bhaumik. Edited excerpts:

Why does custodial violence persist despite statutory safeguards and Supreme Court guidelines?

Anup Surendranath: India has signed but not ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture, and lacks a stand-alone domestic law criminalising torture. This reflects a lack of political will to implement international human rights obligations. However, the more pressing concern lies in the entrenched institutional culture that normalises and even justifies custodial violence. Police personnel often perceive such violence as a necessary means to achieve justice, especially when the formal legal process is seen as slow and ineffective. Public reaction to custodial violence is similarly inconsistent and often shaped by the nature of the case. For instance, while the recent incident has sparked widespread outrage, the 2019 alleged encounter killing of four men accused of raping and murdering a veterinarian near Hyderabad was met with public celebration. There is also a glaring absence of authoritative data on custodial violence. As a result, accountability mechanisms remain weak.

What factors contribute to the institutional culture that condones police brutality?

M. Srinivasan: The rigid hierarchical structure of police forces, combined with a high-pressure working environment, fosters a culture in which aggression is often valorised. Mainstream films frequently glorify vigilante justice. In many cases of custodial violence, instead of facing disciplinary action, offending officers are rewarded with promotions.

AS: Custodial violence should not be dismissed as the actions of a few 'bad apples' within the system. Such behaviour is perpetuated by



B. Ajith Kumar's family mourns his death in Sivaganga district. L. BALACHANDRAN

entrenched social hierarchies and an enduring colonial mindset within the police, where the public, particularly marginalised communities, is viewed not as citizens to be protected, but as subjects to be controlled. Certain bodies are routinely viewed with suspicion and subjected to heightened surveillance and force. Policing, in this framework, is not about serving the population but about exerting authority over it.

What reforms are required to change such prevailing attitudes?

MS: It is crucial to implement robust training programmes that not only equip police personnel with modern policing methods, but also sensitise them to their own implicit biases. Third-degree torture is often disproportionately inflicted on petty offenders, while white-collar criminals are rarely subjected to such treatment. There is also an urgent need to adopt scientific interrogation techniques. Most police officers lack adequate training in contemporary investigative methods and forensic tools, and there is often a reluctance to collaborate with external experts such as forensic specialists and mental health professionals. Another important reform, supported by many stakeholders, is the decriminalisation of petty offences, particularly minor property-related crimes. This would limit the arbitrary use of arrest powers and help ensure that custodial detention is reserved for exceptional cases.

In 2020, the Supreme Court mandated the installation of CCTV cameras in police stations and affirmed victims' right to access the footage. How effectively have these directions been implemented?

AS: The *Paramvir Singh Saini v. Rajni Singh* (2020) judgment is a classic example of the Supreme Court prescribing technocratic



Custodial violence should not be dismissed as the actions of a few 'bad apples' within the system. Such behaviour is perpetuated by entrenched social hierarchies and an enduring colonial mindset within the police, where the public, particularly marginalised communities, is viewed not as citizens to be protected, but as subjects to be controlled.

ANUP SURENDRANATH

solutions to deeply entrenched institutional problems. In reality, compliance with its directions is minimal. More importantly, as seen in the Ajith Kumar case, acts of torture often occur outside police stations. Even where cameras are installed, a common complaint is that they are conveniently non-functional when victims' families seek access to the footage. This contributes to the continued prevalence of illegal detentions, with arrest dates and times frequently manipulated in police records. Ultimately, the effectiveness of any reform rests on political will and the institutional capacity to enforce it.

The Law Commission has recommended introducing a provision that reverses the burden of proof in such cases. Do you think this could enhance accountability?

AS: Introducing a rebuttable presumption in evidence law would be a significant step towards accountability. However, those most often subjected to such violence typically belong to vulnerable communities. The real question, then, is how we are enabling them to access the legal and constitutional remedies available to them. It is unrealistic to expect victims or their families to navigate the labyrinth of legal procedures on their own. Our justice system often tests the resilience of the very people it should be protecting. So, while legal reforms are important, without parallel efforts to empower vulnerable communities and reduce systemic barriers, the pursuit of justice will remain an uphill battle.

Are judicial magistrates, as the first line of defence against police excesses, discharging their duty to prevent such abuses?

AS: The statutory requirement to produce an accused before a magistrate within 24 hours of arrest is a critical safeguard against police excesses. However, it is deeply concerning how perfunctory this process has become. Magistrates often fail to fulfil their intended role,

which includes scrutinising the grounds for arrest, physically examining the accused for signs of torture, and engaging meaningfully with them to uncover any evidence of mistreatment. Even medico-legal examinations are often reduced to a mere formality. The higher judiciary has fallen short in addressing lapses in magisterial oversight. This systemic failure contributes to the abysmally low conviction rates in cases of custodial torture and deaths.

A further concern is the routine admission of torture-based evidence in the legal process. Section 27 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, is particularly problematic. While the law excludes confessions made to the police from admissibility, it permits the use of material recovered as a result of such confessions. This loophole enables the continued use of custodial torture, as coerced confessions can still produce evidence that is admissible in court.

In *Prakash Singh v. Union of India* (2006), the Supreme Court mandated the creation of police complaints authorities, led by retired judges, at the State and district levels to address complaints against police misconduct. How effective have these institutional watchdogs been?

AS: Most States have failed to establish these authorities. Where they do exist, their credibility is compromised by the inclusion of serving police officers as members. This reflects a broader pattern in which judicial directives receive little meaningful compliance from State governments. It also raises serious questions about the judiciary's ability to enforce its orders.

Can community policing or greater civil society involvement help curb such practices?

MS: Absolutely. Awareness campaigns led by the media, educational institutions, and civil society organisations can play a vital role in informing people about their constitutional rights and the mechanisms available for redress. Increased public scrutiny of custodial practices can also generate pressure for systemic reforms. At the same time, for community policing to be effective, it is essential to clearly define the role of community representatives and ensure they are properly trained to engage with law enforcement constructively.



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NOTEBOOK

Caught in violence while reporting on protests against violence

Hundreds of people come together at protests to express solidarity with the cause, but some also come with an agenda

Shrabana Chatterjee

As a female reporter, I have always found it unsettling to cover crimes against women. The challenge is not only to report the story, but to keep personal feelings out of it as well. Reporters also cannot afford to let their guard down, especially while covering protests. Hundreds of people come together at such protests to express solidarity with the cause. However, some of them also come with an agenda.

In less than a year, I found myself caught in at least two violent situations while covering two separate cases of sexual assault. Last year, when India was celebrating its 78th Independence Day, Kolkata was reeling from the horrific rape and murder of a 31-year-old doctor inside the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital. Like my colleagues and peers, I spent a lot of time on the road covering 'Reclaim the Night' marches, held by people protesting against sexual violence.

One night, I entered R.G. Kar Hospital and stood in front of a stage, waiting for one of the marches to start. The premises had been heavily barricaded and police personnel had been stationed at all the entrance gates. The space felt secure until it did not. A few minutes past midnight, I started hearing loud screams. It was clear that something was wrong; these were not protest slogans.

Suddenly, more than 100 men, some intoxicated, broke the gates of the hospital. They brought down the barricades and went on a rampage. As they hurled stones and sticks at protesters, terrified workers, doctors, and nurses ran looking for cover. The police fled, offering little or no help. Many police personnel were injured. Later, they told the media that they were not prepared to handle the mob.

Panic rising, I ran across the college campus, knocking on every door and pleading for shelter. All I wanted to do was to hide from the violent mob. Most of the students said they could not trust me enough to let me inside. They were suspi-

cious of me and I couldn't blame them. The situation was already violent and the odds were stacked against them. Finally, one kind man took mercy and urged his peers to let me into a seminar hall. I joined a group of people huddled inside. We stacked wooden planks and desks against the entrance in a desperate attempt to keep the mob out. I waited with them for hours, watching my phone in dismay as the battery threatened to die. Every time there was a bang on the door, we shivered in fear. The mob could be heard abusing people outside. They were trying their best to locate people hiding inside the campus. They finally went away and we walked out, relieved.

In June this year, I was covering another protest march in front of the South Calcutta Law College. For nearly three hours, there had barely been any activity. So, as human nature would have it, I let my guard down. But that was the calm before the storm.

The situation again escalated in seconds. A group of political workers who allegedly came to protest against the lack of safety of women started abusing the students who were agitating about the same issue. They hurled gendered abuses at us and beat up everyone who came in their way, including women. Caught in the crosshairs, I ran with other journalists. We looked for cover and found a tea shop. The police were nowhere to be seen this time too.

While reporting on protests against violence, reporters don't expect to be caught in the violence. Both these protests were in the heart of the city, yet I ended up feeling threatened. I wondered, if I felt this way in a crowd, how frightened and insecure must women feel while travelling alone at night? The experiences left me shaken and I realised that I would always have to watch my back. Journalists must be constantly look for a way out of such situations, to save ourselves and to tell the story.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

All eyes on Pandharpur



Warkaris, members of a Hindu religious tradition called the Warkari Sampradaya, dance on the banks of the Chandrabhagha river on the occasion of Aashadi Ekadashi in Pandharpur in Maharashtra. Aashadi Ekadashi is a significant pilgrimage for devotees of Lord Vitthal. EMMAUNUEL YOGI

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 11, 1975

Jeddah meet to consider Saudi move to set up Islamic oil fund

New Delhi, July 10: The Foreign Ministers of nearly 40 Afro-Asian Islamic States meeting in Jeddah this weekend will be considering the Saudi Arabian proposal for the creation of a special fund by the oil-rich Muslim countries to help out their Islamic brethren with credit and grant in footing the high costs of their oil imports. The participants in this conference include the more affluent Islamic countries like Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, the Gulf

The Hindu

Sheikhdoms, Libya, Algeria and Nigeria, and Malaysia and Indonesia. One of the principal beneficiaries of this Islamic oil fund will be Pakistan, which is already receiving considerable financial assistance from Iran, Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf Sheikhdoms. Apart from easing the burden of its payments position, the proposed subsidies from the Islamic fraternity will enable Pakistan to utilise some of the extra cash for buying arms from countries like the United States. There are reports that, besides commending the Saudi proposition for an Islamic oil fund, Pakistan has been actively campaigning for the support of the Muslim countries to its candidature for one of the Security Council seats falling vacant at the end of this year.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 11, 1925

Bombay cotton crisis

Bombay, July 10: The conversation between the Committee of the Bombay Mill-owners' Association and the local labour leaders have commenced. At a conference yesterday, the Chairman of the Mill-owners' Association explained to the labour leaders the position of the mill industry and told them that if immediate action was not taken half the mills would have to be closed down at once. The Mill-owners wanted to avoid extensive unemployment. At the same time they were anxious to reduce their losses.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Ukrainians killed in Russian attacks in June this year

232 Russia's escalation of drone and missile attacks on Ukrainian cities led to a three-year high in the number of civilians killed or wounded in June, the United Nations said on Thursday. The UN verified at least 1,343 wounded during the month. [AP](#)

Women detected with cancer-like symptoms in Hingoli

14,542 These women in Hingoli, Maharashtra have been detected with "cancer-like symptoms" during screening under the Sanjivani scheme, State Health Minister Prakash Abitkar informed the Assembly on Thursday. [PTI](#)

Number of journalists killed in Israeli strikes in Iran

12 The media arm of the Basij paramilitary forces — a branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps — said the death toll among media workers had risen to 12 following the identification of two additional individuals, the IRNA news agency reported. [AP](#)

Persons rescued due to the flood in the Northeast

3,820 The Army has launched humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in several States of Northeast, according to a release issued on Thursday. The army has so far deployed 40 relief columns and rescued 3,820 people, it said. [PTI](#)

Number of foreigners executed by Saudi Arabia in 2025 so far

101 Saudi Arabia executed two Ethiopian nationals on drug charges, the Interior Ministry said on Thursday, bringing the number of foreigners put to death since the beginning of the year to at least 101, according to an AFP tally. [AP](#)

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The need to safeguard the right to vote

What did the Supreme Court say about electoral rolls revision in Bihar? Is the right to vote a fundamental right in India? Can electoral roll errors invalidate an election? How can India balance electoral vigilance with the inclusion of genuine voters?

LETTER & SPIRIT

Kartikay Singh

The story so far:

On July 10, the Supreme Court directed the Election Commission (EC) to consider Aadhaar cards, voter ID cards, and ration cards as acceptable documents for the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar. It has listed the batch of petitions challenging the EC's decision for further hearing on July 28. The court's remark — that the question of 'right to vote' goes to the very root of the functioning of our republic — has cast a spotlight on the foundational processes of India's electoral machinery and the genesis of India's 'universal adult suffrage' (UAS). India's constitutional promise of the 'right to vote' differs significantly from that of many Western democracies. Reflecting the flawed belief, espoused by thinkers like J.S. Mill, that voting should be reserved for the "enlightened" and denied to the "ignorant," countries like the U.K. initially restricted the franchise to male property owners. Universal male suffrage emerged only in 1918, and women were granted the right to vote a decade later in 1928. In the U.S., although the 15th and 19th Amendments extended voting rights to African Americans (1870) and women (1920), systemic barriers such as poll taxes and literacy tests continued to disenfranchise many for decades thereafter.

How was universal adult suffrage made real in India?

In sharp contrast, far from gradualism and the 'privileged class' criteria, India's choice of immediate, universal inclusion ensured 'democratic equality' from the outset, bypassing the prolonged and often violent struggles seen elsewhere. Article 326 of the Constitution granted every adult citizen the right to vote, regardless of gender, caste, religion, education, or property, at a time when most of the world moved cautiously. Initially set at 21 years of age, this threshold was lowered to 18 by the 61st Constitutional Amendment in 1989. This commitment to a robust, inclusive democracy found further constitutional reinforcement in a series of Supreme Court judgments, notably starting with *Kesavananda Bhurari v. State of Kerala* (1973), which established democracy as part of the 'basic structure' doctrine. For this ideal to function meaningfully, people should be able to freely decide the fate of their government, an unassailable right that shapes governance and must never be compromised.

This inclusive vision was operationalised through two key laws: the Representation of the People Act, 1950, which governs the preparation and revision of electoral rolls; and the 1951 Act, which regulates election conduct, candidature, and electoral offences. The EC has repeatedly introduced administrative innovations to realise this 'constitutional promise'. Notably, the then Chief Election Commissioner Sukumar Sen, faced with the task of enrolling 173 million largely illiterate voters, turned a logistical hurdle into a democratic breakthrough by introducing election symbols, making UAS practically accessible.

In India, EC has a great responsibility to reach the last citizen, wherever they may be, to actualise their 'right to elect'. As Winston Churchill once said, "At the bottom of all tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into a little booth, with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper..." His words



A booth-level officer verifying documents during the special intensive revision of electoral rolls at Kamalpur in Bihar's Purnia district. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

remain a timeless reminder that the health of any democracy ultimately rests on the sanctity of the 'right to vote'.

Is voting a fundamental right in India?

The legal status of the 'right to vote' in India has long been debated. Although Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and K.T. Shah proposed including it in the Constitution's fundamental rights part, the Constituent Assembly's Advisory Committee ultimately rejected the idea. Importantly, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in *Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India* (2006) held that the 'right to elect' is a statutory right under Section 62 of the RPA, 1951, and not a fundamental or constitutional right.

Later in 2016, though a two-judge bench in *Rajbala v. State of Haryana* described the 'right to vote' as a constitutional right, the larger bench ruling in *Kuldip Nayar* prevails. Again, in *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India* (2023), the top court declined to pronounce on the issue, noting that it had already been settled by the five-judge Bench in the *Kuldip Nayar* judgment. However, in his dissent, Justice Ajay Rastogi asserted that the 'right to vote' is an expression of Article 190(a) and reflects the essence of Article 21. Yet, as this view remains a minority opinion, the 'right to elect' continues to be recognised as a statutory right under prevailing law.

Nevertheless, even though it is not a fundamental right, courts have regarded the right to vote as an inseparable part of democracy, anchoring their reasoning in the idea that it enables citizens to shape governance, making it a "democratic imperative" vital to the Indian republic's survival. As philosopher John Dewey said, democracy is not just a form of government, but a social and personal ideal.

Why does electoral roll accuracy matter?

Free and fair elections rest on accurate electoral rolls, under the RPA, 1950. Inaccuracies — such as mass omissions, ineligible inclusions, duplicates, or incorrect entries — undermine the "one person, one vote" principle by enabling impersonation, disenfranchisement, or dilution of votes, ultimately distorting the people's mandate. Therefore, the EC is empowered under Section 21 of the 1950 Act to prepare and revise these rolls to ensure integrity.

While discrepancies may arise, courts have consistently held that only

substantial and systemic errors that demonstrably "materially affected" the election outcome can compromise the sanctity of the electoral roll. Minor mistakes or isolated disenfranchisement are insufficient. Allegations like those in Bihar warrant scrutiny, but it must also be noted that purification of rolls is necessary because just as the exclusion of an eligible voter undermines democracy, so does the inclusion of an ineligible name. Therefore, rather than disrupting or delaying the exercise, efforts should focus on helping improve the process. The Supreme Court's suggestion to include more accepted documents helps safeguard every genuine elector's right to be represented.

While the right to inclusion or objection in electoral rolls is conferred on individuals, not political parties, the court in *Lakshmi Charan Sen v. A.K.M. Hassan Uzzaman* (1985) observed that in a largely illiterate and politically unaware electorate, parties should take steps to ensure eligible voters are included and ineligible ones are removed. Given India's party-based Parliamentary system, such vigilance will help to preserve 'electoral integrity'.

Who qualifies as an ordinary resident?

The EC under Article 324 serves as the constitutional guardian of elections, with powers of superintendence, direction, and control. A key duty is preparing accurate electoral rolls, guided by Section 19 of the RPA, 1950, which mandates that any citizen aged 18 or above, "ordinarily resident" in a constituency and not disqualified, is entitled to be registered. "Ordinary resident" implies a genuine, continuous presence, not a temporary stay. For example, a student living in a hostel may not qualify if their permanent home and intent to return lie elsewhere. Mere temporary absence from one's place of ordinary residence does not negate one's status as an ordinary resident of that location. This criterion prevents fraudulent registrations and ensures voters maintain real ties to their constituencies, preserving representative accountability.

Interestingly, the Manmohan Singh case (1991) exemplifies judicial scrutiny on this front. His election from Assam was challenged for lack of "ordinary residence," leading the court to clarify that ordinary residence means habitual, regular, and genuine presence, not a temporary or casual stay or a nominal address. Beyond ordinary voters, India's

electoral system accommodates those unable to vote conventionally. Under Rule 18 of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, 'postal ballots' are available to service voters like armed forces personnel, paramilitary, armed State police posted outside, and government staff abroad, and voters on election duty. Overseas electors — Indian citizens living abroad without foreign citizenship — can register under Section 20A of the RPA, 1950. However, they must vote in person, as they are currently ineligible for postal or proxy voting.

One of the most contentious issues regarding the SIR exercise in Bihar is the debate on 'citizenship verification'. In *Lal Babu Hussein v. ERO* (1995), the court quashed two EC directives (1992 and 1994) allowing District Collectors and Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) to identify and delete alleged foreigners from voter rolls. The Supreme Court noted that the poll body guidelines put the "onus of proof of citizenship" on the person involved, even disregarding that several persons were voters in previous elections.

The court ruled that EROs must give due weight to past electoral rolls, conduct full inquiries, and follow quasi-judicial procedures, ensuring natural justice and adherence to the Citizenship Act and Constitution. These safeguards must guide the current exercise as well. Moreover, allegations or vague suspicions cannot justify the exclusion of individuals from citizenship or voter lists without credible evidence and due process, according to the judgments in *Lal Babu* and *Md. Rahim Ali* (2024).

What is next?

The Bihar SIR controversy and broader electoral reform debates highlight a core democratic truth: India's democracy depends on electoral rolls that are accurate, inclusive, and accessible. As the Supreme Court prepares to resume hearings on July 28, the EC must complete the exercise with a careful balance between genuine vigilance and inclusion to uphold the fairness of the process.

Public awareness should empower voters to verify and update their entries, making them active custodians of electoral integrity. Safeguarding the vote is not merely a statutory obligation; it is a shared democratic responsibility, requiring vigilant institutions, informed citizens, and forward-looking legal reforms.

Kartikay Singh is a lawyer based in New Delhi

THE GIST

▼ The Supreme Court, while hearing challenges to the special intensive revision in Bihar, suggested that the Election Commission consider Aadhaar, voter ID, and ration card as acceptable documents, a move aimed at improving access and reducing wrongful exclusions.

▼ The Election Commission, under Article 324, is empowered to revise electoral rolls under Section 21 of the RPA, 1950 — but this process must balance vigilance with inclusion, and follow due process to avoid wrongful disenfranchisement.

▼ The right to vote in India is a statutory right, not a fundamental one, but it is treated as a 'democratic imperative' essential to the survival of the Indian republic.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



David Corenswet in a scene from *Superman* (2025). AP

Curse of perfectionism: Why Superman is a timeless superhero we could all relate to?

Superman, often dismissed as an outdated fantasy, mirrors relevant social constraints as a saviour burdened by the need to be flawless in a world suspicious of the non-conforming, as a misfit who needs to hide who he is to cope with the fear of not belonging

Rhuvanesh Chander

When comic book writers Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster debuted the red-caped crusader in 'Action Comics #1' in 1938, Superman was a necessity. He was a collective champion who was meant to be a ray of hope for the less fortunate children; a preacher who shone light on a world reeling from the economic depression; a Jewish icon against anti-Semitism; an alien who shattered the misconceptions attached to immigrants; an advocate of the American dream, and a powerful voice against injustice who offered a fantasy escape for the working-class. Born in one of the most vulnerable eras in modern history, he had to be the perfect hero, so perfect that only something not of this Earth, like Kryptonite from his home world, could weaken him.

Ironically, the very society that once necessitated a perfect superhero has now largely deemed him irrelevant. In 2025, Superman is often dismissed as an outdated fantasy. Compared with the 'real' superheroes from DC and Marvel, he's often criticised as a product of an absurd myth – superhero origin stories now need to happen on Earth – and as an overpowered entity who is too alien to our reality.

But what Superman critics often miss is this: the Man of Steel does have a weakness – not Kryptonite – but a compulsive need to be perfect, and the perennial struggle of being too perfect in a world suspicious of those who stand out.

The quiet exile
"Perfectionism," says American clinical

psychologist and author Anne Wilson Schaefer, "is self-abuse of the highest order." Living in a society that constantly sets up ideals to live up to, we try to become the perfect version of who we and others think we should be. It's a cage we put ourselves in – a lonely pursuit towards an impossible, abstract ideal. Life as a human can feel so fragile that even failing in a daily routine seems like the end of the world.

Superman has always mirrored this complex compulsion. He's intrinsically a character designed to replicate society's notion of perfection – chiselled jaws, fit body, handsome, gentlemanly, and a farm boy who has touched grass and can see right from wrong. In Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978), Christopher Reeve's Man of Steel, anguished by the death of his sweetheart Lois Lane, even breaks cosmic laws to bring her back. In Zack Snyder's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), Henry Cavill's Superman pleads to Batman to 'save Martha,' his adopted mother, in a vulnerable moment that paints him as a tragic figure still beating himself for not being able to save his adopted father, Jonathan Kent (Kevin Costner). Unlike other superheroes, being invincible is non-negotiable for Superman.

"Superman cannot kill" – this is a code every depiction of the superhero has followed. When fiction decides to break that code, he is often pushed to the other extreme, as a monster in alternate depictions such as *Brightburn*, *Homelander* (*The Boys*) and *Omni-Man* (*Invincible*). In DC, even the evil Superman in Donner's third film doesn't go to the extent of killing; while Zack Snyder's reign at the now-defunct DCEU ended before we could see an evil

Superman (hinted at the Knightmare sequence in *BVS*), the scene in which Superman reluctantly kills General Zod elucidates this moral tussle. In fact, unlike most superheroes, Superman can never allow himself to be who he truly is or use his powers to their full potential.

Loneliness of being too good

The Last Son of Krypton is often depicted as a god-like entity who must learn to live gently among fragile beings. But seldom have films depicted the fear of isolation and frustration that comes from not being allowed to be yourself. As Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, he has to refrain from using his full potential – even holding a glass of water too tightly could cause trouble – to avoid being detected. He must suppress parts of himself even from Lois.

Fascinatingly, this isn't always about protecting his identity.

In the 1978 film, the first dialogue his father tells him is, "Been showing off a bit, haven't you, son?" for an inconsequential prank he pulls off on his friends. Clark responds, "It is showing off if someone is doing the things he's capable of doing? Is a bird showing off when it flies?" Is Superman showing off if he is...Superman? Now, watch what Jonathan replies: "When you first came to us, we thought people would come and take you away because, when they found out, you know, the things you could do... and that worried us a lot. But then a man gets older, and he starts thinking differently, and things get very clear. And one thing I do know, son, and that is you are here for a reason."

Clark can also be seen as a mask that a misfit needs to wear. Even his reluctance to open up to Lois portrays him as a tragic

figure who must wear the hat of a journalist to fit in. It's his only survival strategy and the only way he could be 'tolerated.' In a world that demands conformity and alienates misfits, Clark is the only way to cope with the loneliness that comes with being a tad too brilliant than the rest. It's easy to be what they want you to be – wear a pair of spectacles, and they'll see a man who vanishes into a crowd.

Working under the compulsive need to be perfect, Superman retreats into his Clark Kent identity whenever things go out of order. In *Dawn of Justice*, shaken by the Senate bombing and media trial, Superman internalises the disapproval and questions his own purpose. Usually wielding a strong moral compass, he seems more affected by how others see him, reflecting an internal crisis between who he wishes to be and who he is expected to be.

A fascinating parallel comes in *Superman II* (1980), where Clark is left bloodied by a bully at a bar. His sense of self-worth crumbles. He realises that Clark isn't who he is supposed to be – it's a ruse.

Alternatively, Superman's struggle as an ideal is pronounced well when supervillains appear envious of his image as the leader of humankind. In James Gunn's upcoming *Superman film*, Lex Luthor's conflict reportedly stems from the belief that he – not Superman (David Corenswet) – is better suited to lead humankind.

Superman is the epitome of perfectionism, a freak who isn't allowed to be, and that makes him the rarest of superheroes in the history of fiction. You don't need a Kryptonite spear to threaten him. He is already his own Kryptonite.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Today marks 65 years since the publication of the Harper Lee classic *'To Kill a Mockingbird'*. Here is a quiz about five equally definitive novels of the 20th century

Yasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

In this dystopian novel famous for its exploration of surveillance and totalitarianism – and which was published 35 years before the date in its title – what is the name of the omnipresent authoritarian leader symbolising oppressive control?

QUESTION 2

This novel has been celebrated for its critique of the 'American dream' during the Jazz Age. It was however a commercial failure when it was published in 1925. In its pages, name the mysterious millionaire known for lavish parties and his obsession with Daisy Buchanan.

QUESTION 3

First published in 1967, the book quickly came to be hailed as one of the greatest

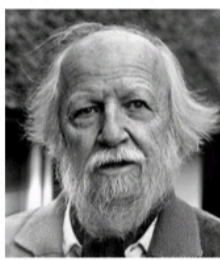
achievements of literature worldwide. A landmark of magical realism, the book chronicles the Buendia family saga in what fictional town that symbolises isolation and cyclical history?

QUESTION 4

Known for its satirical take on the absurdity of war, _____ is named for a paradoxical military rule in its plot that traps soldiers in a no-win situation. Fill in the blank with the book's name that has also entered regular use as a term of the English language.

QUESTION 5

In the vein of the narratives woven by James Joyce and Marcel Proust, the plot of _____ (1927) was subversive to its stream-of-consciousness style and exploration of time and perception. Fill in the blank with the name of this book, whose story also bears many similarities to its author's life.



Visual Question:

Name this British writer best known for his debut novel, renowned for its exploration of human nature and societal breakdown.

DUTCH NATIONAL ARCHIVES (CC BY-SA)

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. Name this biographical film on the life of a Nobel-winning mathematician. What was the diagnosis the doctor made? **Ans: A Beautiful Mind, schizophrenia**
2. In the Tamil movie *Thenali*, Kamal Hassan plays the titular character. What condition is he suffering from? **Ans: Panophobia/pantophobia or Omnipobia, or a generalised fear of everything**
3. In the delightful animation *Finding Nemo*, Dory is portrayed as a fish with short term memory loss. What is the scientific term? **Ans: anterograde amnesia**
4. In his role as Christy Brown, Daniel Day Lewis delivers an Oscar winning performance of a young man diagnosed with _____ at birth. **Ans: Cerebral Palsy**
5. This film is loosely inspired by the writer's own experience with cancer. What kind of rare cancer does the protagonist have? **Ans: Schwannoma neurofibrosarcoma, or cancer of the spine**
Visual question: Satine is diagnosed with what condition? **Ans: Tuberculosis (consumption)**
Early Birds: Tamal Biswas | Siddhartha Viswanathan | Erfanly Oosmany | Suchit Narottam

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



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"How do you pronounce cajole?"

"Well, the 'a' in the first syllable is like the 'a' in 'China.' And the second syllable 'jole', rhymes with the words 'hole,' 'mole' and 'soul'. The word is pronounced caJOLE with the second syllable 'jole', rhyming with the words 'hole,' 'mole' and 'soul'."

"The word is pronounced caJOLE with the stress on the second syllable?"

"That's right! Do you know what cajole means?"

"Doesn't it mean to 'flatter' or something?"

"Right again. When you cajole someone into doing something, you get them to do it by flattering them, praising them, or by saying other things that they want to hear. For example, the salesman cajoled my boss into buying a new suit."

"Can I say, I tried to cajole Sujatha into doing my homework?"

"You certainly can. Was she cajoled into doing it?"

"No, she told me to get lost. I tell you, that girl is not easy to cajole."

"From what I read in the newspapers, it looks like you can cajole politicians into doing anything."

"Provided you have the money, of course."

"That's true. You know what they say, money talks."

"Talking about money, is there a difference between 'The bank adjoins the library' and 'The bank is adjacent to the library'?"

"Yes, there is. First of all, the 'd' in the word a-d-j-a-c-e-n-t is not pronounced."

"You mean it's silent?"

"That's right. The first syllable 'ad' sounds like the 'a' in 'China'."

The second syllable 'ja' is pronounced exactly like the letter 'j'."

"So, the second syllable rhymes with the words 'hay,' 'way' and 'pay'?"

"Yes. The 'e' in the final syllable 'cent' is like the 'a' in 'China'."

"Not China again! And I suppose the stress is on the second syllable 'ja.'"

"That's right. It's pronounced adjacent."

"But what does adjacent mean?"

"Well, if you say the bank is adjacent to the library, it means that the bank is next to the library."

"Adjacent" means 'next to'. I see. So, I can say, my house is adjacent to Mohan's."

"You certainly can. Here's another example. My sister's room is adjacent to mine."

"Ok. But what does 'adjoin' mean?"

"Once again, the 'd' in the first syllable is not pronounced."

"So the first syllable in the words 'adjoin' and 'adjacent' are pronounced like the 'a' in 'China'?"

"Yes. And the second syllable 'join' is exactly like the word 'join'."

"What's the difference between 'adjoin' and 'adjacent'?"

"Adjoin, like the word 'adjacent' means 'next to'. When you say 'The bank adjoins the library,' it means that the two buildings are next to each other and that they are touching each other."

"So, 'adjoins' means 'touching'?"

"You could say."

"So, if I said, Shanthi 70mm adjoins Shanthi 35mm, does it mean that the two theatres are touching each other?"

"Correct."

Published in *The Hindu* on March 3, 1997

Word of the day

Peregrinate:

travel around, through, or over, especially on foot

Synonyms: walk, roam, wander

Usage: After retiring, he decided to peregrinate across India.

Pronunciation: newth/ive/ peregrinatepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /peɪɡrɪneɪt/

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

The EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
CENSORSHIP REFLECTS A SOCIETY'S LACK OF
CONFIDENCE IN ITSELF. — POTTER STEWART

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A BRIDGE FALLS

Vadodara tragedy should lead to rethink on infrastructure maintenance. Price of failure is borne by general public

THREE YEARS AFTER a suspension bridge collapse claimed 135 lives in Morbi, Gujarat, at least 13 people were killed on Wednesday when a 40-year-old bridge in Vadodara came apart, dragging multiple vehicles into the Mahisagar River. The structure that connects central Gujarat to the Saurashtra region had reportedly been showing signs of distress for more than three years. However, repeated warnings by local people, including panchayat leaders, did not receive attention from the Vadodara division of the Gujarat Roads and Buildings (R&B) Department. Vadodara's district collector claims that the bridge had undergone repairs last year. But by all accounts, they only provided a band-aid to the ageing structure on which more than a lakh vehicles pass every day. The Gujarat government has announced a probe and sought a report from the district collector. Justice must be served and accountability fixed for negligence, but it's time the state government, and its counterparts in other parts of the country, addressed the common failings that underlie the recurrent bridge collapses. These structures continue to crumble with frequency, despite the all-too-familiar conclusions of inquiries into past tragedies — Mumbai 2019, or Morbi 2022, Banaskantha a year later, or the 12 bridge collapses in a span of three weeks in Bihar last year. Structural audits are rarely conducted, contractors cut corners, officials pass the buck, engineering defects are ignored, government assurances after mishaps are never followed by meaningful action — and there are no political penalties for failure.

An analysis of bridge failures in India from 1977 to 2017 in the October 2020 edition of the international journal *Structure and Infrastructure Engineering* found that as many as 2,130 bridges have failed to be used or collapsed in the past four decades. The study also concluded that bridges in the country have an average lifespan of 35 years compared to the global average of 50 years. Bridges require regular inspections and maintenance to address wear and tear. But, as the study pointed out, neglecting routine upkeep and failure to repair minor damage lead to problems accumulating over time, increasing the risk of collapse. The Morbi tragedy did lead to a belated recognition of this cardinal principle of maintenance, at least in Gujarat. The state government informed the Gujarat High Court that it had framed a policy for the inspection and upkeep of bridges in municipalities. However, the continued crumbling of bridges, even after the 2022 tragedy, suggests that the policy has remained on paper. The collapse of the Vadodara bridge barely a year after an R&B executive engineer found no "major defect" should compel the government to rethink — something is seriously wrong with its monitoring methods.

Infrastructure development is among the major focus areas of the government. Over the past decade, the country has made significant investments in highways, airports, tunnels, dams, and ports. But the success of these mega projects should not take attention away from the potholed roads in almost every city in the country, tinderbox like buildings and fragile bridges. In the absence of a politics that shines the light on urban governance and draws lines of accountability, the failure to observe due diligence in the construction and maintenance of these structures is borne by the citizens.

TRIGGER-HAPPY CBFC

Its overreach in 'Janaki v/s State of Kerala' is a preemptive capitulation to the mob, infantilises audiences

IT IS A real-life courtroom drama that the makers of Malayalam film *Janaki v/s State of Kerala* did not account for: Centred on a rape survivor's pursuit of legal justice, the Suresh Gopi-Anupama Parameswaran movie, which was slated for a June 27 release, found itself ranged against the overreaching arm of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). The Board refused its certification on the ground that it was inappropriate and inflammatory for a character portrayed as a sexual-violence survivor to bear a name with mythological associations, and to be cross-examined in court by a character of another faith. After legal intervention, a compromise has been reached. The filmmakers have agreed to insert an initial before the protagonist's name in exchange for only two of the 96 cuts demanded. But the episode is troubling. It signals a dangerous narrowing of artistic spaces. It is also a reminder of how the CBFC, whose remit is to classify films, not censor them, repeatedly strays into moral and political gatekeeping.

Janaki, joins a long list of films — *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *Padmaavat* (2018), and more recently, *12: Empuram* — that have faced similar interference under the pretext of preserving public order or avoiding offence. *Sitara Zameen Par* was released after five changes, including the addition of a quote by the Prime Minister in the opening disclaimer. The CBFC's entanglement with identity politics — religious, regional, or patriarchal — points to a deeper institutional malaise. Over the years, the Board's role has mutated to control, often wielding its power to appease real and imagined figure sensitivities rather than upholding and expanding spaces for artistic liberty. In trying to pre-empt hypothetical offence, it reinforces a culture where free expression is contingent on the veto of the most easily outraged. This poses a dual threat: Not only are filmmakers forced into a regressive self-censorship, as was the case with the makers of *12: Empuram*, but audiences, too, are denied mature engagement with difficult ideas. The Kerala High Court, while hearing the case, asked pertinent questions: "Has anyone complained about the name Janaki? Whose sentiments are being hurt? Has anyone actually raised an objection? And "Now you will dictate to directors and artists which names they should use and which stories they should tell."

A defining feature of a mature democracy is a cultural framework that trusts people to engage with complexity. Art thrives in discomfort, dissent, provocation and debate. The CBFC must remember its job is to classify cinema — and then get out of the way.

NOBEL PLEASE PRIZE

From Trump to Kejriwal, the case for an honour that meets the demands of the age

HEARD THE ONE about how to ingratiate yourself with the world's most powerful man? Just give him the Nobel Please Prize. This might one joke about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nominating Donald Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize — an accolade that the latter has made no secret of coveting. Coming shortly after Pakistan Army chief Asim Munir pledged to nominate the US President for the honour, perhaps the Norwegian Nobel Committee should consider the proposal seriously when it prepares to receive nominations in September.

That Trump hasn't exactly achieved the results he claims — "I'm stopping wars", he said at the dinner with the Israeli PM — is another matter. If this is not a time for war, neither is it a time of peace. But the Nobel Committee need not dwell on this; its own history shows that sometimes, intentions are enough, such as when US President Barack Obama, after a few months in office, was chosen as the 2009 Peace Laureate for his "vision of a world free from nuclear weapons". Obama himself expressed shock, while the then secretary of the Prize, Ger Lundestad, confessed in 2015 that the decision had been "only partially correct".

One solution to ensure all future decisions are fully correct is to drop any connection to actual peace and hand out a Prize to all claimants. The Nobel Prize for Doing His Job, for example, could go to AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal, who reportedly said that he deserved a Nobel for getting work done as Delhi Chief Minister "despite the L-G". In a time when the work of peace is often limited to online petitions and Instagram reels, the instant gratification of such a Prize may be all that is really needed.



ASHOK LAVASA

THE SUPREME COURT has not stayed the contentious Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar. Instead, the Court said, "After going through the documents, ECI has pointed out that the list of documents for verification of voters include 11 documents and is not exhaustive. Thus, in our opinion, it would be in the interest of justice if Aadhaar card, EPIC card and Ration Card be included. It is for the ECI to still decide whether it wants to take the documents or not. If it does not take the documents, (it has to) give reasons for the same." "The matter needs hearing," it concluded while issuing notice to the ECI for its response "within one week on or before July 21 and reappear before July 28".

Interestingly, the citizenship issue and the ECI's competence to delve into it is not mentioned in the order, although it was reportedly mentioned during the hearing. It is incontrovertible that only Indian citizens have a right to vote as per Article 326, and no one who is agitated by the SIR has argued against this. It is equally incontrovertible that the ECI is the "empowered" constitutional authority to supervise the preparation of electoral rolls. It is also a fact that there is no legal document issued by the government by which citizenship can be proved. How far is it, then, to ask citizens to produce a conclusive document to establish citizenship? If the purpose of the SIR is to verify identity, then why do it all over again, having once done it to the satisfaction of the registration officers in keeping with relevant regulations?

In the absence of definitive proof of citizenship issued under the Citizenship Act, the ECI has done a credible and commendable job in preparing inclusive electoral rolls that have expanded from about 180 million electors in 1951 to about 990 million in 2025. This has been possible because of an expansive and pragmatic approach, with the ECI's motto, "no voter is left behind". In that process, it has devised its own procedures to ascertain the identity, bona fides, and "ordinary residence" of Indian citizens so that they

EC must listen

To questions and voices from the ground in Bihar — a bureaucratic approach with an unclear purpose can be a nightmare for citizens

are not deprived of the democratic right to elect a government. Conscious of its constitutional obligation, the ECI neither waited for the government to fulfil its legal responsibility of issuing a citizenship document nor was guided by it into adopting a system to satisfy itself about a citizen's eligibility in preparing electoral rolls. This served the country and its citizens well and earned accolades for the ECI as an empathetic, transparent and efficient independent organisation. It rightly adopted systems that do not conflict with extant laws and do not unduly encumber the citizen — from enrolment to voting.

In fact, the ECI has been indulgent. Even though it is an elector's responsibility to ensure that she is not enrolled in more than one place, the ECI has been tolerant of this while working on methods by which such duplication can be detected and deleted. It has not filed a single case against electors who may have committed this irregularity because it was confident that its procedures would not permit electors to vote more than once. It has innovative ways of facilitating voters embracing modern technologies to make the system failproof.

The Indian electoral system has faced a fundamental challenge in determining where an elector should vote. EPIC recognises an elector's eligibility but is not sufficient to vote till the elector's name appears in the electoral roll of a particular constituency. The EC has been flexible in allowing an elector to be enrolled in a place of his ordinary residence. The meaning of "ordinary resident" is defined in the RP Act in an ambivalent manner that enables the ERO to exercise his judgement in determining the claim made by the elector seeking registration.

The person seeking to register as a voter is required to give an affidavit that she is a citizen of India and provide documentary evidence of her identity and ordinary residence. In fact, as per Rule 18 of the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, "if the registration offi-

cer is satisfied as to the validity of any claim or objection, he may allow it without further inquiry". He must conduct an inquiry, if demanded. Even in the case of deletion, he cannot do so without giving the person an opportunity to be heard, and the onus of proof is on the objector.

What is puzzling in the case of Bihar is that the EC discarded its own findings of more than two decades in registering electors as per its notified due process, and placed the burden of proof on electors. In an unprecedented step, it ordered that registration till 2003 would carry "probative evidence of eligibility, including presumption of citizenship", not mentioned in earlier revisions. The previous EC orders for SIRs should be seen in this regard. The practice hitherto, as per available information, was house-to-house enumeration where the head of the family would provide details of all adult members, as per Forms 4 and 5, without any document for supporting citizenship. Therefore, the distinction made between pre-2003 and post-2003 is illogical.

A bureaucratic approach coupled with an unclear purpose can be a nightmare for citizens. Even if the ECI agrees to expand the list of documents that electors are required to submit for reconfirming the satisfaction of the ERO, the distinction made between two groups of electors, pre and post-2003, is unreasonable and needs review. Similarly, the distinction between different categories of citizens based on their date of birth is unprecedented. It may not be desirable to let an overzealous ECI enlarge its sphere of responsibility. After all, hasn't the ECI steadfastly remained away from enforcing the order of the Central Information Commission treating political parties as public entities under the Right to Information Act as it doesn't lie in its remit? Or should we expect the ECI to take that issue up with equal conscientiousness?

The writer is a former election commissioner



RAKSHASHANDA JALIL

FOR THE PRESENT generation of Urdu walhs and translators, Chaudhry Mohammad Naim (popularly known as CM Naim) was an *ustadon ke ustaad*. He showed the way to many with his immaculate scholarship, bilingual ease, vast and varied reading of the ocean that is Urdu literature and yes, prodigious publications. Always eclectic, consistently unorthodox and relentlessly prolific, Naim sahib continued to delight and astonish both the serious Urdu researcher and the literary dilettante with his steady stream of articles, essays and books covering a gamut of concerns and topics in the course of a long and illustrious literary career. Essentially a teacher of Urdu language and literature to several generations of American students, he had, over the years, emerged as a passionate crusader for Urdu *zubaan* and *tehzeeb*.

Born in Barabanki in 1936, educated at Lucknow University and the University of California, Berkeley, with Master's degrees in Urdu and Linguistics respectively, he joined the University of Chicago's Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations in 1961, and chaired it from 1985 to 1991. On retiring from active teaching in 2001, he was a national fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and a visiting professor at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He was also professor emeritus at the University of Chicago, where he edited two of Urdu's most influential and widely read journals, *Mahfil*, and later the iconic *Annual of Urdu Studies* — both fortunately available online in their entirety.

Naim sahib's list of publications is as long

GO GENTLY INTO THE NIGHT

CM Naim was a beacon for those struggling to take Urdu to newer readers

as it varied, showing the range of his interests: From Urdu pedagogy to translations (from both Hindi and Urdu), polemical essays, Urdu readers and compilations for graduate students at American universities as well as several sharp takes on the state of Urdu, the challenge of being a Muslim in India, and timely interventions in newspapers and magazines, not to mention his seminal work on Mir and Ghalib. A meticulous keeper of his own archive, much of his writing can be found at <https://cmnaim.com>.

One of his later offerings, *Urdu Crime Fiction, 1890-1950*, broke the following by way of sub-heading: "An Informal History". He confessed to an early and abiding love for mysteries and thrillers, in English and in Urdu, making his book "both a labour of love and an exercise in nostalgia". Explaining the sub-title, he elaborated: "It is a 'history' because it offers an account of the past in a loose, chronological order, and it is an 'informal' history because I wrote it chiefly for those who read crime fiction in any language only for pleasure." This, to my mind, sums up Naim sahib, the man and the writer. He was a man blessed with boundless curiosity that remained undimmed by age, coupled with his wide-ranging reading across genres and his steadfast refusal to be hemmed in by academic pretentiousness.

As a translator, I am instantly amazed by Naim sahib's extraordinary ability to extend the scope of what might otherwise have been luminous but brief magazine-style mazzam (essays), often by forgotten or obscure writers. Take *A Most Noble Life*:

The Biography of Ashrafunnisa Begum (1840-1903) by Muhammad Begum (1877-1908), translated from the Urdu with additional material plucked from different sources that add layers of context, profuse footnotes that make delightful reading and supplement the translation in myriad ways along with a rigorously researched introduction and afterword. Through such feats of literary ingenuity, Naim sahib extends the "brief" translators have traditionally given themselves.

Having known him for several decades and corresponded sporadically over email and the occasional meeting during his visits to India, our correspondence had quickened in recent times. Upon hearing of my interest in Maulana Hasrat Mohani and the biography I have been fitfully working on over the years, he shared generously from his own rich collection of material on Hasrat, most notably photographs, newspaper clippings and recently his as-yet unpublished translations of Hasrat's *Mushahidaat-e-Zindaan*, an account of his first jail term. His brief, often telegraphic emails contained a wealth of information and ideas.

Go gently into the night, Naim sahib, for you have been a beacon, an unwavering *chiragh-e-raah* for so many of us struggling to make Urdu accessible to newer readers and trying to rise above the picket fence of languages.

Rakhshanda Jalil is a writer, translator and literary historian. She writes on literature, culture and society



JULY 11, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

ONE BLACK BOX FOUND

AFRENCH NAVAL ship has finally recovered one of the two black boxes from 2,000 metres under the Atlantic. The black boxes had sunk into the Atlantic following the crash of an Air India jumbo jet on June 23 in which all 329 persons aboard had died. The recovered black box is the cockpit voice recorder, which may provide evidence of the exchange between the pilot of the ill-fated plane and all air control towers.

ENCROACHMENT BAN

A CONSTITUTION BENCH of the Supreme Court held that though the Constitution guarantees

the right to livelihood to all persons, no one can encroach upon pavements or other public places to make a living. The five-judge bench upheld the provision in the Bombay Municipal Corporation Act that prohibits unauthorised structures and grants power to the commissioner to remove them.

DELHI BANK HEIST

THREE GUN-TOTING YOUTHS raided the Panchsheel Enclave branch of the New Bank of India and made away with Rs 3.02 lakh in cash. The robbery occurred at around 12.40 pm, shortly after the bank had finished its morning transactions. The 30-odd employees of the

bank were busy with paperwork. Two customers were still inside, finishing their work when three youths stroled in.

SRI LANKA CRISIS

THE SRI LANKAN government said it would free more than 600 Tamil guerrilla suspects and lift the night curfew in the troubled Northern Province for the first time in eight months. The announcement immediately eased tension in the Tamil-populated provincial capital of Jaffna, which had been rocked for two days by demonstrations against secret peace talks between Tamil separatists and the Sri Lankan Government in Bhutan.



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EXPLAINED GLOBAL

What ICC warrants for Taliban leaders mean



Haibatullah Akhundzada (left) and Abdul Hakim Haqqani, file

SHAARVI MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, JULY 10

THE INTERNATIONAL Criminal Court (ICC) on Tuesday issued arrest warrants for Haibatullah Akhundzada and Abdul Hakim Haqqani, two senior leaders of the Taliban, for the crime of persecuting women, girls, and others who oppose the gender policy of the Islamist militia that rules Afghanistan.

The crime

Since the Taliban regained control over Afghanistan in August 2021, the regime has promulgated a series of laws to systematically oppress and marginalise women and girls, deny them education and opportunities, and put severe restrictions on them.

According to the ICC, the Taliban have "severely deprived" girls and women of basic human rights like education, privacy, and family life, and the freedoms of movement, expression, thought, conscience, and religion.

A 144-page "morality law" promulgated by the Taliban in August 2021 includes provisions requiring women to cover their entire body and to not sing or even speak in public. The code forbids women and men from looking at each other in public, and provides for the persecution of LGBTQ people. The UN has characterised these actions and laws as "gender apartheid".

Haibatullah Akhundzada is the Emir or Supreme Leader of the Taliban. Abdul Hakim Haqqani is the Chief Justice of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The ICC has accepted evidence that these individuals "committed" — by ordering, inducing or soliciting — the crime against humanity of persecution, on gender grounds, against girls, women and other persons non-conforming with the Taliban's policy on gender, gender identity

ity or expression; and on political grounds against persons perceived as "allies of girls and women".

The impact

The ICC's warrant is unlikely to result in any arrests. Akhundzada is extremely reclusive, and rarely makes public appearances. And Haqqani is unlikely to be stepping out of the country any time soon. The ICC has previously issued warrants against Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Zabihullah Mujahid, the chief spokesman for the Taliban, posted on X: "We do not recognise any organisation called the International Court, nor are we committed to it in any way."

Nonetheless, the arrest warrants hold symbolic value. Tahera Nasiri, an Afghan women's rights activist now living in Canada, told *The Guardian* that the warrants were an acknowledgment of the abuses Afghan women faced. "For four years, the Taliban have told us to stay silent, stay at home, cover our faces, give up our education, our voices and our dreams. Now, an international court is saying: 'Enough. This is a crime,'" she said.

The court

The ICC is an international tribunal established under the Rome Statute, an international treaty that was adopted on July 17, 1998. It is headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands, and started functioning after its founding treaty entered into force on July 1, 2002.

The ICC aims to "end impunity for the perpetrators of the most serious crimes of concern to the international community" — genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.

It is the only international court with the jurisdiction to prosecute individuals — this is unlike ICJ, which is an organ of the UN that takes up disputes between states.

Study creates 37,000-year chronicle of diseases

A STUDY published in *Nature* on Wednesday unveiled a new genetic chronicle documenting the rise of 214 diseases across Europe and Asia over the past 37,000 years.

Researchers examined the remains of 1,313 ancient individuals, and used genetic clues to track the rise and fall of epidemics across centuries. "As far back as we go, humans have had infectious diseases," said Eske Willerslev, a geneticist at the University of Copenhagen and an author of the new study.

But remains of early hunter-gatherers did not have traces of some of the biggest killers of recent history, such as *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes plague. Researchers initially assumed that they would see such dis-



NEW RESEARCH

eases rise to prominence starting about 11,000 years ago, when people started domesticating animals.

But ancient DNA evidence indicates that plague and a number of other diseases jumped to people from animals starting only about 6,000 years ago, when nomads in Eurasia started rearing vast herds of cattle and other livestock.

Over time, as these nomads expanded across the steppes of Asia and eastern Europe, the pathogens they carried spread. Some epidemics were so intense that they changed the genetic profile of the nomads, and played a "big role in genetically creating the world we know of today", the study said.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Famous slope at Lord's: how it affects bowlers, batters, keepers

SANDIPG

NEW DELHI, JULY 10

TWO CENTURIES and 148 Tests old, the Lord's slope endures as an intrigue and an idiosyncrasy. In theory, everyone knows everything about the eight-foot two-inch incline that runs diagonally from the Grandstand to the Tavern Stand. Yet, the geography of the most hallowed piece of real estate in cricket continues to intimidate and perplex.

Older than ground

Before it became even a first-class haunt, Lord's was a duck pond.

When the Marylebone Cricket Club emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century, its members wanted a tranquil setting. Lord Winchelsea, a prominent patron, encouraged entrepreneur Thomas Lord to lease a piece of land in St John's Wood, and converted the pond to three grounds.

The present Lord's, a part of the Middle

Ground, has survived various attempts at modernisation and suggestions of flattening the quirk of its geography, which over time has become a part of the ground's legend.

End justifies the means

Bowlers run neither up nor down, but instead across the Lord's slope. As such, the choice of ends can dramatically influence the trajectory of the ball.

From the Nursery End, the slope slants from right to left, which makes it the preferred choice for natural outswing bowlers, and swing bowlers

generally. The gradient takes the ball away from right-handed batsmen — meaning there is always a natural angle to work with. And if there is a breeze blowing from line leg, the outswinger could wreak havoc.

Yet, the great English swing merchant James Anderson preferred bowling from the Pavilion End. He felt the slope from Nursery End unbalanced his action by making him lean a touch backwards. Indeed, adjusting to

The revision of electoral rolls

Why, and by what process, does the Election Commission of India carry out revisions of electoral rolls? What happened during earlier intensive revisions, and what safeguards evolved over time?

RITIKA CHOPRA

NEW DELHI, JULY 10

THE SUPREME Court on Thursday declined to restrain the Election Commission of India (ECI) from going ahead with its Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar, but advised it to consider allowing Aadhaar, voter ID cards, and ration cards as valid documents for updating the rolls.

There is widespread political opposition and significant confusion on the ground in the poll-bound state over the ECI's new requirement that even existing electors, if enrolled after 2003, must furnish documentary proof to establish their date and/or place of birth, which is then used to determine citizenship.

The SIR has triggered concerns over its potential to disenfranchise large numbers of electors. What has happened during earlier intensive revisions of electoral rolls in the country, and what safeguards evolved over time?

What is an 'intensive' revision, and how does it differ from other revisions?

An intensive revision involves a full, fresh preparation of electoral rolls through house-to-house enumeration. Enumerators visit every household to record eligible electors as of a qualifying date, without reference to existing rolls.

This is done when the ECI determines that the current rolls are outdated, inaccurate, or require complete rebuilding — typically before major elections or after administrative exercises such as delimitation of constituencies.

A second type of revision is a "summary" revision. This is routine annual updating, in which existing rolls are published as drafts, and citizens file claims for inclusion, deletion, or correction. There are no door-to-door visits.

A third type, "special" revision, is undertaken in exceptional cases such as missed areas, large-scale errors, or legal or political exigencies. The ECI may, under Section 21(3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, conduct a special revision using either summary or intensive methods, or a combination of both.

Each kind of revision has a specific purpose: intensive is for comprehensive overhaul; summary for routine maintenance; special for addressing specific deficiencies or extraordinary circumstances requiring tailored approaches.

But why is the ongoing exercise in Bihar called a special intensive revision?

The nomenclature "Special Intensive Revision" (SIR) indicates that the ECI is exercising its discretionary powers under Section 21(3) of the 1950 law, which permits it to revise electoral rolls "in such manner as it thinks fit".

For this exercise, the ECI has adopted a hybrid approach — combining door-to-door



A Booth Level Officer (BLO) surrounded by electors in Bihar during the ongoing Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls. Express

field verification that is characteristic of an intensive revision with elements of a summary revision, such as the reliance on existing electoral rolls to distribute enumeration forms.

What has set the ongoing SIR apart, however, is the introduction of a new step — the requirement of documentary proof at the enumeration stage itself. This is a striking departure from past practice.

The "special" in this intensive revision in effect signals its methodological flexibility.

But why has the ECI undertaken this exercise at the present moment — and why has Bihar been chosen for it?

The SIR is not limited to Bihar. On June 24, the ECI announced that it would carry out an intensive verification of electoral rolls across the country. This would be the first such exercise in more than two decades, and the process has begun with Bihar, where Assembly elections are due before November.

The ECI's stated reason for the exercise is the "significant change" that has taken place in the electoral rolls over time, with large-scale additions and deletions since the last intensive revision. It has attributed these changes to rapid urbanisation, increased migration for education and livelihood, and the practice of voters enrolling at a new address without ensuring their names are deleted from the rolls of their previous residence, which can lead to duplicate entries.

This situation, according to the ECI, warrants an intensive drive to verify each person before they are enrolled as an elector. Officials have also cited the repeated complaints from political parties — including allegations of manipulation of Maharashtra's electoral roll by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi — as a factor

behind the renewed push to clean up and standardise electoral rolls.

How often has the ECI revised electoral rolls intensively, and what were the circumstances of those earlier exercises?

Intensive revisions of electoral rolls, in all or some parts of the country, have been undertaken earlier in 1952-56, 1957, 1961, 1965, 1966, 1983-84, 1987-89, 1992, 1993, 1995, 2002, 2003 and 2004. Each revision has reflected the ECI's evolving priorities — from correcting early administrative flaws to addressing migration, delimitation, and concerns over the quality of the rolls.

In the first decade after independence, the overriding priority was to fix the rolls used for the 1951-52 Lok Sabha election, which were riddled with inaccuracies and omissions. The Commission's narrative report of the first election noted that "the final electoral rolls were not always as accurate and satisfactory as might have been desired".

It attributed these flaws to multiple factors: widespread public ignorance, limited organisational capacity among political parties, and inexperience in the government machinery.

One striking example was the mass exclusion of women before the first Lok Sabha election — many women refused to give their names to enumerators, and instead identified themselves only as "wife of" or "daughter of".

Political parties, which at the time lacked both structure and familiarity with the electoral process, did not actively assist election officials to aid in the preparation of the rolls.

The situation was further complicated by the absence of an electoral law in the early years, the late establishment of a central su-

perisory authority, and the lack of time to carry out a thorough verification.

To address these systemic shortcomings, the ECI launched a phased, rotating intensive revision strategy: one-fifth of each state was covered annually between 1952 and 1956 before the next Lok Sabha election in 1957, followed by one-third each year from 1957 to 1961 before the 1962 election, with particular attention to urban and migrant-heavy constituencies that were known for higher rates of voter movement and errors.

Administrative events like the reorganisation of states in 1956 and the delimitation exercises in the 1960s made fresh revisions of the rolls necessary.

By the 1980s, there was a growing focus on preventing the inclusion of ineligible voters, particularly foreign nationals, in the electoral roll — even as the emphasis on guarding against duplicate entries continued.

The ECI began to issue intensive revision guidelines, with specific instructions on "safeguards against inclusion of foreign nationals" — a reflection of concerns that had started to surface in the political discourse.

During this period, the Commission received multiple complaints from Chief Ministers of border states, especially in the Northeast, alleging that significant numbers of foreign nationals had managed to get themselves enrolled as voters.

The ECI at this time firmly articulated the principle that names that were already included in the electoral roll should not be deleted without following due process.

Officers were instructed to uphold the "sanctity" of the existing roll, especially when objections were raised about an elector's citizenship status. The Commission made it clear that the burden of proof lay with the person objecting to the inclusion, and not with the elector whose name was already on the roll.

In 1993 and 1995, the ECI again ordered countrywide intensive revisions. Although 1993 was the year when Elector's Photo Identity Cards (EPIC) were introduced under Rule 28 of the Registration of Electors Rules, ECI records from that time do not indicate that EPIC was the purpose of the revision.

Instead, the records note that EPIC details were "also captured" — suggesting that the field verification process of the revision helped facilitate, but was not driven by, the rollout of the photo ID.

Over time, as the quality of the rolls improved and administrative costs increased, the Commission gradually moved towards summary revisions as the default.

But whenever accuracy became a serious concern — due to demographic shifts, political complaints, or structural changes — the ECI returned to intensive methods, adapting them to the needs of that moment.

As hearing starts, recalling key case from 1977

AMAAL SHEIKH

NEW DELHI, JULY 10

WHILE AGREEING to hear pleas challenging the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar, the Supreme Court on July 7 made a reference to a 1977 ruling that had clarified the powers of the Election Commission of India (ECI) to conduct free and fair elections.

The petitioners in the present challenge have questioned the ECI's power to conduct the SIR, as well as the procedure for it. Under Article 326, every citizen above the age of 18 has the right to vote. The SIR has shifted the burden of proof of citizenship on electors in some cases. The ECI has issued a new enumeration form, which is not prescribed in the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which

governs the conduct of elections.

The court began hearing the challenge on Thursday.

The 1977 case

The ruling by a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court (*Mohinder Singh Gill v. The Chief Election Commissioner*) came after the post-Emergency Lok Sabha election of 1977. Following violence and the destruction of some ballot papers during counting of votes for one segment of the Ferozepore (Firozpur) seat, the ECI cancelled the entire process and ordered a re-election at the seat.

Gill was leading the court at the time, and challenged the decision in Punjab and Haryana High Court under Article 226, which gives HC's the power to issue writs for the enforcement of fundamental rights and provide legal remedies for violations of law.

The court considered three questions: first, whether the ECI is empowered to order a re-poll for the entire constituency; second, whether the ECI's order violated the principles of natural justice; third, whether the HC was competent to intervene under Article 226, given the bar placed by Article 329(b) on judicial interference in election matters.

It upheld the ECI's order and dismissed the petition, saying that it lacked jurisdiction to intervene in electoral matters through a writ petition. On appeal, the Supreme Court too upheld the ECI's decision and clarified the extent of its powers.

The SC's ruling

The SC underlined the ECI's plenary powers over the "superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of" elections to Parliament

and state Assemblies under Article 324.

It said that if laws enacted by Parliament and state Assemblies under Articles 327 and 328 respectively, are silent on any aspect, the ECI must act independently and decisively to ensure free and fair elections.

The court also held that the ECI can take proactive decisions, including ordering a re-poll, if it believes that the integrity of the election has been compromised. While natural justice is an important procedural safeguard, it must be "pragmatic and flexible", the SC said.

The court underlined that the powers of the ECI are subject to judicial review, but judicial review came into play only after the election was complete. It clarified that Article 329(b) places a "blanket ban" on courts from intervening during an ongoing election process, although it has "large enough powers to give relief to an injured candidate" afterward.



The Lord's cricket ground ahead of the third England-India Test that began on Thursday. PTI

the incline can often be a nightmare for bowlers, especially from overseas. The incline creates a natural tendency for bowlers to fall over or lean away, resulting in wayward lines.

Seamers usually prefer the Pavilion End. Australia's Glenn McGrath, for instance, utilised the ball coming down the slope to make batsmen play at deliveries they would have otherwise left. Even if the ball straightens or moves away a smidgeon, it conjures up a visual impression of massive movement. Jasprit Bumrah too prefers this end, which

makes his wicked straightener wicked-er.

All about the angles

Those with angled run-ups prefer bowling from the Nursery End, as it does not take them down the slope. The deadliest bowlers from the Pavilion End have relatively straight run-ups: an angle could make them err into the pads of right-handed batsmen, or pitch far too across for lefties.

More than on any other ground, the bowler has to hold his action till the last

minute. Otherwise, the front arm or head could collapse, resulting in the shoulder dropping prematurely.

Scanners generally prefer bowling to left handers from the Nursery End, which helps magnify the shape of the inswingers. Left-arm spinners, meanwhile, prefer bowling from the Pavilion End, due to the slope creating a natural inward drift.

Falling over, falling backwards

Batsmen are presented with peculiar challenges. Depending on the end, a batsman can feel like he is falling over or backwards.

When batting at the Nursery End, the batsman's eyes are already drawn to the inward angle — even if the ball straightens a trifle, he gets squared up. The visual effect is the opposite from the other end.

As a result, some batsmen take a middle-stump guard and shuffle across when batting at the Nursery End, so that they can leave the ball when it straightens. In case the ball cuts back and the batsman misses, he would be hit outside the line of the off-stump.

From the opposite end, batsmen are careful to not go too far across, as they could fall over when the ball swings or seems in, and instead are conscious of planting their feet straighter than they normally would and defend side-on.

Left, right, left

The wicket-keeper too needs to get used to the oddity of the ground. The slope amplifies the movement of the ball, wrong-footing keepers, and making them spill edges and concede byes. Add the wind and the tendency of the Dukes ball to move prodigiously in the air after it has crossed the batsman, and things get tougher.

A lot of home-grown wicket-keepers, therefore, take an extra stride to the right when keeping from the Nursery End, and to the left when keeping from the opposite end.

Teams have to factor in the slope even when setting fields. Packing the upside of the slope leaves space on the downside when bowling from the Pavilion End, and could bleed runs if the bowler strays into the body.

'TB death audits, like maternal mortality model, can aid elimination'

Soumya Swaminathan emphasises the need to prioritise reducing TB deaths and prevalence and incidence of the disease, stating that finding gaps, addressing them, and having an ambitious plan need to be focused on; our short-term focus, in the next National Strategic Plan, is to reduce TB mortality, she adds

Maitri Porecha

A detailed dissection of every tuberculosis-related death at the district level or a 'TB death audit', much like the public health approach adopted by the Centre to reduce maternal deaths, will prove to be useful towards meeting India's TB elimination goals, Soumya Swaminathan, Principal Advisor for the National TB Elimination Programme in India told *The Hindu*.

"Like COVID, TB is also a pandemic, but it has been around for a very long time. It affects the poor and vulnerable in every country. Even one dengue death gets picked up immediately by the media, and gets reported. Still, 800 to 900 people die every day of TB in the country, but the news of a TB death hardly ever makes it to the newspaper," she said.

Dr. Swaminathan noted that among the challenges facing National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP) is the further reduction in TB mortality rates to meet the End TB and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets. From an estimated 35 deaths per 1,00,000 population in 2015, India has brought down this rate to 22 per 1,00,000 according to the latest official data. "However, we still have case fatality rates ranging from 5% to 10% in different states. These rates are higher for drug-resistant TB. These deaths are mostly happening in the economically-productive age group of 25 to 55 years," she said.

TB Death Audit

India has significantly reduced its maternal mortality rate (MMR) by expanding the scope for institutional delivery, better antenatal and postnatal care and by undertaking district-wise maternal death audits which are headed by the district collectors. "Everyone has to sit and explain why that [maternal] death happened and how it could have been prevented. Can we adopt a similar approach for TB," asked Dr. Swaminathan. "The District Collector should be aware of how many TB deaths occur, and non-programme partners should be engaged in audits of randomly selected cases. These could be community medicine departments of nearby medical colleges or public health institutes. It should not be the TB programme itself that does the death audits. TB deaths should be presented, analysed along with reasons, and the discussions could lead to improvements in service delivery," she added. The deaths are most likely caused by a combination of complications due to TB, along with social and economic risk factors.

Citing an example, Dr. Swaminathan said that National Institute of TB and Respiratory Diseases runs a 'difficult to treat', virtual TB clinic (using the ECHO platform), where cases are presented and discussed every month, for the benefit of doctors and nurses across the country. The case of a 19-year-old belonging to a poor migrant family who succumbed to



Public awareness: Students conduct a rally to raise awareness on TB, a contagious disease that is treatable and preventable, and yet continues to kill millions each year, in Hyderabad. *RULE PHOTO*

TB in Delhi was presented. Her father had previously died of TB and her sister had also contracted the infection. "They worked as house maids and had initially sought treatment with private doctors. By the time she got admitted, she had extensive bilateral TB and was in respiratory failure. The fact that a 19-year-old girl died of drug sensitive TB points to the need for every patient to be notified and followed up by the TB programme. Any number of such cases are occurring every day. Are we paying attention and trying to improve the system?"

Tamil Nadu model

Tamil Nadu's Kasanoi Erappilla Thittam (TN-KET) meaning 'TB death free project,' was jointly started by the Indian Council of Medical Research's National Institute of Epidemiology (NIE) and the State government for all aged 15 years and older with drug-susceptible TB notified by public facilities, with a goal to reduce deaths by 30% in this group.

According to NIE data, during April - June 2022, 14,961 TB patients were notified out of which 11,599 (78%) were triaged. It was found that of these 15,099 (13%) were at high risk of severe illness. Of these 48% were severely undernourished, another 50% had respiratory insufficiency, and 29% were unable to stand without support. Of the 15,099 patients, 11,288 (75%) were assessed at a nodal inpatient care facility. Of these 993 were confirmed as severely ill, and 909 (92%) were admitted. Of those admitted 4% patients succumbed to their illness. As a result of implementing TN-KET, Tamil



The District Collector should be aware of how many TB deaths occur, and non-programme partners should be engaged in audits of randomly selected cases. These could be community medicine departments of nearby medical colleges or public health institutes

Soumya Swaminathan
Principal Advisor for the NTEP

Nadu now routinely captures BMI data for all adults with TB (notified from public facilities).

In the southern States, people have co-morbidities such as diabetes, alcoholism and in the north, there is severe malnutrition and severe anaemia, Dr. Swaminathan observed. In any case, every TB patient must be clinically evaluated for co-morbidities and risk factors and these should be treated too.

Dr. Swaminathan pressed on the need to prioritise reducing TB deaths, along with reducing prevalence, and incidence of the disease. "China has a death rate of 3 per 1,00,000 from TB, while India has a death rate of 22 per 1,00,000. We need to find gaps, address them and have an ambitious plan," she said.

"Our short-term focus, in the next National Strategic Plan, is to reduce TB mortality. Incidence reduction will take time, whatever we do, because we don't have a highly efficacious vaccine. Unless we start finding everyone and treating

them, we will not have a rapid incidence reduction," she adds.

Dr. Swaminathan said that the National TB prevalence Survey and State-specific Prevalence Surveys in Gujarat, Rajasthan reveal that sub-clinical TB accounts for 40% to 50% of cases. "Which means, you will not pick them up with symptom screening and our national programme was entirely based on symptom screening. So, we were straightaway missing half of the active TB in population," she said.

According to her, the solution is to have widespread use of X-ray backed up by an AI algorithm. "The hand-held X-ray technology with AI is green lighted by the World Health Organization (WHO), STOP TB Partnership and ICMR. In fact, six government hospitals in Mumbai applied X-ray screening and their case notifications went up by 10% to 12%," she stated.

Upfront molecular testing until last year in India was 30%. The 100-day TB elimination campaign aimed at strengthening diagnostics and linkage to treatment, as well as efforts by CTD to expand upfront molecular testing should pay dividends this year, she added. Upfront molecular testing involves offering tests which can pick up TB as well as drug-resistance to TB bacteria leading to accurate treatment, which improves chances of the patient's recovery. Screening of household contacts should be made convenient as they cannot be expected to spend days in going and getting themselves screened. This can happen now with the highly portable handheld X-ray devices which many States have started using.

The crucial role of nutrition

She also emphasised on providing good nutrition to TB patients and their families. "The RATONS trials led by Anurag Bhargava in Jharkhand among a population with BMI as low as 16 and 17 has demonstrated that almost 50% secondary household cases could be prevented just by providing good nutritional support. We don't yet have a vaccine with 50% efficacy so if we give adequate calories and protein, it acts like natural protector from bacteria."

Commenting on the Nikshay Mitra Programme floated by the Centre for nutrition support to TB patients, Dr. Swaminathan said that while the goal was laudable, its success depends on volunteers coming forward to donate nutrition support and this may not be uniform across all geographies. "Also, the ability to deliver it [nutritional support] may be limited in remote areas," she emphasised. The government's move to double the amount meted out under the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) - (an earlier amount of ₹500 per month provided to TB patients during treatment, has now been increased to ₹1000) would go a long way towards meeting the patients' nutritional needs, and more research is needed in ways to improve the family's nutritional status, wherever needed. (porechamaitri.m@thehindu.co.in)

THE GIST

Dr. Swaminathan noted that among the challenges facing National TB Elimination Programme is the further reduction in TB mortality rates to meet the End TB and Sustainable Development Goals targets

Every TB patient must be clinically evaluated for co-morbidities - such as diabetes, alcoholism, severe anaemia, and risk factors - and these should be treated

She also emphasised the importance of good nutrition to TB patients and their families, citing the RATONS trials led by Anurag Bhargava in Jharkhand

The real fertility crisis is one of agency, says UNFPA Asia Pacific director

WORLD POPULATION DAY

Ramya Kannan

Nations across the world reacted predictably to the conclusion of the UNFPA's Global State of the World's Population Report released last month, some with a sense of alarm, and others with the assurance of having fast-tracked policies to improve declining populations. The media mostly headlined falling fertility rates. But the real fertility crisis, said Pío Smith, Asia-Pacific Regional Director for the UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health and rights agency, is one of agency.

"It is not about too many or too few births. At the UNFPA, we're looking at those fertility outcomes that are shaped by a range of different factors," he told journalists on the sidelines of the 3rd Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, held in Bangkok

late last month. "There have been many demographic alarm bells, about falling population rates, and some have missed the mark. And there have been anticipatory responses, and some have been effective and some less so. And they varied, I would say, across regions and across the globe. Very often, what we see at UNFPA is that, the headlines, the policymakers too often frame the decline in fertility rates as the result of deliberate choice."

"At the UNFPA, we are unmasking that to say, very often, it is women who are too seldom able to make voluntary informed choices about their reproductive opportunities. Particularly when you look at, you know, about a quarter of women are unable to say no to sex," he added.

The report underlined that women are, all too often blamed for these demographic shifts. Some governments are employing drastic measures to incentivise young people to



Pío Smith, Asia-Pacific Regional Director for the UNFPA, which works with countries to provide support to people to form families. *RAMYA KANNAN*

make fertility decisions in line with national targets. But the real crisis is that the most consequential reproductive decision a human being can make - when, whether and with whom to have a child - is being undermined.

The 'alarm bell'

It is true, Mr. Smith adds, that if falling fertility is often the face of a woman. It begins with the lack of equality and equity that is afforded to girls and

women from the beginning of life.

"And that's the alarm bell. That she is unable to exercise her choice and decide whether she wants to have a family. And if she does, is she able to do so in an economically and socially responsible and acceptable way?" Mr. Smith answered that himself: "That's why at the UNFPA, we're advocating for a lifecycle approach that invests in women so that their health, but also their education

and other needs, are equitably invested in by governments throughout their life."

The UNFPA is tasked with working with governments in nearly 150 countries across the world to provide real support to people to form the families that they want to, resting on a rights-based approach to fertility. So what is this 'real support' and what does a rights-based approach entail?

A rights-based approach

Mr. Smith lists these as cost of living, gender norms, social pressure, and uncertainty about the future - including about wars, conflicts, and pandemics. "The urgency is really clear for us - demographic transitions are accelerating, but people's choices are increasingly constrained," he says. In effect, real support is not 'about baby bonuses or coercive policies'.

"It's actually about providing support that empowers people to help create the families

that they want. That includes various elements like affordable housing, childcare, decent work, and equitable pay. It's also about parental leave for all parents and all families. It's about accessible fertility care, reproductive health services also that are accessible, particularly to our adolescents," Mr. Smith listed.

The UNFPA is also advocating among member countries to provide better support and legal recognition for all family types. Same-sex couples face certain legal and social barriers to full access. In this context, the social aspect is almost more important because legal conditions can be created, but social barriers may still stymie equal access. So acting on the social conditioning too is important.

"We are calling on governments to invest in rights-based systems, that would enable reproductive autonomy, regardless of a country's fertility rate. We have a programme around demographic resi-

lience (2:05) and that offers policy support to help governments harness the opportunities that are available to them and that come with demographic change," according to Mr. Smith.

He added that it would not be good enough just to have a policy. "You need leadership that is going to be courageous and that's going to have the foresight to look into these demographic changes. They also have to make sure that the policies are responsive, and that they're investing."

(The reporter was at the 3rd Ministerial Conference on CRVS held in Bangkok at the invitation of UNESCAP. (ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in))

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THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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



C R Sasikumar

After the BRICS summit, a question: Do multilateral institutions serve India's interests in a changing world order?

Global South, building BRICS

India needs to be in as many coalitions as necessary till it is made a genuine participant in world affairs



PANKAJ SARAN

DON'T BLAME BRICS for the curse of multipolarity. BRICS is not the reason for the relative decline of the US as a global power. The folly lies at the doorstep of a multi-decadal US policy, with active abetment by its Western allies, to outsource manufacturing to China and make it the manufacturing capital of the world. To make matters worse, the US-led West handed over the fate of a devastated global economy to China in the wake of the collapse of capitalism and the financial crisis of 2008. China was happy to play saviour. Neither BRICS nor India can be blamed for the rapid rise of a power that today believes it is poised to challenge US global hegemony. In fact, India is the receiving end of policies pursued by its Western partners. The lessons have not been learnt even now. Europe and the US are divided about whether and how much to shake off their interdependence with China. In fact, we are told there may not be any good solutions. China continues to ride the wave of the American and European economies. Its integration with them is far greater than with any BRICS member.

Unlike his predecessors, the current US President has launched a frontal attack on BRICS, with the threat of punitive tariffs. Some truths need to be told here. He has equally harsh words to say about the European Union, which he has said was formed to do damage to the United States, Japan and Korea have not been spared either. India's largest and most important trade and technology partners are outside BRICS. If the winter world was satisfied with the current state of world affairs, BRICS would have been relegated to a fringe organisation. Its rapid expansion in the past couple of years, involving several well-known friends and partners of the US, needs interpretation in Western capitals, not name calling.

A scenario where India walks out of BRICS is possible, because nothing is impossible. But would it be admitted into the G7 as a reward for switching sides? It has been made clear that in today's world, democracy has lost its premium. Military-ruled Pakistan is considered as great a nation as India, and as indispensable a partner for the US. Russia, on the other hand, must be shunned for being authoritarian. If the world has to be rebuilt using the alliance template of the last cen-

tury, India should also be walking out of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and the RIC (Russia-India-China) and IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) groupings, which variously represent systemic challengers and the Global South.

The Global South is a reality, whichever way we define it. The question is how India sees itself in the larger comity of nations. For years, China relished being referred to as the "G77 plus China" in diplomatic jargon. India is embedded in the South in real terms as well as in philosophical terms. It would be delusional to think otherwise.

At the same time, India can barely be faulted for believing in itself and having a sense of its destiny in the long run. Its accretion of power is an inexorable process, unless we reconcile ourselves to a forever status of a post-colonial emerging nation and perpetual aspirant. In the transition phase of the current world order, India's interests lie in working with the known US-led order, while being conscious that there are many things out of its control. For instance, the continuation of this order depends on how it is led, rather than the choices of its followers. At the same time, India will seek to grow as fast as it can.

Since the scale of transformation by itself is of epic proportion, affecting the lives

of one-sixth of humanity, and additionally, given the track record of those who govern or misgovern the current order, India's interface with the world will have to be cut across the board. India needs to be in as many thematic and geographical coalitions and groupings as necessary till it is made a genuine participant in the governance of international institutions. This is the essence of India's case.

No doubt, organisations like BRICS and SCO have internal divisions, as do other, more honourable ones. Their achievements are modest. Members have different orientations and goals, and even bilateral differences. They have different geopolitical uses for these organisations. India is not exactly enamoured of the putative hegemon. It is hardly likely, for example, that India will facilitate the replacement of the US dollar with the Chinese yuan as an international reserve currency. The US, however, is not helping matters. By making the availability of the dollar scarce through forced reduction of trade surpluses against it and, in parallel, weaponising it as a geopolitical tool, it is driving even the best-intentioned nations to hedge against unpredictability. This is the new reality we live in. Understanding these complexities requires a new way of thinking.

The writer is convenor, NatStrat, former deputy national security adviser and ambassador

BRICS is China's playground

As China's economic might continues to grow, the forum today constrains rather than furthers India's foreign policy objectives



SURUPA GUPTA

AS AN EMERGING power, India's interests are arguably served best by aligning with multiple major powers, which according to conventional wisdom allows Delhi to limit its dependence on any one power and instead work with each on specific issues of common interest. India's membership of multilateral institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has been justified along the lines that these provide platforms to push for a more multipolar world order that limits the dominance of Western powers and West-led institutions.

Indeed, BRICS emerged as a group focused on challenging the norms that shaped multilateral economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. BRICS offered another avenue for India's aspirations for global leadership as it, along with Brazil, China and Russia, negotiated a larger proportion of votes and seats at these institutions. In recent years, as BRICS has expanded its membership, it has arguably provided India another platform to develop ties with countries in the Global South. One could argue that as the US under the Donald Trump administration pursues an unpredictable and more volatile foreign policy, it might be even more imperative for India to build ties with such institutions.

But does membership of BRICS really serve India's interests? What specific foreign policy goals can it pursue through this? The international order is going through a transformation and the contours of the new order are not yet clear, and it is pertinent to ask whether China-dominated institutions such as BRICS will help India or drag it down.

I argue that while BRICS and the SCO still provide India platforms to push for its foreign policy, they do not further many of its key foreign policy goals. In some cases, its interests might even be adversely affected through the collective positions taken. Clearly, China's economic size, assertive foreign policy and dominance in these institutions limit the extent to which India can exert its influence and secure its interests.

China's GDP, at \$17.7 trillion, is nearly five times the size of India's at \$3.56 trillion. This economic might, along with China's extensive trade and investment ties with other BRICS countries, allow it to exert greater political influence. At the BRICS summits, Beijing has used its leverage to promote goals such as de-dollarisation and expan-

sion of the organisation's membership. It has also used the venue to advocate for a larger role in global governance for itself. While India seeks to pursue some of these goals, it has not been able to further its interests through BRICS. The redistribution of IMF quotas in 2015 may have been the only exception. Even then, as BRICS countries banded together to reform global governance, China emerged as the clear winner as it was able to secure a deputy managing director position at the IMF.

While India seeks to expand its ties with countries in the Global South and portray itself as its leader, given the deep economic ties China enjoys with other BRICS countries, it is difficult for New Delhi to claim the leadership mantle while operating within the organisation. It might be easier for India to create a leadership narrative through its bilateral ties and in blocs where China is not present.

Additionally, India is deeply conflicted on de-dollarisation. While it has not been opposed to creating alternative payment mechanisms, it has enjoyed strong and increasing trade and investment ties with the US and has sought to limit its dependence on the dollar. Trump's threat of imposing additional tariffs on BRICS countries pursuing de-dollarisation puts India in a difficult position: Even though New Delhi was never in favour of the policy, it would need to clearly communicate that it is not retreating under threat.

The economic asymmetry within BRICS has also spilled over in the way Beijing has used the New Development Bank, the group's flagship financial institution. While India has borrowed for its infrastructure projects, it is China that has been able to leverage its economic power to shape the discussion at the NDB around infrastructure and connectivity, which in turn bolsters its Belt and Road Initiative.

It is not only in the realm of economics that New Delhi has seemingly played second fiddle. More recently, to maintain BRICS cohesion, India signed a joint declaration that condemned the terrorist attack in Pahalgam but did not criticise Pakistan for supporting cross-border terrorism. India has fought long and hard to convince the world that Pakistan promotes and exports terrorism — the BRICS declaration went directly against India's long-held position.

In the early years of the forum, BRICS membership likely gave India a larger profile in global governance by providing a mechanism for policy coordination by emerging economies. As China's economic might has continued to grow and its foreign policy has increased in ambition and assertiveness, the forum today might constrain rather than further India's foreign policy objectives. Indian leaders might be well advised to reevaluate BRICS's utility.

The writer is associate professor, political science and international affairs, University of Mary Washington

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"By blowing up the framework of multilateralism and international law and replacing it with strong-arm tactics, the word of the US has lost its value."
— LE MONDE

Let the rivers talk to each other

Namami Gange Programme can potentially leverage Delhi's Yamuna cleaning project towards the broader goal of rejuvenating India's rivers



SRINIVAS CHOKKAKULA AND DEBARSHREE DASGUPTA

CLEANING THE YAMUNA is among the top priorities of the newly elected BJP government in Delhi. The keen interest from the central government, also led by the BJP, favours the project. The project also has the advantage of the Yamuna being part of the Namami Gange Programme (NGP). Delhi's state-driven effort to clean the Yamuna carries the prospect of valuable reciprocal learning, which can help shape a comprehensive policy ecosystem for rejuvenating India's rivers.

The NGP, launched in 2014 as the Government of India's flagship programme, can boast of a discernible impact in improving the water quality and ecological status of the Ganga. Besides the recent cleaner Maha Kumbh, the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) offers the rising populations of keystone species such as the Ganges dolphin as evidence of the improved ecological status of the river. In over a decade of its implementation, the NGP's responsive policy and institutional experiments stand out as a departure from the earlier Ganga Action Plan.

Implemented in mission mode, the NGP has interesting legal and institutional innovations to its credit. The foremost among these is that it has shifted from the regulatory framing of what was the Ministry of Environment and Forests to an executive approach, in the Ministry of Jal Shakti (earlier the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation). The programme also marks a shift from pollution abatement to improving the ecological condition of the river. The NGP has pursued a river basin approach informed by a plan produced by a consortium of the Indian Institutes of Technology. In celebrated river restoration programmes, like those in Europe, such shifts took decades. The International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR), established in 1950 to restore the River Rhine, made these shifts only after the Sandoz disaster in 1986.

The NMCG was accorded the status of an authority soon after it was launched through the River Ganga (Rejuvenation, Protection and Management) Authorities Order of 2016. The National Ganga River Basin Authority, constituted earlier, was dissolved through this order and was replaced with a National Ganga Council

(NGC). There are other institutional innovations that show an unusual agility in policymaking. The NGC is headed by the Prime Minister with the chief ministers of the riparian states and 10 Union ministers as members. The NGC guides an empowered task force headed by the Union Minister for Jal Shakti, and an executive committee headed by NMCG's director general with extensive financial and regulatory powers.

The most striking feature of the 2016 order is the recognition of the subnational governments as important partners. It mandates a layered structure of state Ganga committees and district Ganga committees — accommodating the important roles of governments at different levels. Despite this deliberate effort, the subnational participation in Namami Gange has not been very encouraging. The absence of ownership of the programme — the basin states' legal, institutional and budgetary responses — raises questions about its enduring impact.

This is where the NGP can leverage the Delhi government-driven project of cleaning the Yamuna for a model that can be scaled. The project can reveal the missing and less understood drivers, motivations, and channels of subnational mobilisation for river rejuvenation.

Delhi's Yamuna project is a particularly complex one and can therefore make a useful contribution. The Yamuna, like all other major Indian rivers, is an interstate river. Improving its ecological status depends on reliable interstate cooperation mechanisms for enduring outcomes — a challenge that Delhi will need to address. At the same time, it faces water quality deterioration due to a pollutant load of close to 80 per cent from the city-state of Delhi. This singular characteristic brings the role of a distinct territorial entity, that too of an urban agglomeration, into sharp focus for improving river water quality. Studies have shown that Delhi's uncaptured and untreated sewage is responsible for the pollution load in the Yamuna. This is a classic instance where improvement in river water quality directly depends on improved urban governance. Delhi can, therefore, demonstrate what states should do for enduring outcomes for the NGP and the nature of Centre-state collaboration that is required to achieve this.

In Europe, it took a long time to get to the foundational Water Framework Directive. That experience is all about how institutions such as the ICPR mobilised the internal responses of sovereign nations in Europe. The NGP can potentially leverage responses like Delhi's cleaning of the Yamuna towards creating a policy and institutional ecosystem to rejuvenate India's rivers.

Chokkakula is the president and chief executive of Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi. Dasgupta is a research associate at CPR. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NO LESSONS LEARNT

THIS REFERS TO the report, '12 killed as vehicles fall into river after bridge collapses in Vadodra' (IE, July 10). Three incidents of bridge collapse in less than a month in Gujarat indicate the urgent need for course correction. Apparently, there were lapses in maintenance. Despite telltale signs of structural decay, the bridge was neither closed nor repaired on priority. More than 140 people were killed when the Morbi suspension bridge, from the British era, collapsed in October 2022 — just four days after it had been reopened following repairs. No lessons seem to have been learnt from that major tragedy.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the report, '12 killed as vehicles fall into river after bridge collapses in Vadodra' (IE, July 10). The tragic collapse of the Mahi river bridge near Mujpur in Vadodra district, claiming 15 lives, is yet another grim reminder that we have learnt little from past disasters like the Morbi bridge tragedy of 2022. Despite repeated incidents and public outcry, our infrastructure continues to not measure up, lacking quality checks and maintenance. The fact that the Gambhira bridge, built in 1986, was flagged for its deteriorating condition as early as 2022, but action was delayed still, speaks volumes about systemic negligence. This is not an isolated incident. The recent Kundamala footbridge collapse in Pune also highlights how aging and overused infrastructure, along with ignored safety warnings continue to pose serious risks to the hundreds of people who utilise them.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

A RISKY SHORTCUT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'In no clear terms' (IE, July 10). United States President Donald Trump's latest trade war threat to over a dozen countries aligns with his signature style of bullying. Japan and South Korea are among the allies now in the line of fire. The maverick President took to Truth Social to announce new reciprocal tariffs on 14 countries — including Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Cambodia — setting rates between 25 per cent and 40 per cent, and warning that resorting foreign goods or retaliating would attract even higher tariffs. Trump's decision to bypass negotiations and impose pre-set tariff structures negates decades of hard-won norms in international relations. It may resonate with a domestic audience but is sure to deepen uncertainty and provoke retaliation, even from Washington's allies.

Khokhan Das, Kolkata

(CRITICAL)LY NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Minding the minerals gap' (IE, July 10). The Quad Critical Minerals Initiative is a timely and necessary intervention in this niche and emerging domain. The authors' emphasis on multilaterals or "clubs" shows that this strategy can help India secure supply chains of critical minerals. Along with the Mineral Security Partnership and the Quad Initiative, India has taken certain steps at the domestic level too. This includes the National Critical Minerals Mission, release of the list of 30 critical minerals, etc. The time has come to make India's role in the supply chain indispensable.

Dewang Ganesh Thosar, New Delhi



Dropouts are only one outcome of bad quality of education. Poor learning outcomes, low employability of graduates, low productivity, and consequent low wages constitute another set of outcomes

Blurb
Debroy

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

—Rannath Goenka

END BITTER HARVEST: SUPPORT FARMERS WITH WATER MANAGEMENT

In a country where poor farmers are exiting agriculture every year, Maharashtra contributed a dubious statistic in 2025—of 767 farmers dying by suicide between January and March. In the Marathwada and Vidarbha regions, where most of these deaths occurred, agriculture has slipped several notches down the developmental ladder. The sector is not unproductive—rather, it is unviable, with institutional support to farming caught in red tape and policy rigidity.

Maharashtra is a maze of contradictions in agriculture. It has the maximum number of dams in India, but a minimum share of irrigated cultivation. The industrialised state produces most of the country's pulses, soy, cotton and sugarcane, but water scarcity and climate change blight crops. The reasons for farmer suicides are well established—with their lands hardly irrigated, input costs high, output prices low, chemicals hurting soil fertility and institutional finance often inaccessible, they fall prey to voracious debt. Cornered, agriculture becomes their epitaph. Even death brings no peace, because these suicides are ineligible for the scant government compensation unless they meet the set criteria.

Maharashtra's case should prompt policy planners to recognise the vulnerability of rain-fed agriculture nationwide. It supports 40 percent of the population, over half of livestock, and just under half of total food production; but is predominantly practised by poorer farmers and is vulnerable to climate change. Therein lies the challenge to make rain-fed agriculture regenerative. On the other hand, Maharashtra's Jaluyut Shivar Abhiyan, a water empowerment scheme, should be adopted nationwide. Reduced water vulnerability can encourage farmers to diversify their crops and adopt sustainable practices, thereby reducing input costs and risk of crop failure. Small farmers cannot be left unsupported and expected to grow pulses and cotton in drought-prone Maharashtra, for instance, where cooperative lobbies promote water-intensive sugarcane cultivation.

The focus in rain-fed areas should shift from centralised irrigation to locally adaptive water management and community-based conservation. The government must scale up last-mile irrigation in dry regions through pond construction, rainwater harvesting, and the use of drip and sprinkler systems. Consistent government procurement and minimum price support must complement extension services like affordable credit, regular insurance payouts, accurate weather forecasts and drone-based field damage assessments. Maharashtra should lead the country not in burying its farmers, but in harvesting its future.

BOOST MATH LEARNING TO BUCK TECH SKILL SHORTAGE

A nationwide survey of mathematical and linguistic proficiency by the National Council of Educational Research and Training has found massive deficiencies in basic skills among mid-primary and middle-school students. The survey, conducted in 2024, assessed 21,15,022 students across 74,229 schools in 36 states and Union territories. It found that among class 3 students, 50 percent could not classify basic geometric shapes, 50 percent could not perform simple monetary transactions, 45 percent were unable to arrange numbers up to 99 in ascending or descending order, and 42 percent could not perform addition or subtraction of two-digit numbers. At least 46 percent of class 6 students failed to understand simple multiplication, repeat additions and divisions.

This is disturbing and threatens the future of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics or STEM streams in India. It needs urgent corrective measures across the board. The numbers indicate a lack of basic arithmetic skills that anyone would require for everyday life. They project a looming vacuum in skilled human resources that could hinder the country's progress at a time science and technology are poised for era-defining advances and stress is laid on indigenous development in every sphere. There is an urgent need to act on the survey's recommendation of improving competencies in mathematics and science among school children, while emphasising the importance of gender-sensitive pedagogies, regional equity, and inclusive education.

Governments need to make mathematics learning an enjoyable experience in schools by using engaging ways to teach the basics and lay a strong foundation that would benefit the children as well as the country. Concurrently, the urban-rural divide should be bridged while identifying children with learning disabilities—especially dyscalculia (difficulty in understanding numbers, performing calculations, grasping mathematical concepts), dyslexia (problem with recognising alphabets, numbers, words and understanding text), and auditory processing disorder—and assisting them with specialised care.

Last year, the Union minister for youth affairs, labour, employment and sports, Mansukh Mandavkar, admitted to India staring at a huge shortage of skilled manpower. The crucial role of basic mathematical skills among children in raising an adequate technological manpower for the future should not be lost on anyone. Parents, teachers and counsellors—alongside the government machinery—must get involved in a nationwide exercise now, rather than regret later.

QUICK TAKE

OUTSOURCING GENOCIDE

An utterly tragic truth about our world is that even genocide has a cost. *Haaretz*, Israel's oldest newspaper, has pointed to the Israeli Defence Forces' Facebook advertisements for bulldozer operators who can help demolish structures in Gaza Strip. It's reported they would be paid per building: 2,500 shekels (₹65,000) for demolishing a small building and 5,000 shekels (₹1,30,000) for a large one. Costs are being counted elsewhere, too. Reports in *FT* and *The Guardian* this week revealed an American consulting group developing a post-war plan for the Strip that includes the creation of a 'Trump Riviera'. Irony would die a thousand deaths if countries whose companies profited from the war make money from cleaning up after, too.

TWO months after India struck nine known terrorist base camps and launchpads in Pakistani territory, an analysis of the military and operational dimensions of Operation Sindoor points to certain preliminary but clear conclusions.

First, India hit hard but hit smart—in carefully calculated strikes that took place at night to avoid collateral damage to civilians. Operation Sindoor, which targeted a broader geography and a wider set of targets than any previous counter-terrorist action, was a remarkable logistical and military achievement. Despite Pakistan being on the highest alert, India succeeded in breaching its defensive lines and striking its intended targets, including eliminating some known terrorists (whose funerals witnessed high-level attendance from Pakistani military and police officials, reconfirming their complicity in terror).

India's initial strikes deliberately avoided Pakistani military and governmental targets. In order to signal that its action was purely in reprisal against terrorism and not intended to be the opening salvo in a protracted war: It left the burden of escalation to the Pakistani military, which duly obliged, inviting additional retribution.

Second, the very terms of engagement with Pakistan have irrevocably shifted. India has shed its longstanding hesitations regarding military action, once held hostage by fears of "internationalising" the Kashmir issue. No longer will such concerns restrain the nation. India has moved beyond the familiar diplomatic process of presenting dossiers and evidence, petitioning a UN Security Council that has long allowed Pakistan to find shelter behind one of its permanent members. The time for such diplomacy is not over, but it is no longer enough. Instead, New Delhi's resolve to respond to terror with military force, and to manage counter-retaliatory actions, was clear and unwavering, with India signalling it was prepared to inflict even more severe consequences if required.

Third, from swift cross-border surgical strikes in 2016 to an air strike in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir in 2019, India has progressively expanded the scope of its strikes. India crossed not only the Line of Control (which the Modi Government had been careful not to breach till its 2016 surgical strike after the Uri terror attack) and the international border (which it had breached in its single strike after the Pulwama bombing), but it did so this time by hitting nine targets. In the process, Pakistan's nuclear blackmail and its incessant threats of an uncontrolled war were ignored and unmasked. For too long, Islamabad had held both India and the

Delhi can't assume better sense will prevail in Rawalpindi anytime soon. After demonstrating military precision and political will with Operation Sindoor, it must prepare for a more volatile region

TAKE PRIDE IN THE OP, BRACE FOR THE WORST

SHASHI THAROOR



Fourth-term Lok Sabha MP, Chairman of Standing Committee on External Affairs, and Sahitya Akademi-winning author of 24 books



SOURAV K

world hostage to the shadow of its nuclear arsenal. India demonstrated that terrorism can meet a calibrated military response without inviting a nuclear holocaust.

India has clearly demonstrated that, in the event of conflict with Pakistan, any future sub-conventional provocations will now be met with a full-scale conventional response. The onus is now squarely on Pakistan to ensure that such provocations cease, if it wishes to avoid the consequences of India's conventional military power.

Fourth, by placing the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance, India has sent an unequivocal message: the costs of sponsoring terrorism can no longer be contained within the realm of symbolic reprisals. Pakistan must now face the real possibility that its actions could jeopardise the very livelihood of its people—its water. While India has not yet shown any inclination to substantially divert these waters, the mere suggestion that

the flow could be curtailed dramatically alters the dynamics. Henceforth, the bargaining chip is no longer dialogue in exchange for peace; rather, it is Pakistan's cessation of terrorism in exchange for India's continued provision of water.

Fifth, the world has been sharply reminded of the persistent threat posed by radicalisation and extremism emanating from Pakistan. Operation Sindoor has refocused attention on Pakistan's deep and continuing links to terrorism, as well as its perilous nuclear brinkmanship.

Details of the behind-the-scenes discussions between the US and Pakistan, and India's military manoeuvres will no doubt emerge in time. However, what is indisputable is that a ceasefire would not have been achievable without the full application of military pressure by India, nor would it have been possible without India's readiness to call a halt whenever Pakistan

stopped off the ladder of escalation.

Sixth, in light of the current state of affairs, dialogue with Pakistan seems a remote possibility. Nothing substantive is likely to change in the bilateral relationship, and proposals for talks on Kashmir will likely fall on deaf ears. Kashmir is neither the root cause nor the ultimate solution to the enduring tensions between India and Pakistan. This is a myth perpetuated by Pakistan to justify its claims on Indian territory, based on nothing more than the biggest argument that Muslims cannot live in a country with a non-Muslim majority.

Seventh, India made it unequivocally clear that any future terrorist attack would be treated as an act of war. The principle of zero tolerance for terrorism, when translated into real policy, compels Pakistan to seriously consider whether it is willing to risk a broader conflict every time it sends its proxies across the border to disrupt peace.

Eighth, though India has understandably been focused on its own economic development and high-tech growth rather than war preparations, it is clear that it cannot assume better sense will prevail in Rawalpindi. India must prepare for the worst. This entails bolstering its military capabilities, addressing diplomatic vulnerabilities, enhancing internal security measures, and readying its citizens for the inevitable cycles of violence, loss, and disorder that might follow. India must continue to adapt, prepare, and evolve its strategies in the face of an adversary that is not likely to abandon its destabilising tactics any time soon.

India's GDP is 11 times that of Pakistan, and the Indian government must not leave itself vulnerable to a military regime that stokes instability by propping up terror proxies to reinforce its domestic dominance. It is important to recognise that the Pakistani military's overarching authority, its control over the Pakistani national budget, its historical relationships with major powers, and its strategic alliances with China and Turkey provide it with substantial tools to sustain an armed conflict. While India enjoys overwhelming military superiority and would undoubtedly prevail in any conventional conflict, Pakistan's ability to inflict harm, both through direct and indirect means, must not be underestimated.

India can take justifiable pride in its demonstration of resolute political will in confronting terrorism and its capacity to dismantle Pakistan's terror infrastructure with precision, while remaining steadfast in its unity and maturity in the face of heightened emotions. At the same time, India must brace itself for an increasingly volatile security environment and a neighbourhood that has, perhaps, grown more fragile in the wake of recent events. (Views are personal)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Chinese checkers

Ref: Govt needs to address rare earth supply challenge with urgency (Jul 10). India has to start reducing its dependency on China by strategic and targeted rolling out of specific geological policies annually. China's monopoly impedes India's dream of greener initiatives and sustainable development.

Avinash Krishna Kumar, Bhubaneswar

Farm fork

Ref: Tricky pavers over use of fertile farmland for park (Jul 10). Land grabbing has been on the rise lately for industrialisation and real estate ventures, which is totally neglecting agriculture, which is totally neglecting agriculture. It goes unsaid that enticing compensations would not help food insecurity of the farmer or the country.

Ramalingeswara Rao, email

Bridge fears

Ref: Bridges over troubled waters (Jul 10). This devastating incident has instilled grave fear among commuters—especially given the alarming number of similar incidents reported across the nation. It is imperative that the government takes urgent and concrete steps to assure and account for safe public infrastructure.

Mohd Arbaz Alam, Haveri

Risky encroachments

Ref: Making ethical sense of too many deaths (Jul 10). The author, questioning airports of being close to residential areas, does not take into account the enormous number of similar incidents reported across the nation. Authorities must be held accountable for letting slums proliferate near airports, particularly in places like Mumbai.

OP Swaminathan, Bengaluru

Regular audits

Ref: 17 dead as 40-year-old Gul bridge collapses (Jul 10). The tragedy highlights the grave consequences of neglecting timely maintenance of public infrastructure. Aging bridges and buildings across India pose a serious threat to public safety if not regularly audited and repaired.

Narayanan Kizhumbayudu, Thiruvur

Creative liberty

Ref: 'Anah' gets an initial as makers agree to modify title (Jul 10). The audience patronising Malayalam cinema has never taken any offence; yet the censor board remains intolerant. Cinema should not be curtailed by narrow-mindedness. We must pave the way for the next generation to continue the legacy of legends.

Menu B, Kottayam

NEITHER TOO MANY, NOR TOO FEW

At a time when the world is grappling with climate breakdown, economic instability, widening wealth inequality and deepening gender divisions, perhaps only one truth stays constant: people must be at the centre of the future we imagine.

The relation between population and development has never been more critical. Long before Thomas Robert Malthus and Adam Smith, thinkers across the world—from Kautilya in India to Confucius in China and Aristotle in Greece—grappled with a fundamental question: how does the size and composition of population influence prosperity, stability and moral order?

Between the 15th and 18th centuries, the thought shifted dramatically as resources came to be viewed as limited. Population growth, once considered a sign of strength, came to be seen as something that would inevitably lead to economic instability, wealth inequality, poverty and hunger. However, this narrative was challenged in the 20th century by the success of Norman Borlaug's Green Revolution. Advances in agricultural technology dramatically increased food production, seemingly resolving the long-fear crisis of feeding a growing population.

Yet, despite this surplus, millions around the world still go hungry. This underscores that the core issue is not absolute scarcity or inadequate production, but rather inequality, flawed distribution systems, and poor governance. These challenges—rooted in questions of justice and access—have echoed through history and remain central to global development debates.

India's demographic story has always been complex. Once feared for its so-called population explosion, India now faces a fertility transition. According to the National Family Health Survey 5, India's total fertility rate (TFR) has fallen to 2.0—below the replacement level. There are two contradictory concerns at the centre of population debates today. On one hand, some commentators express concerns about India's "overpopulation" and the resultant strain on resources, jobs, and infrastructure. Then there are others who point to the declining fertility rates—particularly in the southern and western states—and warn that we may be heading towards an ageing crisis and shrinking workforce.

This paradoxical anxiety about having both too many and too few people is symptomatic of a fundamentally flawed demographic discourse. It assumes fertility and population can be engineered or manipulated through policy interventions, in-

stead of addressing the social norms, freedoms, and inequalities that actually drive demographic choices. With rapid fertility decline, rising life expectancy, improved healthcare, and other positive demographic and socio-economic trends, India has much reason to be optimistic about its development trajectory. Yet, critical questions remain.

First, can India truly harness its demographic dividend by transforming its vast youth population into a skilled and productive workforce—especially at a time when youth unemployment remains alarmingly high? Second, with population ageing accelerating, particularly in southern states, how will India integrate its growing elderly population into productive roles, especially when employment opportunities are limited even for younger cohorts and safety nets remain weak?

Third and perhaps the most critical, India's demographic discourse continues to neglect the potential of the gender dividend. With fertility rates falling and women attaining higher levels of education, how are Indian policymakers planning to integrate this shifting female population into the economy? Will their potential be realised through formal employment, entrepreneurship, or leadership roles? And most importantly, how

will the unpaid work they continue to shoulder be recognised, redistributed, and valued both socially and economically? Fourth, the continued existence of widespread child labour in India highlights major gaps in our education and protection frameworks. Despite policies like the Sarva Shiksha Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act, many children, especially from marginalised communities, remain excluded from meaningful education and are instead absorbed into exploitative labour forces. This not only undermines their rights, but also compromises India's long-term human capital development.

Fifth, while poverty levels have declined in recent years, a substantial portion of the population still struggles with deprivation. Meanwhile, the number of millionaires has grown sharply. Data from the World Inequality Database paints a stark picture: the bottom 50 percent of the population owns just 6.4 percent of the country's wealth, while the top 10 percent owns 65 percent, and the top 1 percent alone owns 40.1 percent. In terms of income, the bottom 50 percent population earns only 15 percent of the national income, compared to 57.7 percent claimed by the top 10 percent. This extreme imbalance between population, income, and wealth distribution highlights the urgent need to reimagine India's development model not only through the lens of growth, but through equity, inclusion, and justice.

Today, as we observe World Population Day, India must seize the opportunity to rethink its population discourse. The real issue is not the number of people, but the persistent failure of institutions, governance, and policies to ensure justice, equity, and opportunity for all. While youth empowerment is vital, so too is the imperative to focus on women, the elderly, children, and the marginalised in our demographic vision.

Population is not the problem—justice is. It is time to reject the false binaries of "too many" or "too few" and embrace a justice-driven discourse. Demographic measures must not be about control or reaching an "ideal" number. It should be about creating the conditions under which all people can live with dignity, exercise choice and autonomy, and realise their full potential.

(Views are personal)

Bengaluru brouhaha resonates in distant Delhi

If ever there was a perfect tussle for power, the Karnataka example would fit to a T. What began as a sustained bout of shadow boxing in the summer of 2023 as a resurgent Congress stormed to power in the south-western state has continued to pop up, at the most inappropriate of times for the ruling dispensation and much to the delight of the Opposition who have rubbed it in, almost at will. The two contenders – one the incumbent Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and the other his fiery and influential deputy, D K Shivakumar have for the present decided to bare their real intentions, stop pretending, and indulging in typical Congress party doublespeak, thereby letting it all out in the open. With south India still refusing to be 'Modified to the extent the saffron headquarters wants in New Delhi and

elsewhere, the dramatic high which the OGP experienced two years ago when they wrested control in Bengaluru is no more evident in the silicon city. Propped up by well-wishers and a motley set of mutt leaders brazenly exhibiting a cocktail of casteist and religious power, both Shivakumar, the crisis manager and the go-to man for Congress for a few years and his senior competitor Siddaramaiah have not let anything pass in their battle for the gaddi.

With loyalties split within the cabinet as groupism is rampant, the CM and his deputy have had to enable the campwallas to vent out their feelings (like how a ventriloquist does) and then pretend to douse the fire that it invariably causes. One has read a host of loaded statements, directly and indirectly, made by the leaders themselves and the ubiquitous AICC heads, who

still unsuccessfully try to cover up and deflect attention from the raging controversy. It is still inexplicable why Congress is doing this. In a long time, they won with a convincing number of seats in 2023 after receiving sizeable support from the public in Karnataka, who were fed up with the ineffective rule of BJP, fighting its own battles within the party. If ever power sharing by 'rotation' was considered a doomed to fail task, the Karnataka example would add to the many that have taken place in India over the past three decades, when coalition governments, shaky right from the start, patch up just in time to seize the gaddi and convince the dissidents in their respective parties that it will be an equal tenure rule for the principal players.

Invariably, betrayal and opportunistic switch of partners to stay on and make

fresh alliances to ensure their political survival have been the oft-used tactics of both regional and national parties, which are forgotten as the next elections are announced. There is a huge list in this regard for political scholars to study all over the nation. Karnataka has once again grabbed attention as the political pow-wow as of now is being played out in New Delhi, where political pundits enjoy the southern flavour of this no-holds-barred fight and come up with expert theories on how it may all end up. As far as the grand old party is concerned, it has often shown that it needs no enemies from outside, laden as it is with 'good friends' within. Going by past experiences, Bengaluru may quiver and shake for a while, but this too shall pass. Or fail, depending on which lobby you want in power.

LETTERS

MNS MLA must be punished

THIS refers to the editorial 'Politicians wreaking havoc should be duly punished' (THI July 10). Sadly, Maharashtra is witnessing political highhandedness of Shiv Sena and MNS workers, who are indulging in needless violence either in the name of Marathi language or in the process of intimidating innocent people from other states. The over-zeal by the MNS to teach Marathi to others is unnecessary and unwarranted. Its MLA slapping and punching a non-local in the MLA canteen over the quality of 'dal' served there, has brought the reputation of the Shiv Sena and MNS combine several notches down in the public eye. The wanton vandalism of the toilet booth showed the rowdy and uncouth behaviour of the opposition in Maharashtra in dismal light; and the government must take to such these lawbreakers so that they would not dare to repeat such acts again.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

Publicly humiliate all law-breaking leaders

Politicians displaying a troubling disregard for constitutional norms and democratic principles is not only condemnable but is also indicative of a larger political conspiracy due to its inability to reconcile with failures. Recently, the way MNS members are resorting to violence in the name of limiting innocent people from other states and identity-driven political climate is deplorable. Similarly, politicians taking law into their hands at the drop of a hat and going on a rampage on a false notion is dangerous. It is time to draw a line and unequivocally warn people triggering mob violence. Strict action should include arrests, fast-track trials and publicly demanding the perpetrators. The courts, police and civil society must unite in ensuring this does not spiral into another round of violence. Only then, can hate violence and mob violence on one pretext or the other be put to an end.

R K Srinivasan, Secunderabad-3

Mandate semi-circular layout of classrooms

IT is commendable that some schools in Kerala have given up the traditional row-based seating arrangement in favour of a semi-circular layout in classrooms inspired by Vinesh Viswanath's debut Malayalam film Sharanathi Sreekutan. The film portrays school life in a rural setting in Kerala. The time has indeed come to actualise the idea of semi-circular configuration of classrooms to foster friendship and fellowship among students. This innovative adaptation would de-congest the classroom, create a more congenial atmosphere for interaction and learning and enable schools to do without pigeonholing students as 'front-benchers', 'middle benchers' and 'backbenchers' and students to imbibe the spirit of equality and companionship and camaraderie and value cooperation more than competition. Further, it would do away with getting seats depending on height or supposed brilliance or based on names in alphabetical order. In the new classroom configuration, all students get the teacher's attention in equal measure and no student feels neglected. From now onwards, the governments and private school managements would do well to design and build new schools, keeping in mind creation of enough space for the semi-circular layout of classrooms.

G. David Milton, Maruthanadu (TN)

Identify Nipah cases on urgent basis

PATIENTS recovering from Nipah infection, which has become endemic in north Kerala, have been disease-free and without post-infection sequelae thus far. However, two persons continue to be bed-bound in a vegetative state, as an aftermath of Nipah encephalitis. This has cast a gloom on Nipah survivors and is worrying healthcare providers. The unfavourable long-term effect of the infection renders the identification of the source of the dreaded viral infection even more crucial.

Dr. George Jacob, Kochi

No way to treat history-making women cricketers

INDIA's women's cricket team has just made history by winning their first T20 series in England. Alas, what has been the nation's reaction? A passing cheer. Had it been the men's team, headlines would scream the achievement and there would be celebrations on the streets. Why must women work twice as hard for half the recognition? This isn't just about cricketers—it's about respect, equality, and breaking old patterns. The question is well spongers and fans now stand behind them—or simply scroll past? If victory abroad doesn't earn lasting support at home, what will? Let's not just clap today. Let's commit to change. Because real progress isn't in trophies—it's in the way we value them.

Hassain Rabbani, Mumbai

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

BBMP to spend Rs 2.88 crore on stray dog feeding project

BENGALURU: In a first-of-its-kind move, the government, which has long supported the India Canteen initiative to feed the urban poor, is now extending its compassion to Bengaluru's stray dog population. The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) has announced a new project to provide nutritious meals to stray dogs across its 8 zones and has floated a tender worth Rs 2.88 crore.

BBMP Special Commissioner Vikas Kishore Suralkar stated that the initiative aims to reduce stray dog attacks, especially on children, by ensuring that the animals are well-fed. He added that pilot programs conducted in a few wards have shown promising results. In these test runs, meals were provided to around 100 dogs over a period of 2-3 months, helping curb aggressive behaviour.

The BBMP plans to serve calorie-rich meals such as egg rice and chicken rice to stray dogs. These meals will be distributed in collaboration with local restaurants and food providers.

According to the tender notice issued via the Karnataka Public Procurement Portal, proposals are being invited to provide cooked food to stray dogs across all 8 BBMP zones.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

TRUMP OF IDEOLOGICAL LOYALTY

SURGICAL STRIKE



K. KRISHNA SAGAR RAO

A few moments in public life restore our collective faith in the possibility of justice. One such moment arrived with the elevation of my senior party colleague, N. Ramchander Rao, as the State President of BJP Telangana. It is more than just a political appointment. To me, it is a triumph of ideological loyalty over expediency, of consistent service over opportunistic maneuvering.

In a political climate where party affiliations shift faster than breaking news tickers, and ideological loyalty is treated as an inconvenient, if not a hindrance, this development feels like a powerful counter-narrative. Rao's rise is not sudden. It is a result of over four decades of unwavering commitment to the same ideological framework, to the same party, and to the same larger purpose.

tive Council, and now as the State President, his climb has been both principled and patient. He did not hop across parties when times were tough. He did not rebel when the tides were not in his favour. He stayed, served, and strengthened the party when there was little visibility and even lesser reward. He believed in the ideology, in the organization, and in the vision of a stronger India led by principled politics.

Ideology is not a costume: In contemporary politics, ideology has become a fashion statement, worn one day, discarded the next. It has become something leaders wear on stage and take off in the green room. But for those of us who take public life seriously, ideology is not a costume, it is our character.

A strong ideological foundation is not meant to be strict, but to refine. It helps leaders make decisions that are consistent, and are less represented, and policies remain rooted in purpose. That is why parties like BJP are not just electoral vehicles, they are ideological missions. And leaders like Ramchander Rao are its long-distance runners.



N. Ramchander Rao

It has become commonplace to see people jump from one extreme of the political spectrum to the other. Even from extreme Left to extreme Right. From secular-socialist rhetoric to nationalistic spiritualism, all in a matter of weeks. They swing across ideologies like it is all part of some harmless political game. But it is not. It is an insult to the electorate, a mockery of democracy, and a brutal erosion of trust in public life.

Four decades of consistent commitment: I have known him for over 12 years, not just as a party colleague but as someone I have had the privilege to work with closely, especially during our time as spokespersons for BJP Telangana. While he was senior and I was new to the role, we collaborated on many party assignments, media campaigns, crisis communications, press conferences, strategic outreach efforts, and I always admired his clarity, composure, and deep-rooted ideological conviction. He is not a man of noise, but of substance. And in a political age addicted to instant gratification, his trajectory reminds us that meaningful leadership is not a sprint but a long, committed climb.

Rao began his political life as a spirited student leader with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in Osmania University campus. In the turbulent political environment of student activism in the 1980s, ideological clarity was not a convenience, it was a conviction. And he held onto it like a torch in the dark.

From those early days to holding responsibilities as the official spokesperson of the BJP, State General Secretary, Member of the Legisla-

The great political betrayal- Left-party hopping as a culture: Let us talk about the rot. We are now living in an era of political restlessness. Leaders jump from one party to another like changing outfits for an evening function. One day, they are condemning a party's ideology, and the next, they are star campaigners. They have mastered the art of ideological amnesia, conveniently forgetting what they stood against, to now claim what they never believed in.

It has become commonplace to see people jump from one extreme of the political spectrum to the other. Even from extreme Left to extreme Right. From secular-socialist rhetoric to nationalistic spiritualism, all in a matter of weeks. They swing across ideologies like it is all part of some harmless political game. But it is not. It is an insult to the electorate, a mockery of democracy, and a brutal erosion of trust in public life.

Let me be clear, party-switching is not illegal, nor is it unconstitutional. But it is ethically troubling and democratically corrosive. People elect representatives based on what they say they stand for. If that representation is betrayed for personal

advancement, the very foundation of democracy begins to crack.

When newcomers claim seniority: What is even more disturbing is that many of these party-hoppers come in with high demands. They do not enter with humility. They enter with a sense of entitlement, they want top leadership roles, ticket assurances, and strategic visibility at events on stage. In contrast, those who have spent decades in the trenches of party work are often asked to wait, to watch and adjust.

This creates not just internal imbalance but ideological dilution. It undermines the value of loyalty. It tells young political aspirants that you do not need to commit long-term, you just need to switch at the right moment to get ahead.

And let me not pretend this is a one-off issue. This trend is widespread across parties. However, as a senior member of BJP Telangana, I find it more important than ever to raise a red flag within my own ecosystem. Because we must hold ourselves to a higher standard. BJP is not just a political party, we are a movement, we are a party with a difference. And movements are sustained not by influx, but by integrity.

My own journey-Loyalty without expectation: I speak not just as an observer, but as a participant in this journey.

I have served BJP for over twelve years as its chief spokesperson in Telangana. Through changing leadership, shifting political equations, and intense public scrutiny, I have remained in the same role. Many have asked me why? Why not ask for something bigger? Why not negotiate for a more powerful post? Why not jump to a party that offers me more?

Believe me, I have had many such invitations. Roles in State Government. Higher party positions in other political parties. More visibility, more comfort, more responsibilities, more growth, more opportunity. However, I did not flinch for a minute to reject these offers.

I stayed. Not because I lack ambition, competence, but because I value allegiance. I believe in the BJP's ideology, deeply, emotionally, and intellectually. I did not join this party to climb a ladder. I joined to help rebuild a nation.

And I know I am not alone. There are thousands like me across the state and this country. Competent, highly educated and passionate individuals, who chose

BJP not for convenience, but for conviction to its ideology. I have spoken on thousands of media platforms regionally and nationally, worked at the ground level during elections, during crises, and represented the party with pride. But unfortunately, many feel sidelined when they see those who have switched from other parties walking into high tables.

It is disillusioning. It sends a disheartening signal to the youth who look up to us, hoping that loyalty and long-term service still mean something. It creates confusion about what politics truly rewards, loyalty or leverage?

Rao's elevation-A beacon of hope: And that is why at this moment, Ramchander Rao's elevation is so important.

It tells us that ideological loyalty is not dead. That the party still recognizes those who have walked with it, not just those who arrive when the weather is good. That substance still matters. That the long road one has taken, the prime years of youth one has spent in contribution to the party, is not a wasted one.

I commend the national and state leadership of BJP for this bold and correct choice. Among several worthy contenders, they chose a man who did not just work for the party, he embodied the party. It shows that in BJP, eventually, commitment gets its due. Even if it takes time, even if it takes patience, it does arrive.

And let this appointment also be a signal to the rest of the party. It is a message to the majority within the party, those working quietly, tirelessly, thanklessly. You are being watched. You are being valued. Your time will come.

A word to the youth-Ideology is still worth it: To every young Indian who dreams of entering public life, here is my sincere advice, do not trade long-term credibility for short-term advantages. Politics is not a job switch. It is a life commitment. Join a party only if you believe in its principles. Stay not because it is easy, but because it is right.

The new culture of open houses, where every party accepts anyone, regardless of past contradictions, might seem welcoming. But it also weakens our democracy if there are no ideological filters. Politics without ideology is power without actual purpose.

If we want to create leaders with character, we must

create political journeys that reward conviction. Let us not normalize disloyalty. Let us not glorify the art of switching sides. Let us, instead, uphold the power of staying rooted.

Politics of integrity: At this juncture, we must reflect on the kind of politics we want for our nation. The integrity of politics directly influences the integrity of the nation. If we continue to allow opportunists, criminals, and power-seekers to define political discourse, we risk hollowing out our democracy.

It is the responsibility of every political party, including ours, to create space for young people, competent professionals, nationalists, and individuals with strong ideological leanings who have no criminal or corrupt background. These are the people who can elevate public life. These are the people who must be encouraged, mentored, and empowered.

Politics should not be the last resort for the unemployed. It must be a first career choice for the able, the educated, the ethical, the patriotic and the inspired. This transformation is not only necessary, but also urgent. Because the quality of a nation's politics is the truest indicator of its national character. And we must not let it fall into mediocrity.

Closing thoughts-The real seniority: Ramchander Rao did not demand seniority, he earned it. He did not threaten to exit to gain attention. He chose to stay even when it was not rewarding. That is what makes this elevation beautiful. It is poetic justice in an era that often forgets to reward integrity.

To my senior colleague Ramchander Rao, I extend my hearty congratulations. May your tenure inspire a new generation of leaders who do not just seek positions but pursue principles and stay rooted in the ideology of the party.

Let us show that loyalty is not a weakness. That conviction is the real currency of politics.

His, to me, is the real triumph. The triumph of ideological loyalty.

(The author is the chief spokesperson of BJP, Chairman for Nation Building Foundation, a global expert in Emotional Intelligence and a Harvard Business School certified Strategist)

Ice baths are potential health risks

WALK through any trendy suburb and you might find a new 'wellness' studio offering ice baths or 'contrast therapy' (a sauna and ice bath combo). Scroll social media, and you're likely to come across influencers preaching the cold plunge gospel with cult-like zeal. Ice baths have gone mainstream. Initially practised mainly among high-performance athletes, cold water immersion is now a booming business model sold as recovery, discipline and therapy all in one.

But the benefits are questionable and, importantly, ice baths can have health risks – particularly for people who have limited experience using them.

Cold water immersion isn't a new concept. The 'frigidarium' – a room with a cold plunge pool or bath – was a feature in most Roman bathhouses. For decades, athletes have used cold water immersion, such as swims in cold water, for recovery. But in

recent years, with the proliferation of commercial cold plunge centres, there's been an explosion in people using ice baths recreationally. Many people are even setting up their own ice baths at home. Social media shows serene influencers meditating through the pain, claiming it boosts mental health, serotonin, testosterone, and metabolism. But does the evidence stack up?

Ice baths can reduce muscle soreness after intense training. However, the effect is modest and short-lived. Some research shows cold water immersion can improve mood after a single exposure in young, healthy people, but other research doesn't find these benefits. Most claims about mental health, testosterone and weight loss aren't backed by strong evidence. Rather, they're anecdotal and amplified by influencers.

Businesses offering ice

baths don't always actively supervise patrons or monitor a person's time in the ice bath. They may leave their customers to self-regulate, assuming people will know to get out of the water before they pass their body's limits. What are the risks?

Cold water immersion triggers a powerful physiological response. Gasping occurs and breathing becomes rapid and uncontrolled. Heart rate spikes. Blood

pressure rises. Staying in the water for too long can lead to hypothermia, a condition where a person's core body temperature drops dangerously low. Shivering may begin within minutes in cold water.

As far back as 1969, researchers found even experienced swimmers could struggle after just a few minutes in cold water. Recently one of us (Sam Cornell) had to provide first aid at an ice bath venue in Sydney. A young man collapsed after staying in an ice bath for ten minutes.

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Politicians must mind language & behaviour

A Tamil Nadu politician, who was a senior minister in the Stalin Cabinet, delivered sexual innuendos freely in a hate speech against women of the Shaivite and Vaishnavite denominations. A legislator from the ruling BJP in Odisha spouted misogynistic comments on a woman leader of the Opposition BJD and went on to elaborate as she hit back. An MLA of the Shiv Sena, an alliance partner in Maharashtra, slapped a canteen staff at the MLA hotel because he was served stale food.

These are just three examples of the kind of crass behaviour that lowers political civility in various states. That politicians may feel so emboldened because they are members of the ruling party or combine is clear. The question is who is to rein them in. Of course, the Tamil Nadu minister lost his job, but the point that the high court, in taking suo motu notice of his vituperative speech on women and sex, noted was that all 124 complaints made against him to the police were closed.

The judge's scathing attack on the impunity with which politicians are bringing their profession, avocation or avowedly honorary public service into disrepute can help only if political leaders occupying the highest position in the party and/or government pulls these people up and dismisses them from posts that seem to empower their crass behaviour or speech. But it would take strong political will to ensure members who cross the red line between civility and abuse of freedom of speech are disciplined by the party first.

The police cannot be seen acting as judge and jury and dismiss the complaints as it did in all the 124 FIRs filed against the then Tamil Nadu minister. It is up to the courts to decide on these matters.

issues, what they tend to do is to say things without abandoning good manners.

What the judge said is most pertinent as he hit the nail on the head saying, "Politicians think that freedom of speech under Article 19 is an absolute right. And they think only the sky is the limit." Whatever is said might not satisfy all sections of the country's 146 crore people. The least the netas can do is keep within the boundaries of decency. But the record suggests that many of them are hardly the type who can hide their male chauvinism.

The police cannot be seen acting as judge and jury and dismiss the complaints as it did in all the 124 FIRs filed against the then Tamil Nadu minister. It is up to the courts to decide on these matters, particularly regarding hate speeches that may cause disaffection among communities, but the courts barely reach them as complaints are disposed of by the police.

It is all too apparent that politicians in power use the system to escape after making the mistake of thinking their gift of the gab comes with eternal wisdom. Even those who raise their hand against ordinary people somehow manage to get out of trouble. The record speaks for itself in over 100 cases of hate speech delivered or physical misbehaviour going without being dealt with firmly by party, government, police or courts.

Betting apps: Refine definition

The Enforcement Directorate's action against 29 film celebrities and influencers for promoting banned betting apps has once again highlighted lack of financial ruin, even triggering suicides. Though the ED's charge against them is limited to money laundering, their crime is far graver and reflects how low the bar has fallen for celebrity responsibility.

Actors and influencers command enormous trust among their fans, and their word becomes currency for them. When they use this trust to promote addictive betting apps or fake projects, the damage multiplies.

The celebrities must, therefore, perform due diligence before endorsing any project. However, in pursuit of financial gain, they allowed the lines between commercial endorsement and public exploitation to blur, which ultimately resulted in their being subjected to the ED's scrutiny.

Another side to the promotion of illegal betting apps is the unclear legal landscape. The law distinguishes between betting based on chance and that which requires skill. However, the line between chance-based betting and skill-based betting is increasingly hard to maintain.

Using this loophole, several betting app makers market betting as a skill-based game and enlist endorsements by celebrities to promote it to the wider public. For example, cricket betting apps could justify their activity as the punter assesses the situation based on past performances, statistics and form.

Instead of dealing with this issue through agencies like ED, the government must refine the legal definition of betting, demarcating clear boundaries between skill and chance. It should make it clear to celebrities that endorsing such apps with accountability. If their endorsement causes loss to the public, they must pay up.

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Kamal Davar

To check Chinese mischief, let India take the lead in revival of Saarc

Geopolitical churning, in frequent measure, are not often commonplace. Whenever shortfalls exist in attaining national goals, countries try to forge alliances with friendly nations to turn the strategic environment to their benefit. South Asia, one of the world's most politically stressed regions, is no exception.

Way back in April 1947, just months before Independence, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru conducted the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi. After Independence, India reached out to its small or neighbours time and again to assist them in myriad ways, like disaster management, soft loans or even outright financial grants, medical cover, educational facilities, assistance in power generation and connectivity by road/rail/water transport and favourable trade procedures. However, India's powerful northern neighbour, the People's Republic of China, proved time and again to be the proverbial elephant in the room. For decades, China has gone out of its way to adopt policies to box India in South Asia and curtail its endeavours and influence outside the region. Unfortunately, this mindset of China persists to this day. It is paradoxical that for many decades, while the United States has been customarily anti-China, its own protégé, Pakistan, has been firmly

Subhani



Mamdaani's NY race offers some democracy lessons

Ruchira Gupta



I first shared dinner with Zohran Mamdaani in 2019. He was tutoring kids to pay rent, counselling tenants harassed by predatory landlords, and rapping at open mic events after midnight. Between bites, he said if ordinary people were trusted and organised, they could transform New York City.

Six years later, the 33-year-old son of Ugandan immigrants is the Democratic nominee for mayor. His rise proves that conviction wasn't a throw-away line, but a method. I write as a New Yorker, an NYU professor, and a US-Indian author whose books begin in India and end in Queens. Queens is the most linguistically diverse place on earth: 138 languages riot through its streets, and you can sample five cuisines in a single block. Yet behind that abundance lurk eviction notices, hate crimes, and subway delays that eat whole pay cheques. I have watched neighbours retreat behind mosque walls or whisper across caste lines in grocery queues. That is the New York Mamdaani was born — vibrant, yes, but fractured, anxious, unaffordable.

Yet he refused to polarise. He had multiple jobs, lived in streets where neighbours fear ICE raids and turned that anxiety into a forward-facing vision. His politics isn't built on fear, it's built on belonging.

Mamdaani, Muslim by birth and secular by temperament, campaigned arm-in-arm with Brad Lander, a Jewish progressive from Brooklyn. He condemned Israeli bombardments of Gaza and Narendra Modi's persecution of Muslims, while inviting Jewish and Hindu volunteers to carry the same blocks. The message wasn't "set your identity aside" but "bring it, and let's compare rent receipts." Affordability was the shared grammar through which 138 languages could argue and still cooperate. India should pay attention.

Our cities too are fractured by caste, religion, and class. Mamdaani shows that issues woven into daily life win races. He made democracy feel tangible like something you could hold in your hand. What struck me in 2019 was how little he resembled the archetype of "the leader." Zohran was 27, passionate, and wrestling with the same uncertainties many young people face — rent, employment, identity. Yet he didn't perform politics; he reached out. He showed up, knocked doors, earned trust by earning a living — rooted, reachable, real.

He listened more than he spoke, scribbling notes on the Q86 bus and lingering on stoops to ask tenants what kept them up at night. Those humble, horizontal conversations, sometimes in halting Hindi, Urdu, Bangla or Spanish, became the campaign. There was no spectacle, just steady relationship building.

The operation was horizontal by design. Long before a glossy flyer appeared, thousands of micro-meetings knitted strangers together — vibrant, yes, but fractured, anxious, unaffordable. Some volunteers were taxi drivers who drafted poems between shifts; others were retired nurses who never voted in a primary. The means were the end.

Out of that process emerged three dignity guardrails: childcare that doesn't bankrupt families; a community that doesn't devour wages or time; good groceries in state stores and housing that feels like shelter, not shackles. To pay for the proposed a modest two per cent levy on fortunes over \$50 million and aligning corporate taxes with New Jersey.

Because the programme arose from shared experience, no one had to be bribed to believe it. Volunteers, many of them students, many immigrants, knocked on over a million doors. They relied on neighbourly trust, not paid ads or algo-

Mamdaani didn't ask Queens to transcend identity; he asked it to translate identity into common cause. Queens hasn't elected a new political machine; it has assembled a choir that can improvise on the stoop.

ritmic targeting. No flashy consultants, no poll-tested slogans. Many had never canvassed before. They followed him as he wasn't a star.

Social media didn't win; it amplified a ground game rooted in face-to-face relationships. In an age obsessed with likes and clicks, Mamdaani's rise reminds us that algorithms can't replace trust. Critics warned donors would flee. Yet even many wealthy New Yorkers backed him because his critique ran along class lines without caricaturing "the rich." Charts showed how thin tax tweaks could fund universal after-school care.

Equally instructive was his choice to stay invisible as Democratic Party. It is tempting to bolt for the purity of third-party banners. Mamdaani chose the slower, messier route of internal insurgency — rank-and-file membership drives, platform fights at 11 pm — and bent the machine until it nominated him. The lesson for reformers, in India or anywhere: boring procedural stardom often beats spectacular exits.

Now comes November. Eric Adams, rebranding as an independent defender of "law and order," still clomps the bully pulpit. Antonio Queno is testing the waters, and Curtis Sliwa stalks Fox News studies warning of "Marxist mayhem." Wall Street super-PACs are sharpening attack ads faster than chefs cook onions in Jackson Heights. Victory is not assured. But what cannot be erased is the durable network of block captains who discovered power by using it.

That discovery resonates far beyond the East River. Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru are racing toward the same cliff of unaffordability that pushed Queens families to desperation. Indian par-

ties grow richer and more paranoid, erecting social-media fortresses instead of door-to-door relationships. We chant "Save Democracy" but for millions who have never tasted it, the slogan rings hollow. Democracy must be felt before it can be defended. Mamdaani offers a case study in fighting authoritarianism with kinder slogans, by making democracy irresistible in daily life. By listening, organising, and redistributing power — not symbols — he shows how fear can be met with collective joy.

Now that we've seen the effect. Queens tenants who once dreaded ICE now knock on strangers' doors to explain their stabilisation. Bengali grandmothers debate childcare ratios with Colombian baristas. A young Sikh volunteer tells me canvassing helped him understand why his grandfather's inhaler costs three subway rides.

None of that was orchestrated from a stage; it unfolded across living-room rugs and hallway lights where turner-of-mingles and strong coffee. Mamdaani didn't ask Queens to transcend identity; he asked it to translate identity into common cause. Queens hasn't elected a new political machine; it has assembled a choir that can improvise on the stoop. Its power lies not in spectacle but in repetition — the quiet, stubborn insistence that neighbours deserve one another's attention and care.

He reminded immigrants why they came: not just to escape something, but to build something that cannot be built alone. Inspiration, he proved, is not a soft virtue but a hard strategy — it recruits in multiples.

If that can happen in a borough where 138 languages jostle for airtime, it can happen in India's cacophony. Door knocks, listening circles, volunteer spreadsheets, late-night dosa dinners — these are the levers. Practise them daily and, as Queens did, we may discover how feels downright ordinary.

And in this exhausted century, ordinary may be the most revolutionary thing of all.

Ruchira Gupta is the author of 'The Freedom Seeker and Kick and IFF', founder of NGO Apep and a professor at NYU.

LETTERS WAKE-UP CALL FOR MIGRATION

The case of Nimisha Priya, on death row in Yemen, underlines a grim reality: Indian citizens attracted by overseas opportunities often face dire legal and humanitarian risks. While diplomatic efforts continue to save her, this episode demands urgent scrutiny of recruitment agencies and their unchecked operations. Many fail to educate recruits about harsh legal systems like Yemen's Sharia law, employer impunity, or lack of legal recourse. The Government of India must hold such agencies accountable and ensure pre-departure legal briefings are mandatory. A tragedy like Nimisha's should not recur due to ignorance or poor regulatory oversight.

Gopalaswamy J Chennai

TRADE WARS

The trade wars unleashed by US President Donald Trump are far from over, with him recently announcing new tariffs ranging from 25 to 40 percent on 14 nations, which include his traditional allies Japan and South Korea. Considering the cat-and-mouse game of India's trade with the US, India could consider forging multiple trading alliances among emerging nations, as it could lower risks and promote greater independence.

M. Jayaram Sholavaram
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At Chengdu, but excluded India. China's Belt and Road Initiative is another step aimed at perpetuating China's influence in South Asia, with China also doing its best to marginalise India in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Indian diplomacy in the past few months has been under great stress, especially after US President Donald Trump assumed office in January and the Pahalgaon massacre in April, followed by India's Operation Sindoor the following month. China's diplomatic machinations in the region are well known to the Indian establishment, and therefore the external affairs ministry has its task cut out to ensure that China doesn't succeed in luring other South Asian nations into a camp and make the now-moribund Saarc completely irrelevant. Along with other like-minded nations — Afghanistan, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives and other observer organisations — India must earnestly strive to revive the sluggish Saarc for the region's benefit. Bangladesh can be discreetly warned to stay away from the Chinese camp or face additional economic blockades from the Indian side.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, was the first head of India's Defence Intelligence Agency, and is a strategic analyst.

Opinion

FRIDAY, JULY 11, 2025

Moving at pace

PPP projects are finally giving a boost to logistics infra; plugging a few gaps is necessary

A SHAKE-UP OF global trade and financial systems is underway, with the supply chains of goods and services too undergoing a concomitant restructuring. The unprecedented scale of this reorganisation of transactional commerce is caused not only by geopolitical fracturing, and a strong wave of protectionism, but is also driven by the rapid expansion of e-commerce, as well as digitisation of cargo movement and logistics systems. Whether India would gain from this churning or be left high and dry yet again, will depend on how efficient and fast it could cut redundant economic costs. While several structural changes of the economy are needed, and there's scepticism about the pace at which these are being undertaken, what's inspiring confidence is the major headway being made on the logistics front. That public-private-partnership (PPP) projects have really taken off in assorted areas of logistics infrastructure is encouraging.

The government has reportedly drawn up a plan to build 200 "Gati Shakti cargo terminals" in the PPP mode, along the rail freight corridors that have just been up and running. Each of this terminal would cost ₹70-100 crore, and once they are on stream, cargo-handling capacity by the country's rail network would rise many times over, potentially reducing freight cost. A plan is also afoot to build modern grain warehouses via the PPP mode. The combined capacity of wheat silos is projected to triple to 9 million tonne (MT) in the next three years. State-of-the-art storage facilities are critical to cut the economic costs of grains stocked and handled in the public sector, and have a positive fiscal spin-off. India's warehousing industry is also witnessing pragmatic, fast-paced shift to tier I and II cities. Such cities already have acquired a 20% share in the warehousing stock. In parallel, the PM Kisan Sampada Yojana is playing a role to build efficient supply chain management from farm gate to the retail outlet.

Moreover, with deregulation of port tariffs and slashing of rentals by state-owned "major" ports, PPP projects have progressed in the sector, signalling an end to long years of diffidence among private investors. The recently commissioned Vizhinjam transshipment port in Kerala is a PPP venture that would help reduce India's heavy dependence on Singapore, Dubai, and Colombo ports, as it is naturally conducive for berthing mother vessels. The proposed Vadavan offshore port in Maharashtra is promising to be a large all-weather deep-draft facility, and the Galathea bay port in the Great Nicobar Island is another mega project in the offing.

While all this is kosher, and would help reduce the country's still-high logistic costs further, an area that needs focused attention of policy-makers is domestic ship-building. About 95% of the country's international cargo is still transported on foreign ships, and this causes annual forex outflows to the tune of \$80 billion, if not higher. Vessels flying the Indian flag should be carrying at least a third of the country's export-import cargo, up from a barely 8% now. India owns a mere 1.2% of the ships operational globally, a far cry from nearly 13% by China, and hardly 0.8% of the ships registered globally carry Indian flags. Also, the connectivity of road and rail network to the ports needs further improvement. Addressing these residual issues are essential for the fruition of the national multi-modal connectivity envisaged under the PM Gati Shakti initiative, and more synchronised development of the country's logistics infrastructure.

A STRUCTURED APPROACH IS IMPORTANT TO MAKE AI ADOPTION IN BFSI DEEPER AND WIDER

AI road map for financial services

WHEN IT COMES to artificial intelligence (AI) adoption in the financial services (banking, financial services, and insurance) sector, India ranks as a global leader. According to some recent surveys by recognised firms, more than 30% of Indian companies have been trying to or plan to maximise value from AI. Fintech, banking, and software sectors in India are at the forefront of this, leveraging AI for tasks such as customer interface and servicing, credit risk assessments, process and control efficiencies, and automation and fraud detection. The adoption of digital is exceptionally high, and India can boast of the highest fintech adoption. According to a survey, the adoption is 87% compared to a global average of 64%. About 46% of the world's banking digital transactions occur in India, reflecting the country's strong digital foundation.

There has been strong government backing as well as regulatory encouragement. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has played a significant role in both digital as well as AI adoption in banking. With the support of policymakers and regulators, the nation has built innovation and skilling hubs across several centres of excellence. Initiatives like India AI Mission and Digital India Bhashini are supporting indigenous AI models and language technologies, further strengthening the ecosystem for AI innovation and accessibility in financial services. There are guidelines and regulations framed by the regulators in areas like algorithmic trading, robo-advisory, and digital lending. The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act establishes comprehensive data protection requirements for AI deployment in BFSI.

This article, in the backdrop of an excitement around AI, examines the ways to make AI adoption in any BFSI constituents deeper and wider. It examines the essentials and parameters to build a robust framework of governance, and critical ingredients essential for a linear and structured growth of AI application in a



ASHVIN PAREKH

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company. Some of the pitfalls and risk management of undesired consequences are also discussed.

To help BFSI firms identify AI use cases and drive wider and deeper adoption, a company could follow these structured steps. The first critical step would be to align initiatives with business objectives (example revenue, growth, risk reduction, customer experience, etc.) followed by the creation of a framework for measuring impact from the shortlisted use cases. According to a survey report published by the Bank of England (BOE) and the Financial Conduct Authority in 2024, the use cases ranged from optimisation of internal processes to cybersecurity and fraud detection. The survey also observed that a third of all the respondents across the BFSI sector deployed third-party implementation. This proportion of third-party implementation is expected to be higher in India's BFSI sector, thanks to the growth of infrastructure including software engineering institutions, incubation centres, and a large number of entrepreneurial coders and solutions developers.

In regard to the materiality of applications, defined by the BOE survey, quantitative size-based measures, including exposure, book or market value, number of customers serviced or covered by the use case are notable. And in addition, there are qualitative factors vis-à-vis the purpose of the model and its relative importance to informing business decisions and considering the potential impact on the firm's

solvency and financial performance. Of the total number of use cases reported by the respondent firms, 62% were rated low materiality, 22% as medium, and 16% as high. Low and medium materiality use cases were most common in operations and information technology (IT), whereas high materiality use cases were common in general insurance, risk and compliance, and retail banking.

This data, when analysed in the Indian context, could reveal either a planned decision to adopt low materiality use cases with a view to demonstrate some early wins or that firms are focusing on other infrastructure blocks including building data foundations. What could be an adverse factor is that the low materiality use cases are more in the operations and IT areas.

Let us now examine the third important aspect of the framework, that of governance and accountability. The BOE survey covered the range of governance frameworks over a variety of approaches used by respondent firms. The most used framework, control or process specific to AI was to have an accountable person or persons with responsibility for the AI framework. This factor was closely followed by the second approach using an AI framework based on principles, guidelines or best practices and data governance. With regard to data management, the respondent firms believed that it was the key to governance. It is a major concern, however, that there is over-depen-

dence on data science teams who are responsible for data ethics, bias, reliability, and authenticity and fairness. In this approach, firms tend to use in-house databases which are for internal consumption rather than for customers and distribution partners.

The last key ingredient to sound governance for adoption of AI is the firm's assessment of their own or third-party models. The aspects in the governance framework which are assessed include business need, evaluating how appropriate a particular type of model is to the business objectives. In the case of Indian BFSI firms use complexity tests, some of which are built into existing processes and some of which are AI-specific. AI-specific tests include consideration of methodology, data, complexity of code, interoperability, parameter count, and frequency of use. Complexity of data is also a central factor, particularly where large and multi-dimensional or multi-model data sets are involved. One very interesting aspect observed in firms worldwide is the understanding of AI technologies implemented in their operations. It is believed that a large number of firms have a partial understanding of the AI technologies used and a small number have near-complete understanding, underlying a major weakness which needs to be addressed over a period of time to strengthen governance and AI adoption.

To make AI adoption deeper and wider, a structured approach is an important factor. This needs a robust and dynamic framework to critically examine the materiality of the use case and a strategic approach to migrate from low materiality to high impact use cases and a governance framework making persons accountable for frameworks as well as the use cases. Companies must address the aspect of partial understanding of the use cases or technologies used by way of creating awareness and gradually moving to making business owners the responsibility for use cases.

It is believed that many firms have a partial understanding of the AI tech used and only a few have near-complete understanding

G7 and the doublespeak of war



AMOL AGRAWAL

The author teaches at the National Institute for Securities and Markets

THE G7 MEETING in Canada last month made waves, mainly for the wrong reasons. US President Donald Trump did not just leave the meeting in the middle but also attacked Iran, pushing the world to the brink of another world war. The G7 was established 50 years ago, but things have not changed much since then.

The start of the 1970s brought multiple economic crises in the world economy—the breakdown of Bretton Woods, oil shock, and dual problems of high inflation and high unemployment. To address the crises, in 1973, then US treasury secretary George Schultz held an informal meeting with the finance ministers of the UK, France, and Germany. In mid-1973, Japan was added, making it G5.

In 1975, most of the G5 countries went through political turmoil and leadership changes. Given the crisis in geopolitics and geo-economics, the French presidency organised the first formal meeting of the G5, with Italy as the sixth member, at Château de Rambouillet. G6 decided to meet every year under a rotational presidency, and added Canada as the seventh member to become G7. Over 50 years, G7 became a major platform for advanced economies to coordinate their economic policies. In 1981, the European Economic Community was made an informal member and was replaced by the European Union in 2009. Russia was made a member in 1998, but its membership was suspended after it annexed Crimea in 2014.

Fast forward to now, the G7 meeting was held at Kanaraks, Canada. When we compare the declarations 50 years apart, we see both similarities and differences.

Let us start with the similarities first. The Rambouillet declaration stated that the member governments were "responsible of an open, democratic society, dedicated to individual liberty and social advancement". The Kanaraks declaration voices similar sentiments of maintaining an open and democratic society. Both declarations echo the need to drive inclusive growth and sustained investment. Moreover, there were concerns over energy security in both 1975 and 2025.

In terms of differences, high inflation was a major concern in 1975 but there is no mention of it in the 2025 document. The 1975 declaration also mentioned the role monetary authorities needed to play to restore price and financial stability. In 2025, the monetary authorities have fared better in price stability. The credit goes to the adoption of an inflation target of 2% in most of these economies. Though inflation is higher than targeted in most of the G7 economies, it is much lower than the double-digit inflation of 1975.

The 1975 declaration also discussed how developing countries had high trade deficits and were resorting to protection-

ism. It argued for a cooperative relationship and improved understanding between developed and developing countries. How the tables have turned in 2025! It is the developed countries, especially the US, that have high trade deficits and are resorting to protectionism. The economic fortunes of developed and developing countries have reversed. In 1980, the share of developed countries in the world GDP was 63%, which has declined to 40% in 2025. Within the same period, the share of developing economies has nearly reversed from 37% to 60%.

There is a reason why G7 invites several developing countries to its meetings. We see similar trends in most macroeconomic indicators, with the developing world doing better than G7 and other advanced economies.

The other major difference in the 2025 declaration is the number of conflicts the world is facing currently and the threat of nuclear weapons—not that the 1970s were any more peaceful, with multiple wars being fought even back then. The 2025 declaration mentions the Russia-Ukraine war and highlights the US's efforts to restore peace in the region. On the ongoing conflict in West Asia, it mentioned that Iran cannot have nuclear weapons and asserted Israel's right to defend itself. Nuclear weapons find

another mention as G7 is concerned with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (North Korea) nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes.

One major change is the mention of China, which has emerged as a big power challenging the supremacy of G7. It notes the country's destabilising activities in the East and South China Seas and the need to maintain stable relations with it.

In all the discussion on conflicts, the G7 avoids talking from playing a key role in igniting them. They say peace but mean war. For a long time, these economies have not just stood on defence but also partnered with defence companies. The ongoing wars are being fought with jets and guns manufactured by companies from mainly the so-called G7 economies. The governments of these countries usually pitch for these companies to other countries.

In several ways, none of the warmongering is new. Much of human history has revolved around conflicts. Economists have, for a long time, argued that a military economy is the key to capitalism. After the two world wars, none would have imagined we would settle for peace. Yet, countries have only spent more on military expansion and not on public welfare. We are seeing similar trends now. Humanity never learns that wars may magnify the profiles of leaders, but only multiply the misery for the people.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pitfalls of xenophobia

Apropos of "Linguistic othering" (FE, July 10), Mumbai thrives as India's financial capital because of its inclusivity—nearly 50% of its population comprises non-Marathi speakers, including migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, and south India. They power sectors like construction, logistics, retail, hospitality, and finance. Maharashtra contributes over 14% to India's GDP,

and Mumbai alone handles more than 25% of India's industrial output. Fueling regionalism and linguistic othering threatens this vital human capital, discouraging investment, talent inflow, and economic stability. Such divisive politics risks undermining the very foundations of Maharashtra's growth. Preserving Mumbai's cosmopolitan character is not just a cultural need, but an economic imperative.

—Nilesh Dubey, Ahmedabad

Towards India@2047

Apropos of "Framing India's 2047 goals" (FE, July 10), framing India's 2047 goals is not an easy nut to crack since there are many basic conundrums which impair growth. The health and education sectors still need to grow in order to have a skilled working population with sound health. Corporate performance is dismal, and there is a dearth of private investment and formal finance from

banks. Though initiatives like Make in India give an impetus, they are not enough for the desired industrial growth. Above all, the prevailing geopolitical chaos seems eternal, and sprouts factors which will never allow to frame concrete policies. Framing dynamic policies based on current situations leaves no chance for long-term policies for growth.

—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

Why Buldak ramen is an \$8-billion brand

WHEN IT COMES to instant noodles, there's no Korean discount. Only a Korean premium.

Samyang Foods Co., the manufacturer of "Buldak" ramen, has gained 93% this year. Trading at 26 times forward earnings, it boasts \$8.1 billion market cap, as much as bigger rivals Japan's Nissin Foods Holdings Co. and Korea's Nongshim Co. combined. This rally has also made Chief Executive Kim Jung-soo, who married into a conglomerate family and turned around the instant-noodle company after it declared bankruptcy in the late 1990s, a rare billionaire in her own right in the country's male-dominated business world.

Buldak, which translates to "fire chicken" in Korean, is not for the fainthearted. With its debut in 2012, Samyang introduced a level of spice previously unseen in the instant ramen market. It has roughly the same heat level as jalapeño peppers. Last year, Denmark briefly recalled the fiery ramen for being too spicy.

Perhaps because of its "seriously extreme spice," Buldak has become an object of fascination for social media influencers who might enjoy truth-or-dare antics. The carbonara version, in particular, resembles the boxed macaroni and cheese Americans grew up with—with a kick.

In May, the number of TikTok hashtags related to Buldak surged 250% from last year, according to CLSA, a brokerage. The keyword leaps up on Google trends, too. As these ramen packs go viral online, they fly off supermarket shelves. In the first quarter, revenue in the US jumped 20% quarter-on-quarter, even as sales at Walmart Inc. declined slightly due to a Buldak Carbonara shortage.

This is nonetheless music to investors' ears: Unrequited love can be a beautiful thing. Upon the completion of a second plant in Miryang in June, Samyang will soon be able to ramp up shipments to major distributors including Costco Wholesale Corp. By 2030, Samyang's market share in the US can double from 8.1% in 2024, according to CLSA estimates.

In many ways, there are parallels between Samyang and China's Pop Mart International Group Ltd., the maker of Labubu, an elf-like plush toy that has become a global sensation. With \$4.5 billion market cap, the toy maker is worth more than twice as much as Sanrio Co. and Mattel Inc. combined, owners of long-time favorites Hello Kitty and Barbie.

These products are not for everyone. With pointy ears and nine serrated teeth, Labubu has a weird look, which only some consumers find cute, while others scratch their head and puzzle over its stardom. Existing outside the mainstream, both generate conversation and attract eyeballs. They are designed to go viral.

Investors are also betting that unlike older generations, young Americans have the adventurous spirit for something different. These days, people are getting hooked on Korean specialty grocery chain H Mart, quite a cultural shift considering cucumbers were a new vegetable for McDonald's Corp.'s US menu just over a decade ago. And the youth are friendlier to China than their parents. iShowSpeed, a streamer with 38 million followers, certainly enjoyed Chinese cars and robots during his two-week trip in the spring.

As for President Donald Trump's trade policies? Investors are not at all worried, seeing that both brands are tariff-proof. In the US, eating out has become an expensive endeavour. A meal at a fast-food restaurant can easily set you back \$10. Instead, staying at home with a bowl of Bulbu who might enjoy truth-or-dare antics, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi 110002. Phone: 0320-6651500. (Cover price: Patna ₹12, Raipur ₹12, Singapore ₹15) Chairman of the Board: Viveck Goenka, Editor: Shyamal Majumdar, Editor (Delhi): Shobhana Subramanian ("Responsible for selection of News under the PRP Act")

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Managing excess liquidity

Financial markets need more clarity

Liquidity conditions in Indian banking have undergone a significant change over the last few quarters. While the system was in a deficit of about ₹2 trillion at the end of 2024, it now records a daily surplus of over ₹3 trillion, rising to ₹4 trillion on some days. Central banks sometimes keep the system in deficit or surplus to attain monetary policy objectives, but an excess on either side could lead to unintended consequences. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), for instance, faced criticism for the liquidity deficit in recent quarters, which partly resulted from its intervention in the currency market to support the rupee, pushing up market interest rates. However, the situation changed as the pressure on the rupee abated and the inflation rate turned favourable.

As RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra's June 6 monetary policy statement noted, the central bank had injected durable liquidity worth ₹9.5 trillion since January. The central bank also decided to reduce the cash reserve ratio (CRR) by 100 basis points, to be implemented in four tranches, which will add liquidity worth ₹2.5 trillion to the system. As a result, some economists are of the view that excess liquidity in the system could go up to ₹5 trillion later this year. While the liquidity deficit pushes up money-market rates and lending rates in general, surplus liquidity can have the opposite effect. Excess liquidity in the system can increase inflationary risks. Although India is in a comfortable position on inflation, based on the Consumer Price Index, for the foreseeable future, excess liquidity can fuel asset-price inflation. Banks, for example, have cut savings deposit rates, among other rates, which might prompt savers to shift funds to high-yielding assets.

Excess liquidity could also incentivise the banking system to extend loans at lower rates. As a report in this newspaper showed, many market participants were surprised that a public-sector entity was recently given a ₹1,000 crore loan at just 6.1 per cent, which is close to the cost of funds. Easy availability of funds can also prompt some banks to extend loans to entities that may not otherwise qualify. However, it is worth noting that a lower policy rate or excess liquidity may not by itself push bank credit for a variety of reasons. There is significant global uncertainty, which will affect investment decisions in the private sector. Further, corporations are raising more funds from the capital market. As the latest Financial Stability Report of the RBI showed, resource mobilisation through capital markets increased 32.9 per cent in 2024-25, and over 60 per cent was in the debt segment. The year witnessed the highest corporate bond issuance worth about ₹10 trillion. As the debt market gains depth, higher-rated corporations will likely find it more attractive to raise funds from the debt market than from banks. Thus, competition could compress net interest margins in the banking system.

In terms of liquidity management, while the RBI is conducting variable rate reverse repo auctions, the weighted average call rate — the operational target of monetary policy — is trading well below the policy rate. The RBI may intend to keep things this way for some time to enable the transmission of its recent policy decisions. However, it will need to do more to manage excess liquidity in the system, especially as more liquidity is expected to be released owing to the CRR reduction. It would also do well to communicate to the market the level of excess liquidity it intends to maintain.

Build to last

Maintaining structures as critical as building them

The mounting death toll following the collapse of the Gambhir Bridge in Gujarat is a warning signal for India's massive infrastructure-construction agenda. It shows how infrastructure is often built in haste with minimum oversight on quality and then so poorly maintained that it becomes a safety hazard. The bridge was just 43 years old. But it had become dangerously dilapidated by 2022, with the pillars vibrating every time traffic passed over it. The poor condition of the bridge was flagged by the local Roads and Bridges (R&B) Department at least three years ago by panchayat and district officials. Worse, a testing report from the R&B in the same year also suggested that the bridge was unsafe, although the report was never made public. Instead, the bridge was opened again to the public after some minor tinkering.

But the tragedy is not an exception. Last year, the government admitted that 42 major and minor bridges collapsed in the past five years. And the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways said 21 bridges, 15 of which had been completed, collapsed on the National Highways between 2021 and 2024. The lesson here is that it is important not only to build infrastructure rapidly but also to ensure and maintain what already exists. It should be noted that bridges, if constructed properly and regularly maintained, should last 50-100 years. Famous examples are San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, which was completed in 1937, and the Tower Bridge in London, which was completed in the late 19th century, both of which have undergone major retrofits and sustain far heavier daily traffic loads than the Gambhir Bridge did. Poorly constructed and maintained bridges are only one aspect of the massive public construction boom that state and central governments have undertaken in recent years as a key driver for economic growth. In 2025-26, for instance, the Union government plans to spend ₹11.2 trillion, or more than 3 per cent of gross domestic product, on infrastructure projects — including roads and highways, ports, airports, railways, and housing.

This spending entails a massive mobilisation of private contractors and engineering companies to undertake construction, implying in turn the critical need for ensuring close oversight and proper channels of accountability. The Pragati Maidan underpass in Delhi, built in time for the G20 summit in 2023, is a case in point. Built at a steep cost of over ₹700 crore, it was closed following waterlogging after a bout of heavy rain within months and has since been declared a threat because of design flaws and engineering deficiencies. The bigger risk here is that the culture of poor oversight and shoddy maintenance in public projects tends to transmit itself to the private sector, which is also increasingly undertaking public infrastructure projects. Leaks in the roof of the glittering Bengaluru Airport Terminal 2, which is 74 per cent private-owned, just 18 months after it opened, is one example. Last year, heavy rain caused a canopy in Delhi's Terminal 1, also run by a private operator, to collapse, killing one person. A report later found serious flaws in the canopy design, workmanship, and maintenance. The loss of life, injuries, and wasted investment are costly lessons to learn.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

MSME lending a new driver of credit growth?

Credit growth to small and medium enterprises is outpacing all other sectors, but the test of asset quality lies ahead

India's banking sector is in rude health. By a variety of measures — capital adequacy, provision coverage ratio, liquidity coverage ratio, return on assets, and gross non-performing assets (GNPAs) as a proportion of loans — the sector demonstrates strengths that would have been unthinkable five years ago.

Capital adequacy in the system as a whole is 17.3 per cent, with public sector banks' (PSBs) capital adequacy at 16.2 per cent. Being over five percentage points above the regulatory minimum is prudent and a source of stability. Return on assets (RoA) for all banks is 1.4 per cent. PSBs have an RoA of 1.1 per cent, which is above the benchmark of 1 per cent in banking. When a bank produces an RoA of 1 per cent or more, it can be reasonably sure of access to capital from the market. In other words, PSBs do not have to turn to the government for capital support. The question is often asked: How do PSBs compete with private banks that produce higher returns? The answer is that they can compete on their own terms as long as they can raise capital from the market.

The banking sector will walk on two legs. We will have private banks that are focused on maximising returns by catering to the mass affluent. And PSBs that will marry larger social objectives with profitability while catering to the wider market. The model as a whole remains viable as long as the benchmark of profitability is met.

So far, so reassuring. Banking is safe and sound. That apart, a few points emerge clearly from the latest edition of the Reserve Bank of India's Financial Stability Report (June 2025).

Firstly, credit growth slowed noticeably to 11 per cent in 2024-25 from 16 per cent in 2023-24 and 15.4 per cent in 2022-23. In 2024-25, PSBs have shown higher credit growth than private banks, which means their market share has risen after years of decline.



FINGER ON THE PULSE
T T RAM MOHAN

The slowing down of credit growth was deliberate and engineered by the regulator. The RBI had two concerns. One, credit growth was outstripping deposit growth and that meant it was being financed by high-cost and volatile funds. Two, growth in segments such as personal loans and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) was too high for comfort. Between April 2022 and March 2024, bank lending to the retail sector grew at 23.2 per cent, and lending to services, which includes bank lending to NBFCs, grew at 22.4 per cent, far exceeding the overall credit growth of 16.4 per cent. The RBI increased risk weights on these two segments. Credit growth in these segments slowed down as a result.

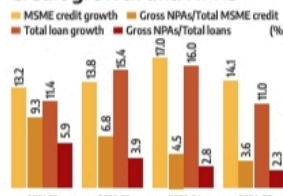
Secondly, the slowdown in credit has not adversely impacted growth in profit or profitability. Profitability of all banks has gone down marginally, but that of PSBs has increased from 0.9 to 1.1 per cent. Profit after tax of all banks rose by 17 per cent with that of PSBs rising by 32 per cent, mainly on account of other operating income.

Thirdly, in 2024-25, growth in credit to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) has outpaced growth to all other sectors. Credit to MSMEs grew by 14.1 per cent, compared to growth of 11.2 per cent in services (ex-MSME) credit, and 11.7 per cent in retail credit. The share of MSMEs in retail credit has risen from 17 per cent in March 2024 to 17.7 per cent in March 2025.

Fourthly — and this is, perhaps, the most striking feature of the latest PSR — gross NPAs in the system have touched a new low of 2.3 per cent of loans, with a sharp drop in NPAs in MSMEs. Gross NPAs in MSMEs declined from 6.8 per cent in 2022-23 to 4.5 per cent in 2023-24 and further to 3.6 per cent in 2024-25.

NPAs in the MSME sector have historically been of the order of 9 per cent or more. Until a couple of

Credit growth and NPAs



Source: Financial Stability Reports, Annual Reports, RBI

years ago, senior public sector bankers wondered how on earth they were to crack the MSME lending issue. In 2024-25, PSB credit growth to SMEs has been greater than that of private banks, reversing the earlier trend. Has something changed fundamentally in lending to MSMEs? What has brought about a dramatic decline in NPAs to this segment?

The RBI might have shed light on the issue instead of merely putting out the numbers. True, bankers have found innovative ways, such as the Trade Receivables Discounting System (TReDS), to finance MSMEs. TReDS is an online platform for facilitating financing of trade receivables of MSMEs from corporations, public sector companies and government departments. These exposures are considered low-risk.

The TReDS book was about ₹2.7 trillion, or 10 per cent of the MSME book, in 2023-24. It cannot explain the current NPA level of 3.6 per cent on the entire MSME exposure. The NPA level in the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) is 5.6 per cent. Recall that the ECLGS was introduced during the pandemic in May 2020 in order to facilitate additional lending to MSMEs and prevent a secular collapse in the sector on account of a crisis of liquidity. The eligibility conditions were pretty stringent. Only MSMEs that were solvent prior to the onset of pandemic were meant to qualify.

The loans granted under ECLGS in the period 2021-23 amounted to ₹3.68 trillion or 12 per cent of loans outstanding to MSMEs in 2024-25. If gross NPAs on the ECLGS loans were 5.6 per cent and NPAs on total MSME loans are 3.6 per cent, that makes the performance on the remaining 88 per cent of MSME loans truly impressive. It certainly needs explaining. Is it explained merely by the seep in the denominator, namely, the share of loans in the past few years? If that is so, we should see a rise in NPAs in the years ahead. The RBI's stress test projections for NPAs may then turn out to be optimistic.

Banks have tended to pursue a risk-averse approach to lending. Loan growth has been driven by working capital loans to industry, retail loans and loans to the services sector, including NBFCs. The year 2024-25 has seen a shift of gear with loans to MSMEs growing faster than loans to other segments. We will need to wait for a year or two to see what the shift implies for asset quality in the system.

The real test will, however, come when banks step up growth in term loans and project finance whenever private investors pick up. Celebration over the steep fall in NPAs must be low key until banks begin to take greater risk than they have in recent years.

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Poor outcomes of infra subsidies

One of the paradoxes of India is that the massive infrastructure subsidies that the central and state governments sustain in the name of helping the poor have brought limited benefits to these target beneficiaries but play a key role in stalling the ambition to attain 'Viksit Bharat', whichever way you choose to define it. Unless these subsidies are reassessed, India's yearning to become a manufacturing powerhouse will be as elusive as ever — a reality that ends up doing a disservice to the poor. This is not to argue against subsidies for the poor and genuinely needy. But India is supposedly an information technology powerhouse, and solutions are available in the form of well-designed direct benefit transfers to the genuinely needy.

Let's start with power. In the first flush of reform in the 1990s, with a view to attracting private sector investment in this near moribund sector, states started unbundling their electricity boards into generation and transmission and distribution companies, and introduced the concept of power purchase agreements (PPAs). Steady regulatory reform over the decade attracted a raft of efficient private power producers; today, private power generation accounts for almost half the installed capacity.

But the problems remain at the distribution end, where state-owned distribution companies or discoms dominate. Over 90 per cent of electricity consumption in India comes from discoms. They remain in state hands chiefly on account of the policy of giving farmers either free power or at heavily subsidised rates. The irony of this policy, rooted in the Green Revolution, is manifold. First, discoms incur enormous losses on account of meet-

ing this social obligation, with knock-on effects in terms of inadequate investment in technology upgrades, the public sector banking system (which bears the brunt of discom debt) and growing cross-subsidies that raise the cost of power to industrial and commercial consumers, adding to the uncompetitive cost structure of Indian industry.

Multiple and quite imaginative bailout and restructuring schemes for discoms — five since 2001 — to instil financial discipline have failed, principally because no state government will risk doing the one thing that can solve the problem: Raise agricultural power tariffs. Those of socialist bent may balk at such supposed neoliberalism, but the irony is that this policy scarcely benefits the small farmer who really needs it. That's because the bulk of the free electricity to agriculture goes into pumping groundwater for irrigation that is cornered by the powerful lobby of large farmers. This asymmetry has two effects. The first is the indiscriminate extraction of groundwater, which has resulted in the drastic depletion of water resources — especially in the key growing areas of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

Second, lack of awareness of myriad government irrigation schemes, fragmented holdings and limited resources to invest in pumpsets have meant that small and marginal farmers overwhelmingly rely on rain-fed farming with all its implications on agricultural productivity.

Skewed pricing on the giant Indian railway network is another point of contention. This monopoly network transports 13 million people every day and its non-premium services are heavily subsidised. According to the railway minister, the cost of travel

per km by train is ₹1.38 but passengers pay only 73 paise, a subsidy of 47 per cent.

Though the government dishes out large sums for passenger subsidies, part of the gap is supposed to be covered by freight services and premium air conditioned passenger services. The problem with this cross-subsidy policy is that railway freight services have been steadily losing share to road transport over the decades and its profits are not enough to cover the losses from passenger services. As for AC services, some of which make money in some years, they account for a minuscule 5 per cent of overall passengers. The proliferation of low-cost passenger services — ironically, this, too, is government policy — is likely to diminish demand for this segment, despite the investment in semi-high-speed premium Vande Bharat service.

Crores are being invested in upgrading services, in track renewal, signalling systems, and station redevelopment, much of it with budgetary support. But train travel in the general and non-AC coaches (which account for over 90 per cent of the railways' passengers) is a uniquely awful experience of overcrowded, uncomfortable, unhygienic carriages, non-existent personal security and appalling punctuality. Beyond transporting humans from point A to point B, the quality of service can hardly be described as meaningfully serving the poor.

At the same time, the multiple inadequacies of railway freight services — from slow speeds on high demand routes and a lack of last-mile connectivity — has cost the utility market share over the years to relatively expensive private sector road transport companies. This may change once the dedicated freight corridors become fully operational. But whether this signature project will help change the quality and dynamics of train travel for India's low-income groups remains a wide open question.

The unmaking of empire



CHITTAJIT MITRA

The standard school history syllabus teaches about the partition of India in 1947, which led to the creation of two nation states accompanied by searing communal violence. Even when we leave school, we retain this limited viewpoint as an absolute fact around which contemporary politics revolves in our country. In *Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia*, Sam Dalrymple presents it, Partition was never a singular moment in time but a long process. The author has structured the book into chapters in a way that demonstrates this progression of events. It starts with the arrival of the Simon Commission, a time that also cemented the probability of Partition in the region. It was also the period that saw a tumultuous time in Burma leading to the biggest and most sustained revolt in the history of the post-1857 British Raj, which later led to separation of that country from the Indian counterpart. With World War II, things got more

complex. On one side, the Bengal famine led to millions of starvation deaths; on the other hand the Japanese were trying to commandeer the Nagas as allies, which they failed to do. The author has carefully included relevant maps for the reader to understand what was happening geographically at a particular time such as the Battle of Kohima in 1944, where Japanese troops along with Rose's Indian National Army (INA) fought against the British Indian army.

Today when the far right politics is obsessively searching for 'the other' in the country by targeting Bengali Muslims and subsequently dispossessing them of their citizenship, Mr Dalrymple's book contextualises the shared history of the subcontinent and reminds us of its many dark realities. He mentions how the persecution of Communists and Dalits in East Pakistan forced Nehru to intervene, leading to the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, which essen-

tially aimed at protecting the rights of refugees and minorities in both countries, something that both nations are struggling to uphold today. In *Shattered Lands*, Mr Dalrymple has been careful to humanise history. Jinnah's outcry as manifested in his 'Fourteen Points' in response to the Nehru Report focusing on the brotherhood of Hindus and Muslims is just one example. Another aspect of Partition and its traces were the after-effects it left on artistas at large as they lost royal patronage and were forced to either pursue alternative means of employment or find opportunities on the radio or in the movies. Much has been written about the Raj but there have always been pockets of



Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia by Sam Dalrymple Published by Harper Collins 536 pages ₹799

even won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919. However, her support of the military persecution of the Rohingyas has

deeply tarnished her image and cost her much Western support. I had hoped the author would explore the Arab region in the west, which came under British rule after World War I, and where partitions have been no less painful. Perhaps he will do so in his next book.

Sam Dalrymple is the son of historian William Dalrymple who is widely read and celebrated in the Indian literary scene, so the temptation of comparing his debut with his father's works will be high. It is fair to say he has undoubtedly made his own mark over the last 15 years, and then went on to become the head of state, but was dethroned in 2021 by a military coup. She was once called one of the children of Gandhi and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919. However, her support of the military persecution of the Rohingyas has

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