

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of hostages held by militants on a train in Pakistan

450 Armed militants took passengers hostage and wounded the train driver in an attack on Tuesday in Pakistan's volatile southwestern Balochistan province. The Baloch Liberation Army said gunmen bombed the railway track and took control of the train in Sibi district. **APR**

Settlements retaken by Russia from Ukraine in the Kursk region

12 Moscow has launched a rapid counteroffensive to take back land seized by Kyiv last year. Ukraine has been losing ground in the Russian border region — swathes of which it has held since August 2024 and which it hoped to use as leverage in peace negotiations — for several weeks. **APR**

Deaths per day due to road accidents in Maharashtra

42 The Maharashtra State government said it plans to introduce testing kits to assess if a driver has consumed drugs. This was informed by Transport Minister Pratap Sarmaik in the State assembly. Mr. Sarmaik said that the number of accidents rose to 36,084 in 2024 (98 per day). **PTI**

Number of years after which Guns N' Roses is returning to India

13 years. Legendary rock band Guns N' Roses is returning to India with a live concert in Mumbai. The American group will be on stage with their full squad Axl Rose (vocals, piano), Duff McKagan (bass) and Slash (lead guitar) at the concert on May 17 at the Mahalaxmi Race Course. **PTI**

Murders for which an arrest warrant was issued for Duterte

43 The International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for former Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte for crimes against humanity committed during his deadly war on drugs. He is accused of committing them from 2011-2019. **REUTERS**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Is rising consumer credit cause for concern?

A recent report by the RBI highlights the shift towards healthy and prime borrowers in the economy. However, the fact that there is a significant amount of borrowing being done for the purpose of consumption is a cause for concern, signalling macroeconomic weaknesses in the economy

ECONOMIC NOTES

Rahul Menon

The release of the Financial Stability Report (FSR) 2024 by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has called attention to the question of household finances and consumption loans. The stock of household debt has shown a gradual increase, rising from 36.6% of GDP in June 2021 to 41% in March 2024. According to the FSR, it has risen to 42.9% in June 2024. Even though household debt in India is lesser than most emerging market economies, the rise in household debt-to-GDP ratio is of concern.

Debt is largely taken to build up holdings of assets. However, the stock of household assets has fallen from 110.4% of GDP in June 2021 to 108.3% by March 2024. A reduction in assets and an increase in debt indicates that a greater proportion of borrowing is being used for consumption. Even though the RBI highlights the shift towards healthy and prime borrowers in the economy, the fact that there is a significant amount of borrowing being done for the purpose of consumption is a cause for concern, which might indicate macroeconomic weakness of the economy.

Healthy borrowing and borrowers?

Even though household debt has increased significantly, the RBI highlights several points pointing towards the health of the Indian economy. For one, the RBI presents data to indicate that rising borrowing is being driven by an increase in the number of borrowers rather than rising indebtedness. Secondly, the proportion of sub-prime borrowers has been reducing, with almost two-thirds of debt belonging to prime borrowers and those with above prime credit quality. Rising per-capita debt amounts is witnessed only for super-prime borrowers, indicating that only highly-rated borrowers are undertaking larger levels of debt, mainly using it for asset creation.

Borrowing by individual consumers has been an important source of credit growth since the pandemic. The RBI did introduce measures to curb this growth, leading to a slowdown in credit growth since September 2023. The slowdown has seen a shift towards healthier borrowers, with sub-prime borrowing seeing a relative reduction. This can be seen as a net positive outcome, indicating healthy credit growth focused on asset creation by worthy borrowers, and an increase in borrowing without an increase in average indebtedness.

On increasing consumption

However, there are some worries. The share of loans taken for consumption purposes has increased over time. Households are taking on credit largely for consumption purposes and not to accumulate assets such as houses or vehicles, or to invest in education. The increase in borrowings by prime and super-prime borrowers hide the fact that much of borrowing for consumption purposes is being done by households with lower levels of income.

While 64% of loans taken on by super-prime borrowers are for asset creation, nearly half of the loans taken on by sub-prime borrowers are for consumption purposes. Households earning less than five lakh have largely taken on unsecured loans, such as credit card debt, for consumption purposes while richer households largely take on



debt for purposes of purchasing housing. Amongst forms of debt, personal and credit card debt have shown a gradual increase in delinquencies in September 2024 relative to September 2023, indicating greater stress for lower-income households. The RBI outlines the dangers emanating from financial stress for lower-income households. Around half of all borrowers with credit card debt or personal loans also have housing or vehicle loans. A default in any category leads to all loans of the same borrower being classified as non-performing loans for the lending institution. Thus, if a borrower defaults on credit card debt or a personal loan, the housing loan will also be classified as a non-performing asset. Rising stresses in unsecured loans can spell weaknesses for higher-value loans as well. The RBI is keen to assert that the loan make-up is gradually shifting towards more prime borrowers, with sub-prime borrowers reducing. This may be the case, but the overhang of consumer debt implies that macroeconomic problems might arise.

The impact of debt on the multiplier
The rise in borrowing for consumption specifically among households with lower levels of income is something that

requires due attention. What factors have driven this increase? Has it come about because households have faced greater income insecurity since the pandemic, and are hence borrowing through the medium of credit cards and unsecured loans to tide over income and consumption shortfalls? Or is it because financial innovations have allowed for households to undertake larger borrowings on the back of financial instruments like credit cards? The former indicates a weak macroeconomy, while the latter carries with it uncomfortable questions, such as the role of financial innovation in leading to the development of fragility and stress by exposing lower-income households to greater debt, pushing them towards financial marginalisation.

Regardless of the factors leading to an increase in this category of loans, the fact that the share of consumption loans has been rising is not a healthy outcome, as it indicates a relative reduction in the number of assets being created even as households become more indebted. Increasing household debt — especially for poorer households — implies a reduction in the power of the income multiplier. The multiplier, which indicates how much output increases for a given

increase in investment, is greater for lower-income households, since a greater proportion of their incomes is translated into consumption of goods. Richer households will have a smaller multiplier, since most of their immediate needs are met, and a greater proportion of their income goes into savings.

However, if lower-income households are saddled with debt, some proportion of their income will go into servicing their debt, leading to lesser spending and hence a lower multiplier. An economy with greater levels of household debt, especially from poorer households, might show lower growth for the same amount of investment. In this case, it remains to be seen how much impact macroeconomic policy moves such as the reduction in income-tax rates would have, if households are largely indebted. There might be certain indications that the borrowing structure is healthy and shifting towards super-prime borrowers, but policy will have to remain awake to the possible sources of fragility engendered by the increase in consumption loans and the proliferation of unsecured forms of consumer credit.

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THE GIST

▼ The RBI presents data to indicate that rising borrowing is being driven by an increase in the number of borrowers rather than rising indebtedness. Secondly, the proportion of sub-prime borrowers has been reducing.

▼ Rising stresses in unsecured loans can spell weaknesses for higher-value loans.

▼ The rise in borrowing for consumption specifically among households with lower levels of income is something that requires due attention.

BUILDING BLOCKS



For representative purposes. GETTY IMAGES

How has the humble computer mouse evolved over the years?

From their old bulky models to the ergonomic builds today, computer mice have undergone a significant evolution. These designs have mainly differed in how they translate a user's movement of the mouse to that of a cursor on the screen

Amartya Srinivasan

The computer mouse has become an essential part of personal computing, allowing users to interact graphically, that is, with the aid of their eyes, with virtual objects. While scrolling through a website, editing a video or playing a videogame, a mouse works like an extension of the user's hand, translating its movements to movements on screen.

What kinds of mice are there?

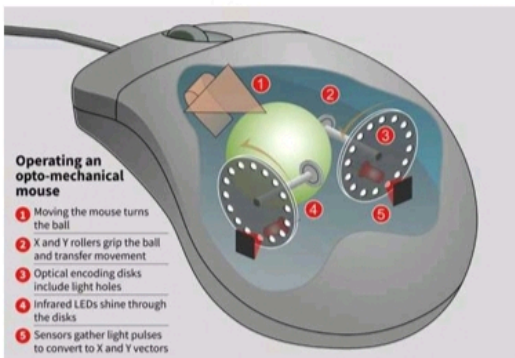
The common mouse is able to accept two kinds of input – button click and motion. From their old bulky models to the ergonomic builds today, computer mice have undergone a significant evolution. These designs have mainly differed in how they translate a user's movement of the mouse to that of a cursor on the screen. The buttons are fairly straightforward. Each button is a switch in the mouse that completes a circuit when it is pressed, sending a signal to the computer to perform a certain action.

The first stage in the mouse's evolution was the trackball mouse whereas current models use lasers.

How did the trackball mouse work?

The ball mouse, also called a trackball or mechanical mouse, has a small ball on its underside that rotates when the user moves the mouse.

This ball exerts pressure on two rollers that are positioned at right angles to each other (see image). One roller detects movement along the X-axis



A schematic diagram showing some of the components of a trackball mouse. JEREMYKEMP

(forward-backward) and the other detects movement along the Y-axis (left-right). A third roller, which is spring-loaded, pushes the ball against the two other rollers. Each roller is linked to an encoder wheel with unique thunderbolt-shaped edges.

A light source, like a small bulb, emits infrared radiation from behind the encoder wheel. A sensor on the other side receives this light. When the user moves the mouse, the ball moves and rotates the rollers. This finally turns the encoder wheels, which interrupt the infrared light falling on the sensors as they move. The sensors translate this series of

interruptions into a digital signal – 1 when it receives light and 0 when it doesn't, resulting in a sequence of 0s and 1s. Simple logic circuits figure out which way the wheel is rotating by examining these signals.

Typically, the ball's outer casing is made of steel while the ball is covered in a precisely moulded rubber surface. The weight of the ball is also adjusted to ensure it maintains reliable contact with the surface its moving on, guaranteeing accurate transmission from the mouse's movement to the rollers and the cursor on the screen.

Elegant as the trackball mouse was, it

had to be cleaned regularly to work properly. The optical mouse requires less maintenance.

How does the optical mouse work?

Microsoft invented the modern optical mouse in 1999 and called it the " IntelliMouse".

Rather than a ball on the underside, this device had a laser pointer pointing down. The laser light would bounce off the surface on which the mouse moved and into a complementary metal-oxide semiconductor (CMOS) sensor inside the mouse. The CMOS sensor is like a camera that takes 1,500 to 6,000 images of the reflected light per second. The images are passed to a digital signal processor. It detects patterns in each image and determines how far the mouse has moved since the previous image, and sends the corresponding coordinates to the computer.

Aside from maintenance, the optical mouse is also more sensitive to small movements than the trackball mouse.

In the 1980s, Xerox developed another kind of optical mouse that had a low-resolution camera in place of the CMOS sensor. It didn't catch on because it required more computational power to work.

The humble computer mouse has come a long way since its early days. But whether mechanical or optical, both types have banked on clever engineering to convert simple hand movements into precise on-screen interactions.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
Upendran

"Are you ready for the test?"

"Well, I am not sure. I..."

"...have butterflies in your stomach?"

"Butterflies in my stomach! I'm a

vegetarian, I don't eat..."

"...When you say you have butterflies

in your stomach, it means 'you are

nervous about something.' It is an

informal expression. For example, I can

say, 'I always get butterflies in my

stomach whenever I visit the dentist.' "

"I've never been to a dentist, so I

wouldn't know. I always get butterflies in

my stomach when I watch a horror film."

"Good example. By the way, you can

either say 'get butterflies in the stomach'

or 'get butterflies'. Both are acceptable."

"So, can I say, 'I get butterflies thinking

about the test.' "

"You certainly can. Sudha, for

example, gets..."

"...While we're on the subject of Sudha,

did she ask you to help her complete her

project?"

"She did. But I refused point-blank."

"Point-blank! What does it mean?"

"When you say something

'point-blank', you 'say it very directly, or

even rudely, without apologies or

explanations."

"That sounds just like my uncle!"

"Ha! Ha! Why, does he point-blank call

you a fool?"

"No, but he point-blank refuses to

listen to anything that I have to say."

"He's a very intelligent man! Ha! Ha!"

"I don't find that funny."

"Sorry. Here's another example with

'point-blank'. The Minister denied the

charges point-blank."

"I don't think people believe what their

Ministers say any more. That's why these

politicians get out. How do you

pronounce 'oust'?"

"The 'ou' sounds like the 'ou' in 'house' and 'mouse'. It is this which has the

stress."

"So it's 'Ousted'."

"That's correct. Do you know what the

word means?"

"Well, er..."

"...when you oust someone from his

place, job or position of power, 'you cause

them to leave it, often by force or illegal

means.' For example, the principal was

ousted from his job."

"Can I say, 'The landlord ousted the

tenants'?"

"You can. But remember, ousted is a

formal word. Now please leave before

you're ousted."

"Yes, sir."

Published in The Hindu on September

26, 1995.

THE DAILY QUIZ

India defeated New Zealand by four wickets to win the 2025 Champions Trophy in Dubai on March 9. Here is a quiz on all the times India has won an ICC trophy

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

The 1983 Cricket World Cup in which India registered its first ever win was also known by another name. What was it? Who were the runners-up?

QUESTION 2

In this tournament, India won the cup defeating Pakistan in the finals. It was hosted by South Africa and the player of the series was Shahid Afridi. Which was this tournament?

QUESTION 3

The 2011 ICC Cricket World Cup was hosted by India and which other countries? Who was declared as the player of the

tournament?

QUESTION 4

In this tournament, during the semi-final between India and Sri Lanka in England, individuals, possibly Tamil youth activists ran onto the pitch with flags of Tamil Eelam and banners protesting against the Sri Lankan team playing in the U.K. This happened during which ICC tournament?

QUESTION 5

The 2024 Men's T20 World Cup was the first major ICC tournament to include matches played in which country? Who took the most number of wickets in the tournament?

QUESTION 6

Which player scored the most number of runs, and was also awarded player of the tournament in the recently-concluded 2025 ICC Champions Trophy?



Visual question:

Identify the tournament from this image. Who won the trophy?

Questions and Answers to the

previous day's daily quiz: 1. The

capital of this country hosted the

meeting in 1920 where the

Communist Party of India was

formed. **Ans: Uzbekistan**

2. Aurch is the national animal of

this former Soviet state. **Ans:**

Moldova

3. This former Soviet state is called

the land of fire. **Ans: Azerbaijan**

4. The flag of this former Soviet state

depicts the sun with 40 rays for 40

tribes in the region. **Ans: Kyrgyzstan**

5. The name of this former Soviet

state stems from the phrase 'white

Russian'. **Ans: Belarus**

Visual: The burning gas crater is

located in this country. **Ans:**

Turkmenistan

Early Birds: Tamal Biswas| Patrick

Vijayan| Aman Sagar| Sandhya Rao|

Anju Sharma

Word of the day

Recrudescence:

a return of something after a period of abatement

Synonym: comeback

Usage: The doctors saw that there had been a recrudescence of the symptoms.

Pronunciation: newsth./live/

recrudescencepro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /rɪˈkruːdəs(ə)ns/, /r-/-

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Opening moves

A political churn is happening after the 2024 general election

As political parties are repositioning themselves in response to changed circumstances, a realignment of politics appears to be underway, nearly a year after the general election in 2024. The non-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) parties, that assembled as a putative national opposition under the INDIA banner, do not have a shared goal now. In fact, the Assembly elections in Bihar in late 2025, and in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala in early 2026 will scatter these parties further, and possibly pave the way for a reconfiguration of politics in these States and beyond. Some indicators are clear. Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader Prakash Karat said recently that INDIA was meant only for the Lok Sabha election and was specific to particular States. The Left and the Congress will face off in Kerala in what is going to be one of their most combative contests ever. In West Bengal, the Left and the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) cannot form an alliance while the Congress will weigh its options between the two. In Tamil Nadu, the Left and the Congress could both be in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's tent, but that is not a certainty yet. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Congress, that revived their old rivalries amid heightened bitterness during the Delhi Assembly election recently, are set to continue their clash in Punjab, Gujarat and Goa.

The marginal gains of these parties had the aggregate impact of pushing the BJP to the brink of defeat in the general election but it was more happenstance than a new trend as developments in the following months have shown. Insurmountable contradictions in the calculations of individual non-BJP parties soon made INDIA dysfunctional, though the parties coordinate their parliamentary strategy to some extent. These parties are united in demanding more transparency in the electoral process and the accountability of the Election Commission of India. The BJP, meanwhile, has acted with alacrity to shore up its base and win the Assembly elections in Haryana, Maharashtra and Delhi. The BJP and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam are also showing signs of a thaw in their relationship after having been routed in the general election that they fought separately in Tamil Nadu. Emerging conversations around questions of education and language policy and delimitation are generating a fresh political churn. The regional parties are facing a crisis in parts of the country, and the eclipse of some of them looks increasingly possible. But a lot more churn is likely before political alliances have a settled look.

New opportunity

India and Canada can discuss a reset in ties after new Prime Minister takes over

The newly elected leader of Canada's ruling Liberal Party, Mark Carney, who is now Prime Minister-designate, has a tough task ahead in what is expected to be a short period of time. Mr. Carney, who is set to take over from Justin Trudeau when he formally steps down this week, will almost immediately face a confidence vote in Parliament, after it reconvenes on March 24. Federal elections in Canada are due in October 2025, but observers say Mr. Carney could call for snap polls first, hoping to ride a surge of unexpected popularity for the Liberal Party for standing up to threats made by the U.S. President Donald Trump since he took office. Mr. Trump has consistently targeted Mr. Trudeau, suggesting that Canada would be better off as the "U.S.'s 51st State", and has been threatening to impose a slew of tariffs, accusing Canada of unfair duties as well as allowing fentanyl drugs and immigrants across the border. Canada has threatened counter-tariffs, and is considering a 25% surcharge on electricity exports to the U.S., with Mr. Carney claiming that "in trade, as in hockey, Canada will win". Mr. Carney, who is unelected and not a traditional politician, will have to convince voters of his ability to ensure that, as he takes on his rival, Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre, who has been far ahead in the polls until recent weeks. To that end, Mr. Carney's non-political skills will come handy. He was an economist and a central bank Governor; that he was not a member of the Trudeau cabinet means that he is free of any taint from its actions.

The exit of Mr. Trudeau is cause for relief for India, and an opportunity to reset ties that have been on ice. His intransigent decision to name "Indian government agents" and then expel Indian diplomats, implicating them in a purported plot to kill Khalistani activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, without proffering any proof, was a miscalculation and diplomatic blunder. The actions, seen in comparison to more discreet dealing by the U.S. in a linked case, sent India-Canada ties to their lowest ebb since the 1980s. It is significant that India is considering restoring a High Commissioner to Ottawa, while Canada is sending its intelligence chief to a conference in Delhi. Mr. Carney and Mr. Poilievre have made it clear that they would like to rework the relationship with India, and there will be opportunities to do so, particularly in education, investment and trade, all of which have taken a back seat after the violence and schisms within India's diaspora community, and its supporters in Canada's government. The interlude is also a fitting period for New Delhi to consider how it wishes to take forward. Regardless of the change in leadership, the Khalistani issue cannot be wished away, and requires sustained, considered diplomacy and respect for each other's concerns, while ensuring India's national security priorities.

In February 7, 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a report, "Compassion and primary health care", which recognises compassion as a transformative force in primary health care. The Director-General of WHO, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has called for an exploration of the role of compassion in global health, with specific attention to its impact on the quality of health-care services and its connection to primary health care.

Based on my personal experiences of interacting with pioneers in the medical field, and available evidence I can say with confidence that the report gives a big push to advocating compassionate health care. In the 74th World Health Assembly in 2021 and several other WHO and United Nations forums, I gave a clarion call to globalise compassion in health care. And, I am finally noticing that the world is waking up to the necessity of compassion.

Helping the patient and carer

Let me explain how compassionate health care is beneficial to both patients and the medical fraternity.

Most of us have had to visit a hospital or a doctor for a personal consultation or for family members at some point in our lives. We remember two kinds of health-care professionals — impolite and indifferent doctors and nurses, and the compassionate staff, who make a remarkable shift in our healing process.

Research conducted by Stanford University's The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE) has found out that patients treated by compassionate health-care providers recover quickly and the duration of their hospital stays is way less. Another study by the Johns Hopkins Hospital explored how compassionate communication has a significant impact when it comes to the recovery of cancer patients. It was observed that when doctors spend an additional 40 seconds with each patient and express solidarity with them by saying, "We are in this together", it significantly reduced anxiety in patients and positively influenced their recovery.

Compassion is not just beneficial for patients, but for health-care providers also. When health-care professionals practise compassion,



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they experience reduced stress, improved job satisfaction, and build stronger relationships with their patients, which is essential for providing high-quality care.

Terms and the differences

Let us not mistake compassion with sympathy, empathy and kindness, terms which are often used interchangeably. Sympathy is a pity-based momentary response, while empathy is when people immerse themselves in others' problems and they get overwhelmed in the process.

Health-care workers who operate with empathy can experience anxiety, exhaustion, and sometimes depression when they internalise the anguish of their patients. Along with demanding work hours, the stress can lead to empathy fatigue and further degrade the quality of care to patients.

On the other hand, compassion is about mindful problem-solving. A compassionate health-care provider will have the emotional stability to work together with patients that will be favourable for both parties. They will feel the patients' pain as their own but, at the same time, maintain a detachment that will not let them get overwhelmed. Compassion facilitates adopting a more sustainable approach to health care that will allow professionals to offer excellent medical treatment, be content and peaceful with the recoveries of their patients, and protect their professional and personal lives.

While the WHO report is focused on primary health care, we must also realise the urgent need for compassion in mental health. As per numerous mental health experts, depression can potentially become the "next pandemic" due to its widespread impact and long-term consequences on individuals worldwide. Having worked with children rescued from slavery and abuse, my understanding of mental health has been deeply influenced through our experience. Let me share a story about a rescued child, Pradeep. Soon after his birth, an exorcist labelled him as the cursed child and gave a 'solution' to offer him as a sacrifice to appease the gods. However, on the day of the sacrifice, the blade that was supposed to slice Pradeep's neck landed on his head instead, gravely injuring him. He was blamed for having survived, and then abandoned. When Pradeep came to Bal Ashram,

Compassionate health care must become the driving principle for industry leaders, hospitals and health-care think-tanks

More signs of overhauling the compliance framework

Despite concerted efforts to combat corruption, red-tapism and bribery remain formidable barriers to business growth in India. A recent "India Business Corruption Survey 2024" presents a troubling picture: 66% of business entities admit to paying bribes, with 54% stating they were coerced to expedite government processes, obtain permits, ensure compliance, or acquire duplicate licenses. The problem is most acute in sectors governed by overreaching officials in labour, Goods and Services Tax (GST), income tax, pollution, provident funds, property registration, drug, and health departments.

The economic impact is undeniable. A survey by EY-FICCI shows that four out of five respondents believe corruption is a significant deterrent to foreign direct investment (FDI). This underscores the urgent need to overhaul India's compliance framework to foster a transparent, fair, and predictable regulatory environment.

While the government initiated compliance reforms two years ago, progress has been sluggish. The Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Act, 2023 was a step forward, decriminalising 180 provisions related to imprisonment clauses that burden businesses and entrepreneurs. However, Budget 2025 that was presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a "Jan Vishwas 2.0" which aims to further decriminalise around 100 provisions. While this is a welcome step, it barely scratches the surface — over 200 provisions with imprisonment clauses remain untouched.

The constant flux of compliance rules

For Indian businesses, compliance is already a complex challenge, but its intersection with corruption makes it nearly insurmountable. Regulatory officials often wield compliance provisions as tools to extract bribes. Many businesses report that unofficial payments are still required to secure regulatory approvals, even when all the necessary compliances are met. A significant flaw in the system is the enormous subjectivity granted to inspectors, who can threaten imprisonment or factory shutdowns without accountability.

Another pressing issue is the overwhelming frequency of compliance updates, which fosters



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inefficiency and corruption. Over the past year alone, there have been 9,420 compliance updates — an average of 36 daily changes. This staggering rate of change indicates either regulatory incompetence or a deliberate design to create systemic corruption pipelines. A bureaucracy that needs to update rules at such an erratic pace is either incapable of foresight or complicit in fostering an environment where bribes become inevitable.

A recent directive by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is a promising initiative to curb this chaos. Effective this January, changes to food label regulations will be announced only once a year, offering a model for predictable regulatory changes. Similar measures should be extended across all regulatory bodies.

A significant portion of compliance-related imprisonment clauses stem from labour laws, which fall under the Concurrent List of the Constitution. While India has replaced 29 colonial-era labour laws with four modern labour codes, they remain in limbo, awaiting implementation. Without this critical step, the long-touted "biggest labour reforms in independent India" remain mere rhetoric. State governments must act swiftly to operationalise these reforms.

Have a digital-first approach

Establishing a factory in India requires submitting hundreds of self-attested and notarised documents across more than 40 government departments. This archaic system breeds corruption and inefficiency. A digital-first approach could transform the process. Imagine a scenario where entrepreneurs can apply for factory permissions using a single business identifier, granting regulators access to verified documents using an entity called a "digital locker". Such a tamper-proof, authenticated repository could cut approval times from months to days, mirroring the success of India's Digi Yatra in streamlining airport security.

India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) has revolutionised governance, but business compliance remains fragmented. Entrepreneurs must navigate at least 23 identity numbers issued by various Union and State authorities — from

the long-term rehabilitation centre at my organisation, Satyarthi Movement for Global Compassion, he could barely speak.

All children who come to Bal Ashram experience trauma, so we never coax them to speak or open up about their past. The teachers and caregivers who are trained in compassion in action at Bal Ashram are very sensitive towards the needs of the children, and that is how we see remarkable results. Pradeep's transformation was also miraculous. Soon after he arrived at Bal Ashram, he made friends, would open up, and began to narrate his story.

This is what true compassion is, and my philosophy of compassion has always been rooted in transformative actions. To me, compassion is when we feel the suffering of others as our own and act to solve it.

We need to recognise that health care is not just about treating illnesses but also promoting the overall well-being of individuals. So, how can medical professionals incorporate compassion into their practice?

Putting it into practice

Let us look at a few strategies. To begin with, we need to create awareness on the imperative need of compassionate health care. Compassion should not just be a 'good thing' to do, but the parameter that drives decision making in board rooms. Compassionate health care must become the driving principle for industry leaders, hospitals, thought leaders, and health-care think-tanks.

Second, we need to equip health-care providers on what compassionate care is all about and how they can incorporate it effortlessly. All we need is a little investment in quality training of doctors, nurses and paramedical staff, and experiential learning. The fraternity should also be taught the difference between empathy and compassion.

Last, compassionate health care must encompass equitable, accessible, and quality health care for all, irrespective of their socio-economic status, gender, or caste. After all, compassion is the foundation upon which we can build a health-care system that is truly people-centric and responsive to the needs of all.

It is time to globalise compassionate health care for all.

Permanent Account Number (PAN), Goods and Services Tax Identification Number (GSTIN) and Corporate Identification Number (CIN) to professional tax numbers and factory licences. Each identifier has its lifecycle, requiring periodic renewals and payments, leading to inefficiencies and corruption.

A unified "One Nation, One Business" identity system could dramatically simplify compliance, reducing bureaucratic friction and the opportunities for corrupt practices. A small budgetary allocation toward this initiative could streamline regulatory interactions, enhancing India's appeal as a business destination.

A global perspective

The global competition for investment and talent is intensifying. The United States is advancing governance reforms, including its Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), to make business operations seamless. If the world's largest economy (GDP \$27 trillion) becomes even more business-friendly, why would investors choose India's \$4 trillion economy, where red tape and corruption persist? The answer is simple: they will not. A clear American efficiency attracts global capital, India risks losing out on both investment and entrepreneurial talent — a fundamental driver of its knowledge economy.

The time for complacency is over. What was an opportunity yesterday is an urgent necessity now. To sustain its economic momentum, India must dismantle bureaucratic hurdles, create a predictable compliance environment, and eradicate corruption.

A clear, well-structured compliance framework — ushered in through the Jan Vishwas 2.0 — is not just about ease of doing business. It is about safeguarding India's economic future. The government must act decisively to attract global companies and empower Indian entrepreneurs to innovate, expand, and create jobs without fear or unnecessary regulatory friction. India stands at a crossroads. Whether the High-Level Committee for Regulatory Reforms embraces a bold compliance overhaul or hesitates, the stakes are high. The choice is clear: modernise or risk being left behind in the global economic race.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Language policy

The latest round of an exchange of words in Parliament is nothing but sound and fury that signifies nothing. There are a record number of aspirants from Tamil Nadu signing up to learn Hindi through the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha. Moreover, the National Education Policy does not mandate that Hindi has to be the third language. My own experience of being educated in Tamil Nadu

during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s informs me that knowing more languages increases educational and employment opportunities in other States. The outdated two language policy in Tamil Nadu needs to be revised. A formulation of good policy made for the welfare of all students is sadly missing. **G. Parameswaran,** Coimbatore

Appointment of judges

It is true that we need social

justice in the appointment of judges — for that matter, in every walk of life. What is equally if not more important is that we need judges who will do social justice, which is lacking in great measure, and which we should immediately address ourselves to in filling up appointments. The on-going agitation should address itself to this constitutional requirement. The perquisites of this high office should not be the only 'attracting' feature.

Otherwise, the judiciary will be working at cross purposes and become counter productive. **N.G.R. Prasad,** Chennai

Where are the trees?

There is much loss of green cover in Chennai city in the slew of ongoing infrastructure and development works. It is disheartening that age-old trees are to be chopped near Greenways road for road expansion work. This is

an area of Chennai that is shelter to many species and is host to a larger ecosystem. The area near the Central Leather Institute has already lost many old trees because of projects and expansion plans. The Metro Rail and storm water drain work have already destroyed tree cover. Moving to the East Coast Road area, it has now become a place that is barren and radiates heat. The Tamil Nadu government needs to stop

the ruthless deforestation across the city. Environment bodies and the media need to raise the issue and protest. There is no evidence of replanting. The government should note that it takes at least 25 years to replace what has already been lost. The massacre of Chennai's greenery must stop. **Subramanian R.,** Chennai

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

What's in a (disease's) name?

Toponymic diseases may derive their name from towns, rivers, islands, forests, mountains, valleys, countries, continents, and even trenches. Examples of such diseases include the Spanish flu, Delhi boil, Madura foot, and West Nile Virus.

These names often lead to considerable misinformation, stigma, and racial prejudice. They can harm science by politicising it and tarnish entire countries or regions and their populations for no fault of theirs, especially when the origin of these diseases is unclear. For example, the influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 is sometimes called the Spanish flu even though it did not originate in Spain. The story goes that Spain was one of the major European countries to remain neutral during World War I. Unlike the other countries involved in the war as part of the Allies or Central Powers, where censors suppressed news of the flu to avoid affecting morale, the Spanish media freely reported on it in detail. Thus, this pandemic, which affected 500 million people worldwide and resulted in more than 20 million deaths, was named due to misinformation.

Renaming diseases

Pushed by experts, and concerned about the above-mentioned issues, the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2015 mandated that this trend be avoided. It instead directed scientists to move towards providing names based on scientific characteristics rather than geography. This is why the next year, physicians started to rename the fatal disease caused by the Zika virus to congenital Zika syndrome.

The name Zika virus comes from the Zika forest in Uganda, where scientists first isolated the virus from a rhesus monkey in 1947 while researching yellow fever; Zika is the name of the forest in the Luganda language. The name congenital Zika syndrome was proposed by the



Dr. Kabir Sardana
Director, Professor and head, Department of Dermatology, Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, Delhi

WHO team which confirmed that the virus causes damage beyond microcephaly, the first fetal condition to be linked to it.

More recently, the WHO began using mpox as a synonym for monkey pox. This followed reports of racist and stigmatising language being used against certain communities and regions, both online and offline, because of the name monkey pox.

The latest issue

However, the trend of misleading and inappropriate naming still continues. In January, dermatologists from India and 13 other countries objected to the region-specific nomenclature given to a novel species of fungus – *Trichophyton (T.) indotinea* – that causes widespread and hard-to-treat skin infections and is resistant to most anti-fungal medicines. The term *indotinea* has pejorative connotations. It was Japanese dermatologists who had spotted the fungus in patients from India and Nepal and proposed in 2020 that this fungus should be considered a new species and named *Trichophyton indotinea*. It is important to note that the origin of the fungus is not clearly known even now and that the fungus has been reported from more than 40 countries.

The *Trichophyton indotinea* fungus causes a ubiquitous skin problem, commonly known as ring worm, and is resistant to the first-line oral drug terbinafine. The resistance gene was discovered by the Dermatology Department at Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital and simultaneously by the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh.

In an article published in the *Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology* titled “*Trichophyton indotinea*”, experts say that the name of the fungus is prejudicial and ignores the recommendations of the WHO and the American Society of Microbiology, among others.

The WHO notes that assigning names to new diseases and, on exception, to existing diseases is its responsibility under the International Classification of Diseases and the WHO Family of International Classifications through a consultative process which includes WHO member states. Considerations for the recommendations include rationale, scientific appropriateness, extent of current usage, pronounceability in different languages, absence of geographical or zoological references, and the ease of retrieval of historical scientific information. The current case of naming the fungus *indotinea* is a travesty of the WHO mandate and adds no value to either treating the disorder or finding a cause for the resistance.

The WHO also renames diseases or debunks researchers if they have disturbing legacies. The disease Reiter's Syndrome was named after the German physician, Hans Reiter, who was the first to describe the clinical triad of arthritis, urethritis, and conjunctivitis in 1916. However, problems arose after World War II, when the physician's association with Nazi ideology and his involvement in unethical medical experiments was discovered. The syndrome is now known as reactive arthritis.

The need of the hour

The need of the hour is for the WHO and scientists across the world to focus on finding the causes of diseases and pool together resources to find ways of preventing and curtailing them using precision in language and descriptions. If the outbreak of SARS-CoV2 has taught us anything, it is that we are a global community whose actions and choices have consequences for others. We should strive for unity, be sensitive to others, and seek out opportunities where we can help and support one another. Microbes defy borders, but stereotypes only divide people.

Naming diseases after places often leads to misinformation, stigma, and racial prejudice

The new forms of punishment in M.P.

The police are parading and publicly humiliating the accused in some cases

STATE OF PLAY

Mehul Malpani
mehul.malpani@thehindu.co.in

On March 11, videos on the Internet showed nine young men, with their heads shaved, faces hidden, and feet bare, being paraded by the police in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh. The men had been accused of creating a ruckus during the celebrations of the Indian cricket team's victory in the ICC Champions Trophy, and misbehaving with the police.

The BJP MLA of the Dewas constituency, Gayatri Rajee Pawar, objected to this. She called on the Dewas Superintendent of Police (SP) to condemn the police action and sought a probe into it. An Additional SP has now been tasked to investigate the case and an officer, who was seen using “indiscriminate force” in a viral video from March 9, has been taken off duty. The MLA also claimed that many of the accused who were arrested by the police were innocent.

Earlier, on the night of March 2, the Ujjain police arrested two men, Salim and Aaqib Mewati, accused of cow slaughter from near Indore. Cow slaughter is a crime in Madhya Pradesh as per a 2004 law. The next day, personnel from the Ghatiya police station publicly “paraded” the two men while taking them to court, and two cops thrashed them with batons. Salim and Aaqib, tied together with a rope and limping, were heard chanting “Gaay hamari mata hai, police hamari baap hai (the cow is our mother, the police is our father)”. Local members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal then proceeded to the police sta-



tion to garland the personnel, including the station in-charge D.L. Dasoriya, and gave them sweets. When videos of these acts went online, many people praised the Ujjain police. Last week, too, five men were arrested on charges of cow slaughter and paraded on their way to the court in Damoh. The local administration razed their “illegally encroached” properties where, according to the police, the men had slaughtered cows.

In both the cases related to cow slaughter, the complaints were made by members of right-wing Hindu outfits. In Damoh, the men were also accused of firing at some right-wing activists when they went to stop the alleged activities.

In yet another video that went viral in February, two men, with bandages on their heads and arms, were seen limping and holding their ears in apology, while a group of police personnel escorted them. They had been accused of assaulting an on-duty sub-inspector when he had stopped their car during night patrolling. The Indore police, however, said that the injuries were from an accident that the accused had been in before assaulting the cop.

While the Supreme Court's “binding directives” issued last November seem to have reduced the frequency of bulldozer action, these incidents show that parading and public humiliation are emerging as new forms of punishment.

The orders of demolitions of ten came from district or civil administration; in these cases, the police seem to have taken matters into their own hands.

Whenever a “parade” is taken out, the local media take out their cameras and bystanders whip out their phones to record videos and post them online. Bystanders both offline and online often cheer these acts and believe that they are appropriate for the alleged crime.

For instance, many people who lauded the Ujjain police said cow slaughter deserved such punishment. While people on social media may move on, the lives of the families of the accused are bound to be impacted given the virality of these videos.

The police continue to deny any “intentional parading”, and downplay such incidents. Ujjain Additional SP Guruprasad Parasara insisted that it was “not such a serious matter” and blamed it on the local media's “portrayal” of the events. Mr. Dasoriya denied that any “parade” was ever taken out. Damoh SP Shrikirti Somvanshi said that the police vehicle carrying the accused had broken down midway, forcing the officers to take the accused by foot. “Some local media called it parading,” he said.

Such practices are similar to those taken by local community leaders in the past to shame people involved in adultery and other acts that society did not approve of.

In some of these cases, the police seem to be bolstered by the cheers of members of the public, local politicians, and fringe groups, as well as the silence of the government. Those in power in Madhya Pradesh insist that they are tough on crime; this, too, may give the police the confidence to act in the way they do.

In 2023, U.S. spent 0.24% of its national income on foreign aid

But perception surveys in the country show American citizens thought it was as high as 31%

DATA POINT

Hannah Ritchie

In the early 1980s, almost half a million people were paralysed by polio every year. Most of them were children. But look at the progress the world has made: in all of 2023, there were the same number of cases as just two days in 1981.

Foreign aid programmes have played a crucial role in the fight against polio. **Chart 1** shows the sources of polio eradication funding over time. While private donors have made the largest contributions in recent years, governments have played a crucial role over the last few decades. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, in particular, donor countries were funding more than 80% of these efforts.

What's true for polio is also true for other diseases and essential resources like food. The PEPFAR programme, launched by the U.S., is estimated to have saved over 25 million lives from HIV. Donations for bednets and antimalarial treatments have helped reduce the number of people catching and dying from malaria. The Global Fund and USAID have reduced deaths from tuberculosis. The list goes on. These successes have been achieved with a relatively small amount of money. In 2023, the world gave around \$240 billion in foreign aid (**Chart 2**). It's a very small percentage of most rich countries' economies. Take the U.S. and it was just 0.24% of its gross national income (GNI). Norway is the only country that spends more than 1% of its GNI on aid (**Chart 3**).

How can the world achieve more of this? One question you might have is whether most of the world's aid comes from governments or private donors, which are dominated by billionaire-funded philanthropies. If it's the former, citizens can have some in-

fluence on the global aid budget.

More than 95% of foreign aid came from national governments in 2023 (**Chart 4**). Just under \$11 billion – or 4.5% of the total – came from private grants.

That means two things. First, a drop in support for aid can have huge consequences for the global total. The U.S. gave \$62 billion in aid in 2023. If it had cut its aid budget by just 20%, its contributions would have been around \$13 billion lower. That would be the same as eliminating all private philanthropic donations worldwide.

The second implication is that if we want to see an increase in global foreign aid, building public support for more generous aid budgets from our governments matters a lot. We can illustrate this point by focusing on the UN's target for developed countries to give 0.7% of their GNI to foreign aid. Only five countries – Norway, Luxembourg, Sweden, Germany, and Denmark – met this target in 2023.

Let's imagine that the public in developed countries pressured their governments to step up and meet this target. If all developed countries achieved this, we'd add an extra \$216 billion to the pot, meaning the global official development assistance budget would almost double (**Chart 5**). Again, it's important to highlight that these are still relatively small amounts of money for developed economies.

Interestingly, this is far less than most people think their countries currently give to foreign aid.

Very recent data is hard to find, but in a 2015 survey, American citizens were asked to guess how much U.S. federal spending goes to foreign aid. The correct answer was just under 1%. Only 3% of respondents got the answer right. The average guess was a whopping 31%. What's also interesting is that when asked how much federal spending should be going to foreign aid, the average answer was 10%. That's 10 times more than what is currently spent.

Small drops make an ocean

The charts were sourced from article titled “For many of us, it doesn't cost much to improve someone's life, and we can do much more of it” written by Hannah Ritchie. She is the Deputy Editor and Science Outreach Lead at Our World in Data



Chart 1: The chart shows the financial contributions toward polio eradication over the years

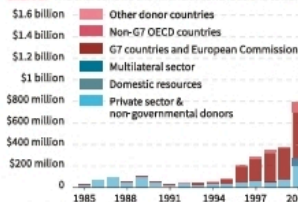


Chart 2: Top 10 largest donors of foreign aid in 2023 (in \$ billion)

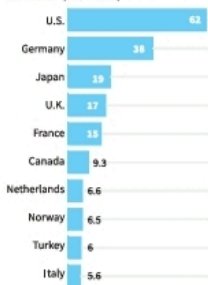


Chart 3: Top 10 largest donors of foreign aid (2023) as a share of GNI (%)

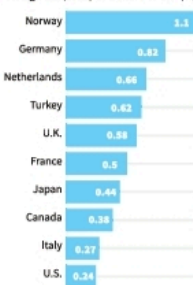


Chart 4: Foreign aid from governments and private donors (in \$ billion)

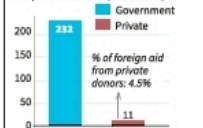


Chart 5: Potential foreign aid if countries meet the UN target (in \$ billion)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 12, 1975

“Centre heaping insults on State Govt.”: CM

Madras, March 11: The Chief Minister, Mr. Karunanidhi, said to-day that he would have to give up parliamentary methods to achieve the objective of State autonomy if the Centre did not change its posture towards the State Government. Making a spirited case for autonomy in the Legislative Council while replying to the budget discussion, Mr. Karunanidhi said the Centre was heaping insults on the State Government. It had not sanctioned several pending projects including power generation schemes in the State. He complained of unfair treatment in respect of the annual Plan allocation and pointed out that the per capita allocation to the State was lower than to other States. The Chief Minister said that even to trim the lawn at the Fort St. George, the Centre's permission had to be obtained. While the Union government had not given its consent for the installation of a statue of Raja Raja Cholan in the Brahmaeswarar temple at Thanjavur on the ground that it would spoil the antiquity and archaeological value, it had put up a Varahi temple inside. It was not a repair work as there was no Varahi temple there before. While the great Chola King who built the temple had no place there, he asked whether a temple should have been raised for a broken pig-faced idol. The Centre did not think it proper to allow the State to maintain monuments at Mahabalipuram, Gangakondan Cholapuram and other historic places. These issues involved the “self-respect” of Tamils and insults could not be taken lightly. The Chief Minister declared: “We approach the question of State autonomy through parliamentary methods. But if the Centre pushes us to a situation when this weapon is of no avail we have to think of other ways like installing the Raja Raja Chola statue in the temple, asking the Central Archaeological department officials to hand over the monuments to the State and taking charge of the monuments at Gangakondan Cholapuram.”

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 12, 1925

British cotton exports to Russia

London, March 11: In the Commons, replying to questions, Mr. Samuel said that raw cotton, exported from Britain to Russia, during last year, amounted to 4,50,000 bales valued at four million sterling, compared with 99,000 bales, valued at 7,31,000 sterling in 1923.

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

ON THE EDGE

Trump's trade policies haven't gone down well with markets. Monday's meltdown has added to the economic uncertainty

IN RECENT WEEKS, fears of an economic slowdown in the US have gained traction. On Monday, the S&P 500 fell 2.7 per cent with growing investor concerns over the impact of Donald Trump's trade policies on the US economy. The market meltdown came a day after Trump appeared not to rule out the possibility of the economy entering into a recession. In an interview on Sunday, when asked, Trump also sought to deflect the issue, saying, "I hate to predict things like that." He added, "There is a period of transition, because what we're doing is very big."

However, there are some indications of an economic downturn. A few days ago the Atlanta Fed's GDPNow model had pegged US GDP growth at -2.4 per cent in the first quarter of 2025 (seasonally adjusted annual rate). While these estimates can be volatile, Goldman Sachs has now upped the odds of a recession from 15 per cent to 20 per cent. Consumer confidence in the US is also falling — the Conference Board's consumer confidence index fell to 98.3 in February, from 105.3 in January. Markets, firms and consumers dislike uncertainty. And, there is considerable uncertainty over how Trump's tariff policies will play out and what will be the retaliatory impact — Trump has already gone back and forth on levying tariffs on countries. This also reflects in the economic policy uncertainty index of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis which has been edging upwards. However, so far, other indicators do seem to indicate that the economy is humming along. The labour market appears to be holding up. In February, the US economy added 151,000 jobs, only marginally below expectations. The unemployment rate though has edged up to 4.1 per cent. Further, the New York Fed's Nowcast model is at 2.67 per cent for the first quarter of 2025. However, the long-term implications of levying such tariffs is clear. For instance, as per the Tax Foundation, a Washington-based think tank, 25 per cent tariffs on Canada and Mexico would lower long-run GDP by 0.2 per cent.

Attention will now shift to the US Federal Reserve. In its last meeting held in January, the Fed had voted to maintain the federal funds rate in the range of 4.25 to 4.5 per cent. However, retail inflation rose to 3 per cent in January, while core inflation was at 3.3 per cent. Data for February will be released on Wednesday. The imposition of tariffs, which will be inflationary, will make it difficult for the Fed to further ease policy rates — a policy stance that Donald Trump favours. The next meeting of the Fed, scheduled for March 18-19, will provide greater clues on the trajectory of monetary policy in the US.

SMOG OVER URBAN INDIA

Towns are as vulnerable to air pollution as metros. IQAir report should occasion cooperation across cities, states, countries

THE LATEST EDITION of the World Air Quality report released by Swiss Air Technology major IQAir has sobering news for India. The country has 13 of the 20 most polluted cities in the world. The study is a reminder that though governments have taken significant steps to clean air — at times after being nudged by courts — the interventions have not led to appreciable improvements. The country is ranked the fifth-most polluted country, after Chad, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The IQAir list comprises not just urban centres whose trysts with toxic air are well known — Delhi and its adjoining areas for example — it also features small towns such as Bijnor in Uttar Pradesh and Mullana in Punjab. This is not a new finding. In recent years, towns such as Bhiwadi in Rajasthan and Begusarai in Bihar have topped the IQAir list. But the country's pollution challenge continues to be framed largely in terms of a crisis in big city governance.

A knowledge base on pollutants is some Tier 2 cities is being built up gradually. The number of pollution monitoring stations has increased from 37 in 2015 to more than 1,000 (including manually operated ones) in 2023. These, however, represent less than a quarter of the country's requirement. Small cities remain underrepresented in research and policy. There is very little micro data on most of the 74 Indian cities listed in the IQAir report. According to a 2023 study by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), barely 12 per cent of India's 4,000 census towns and cities are covered under air quality monitoring mechanisms. The analysis by the New Delhi-based organisation shows that 62 per cent of the country's population is outside the real-time monitoring network. The other major problem is that despite the National Clean Air Programme's emphasis on targeted interventions over large areas, pollution continues to be seen as a local problem. Individual cities and states are, by and large, left to their own devices and even emergencies such as Delhi's annual health crisis do not lead to a modicum of cooperation.

The IQAir report underlines that pollution affects even the developed economies. However, the least developed and emerging economies are the most affected. India's neighbours, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, are among the poor performers. The problem's transboundary nature has been evident for long. In recent times, experts have been advocating interventions in multiple airsheds — contiguous regions — whose geography makes it difficult for them to disperse pollutants. However, cooperation between the South Asian neighbours has been underwhelming. The IQAir report is another reminder that such intransigence doesn't work.

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SAY WOOF

New study says people don't really get dogs as well as they think they do. Blame it on the human tendency to project

THE WRITER ADAM Gopnik once observed that somewhere between dogs' limitless intuition about people and their inner lives, and people's limitless imagination about dogs and their inner lives is where the human-canine relationship is formed. There is great solace to be found in the belief that humans — who are lonely despite and because of their uniquely complex communication cultures — can form lasting bonds of understanding with at least one other species, imperfect as such a connection may be. It turns out, however, that even this may be too optimistic, and that people don't really get dogs as well as they think they do.

The authors of a new study, 'Barking up the wrong tree: Human perception of dog emotions is influenced by extraneous factors', have found that people's perception of a dog's emotions is almost entirely based on context cues: Everything but the dog itself, in other words. Complicating this picture is the human tendency to project emotions — a useful quality when it comes to creative, imaginative tasks like writing books and making movies, but one that can hamper other activities like least training a dog. Here, the problem is not so much the language gap, but people's inability to "read" their closest companions on any terms but their own.

It may be time to consider that dogs don't process emotions the way humans do. And as with all relationships, human or canine, it comes down to paying close attention to the other party, instead of relying on one's own imagination of how they might think and feel. The study's revelations also beg the question: Is it time to reappraise the popular perception of cats as inscrutable, mysterious and standoffish? It may be that cats are all that — it is likelier, however, that people are simply as clueless about them as they are about dogs.



SANJAYA BARU

INDIA HAS DONE well to reassure Mauritius by endorsing her claim over the Chagos Islands. Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri articulated the Indian view last week, stating: "We support Mauritius in its stance on its sovereignty over Chagos, and this is obviously keeping with our long-standing position with regard to decolonisation and support for sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries." Bravo!

Chagos is just one more territory that the neo-imperialist supporters of United States President Donald Trump are laying claim to. Last October, the British government agreed to hand over Chagos Islands, which are home to the US military base at Diego Garcia, to Mauritius. A Republican senator and Trump supporter, John Kennedy, recently warned London that it could damage its relationship with the US if it decided to cede sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius threatened the future of the US military base on the island of Diego Garcia.

Misri's statement came, interestingly, a day after External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to London. Clearly, there is a message in there for Washington. Ironically, it emanated from the centre of one of the biggest empires of the colonial era. American imperialist ambitions and pretensions recently articulated by Trump have sparked off debates around the world on the legitimacy of territorial aggrandisement in this day and age.

The present territory of all the three so-called "Great Powers" — the US, China and Russia — is the legacy of imperial conquest and territorial expansion. Till the dawn of the 20th century, few questioned this phenomenon by which nations were created and reshaped. Europe spread itself around the globe, legitimising its acquisition of territory on every continent. The US took its final shape through the conquest of territory. Russia went eastwards, extending itself from the Atlantic to the Pacific. China marched into the heart of Asia absorbing Tibet and more.

It was in India that the greatest and longest battle against imperialism was launched. India as it now exists is in fact the only modern nation that occupies less territory than its ancient historical footprint. While there are some in India who still nurture territorial ambitions through their theory join FREE Whatsapp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2YRb6RGjOKH6b0d6DF>



MOUMITA ALAM

WHEN DID YOU last sleep well? People often ask me after seeing the dark circles under my eyes. These dark circles never go away, because I never sleep well. How can I? As a working woman who is a single parent — the primary caregiver of my daughter — I suffer from time-poverty. I don't have time to eat properly or to sleep properly. I have to work all the time. As a person living in a semi-urban area, neither do I earn well enough to avail myself of 24x7 household help, nor do I have professional daycare facilities near my workplace. After the drudgery of a long day at work, the word "empowerment" seems like a myth.

ResMed, a global health technology leader, recently revealed in its fifth Global Sleep Survey (India) that people are losing at least three nights of restorative sleep each week. And, as expected, the report suggests that women experience poorer sleep quality than men. According to the report, they experience fewer nights of good sleep per week compared to men (3.83 vs. 4.13). They also struggle more with falling asleep (38 per cent vs. 29 per cent), with hormonal changes being a key factor. Menopause significantly impacts sleep, with 44 per cent of menopausal women worldwide struggling to fall asleep at least three times a week, compared to 33 per cent of non-menopausal women. In India, women (17 per cent) are more likely than

With major powers harbouring neo-imperialist ambitions, India must be the voice of anti-colonialism

of "Akhand Bharat", the republic of free India has never harboured extra-territorial ambitions or imperialist fantasies.

The history of the 20th century has been a history of the struggle against imperialism and its multiple ideologies. India has thus far held its head high. The acquisition of Sikkim was a minor transgression but that of a few coastal territories was in line with India's pushback against European colonialism. Given this history and record, it is incumbent on India to continue to be the voice of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism.

India's struggle against imperialism inspired anti-colonial movements across the world, reshaping the 20th century's global map. At the end of the 20th century's "war of colonial conquest", when the ambitions of Germany and Japan were thwarted and the British Empire retreated, the international community created the United Nations, making an explicit pledge against territorial expansionism. The UN Charter commits its members to "refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations".

The Government of India responded correctly to the Russian invasion of Ukraine by invoking the UN Charter's explicit commitment to the adherence by member nations to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all nation-states. India has also questioned the territorial claims of other major powers. Hence, the Indian statement on Mauritius should be welcomed.

India and Mauritius may well agree to allow the US and the UK to continue to operate their military base from Diego Garcia. However, this would require US recognition of the sovereignty of Mauritius over the islands. The Chagos Islands are an obscure set of dots in the Indian Ocean. However, the ejection of "outside" powers in any region is a cause that has acquired great importance once again.

The focus on Trump's threats on trade and tariffs and on the theatrics in the daily circus at the White House have diverted attention from the US President's neo-imperialist fantasies. However, it is imperative that post-colonial nations like India, Brazil, mem-

bers of ASEAN and the African Union join hands and convene a global convention against neo-imperialism. All major powers, including the US, China and Russia, must be put on notice. The victories of the hard-won struggles of the 20th century will not be allowed to go to waste in the 21st.

Chagos may be a speck in a vast ocean. Just as the Panama Canal is but a narrow navigable lane, it is such strategic spots that have been eyed by imperial powers for centuries. Trump has raised the spectre of imperialist ambitions once again, not just eyeing such specks and spots but laying claim to the vast expanses of Canada and Greenland.

Interestingly, the Chagos decision shows the British government in a good light. It offers an opportunity for Britain, home to the last great empire, to make common cause with its colonies and revive the Commonwealth as an institution. In a rapidly changing world in which plurilateral groupings such as BRICS, ASEAN, the Quad, SCO and the African Union have become important regional platforms, the Commonwealth has the opportunity to reinvent itself as an association of post-colonial nations standing up for the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty. It would make for an interesting inversion of the idea of the Commonwealth.

By taking a stand on Chagos, India has hopefully sent a message to all major powers, for there has been a surfeit of activity around the globe with major powers once again acquiring territory or laying claim. India should join hands with other post-colonial nations to re-ignite global consciousness about imperialism and the lasting damage it has done to societies around the world.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi did well during the hosting of the G20 Summit to convene and articulate the Voice of the Global South. With Trump intent on dumping the G20, as indicated by the US boycott of the G20 meetings in South Africa, it would be opportune for the Global South to collectively denounce the neo-imperialist ambitions of major powers.

The writer was member, National Security Advisory Board of India, 1999-2001 and media advisor to the Prime Minister of India, 2004-08

DARK CIRCLES TELL STORIES

A survey shows women sleep far less than men. The reasons aren't hard to discern

men (12 per cent) to take sick leave due to poor sleep.

Clearly, women are suffering from a sleep crisis. But why? A big reason is that women remain the primary caregivers in the family, for both children and elderly people. Having a steady job does not relieve them from domestic chores. With rising inflation and the growing aspirations of the neoliberal market economy, in many households, women are allowed to work outside the home on the condition that domestic chores and child-rearing are not disrupted. In places like Mumbai, it is common to see women chopping vegetables for dinner during their evening commute back home (Niranjana Bhownick, *Lies Our Mothers Told Us*). With the constant ticking of a clock in their ears, it's no wonder that women don't sleep well — to cope with the workload of the home and the workplace, sleep is the first thing to be sacrificed.

In the last few decades, a phrase we've often heard is "women's empowerment". We teach our daughters to be financially independent and pursue careers, but we have never tried to put in place a mechanism that can relieve women of the burden of household chores. Neither have we taught our sons to share these responsibilities. "Women's empowerment" thus becomes nothing short of the exploitation of women's labour.

The government, too, has not focused on the creation of a proper ecosystem for women in workplaces or at home. How many government-run creches do we have? Women are always worried at the workplace, leaving their children with nannies who might be inefficient or careless. Some are forced to leave their children with their parents back at home.

Sleep poverty is particularly a problem among lactating mothers. In the first few years of motherhood, sleep is a casualty. Often, the maternity leave that is sanctioned is not enough. And with the mass privatisation of jobs, maternity leave policies are becoming more regressive. Women employees in some states get CCL (child care leave) for two years till their children turn 18. But every female employee knows how tough it is to get CCL approved, with a male-dominated leadership posing a significant hurdle.

Ground realities in India are often grimmer than what data reflects. There is also a lack of good data — with the diversity that India has, it's very difficult for any organisation to give near-perfect data. But just look at the dark circles under women's eyes. They tell us what we need to know. Let women sleep.

Alam is a poet and writer based in North Bengal

MARCH 12, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

CHERNENKO DEAD

THE SOVIET PRESIDENT and Communist Party General Secretary, Konstantin Chernenko, died at the age of 73 after a grave illness and was succeeded by Mikhail S Gorbachev — long considered Chernenko's number two — as the party chief. The oldest person to hold the post, Chernenko was in office for the briefest period — just under 13 months compared to the 15 months of his predecessor, Yuri Andropov.

GORBACHEV TAKES OVER
WITH THE ELECTION of Mikhail Sergeevich

Gorbachev to the post of general secretary of the CPSU, the leadership of the Soviet Union has passed into the hands of a new generation born much after the October Revolution. Born on March 2, 1931, he recently celebrated his 54th birthday. Known as an agriculture wizard, he made his mark in political life by transforming the Stavropol region into a rich granary.

AKALIS OUT OF JAIL

THE GOVERNMENT HAS ordered the release of eight important Akali leaders who were in detention under the National Security Act, including Akali Dal president Harchand Singh Longowal. Ironically, two top leaders,

G S Tohra, president of the SGPC, and Parkash Singh Badal, former Punjab chief minister, have not been released. There is a case against Tohra on charges of waging war against the government.

SHASTRI'S AUDI

THE BOARD OF Control for Cricket in India has decided to request the government to waive the customs duty, as a special case, on the Audi car won by Ravi Shastri, declared champion of champions in the World Championship of Cricket in Melbourne. Under normal circumstances, the combined duty would have been about as much as the value of the car (about Rs 4 lakh).

THE IDEAS PAGE

From Delhi to Port Louis

India's relations with Mauritius rest not just on shared ethnicity, but also on a reliable partnership to strengthen the island nation's sovereignty. PM Modi's visit will strengthen ties



RAJA-MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

FEW COUNTRIES ARE closer to India than Mauritius. The ties that bind Delhi to Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius, are many. They include the island's large Indian-origin population, constituting nearly 70 per cent of its 1.3 million people. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ongoing visit to the island state, almost exactly a decade after his last visit in March 2015, is about lending deeper strategic support to this special bilateral relationship.

Modi's 2015 visit to Mauritius and Seychelles marked a recognition of the renewed geopolitical significance of the Western Indian Ocean islands. Modi's speech outlining India's SAGAR (security and growth for all) ambition also highlighted the urgency of putting the Indian Ocean at the top of India's diplomatic agenda.

But the geopolitics of the region have become even more contested and demanding over the last decade. India has its task cut out in raising its game in Mauritius and the Western Indian Ocean islands as more actors, including Europe, Russia, China, Gulf states and Turkey, jostle for greater influence in the region. Central to Delhi's task is the clear recognition that Mauritius is not an extension of India, despite the strong bonds of ethnic kinship. Mauritius has a geopolitical identity and agency all of its own.

Few locations in the world capture the complex evolution of modern world politics more succinctly than Mauritius. Consider, for example, its colonial history. All European colonial powers — including the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British — showed up here. Its independence from Britain did not end its battle against colonialism. One of the last vestiges of colonialism in Mauritius was sorted out only recently with the agreement between Port Louis and London over the Chagos archipelago.

When Britain gave independence to Mauritius in 1968, it separated part of the Chagos archipelago into the 'British Indian Ocean Territory' and gave the island of Diego Garcia on lease to the United States, which set up a major military base on the island. Over the last couple of decades, Mauritius had mounted a patient but powerful global campaign to reclaim its sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago.

The UK-Mauritius agreement on Chagos holds profound legal, geopolitical, and humanitarian significance. From the legal standpoint, the agreement reaffirms Mauritius's sovereignty over Chagos. It aligns with the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019, which supported Mauritius's claim to the archipelago. This move strengthens international law by respecting decolonisation principles and sets a precedent for resolving similar territorial disputes between European powers and post-colonial states. The agreement between Mauritius and the UK also addresses the humanitarian concerns of the people displaced during decolonisation. It also provides the basis for long-term environmental cooperation.

Britain's decline as a great power and its withdrawal from the Indian Ocean in 1970 was followed by a large American military presence in the Middle East and Indian Ocean region. The US-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War led to competition between Washington and Moscow for military access to key locations in the Indian Ocean, including the Western Indian Ocean islands.

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CR Sasikumar

eration between London and Port Louis.

From the geopolitical perspective, Mauritius has extended the lease on Diego Garcia for 99 years, helping retain the US military base there. Although the Tories in the UK and some Republicans in the US have denounced this agreement as paving the way for Chinese dominance of the Indian Ocean, it does exactly the opposite by retaining the US base with Mauritius's consent. This should help sustain a long-term US military presence in the Indian Ocean amid China's growing strategic focus on the littoral. During British PM Keir Starmer's visit to Washington last month, President Donald Trump endorsed the agreement.

For India and PM Modi, who stood by Mauritius in its struggle to regain sovereignty, it is a moment of quiet diplomatic satisfaction. Delhi was instrumental in promoting a pragmatic agreement between Mauritius and the UK that would meet India's regional security concerns over China's expanding naval profile in the Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, India's construction of logistics infrastructure on Agalega Island underlines both Mauritius's enduring geopolitical significance in the Indian Ocean and Delhi's growing maritime stakes in regional security. Many things have changed in world politics over the centuries, but the importance of geographic location remains constant. Mauritius's critical position in the Western Indian Ocean earned it the name 'Star and Key of the Indian Ocean'.

For European sailors navigating down the African coast and entering the Indian Ocean after passing the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius was indeed key to the onward journey up the African coast and across the Indian Ocean. The opening of the Suez Canal in the mid-19th century seemed to reduce the importance of Mauritius and the Western Indian Ocean islands. But the two World Wars and the Cold War thrust Mauritius back into the centre stage of world politics.

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The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

Rewriting the score

Oscar-winning documentary speaks of classical music's gendered world



SUANSHU KHURANA

IN THE 1960s, when noted conductor Zubin Mehta was at the peak of his professional eminence, he made a remark about women musicians in classical orchestras. "A woman's life in the orchestra is not as long as a man's; she is just not as good at 60 as a man is," he had said, a statement echoing the sexism in prestigious orchestras.

Mehta was 30 years old and the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, where he had once imposed a limit of 16 on the number of women in the orchestra. It was probably a carry-over from his days at the all-male Vienna Philharmonic, his learning ground and the first orchestra he would conduct. A Time magazine article in 1966 spoke of how "women were ill-tuned to the rigours of symphony life and played erratically during menstruation or when they are concerned about family problems". The same article called double bassist Orin O'Brien, the first woman to join the New York Philharmonic Orchestra full-time under the direction of Leonard Bernstein — Mehta's colleague and friend — "as curvy as the double bass she plays". It forgot to mention her arduous training and musical excellence or that she was an usher at Carnegie Hall for two years and imbibed every note with the utmost attention.

Almost half a century later, a documentary made by O'Brien's niece Molly O'Brien, *The Only Girl in the Orchestra*, which tells the story of her struggles and successes, has won an Academy Award for the Best Documentary Short Film.

It's interesting how O'Brien, who retired from the orchestra in 2021 after a 55-year-long career, didn't want a film to be made on her. She told her niece that she wasn't important enough. The daughter of movie actors George O'Brien and Margaret Churchill, she would shrink from attention, thinking that the other members, the men, would resent her for it. "The double bass is in the supporting role in an orchestra. You don't want to stick out. You're the floor under everybody; that would collapse if it wasn't secure," she says in the film. Bernstein, in one of his lectures, once wrote, "Whenever I look in her direction, I see her intently looking back at me and I marvel at this concentration. How does she do it? Has she memorised every note of every bass part in every work we play? It is as impossible as any other miracle." But O'Brien played and she persisted.

The documentary on O'Brien is also a reminder of the gendered world of classical music where men and women did not play music together, where women musicians had to overcome discrimination — their talent and creativity dismissed, their presence deemed a distraction — to just persevere in their chosen vocation. Conductor Vasily Petrenko said about a decade ago, "A cute girl on a podium means that musicians think about other things". In 1930, when Antonia Brico became the first woman to ever conduct an orchestra, it was considered "daring". She was called a "female conductor", her gender qualifying her professional position. The arrival of blind au-

ditions would eventually help as everyone auditioned from behind a screen in a thickly carpeted area where their heels would not give away their gender.

Among the many battles that have and are being fought by women in the world of classical music, the foremost remains that of trombone player Abbie Conant who, in 1982, initiated legal proceedings against the city of Munich for discrimination after she was demoted to second trombone despite being selected as first trombone in blind auditions. She was also denied solos and was being paid less than her male counterparts. During the legal battle, lawyers blamed her physical strength for demotion, following which Conant had to go through a battery of tests including blood being drawn from her ear, getting her ribcage examined and blowing through numerous machines to measure the capacity of her lungs. It took her 13 years, including four to get her position back and five for equal pay, for legal recognition of the discrimination. Then there was principal flautist Elizabeth Rowe's lawsuit in 2018 against the Boston Symphony Orchestra demanding that she be paid as much as the other principal musicians in the orchestra.

Women were banned from auditioning for the prestigious Vienna Philharmonic until as late as 1997, when they were forced to accept Anna Lelkes as a temporary harpist as there was a dearth of male ones. When she performed, neither was her name mentioned in the programme, nor was she shown on tel-

While the Cold War's end again turned focus away from the islands, China's rise and growing influence in the Indian Ocean littoral has made Mauritius and other islands in the region — including Comoros, Madagascar, the French territory of Réunion, and Seychelles — a zone of geopolitical contestation.

China's growing reliance on African and Middle Eastern resources, its construction of major infrastructure projects including ports and transport corridors in the region, the PLA's eagerness to project naval power into the Indian Ocean, and its establishment of its first foreign military base in Djibouti underscore Beijing's growing salience in the Western Indian Ocean.

China has also consistently courted Mauritius and other Western Indian Ocean islands. It has convened two Indian Ocean conferences focusing on the island states in recent years. Beyond the military dimension, China recognises Mauritius's geo-economic importance.

During the 19th century, Mauritius was an important node in Indian Ocean globalisation, facilitating the movement of capital and labour across the region and developing sugar plantations to serve the world market. Through elite pragmatism and economic vision, post-colonial Mauritius has transformed itself into a regional financial hub, a centre of connectivity networks, and a bridge between Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

It isn't just China that's now interested in the Western Indian Ocean. Europe is attempting to reclaim a strategic presence in the littoral. The Gulf countries, with their vast financial power, have become influential actors in the region. Russia, Iran, and Turkey are all actively expanding their regional involvement.

As a complement to its prosperity noted in global connections, Mauritius has developed alliances ties with all major powers while strengthening its strategic autonomy.

Delhi's success in Port Louis stems not from shared ethnicity but from being a reliable and benign partner in boosting Mauritius's sovereignty. That Delhi is determined to strengthen this unique bilateral strategic partnership, with all its regional and global dimensions, is the main message from the PM's visit to Mauritius.

The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Returning Pakistan to the top of world cricket will be an arduous challenge. But for now, that is India's place — it has the team and the influence to hold on to it."

— DAWN

Green shoots in the Valley

J&K is on the cusp of a major economic transformation. Private investment will need to be nurtured, ecological concerns addressed



ROHIT KANSAL AND
DIPANKAR SENGUPTA

JAMMU AND KASHMIR has been in the news since the beginning of this year for the right reasons. On January 13, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Sonmarg Tunnel, a strategically significant project that will lead to year-round connectivity to the tourist resort of Sonmarg and eventually to Ladakh. Then, on January 25, the trial run of the Jammu Srinagar Vande Bharat was completed, making Srinagar fully ready to welcome the arrival of the first train connecting the Kashmir Valley with the rest of the country.

On the same day, one of India's top cement companies announced its intention to acquire a majority stake in J&K's largest cement company, making it the first such large private investment in manufacturing in the Valley. It is easy to read these developments as a result of the policy of physical and economic integration of the region followed by the Centre post 2019. A concerted infrastructure push has seen massive improvements not just in rail and road infrastructure but also in hydropower capacity and power infrastructure. To cite just one metric, the pace of road construction tripled from 6.5 kilometres per day in 2019 to 20.5 kilometres per day at the end of 2022. However, it would perhaps be equally instructive to view these developments from the prism of economic potentiality — not just what has been achieved so far but, as Shakespeare would have said, a real possibility of "a tide... which, taken at the flood, (can) lead on to fortune".

The increased integration opens real possibilities for an economic transformation which would permanently steer the region away from its current dependence on the Centre's support for nearly half of its expenditure. Three key areas stand out as critical to this transformation.

The first one is clearly tourism. The rapidly expanding rail and road network will bring increasing numbers of tourists. The extension of the railways has already made hitherto poorly connected areas like Gool, Sangaldan and Khari eminently accessible. The engineering marvel of the highest rail bridge on the Chenab near Sangaldan is a tourist destination in itself. While hidden gems like Bani, Dudu Basantgarh, Gurez and Bangus are becoming more accessible due to an expanding road network, traditional favourites like Gulmarg and Pahalgam are witnessing increasing footfalls.

To reap the benefits of increased connectivity and larger inflows, J&K will have to reimagine its tourism strategy. This will require better carrying capacity and more infrastructure — more hotel rooms, improved urban services like sanitation and sewage treatment, better internal road networks, expanded public transport and tighter regulation. But beyond the basics, J&K will require a more creative strategy designed to offer more exclusive tourist experiences.

At 9.5 per cent, J&K's growth rate is promising. However, it has so far been largely driven by public investment and government expenditure. The overwhelming response to the 2021 New Industrial Development Scheme for J&K provides the possibility of strongly supplementing this, with private investment-led growth. The recently concluded cement deal underlines the magnetic role that local entrepreneurs can play in this. With Indian GCCs (Global Capability Centres) being the global host and their movement to Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities being planned, J&K can make a difference by this expanding pie as well. However, given the frenetic competition for investment among various states, the green shoots of private sector interest in J&K need to be carefully nurtured. Current investors, especially local players, would need to be actively encouraged to help expand their existing businesses and invest in new ones.

All this would require a strong facilitative regime, particularly in terms of availability of land, provisioning of infrastructure and utilities, facilitating access to capital and skill development initiatives. As a late entrant to this race, J&K needs vast improvements in governance capacities and faster response times. J&K is today at the cusp of a major transformation. A virtuous cycle of developments — from targeted public investment, strong infrastructure growth, committed central support and increasing private investor confidence — bodes well for its future.

Kansal is a senior IAS officer of the former J&K cadre. Sengupta is professor of economics at the University of Jammu. The views expressed by authors are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CRICKETING GLORY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The winning habit' (IE, March 11). India's spin quartet bowled like a well-oiled machine, turning the screws on opposition batsmen. The batting lineup was versatile and reliable, and everyone contributed to the tournament. With four all-rounders, the team's balance was perfect. Winning two back-to-back white-ball ICC tournaments says a lot about our strengths. However, this should not mask the weaknesses in Test matches. The BCCI must ensure that no player plays all three formats in order to build a strong Test team capable of regaining lost glory.

Bal Govind, Noida

BUILDING TRUST

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Challenge of peace' (IE, March 11). The Manipur ethnic strife brings into the limelight the entrenched suspicion between Meitei and Kuki groups, stoked by segregation and a failed bid for reconciliation. The concept of free movement, noble though it may be, has led to even more disturbance. Does this mean that peace cannot be ushered in without addressing past grievances and building trust? It is through comprehensive outreach that reconciliation must be achieved.

Anshu Bharti, Nagaurai

PROTECTING DIGNITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Not another Pretty Woman' (IE, March 11). National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) data highlights that there are over 8 lakh women sex workers in India, among whom more than 6,000 are subjected to abuse, as provided by the NCRB report (2020-21). Female sex workers are more vulnerable to diseases like AIDS, STIs, and cervical cancer. The Supreme Court in 2011 extended the right to dignity under Article 21 to sex workers and suggested certain rights by constituting a panel. A balanced approach is needed — one that provides them with legal protection, ensures consent, and offers rehabilitation through law and awareness campaigns.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The winning habit' (IE, March 11). The victory at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium highlights India's dominance. Across 24 ICC tournament matches — including the 2023 ODI World Cup, the 2024 T20 World Cup, and the Champions Trophy — Rohit Sharma's men have secured 23 wins, an astounding 95.83 per cent success rate. Contributions from Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, K L Rahul, and Hardik Pandya underscored the collective effort, while on a sluggish pitch, India's strategy of fielding four spinners proved decisive. Selectors must now look ahead to the 2027 ODI World Cup.

SS Paul, Noida

SCIENCE

New, greener electrochemical process turns urine into plant fuel

The process, described in *Nature Catalysis*, proposes to convert urea, a nitrogen-rich compound in urine, into a crystalline peroxide derivative called percarbamide. Thus, it strikes two targets at once: enabling the treatment of urine in urban wastewater and transforming it into a useful resource

Sanjukta Mondal

In the 17th century, a German alchemist named Hennig Brand was on a quest to find the "philosopher's stone," a mysterious object that could turn any ordinary metal into gold. When he realised the golden colour of urine, he believed it contained tiny particles of the precious metal.

Brand then collected urine from himself, his family, and beer drinkers at his local pub and began distilling it in the hope of finding gold at the end. There was no gold, alas, but the silver lining was that Brand discovered the element phosphorus.

In fact, some call urine "liquid gold" because it is loaded with elements that plants desire. The waste product is packed with phosphorus, potassium, and nitrogen in the form of urea, the "Big Three" nutrients that fuel plant growth and form the backbone of commercial fertilizers.

Two birds, one stone

A new electrochemical technique published in the journal *Nature Catalysis* now proposes to separate urea from urine in its solid form via a greener, less energy-consuming process. This method converts urea, a nitrogen-rich compound in urine, into a crystalline peroxide derivative called percarbamide.

Thus, it strikes two targets at once: enabling the treatment of urine in urban wastewater and transforming it into a useful resource.

Humans obtain nitrogen from food, convert it into urea, and excrete it through urine. Since urea is rich in nitrogen, it has the potential to be a natural fertilizer. In theory, returning the nutrients to the soil could complete the nitrogen cycle, but scientists currently lack efficient methods to extract urea directly from urine, leaving a crucial gap in this cycle, Xinjian Shi, a researcher at Henan University, China, and the first author of the new study, said.

"Our team's research fills this gap."

Pee-cycling to close the loop

An adult produces around 450-680 litres of urine, researcher Björn Vinnerås estimated in a 2002 study. The substance is 95% water, yet the annual output also contains around 4 kg of nitrogen and 0.3 kg of phosphorus, enough to grow wheat for one loaf of bread every day for a whole year.

If it's so valuable, why flush it down the toilet? The answer is that urine is a complex system, and many of its components, especially salts, interfere



A farmer sprinkles urea on a crop of finger millet on the outskirts of Bengaluru. APF

with processes that can extract urea alone from wastewater, Shi said. The team's study claims to have jumped this barrier.

Urea is made up of nitrogen, oxygen, and hydrogen and is prone to forming hydrogen bonds with other molecules, including urea itself. When these bonds form, the compound's physical and chemical properties tend to change. This tendency turned out to be a game-changer in the separation process.

For example, when urea forms hydrogen bonds with hydrogen peroxide, it forms percarbamide, a white, crystalline solid that can be precipitated out from urine with high purity.

Percarbamide is known for its ability to steadily release active oxygen, making it a valuable candidate for processes that need to supply oxygen for other chemical reactions. Another key trait of this substance is its ability to accelerate the recovery of urea from urine.

To take advantage of this property, the researchers developed an in-situ electrochemical technique that uses graphitic carbon-based catalysts to convert urea in urine into percarbamide. Achieving almost 100% purity, the team used this process to effectively extract percarbamide from both human and animal urine.

While the result was promising, the true focus of the researchers was something else.

A eureka moment

At first, the researchers focused on one problem: keeping hydrogen peroxide stable in liquid form at higher concentrations. They began exploring

Percarbamide is known for its ability to steadily release active oxygen, making it a valuable candidate for processes that need to supply oxygen for other chemical reactions. Another key trait of this substance is its ability to accelerate the recovery of urea from urine

whether it could be solidified directly within a solution with a compatible material. Urea seemed like a promising option – but commercially made urea is quite expensive.

"Then, we suddenly thought, if we could use it within the urine system, it would not only achieve the original goal but also address the issues of urine treatment and nitrogen cycling. Wouldn't that be a win-win?" Shi asked.

With this insight, the researchers designed an activated graphitic carbon catalyst. Graphite is a soft crystal made of carbon atoms. Activated graphitic carbon is a porous form of graphite subsequently modified to further increase its surface area, making it more reactive.

In this case, it was engineered to enhance two chemical reactions, or pathways, that produce solid percarbamide.

In pathway I, urea reacts directly with hydrogen peroxide in the presence of a catalyst that facilitates interactions between the two molecules. In pathway II, urea binds to a hydroperoxyl (*OOH) intermediate, a highly reactive and short-lived molecule. Then it gains

hydrogen ions (H⁺) and triggers a reaction to form percarbamide in the presence of a catalyst that enhances hydrogen bonding.

The activated graphitic carbon catalyst was suitable for both pathways.

Waste is golden?

After several rounds of trial and error, the researchers found they could maximise percarbamide production by holding the concentration of urea between 15% and 38%. They also found that maintaining temperatures just above freezing at a slightly acidic pH of around 4 works best for the process.

According to the researchers, the pure percarbamide extracted from this new process combines the best of both worlds: the nitrogen-rich benefits of urea and the oxidative power of hydrogen peroxide, unlocking new possibilities for sustainable applications.

"When the solid product is collected and used as fertilizer, nitrogen is slowly released, while also promoting root respiration and facilitating crop growth," Shi said. "This process fully addresses the missing link in the nitrogen cycle that exists in human society."

The team has also expressed excitement about bringing together resource recovery and recycling with wastewater treatment in the future. They believe this innovative approach can change how we think about and use waste.

(Sanjukta Mondal is a chemist-turned-science-writer with experience in writing popular science articles and scripts for STEM YouTube channels. sanjuktamondal.sm@gmail.com)

THE GIST

Urine is known as 'liquid gold'. It is packed with phosphorus, potassium, and nitrogen in the form of urea, the 'Big Three' nutrients that fuel plant growth and form the backbone of commercial fertilizers

An adult produces 450-680 litres of urine, which is 95% water, yet the annual output also contains around 4 kg of nitrogen and 0.3 kg of phosphorus, enough to grow wheat for one loaf of bread every day for a whole year

Researchers found they could maximise percarbamide production by holding the concentration of urea between 15% and 38%. 'When the solid product is used as fertilizer, nitrogen is released slowly, it also promotes root respiration and crop growth'

BIG SHOT



One of three wind turbines, built and operated by the renewable energies company Valorem, as part of a wind farm in Andilly-les-Marais near La Rochelle, western France on March 10. A wind farm with the three highest national wind turbines culminating at 120m for the axis and 200m at the top of the blades, is to be officially inaugurated in May. APF

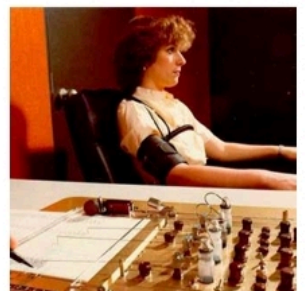
QUESTION CORNER

Lie detectors: reading your vitals

Q: How does a lie detector work?

A: A polygraph, also called a lie-detector test, is generally used during interrogation by police.

The instrument works by recording physiological functions such as blood pressure, heartbeat, respiration, and perspiration. A pneumograph tube is fastened around the person's chest, and a blood-pressure-pulse cuff is strapped around the arm. The psychogalvanic skin reflex, an electro-dermal response, and the flow of current between different parts of the body are also measured. Sensitive electrodes are used to pick up the impulses, which are recorded on a moving graph paper. The parameters are recorded when a suspect answers questions put to them by an operator. The data is then used as the basis for deciding whether the person is lying. When a person lies, the graph deviates from the 'normal' shape in one or more of the body functions. Such changes were believed to occur due to the emotional response to telling a lie. There is consensus among scientists today that polygraphs



A person undertakes an early version of the polygraph test. US FBI

are ineffective, unreliable, and easily overcome. The modern polygraph was first constructed in 1921 by John Larson, a medical student at the University of California, along with a police officer. His instrument was capable of continuously recording blood pressure, pulse, and respiration. While the device has been in use since 1924, it has not been accepted as proof of truth-telling in courtrooms.

- The Hindu Bureau

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

— Ramnath Goenka

LOOMING RECESSION IN THE U.S. BODES ILL FOR INDIA'S GROWTH STORY

AMERICAN voters love Donald Trump for his disruptive volatility. But this time, he seems to have bitten off more than his countrymen can chew. Markets around the world have been spooked by Trump slapping tariffs on both friends and foes. Though he has paused action against Mexico and Canada till next month, he has gone through with a 20 per cent impost on China. India too is in line for a hit from April 2. These signals, together with Trump's refusal to rule out a recession in the US, sparked Monday's meltdown in the US that shaved off \$1.75 trillion. The tech-heavy Nasdaq suffered the sharpest single-day decline since September 2022, with Tesla shares being the heaviest drag. Both the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the S&P 500 plunged almost 3 per cent.

Trump believes this is transitory turbulence and, in the long run, the US stands to gain billions of dollars from tariffs and the revival of the 'rust belt' industries it lost to China, Mexico and other cheap-labour hubs. The market fears the opposite. Tariffs will make imports and local manufacturing more expensive, and slow down consumer spending, the heart of the US economy. While the American economy has repeatedly belied predictions of recession, there are some new, worrisome tell-tales. The job market has slowed. Consumer spending is falling and consumer confidence is the lowest since last August. Other indicators such as credit card dues soaring to \$1.21 trillion and late payment on auto loans ballooning also bode ill.

Trump tariffs are now the strongest headwind against global economic growth. Reversing the efficient global distribution of production will hurt consumers everywhere. As for India, a recession or even a slowdown in the US will have serious repercussions. The US is India's largest trading partner, clocking nearly \$130 billion in bilateral goods trade in 2024; more importantly, we logged a trade surplus of nearly \$90 billion last year. India's tech industry is virtually joined at the hip with the US and any slowdown there will result in job losses at home and lower remittances. There is still time to learn from China: the best way forward is to build an economy on high investment leading to higher consumption at home.

MANIPUR IN FOR A LONG SPELL OF CENTRAL RULE

WHEN retired Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla was appointed governor of riot-torn Manipur last December, it was evident to the discerning that the Centre had major plans to change the status quo in the state. Bhalla is an able administrator who is perhaps on his toughest assignment so far. Soon enough, Chief Minister N Biren Singh was shunned and Manipur placed under president's rule. Singh was a lightning rod for controversy and seen as representing the interests of the majority Meitei community in a state that has Nagas and Kukis as well. Bhalla started well by issuing a public appeal to surrender firearms looted from the armoured forces. The weapons returned by the deadline last week are a fraction of the estimated 6,000-plus stolen from police and military camps ever since violence broke out in 2023 following an ill-advised judicial order on jobs quota.

Manipur's topography is such that the Meiteis live in the Imphal valley surrounded by the Kukis based in the hills. When the ethnic faultlines grew deeper, their compartmentalisation became total. Now members of one community cannot even dream of taking a highway that cuts through the landmass controlled by the other without threat to life and limb. As a result, Meiteis can only fly in and out of Imphal, and Kukis cannot even step into the Imphal valley, forget driving to the airport there. Union Home Minister Amit Shah's recent flat on restoring free movement in the state was read by the Kuki-Zos as facilitating Meitei travel through their territory and opposed tooth and nail. Two buses sent to the Kuki-majority areas of Kangpokpi and Churachandpur on March 8 as an exploratory exercise were vandalised. One life was lost in the resultant clash with security forces. And the Kuki-Zos imposed indefinite shutdown in the districts dominated by them.

The ethnic violence has reignited Kuki-Zo sub-nationalism and aspirations for a separate land. To participate in the peace process, they want a separate administration and Union Territory status with a legislature. Expecting them to yield in the short run would be naive. At a debate in parliament, the government claimed Manipur's law and order situation has improved. However, the state appears headed for a long phase of central rule.

QUICK TAKE

THE E-FRAUD FIGHT ABROAD

ANOTHER group of Indians lured into working at cyber-centres abroad were brought back on Monday. The 283 people flown back from Mae Sot in Thailand are the latest of several batches repatriated over the last two years from scam hotspots spread between Myanmar and Cambodia. The UN said last August that hundreds of thousands of Asians had been trafficked to these scam centres. Those trapped are forced to work on money laundering, gambling and cryptocurrency frauds in slave-like conditions. Given that thousands of Indians are still said to be trapped, the government must table a white paper giving a clear picture of the solutions worked upon.

THE Ranveer Allahbadia episode has posed some consequential questions on freedom of expression, obscenity, and the extent and nature of restrictions on individual liberty. According to some viewers, Allahbadia's comments on the YouTube show India's Got Latent were laced more with profanities than with humour. Multiple police reports were registered against him in different states. He, in turn, approached the Supreme Court challenging them. The court prevented Allahbadia's arrest, but as a pre-emptive injunction also prohibited him from airing any new content until further orders. This is deeply troubling.

During the hearing, the Supreme Court underlined the need to have a national law on digital content, a suggestion that was readily accepted by the Centre. The Union government is of the view that a new legal framework to regulate content on digital platforms should be evolved. According to the central government, the 'misuse of free speech' on digital platforms calls for stronger laws. Pertinently the Union's move is at the instance of observations from the top court. This situation is extremely problematic.

Freedom of expression is a constitutional imperative. It's not as if a majority of the people on their own will always achieve and maintain it. Had that been the case, totalitarian regimes in the guise of socialism or autocracies disguised as democracies could not have come into being. Many people might opt for the security of 'unfreedom' rather than the uncertainties of freedom.

Many written constitutions understand this historical reality and, therefore, guarantee freedom of expression as an enforceable fundamental right. This is the rationale behind Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, which says that except by way of reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2), a citizen's freedom of thought and expression cannot be curtailed. If a legislation or executive order tends to abrogate this liberty, the constitutional courts will have to scan such action.

There would be many temptations—political or otherwise—for the regime of the day to promulgate draconian laws. As famously said by James Madison and reiterated by Justice Felix Frankfurter of the US Supreme Court, all power is "of an encroaching nature". Therefore, judicial vigilance on curtailment of freedom is the ultimate safeguard in such situations.

On December 1, 1948, Thakur Das

There is no dearth of laws addressing obscenity or profanity. Rather than suggesting more curbs on the freedom of speech, the judiciary should address the laws' overuse and misuse

WHEN JOKES NEED TO BE PROTECTED BY THE CONSTITUTION

KALEESWARAM RAJ

Lawyer, Supreme Court of India



MANDAR PRASAD

Bhargava underlined in the Constituent Assembly the need for the restrictions on freedom to be reasonable. He asked, "Are the destinies of the people of this country and the nationals of this country and their rights to be regulated by the executive and by the legislature, or by the courts?" He held that "the Supreme Court should ultimately be the arbiter and should have the final say" in such situations. He added, "If you put the word 'reasonable' (in the article later numbered 19), you will be giving the courts the final authority to say whether the restrictions put are reasonable."

Two things follow: any restriction on speech should be reasonable, and if it's not, it's for a constitutional court to strike down the unreasonable act.

In *Kaushal Kishor* (2023), the Supreme Court considered whether there could be restrictions on the freedom of speech of public functionaries, other than what is permissible under Article 19(2). The question was correctly answered by the court in the negative. Kaushal Kishor, among other things, dealt with hate speech by political leaders and came down heavily on such acts. Yet, crucially, the basic embargo against additional restrictions was clearly upheld.

During a hearing in *Qurban Ali* (2022), when Justice K M Joseph, who led the bench, was about to suggest more laws to regulate hate speech, the possibility of having more draconian laws and their selective use was highlighted against what fell from the bench. A view ex-

pressed by legal scholar Nadine Strossen in her book *Hate: Why We Should Resist it with Free Speech*—the remedy against hate speech lies in more speech, and not in censorship—was cited by this writer, which the bench graciously accepted.

Criminalising joke or profanity also requires a cautious approach. The judicial restraint shown by the benches in *Kaushal Kishor* and *Qurban Ali* in not suggesting additional regulations should have been a guiding light in the Allahbadia case as well.

It's not as if there is any vacuum in Indian law on obscenity. The Supreme Court in *Ranjit Uteshi* (1964) invoked the Hicklin test based on the potential of the work to deprave or corrupt a vulnerable reader. That led to the endorsement of punishment for possessing or selling D H Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. However, in *Aveek Sarkar* (2014), the court discarded this outdated approach and adopted the community standard test.

Obscenity or profanity is very well addressed by the existing laws in India. Section 67 of the Information Technology Act says that publication or transmission of obscene materials in the electronic form is punishable. Sections 294, 295 and 296 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita also penalise obscene provisions in the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act also are effective. Therefore, the perceived legal vacuum on the topic is a myth, which the top court and the Centre unfortunately failed to appreciate.

Allahbadia's case shows it's not the dearth of laws, but abuse of the existing ones in registering multiple police complaints that's of concern. The misuse, or overuse, of laws is an Indian reality. It has happened in the recent past to victimise political dissidents and journalists who dared to speak truth to power.

The Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita or criminal procedure code permits the registration of multiple police complaints on the same incident, and it is by using the law's indulgence that such complaints are drawn up.

This complex issue requires a judicial solution, which is the real challenge the court will have to take up for consideration in Allahbadia's case. Instead, if the court trends the wrong path by issuing gag orders against those who approach it and instigating the executive or the legislature to come up with additional restrictions, it would be antithetical to the counter-majoritarian role that the constitutional courts are supposed to play.

(Views are personal)
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COST OF INTELLIGENCE: CAN AI SUSTAIN ITSELF?

ADITYA SINHA

Public policy professional

ARTIFICIAL intelligence firms are grappling with significant financial challenges despite rapid growth. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman revealed that his company was losing money on its \$300-a-month ChatGPT Pro subscriptions, as operational costs—estimated at \$700,000 daily—far exceeded revenues. With projected losses of \$5 billion in 2024 against revenues of \$3.7 billion, the company is struggling to sustain the high costs of running advanced AI models while maintaining user accessibility.

This highlights a broader issue in the AI industry: balancing innovation, scalability and profitability in a sector where resource consumption grows exponentially with usage, necessitating constant recalibration of business models.

The substantial costs incurred by AI companies are deeply rooted in the computational and infrastructural demands of training and deploying large-scale AI models. Training state-of-the-art models like GPT involves processing vast datasets to fine-tune billions of parameters. This process requires extensive use of high-performance hardware deployed in large clusters to manage millions of simultaneous interactions. The computational workload requires significant energy, often measured in terawatt-hours, with estimates for training some of the largest models reaching tens of millions of dollars per iteration.

The cost of inference—serving user queries—adds a layer of complexity. Live deployment requires robust cloud infrastructure with low-latency response times to handle millions of simultaneous interactions. This necessitates investments in scalable storage systems, data pipelines and load-balancing mechanisms alongside geographically distributed data centres.

Additional expenses arise from the need for continuous updates of these models. Companies invest heavily in algorithmic refinements such as reinforcement learning and prompt engineering to improve performance and adapt to evolving user requirements for safety, fairness and ethical compliance also require ongoing research, testing and implementation.

Data preprocessing—cleaning, labelling and augmenting datasets used for model training—constitutes a significant portion of the costs. This is often coupled with the cost of acquiring proprietary data.

To manage this ecosystem, AI companies often invest in dedicated engineering

the mechanisms through which AI agents prioritise decisions.

Users are excluded from understanding the transactional dynamics influencing the AI's choices, undermining the principle of informed consent and limiting their ability to make autonomous decisions. This lack of transparency raises concerns about moral autonomy, as articulated in Kantian ethics, which emphasises the necessity of preserving individual agency.

This model commodifies the decision-making process of AI by monetising its attention. It transforms a supposedly objective process into one influenced by financial incentives. This introduces a market logic to what should ideally be a rational, unbiased process, undermining the philosophical ideal of AI as a tool for informed decision-making and fairness.

While users are spared direct exposure to ads, their decisions about what to use are compromised. Users rely on the AI agent's choices without knowing the extent to which vendor-paid inputs shape these decisions. This creates a sort of paternalism where choices are made on behalf of individuals in ways they cannot scrutinise.

If vendor payments influence decisions, the moral responsibility for potential harm becomes blurred. This raises philosophical questions about who is ethically accountable—the AI developers, the vendors or the system itself.

While companies will strive to monetise their AI models, achieving this goal is far more complex than it appears. Models that prioritise revenue through vendor-driven advertising or transactional risks risk alienating users if they perceive the AI as biased. These strategies often encounter operational challenges such as ensuring transparency, avoiding monopolies and complying with regulations designed to protect consumer rights.

Successfully monetising AI requires innovative approaches that align financial incentives with user satisfaction, fairness, and long-term sustainability, making the process more about ethical and technical ingenuity than business acumen.

(Views are personal)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@morningstandard.in

School reforms

Ref: Overhaul residential schools for poor kids (Mar 11). The alarming state of residential schools in Odisha demands urgent attention. The lack of medical care, unhygienic conditions, and sheer negligence have turned these institutions into death traps for underprivileged students. The government must act immediately to reform these schools to protect the future of our nation.
Aman Aditya, Ranchi

Teacher's responsibility

The cheap values that are often deep rooted among tribal girls are that getting married is more luxurious than studying. Even teachers are unwilling to take revolutionary steps to push those potential scientists, sport persons, doctors, etc. Teachers should be reminded of their responsibility so our nation does not lose native talents.
Tejaswini Nayak, Semilguda

Unnecessary comment

Ref: Fiery Day One as language row explodes in Lok Sabha (Mar 11). I don't think the implementation of the National Education Policy should be mandatory. The new approach could be optional. Our country follows the confederation style of governance. The comment of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan about 'Tamil Nadu being undemocratic' is unnecessary and unacceptable.
Kevin Joseph, Nagore

Political gimmick

In Tamil Nadu, Dravidian parties oppose national policies in general and the Hindi language in particular. The ruling DMK in TN seems to be politicising the three-language policy in order to derive mileage. This is unbefitting of a progressive party like the DMK.
Gowdham Mynedu, Jayawada

Canada ties

Ref: Canada PM-elect to reset India ties (Mar 11). The PM-elect of Canada, Mark Carney, has expressed his intentions to mend fences with India. Much water has already flowed under the bridge, so his new government has to push the envelope to narrow the chasm between Indo-Canada relations.

Deepak Singhal, Noida

Challenging path
It is a welcome initiative that Canadian PM-elect Carney is all set to renew the deteriorating ties with India. Though he has a promising start, he faces a raft of challenging tasks internally and externally. He has to work on Canada's wobbly economy as well as US President Donald Trump's massive tariff against his nation's goods.
Rajamani Chelladurai, Tirunelveli

Deflated dreams

China bets on tech to avoid slowdown

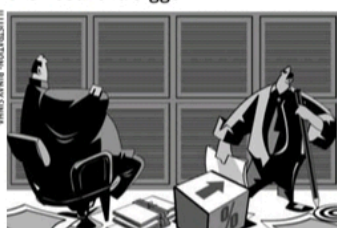
The weeklong National People's Congress of the Chinese Communist Party this year was — as it usually is — a celebration of President Xi Jinping's leadership. The optimism on display might sit somewhat awkwardly with the rest of the economic news out of China, however. Deflationary pressure has become difficult to ignore, with prices falling for consumers over the first months of the year, signalling that demand is still weak and overcapacity a problem. This follows two years in which broad measures of prices appear to have slipped into deflationary territory. Questions about the excess capacity in the economy will become even more urgent as and when various trade restrictions and tariffs promised by the new administration in the United States begin to bite. The government has been quite sanguine in public about the tariffs, indicating that domestic issues take precedence — but that confidence should be dismissed. In this case, external factors will only intensify domestic structural problems, which have been building up for some time. Growth targets of 5 per cent and inflation targets of 2 per cent, therefore, seem quite ambitious. Sectors that continue to be dependent on Chinese prices and production — such as metals exports from India — will need to be revalued.

Analysts are already beginning to discuss the possible "Japanification" of China, referencing the long, deflationary stagnation that plagued the Japanese economy after its boom years ended in the early 1990s. In 1990s Japan, as in China, this period was extended by a property market, which overextended itself and did not wind itself up in a timely manner. About \$18 trillion in wealth may have been lost by Chinese households thanks to its real estate troubles, meaning that it will take a long while for consumer demand to revive. There is thus little sign of resolution of the macroeconomic imbalance between production and domestic demand, which is central to China's current problems. In real terms, this means that capital is being misallocated on an enormous scale. Firms are maintaining or expanding capacity and production even when they are only marginally profitable or even loss-making. Deflation also encourages people to save rather than spend — which, together with restrictions on capital mobility, simply adds to the pile of misallocated capital.

The logical way for Mr Xi to address this issue would be to free up capital mobility, allow for some unprofitable but politically connected producers to go under, and reduce the political constraints on spending and investment by households and the private sector. However, these are not choices that the government is willing to make. Nor is it wise to address this problem as similar issues in the past have been handled, through a vast fiscal stimulus — since that would merely add to overcapacity. Thus, Mr Xi has chosen a third path, which was visible during the National People's Congress. Political attention and resources are being poured into technological endeavours, in the hope that this will boost productivity and ensure Chinese leadership in the industries and exports of the future. In 2021, investment in research and development in China was only 16 per cent less than in the US. With recent cuts in government spending in the US, and sharp budgetary increases in China, the lead might be wiped out. Mr Xi clearly believes that tech leadership can dig China out of what otherwise might be a decades-long deflationary spiral.

Waiting for better statistics

The latest round of GDP data revisions underlines the need for a bigger fix



About a year ago, the National Statistical Office (NSO) of the Union government announced what was certainly a much-delayed and much-needed statistical reform. Instead of releasing about half a dozen versions to estimate the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and its components, the NSO decided to release only five such iterations. The wait for knowing the final estimate of the country's economic growth was, therefore, reduced from three years to two. The decision to reduce the number and duration of these revisions was implemented starting with the GDP data for 2021-22, with its final estimate becoming available by the end of February 2024, against the earlier wait that would have lasted till February 2025.

Statisticians across the spectrum welcomed this decision, though questions remained about why the timeline for releasing a given year's GDP data and the number of revisions couldn't be reduced further. After all, many countries finalise their GDP data with fewer iterations within a year. In India, one of the reasons for a three-year wait for producing the final GDP figure was that many state-owned enterprises and government agencies took a long time in supplying the final data for their economic activities. By February 2024, the NSO, it seemed, had succeeded in persuading these entities to expedite the process.

But has the NSO been able to address another key area of concern — a disturbing variation in the different GDP estimates for the same year? To be sure, this has been a cause for concern for years. As the accompanying chart shows, the variations over these GDP iterations have moved in both directions, with the final estimate being lower as well as higher than the first estimate. Since the launch of the new GDP series data in January 2015, when the base year was changed to 2011-12, the different iterations of growth figures for nine years from 2014-15 to 2022-23 reveal an intriguing trend.

During this period, the final growth number compared with the First Advance Estimate (FAE) improved by over 1.2 to 1.9 percentage points in two years (2016-17 and 2020-21), saw a marginal increase of 0.3 to 0.6 percentage points in four years (2015-16, 2017-18, 2021-22 and 2022-23), and a deterioration of 0.7 to 1.1 percentage points in two years (2018-19 and 2019-20). In only one year — 2014-15 — was there no divergence between the growth numbers in the FAE and the final estimate.

The government explanation for such divergence has invariably been that updates to data from many sectors caused these changes in the final estimates.

The sharp improvement in the final GDP number over the FAE for the Covid year of 2020-21 can perhaps be understood, as institutional capacity to furnish data on time was seriously constrained. But there could be no such justification for the data divergence of about half a percentage point in each of the following two years. Equally striking, if not puzzling, was the sharp upward revision of the GDP figure for the demonetisation year of 2016-17 — from 7.1 per cent in the FAE to 8.3 per cent in the final estimate.

The downward revision in GDP numbers in 2018-19 raises an interesting question, as this pertains to a period just before the general elections of 2019. The FAE of GDP in 2018-19 was released in January 2019, a few months before the elections, and was pegged at 7.2 per cent. Three years later, the final number showed the growth to be much lower at 6.5 per cent. A similar story was repeated in 2019-20, when the FAE of 5 per cent, released in January 2020, ended up at 3.9 per cent in the final estimate.

It would appear that the final GDP estimate is often higher than the FAE when the economy is in reasonably decent shape. The reverse happens when the economy is not doing well. Perhaps over-optimism in a year when the chips are down influences the eco-

nomics agencies to present or project numbers that eventually are not achieved because of economic headwinds. Critics will also argue that in national election years there could be a natural tendency, on the part of state-owned entities, to project a rosier growth prospect than what the ground reality may justify.

Whatever may be the reasons for such sharp divergences, they seem to be taking place quite consistently and irrespective of whether the year in question is one of strong or weak growth. That was once again borne out by last month's release of the latest GDP numbers for 2023-24. In fact, the extent of divergence has increased, raising even more questions.

On February 28, 2025, the NSO released the First Revised Estimate (FRE) of GDP for 2023-24, which is the penultimate round of data releases before the final one. The FRE placed GDP growth for 2023-24 at 9.2 per cent, up from 8.2 per cent in the previous iteration — the Provisional Estimate released seven months earlier at the end of May 2024. And compared with the FAE of 7.3 per cent, released in January 2024, the FRE for GDP growth in 2023-24 was 1.9 percentage points higher. Even the Second Advance Estimate for 2024-25 showed GDP growth to be slightly higher at 6.5 per cent, compared to 6.4 per cent in the FAE.

Such sharp variations were attributed to upward revisions for both demand-side and supply-side components at the end of May 2024. Usually, the manufacturing sector data is revised based on returns from the unorganised sector and medium as well as small industrial units. Does this mean a revival in the medium and small industrial sector? Note that these sharp revisions took place over just about a year and in four iterations of the GDP numbers.

From a public finance perspective, these revisions improved the Centre's fiscal consolidation performance. Instead of 5.6 per cent of GDP, the fiscal deficit for 2023-24 was now lower at 5.5 per cent. And for 2024-25, the fiscal deficit was now further down from 4.8 per cent to 4.7 per cent of GDP, making the target of 4.4 per cent for 2025-26 look far less daunting. Even the Modi government's average annual growth performance in its second term suddenly looked better — from 7.1 per cent, compared to 4.6 per cent based on earlier estimates.

These changes are now noticeable as the NSO has significantly revised its GDP estimates. Of course, some degree of revisions cannot be ruled out. But if the revisions are large enough to alter the assessment of the government's growth performance or its fiscal consolidation record, then questions over data reliability will be raised, making the task of managing the economy more onerous and undermining the need for reform of the country's statistical system. If such reforms can lead to fewer revisions with smaller or very marginal variations over a shorter time period, then they should be prioritised without any delay.

Improving competitiveness

MSP benefits remain concentrated

Minimum support price (MSP) has been an integral part of India's agricultural policy. While it is driven by a well-intentioned effort to ensure food security and safeguard farmers from price risks, it has also had unintended consequences such as less than desired crop diversification and environmental degradation in some parts of the country. While there is a need to boost farm income, a legally enforced MSP, which some farm groups are demanding, may not be the best solution. This may disrupt price discovery and skew production further, among other consequences. Besides, it is not an effective measure to protect farm income. A recent study by the ICAR-National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research concludes that the outreach of MSP remains limited. The findings indicate that only 15 per cent of paddy and 9.6 per cent of wheat farmers engage with the procurement system. Moreover, it remains confined to mostly large farmers. Small and marginal farmers, despite producing 53.6 per cent of paddy and 45 per cent of wheat, have low participation in public procurement. The direct relationship between participation in the MSP-backed procurement system and farm size arises because small and marginal farmers are likely to have low awareness about the procurement system, and are often constrained by their limited scale of production.

Other complexities associated with MSP include a large fiscal outlay, over-production of water-intensive crops, and inadequate storage infrastructure. For improving farm income, it is important to make sure that markets work well. This involves investing in physical infrastructure and facilitating the building of efficient value chains, which minimise the price gap between farm and fork. To protect farmers from price fluctuation, which is always a risk, the above-mentioned study calls for upscaling the price-deficiency payments, whereby farmers are compensated for the difference between MSP and lower market prices. While this aims to reorient the MSP policy away from procurement towards acting as more of an income instrument, its implementation is also fraught with problems. In the past, Madhya Pradesh experimented with the policy, called Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana, but had to give up after just one season. As agricultural economist Ashok Gulati has pointed out, the policy can push market prices even lower, with farmers and traders colluding to show market prices much lower than the MSP. This can increase pressure on the exchequer.

Clearly, there are no easy answers. Nonetheless, what India needs is to incentivise private procurement, promote crop diversification, and focus on agricultural research. Derivative markets in agri-commodities may also help stakeholders hedge against market uncertainties and price risks. India needs free markets and strong agri-value chains where farmers get a large share of what consumers pay. As has been argued by experts, growth in the sector is mainly driven by non-MSP products. There is a need to build on these successes and shift production with the changing demand patterns. Government intervention in terms of price support and deficiency payments, which have limitations in terms of reach and effectiveness, will not be able to support the sector permanently. Given the increasing pressure to open up the agri market to trade, all stakeholders, including the government, need to look for ways to improve competitiveness.

Streaming's rush for reach

The "linearisation" of streaming has begun in earnest. On April 1, Netflix will start streaming its Wednesday Entertainment, or WWE, in India. This, stated, somewhat exaggerated, promotional wrestling drew about 50 million Indians in 2019. Netflix is banking on this "sports entertainment" show, among others, to ramp up its reach (47 million currently) and subscribers (15 million) in the country. Its core remains premium shows such as *Deli Crime* or *Black Widow*. But the last two years have seen it being in *The Great*, *Indian Idol*, *Maandaz Legend*, *The Great Rivalry* — *India vs Pakistan*, and WWE in its attempts to reach the masses.

Amazon, meanwhile, is expanding content and pricing options across the board to reach every language and income class. Amazon Prime Video began offering other OTT brands such as Lionsgate and manoramax on its platform in 2021. The tally is 25 now. It also offers 8,500 movie titles on rent. In September 2024, it acquired MX Player from Times Internet. Amazon MX Player unveiled a slate of 100 new shows last month with a guarantee that the service will remain free.

SonyLIV, home for cerebral shows such as *Rocket Boys* and *Freedom at Midnight*, is using non-fiction fare like *Shark Tank* and *Million Dollar Listing* to get to more people. The recent season 4 of *Shark Tank* has seen its reach double across 15+ OTT platforms.

Another large OTT has been (reportedly) asking producers to cook up 100-episode series instead of a 7-10 episode series. Many now stagger episodes in a new season to keep the audience coming or they drop the latest in a show at a fixed time, to encourage appointment viewing, a la TV. Note that habit and appointment make for good advertising rates, much like TV.

The irony is hard to ignore. As the Indian streaming

market moves to its next phase of growth, it is becoming exactly like broadcasting. Growth is about more languages, more programming, cheaper product variants and plenty of free stuff.

Much of this, however, is inevitable. In 2024, India's entire streaming video business was worth around ₹3,600 crore, with over ₹1,000 crore spent on producing shows and acquiring films. Not surprisingly, no service — except perhaps YouTube — made money.

Eight years after SVoD or subscription video-on-demand took off, the state of the market is spelt out, for India had 125 million OTT subscribers in 2024, according to Media Partners Asia data. That amounts to a reach of about 375 million viewers.

If streaming has to make money in India, it needs to reach all the screens that Indians are on — the 650 million on smartphones, 900 million on television, 200 million on connected TVs. These figures are not discrete, there is a lot of overlap among them. If you take 900 million as the base market, streaming has a long way to go. YouTube, the largest service, reached 454 million people in December 2024, according to eMarketer data. Meta's Instagram was at 324 million. At a distant number three is JioHotstar (JioCinema+Disney+Hotstar) with 188 million unique visitors. All the others, Zee5, SonyLIV, Amazon Prime Video, Netflix are in the 20-50 million range.

Clearly, the top-end metro market is maturing. It is time to go lower down the pyramid into the middle and lower tiers. This is free, ad-supported and user-generated content territory. This is where Google's YouTube, Meta's Instagram, and the state-controlled DD FreeDish, with free channels like Dangal and Goldmines, rule. Much of this then explains the emphasis on free and the obsession with popular themes. *The Great Rivalry* — *India vs Pakistan* is the kind of show you might want to see as a filler on a sports channel. Ditto for the WWE. But if you know

that for Netflix, the fastest growth in new subscribers, has been coming from its basic pack priced at ₹199 a month, then the case for the middle and lower tiers is a global reality. Every major SVoD service has introduced an ad-tier. Last year, 24 per cent of SVoD revenues in America came from the ad-tier, according to an Omnia report.

This raises the question: Will premium programming get watered down to pay OTT? Programming budgets have been stagnant for two years now. As the same budget is stretched over more shows, worries about quality are real.

They may be misplaced for one simple reason — the context has been set. Indian broadcasting never saw its "HBO" moment with premium shows such as *Game of Thrones* or *Succession* because price regulation on TV completely stifled it. On streaming, the contextual budget, the one which sets the benchmark, has been good original programming. It shows such as *Pastal Lok* (Amazon Prime Video) or *Scam* (SonyLIV) that get new, paying subscribers. It is the promise of shows such as *Squad Game* that has ensured the success of the ad tier that Netflix has introduced in 12 markets across the world (excluding India) in 2022. A basic quality of storytelling is non-negotiable. Take a look at the originals Amazon MX Player unveiled earlier this year — *Bhay*, *Mitti*, *Who's Your Gynae*. They look and feel like well-written and cast shows, albeit with different production values. The *Viral Fever* or *TVF* has some of the most successful shows — *Punchyapatti*, *Gulab* — on streaming. But many of its big hits, *Kota Factory*, for instance, began on YouTube in 2019 but they were low-cost and the big OTT didn't want them. But not all series can or want to take a series that cost a crore an episode. A good story, told at the right cost, will work. Vijay Koshly, president TVF, compares the firm to a Maruti car. "It is not fancy but it does its job, is reliable and cost effective."

That is what the business needs to hit scale and profitability.

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Bofors: Behind the smoking gun



BOOK REVIEW

ADITI PHADNIS

It is no exaggeration that the 1980s and 90s in Indian politics were the decades of the Bofors saga. Allegations of a ₹64 crore bribe in a ₹1,437 crore deal. On March 24, 1986, Rajiv Gandhi approved the proposal to give Swedish armaments giant AB Bofors, the contract to sell India 155mm towed guns, popularly described as having "shoot and scoot" capabilities. In April 1987, Swedish state radio broadcast that Sweden won the contract only after paying bribes to senior Indian politicians and others in four instalments to accounts in Swiss banks. This was confirmed by the Swedish National Audit Bureau, which said Svenska, the front company belonging to Wapshar (W) Chadha,

was paid commissions. Others were named but as large parts of the report were redacted, we do not know at whose request. From a reporter — an Indian based in Switzerland — who didn't know what a "howitzer" was when she began reporting on the sale of Bofors guns to India, Chitra Subramaniam has made a household name for her investigation into this scandal.

Yet still don't know the identity of all the beneficiaries of the Bofors pay-offs. Ms Subramaniam says, because of the reluctance of successive Congress and non-Congress governments to upset Gandhi apple carts, which resulted in several boxes of evidence given by the Swedish and Swiss governments lying unopened in the Central Bureau of Investigation offices. The case was closed in 2011. She reveals for the first time in this book the name of one of her whistleblowers, the Swedish head of police, Sten Lindstrom, who was conducting the Bofors investigations and supplied her with enormous amounts of written evidence, including the diaries of

Bofors Managing Director, Martin Ardbo. The most shocking information was that senior Indian bureaucrats had "tutored" Bofors officials at a "secret meeting" in 1987 on "how to absolve them Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of all blame". It was a 15-page agreed-upon summary of how to hide corruption, how to handle with my investigations as I made progress, and, above all, how to absolve PM Rajiv Gandhi of all blame. These discussions were held in the Ministry of Defence on 15, 16, and 17 September 1987," she writes.

The book reveals the role of Arun Nehru; and the government's attempts to frame Anitabh Bachchan. She goes under pressure to find evidence that linked one of the pay-off accounts as Bachchan's. She describes his visit to her home with wife Jaya, after she refused to write stories that suggested he was a recipient of commissions (he helped her mother-in-law buy the dinner table). The government itself diluted requests to seek information from Switzerland.

Ms Subramaniam's struggles as a reporter, a wife, and a young mother are

poignant. "Four years into my marriage, I had a baby just as the scandal broke. I raised our son from feeding bottles, Pampers, mashed apples and trust calls from India. As I juggled my marriage against the biggest story of my career and my country's contemporary history, questions ran amok through my mind," she writes.

As editors she worked with collected awards for investigations she had done, while colluding with the very people they had vowed to "expose", Ms Subramaniam says she found friends in the unlikely places: Some fellow journalists, whistleblowers in Switzerland and Sweden, helpful lawyers, *au pairs* and many who are nameless in the book. These were dangerous. She had to hide her identity and anonymous calls and smashed car windows. The brakes in her car failed and were found to be tampered with. Explicit death threats to her baby son were made

over trunk calls from India. On one occasion, a Ms Donovan from the UK tried to deposit money in her bank account. In parallel, the book details another case of corruption — the purchase of the HDW submarines from Germany. The investigation of which also came to naught. Earlier this week, Christian Michel James, the alleged middleman in the AgustaWestland VVIP chopper

scandal, refused to accept bail, calling Delhi an "unsafe" place for him. He has been in prison for six and a half years for a crime that has seven years maximum punishment. His trial hasn't even begun. It does make you wonder.

Ms Subramaniam's book goes deep into the complex financial network of companies that were involved in the money was lodged. She unearthed the linkages at a time when there were no mobile phones or internet, and negligible institutional support. That

she could unearth so much information is testament to her passion as a reporter.

Despite all that, her book is occasionally confusing. She writes that Martin Ardbo was on the flight that was carrying Rajiv Gandhi and Swedish PM Olaf Palme. Which flight? From where? She writes that Ardbo, seated within hearing distance of both men, smiled to himself. He reckoned the contract was a done deal. But how do we know this? In the next paragraph, she writes: "We still don't know what terms were discussed on the flight".

There are small but jarring errors. The joint secretary in the ministry of defence who was part of the secret meeting to tutor Bofors was not K Banerji but T K Banerji. The Bofors deal was a scam, not the grant to the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation managed by Manmohan Singh in his first Budget was not ₹1,000 crore but ₹100 crore. And it was not "S Chandrasekhar" who became Prime Minister after VP Singh but Chandrasekhar. The occasional confusing, the book is truthful and unsparring even when it comes to examining her own motivations. All reporters must learn from it and all Indians must read it.