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[OUR TAKE]

Targeting the RS chairperson

The move against the vice president is the fallout of a breakdown in communication between the treasury and Opposition benches

The unprecedented move by the INDIA bloc to oust the vice president (VP) and Rajya Sabha chairman, Jagdeep Dhankhar, on charges of being partisan, will likely fail because its motion will fall well short of the required 50% (116 votes) to do so (it has only 86), but the real story is not the numbers but the message in the move. And this is a message of distrust between the treasury and Opposition benches (across Parliament and not just the upper House), and the increased scrutiny and criticism constitutional posts (including the governors of states) have come under in an environment characterised by extreme polarisation.

The Opposition has been threatening this for a few sessions but held its hand. Now that it has chosen to act, Mr Dhankhar becomes the first VP to face an ouster attempt, and the effects of this notice — sure to be defeated if put to vote — will be far-reaching and long-lasting. For starters, it will further damage the relations between the Chair and the Opposition. The target of a no-confidence motion will have to be a saint to forget the ignominy of facing one, and saints are in short supply these days. Second, the move threatens to diminish and question the authority of the Rajya Sabha Chair, an independent institution.

Running the Rajya Sabha has never been an easy task, and the polarised state of politics inside and outside Parliament has not made Mr Dhankhar's job any easier. If the ruling alliance believes that its majority allows it the privilege to dominate Parliament, the Opposition, buoyed by better-than-before numbers in this Lok Sabha (and healthy numbers in the upper house), has been equally aggressive in confronting the treasury benches. Both sides have carried the viciousness of poll campaigns into the House. Both have responsibilities to Parliament that they have ignored: The government must convince the Opposition of adequate opportunities for debate and dialogue; and the Opposition must focus on constructive criticism, aimed at bettering the lot of Indians. Floor managers across parties have failed to persuade leaders across the aisle to sit together and build a climate of trust to enable debate on sensitive subjects. And if the government has used the strength of numbers to suppress the Opposition's voice, then the latter has made Parliament a show-and-tell session, replete with T-shirts and masks, lowering the seriousness of the very issues it wants to flag before the nation. It would take superhuman skills to chair a House marked by these, and those, again, are in short supply these days. Unless the government and the Opposition can figure out a way to break the jam — the coming discussion on the Constitution may be an opportunity for that, and there appears to have been a mini-breakthrough at least in the Lower House — expect more bad blood in the Rajya Sabha, even after the storm over the Opposition's notice for the motion has passed.

A timely push for the digital rupee

Moving to the digital rupee — India's central bank digital currency (CBDC) — for subsidy payments, a course the Centre is considering, could deliver multiple benefits. For one, this will help familiarise large chunks of the population with the rupee's digital form, which remains rather "niche" at present. And, as this newspaper has reported, given that it can be tied to a specific end-use and deadline, the government can ensure against the abuse of the transferred amount as also take care of any lag in consumption, which can be the case with cash transfers to accounts. Then, there are the cost savings and transaction efficiencies — in terms of currency printing, storage, handling and damage losses avoided — that will accrue from such a transition.

The impact of such moves on the digital currency space is no less significant. CBDCs have become a geopolitical and security imperative amid the rising weaponisation of global reserve currencies and the explosion of private digital currencies, including cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin. CBDCs — the digital imprint of physical fiat currencies — offer stability and certainty for cross-border transactions in such scenarios. From the security point of view, they carry some of the benefits of decentralised digital currencies without the attendant risks, such as becoming instruments of illegal transactions and financing.

Against this backdrop, attempts to expand use cases — subsidy payments being a good example — are an important step forward; the economy can neither lock itself away from the gains of such innovations nor suffer vulnerabilities to the risks emerging from these.

What ails the health insurance industry

Deny, delay, and depose pave the way for insurance company profits and widespread policyholder anger

Monika Halan

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Understandably, a rush of sympathy for the victim and her/his family, as it should. But the murder of Brian Thompson, CEO of UnitedHealthcare, on a New York street on December 4, 2024, instead brought to the surface the simmering public anger against insurance firms which "deny, delay and depose" as a strategy to avoid claims to earn higher profits. In fact, these words were found on the bullet casings used by the assailant who has now been caught.

Thompson led the largest health insurance firm in the United States (data from [investor.com/news/8](https://www.investor.com/news/8)) with 2023 revenues of almost \$360 billion. Other than being the largest company, it is also known as the one with the highest claim denials, denying, as per ValuePenguin, 32% of all claims whereas the best company denied just 7% (data from [investor.com/news/8](https://www.investor.com/news/8)).

Social media comments play on standard responses in customer care when one tries to reach a health insurance firm, with one person tweeting: "I submitted a claim for my condyloma but it was denied". However, no amount of public anger, misplaced or otherwise, can ever justify the murder

or the criminal intent behind it.

Closer home, data on health insurance claims in the Indian market has also put the issue centre stage. Data for 2023 from the Insurance Brokers Association of India (IBAI) shows some worrying claim trends for health insurance (report here: tinyurl.com/42mydxc8). There are two main inferences from the data. First, the public-sector firms are far more consumer-friendly in terms of their claims record than private-sector firms. Worse, a few private health insurers have very poor claims behaviour. All four PSU firms paid more than 70% of the amount claimed, with New India paying 98.74% of the amount claimed and Oriental Insurance paying 87.37%. Four private-sector firms have ratios above 80%, with SBI General paying the highest in the private sector at 88.30% of the amount claimed. Eleven private-sector firms paid less than 70% of the amount claimed, with Star Health right at the bottom with just 54.6% of the amount claimed paid.

The second is that it seems some firms are playing with reporting standards to look better than they are. The data determines the importance of data claims by the number of policies and claims by the amount paid. Take the case of Star Health for example. It pays a healthy 75.10% of claims by number of policies, but a very poor 54.6% by amount. This could point to a firm paying off the lower value claims playbook to deny, delay, and depose without a deny, delay, and depose playbook to get the claims

number up, but dragging their heels when it comes to higher value claims. It could also point to fine print in policies that allow firms to get away with lower claim amounts. For example, a sub-limit on room rent will restrict what the policy pays out if the room rent is higher during the hospitalisation.

The data points to the fact that the insurance regulator, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) is unable to get all health insurers to play fair with the customers. Health insurance is a business where the claims amount should not be higher than the premiums gathered by an insurance company as that will lead to insolvency of the firm. Similarly, a claims ratio of lower than 60% points to consumer gouging that will trigger mandatory refunds to policyholders in the United States (US). But India does not have such a regulation in place. Worse, despite having such poor claims ratios, firms are allowed to rack up premiums year after year.

Insurance companies point to fraud as one of the reasons for the low claims. While frauds are a real problem, possibly the worst-performing ones can learn from the better-performing ones on how to deal with fraud. As a first step, IRDAI must ask insurers to disclose their claims ratio in amount (and not the number of policies) for each policy sold at the point of sale. They need to reach out to their



While insurance firms and hospitals have the legal and operational muscle to deal with each other, the patient and policyholder suffers a double hit

existing customers with the latest claim number. Customers should be allowed to port their policies to another insurer that displays a better claims experience. IRDAI must not get bullied into the threat of insolvency that insurance firms routinely use when the regulator presses the consumer protection pot just a bit. This is an old trick of the financial sector that banks earlier have used to keep costs high and service standards low. Both life and health firms use the same threat of if-you-push-me-too-hard-I-will-roll-over-and-dead. The threat is that policyholders will be hurt and a failure can trigger a larger crisis. IRDAI can counter it by revoking the license and enforcing a ban on business for a decade rather than blink.

But there is a deeper problem to be solved that is beyond IRDAI. Health insurance is a contract between three parties — the policyholder, the insurance company, and the hospital. The hospital is an unregulated entity with no caps on costs in this equation. That many hospitals perform surgeries that are not needed is a well-known fact, as is the experience of being overcharged. During the Covid-19 pandemic, one

health insurance analyst shared that some hospitals were billing each customer for the hazaar suit the doctor and nurses wore, while they were the same suit for all the patients. But if there were 50 patients, the hospital billed the same suit 50 times.

While insurance firms and hospitals have the legal and operational muscle to deal with each other, the patient and policyholder suffers a double hit. Government hospitals are mostly dysfunctional with some notable exceptions and private health care is expensive. But when hospitals overcharge and insurance firms do not pay, there is nowhere the patient and policyholder can turn to. They will cut consumption, dip into their savings or take loans. All of which, at a macro level, are bad for the health of the economy. The government needs to form a task force to think through the problem with an integral approach rather than deal with it in the silos of the health and finance ministries.

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

Could Trump as president accelerate de-dollarisation?

De-dollarisation, or the ongoing efforts by many (if not most) countries to reduce dependence on the United States (US) dollar, is not a new phenomenon. At various points in the past when US government debt threatened to explode, there would be talk of de-dollarisation and efforts to find a substitute — all to no avail. However, the dollar's share of global reserves has been volatile, falling from nearly 80% in 1970 to below 58% in 1980 and further to an all-time low of 47% in 1990. It rose to 71% in 1999 before falling again, to about 58-59% in 2020.

With the birth of the euro in 1999, there was a period when it was thought that, perhaps, this could provide a reasonable avenue of diversification for central banks, both from an economic and geopolitical perspective. However, it is clear that the euro is but a shadow of what was expected.

Nonetheless, the effort to find an alternative to dollar hegemony continues, accelerating after the G7, under US direction, sanctioned Russia after it invaded Ukraine, by cutting it off from SWIFT, the global settlement system. In recent years, as China loudly climbed to its position as the second-largest economy, the renminbi (RMB) was seen for a time as a possible alternative to the dollar. However, despite its positives — highest volume of underlying physical trade, increasing trading and settlement volumes, large number of bilateral treaties, and a remarkably large bond market (\$8 trillion versus the much older US market of \$30 trillion) — there are major countervailing negatives, primarily that the currency is not convertible and remains in thrall to the Chinese government, which means that no oligarch or corporate giant worth his/her salt would ever think of maintaining any wealth in the RMB. Thus, although the RMB has made significant strides in becoming globalised, it remains a poor relative of the dollar in the larger scheme of things.

However, the discomfort with the dollar continues. In 2022, global central banks bought 1,138 tonnes of gold (worth \$70 billion) in an effort to diversify from the dollar, the highest annual purchase since these were first recorded in 1950. And it appears that these purchases have continued to rise in 2024. This, despite the fact that gold has limitations as a store of value since it earns no return and actually entails a storage cost.



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In all this, it is important to recognise that, in addition to managing the potential geopolitical threat, there is another critical element at play — the cost of short-term borrowings, particularly for trade finance.

Since early 2022 — coincidentally the same time as Russia's invasion of Ukraine — the US one-year Treasury-Bill yield shot up from near-zero to over 5%, at the same time, Chinese Treasuries yielded around 2%. This has been pushing companies, particularly those trading with China, to prefer RMB-denominated debt (to 5-denominated) in trade finance transactions.

The rise in US rates was obviously the result of the Federal Reserve trying to bring inflation, which had scooted away from right beneath its nose, under control. On the other side, the Chinese economy is crying out in pain, pressuring the government to ease the real estate sector and ailing (in the real standards) growth, which has kept interest rates subdued.

Another factor that has been pushing against debt is the de-dollarisation drive, which has led to a squeeze in dollar liquidity, particularly in emerging markets. A blog from the Atlantic Council points out that "higher rates increased the value of debt, which in turn determined the importance of dollar liquidity, particularly in emerging markets. A blog from the Atlantic Council points out that "higher rates increased the value of debt, which in turn determined the importance of dollar liquidity, particularly in emerging markets. A blog from the Atlantic Council points out that "higher rates increased the value of debt, which in turn determined the importance of dollar liquidity, particularly in emerging markets."

With Donald Trump having taken dramatic charge with a flurry of appointments and announcements, it seems quite clear that inflation is being targeted, and the Fed is likely to remain high. Tariffs are an odds-on bet to lead to higher prices; reducing the number of workers in an economy (albeit illegal ones) will reduce the supply of labour, again increasing prices; and of course, tax cuts will only serve to increase the deficit, leading to higher inflation (yet again).

Thus, it seems likely that US interest rates are not going to subside sweetly and quietly as many seem to expect. It is possible that Trump may even try to push the Fed into doing his bidding — viz, lowering rates even if they are not ready. But that would have the impact of increasing volatility in the US debt markets and, possibly, a collapse in US equities.

On the other side (again), there are many analysts who fear that China may be heading for a long Japan-style period of low to possibly negative inflation, which means that interest rates there may actually fall from current levels. Thus, the interest rate differential will remain strongly in favour of borrowing in RMB, and the longer it persists, the more the number of companies flocking to this new deal in town. This tail will likely wag the dog as more central banks reduce their dollar holdings in favour of other alternatives.

Of course, none of this means that the dollar will really go down of favour — it's just that de-dollarisation is an ongoing process as the rest of the world goes along.

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MOHAMMAD AL-BASHIR | SYRIA'S TRANSITIONAL PM

My appeal to all Syrians abroad is Syria is now a free country that has earned its pride and dignity. Come back. We must rebuild, be reborn

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A Maharashtra primer for Mahayuti leadership

The poll grand slam in Maharashtra will certainly warm the cockles of the BJP's heart; but the phenomenal Vidhan Sabha tally raises several issues which the BJP strategists need to address before getting down to the nitty-gritty of governance in Mantralaya, the seat of administration, in south Mumbai. Any plan by the BJP to tweak Maharashtra's socio-cultural agenda, the Maharashtra dharm, which transcends caste and caste, will trigger tensions in the Mahayuti alliance and shatter the state's inclusive character. For a start, the BJP's central leadership needs to give up scanning Maharashtra through its North-centric lens.

Deeply ingrained in the state's cultural consciousness, the hoary Maharashtra dharm has been deepened by medieval saint-poets; the multiple *sampradaya*s — for instance, the Nath and the Varkari sect which preached harmony and compassion, the fiercely fought Maratha-Mughal wars, the 20th-century social crusades which culminated in the Samyaktva Maharashtra Samiti's prolonged struggle in the 1950s to create a separate linguistic state for Marathi with Mumbai as its capital. The Samiti leaders were allied with Jawaharlal Nehru for his proposal to turn Bombay (as the city was then known) into a Union territory. The confrontation assumed the proportions of an epic Marathi *dharm*, he said. A senior state BJP functionary said that this party would soon *safronise* Pawar. Such brazenness is scary.

Shorn of rhetoric, the BJP policy planners need to do some good homework on Maharashtra. For instance, Lord Ram, a Great Marathi, cuts a swathe across castes and communities in the North, but not down the Vindhya. Maharashtra is culturally inclined more to southern India than the Indo-Gangetic plains. Summat Vichar, scholar Vishwanath Khairi's well-researched tome, discusses in detail the specifics of the Maharashtra-Tamil Nadu cultural and linguistic ties. Many local

deities of Maharashtra have their counterparts in, say, Karnataka or Andhra. In fact, Maharashtra's pluralistic culture resembles "godhadi", a quilt which offers warmth to a farmer on a cold night.

Second, although a Congress stronghold for decades, Maharashtra's inner core resonated with Left-socialist ideals, thanks to Janshewar and Tukaram's egalitarian poetry. And, the state has for long nursed deep suspicion of New Delhi rulers — "Dillishwar" (the Delhi bosses) was the term Balasaheb Thackeray coined to rile the Congress high command. The BJP runs the risk of earning the sobriquet if it doesn't gear itself up to decipher the nuanced Marathi ethos.

With the Uddhav Thackeray and Shiv Sena faring poorly in the assembly polls, Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar, both Marathas, may well emerge as regional satraps and strong votaries of the Maharashtra dharm. Both are aware of the fact that in their attempt to expand their politico-electoral space, they may at some point in time have to stand up to the "Dillishwars". The duo will do it with a sense of *deja vu*.

Instances of Congress high command's hostility to Maratha warriors such as Yashwantrao Chavan, Vasantdada Patil and Sharad Pawar are numerous. However, Indira Gandhi never tampered with Maharashtra's cultural fabric. Back then, the "Dillishwars" kept Maharashtra's happy with small mercies.

The BJP does attempt to flout its regional stripes but in a manner which is plainly ad hoc. For instance, in the recent state assembly elections, the BJP, in a bid to bond with the south, the "Dillishwars", kept Maharashtra's happy with small mercies. The BJP does attempt to flout its regional stripes but in a manner which is plainly ad hoc. For instance, in the recent state assembly elections, the BJP, in a bid to bond with the south, the "Dillishwars", kept Maharashtra's happy with small mercies.

The quintessential Marathi *mantri* must suffer from a sense of loss and alienation as a jubilant Mahayuti begins its tenure. Post Aarti Prabhu has succinctly summed up the Mumbai Marathi's dilemma: *Kunachya khandyav kunache ophre?* (On whose shoulder lies whose burden?)

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Speed and scale

T+0 will help retail investors

The Indian stock market is not only among the largest globally by market capitalisation but is also seen as one of the most efficient. To further improve market efficiency, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) earlier this year introduced the beta version for T+0 (same-day) settlement on an optional basis for 25 scrips in the equity cash market. Based on the feedback and experience over the past several months, the regulator has now decided to extend the facility to the top 500 stocks. This shows, in Sebi's view, that the market infrastructure and the institutions involved are prepared to make this big transition at scale. Although reports suggest that the adoption of T+0 has been slow, it should not deter the regulator from taking steps to improve market efficiency. The adoption may be slow partly because of the limited number of stocks in the new settlement cycle.

According to the Sebi circular, the T+0 cycle will be available on an optional basis for the top 500 companies by market capitalisation from January 31, 2025. Scrips will be moved to the new cycle in batches of 100 starting with the bottom of the group. This makes sense as companies with comparably low volumes will be moved first, which will help test the resilience of the system. The bigger companies will be moved to the new settlement cycle progressively. All stockbrokers will now be allowed to participate. They will also be allowed to charge different brokerages for T+0 and T+1 settlements, subject to regulatory limits. Qualified stockbrokers who meet certain conditions in terms of client base will be expected to put in place the required systems and processes to enable uninterrupted participation in the new settlement cycle within the given timeframe.

Meanwhile, stock exchanges, clearing corporations, and depositories—collectively referred to as market infrastructure institutions (MIIs)—will also be expected to put in place the necessary systems for a seamless rollout. Further, to enable smooth implementation, MIIs are expected to come out with operational guidelines and frequently asked questions. This will help all stakeholders, particularly individual investors, to move to the new cycle. For large block deals in T+0, stock exchanges are expected to put a mechanism in place. The move to scale up the T+0 mechanism must be welcomed, particularly from the point of view of small investors. As highlighted in this space earlier, an assessment by the regulator found that over 90 per cent of the equity delivery trades where trade value was less than ₹1 lakh were conducted with advance deposits of cash and securities. Therefore, a majority of small traders and investors will benefit from the move, as it will help improve liquidity.

Overall, the improvement in liquidity and faster closure of trades will help in reducing counterparty risks. While a quicker settlement cycle will help investors, it could put pressure on MIIs, particularly because of two parallel systems. However, given that the Indian market infrastructure has enabled a shorter settlement cycle over time, it is hoped that the system will move to the T+0 cycle seamlessly. Given the improved infrastructure and the ability of all stakeholders to adapt, the market regulator would be well to aim now to shorten the cycle in the primary market. There is ample scope for reducing the time gap between the opening of an initial public offering and the listing of the stock.

Lingering debt danger

External debt levels are dangerously high globally

During the pandemic, another contagion besides Covid-19 threatened to ravage the world: A sovereign debt crisis. Several indebted countries, including many in Africa and also one in India's neighbourhood, seemed on the brink of a default. That immediate threat of default and destabilisation receded, and the subject of sovereign debt was quietly deprioritised in global governance. But a recent World Bank report shows that might have been a mistake. The International Debt Report (IDR) makes for a disturbing read.

The IDR focuses specifically on external debt and classifies countries by income level. For low- and middle-income countries in general, the IDR shows that the elevated levels of external debt reached during the initial months and years of the pandemic continue to persist even after extraordinary spending requirements have gone away. Governments borrowed during the pandemic, as was right, with many doing so from outside their borders. But they have not recovered soundly enough to be able to start paying back what they borrowed. External borrowings that have not been addressed have increased by about 8 per cent over 2020 levels. Naturally, this leads to higher interest bills—and might push some countries closer to a vicious cycle of high interest payments, low growth and extended borrowing.

The effect on the poorest and most vulnerable countries—the 75 or so considered poor enough to borrow from the International Development Association, a wing of the World Bank Group—is even more stark. According to the IDR, the external debt for these countries has risen 18 per cent since the pandemic to cross \$1 trillion. It is also noteworthy that although the external debt levels for all low- and middle-income countries seems high but static, there continues to be a yearly upward trend for these poorest countries. The long-term economic scarring of the pandemic has clearly not been addressed. No serious attempt has been made to assist countries in repaying pandemic-era debt. Some efforts were made in this direction in 2021 and 2022, including during India's presidency of the G20. But it would be futile to deny that, in the absence of a rolling crisis of defaults, the energy has been sucked out of that effort.

This is dangerous complacency. As debt levels increase, macroeconomic stability is rendered more fragile. Any country can prove then to be the domino that would set off a renewed crisis—one which would raise costs for the broader developing world, including India, and disrupt supply chains, besides causing great social distress. The question is why efforts to address this problem have not really worked. Any answer would have to contend with the change in borrowing patterns since the 1980s, when solutions to tackle debt crises first evolved. The presence of China and Chinese state banks as large lenders has significantly muddled the picture. Clear divisions during bilateral, multilateral, and commercial capital in the 1980s were designed for market economies; they struggle to adapt to China's state-led financial sector. Geopolitical distrust has only grown since 2020, and that has played a part as well. But, whatever the reason, the IDR is another reminder of a festering problem that requires more attention from global policy makers. However, it is also critical for economies to keep borrowings in check and not leave a burden for coming generations, as highlighted by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Growth vs inflation: Walking the razor's edge

Despite the growth slowdown, a rate cut-cycle is unlikely to start anytime soon

After a spectacular average gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 8 per cent over the last three years, the economy slowed to its weakest growth in seven quarters, registering just 5.4 per cent in the second quarter. While an economic slowdown during the quarter was anticipated, its magnitude exceeded market expectations. Simultaneously, the inflation rate surged past the tolerance level of 6 per cent in October, driven by elevated food prices.

The continued elevation in food prices has started spilling over into core prices. Despite the nudge from political quarters to start the rate reduction cycle, not surprisingly, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) focused on its headline inflation target and maintained the status quo on the policy rate. The slow growth in the second quarter raises the question of whether this is merely a blip or structural factors are at play, given the steady decline in the growth rate over successive quarters. With growth in the first half of the current fiscal estimated at just about 6 per cent, and despite expectations of a revival in the next two quarters, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has revised its forecast downward to 6.6 per cent from the earlier estimate of 7.2 per cent.

The slowing growth and elevated inflation have forced the MPC to continue walking on a razor's edge. Arresting the decelerating growth warrants starting the rate-reduction cycle and there are nudges in some quarters that the RBI should switch its target from "headline" to "core" inflation.

At the same time, having rightly asserted its commitment to taming headline inflation to 4 per cent, the RBI cannot afford to lower its guard. Not surprisingly, the MPC, in its majority decision, has maintained the status quo on the policy rate while reducing the cash reserve ratio (CRR) by 25 basis points each in two

tranches, on December 14 and December 28 respectively, to ensure adequate liquidity. Of course, this is a clear signal that growth considerations are important in its policy stance. This move was meant to ease the liquidity conditions arising from tax payments and could help revive growth to supplement the increased government capital expenditures in the remaining two quarters. This is crucial for the revival of investment in manufacturing. All the same, the rate-reduction cycle is not likely to start anytime soon.

The policy response in the current scenario depends on whether the situation is viewed as merely a passing phase or as rooted in deeper malice. The RBI's policy statement simply describes the situation as an "aberration in growth-inflation trajectory". There are good reasons to believe that it is indeed so. However, the sharp deceleration in the value added in the mining and manufacturing sectors, which has pulled down the growth of both the primary and secondary sectors, is a cause for concern. Even the growth in value added

in the agricultural sector, at 3.5 per cent on the back of 1.7 per cent growth in the second quarter a year ago and 2 per cent growth in the previous quarter, despite a reasonably good monsoon, is not easy to explain. This may be attributed to the production of vegetables and fruits suffering due to erratic rainfall. Similarly, the deceleration in the growth of the manufacturing sector to 2 per cent in the second quarter is surprising, as the Purchasing Managers' Index has continued to show expansion during the successive months of the quarter. Even a sector like construction, which showed double-digit growth in the second quarter of last year as well as in the previous quarter, has decelerated to 7.1 per cent.

POLICY PILLARS
M GOVINDA RAO

Unintended legacies of the Green Revolution

The Green Revolution is coming back to bite us in ways that policymakers then could not have bargained for. Now, as farmers block borders around the National Capital region (NCR), the downside of that signature achievement of the sixties is manifesting itself in myriad crises—inefficient power supplies, water shortages, deteriorating soil health, air pollution, and an escalating freebie culture.

The Green Revolution was undoubtedly transformational. The programme spared India from famine and the humiliation of its ship-to-wheat existence from Public Law or PL480 wheat shipments from the US. Today, unfortunately, the policies that made it a success are causing unintended perverse outcomes from which central regimes are struggling to extricate themselves. These crises are all products of incentives that were rooted in persuading farmers to grow high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice. Broadly, free power, subsidised fertiliser and a guaranteed minimum support price or MSP for produce sold in official markets.

Consider the MSP. It started as a market-leaving price for farmers, shielding them from exploitation by private traders. But regular increases at the behest of the powerful farm lobbies have rendered the MSP a maximum support price, with the government emerging as a key buyer, procuring between 33 and 40 per cent of India's annual wheat and rice production (the two key commodities that the government buys; there are MSPs for 22 other crops but government purchases are minimal or non-existent for them). Sometimes, state governments, Madhya Pradesh being a prime example, choose to offer a premium above the MSP, adding to the distortions.

These easy returns—in business terms the policy amounts to enabling producers to sell at a prescribed mark-up in a prescribed market—principally benefited large landholders with surpluses rather than subsistence farmers who account for 80 per cent of

Indian farmers. In 2020, the Modi government's attempts to open up and deregulate agri-markets created an uproar. The government proposed three laws that, broadly, allowed sales outside the *mandi* networks, enabling farmers to sell directly to private traders, introduced (admittedly poorly designed) contract farming laws, removed some commodities from the Essential Commodities Act, and deregulated stockholding limits. Passed without sufficient debate or consultations with the farm lobbies, these laws paralysed the national capital as farmers, several of whom were also *mandi* middlemen, rode in on horses and tractors and occupied well-equipped pop-up shanty towns on the NCR's borders for almost a year until the government relented.

The upshot of this imbroglio that put the government on the back foot was that the farm lobby demanded a legal guarantee for MSP. This is simply untenable for government finances. The current impasse over an MSP mandate is only one facet of the Green Revolution's unintended consequences. Free or heavily subsidised inputs such as water, power and fertiliser have created another crisis. The incentive package increasingly encouraged farmers in Punjab and Haryana to grow paddy, a water-guzzling crop that is not a natural ecological fit for the region. Over the decades, this "alien" paddy cultivation has indirectly created the farm fire crisis that chokes the national capital region every post-harvest season.

To conserve the rapidly sinking water table, paddy planting has, since 2009, been mandatorily postponed to synchronise with the onset of the monsoon. Consequently, later harvests have meant that farmers have less time to pull up paddy stubble to clear the fields for rabi crops. Burning the stubble is the cheapest and fastest solution they have found but at the cost of a widespread and increasingly serious public health crisis.

As for fertiliser, a skewed subsidy structure

On the demand side, the slowdown in private consumption could be due to elevated food prices, and government consumption had yet to pick up after the elections. The major factor, however, was the low levels of investment. The gross fixed capital formation registered a growth of just 1.3 per cent, the lowest seen in several quarters, and this was mainly due to the slow revival in public sector capital formation. Both the Union and state governments have delayed incurring capital expenditures after the expiry of the election model code of conduct.

Considering the worse than expected growth in the second quarter, most observers have downgraded the growth estimate for the financial year, including the MPC, which has revised it downward. There are reasons to believe that the economy will recover and the estimated growth in the remaining two quarters at 6.8 per cent and 7.2 per cent may well be realised. The agricultural sector is likely to record higher growth due to the increased arrivals from kharif crops, and with higher reservoir levels, the rabi output is also likely to be better. In the first six months of this financial year, the Union government spent only 37 per cent of the budgeted capital expenditure, and significant spending is expected in the remaining part of the year. This would not only result in an increase in aggregate demand but also crowd in private investment.

The high-frequency indicators show a recovery in manufacturing. The services sector, too, is expected to continue its growth momentum.

However, it would be too naïve to think that the problem is transitory. Aligning the economy to achieve developed country status would require pushing up the growth of GDP to at least 8 per cent on average for the next 23 years. This would require increasing the investment rate to 40 per cent of GDP from the current level of 31-32 per cent. In addition to opening up the economy for foreign investment, it is necessary to reduce the high cost of borrowing for investors. This requires bringing down the inflation rate to initiate the rate-reduction cycle and implementing fiscal reforms to limit the government's draft on the borrowing space. Thus, from a long-term perspective, this is the opportune time to undertake fiscal reforms, factor-market reforms with a focus on labour-intensive manufacturing, and open up the economy to greater foreign trade and investment.

Barring unforeseen circumstances, there could be more cheerful news on the inflation front as well, paving the way for a policy rate cut from February. With better agricultural production, food prices are likely to come down, bringing down the headline inflation numbers. The prices of pulses and edible oils are also likely to soften. Vegetable prices are expected to decline in the winter, and with improved production, the prices of pulses are also likely to ease. With these factors, India may continue to be the fastest-growing large economy, but achieving the aspirational goal of becoming a "Viksit Bharat" requires implementing serious structural reforms.

The author is chairman, Karnataka Regional Imbalances Redressal Committee. The views are personal.



BOOK REVIEW

VEENU SANDHU

Chris van Tulleken's book is the outcome of an experiment in which the author is the lab rat—by choice. The London-based doctor and academic goes on an 80 per cent ultra-processed food diet for four weeks to study its effects on his state of being—on his body and mind.

The title of the book, *Ultra-Processed People: Why Do We All Eat Stuff That Isn't Food... and Why Can't We Stop?*, doesn't quite prepare you for the horrors that lie inside—or, for that matter, all around us. In our kitchen cabinets, in our refrigerators, served in beautiful bowls at our favourite restaurant, in the ice-cream

tub bought from that healthy ice-cream place, in that energy bar kept in the bag for the late afternoon snacking at work...and even in probiotic yogurt.

Before all of this, the first question that comes to mind is: What qualifies as ultra-processed food and how do we tell that what we are consuming is ultra-processed? The thumb rule the author offers is: If you do not recognise the ingredients on the food packet, and if those ingredients aren't something you would find in the kitchen, then consider it to be ultra-processed. For instance, among its ingredients, a packet of wafers in my bag lists "Maltodextrin", "natural and nature identical flavouring substances", "antioxidant agent" and "flavour enhancers". I cannot say for sure what each of these ingredients are. Dr van Tulleken's book has ensured that this packet will remain unopened.

He also writes that if it is a food item covered in plastic, then, too, treat it as a sign that it is probably ultra-processed. The author, however, is not a doctor

simply listing out the perils of processed food and urging readers to abstain. He doesn't tell you how to live your life or feed your family. On the contrary, Drawing from Allen Carr's unconventional self-help book, *The Easy Way to Stop Smoking*, which asks readers to continue smoking while they read about how bad smoking is, he says readers could, if they feel like trying it, continue consuming the same amount of ultra-processed foods they ordinarily do for as long as it takes to finish his book.

A PhD in molecular virology, he delves into the food habits of humans as they once were, and how and when they began to shift, reaching a point where the food industry has turned our consumption patterns upside down. So much so that a sizable population of the world eats the least of those foods that are good for you.

"Over the past 150 years food has become...not food," he writes, "...it's an industrially produced edible substance."

Humans, he writes, are eating stuff "constructed from novel molecules and using processes never previously encountered in our evolutionary history..."

Such information should alarm us, not just because of how much ultra-processed food there is in our everyday lives but also because of how addictive it is. Worse, in several countries today, ultra-processed food is much cheaper and more accessible than what humans are actually meant to eat. The fact that it is also conveniently available in ready-to-consume or almost ready-to-consume packets doesn't help either. Hence, he says, the problem of obesity is on the rise in populations across races, genders and age groups, as are other medical

conditions, physical and mental.

Dr van Tulleken goes through his experiment, starting with ice-cream for himself and his family. It's a warm autumn day and he is surprised to see

that the ice-cream isn't melting. His conversations with friends who are food-industry insiders as he tries to make sense of why ultra-processed food is

made the way it is and why it's so ubiquitous can trigger a gag reflex. Take that ice-cream, for example. From factory to the truck, then to the supermarket or the ice-cream cart, and from there to the consumer, it has to survive many temperature upheavals—going from something like minus 18 degrees Celsius to minus 5 degrees Celsius to back to 18 degrees and so on. No wonder it is treated with all kinds of emulsifiers, gums and glycerine. Why does it hold it together can well be called gunk.

Often in his book, Dr van Tulleken talks of "arms races"—not the political or military kind, but of complex battles of one-upmanship that are inherent in nature. These are "arms races" being waged within and outside our bodies by viruses and bacteria, and the body's defence mechanism: between predators and the prey between the predator and the prey. And now, in the "unfamiliar food environment" we live in, these arms races are powered by the flow of money where "we are the prey".

Dr van Tulleken calls out food corporations such as Nestlé, PepsiCo and Coca-Cola. He speaks of food's relationship with race identity and race bias. He offers suggestions on what governments can do, and what people can do if they want to stop eating ultra-processed foods. He writes about cravings, which the ultra-processed food industry triggers and feeds on, of the high that comes from bingeing and the low that comes from still not being satiated—all of which he encounters during his experiment. And he does it all with the academic rigour of a researcher blended with the wit of a comedian.

Some books can change the way we think. Some can change the way we live. *Ultra-Processed People* is one such book.

ULTRA-PROCESSED PEOPLE: Why Do We All Eat Stuff That Isn't Food... and Why Can't We Stop?
Author: Chris van Tulleken
Publisher: Penguin
Pages: 406
Price: ₹599

Opinion

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2024



ON FAKE NEWS

Union electronics & IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

These are the issues where freedom of speech comes on one hand and accountability and having a proper real news network getting created, on the other hand. These are things which need to be debated

Change course

The economy's capacity is constrained, Budget must unveil consumption booster and more

INDIA'S ECONOMIC GROWTH capacity seems to have settled around 6-6.5%, a far cry from over the 8% annual expansion required for it to meet the \$5 trillion economy target by 2047, the 100th year of Independence. To become a "developed nation" with per capita income (PCI) above \$13,000 by 2047, the PCI must grow at a daunting rate of over 11% a year. To be sure, between the second quarters of FY20 and FY25, the gross domestic product (GDP) grew by an annual average of just 4.87%, and between the first quarters of those years, at an even lower rate of 4.59%. The 8.2% GDP growth reported in FY24 was more a statistical bump caused by the pandemic abyss than being reflective of an economic resurgence. Nothing less than a policy overhaul will suffice for the economy to regain its lost growth capacity and avoid a middle-income trap that looks increasingly real. Domestic levers will be predominantly used to create the incremental growth, since the external world only seems grimmer by the day. The question that hangs over the Narendra Modi government as it prepares the Budget FY26 is whether it will veer off the beaten path and undertake the policy shifts needed to spur the economy.

In fact, through his recent comments, chief economic adviser V Anantha Nageswaran has set the stage for the Budget and the overall economic policy restructuring that looks imperative. He lamented how (while the economy is being formalised) a "creeping informalisation" of the workforce (more contract jobs rather than regular ones) exerts a "downward pressure" on consumption. The CEA also noted that Corporate India (despite being the singular beneficiary of the post-pandemic economic churn) is using micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) as a "source of finance" for it, while it should be the other way around. The economy's travails are manifested in assorted ways: subdued consumption, reluctant private investments, heavily leveraged households, struggling MSMEs, long-stagnant wages, lack of net gains from foreign trade, and a jobs crisis. The post-pandemic period has also seen a curious trend of ever-rising demand for premium products while the overall consumption demand is rather tepid.

The government will have to revisit the strategy of foregrounding investments and aid job creation in MSMEs with effective policy intervention. It must also arrest the shift to centralisation when it comes to allocation of fiscal resources and policy-making. Apart from statistical reasons, the dip in growth in the first half of the current financial year has also dovetailed with the limitation of employing public investments, just 10-11% of the GDP, as a growth driver for long years. The need for a solid consumption booster is evident from the fact it topped the wish-list of economists as well as industry chambers in their recent pre-budget meetings with the finance minister.

The demand from MSMEs for a waiver from capital gains tax speaks volumes (they are selling assets to cut debt and stay afloat). More public monies must be made available with state governments without riders. Even as the tax-GDP ratio is still a few percentage points lower than where it should be, the undue tax burden on the middle class must be eased, along with concrete steps to boost employment and income. The issue of lopsided credit policies of primary lenders must be resolved, and market powers dispersed. Measures taken in this direction in the last Budget appeared half-hearted; it's time to go the whole hog.

From TikTok to Nvidia, the tech war gets uglier

BYTE DANCE LTD'S OPTIONS for TikTok in the US are looking increasingly desolate, as the tech war between Washington and Beijing boils over. The mutual distrust and tit-for-tat animosity lays bare the new reality, where more firms will be plucked from both sides.

China's tech regulators are now targeting Nvidia Corp. in a probe stemming from a deal Beijing approved years ago. The move against the Santa Clara-based chipmaker follows their recent escalations; Beijing halted exports of certain minerals with tech applications to the US after Washington intensified chip curbs to China last week. China is also cutting off drone supplies to the US and Europe that have become a vital part of Ukraine's defense.

And on Friday, a US federal appeals court upheld a law forcing TikTok to divest from Chinese parent ByteDance or face a ban. This makes Nvidia an especially interesting target for Beijing, in part because it exposes how interconnected supply chains still are. ByteDance has become Nvidia's largest customer in China, and amid the TikTok uncertainty it has been reportedly going all-in on AI ambitions in search of its next growth engine.

ByteDance is wise to start thinking beyond its short-form video app. The US saga that has raged for years has now put the Chinese company in an impossible position. When founder Zhang Yiming first publicly explored the possibility that TikTok would have to be sold to a US buyer or face a ban in 2020, he was dragged on Chinese social media and called a traitor and a coward. Beijing changed its export laws to be able to block the sale of TikTok's algorithm, with state-backed media labelling it as "institutional plunder".

Statewide, ByteDance received no reprieve, either. TikTok was able to navigate this first round of scrutiny unscathed after a court challenge. But President Joe Biden signed a law earlier this year — with bipartisan support — to once again force TikTok to divest from the parent or face being prohibited to operate in the US. It's now looking more likely than ever that the platform's days in the US are numbered, despite President-elect Donald Trump campaigning on saving the app. TikTok filed an emergency motion seeking to stop the law until the case could be heard by the Supreme Court. But Beijing making clear that it would oppose a sale leaves few good options for ByteDance.

The appellate court judges on Friday sent a clear message to the Chinese tech industry that its commercial successes are not welcome in the US. The ruling dovetailed down on the government's national security concerns for apps from China's private sector. The judges argued that the national security risks — such as Beijing influencing content and collecting sensitive US user data — outweigh free speech arguments and the livelihoods of US TikTok creators.

At a time when other Chinese tech firms are looking abroad for growth amid tightened spending domestically, this sends a chilling message not to make it too big in the US. And Beijing has shown that it is willing to retaliate. Nvidia still gets about 1.5% of its revenue from Chinese customers, despite Washington barring the company from selling its most-advanced equipment in the market. Other technology firms that shall expose to China should start bracing for a fallout.

Blocking Chinese tech companies and budding entrepreneurs from launching consumer products in the US will not only let Big Tech titans expand their power, but will also lead to less vibrancy and creativity. ByteDance weathered a 2020 TikTok ban in India, which was then its biggest user base. This spurred major growth for Instagram and YouTube there, but something special was lost for consumers, especially for small-time creators and niche communities. A US ban would be devastating for ByteDance, but also for the more than 170 million Americans on the app.

Finding a compromise for TikTok could be a first step toward de-escalation of this tech war. US lawmakers should focus on comprehensive social media regulation that prevents any apps from potential security risks. In the meantime, this battle is only slated to get uglier. Companies will be forced to choose sides with costly results, and consumers will feel the crunch.



CATHERINE THORBECKE

Bloomberg

DIGITAL SOVEREIGNTY

TO ENSURE LONG-TERM RESILIENCE, IT IS IMPORTANT FOR INDIA TO TRAIN ITS OWN LLMs

Building LLMs: a strategic necessity

SHOULD INDIA BUILD its own large language models (LLMs) or adapt existing ones? This debate is more than academic—it strikes at the heart of India's digital future. Some argue that homegrown LLMs are vital to serve India's unique linguistic and cultural diversity, while others see greater value in leveraging established models to save time and resources. But framing this as an either-or question misses the point entirely.

The real issue is strategic autonomy. Just as India's decision to develop indigenous supercomputers bolstered innovation and reduced reliance on foreign technology, mastering LLMs is not a luxury—it is a necessity. In an increasingly digital world, self-reliance in critical technologies is not optional; it is the foundation of sovereignty and progress.

Get the ball rolling

Numerous applications for developing LLMs will emerge, and we must leverage internationally available technologies and methodologies to build our own models, rather than waiting for proprietary technologies. Existing large models based on Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) and techniques like Self-Supervised Learning are readily accessible and can be implemented to advance our efforts.

These advanced models can be used to train smaller, specialised models, along with efforts in Indian data curation and synthetic data generation such as InstructLab, which can be integrated into various applications within the country to enhance their capability of comprehending Indian languages and cultural nuances. Many notable initiatives exist in this domain, like BharatGen, the first government-funded Multimodal LLM project focused on creating efficient and

inclusive artificial intelligence (AI) systems for Indian languages. Sarvam 1, developed by Indian Gen AI startup Sarvam, and Dhenu 1.0, an LLM concentrating on agricultural solutions, are among many other such Indic LLM efforts. These initiatives span across startups, research groups and non-profits, focusing on creating LLMs for Indian language use cases essential for India. These would serve a population of over 1.4 billion, with 22 official languages and innumerable regional dialects. Recently, many of the key stakeholders in the AI ecosystem in India came together as members of the AI Alliance to develop models, data tools and responsible AI solutions in the open.

As AI continues to evolve, its profound impact on nations and communities will establish it as a vital national digital resource. Imagine a future where advanced AI powered by large models becomes ubiquitous for a variety of use cases that cannot be addressed at high quality by smaller language models. If these large models are owned and served by other countries, and stay optimised for global languages, a significant portion of India's population will be unable to fully leverage this foundational technology. A part of the population using foreign models across consumer, government, and industry use cases in India would rely on

other nations for access to these strategic digital resources. To ensure long-term resilience and self-reliance, it is important for India to develop the capability to train its own large models when needed, reducing dependencies and enhancing our digital sovereignty.

Where is the data source?

The insufficient data availability for training LLMs within the frameworks of Indian culture, languages, and nuances is a challenge. This can be effectively addressed with the right investment and time. By engaging local communities, we can either synthesise data or source it from various regions across the country. India has abundant cost-effective human resources, making it feasible to generate and curate a significant volume of data through such initiatives. Efforts like the 10 Trillion Token project from People+AI are already working toward these objectives.

While specific large models extend to hundreds of billions or even trillions of parameters and efforts to build smaller models (<10 billion parameters) are already underway, a notable opportunity exists within the 20-70 billion parameter range. This range is a starting point for undertaking essential data programs and

able to generate and curate a significant volume of data through such initiatives. Efforts like the 10 Trillion Token project from People+AI are already working toward these objectives.

While specific large models extend to hundreds of billions or even trillions of parameters and efforts to build smaller models (<10 billion parameters) are already underway, a notable opportunity exists within the 20-70 billion parameter range. This range is a starting point for undertaking essential data programs and

identifying business use cases that can justify the required investment. Once proficiency is achieved in this range, scaling up to hundreds of billions of parameters will become significantly more manageable.

Our cultural and linguistic diversity makes it increasingly important to address the challenges associated with data and artificial intelligence. By leveraging AI, we can bridge language and cultural barriers, unlocking significant value in the process.

Tap the talent

India has a large pool of computer scientists developing LLMs, both in multinational corporations and startups, ensuring the availability of the necessary skills and capabilities. These computer engineers and scientists are well-versed in artificial intelligence's fundamental principles and proficient in high-performance and parallel programming. These professionals can access the latest libraries and tools to develop effective strategies for scaling up our capabilities.

Quick rundown

The development of LLMs is crucial for national pride and to establish strategic self-reliance. More importantly, we have much to gain from the profound positive impact that AI can have on communities, societies, and nations. Adopting a phased approach to scale up LLMs is essential. Meanwhile, we should identify the value that will justify the substantial investments required. We must take proactive steps towards this journey and leverage the government's ambitious initiatives such as Digital India and the IndiaAI Mission to support India becoming a global leader in the digital and AI ecosystem.

Whither universal health coverage in India?



ALI MEHDI

Founder and CEO, UHC360

India's Universal Health Coverage policy should focus on the reduction of inequalities in our core health outcomes

DECEMBER 12 IS Universal Health Coverage (UHC) Day. According to World Health Organization (WHO), UHC means that "all people have access to the full range of quality health services they need, when and where they need them, without financial hardship" (bit.ly/3ZKMCJC).

Quality, defined as "the degree to which health services for individuals and populations increase the likelihood of desired health outcomes", is a core dimension of UHC. "Access without quality can be considered an empty universal health coverage promise" since even if the world achieved essential health coverage and financial protection, health outcomes would still be poor if services were low-quality and unsafe, argues a WHO, OECD, and World Bank report (bit.ly/3OZF14c).

India's journey towards UHC started around Britain's social security reforms. William Beveridge, born in India in 1879, presented a report on Social Insurance and Allied Services to the British government in 1942, which became the basis for its National Health Service (NHS) Act of 1946. In India, BP Adarkar, who Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel referred to as "Chhotu Beveridge", was appointed in 1943 to develop a plan for industrial workers. Beveridge was also approached for the same, but refused—he felt the focus should be on "the greater part of the Indian population" and not industrial workers alone (bit.ly/4lppT53). Adarkar presented an integrated plan of health, maternity and employment injuries insurance to the Indian government on August 15, 1944, which became the basis for the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) Act of 1948. It offered multidimensional social security for industrial workers. The ESI Scheme (ESIS) was inaugurated on February 24, 1952. Two years later came the Central Government Health Scheme

(CGHS), followed by the Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme (ECHS) in 2003, the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005, Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) in 2008, and Ayushman Bharat in 2018.

How has India done in its 70-year journey (1948-2018) towards UHC?

1) During 2019-21, only 41% Indian households had a usual member covered by a health insurance / financing scheme, ranging from 1.8% in Andaman & Nicobar Islands to 87.8% in Rajasthan (National Family Health Survey [NFHS] 2019-21).

2) Half of Indian households do not generally use a government health facility—48% of them due to poor quality of care. The latter figure varies from 17% in Mizoram to 62% in Bihar (NFHS).

3) 60% of Indian women had at least one problem in accessing health care when sick (NFHS).

4) 32% of Indian women (15-49 years) had contact with a government health worker over the past three months. This

figure ranged from 11% in Chandigarh to 54% in Karnataka (NFHS).

5) 49% of the households that sought OPD care and / or hospitalisation faced catastrophic health expenditure (HPE) and 15% fell below the poverty line due to out-of-pocket HPE. HPE pushes 32.39 million Indians below the poverty line every year (bit.ly/3ZcSp7r).

The situation is equally worrisome as far as the quality of health services is concerned vis-à-vis desired health outcomes.

1) India's total fertility rate (TFR) declined from 5.7 to 2.0 during 1950-2023 (*World Population Prospects: The 2024 Revision* / WPP). It ranged from 1.1 in Sikkim to 3.0 in Bihar (NFHS).

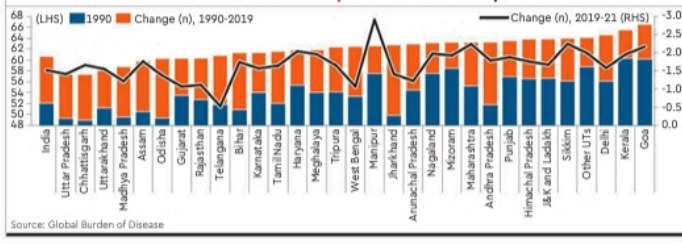
2) India's infant mortality rate (IMR) came down from 176 to 23 during 1950-2023, but it was still the world's largest contributor to infant deaths in 2023 (5.25 lakh) (WPP). IMR, according to 2019-21 and ranged from 3 in Puducherry to 50 in Uttar Pradesh.

3) India's life expectancy

(HALE) went up by 9 years over a period of 29 years (1990-2019), coming down by 2 years over the two Covid-19 years. Its HALE was 61 years in 2019, with a variation of 10 years between its states (67 years in Goa and 57 in Uttar Pradesh).

UHC is based on the core principles of quality and equity. India's UHC policy should focus on the reduction of inequalities in core health outcomes. The TFR target should be 2.1 (replacement level fertility), while the IMR target should be zero for all states and socioeconomic groups. Inequality should be measured and policy priority assigned vis-à-vis the distance from these. As far as HALE is concerned, we should aspire for the highest in the world—76 years in Singapore—as well as the reduction of inter-state and inter-group differentials to ensure aggregate as well as distributive growth. If our economic aspiration is to be the world's third largest economy, our social aspiration should be to be the healthiest country.

HEALTHY LIFE EXPECTANCY IN INDIA, STATES AND UTs, 1990-2021



Source: Global Burden of Disease

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fruits of toil

While most major economies are grappling with inflationary trends, China finds itself in a state of deflation. Its economy has long been driven by external consumption, which has now tapered down in volatile geopolitical realities and supply chain disruption. Export prices of 61% of its major products have

fallen, from industrial materials to integrated circuits and food. On top of this, due to a sluggish economy at home, Chinese companies are reducing excess inventories to export into other countries. As a result, our steel exports are going down and our imports are increasing. Raising tariffs on Chinese imports may be a limited solution. —R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Parliamentary chaos

The current chaos in the Parliament poses major worries about the future of democratic dialogue. Why are the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime and the opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) unable to join in honest debate on critical issues like the Adani charges? The ruling party's

hesitation in discussing several topics is worrying. Parliament should see health debates. Let us hope all parties work together to ensure that all subjects are discussed in a constructive manner. This is important for the proper functioning and governance of our country. —Anshu Bharti, Begusarai

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

THURSDAY • DECEMBER 12, 2024

Syria in focus

Advantage Israel, Turkey at expense of Iran, Russia

Another Middle Eastern regime has been toppled, this time in Syria. Syria is a small country with a population of just over two crore. But in terms of nuisance value to the West it has punched way above its weight. The president, Bashar al-Assad, ran a very harsh government aligning himself openly with Russia and Iran.

To Russia, he provided access to the Mediterranean and to Iran, safe havens from which Hamas and Hezbollah could operate against Israel. Neither endeared him to the US. A concerted effort to remove him from power was therefore inevitable. Nearly half a million people have either been killed or displaced in the civil war that broke out about 13 years ago. During this war some Western powers and Russia also got involved. Assad managed to survive the war but, as it turns out, not for long. Now he and his regime have been chased away by an Islamist group and he is reported to have found safe passage to Russia. It will also take some time for the smoke to clear. Meanwhile the world is wondering how things will pan out. The only thing that's known for certain is that power has been snatched away from a Shia regime and now rests with a Sunni one. It was one of those anomalies of history that a predominantly Sunni population was ruled by Shias. Now that anomaly too is gone forever.

Who else, apart from the Sunni people of Syria, are likely to benefit from this massive change? Israel, for sure, because of the elimination of Iran from Syria. Turkey, for another, as it not only shares a long border with Syria but also because it has helped to train the rebels. It has also been worried that Syria could break up with a separate Kurdistan. There's not much love lost between the Turks and the Kurds. The West, however, has been supportive of the idea of a separate Kurdistan. But that can change very quickly now. All Syria's neighbours will be watching the unfolding scenario in Syria because each has a different concern. But until the new rulers settle down it's hard to say what's going to happen. In the meantime, there will be one more reason to worry about heightened uncertainties in an energy exporting region. This sudden addition of another factor that adds to regional and global uncertainty is probably going to be the main outcome at least during 2025. This has been the pattern all over the Middle East ever since the first regime change happened in Iran in 1953. Thanks to the concentration of oil and gas reserves in the vast swathe of land from Turkey to Iran the region has become the cockpit of the world.

The change of personnel in the White House in America might or might not help in mitigating the situation. The president-elect Donald Trump's moves will be keenly watched. India, a mere bystander, can only keep its fingers crossed that a major conflagration is avoided if and when Iran and Russia decide to counter the new Western influence in the region.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THE GOP'S 2025 RECONCILIATION FIGHT

Republicans seem to like circular firing squads, so the non-surprise of 2024 is that they are already brawling over their strategy for governing when they control Congress and the White House next year. GOP Senators are offering the smarter way to go. Republicans will be in the fortunate position next year of having two bites at "budget reconciliation," which under Senate rules lets them pass bills with 51 votes. That's how Senate Democrats passed the \$1.9 trillion spending blowout in March 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022 on party-line votes. Soon-to-be Senate Majority Leader John Thune wants to jump-start the Donald Trump Presidency by using the first reconciliation to pass the GOP's top priorities — money for border security, increasing energy production and defence. The goal would be to pass this by early February. (WALL STREET JOURNAL, DECEMBER 10)



Stale narrative of 'Chinese debt trap'

In recent years, solidarity and cooperation among the "Global South" countries have proven that development is the fundamental truth and the genuine need of the vast majority of "Global South" countries. It is in the face of tangible development achievements that Western smear over China's cooperation with a wide range of developing countries has been effectively dispelled. Take the so-called debt trap frequently mentioned by some in the West — there is a growing number of "Global South" nations rejecting this narrative. Some Western countries have long used the "debt trap" theory to unfairly label China's cooperation with a vast number of developing countries. This has been ongoing for quite some time. (GLOBAL TIMES, DECEMBER 11)



R.K. PATTHAIK

It is clear that price stability and liquidity management got precedence over economic growth in the Monetary Policy Committee resolution of December 6, 2024, and attendant statements from the RBI. Even though real growth measured in terms of GDP at constant prices has slowed substantially in Q2 of 2024-25 to 5.4 per cent as against 8.1 per cent in Q2 of 2023-24, the MPC has refrained from a policy repo rate cut with a 4-2 voting by the members. In the words of the outgoing RBI Governor: "... only with durable price stability can a strong foundation be secured for high growth."

MPC has revised the real growth rate downwards and the CPI-combined growth rate upwards in its December 6 position as compared with the October 9 resolution (see Table).

The slowdown in real growth in Q2 to 5.4 per cent and the increase in CPI-combined inflation rate to 6.2 per cent in October (which was highest since 2023) have been termed as an "aberration" by the governor. To prove this point, as set out in the Table, the growth rate has been projected higher at 7.3 per cent and inflation rate has been reduced to 4 per cent in Q2 of 2025-26. Given the potential uncertainty arising out of the subdued performance of the manufacturing sector, the slowdown in urban demand coupled with weak investment sentiments, there are doubts about the optimistic growth forecast. Geopolitical tension and geo-economic fragmentation could be a potential threat to commodity prices and a potential threat to continuing fuel group deflation for the 14th consecutive month till October 2024. In addition, clarity on monsoon and climate change has not unfolded. Therefore, there is a big question mark in bringing down the inflation rate forecast to the average of 4 per cent in Q2 as mandated in flexible inflation targeting (FIT).

As alluded to earlier, when price stability is the priority and the RBI is focused on controlling inflation and anchoring inflation expectations, the economy must then see a "disinflation glide path" which would come at the cost of growth. However, in marked contrast to this, the inflation and growth estimates have not explicitly recognised this. Estimates show inflation as coming down from 4.6 per cent in Q1 to 4 per cent in Q2 of 2025-26, and growth as going up to 7.3 per cent from 6.1 per cent in the same period. How will this work? The projection is inherently contradictory.

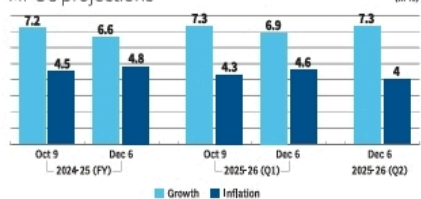
The debate on policy repo rate cut and inflation management in the MPC resolution is not new. Both the old and



Managing inflation gets precedence over growth

SIGNALS NEEDED. In the current context, it would have been appropriate if the RBI provided forward guidance on policy rates

MPC's projections



new MPC members have been differing with the monetary stance and policy repo rate cut. Since the October 2024 MPC resolution, the stance has been neutral to provide "flexibility to monitor the progress and outlook on disinflation and growth and to act appropriately."

However, the MPC has kept the policy repo rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent for the past 12 MPC cycles or past 24 months.

The October 2024 print of higher inflation (6.2 per cent) accompanied by slowdown of growth to 5.4 per cent in Q2 of 2024-25 have raised doubts whether India is facing "stagflation". However, such a view is erroneous, given that it is based on limited data point, of October 2024 inflation rate and Q2 real growth rate.

In the above context, it is important to flag the outgoing Governor's remark

The RBI is not quite sure about the movement of inflation. In addition, it is concerned about the tightening of rupee and dollar liquidity

that price stability is essential for sustained growth, and if growth slowdown lingers beyond a point, it may need policy support. The Governor has also emphasised the criticality of the timing of a decision. However, given that two members have voted for a rate cut, forward guidance on the policy repo rate cut would have been appropriate at this time. This was missing.

LIQUIDITY MANAGEMENT

Now let us turn to liquidity management by the RBI and the decision on cash reserve ratio (CRR) and raising interest rate on Foreign Currency Non-Resident Bank (FCNR(B)) deposits. The RBI Governor announced a reduction in CRR by 50 basis point in two equal tranches of 25 bps with effect from the fortnight beginning December 14 and December 28, respectively. This will restore CRR to 4 per cent and would ease primary liquidity of about ₹1.16 lakh crore to the banking system. The second announcement related to FCNR(B) deposits where the interest rates have been raised for maturity of one year to less than three years (Overnight Alternative Reference Rate or ARR plus 400 bps as against ARR plus 250 bps

currently) and for maturity of three to five years (ARR plus 500 bps as against ARR plus 300 bps currently). This is a temporary measure available till March 21, 2025.

These two measures have been taken by the RBI to manage the potential adverse impact of tightening system liquidity in the coming months due to tax outflows, increase in currency circulation, and volatility in capital flows. Per Weekly Statistical Supplement (WSS) data, forex reserves declined by \$17.76 billion during the week ended November 15. This implies that the RBI has sold these dollars to address the volatility in the foreign exchange market as the rupee depreciated against the dollar due to capital outflows.

While the reduction in CRR is a welcome move, encouraging capital flows through debt instruments like NRI deposits is a matter of concern as external debt will increase, as also the interest payment on external debt. As on June 2024 — the latest date for which data available — the outstanding NRI deposits stood at \$194.1 billion, accounting for 28.4 per cent of total external debt. Further, an increase in NRI deposits as a debt instrument will be a burden as it will be repaid from the forex reserves.

To conclude, the RBI is not quite sure about the movement of inflation. In addition, it is concerned about the tightening of rupee and dollar liquidity but is somewhat comfortable with the growth trajectory. Therefore, in the December 2024 monetary policy statement, managing inflation and liquidity management gets precedence over growth.

The writer is a former central banker and Professor at Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune. Views are personal. Through The Billion Press

Institutions must act when freebies go overboard

The CAG must use its powers to force State governments to disclose all risky, extra-budgetary practices

Govind Bhattacharjee

Inclusive development has become synonymous with cash handouts to the accounts of beneficiaries. After the NDA's electoral sweep of Maharashtra in the recent Assembly elections, attributed largely to its Ladki Bahin Yojna, it is now clear that populism has come to stay as a defining feature of electoral politics.

The Yojna, costing the exchequer ₹45,000 crore annually, offers a monthly stipend of ₹1,500 to nearly 2.5 crore women in Maharashtra. The BJP had resisted the practice until now, believing that its development record alone would suffice to win votes, but having been chastised in the Parliamentary elections, has now embraced the freebies bandwagon.

In Odisha, the BJP implemented the Subhadra scheme to provide one crore women direct financial assistance of ₹50,000 over five years at a cost of ₹55,825 crore.

West Bengal has perhaps the largest number of such handout schemes, covering practically every section of voters, including its much-touted Lakshmi Bhandar under which 2.2 crore women get ₹1,200 or ₹1,000 every month in their accounts, depending on

whether they belong to the SC/ST category or not.

Assembly elections in Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and Telangana, and earlier in Punjab, were won by the opposition parties by promising several such guarantees. Digital Jan-Dhan connectivity has made implementing these promises involving direct benefit transfer a seamless process, and voters know that unlike in the past, parties would now implement them. After all, unlike implementing developmental schemes and delivering their benefits to a large section of population which require many glitches to be fixed, transferring cash is rather easy.

STRUGGLING TO FIND RESOURCES

But these handouts are pushing public debt to unsustainable levels. Many States are now struggling to find resources even to pay salaries to their employees, like in Himachal Pradesh whose debt ratio has soared to 42 per cent of GDP.

In Karnataka, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge recently chided Chief Minister Siddaramaiah for making electoral promises he cannot fulfil — Karnataka's fiscal deficit is projected to swell from ₹46,622 crore, or 2 per cent of GDP in FY23, i.e. before the election, to ₹82,980 crore, or 3 per cent of GDP, in



HANDOUTS. Costing the exchequer

FY25. High fiscal deficit means higher cost of capital for private borrowers which inevitably leads to flight of capital. This has happened in Karnataka.

The State's total FDI has fallen from \$22 billion in 2021-22 to only \$6.57 billion in 2023-24, benefiting Gujarat in the process.

High borrowing also imposes additional burden in the form of higher interest which curtails developmental expenditure, additionally causing higher inflation. All these impact growth, and for the first time in many years, in FY24, Karnataka's real growth of 6.6 per cent fell below the national growth rate of 7.2 per cent.

The need for more money is making some States resort to practices which can be perilous for public finance. Sometimes they force their public sector entities to raise loans on the basis of

government guarantees to finance welfare schemes which are not budgeted and hence do not add to fiscal deficits, but these loans are nevertheless serviced from State revenues.

Sometimes, even the future revenues are pledged to an escrow account to repay these loans, as in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala or MP, which is an unconstitutional practice, and hides such liabilities from public eye. Some States are even levying certain cess and tying their proceeds for servicing these loans, while the Constitution allows only the Centre to levy a cess.

We can neither expect politicians to restrain their promises, nor voters to punish them for irresponsibility. Institutions like the Election Commission and even the Supreme Court have proved ineffective here. Under Article 150 of the Constitution, CAG is responsible for prescribing the format of government accounts, which includes mandatory disclosures. CAG can force the governments to disclose risky, extra-budgetary practices. That may be a small improvement to begin with.

The writer, a former Director-General with CAG of India, is currently a Professor of Practice at the Anna Jaiyee National Institute of Financial Management. Views are personal

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to "Letters to the Editor", The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Loan write-offs

The news report that "PSBs wrote off ₹7 lakh crore" (December 11) should

sensitise all concerned to look into the functioning of banks irrespective of their being public sector or private. Banks lay out stringent conditions when extending small loans, and they often confiscate or auction the pledged properties to recover the amount. But often such due diligence is not exercised when handing out huge loans, especially to corporates. It should be obviously due to political pressure, callousness of the officials, or corruption. Either way the ultimate loss is borne by the depositors. The officials concerned should be held accountable. Above

all, the people should question the authorities about their misdeeds.

AG Rajinikanth
Anantapur, AP

RBI chief's challenges

The appointment of Sanjay Malhotra as the new RBI Governor comes at a time when the country's economy is grappling with unrelenting inflation and sluggish growth and the growing clamour to ease policy rates to support growth. His appointment affirms the government's thinking that a bureaucrat is better able to manage relations between the RBI and the Finance Ministry than an independent economist; his predecessor, Shaktikanta Das, deftly

navigated a difficult domestic and global environment, while ensuring relations between Mint Street and North Block were harmonious. The challenge of the new governor is to steer the bank through a period of global and domestic uncertainty.

M Jayaram
Sholavandan, TN

Insurance plans

This refers to At 2.42 lakh crore, life insurers see growth in new business (December 11), giving out commendable figures and percentage of growth in premiums for LIC and other players, the news item highlights the sunshine sector for businesses. Missed in the hype of

growing premiums and increasing "insurance penetration" is the stark reality that these growth figures mostly mask the lagged or detrimental effect of current insurance products that deny the most needy — breadwinners of common households — from getting adequate, affordable insurance coverage. What is being offered as a combo of savings and protection fall abysmally on both indemnity and return (on investments) fronts. Efforts should be directed at designing and popularising "pure insurance" plans.

Jose Abraham
Villem, Kerala

P Victor Selvaraj
Pulayankottai, TN

Transforming agriculture

Holistic collective farming, a boon for small farmers

S Raghavan

The agricultural landscape of India is a tale of stark contrasts. On one hand, large landowners thrive with access to resources and capital; on the other, small and marginal farmers struggle to sustain themselves on fragmented plots of land.

These farmers are caught in a vicious cycle of diminishing landholdings, lack of resources, and predatory moneylenders.

However, a new model of holistic collective farming offers a beacon of hope. This innovative approach aims to pool fragmented landholdings, empower small farmers through collective efforts, and ensure sustainable, profitable farming practices.

In many farming communities, land inheritance traditions have led to a steady reduction in farm sizes over generations. Small plots of land, often less than an acre, are insufficient to sustain a family.

Without access to reliable water sources, quality seeds, or market knowledge, these farmers struggle to make ends meet. Many fall prey to moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates, pushing them deeper into debt.

COLLECTIVE FARMING

This model seeks to transform the lives of small farmers by addressing their most pressing challenges. The approach involves:

Pooling Land: Farmers retain ownership of their land but agree to pool their plots into a collective unit. This creates larger, contiguous areas for farming, which improves efficiency and scalability.

Collaborating with Social Entrepreneurs: A non-exploitative social entrepreneur provides initial capital, access to water resources, seeds, and marketing channels. They also bring in agricultural experts to train farmers in sustainable practices.

Natural Farming Techniques: Farmers are taught to prepare organic fertilisers using cow dung, cow urine, jaggery, lentil flour, and virgin soil. This cost-effective method enhances soil fertility and reduces dependence on expensive chemical inputs.

Revenue distribution: Farmers receive daily wages for their labour, ensuring financial stability. After the harvest, revenue from the sale of produce is distributed. Operational expenses are deducted, and the remaining profits are shared.



FARMING. Towards a collective approach (F)

among farmers based on their land contribution.

Education and the future: To arrest further fragmentation of land, the model encourages farmers to document their children's names in land records. Earnings from the collective farming initiative can fund their education, enabling them to pursue careers outside agriculture.

The are many benefits of this model. First, the farmers are financial secure earning both wages and profit shares.

Two, the natural farming practices lead to improved soil health and sustainable system.

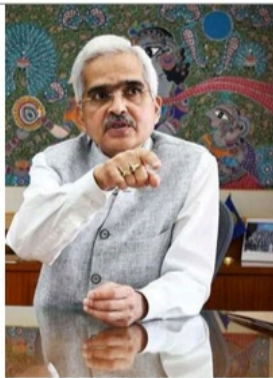
Collective farming fosters community cooperation, reduces dependence on moneylenders. Joint ownership through a pooled model halts land fragmentation.

Redirecting farm income toward children's education creates opportunities for upward mobility and diversification of livelihoods.

The holistic collective farming model is not just an economic initiative; it is a vision for social transformation. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern sustainability practices, it offers a way to rejuvenate India's farming sector. The success of such a model depends on trust-building within communities, transparent governance, and the active involvement of social entrepreneurs and policymakers.

To scale this initiative, government bodies, NGOs, and private stakeholders must come together. Financial incentives, such as subsidies for natural farming inputs or tax benefits for social entrepreneurs, could accelerate adoption.

Simultaneously, robust educational campaigns can highlight the model's benefits, encouraging more farmers to participate.



Shaktikanta Das: Balancing autonomy and reform

PRAGMATIC REFORMER.

Apart from handling crises — Covid, NBFC liquidity — the outgoing RBI Governor also struck balance between innovation and stability



HARSIMRAN SANDHU

When Shaktikanta Das assumed office as the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in December 2018, scepticism and curiosity followed. A seasoned bureaucrat with a long stint at the Ministry of Finance, Das was perceived by some as a safe choice given the friction that prevailed then between the RBI and the government.

His predecessor, Urjit Patel, had resigned amid controversies over RBI reserves and its regulatory independence, heightening public scrutiny on the new Governor's approach.

In the years since, Das has not only quelled many of these apprehensions but has also emerged as a pragmatic reformer. His tenure is characterised by a mix of crisis management, modernisation initiatives, and policy reforms that have helped stabilise and strengthen India's financial system.

KEY REFORMS

(i) Tackling the NBFC liquidity crisis: Das took office during a challenging time marked by the IL&FS crisis, which had triggered a liquidity crunch in the non-banking financial company (NBFC) sector.

To address this, the RBI under Das introduced targeted long-term repo operations (TLTROs), aimed at channeling liquidity to NBFCs and other

critical sectors, thereby averting a systemic collapse.

(ii) Covid-19 response: Monetary Easing and Support: The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented economic challenges. Das led the RBI in deploying aggressive measures, including significant interest rate cuts, a six-month loan moratorium for borrowers, and targeted liquidity infusion programmes.

These actions mitigated economic distress and provided much-needed relief to businesses and individuals.

(iii) Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC): Das's tenure has also been marked by a forward-looking approach to digital innovation. The RBI launched a pilot for the digital rupee, signalling India's entry into the era of central bank digital currencies. This initiative is poised to modernise India's payment systems and enhance financial inclusion.

(iv) Strengthened oversight of cooperative banks: Following high-profile banking failures like the PMC Bank fraud, the RBI tightened its supervisory framework for cooperative banks. These institutions were brought under stricter regulatory oversight, enhancing depositor protection and financial stability.

(v) Inflation targeting and

Das' legacy will likely be defined by his ability to harmonise institutional independence with a vision for long-term financial stability and modernisation

monetary policy discipline: Das maintained inflation targeting as the cornerstone of monetary policy. His focus on price stability helped anchor inflation expectations and contributed to a stable macroeconomic environment, even during periods of global volatility.

(vi) Prompt corrective action framework: The revision of the Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) framework during his tenure has strengthened early intervention in distressed banks. This proactive approach has improved asset quality and ensured greater resilience in the banking system.

(vii) Financial inclusion and digital payments: Under Das's leadership, the RBI has pushed for greater financial inclusion, encouraging digital payment adoption through platforms like UPI. These efforts have widened access to banking services, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

In recent months, the relationship between the RBI and the government has seen its share of back-and-forth debates. Key points of contention have revolved around the RBI's inflation-targeting framework and its cautious stance on growth-focused measures amidst rising fiscal pressures.

The government has sought more accommodative policies to spur economic growth, while Das has emphasised the importance of anchoring inflation expectations and maintaining macroeconomic stability.

The issue of surplus reserve transfers has also resurfaced, with the government seeking additional funds from the RBI to address fiscal gaps. Das has maintained a cautious approach, ensuring that the central bank's balance

sheet remains robust to safeguard financial stability. This delicate tug-of-war highlights the complexities of managing the RBI's autonomy in a challenging economic and political environment.

BALANCING ACT

Das's leadership has been a study in balance — navigating the tightrope between RBI's independence and the need for constructive engagement with the government. While he has worked closely with the government on initiatives like credit support schemes and liquidity measures, he has also defended the central bank's independence on key issues.

His handling of sensitive topics reflects a nuanced approach that prioritises both institutional integrity and national economic interests.

Das's tenure as RBI Governor exemplifies adaptive leadership during tumultuous times. By addressing immediate challenges, such as the NBFC crisis and pandemic-induced economic shocks, and implementing forward-looking reforms, he has fortified India's financial system against future uncertainties.

Despite recent tensions, his pragmatic, consultative style has ensured that the RBI remains both independent and collaborative — a critical balance in an evolving financial landscape.

Shaktikanta Das' legacy will likely be defined by his ability to harmonise institutional independence with a vision for long-term financial stability and modernisation.

The writer is Professor of Finance at IIT Ghaziabad

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 12, 2004

Forex reserves vault by \$3.79 billion, touch \$130.7 billion

The country's forex reserves soared by \$3.79 billion for the week ended December 3, 2004, the highest accretion seen in a week in 2004, as per the latest RBI statistics. According to analysts, revaluation gains, notable foreign investment inflows and intervention by the central bank in the domestic forex market aided the incredible surge in reserves to \$130.717 billion, against \$126.923 billion in the previous week.

ST Telemedia-TM Intl to acquire 47.7% stake in Idea Cell

Singapore Technologies Telemedia and TM International have announced that their consortium has signed definitive agreements for the acquisition of 47.7 per cent stake in Idea Cellular. The total consideration of the deal is approximately \$390 million (or over Rs 1,755 crores), said a press release.

Polyplex arm to list on Thai bourse

Polyplex Thailand Ltd, subsidiary of listed company Polyplex Corporation, is set to make its debut on the Thailand Stock Exchange with its IPO listing on December 15. This is the first time that a company of Indian parent is being listed on the Thailand Stock Exchange.

UZHAVAR app: Digital path to farmers' welfare

E Saranya Devi
VA Anand

The UZHAVAR app is transforming the agricultural landscape of Tamil Nadu, by bridging the gap between farmers and essential government schemes.

The app empowers farmers through a unified digital platform. It simplifies access to agricultural information, government subsidies, and expert advisory services.

By integrating the efforts of critical departments such as agriculture, horticulture, agricultural engineering, seed certification and marketing, in collaboration with Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) and the Tamil Nadu Watershed Development Agency, the UZHAVAR App and its variety of schemes ensure timely, accurate, and actionable resources to farmers.

Since its inception, the UZHAVAR App has touched the lives of over 3.5 million farmers, providing a wide array of services aimed at enhancing productivity and ensuring financial stability.

Of these, over 1.9 million

beneficiaries are from agriculture, 1.6 million from horticulture, and the rest across engineering and marketing support.

The accompanying table presents a detailed breakdown of beneficiaries across various departments, showcasing the schemes significant outreach and impact.

Farmers now experience greater security through initiatives like the 'Chief Minister's Mannayir Kaathu Mannayir Kaappom Scheme', which shields them from financial distress caused by crop losses due to climatic adversities.

Similarly, the 'Rainfed Area Development - IPS 2024-25' scheme has equipped rainfed regions with irrigation systems, crop diversification strategies, and water conservation techniques, ensuring a consistent yield.

In the quest for nutritional security, programmes such as the 'Food and Nutritional Security (FNS) Nutri-Cereals 2023-24' initiative have encouraged the cultivation of millets, which are both drought-resistant and nutritious.

Coupled with the 'TN Millet Mission', these programmes are paving

Number of beneficiaries

Department	(Up to 2024)
Agriculture	19,13,685
Horticulture	16,14,918
Engineering	1,138
Marketing	3,091
Total	35,32,832

Source: tnagriinet.in.gov

the way for sustainable farming and catering to the growing demand for healthy grains.

Additionally, the 'TN Irrigated Agriculture Modernization Project' has optimised irrigation systems, significantly improving water-use efficiency while boosting crop yields. Complementary efforts through the 'Kalaingar Ali Village Integrated Agricultural Development Program' provide integrated resources and training at the village level, fostering grassroots-level empowerment.

A DIGITAL FUTURE

The app's real-time features, such as access to market prices, weather updates, fertilizer stock, and

e-marketplace opportunities, have revolutionised the decision-making process for farmers.

For instance, the 'Uzhavar e-Market' platform connects farmers directly to buyers, cutting out intermediaries and enhancing profits.

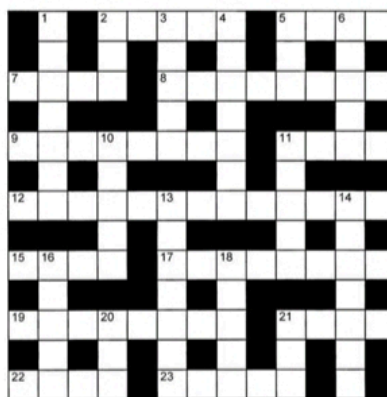
While the UZHAVAR App has made significant strides, the journey towards a fully digitized and farmer-centric agricultural ecosystem is ongoing. Future enhancements could include AI-driven predictive analytics for crop health, expanded access to global markets through enhanced e-commerce platforms, and tailored training modules for modern agricultural techniques.

The app's success demonstrates the potential of technology to revolutionise traditional farming, creating a more resilient, productive, and sustainable agricultural community in Tamil Nadu.

For continued support and updates, farmers are encouraged to visit tnagriinet.in.gov.

Dev's Assistant Professor, A.K College of Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, and Anand is Assistant Professor, Alagappa University, Karaikudi

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2587



EASY

ACROSS

- Theatrical backer (5)
- Male voice (4)
- Canine voice (4)
- One thing that falls in shower (8)
- A setting-back (8)
- Is compelled to (4)
- Twentieth of a ton (13)
- Tie boat up (4)
- It is measured in millibars (8)
- Waterproof garment (8)
- Cow-meat (4)
- Retain (4)
- Brought to correct pitch (5)

DOWN

- French country house (7)
- Noachian craft (3)
- Young females (5)
- Brought down by illness (4,3)
- Rotten, very poor (3)
- Packs away (5)
- Respected man in church (5)
- Supplies of utilities to homes (5)
- Make gain at others' expense (7)
- Crop (7)
- Make speeches (5)
- Consumed (5)
- Chill feeling in the air (3)
- Unopened flower (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- He may back play, carrying a message from the gods (5)
- From a pram one gets this fish with one net (4)
- Dog would sound warning to leading bear on Noah's craft (4)
- Rid apron of a particle of water that falls (8)
- Reveals the Right swing to be a setback (8)
- It has to be a mouldy smell (4)
- County division to stand by, one is told, with heaviness (13)
- Heath to tie craft to (4)
- Newspapers certain not to have begun such strong demand (8)
- Mac turning into a car (8)
- It could be a baron that has some complaint to make (4)
- One part of the castle not to abandon (4)
- Adjusted pitch of duet to include finale of Lohengrin (5)

DOWN

- Informal talk on French water with a wine producer (7)
- Take top off 7 for a chest (3)
- Sugar and spice are productive of women when young (5)
- Didn't make oneself obvious, being stricken by illness (4,3)
- It's not good to be first with publicity (3)
- Packs a steamship with flax fibres (5)
- He has a respected place in the kirk for a tree (5)
- Scots own in writing of electricity, water and gas supplies (5)
- A deed of derring-do one may make use of (7)
- Gather one less hair undergarment (7)
- Speak in public or take a tea-break (5)
- Food being finished by school, one is told (5)
- Move fast to pinch a measure of the spirit ... (3)
- ... which, in the this, one will stop at the outset (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2586

ACROSS 1. Misdeemeanour 8. Appraise 9. Leaf 11. Salve 12. Epitaph 13. Easy 15. Itch 19. Finance 20. Those 22. I'lls 23. Apparent 24. Enterprising
DOWN 2. Impel 3. Deafen 4. Master 5. Overeat 6. Refreshments 7. Laissez-faire 10. Sip 14. Singlet 16. Any 17. Pepper 18. Stearns 21. Ocean

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Cases resolved through mediation in Thane since 2021

2,330 Altogether 2,330 legal disputes have been resolved through mediation in Maharashtra's Thane since 2021. Ishwar Suryavanshi of the District Legal Services Authority shared figures and underscored the significance of mediation. **IN**

Migrants who have landed in the Canary Islands till December

41,425 The number of migrants who are undocumented reaching Spain via the Canaries has increased sharply. 41,425 migrants landed in the islands between January and November compared to 39,910 for the whole of last year. **AP**

Suspects booked for alleged propaganda against Pakistan Army

150 Pakistani authorities have booked 150 suspects and arrested 22 of them, mostly belonging to Imran Khan's party, for allegedly posting against the army on social media about the killings of party workers in Islamabad on November 26, an official said on Wednesday. **IN**

The temperature recorded in Sikar, Rajasthan on Tuesday

1.5 degrees Celsius. Temperatures in parts of Rajasthan dropped over the 24 hours leading up to 8:30 am on Wednesday, with extreme cold wave conditions recorded in one or two areas, the India Meteorological Department said. The lowest minimum temperature was recorded in Sikar. **IN**

The conviction rate recorded by National Investigation Agency

95.23 In per cent. The National Investigation Agency (NIA), which registered 640 cases since its inception, has recorded a conviction rate of 95.23% in 147 cases which have been decided by courts. **IN**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The mosques which face survey petitions

Why has an oral observation made by Former Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud led to repercussions at the lower judiciary? What is the contestation against the origins of the Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra and the Ajmer dargah? What about the provisions of the Places of Worship Act, 1991?

EXPLAINER

Ziya Us Salam

The story so far:

During a hearing of the Gyanvapi petition in 2022, Justice D.Y. Chandrachud made an oral observation that Sections 3 and 4 of the Places of Worship Act, 1991 do not prohibit the "ascertainment of religious character" of any place of worship. His oral observation has had repercussions at the lower judiciary with a number of districts and sessions courts in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan admitting petitions seeking to "ascertain the religious character" of mosques and other places of worship built in medieval India and ordering their surveys. Among the places facing calls for survey are the Ajmer Dargah, Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra, the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal, the Teelawali Masjid in Lucknow, the Shamsi Jama Masjid in Badaun, the Atala Masjid in Jaunpur besides the better known cases of Gyanvapi Masjid, and Eidgah in Mathura.

Are calls for surveys increasing? Shortly after a civil judge in Sambhal ordered a survey of the town's Jama Masjid on November 19, there has been a slew of petitions calling for surveys of mosques and dargahs. On November 24, there was a repeat survey of the Sambhal mosque which led to violence in which six people were killed. Following the violence, the Supreme Court asked the report of the advocate commissioner to be kept in a sealed cover, and directed the mosque's committee to approach the Allahabad High Court to hear the case. Around the same time, Ajmer's West Civil Court admitted a petition claiming that the Ajmer dargah was originally a Sankat Mochan Mandir. The demand led to uproar as the dargah is frequented by people of all religions and the Prime Minister himself sends a chador for its annual Urs in January. Disturbed by these



Historic site: People outside the Ajmer Sharif Dargah in Ajmer, Rajasthan, on November 28. **IN**

petitions, a number of retired bureaucrats and Army personnel wrote to the Prime Minister asking him to curtail what they called, an "ideological assault on India's civilisational heritage".

What about Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra? The dargah petition triggered demand for the restoration of the 12th century mosque Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra to its alleged pre-Islamic heritage. The mosque, located a few minutes away from the dargah, is an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) protected site. The demand came from Ajmer's Deputy Mayor Neeraj Jain who reiterated claims that the Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra was originally a Sanskrit college and a temple before being demolished towards the end of 12th century. Earlier the demand for a Sanskrit college and a temple at the site was raised

after a Jain monk visited the mosque along with some functionaries of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Soon after Rajasthan Assembly speaker Vasudev Devnani demanded an ASI survey at the historic site, arguing, "An ASI survey should immediately be done at Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra to find out whether the Jain delegates' claim is true. It's a subject to research whether it was occupied and converted into a mosque."

The mosque was built by Qutubuddin Aibak around the time he built the Quwwat-ul-Islam Masjid in the Qutub Minar complex in Delhi. Sultan Iltutmish beautified it in AD 1213 with a screen pierced by corbelled engravled arches which appears in this country for the first time. A protected monument, its name stems from an Urs (fair) that used to be held here for two and a half days. Hence

the expression *Adhai Din* or two and a half days. However, the claim of the site being a mosque has been disputed by author Har Bilas Sarda who argued in his book, *Ajmer: Historical and Descriptive*, that Seth Viramdeva Kala built a Jain temple here in celebration of the Jain festival Panch Kalyan Mahotsava in 660 AD. The temple was destroyed by Afghans of Ghor in 1152, he claimed.

The ASI doesn't agree with the assertion. About the mosque, the ASI website states, "It was commenced by Qutubuddin Aibak in about 1200 AD with carved pillars used in colonnades... The pillared (prayer) chamber is divided into nine octagonal compartments and has two small minarets on top of the central arch. The three central arches carved with Kufic and Tughra inscriptions make it a splendid architectural masterpiece."

What about the Shamsi Jama Masjid?

The 800-year-old Shamsi Jama Masjid is the latest mosque to face contestation. A fast-track court is hearing the claims of Mukesh Patel of the Hindu Mahasabha who filed a claim against the mosque, insisting it was an ancient Neelkanth Mahadev temple. In response, the Shamsi Shahi mosque's intezamia committee argued the suit was non-maintainable. Incidentally, the mosque is built on an elevated area called Sotha Mohalla, and is said to be the highest structure in Badaun town. After Quwwat-ul-Islam and Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra, it is the third oldest mosque in north India.

After Badaun, cries are being made about the historic Jama Masjid in Delhi too – that it's built at the site of a Vishnu temple. With the districts and sessions courts continuing to freely admit such petitions, the provisions of the Places of Worship Act 1991 which prohibit changing the character of places of worship as they stood on August 15, 1947, stand ignored. Meanwhile, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board appealed to the Supreme Court to take suo moto notice of such petitions and bar the lower level judiciary from entertaining them in the future.

THE GIST

▼ Shortly after a civil judge in Sambhal ordered a survey of the town's Jama Masjid on November 19, there has been a slew of petitions calling for surveys of mosques and dargahs.

▼ Among the places facing calls for survey are the Ajmer Dargah, Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra, the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal, the Teelawali Masjid in Lucknow besides the known cases of Varanasi's Gyanvapi Masjid, and the Eidgah in Mathura.

▼ The 800-year-old Shamsi Jama Masjid is the latest mosque to face contestation. A fast-track court is hearing the claims of Mukesh Patel of the Hindu Mahasabha who filed a claim against the mosque, insisting it was an ancient Neelkanth Mahadev temple.

Has the government clarified its stance on ONOS?

Why did the 'One Nation, One Subscription' plan invoke criticism after it was unveiled last month?

The Hindu Bureau

The story so far:

On November 25, the Indian government announced the launch of its 'One Nation, One Subscription' (ONOS) plan to improve access to research journals for the country's public education and research institutes. The announcement was accompanied with scant details and broadened widespread criticism from the research community, especially over what was perceived to be its disproportionate expense and lack of support for open-access publishing. On December 11, government officials conducted a press conference in New Delhi that addressed many of these concerns.

What is ONOS's purpose?

When scientists conduct an experiment, they write up their methods and findings and publish it as a paper in a journal. The

journal collects, reviews, edits, publishes, and archives these papers as a service to other scholars and the people at large. In exchange, journals levy a fee. Subscription-based journals charge readers a fee to read papers. Some forms of Open-Access (OA) journals, called 'gold' OA, charge researchers to publish their paper. Institutes in India had subscribed to subscription journals through IO or so consortia within the country. ONOS will replace these consortia as a single window through which all government-funded institutes in the country will be able to access more than 13,000 journals published by 30 major international publishers.

Why did ONOS provoke criticism?

At the time of announcement, a Ministry of Education press release didn't specify which journals would be part of ONOS, how ONOS would be implemented, how its allocation of ₹6,000 crore (for three

calendar years) would be spent, and how ONOS would support efforts to make research OA. Experts on the topic also asked whether the allocation for foreign journals could have been used to support domestic publishing efforts instead.

Also it wasn't clear whether ONOS would help scientists pay to publish in gold OA journals or whether these payments – called article processing charges (APCs) – could be discounted.

What was revealed on December 11?

The press conference was attended by officials from the office of the Principal Scientific Advisor (PSA), the Department of Science & Technology, and the Department of Higher Education.

The package: Students and staff at all public institutes will be able to access all papers in the journals participating in ONOS irrespective of their discipline. Negotiations are underway to bring in more journals.

Phases: Remya Haridasan, a scientist at the PSA's office, said the government would implement ONOS in three phases:

(i) merge all the consortia and work to facilitate journal access in all public institutes; (ii) expand to include private institutions; (iii) create "universal access" to all citizens "through designated access points at public libraries".

Open access: In a pilot, ONOS would set aside ₹150 crore a year to pay for APCs. The government has also negotiated APC discounts for researchers to publish in certain OA journals. The officials said they are aware of transformative OA models and that ONOS would encompass them as it progressed. As of today, they said, around 65% of papers published by Indian scientists were in subscription-based journals.

Domestic efforts: Officials at the press conference acknowledged the need to support domestic publishers. They said there were five repositories in the country – servers where researchers could deposit digital copies of their papers and where others could freely access them – but that scientists were using them to a less-than-ideal degree. They added that other efforts need to take place, such as "enhancement, promotion, and support of Indian journals" and changes in how institutes evaluate the work of researchers, especially to reduce dependence on journal titles and increase focus on the merit of each person's work.

THE GIST

▼ On November 25, the Indian government announced the launch of its 'One Nation, One Subscription' (ONOS) plan to improve access to research journals for the country's public education and research institutes.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY



AFP

Way in the world: how Muslim women travelled from 17th-20th centuries

In 45 essays, three editors gather multiple travel accounts by Muslim women who, alone or chaperoned, veiled or unveiled, travelling for work or pleasure, bust every stereotype. Apart from records of the new and the unexpected, there are also observations about all aspects of life

Rakshanda Jalil

I began reading *Three Centuries of Travel Writing by Muslim Women* (Zubaan Books) chronologically, hoping rather ambitiously to read it from cover to cover, one essay at a time. That was a mistake, I think. The book is better served, and savoured, if the reader were to dip into it in no particular order. Each essay is so precisely contextualised by the immaculate 'Introduction' prefacing each entry and followed by 'Further Reading and 'Notes' that even a casual reader can dip into this richly documented, beautifully translated volume of disparate writings and partake of the spirit behind it.

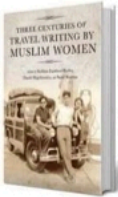
For the more serious reader/researcher, there is of course the scholarly introduction by Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Daniel Majchrowicz who edited the book (along with Sunil Sharma). They write: "On the face of it, the premise of this volume is simple: a comparative study of travel narratives by Muslim women who travelled the world before the 'jet age' transformed modern mobility. Yet in our contemporary moment, the very juxtaposition of these terms – Muslim, women, travel mobility – instantly raises a number of questions."

Colonialism, gender, travel, religion, money come together in unexpected ways throughout this book. What is more, these accounts by educated and "privileged" Muslim women also contain descriptions – sometimes empathetic, occasionally derisive – of other Muslim women they meet during their travels

who are poor and disadvantaged and, being illiterate, could not have recorded their experiences or left written records of their lives. So, apart from records of the new and the unexpected, there are also observations about the different practices of child-rearing, food, cooking habits, dress, religious and social practices.

Multiple voices

These first-hand accounts, originally written in Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Chaghtai Turki, Punjabi, Bengali, Indonesian, German and English, span the 17th to 20th centuries thus presenting an array of experiences and impressions. Written variously as conventional travelogues (Halide Edib, Zainab Cobbold), excerpts from autobiographies (Salamah Bint Said/Emily Ruete, Huda Shaarawi), diary entries (Muhammadi Begum, Begum Hasrat Mohani), written for limited circulation as magazine articles (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Shams Pahlavi), recorded for family and friends (Begum Sarbuland Jung, Ummat al-Ghani Nur al-Nisa), or with a pronounced political overtone (Suharti Suwarto, Melek Hanim) quite naturally, therefore, present different voices and concerns. Chatty, informal, informed when the writing is for herself or her family members; or formal, structured, detailed, sometimes even didactic when she knows what she is writing is meant for public consumption.



Travel as life

There are 45 accounts in all, grouped under four headings: Travel as Pilgrimage, Travel as Emancipation and Politics, Travel as Education, and Travel as Obligation and Pleasure. While large numbers of Indian women have written haj accounts, there is only one Indian in the second section, Shareefah Hamid Ali, who represented India at the United Nations and travelled by air. Several Indian Muslim women chose to travel for education, sometimes their own, or their husband's or sons'. There is Mehr-al-Nisa from Hyderabad who joined her doctor husband in Ohio to train as an x-ray nurse, and Zaib-un-Nisa from Karachi writing an account of her 60 days in America as a member of the U.S. Department of State-sponsored Foreign Leader Exchange Programme where she crosses the breadth of the United States in a hired car with her husband.

Safia Jabir Ali, daughter of the esteemed Tyabji clan, married Jabir Ali who travelled extensively for business from their home in Burma to Europe.

Her memoir, written in Urdu, is brimful with an easy confidence: "I had to travel by myself from Bombay to Marseilles, and that was the first time I had occasion to depend entirely on myself and spend more than three weeks among entire strangers. However, as probably some of you know by

experience, on board the steamer, one gets to know people very soon. I was lucky in being able to travel on the Loyalty, the steamer of an Indian company where there were a good many Indian passengers, and some of us soon became great friends."

Connecting the dots

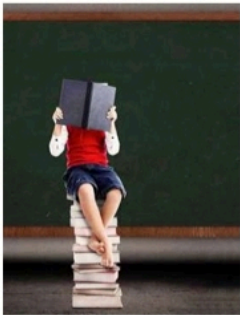
The last part, "Travel as Obligation and Pleasure", has by far the most interesting experiences: Mughal Princess Jahanara's mystical meeting in Kashmir; Salamah Bint Said, a princess of Zanzibar, who flees her home to unite with her German lover in Hamburg, converts to Christianity and takes the name Emily Ruete; and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's pleasure trip to the Himalayas, among others.

While most women travelled with a male (husband, father, son, brother), some travelled alone: "Safia Jabir Ali travelled alone from Bombay to meet her husband in post-First World War Britain, Sediqeh Dowlatbadi from Tehran in 1923 to study at the Sorbonne in Paris, Selma Ekram from 'Stamboul' to New York in 1924 on the promise of work."

Muhammadi Begum with her infant child from Bonn to Oxford in the mid-1930s, and Herawati Diah en route to study at Barnard College in New York in 1937"

Alone or chaperoned, veiled or unveiled, travelling for work or pleasure, these accounts by Muslim women bust every stereotype. In one voice, these women seem to be saying: "only connect".

Rakshanda Jalil is a translator and literary historian.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
Uppendran

"... and if I do that, do you think it'll help my complexion?"

"It's not COMplexion, but comPLExion. The stress is on the second syllable and the 'o' of the first syllable is pronounced like the 'a' in 'China'."

"So 'com' is pronounced like the 'com' in words like 'complete', 'compel' and 'complain'. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"ComPLExion. Good. Now about my complexion. Do you think if I..."

"Don't ask me any mickey mouse questions."

"Mickey mouse question! What does it mean?"

"Mickey mouse means 'nonsense, trivial, time-wasting'. For example, I can say, the report was a lot of mickey mouse."

"Now getting back to my complexion, sorry comPLExion, I wonder..."

"Let's change the channel."

"Change the channel? But the TV isn't on."

"I'm not talking about the TV I'm talking about you."

"You want me to change the channel. What does it mean?"

"You tell me."

"Well, when you change the channel of a TV set, you switch from one programme to another. So when you're talking about something and somebody asks you to change the channel, I suppose it means you are asked to change the topic."

"Excellent. To change the channel means 'to switch to some other topic of conversation'. Mohan is a difficult person to talk to because he keeps changing the channel frequently."

"That's true. So if I don't want him to keep changing the topic, can I say 'don't change the channel'?"

"Yes, you can. Now I definitely want you to change the channel."

"O.K. What do you plan to do during...No...what do you plan to do...I am always confused. Is it 'plan to do' or 'plan on doing'?"

"Both are correct. You can either say 'What do you plan on eating' or 'What do you plan to eat'?"

"I see. So, what do you plan to do this evening?"

"I don't plan on doing anything. Could you please pass me the portable hand-held communications inscriber?"

"Portable what?"

"The portable hand-held communications inscriber."

"What is that?"

"A pencil!"

"You're joking."

"No. That's what the U.S. army calls a pencil."

Published in *The Hindu* on May 17, 1994.

THE DAILY QUIZ

The first radio transmission across the Atlantic Ocean took place on December 12, 1901. Here is a quiz on the event that transformed perceptions of communication

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION 1

Who designed the transmission system and received the first signal?

QUESTION 2

Name the source and destination of the transmission?

QUESTION 3

What was the transmitted message?

QUESTION 4

What did detractors believe would happen during the experiment?

QUESTION 5

Name the device invented by Edouard Branly that helped in transmitting long-range signals?



Visual question:

Name this German scientist who shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with the answer to question 1 for his contributions to wireless communication.

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

1. S.M. Krishna was Governor of this State. **Ans: Maharashtra**
 2. S. M. Krishna was elected from this seat in Karnataka in 1962. **Ans: Maddur**
 3. This task force was the brainchild of S.M. Krishna which ran from 1999 to 2004. **Ans: Bangalore Agenda Task Force**
 4. This scheme designed to better the nutritional status of children was introduced in Karnataka when S.M. Krishna was Chief Minister. **Ans: Mid-day meal scheme**
 5. Krishna's son-in-law passed away in 2019, and was the founder of this multinational food chain. **Ans: V.G. Siddhartha; Cafe Coffee Day**
- Visual. The significance of this photo. **Ans: Film actor Dr. Rajkumar was kidnapped by forest brigand Veerappan**
- Early Birds: Sonali Das| Tito Shildatya| Siddhartha Viswanathan| Barnali Biswas| Lekshmy Harikumar

Word of the day

Sublimate:

the product of vapourisation of a solid; direct energy or urges into useful activities; make more subtle or refined; change or cause to change directly from a solid into a vapour without first melting; vapourise and then condense right back again

Synonyms: rarely, sublimise

Usage: 'sublimated my grief by throwing myself into work.'

Pronunciation: /snwθ.lɪv/;sublimatepro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /sʌblɪmeɪt/

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

SCIENCE

Climate impact of exploring space passing below the radar

Making satellites is an energy-intensive process. Every launch also releases carbon dioxide, black carbon, and water vapour. Rocket propellants deplete the ozone layer and disrupt atmospheric circulation. Satellites burning up in the air release ash into the atmosphere's middle layers

Shrawani Shagun

As the world becomes more reliant on space technology for vital functions like climate monitoring, the environmental consequences of space activities also become increasingly urgent and in need of more attention. The rapid growth of the number of satellites in orbit has led to concerns about interference with climate monitoring systems and the accumulation of orbital debris. With no specific international regulations addressing these challenges, it is crucial the world's governments act quickly to ensure space exploration doesn't drift into unsustainability.

How rockets affect the environment

Every rocket launch releases carbon dioxide, black carbon, and water vapour into the atmosphere. Black carbon is of particular concern because it also absorbs sunlight 500 times more effectively than carbon dioxide does, amplifying global warming. As commercial space ventures become more common, the cumulative impact of these emissions will worsen.

Rocket propellants, especially those using chlorine-based chemicals, deplete the ozone layer at high altitudes, increasing exposure to ultraviolet radiation on the ground as well as disrupting atmospheric circulation – both of which affect the global climate. According to a December 9 article in *MIT Tech Review*, when satellites "burn up in the atmosphere" once their missions end, they release "satellite ash in the middle layers of the earth's atmosphere. This metallic ash can harm the atmosphere and potentially alter the climate."

Next, like many other forms of manufacturing, the production of satellites demands energy-intensive processes involving metals and composite materials, whose extraction and preparation have large carbon footprints of their own. Satellites also use propulsion systems to adjust their location and orientation in orbit, and their emissions add to the overall count. Equally, the rise of space mining – e.g., extracting valuable (on the earth) minerals from asteroids – could lead to increased industrial activity both in space and on the ground. Such mining activities haven't begun yet, but they are sure to be part of the future.

While space technology supports essential climate monitoring and disaster management, the environmental costs for the earth's atmosphere and space are escalating, requiring urgent redressal.

Dangers of orbital debris

Orbital debris, or space junk, refers to defunct satellites, spent rocket stages, and pieces of satellites produced when they break apart in low earth orbit (LEO). According to the European Space Agency, as of September 2024, there had been around 6,740 rocket launches since 1957 that placed 19,590 satellites in orbit. Around 13,200 are still in space, and of them 10,230 are still functional.

Since the space in earth's orbit is a resource just like water bodies and land masses on the ground, the occupation of orbits by non-functional objects constitutes a form of pollution as well – with the added threat of risk magnification.

For example, space surveillance



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket lifts off from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Florida. The rocket carried 23 Starlink satellites. AP

networks have catalogued around 36,860 space objects thus far, including those produced in the 650+ fragmentation events (break-ups, explosions, and collisions). The total mass of all space objects in orbit exceeds 13,000 tonnes. As this mass continues to increase, the collision risks to satellites increase as well. Most space junk can reach speeds of up to 29 km/hr. When moving so fast, even a minuscule piece of metal can smash through a satellite like a bullet, damaging critical components, including those used for communication, navigation, and to monitor climate parameters of merit.

Orbital debris also poses an indirect threat by interfering with scientists' ability to collect data about the earth – from tracking disasters to monitoring weather – from space, such as by interfering with radio waves. Such threats also obligate satellite operators to invest in shielding satellites and actively perform costly manoeuvres to avoid collisions; both requirements drive up mission cost.

The risks are even more significant for human-crewed missions. For example, the International Space Station frequently adjusts its orbit to avoid debris.

Barriers to space sustainability

Regulation is key to ensuring space remains accessible and space activities remain environmentally sustainable. Without clear guidelines, the unchecked growth of emissions and debris will harm the earth's climate and increase the barriers to future space exploration.

Space activities currently fall outside international sustainability instruments like the Paris Agreement, so governments need to establish standards for emissions from rockets and satellites to prevent them from becoming overlooked contributors to global warming.

Without regulations, the increasing number of satellites and debris will overcrowd LEO, rendering future missions more expensive, which in turn would subtract from space's identity as a shared global resource that needs to be

The mass of objects in orbit exceeds 13,000 tonnes. As this increases, the collision risks increase as well. Most space junk can reach speeds of up to 29 km/hr. Even a minuscule piece can smash through a satellite

equally accessible to everyone.

International cooperation through bodies like the Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space (COPUOS) is necessary to create enforceable standards in this context.

Governments can also ensure such frameworks align with the Outer Space Treaty's principles of responsible use of space while addressing the treaty's current lack of binding provisions. This unity is particularly crucial if countries are to address the environmental impacts of space activities.

Achieving sustainability

Achieving sustainability in space exploration requires innovative solutions, which also present challenges of their own. For example, reusable rockets like those developed by SpaceX and Blue Origin reduce manufacturing waste and lower costs by allowing engineers to reuse rocket components in multiple missions. But the reusable parts are often heavier, which increases fuel consumption. These also have limited applicability for high-orbit missions, and their wear and tear invokes costly refurbishments. Thus scaling this technology while maintaining efficiency remains a hurdle.

Second, transitioning to cleaner fuels like liquid hydrogen and/or biofuels can minimise harmful emissions during liftoffs. However, hydrogen is currently produced with non-renewable energy, negating its environmental benefits. Cryogenic fuels – which provide more thrust for the same mass – are more expensive and more complex to handle, keeping them out of reach of smaller

operators. Electric propulsion is another option, but its low thrust restricts its use to specific missions like in-orbit manoeuvres.

Third, designing satellites with biodegradable materials that naturally disintegrate during re-entry can prevent long-term debris accumulation. On the flip side, these materials currently lack the durability required for the extreme conditions of space. High development costs and limited adoption further slow progress. Autonomous debris removal (ADR) technologies such as robotic arms and laser systems also offer hope for cleaning up orbital debris, but again, they are currently expensive as well as need more legal clarity before they can begin to operate safely.

A global traffic system to monitor satellites and debris in real time could reduce collisions and optimise orbit use. Resistance to data sharing, including due to security and commercial concerns, and the lack of a unified international authority hinder its development, however.

None of these hurdles are permanent, of course. Moreover, whereas individual solutions face significant challenges, a combined approach may be more feasible.

For example, binding agreements through COPUOS can standardise emission limits, debris mitigation, and data-sharing practices; governments and private entities can prioritise funding for green technologies, ADR systems, and satellite biodegradability; and financial rewards, subsidies, or penalties can nudge private actors towards sustainable practices.

At the intersection of technological advancement and environmental responsibility, the choices we make today will define the future of space exploration.

(Shrawani Shagun is pursuing a PhD at National Law University, Delhi, focusing on environmental sustainability and space governance. shrawani.shagun@gmail.com)



Spiral galaxy NGC 628, located 32 million light-years away, in an image taken by the James Webb Space Telescope. REUTERS

Webb confirms the cosmos is expanding at unexpected rate

Reuters

Fresh corroboration of the perplexing observation that the universe is expanding more rapidly than expected has scientists pondering the cause – perhaps some unknown factor involving the mysterious cosmic components – dark energy and dark matter.

Two years of data from NASA's James Webb Space Telescope have now validated the Hubble Space Telescope's earlier finding that the rate of the universe's expansion is faster – by about 8% – than would be expected based on what astrophysicists know of the initial conditions in the cosmos and its evolution over billions of years. The discrepancy is called the Hubble Tension.

The observations by Webb, the most capable space telescope ever deployed, appear to rule out the notion that the data from its forerunner Hubble was somehow flawed due to instrument error.

"This is the largest sample of Webb Telescope data – its first two years in space – and it confirms the puzzling finding from the Hubble Space Telescope that we have been wrestling with for a decade – the universe is now expanding faster than our best theories can explain," said astrophysicist Adam Riess of Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, lead author of the study published on Monday (December 9, 2024) in the *Astrophysical Journal*.

"Yes, it appears there is something missing in our understanding of the

The observations by Webb, the most capable space telescope ever deployed, appear to rule out the notion that the data from its forerunner Hubble was somehow flawed due to instrument error

universe," added Riess, a 2011 Nobel laureate in physics for the co-discovery of the universe's accelerating expansion. "Our understanding of the universe contains a lot of ignorance about two elements – dark matter and dark energy – and these make up 96% of the universe, so this is no small matter."

"The Webb results can be interpreted to suggest there may be a need to revise our model of the universe, although it is very difficult to pinpoint what this is at the moment," said Siyang Li, a Johns Hopkins doctoral student in astronomy and astrophysics and a study co-author.

Dark matter, thought to comprise about 27% of the universe, is a hypothesised form of matter that is invisible but is inferred to exist based on its gravitational effects on ordinary matter – stars, planets, moons, all the stuff on Earth – which accounts for roughly 5% of the universe.

Dark energy, believed to comprise approximately 69% of the universe, is a hypothesised form of energy permeating vast swathes of space that counteracts gravity and drives the universe's accelerating expansion.

What might explain the anomalous expansion rate? "There are many hypotheses that involve dark matter, dark energy, dark radiation – for example, neutrinos (a type of ghostly subatomic particle) – or gravity itself having some exotic properties as possible explanations," Riess said.

The researchers employed three different methods to measure a specific telltale metric – distances from the earth to galaxies where a type of pulsating star called Cepheids has been documented. The Webb and Hubble measurements were in harmony.

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Could you slow down?

Yasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

In km/hr, the value of this unit is 1.14×10^{-14} . It translates to one micrometre per year and is used in the earth sciences to measure the speed at which a surface becomes narrower or less thick due to erosion. What's the unit called?

QUESTION 2

X is rising at 0.3 trillionths of a km around the world every hour. While this seems slow, it's becoming faster thanks to global warming and researchers and lawmakers alike are concerned that X will eventually pose great harm to countries everywhere with a shoreline. What is X?

QUESTION 3

In one billion years, Y will have moved 4.7 km away from the earth. If we work backwards, this means Y was once only 22,500 km away from the earth and over time moved to its position 4 lakh km away today. Name Y.

QUESTION 4

_____ is the world's fastest-growing woody plant and grows at 0.00014 metres every 24 hours. This rapidity has prompted scientists to suggest they might be good for afforestation and carbon sequestration. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 5

In 1995, Archie set a world record (at the time) for being the fastest _____ by travelling a distance of 33 cm in

just two minutes at the world championship in Congham, UK. Fill in the blank.

Answers to December 10 quiz:

- Procedure in which a live animal is dissected – **Ans: Vivisection**
 - Person credited with discovering hormones – **Ans: William Bayliss**
 - First known gaseous hormone – **Ans: Ethylene**
 - Series of reactions launched by hormone reaching its target – **Ans: Signal transduction**
 - Name for hormones that act on cells that secrete it – **Ans: Autocrine**
- First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Basavaraj Meti | Anmol Agrawal | A. Izhar



Visual: In the 20th century, the melting of parts of this glacier was responsible for 4% of the process in Q2. It's also one of the world's fastest glaciers at 4 mm/s. Name the island to which it's 'attached.' CREDIT: GILES LAURENT (CC BY-SA 4.0)

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



A wide aisle

Parliament must remain the forum for airing the views of all representatives

In a move that is unprecedented in India's parliamentary history, 60 Members of the Rajya Sabha have expressed a loss of confidence in the Chairman, Jagdeep Dhankhar, who is also the Vice-President of India. These Members of Parliament, from the Opposition, have given notice for a resolution seeking his removal from office. The resolution is unlikely to face a vote, and will be defeated if it does. But that is beside the point. What is real and damaging for democracy is the trust deficit between the Chair and the Opposition members. Mr. Dhankhar's rulings and his public statements have been cited by the Opposition as proof of his partisanship. Mr. Dhankhar's decision to allow Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MPs to speak on the subject of an adjournment motion that he himself had rejected on December 9 was the final trigger for the extreme step by the Opposition. These members alone see, among other things, a pattern of the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge, being disallowed to speak, and Mr. Dhankhar publicly amplifying views of the government and berating those of the Opposition. Most often, it is career politicians who are elected, through a partisan contest, to supposed apolitical positions such as President, Vice-President and Speaker of the Lok Sabha. Once in office, they largely stay above the fray. Hence, the notice for a no-confidence motion against the Rajya Sabha Chairman marks an unfortunate turn for democracy.

It is no coincidence that all this comes against the backdrop of a constant campaign by the BJP to shrink the Opposition space. Criticism of the government is portrayed as an anti-national act, and institutions and individuals are often targeted through insinuations. There is little engagement between the BJP and the Opposition. If Parliament merely becomes yet another platform for political diatribe, it will erode rather than reinforce democracy. The message from parliamentary proceedings to the citizenry should be that the government is sensitive to their voices. The government's defence of Mr. Dhankhar included a reference to his caste, and condemnation of the principal Opposition party, with the insinuation that it was anti-India. While the government gets its way by virtue of its majority, the Opposition must have its say. When Parliament is held hostage to hostility between the government and the Opposition, the Chair is expected to mediate and find a way forward. This role of the Chair is possible only when its occupant is neutral and seen as such. Regardless of the merits of the grievances, the Chairman could take a proactive approach to reassure his critics that he is above the political fray for the sake of institutional integrity.

Bench and bigotry

High Court judge's remarks on minorities require a stern response

Political affiliations are seldom considered a disqualification to hold judicial office, but there is no doubt that open bigotry should be one. The controversial remarks of Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav of the Allahabad High Court, including an unacceptable slur against the Muslim community, at an event organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) cast a shadow on his impartiality as a judge, if not his suitability to remain in office. Justice Yadav observed ominously that "this is India and it will be run as per the wishes of its majority". It was clear from the context of a Hindu-Muslim dichotomy that he was speaking about, that he was not referring to a governing majority in a democracy, but the sort of numerical superiority that would give the larger group the final word on how the country is run. The judge also sought to compare Hindu and Muslim children and comment on how Hindus learn kindness and tolerance, while Muslims purportedly do not because they witness the slaughter of animals. He is previously known to have observed that the cow is the only animal that inhales and exhales oxygen and made remarks against conversion. It is a welcome development that the Supreme Court of India has taken note of reports highlighting Justice Yadav's remarks and asked for details from the High Court. It is too early to speculate whether there will be an in-house inquiry, or a response to calls for his removal, but it is quite certain that the judge's conduct and functioning will come under justified scrutiny.

Even though the event was a discussion on the need for a Uniform Civil Code, it was not an ideal stage for a meaningful debate. The VHP is an aggressive proponent of a Hindu majoritarian view, responsible for spearheading a violent movement for demolishing the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and installing a Ram temple in its place, and an organisation that has been banned in the past for fomenting riots, discord and much bloodshed. It was quite obvious that the forum would be more inclined to assail minorities than extol the virtues of a uniform law for civil matters. Judges of constitutional courts are not expected to grace the platform provided by such groups. It is regrettable that the judge forgot the ethical principles that bind the higher judiciary. In 1997, the Supreme Court had adopted a 'Restatement of Values of Judicial Life', a set of guidelines under which the behaviours and conduct of members of the higher judiciary must reaffirm the people's faith in the institution's impartiality and any act that erodes such a perception should be avoided. While lapses from such principles are not rare, Justice Yadav presents a rather glaring example.

On November 29, 2024, while introducing the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill 2024-25 (The Assisted Dying Law) to the British House of Commons, the Member of Parliament, Kim Leadbeater told a rather distressing story of an "agonising death".

A 47-year-old music teacher with a young son, Ms. Leadbeater said, had suffered from bile duct cancer which obstructed his bowel. On his last day, this saw him vomit faecal matter for five consecutive hours, before he choked and died. The vomiting was so violent that he could not be sedated and, what is worse, he had stayed conscious through the ordeal. All the while, his wife pleaded with doctors to help. But the physicians treating him were helpless. The look of horror on his face as he died, his family say, is something that will never leave them.

Ms. Leadbeater narrated the teacher's case to illustrate the suffering that many others face from deadly illnesses, with no choice available to them to seek assistance in ending their pain. The draft law – which gives terminally-ill adults (in England and Wales), with less than six months to live, the right to die, once they have a request signed off by two doctors and a high court judge – was intensely debated. Eventually, the Bill was passed with a majority of 55 votes, with 330 members voting for it and 275 against.

In somewhat unusual circumstances, the Members of Parliament had been released from the tethers imposed on them by their party whips. They had been asked to decide as their conscience willed. As a result, what ensued was all manners of interesting voting patterns. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and his Conservative predecessor Rishi Sunak voted in favour. The Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner, and the Health Secretary, Wes Streeting, rejected the draft.

The complexity of the issue

With its passing in the Commons, the proposal is now slated for review by a Public Bill Committee, which will scrutinise, line tune, and suggest amendments to its various clauses, before it returns the draft to Parliament for an ultimate sanction. Therefore, there is still some way to go. But seeing how previous efforts, to bring about a law to allow assisted dying, have floundered, the Bill's passing represents a milestone, a victory for those who consider the right to die, when faced with an intolerable ailment, as intrinsic to human liberty.

At the same time, the sharply divergent views expressed amongst lawmakers in Britain also shows us just how complex an issue this is. The debates contain in them lessons that the rest of the world can take, in deciding how best to allow



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The intricacies involved – as the debate in the United Kingdom shows – should not detract from the fact that this is also an issue linked to dignity and the alleviation of suffering

people to both lead, and end, their lives, with dignity and compassion.

The opposition to the law primarily rests on two planks. First, opponents argue that the law is premised on a "slippery slope" – that it would be practically impossible to draw boundaries limiting the right to assisted death, and that the old and the disabled might be pressured into choosing to end their lives in the midst of fears that they might wind up becoming a burden on their loved ones.

Critics also claim that a similar law employed in Canada has produced worrying results. Originally, following a 2015 judgment of the country's Supreme Court, the government 'opened up avenues to allow assisted dying for those whose death was "reasonably foreseeable"'. But the law has since been expanded through judicial interpretation to make it applicable even to those facing a "grievous and irremediable medical condition". In so doing, the bright lines of the rule, the Bill's detractors say, have been dimmed.

'There are legitimate cases'

Proponents of the law counter the criticism by pointing to how the very invocation of a slippery slope suggests that those making the argument are offering a concession: that there are legitimate cases where it might be justifiable to help someone die. Moreover, the law, as drafted, they say, is carefully tailored: it only includes adults competent to make decisions, who are ailing from a terminal diagnosis and who have less than six months to live, to seek assistance in ending their lives.

Additionally, the person making the claim will be independently assessed by two doctors, with a 14-day reflection time afforded to them, and no decision will be sanctioned without the High Court's approval. Lord David Neuberger, the former President of the U.K. Supreme Court, argues that the Bill's clauses are tightly worded enough to ensure that the law respects people's right of personal autonomy, and that there really is no chance of its scope being enlarged through judicial challenges.

The second cause for opposition stems from rather more traditional, philosophical grounds, sometimes resting on considerations of religion and faith. The proposed law, these critics claim, is simply deceit disguised as compassion, and offends the inviolability of the right to life. In response, the Bill's supporters concede that in most cases, there ought to be serious objections to the taking of one's life, and to avoidably allowing people to die. In ordinary circumstances, objections founded on a person's right to life would prevail. But the conflict here, as they demonstrate, is not especially

irreconcilable. For, as Ms. Leadbeater and others have shown, the moral background in which the debate resides cannot permit a wholesale embargo on physician-assisted deaths. After all, every adult, we generally recognise, has the right to make significant decisions on how best to lead their respective lives. This freedom, grounded in the sovereignty of our bodies, may stem from religious faith or simply from conscience, but, regardless, it is something that is embedded in each of us as human beings.

The state, no doubt, owes to us a duty to ensure that we do not indulge in what Ronald Dworkin described as "irrevocable acts of self-destruction". But, equally, the exercise of this duty can under no circumstances "justify forcing a competent dying patient to live in agony a few weeks longer". To do so would impinge squarely on the freedom that each of us enjoys over our lives and bodies.

On choice and dignity

In many ways, the debates in Britain assume universal value. In India, the Supreme Court has previously recognised a limited freedom to die, a right both to passive euthanasia and a right to make an "advance medical directive" – that is a liberty to stipulate one's preferences for medical treatment, or the withdrawal thereof, should one become incapacitated in the future. In its judgment in *Common Cause (A Regd. Society) vs Union of India* (2018), the Court found this right as essential to liberty, as "an element of the privacy of the being".

The road from here to assisted dying is clearly a long one. But the reasons which compel one to hold in favour of individual dignity surely apply just as vigorously to how one might want to go about dealing with a terminal illness in their last days. The latter choice is as critical to one's dignity and independence as it is to any other decision that a person makes over her body and life.

Deliberations made in Britain's Parliament have shown us that making laws to govern assisted dying is a complicated affair. But the mere prospect of a slippery slope, or the possibility of abuse, cannot detract from the fact that at stake here is something central to human dignity – that is, the ability to allow people to make conscious choices to alleviate the most crushing forms of pain and suffering.

One can argue over the fine print of what a law that allows for assisted dying must contain. But there can be no doubt that the rudimentary principle on which such a legislation will inevitably rest is founded on ideas that are central to our existence, to our freedom to lead meaningful lives, and to the rights to privacy, dignity, and autonomy.

Vaikom – two States, two leaders and a tale of reform

A little over a 100 years ago was a landmark socio-political moment like no other. The Vaikom Struggle, which culminated in the lifting of the barriers to the entry of backward caste Hindus to the local temple in the erstwhile Travancore princely state, would be the first of many mass movements that brought political attention to religious reform. Since then, the Dravidian Movement founded by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and its self-respect principles have enabled wider reforms within the Hindu religion and paved the way for a more egalitarian society. What is less understood is that this was made possible only due to the insertion of a key clause in the Constitution by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Celebrating the centenary of Vaikom is not just a tribute to Periyar's persistence and B.R. Ambedkar's acumen but also a re-assertion of the strong reformist tendencies that continue to pervade through modern-day politics in South India.

The evolution of a mass movement

The Vaikom Struggle was fought against the prohibition of backward caste Hindus from walking on the streets adjacent to the Vaikom Mahadeva temple. When leaders of Kerala State Congress Committee and other social activist leaders began agitating against the injustice, they faced a clamp down by the administration. With the entry of Periyar in 1924, it slowly became a mass movement, bringing people from all classes within its fold. In November 1925, when the restrictions to walk on the streets finally lifted, the long arc of political movement began tilting towards social justice. In the decade that followed, movements erupted in other parts of the country, with B.R. Ambedkar leading protests to enter the Ambadevi Temple and Kalamandir, where Dalits were denied entry. However, the trajectory of reform in South



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The Vaikom Struggle was a landmark socio-political moment like no other

India was progressing at a faster pace with the Legislative Assembly introducing a Bill to allow temple entry in 1932, followed by the Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936, the Malabar Temple Entry Bill 1938. There was also the entry of backward castes in the Madurai Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple and the Thanjavur Brihadeeswarar Temple in 1939. The Madras Temple Entry Authorization Act 1947 enabled Hindus of all castes to enter and offer worship in all temples within the then Madras Presidency.

Though many of these reforms took place prior to the adoption of the Constitution of India, the Constituent Assembly took great care in delimiting the right to freedom of religion. During discussions on December 7, 1948, B.R. Ambedkar included the prefix 'subject to public order, morality and health' restricting the extent of the fundamental right and thereby enabling state intervention when necessary.

These seven words went on to form the legal and legitimate basis for reforms within the fold of religion, thereby enabling constitutional courts to intercede when there was a contestation of fundamental rights, namely between those of equality and religion.

State and the issue of regulation

The larger issue has always been whether temples, and religion at large, can be regulated by the state. If this is allowed, some argue, then the government will lose its secular character. There can be nothing further from the truth or logic.

The intervention of the State to regulate temples, which are public spaces, is to ensure equality and access. A long history, beginning with the enactment of the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act 1927 to the present-day Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act 1959, would make it apparent the legislative intent to manage religious affairs in

consonance with public order and morality. This position has been confirmed through various judgments beginning from *The Commissioner, Hindu Religious Endowments, Madras vs Sri Lakshmindra Thirtha Swamiji of Sri Shirur Mutt* 1954 (Shirur Mutt case), where the Supreme Court of India upheld the proposition that the state can manage the secular affairs of the temple and propounded the test of essential religious practice.

Since then, successive governments in Tamil Nadu, beginning in 1970, have enacted laws to enable backward caste Hindus to be appointed as *archakas* (priests), which some have regarded as a contentious act of interference in religious affairs. In such instances, the Court has upheld the right of the State to manage secular matters in temples while carving out a special category of 'Agnamic temples'.

Change and resistance

Over the last few years, Governments of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have appointed hundreds of trained *archakas*, *Odhuvaars* and *Bhattacharyas* from non-Brahmin castes. These have been met with resistance within and outside the courts of law. These reforms challenge orthodox religious beliefs and entrenched social dikats. Nevertheless, the push for reforms is stronger than before. One hundred years after Vaikom and over 75 years since the Constituent Assembly debate on this issue, there is a compelling moral consensus that is emerging. While the Governments of Tamil Nadu and Kerala have collaborated to commemorate the centenary of the Vaikom Struggle on December 12, 2024, they are also celebrating a historic event that brought together two States. They are paying tribute to the start of a social reform trajectory that was made possible due to the coming together of two of the greatest leaders.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA bloc leadership

Involving the 'problems of the INDIA bloc' is not that simple as the main issue now seems to be about leadership. With some leaders in the bloc for a 'change of the captain', it cannot be passed off as worth ignoring. The Leader of the Opposition's advice to his party MPs 'not to react to remarks by allies' on the subject can only indicate his lack of wisdom or diplomacy. The situation now is no

surprise especially when parties that are ideologically different or with no ideologies make unions. Meanwhile, the proposal by several Congress leaders that the party fight elections on its own has its sides. The Congress has not completely lost its status as a Grand Old Party. Then again, the leadership comes into the picture. The truth is that it is only the Congress that has the background to be an effective Opposition

in the country – which is the prime political necessity. **P.R.V. Raja,** Pondicherry, Kerala

A weak and fragile Opposition is only helping the ruling party. Crucial decisions are being taken without 'quality questioning' and this does not augur well for the nation. The new Parliament building, built with a lot of fanfare, raised hopes of a positive environment. But,

sadly, it is a case of non-functional business. As far as the Congress is concerned, it needs to share some of the blame as it seems clueless and directionless. **Balasubramanian Pavan,** Secunderabad

S.M. Krishna In the passing of S.M. Krishna, the nation has lost a stalwart politician who shaped and elevated the garden city to an international level with a

well-established "Brand Bengaluru". His passing marks the end of an era in politics, leaving behind a legacy of public service and progressive governance. **R. Sivakumar,** Chennai

Indian territory and China The External Affairs Minister, in his statement in Parliament on the border issue with China, said, "The House is cognizant of the fact that China is in illegal occupation of 38,000 km² of

Indian territory in Aksai Chin as a result of the 1962 conflicts and the event that preceded it. Furthermore, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,180 km² of Indian territory to China in 1963, which has been under its occupation since 1948." There needs to be more clarity on how India will prevent the loss of more territory. **Ved Shaha,** Kolhapur, Maharashtra

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

Chief Justices need longer tenures

In September, Chief Justices were appointed to eight High Courts across India. While a good move, the fact that all of them, with the exception of one, will have very short tenures is unfortunate. This is a persistent problem that calls for urgent remedial action since it affects the institutional effectiveness of the judiciary.

Short tenures

In fact, one Chief Justice has already completed his tenure. Justice Rajiv Shakher, who was Chief Justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court, retired after just 24 days, on October 18. Just as he was settling into his role, he had to attend his farewell. Justice Manmohan, who had been serving as the Acting Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, was sworn in as Chief Justice on September 29. On December 3, the Union government announced the appointment of Chief Justice Manmohan as a judge of the Supreme Court. Justice Tashi Rabstan will serve a tenure of about six months as Chief Justice of the High Court of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Justice Suresh Kumar Kait, who was appointed as the Chief Justice of the Madhya Pradesh High Court, has a tenure of about eight months. Justice K.R. Shriram, appointed as Chief Justice of the Madras High Court, will serve a one-year tenure. Justice Indra Prasanna Mukerji, the Chief Justice of the Meghalaya High Court, will also be retiring around the same time as Justice Shriram. Justice Nitin Madhukar Jamdar, Chief Justice of the Kerala High Court, has a tenure of about 15 months. The only judge who will serve a relatively long tenure of about four years is Justice M.S. Ramachandrarao, who has been appointed as Chief Justice in Jharkhand.

The Chief Justice of a High Court plays a pivotal role in sustaining the all-round health of the institution. The Chief Justice administers the institution, tracks its financial health, plays an



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important role in recommending names for judgeship, constitutes various committees to administer the institution, attends to the welfare of the staff of the High Court, takes disciplinary action against erring trial court judges and staff when warranted, arranges for defence of such action before appropriate authorities when questioned, responds to innumerable mundane administrative requests, accepts invitations and participates in various symposia, seminars, and functions that are not necessarily restricted to law, participates in functions organised by the Bar Councils and various advocate associations across the State, and addresses problems related to legal education in the State apart from, of course, discharging the function as the top judicial authority of the State. Clearly, doing all of this in the time available is a daunting task.

High Courts are not compact institutions. Further, the tasks that need the attention of a Chief Justice in a High Court situated in one part of the country could be vastly different from what is required of a Chief Justice in a High Court in another part of the country. To understand each of these institutions in their entirety or even substantially takes time and effort. Most Chief Justices barely understand the requirements of the institution by the time their terms cease.

A lot has been said about the short tenure of Chief Justices. During his farewell speech in 2022, Supreme Court Justice Justice L. Nageswara Rao said those elevated as judges to the top court must get a "minimum seven to eight years" in office "if not 10 years". He said, "It takes them (Chief Justices) 1.5 to two years to understand how the Court functions here because it is completely different from the High Courts." He added that by the time they settle down, "they are looking at their retirement". Several Chief Justices who have retired after brief tenures have

voiced similar sentiments. This is a similar lament among Chief Justices of the High Courts too. Yet, little attention has been paid to the problem.

A lesson from the British

It was not so during British rule. Back then, it was a norm for Chief Justices to have long tenures. The Madras High Court came into existence in 1862. When it completed 150 years in 2012, it had completed 85 years as a Court in British India and 65 years as a Court in independent India. The first Chief Justice was Sir Colley Harman Scotland. In 1947, when it had completed 85 years, the Madras High Court had just 11 Chief Justices. Each of them had enjoyed an average tenure of a little less than eight years. During the Madras High Court's 150th year celebrations, Justice M.Y. Iqbal was the 35th Chief Justice. So, in 65 years, the Court had had 24 Chief Justices, which means the average tenure of those judges was hardly 2.75 years. The average term reduces further when we deduct the tenures of Chief Justice P.V. Rajamannar, who served a term of 13 years, and Chief Justice Veeraswami K., who had a tenure of about seven years. This means that there were 22 Chief Justices in 45 years, which brings down the average term of each to merely more than two years.

While the tasks of Chief Justices are only increasing and becoming more complicated, the duration given to them to address these are becoming shorter and shorter. When the system provides such little time for the incumbents to even understand the system, what scope is there for innovation, reform, and improvement?

The prescription here is not to provide prescriptions to the malady. It is to emphasise that the problem needs to be addressed. It can only be resolved by a joint deliberation of stakeholders, including the Bar. It is important that they evolve a solution before the problem seriously affects the system.

By the time Chief Justices have understood the functioning of the Court, it is time for them to retire

The BRS: defeated but not destroyed

The party's aggressive narrative has put Congress on the back foot in Telangana

STATE OF PLAY

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The Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS), which faced an ignominious defeat in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections by failing to win a single seat despite putting up a decent show in the Assembly elections held earlier this year, has succeeded to a large extent in rebuilding its organisation. Stunned by its dismal performance but determined to fight back, the BRS has been watching the ruling Congress government closely and using every opportunity to attack it. The BRS has been trying to reconnect with the people, understand its own mistakes, and slowly get back some of the support that it had lost, especially in the rural areas, by constantly highlighting the "failures" of the Congress government. It has been doing this without its founder, former Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao, being in the public eye much.

The BRS has been highlighting the Congress's struggles in implementing the six guarantees and other promises made in the manifesto. This includes the delay in the disbursement of the balance instalment of the Rythu Bandhu/Bharosa for the 2023-24 Rabi season, the non-disbursement for the 2023-24 Kharif season, and the partial implementation of the T2 lakh crop loan waiver.

The BRS has also focused on the marking/demolition of settlements as part of the government's Musi Riverfront Development Project, the razing of structures of poor and middle class households near water bodies and 'nalas' (drains) by the Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Pro-

Telangana

tection Agency, and the slow pace of paddy procurement. In late November, following protests, the State government withdrew the notification that it had issued for acquiring 1,358 acres of land from nearly 600 farmers in Dudyal mandal for setting up 'pharma villages'. However, the BRS has been keeping the land acquisition issue alive. It has led a group of tribal women from the village to approach the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the National Human Rights Commission to highlight the alleged police atrocities against their families following the attack by some villagers against some of the authorities, including the District Collector. Leaders such as K.T. Rama Rao, T. Harish Rao, K.P. Vivekanand, Pradi Kaushik Reddy, Manne Krishank, B. Vinod Kumar, and Dasoju Sravan, have been organising protests, press conferences, and posting on social media.

Despite its best efforts, the Congress has been forced to be on the defensive. Two weeks ago, Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy rejected the ₹100 crore donation from the Chairman of the Adani Group to the Young India Skills University in Telangana. He also announced that land would be acquired in Kodagall for an industrial corridor and not for the pharma cluster. These

statements were made to avoid possible attacks from the Opposition.

In late November, at a meeting at Vemulavada, the Chief Minister also said that the Congress government has achieved in 10 months what the BRS government could not achieve in 10 years. However, given its long list of unkept promises and its failure to counter the strong narrative of the BRS, the Congress government has apparently conceded some ground to the Opposition. A senior leader of the BRS said, "Congress leaders, including the Chief Minister, are asking for Mr. Chandrashekar Rao to be present on every forum but they seem to be unable to deal with the attacks by the second and third line of the BRS leadership. Mr. Rao will come into the picture at an appropriate time."

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) too has been raising its voice on various issues but its efforts appear to be lukewarm compared to the BRS. It expressed solidarity with the poor who live along the Musi river but has been inconsistent in its criticism. As a result, the enthusiasm among its ranks has waned.

While the Congress has its challenges, the BRS faces inquiries instituted by the State government into the previous government's irrigation and power deals. While the ruling party may be struggling to keep its promises given the constraints in funding, and the BJP, despite its good performance in the last Assembly and Lok Sabha elections, remains out of the battle ring, the BRS undoubtedly has an uphill task. Attacking the government is easy, but building the party, infusing energy in its ranks, and rebuilding its image is a more challenging task.

'Excessive heat' among most searched terms in 2024 in India

The top searches were otherwise dominated, as usual, by sporting events and elections

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

In 2024, cricket and elections dominated Google searches in India. The Indian Premier League was the most searched term, followed by the T20 World Cup, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and election results 2024. The Olympics 2024 was the fifth most searched keyword. Excessive heat ranked as the sixth most searched term, highlighting concerns about extreme weather events. Industrialist Ratan Tata, who passed away in October, was the seventh most searched keyword. The Congress secured the eighth spot, while the Pro Kabaddi League and the Indian Super League secured the ninth and tenth spot.

Chart 1 shows the most searched terms in 2024 in India and the week these terms trended. The darkest shade points to the week when interest peaked in a particular news item, while the lighter shades point to the other weeks when the term was searched but there was relatively less interest in it.

Wrestler Vinesh Phogat was the most searched personality this year. Heeramandi, Mirzapur, and The Last of Us were the most searched shows. Street 2, Kalki 2898 AD, and 12th Fail were the most searched movies. The terms 'All eyes on Rafah', 'Aakay', and 'cervical cancer' were the most searched for their meanings by Indians. Aakay is the name of Virat Kohli and Anushka Sharma's son.

'AQI near me' was searched the most in the 'near me' category, followed by 'Onam Sadhya near me', and 'Ram Mandir near me'.

Chart 2 shows the same information for searches across the world. Copa America and the UEFA European Championship were the top two searches. Singer Liam Payne, U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, and Princess of Wales Kate Middleton were among the top 10.



Chart 1 The chart shows the most searched terms in India in 2024 and the week these terms trended. The darkest shade points to the week when interest peaked in a particular news item. The lighter shades point to interest on other weeks

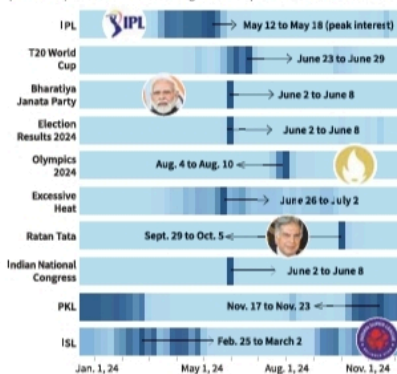
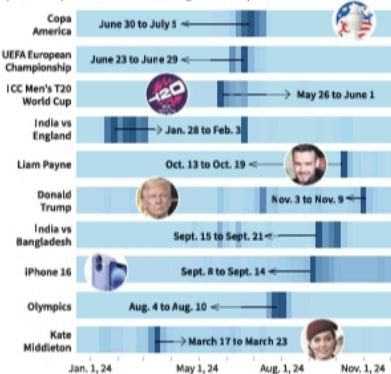


Table 3 The top 10 most searched phrases in India across various categories throughout 2024

MOVIES:	SHOWS:	HUM TO SEARCH:
1. Street 2 2. Kalki 2898 AD 3. 12th Fail 4. Laapataa Ladies 5. Hanu-Man 6. Maharaja 7. Manjunath Boys 8. The Greatest of All Time 9. Salaar 10. Aavesham	1. Heeramandi 2. Mirzapur 3. The Last of Us 4. Big Boss 17 5. Panchayat 6. Queen of Tears 7. Marry My Husband 8. Kota Factory 9. Big Boss 18 10. 3 Body Problem	1. Naadanyan 2. Hoon 1 3. Illuminati 4. Katchi Sera 5. Ye Tu 6. Aaj Ki Raat 7. Jo Tum Mere Ho 8. Yeh Raastein Yeh Mausam 9. Aisa Kooda 10. MASHA UTRAFUNK

Chart 2 The chart shows the most searched terms globally in 2024 and the week these terms trended. The darkest shade points to the week when interest peaked in a particular news item. The lighter shades point to interest on other weeks



PEOPLE:	MEANING:	NEAR ME:
1. Vinesh Phogat 2. Nitish Kumar 3. Chirag Paswan 4. Harik Pandya 5. Pawan Kalyan 6. Shashank Singh 7. Poonam Pandey 8. Radhika Merchant 9. Abhishek Sharma 10. Lakshya Sen	1. All eyes on Rafah 2. Aakay 3. Cervical Cancer 4. Tawaf 5. Demure 6. Pookie 7. Stampede 8. Moya Moya 9. Consecration 10. Good Friday	1. AQI 2. Onam Sadhya 3. Ram Mandir 4. Sports Bars 5. Best Bakery 6. Trendy Cakes 7. Polio Drops 8. Shiva Temple 9. Best Coffee 10. Hanuman movie

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 12, 1974

Cease-fire in Rhodesia's guerilla war: detainees to be freed

Salisbury, Dec. 11: Prime Minister, Ian Smith, to-night announced a ceasefire in Rhodesia's guerilla war and the release of African political detainees as a prelude to a constitutional conference.

Mr. Smith made the announcement in a radio broadcast to the nation which marked the most important development for years in attempts to solve the deadlocked Rhodesian constitutional question.

Mr. Smith said terrorism would cease immediately but warned people in affected areas to continue their vigilance until the ceasefire became fully effective.

Mr. Smith disclosed that talks on the Rhodesian problem between the Government and African nationalists had continued after last week's abortive discussions in the Zambian capital, Lusaka, and the differences that separated them had "now been resolved."

Among those to be released would be the leaders of two previously banned national organisations — Mr. Joshua Nkomo, President of the Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), African People's Union (ZAPU), and the Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, President of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

They have been to Lusaka this week for talks with Rhodesia's neighbours, Zambia, Tanzania, and Botswana. They were temporarily freed from detention in Rhodesia to attend the talks.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 12, 1924

Dense fog in London

Leaflet (Oxford), midnight, Dec. 11: London and practically all parts of the British Isles are enveloped in exceptionally dense fog. The cancellation of all cross channel air services, the abandonment of racing, the postponement of the Oxford and Cambridge Association Football Match and the collision of two London buses causing injury to 10 passengers are among the results. In London, where the fog seems to be most intense, it was as dark as midnight at midday. Street lamps are supplemented by flares. Train and motor traffic is also considerably retarded.