

The Tribune ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Workers in peril

Paying the price for employers' negligence

SITTING ducks — that's what all those nameless, faceless workers are who toil day and night on development projects across the country. Their safety is of little concern to their employers, even though the infrastructure sector continues to be a key driver of Indian economy.

Two workers were killed when a centring frame collapsed during the laying of a slab at an under-construction building in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, on Saturday. The same day, 28 workers were trapped when the shuttering of an upcoming building caved in at Kannauj railway station in Uttar Pradesh.

Why are the humble workers not regarded as nation-builders? Why are they left to fend for themselves? Such apathy does not befit a country that aspires to become developed (Viksit) by 2047.

We don't care

Disregard for art requires a character reset

FOR all the triumphalism about the artistic and architectural achievements of the past that do the length and breadth of the country, our collective resolve to preserve, conserve and value such magnificence is dismal.

What's missing in the national character and what regrettably has seldom been demanded of citizens and of each other is civic duty and responsibility — not enforced, but a way of life that embraces what's special and unique.

Another concern is the self-celebratory fetish to raze or put out of use structures that have stood the test of time. The national capital has been leading the way, sanctioning the drive to weed out the old for the new, no matter the cost involved or the utility of it.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, JANUARY 13, 1925

Change for the worse

THERE is a significant passage in this week's Young India that unfortunately leaves no room for doubt in one's mind that the Mahatma is no longer as keen on bringing about a united Congress as he was believed to be two months, perhaps even a month, ago.

Disclosure curbs enfeebling RTI law

Much remains to be done by the Supreme Court to ensure effectiveness of the Act



WAJAHAT HABIBULLAH FORMER CHIEF INFORMATION COMMISSIONER

THE Supreme Court's recent ruling on the Right to Information (RTI) Act has invited widespread comment and much appreciation from activists.

The Bench asked the government why only people from a specific background (bureaucracy) were the favoured few to be appointed information commissioners.

Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for RTI activist Anjali Bhardwaj, had pleaded, "There has been only regression and not progress after the court's intervention. They are killing the RTI because nobody is interested in giving information."

The intervention in question was the decision on a writ petition (civil) of 2019, of which the present ruling is a follow-up.



FURORE: The Union Government's move to amend the RTI Act had triggered protests in 2019. REUTERS

information commissions had a waiting time of more than one year for an appeal or complaint to be heard, which was calculated on the basis of the number of appeals and complaints pending as on October 31, 2017, as against the monthly disposal rate.

The judgment directed in Conclusion (v): "We would also like to impress upon the respondents to fill vacancies, in future, without any delay. For this purpose, it would be apposite that the process for filling of a particular vacancy is initiated one to two months before the date on which the vacancy is likely to occur so that there is not much time lag between the occurrence of vacancy and filling up of the said vacancy."

The ruling added: "We would like to place on record that aforesaid directions are given keeping in view the salient purpose which the RTI Act is supposed to serve. This Act is enacted not only to subserve and ensure freedom of

The Supreme Court asked the govt why only people from a specific background were appointed information commissioners.

speech. On proper implementation, it has the potential to bring about good governance, which is an integral part of any vibrant democracy.

Thus that writ petition was disposed. That order, followed as it is by Justice Kant's enforcement order, no doubt merits appreciation by the public, to whom the right to freedom of speech belongs under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, and therefore, oversight

of the right to any information held by its server, which is the government that it elects.

Yet, in so lauding the judgment, it is well to remember that the apex court has much to answer for in enfeebling the exercise of this right by the citizenry, having gone so far as to exceed its own brief, which is limited, by actually amending the Act.

Former Information Commissioner Shailesh Gandhi, who served with me in the Central Information Commission (CIC) that I chaired and is now leading RTI activist, lamented in a recent article in The Leaflet that "our right to information is being transformed into a right to deny information before our very eyes."

After quoting from the Supreme Court ruling in P Ramachandra Rao vs State of Karnataka (2002), which lays down the limits of our court's jurisdiction in ruling on any law as, "Courts can declare the law, they can interpret the law, they can remove obvious lacunae and fill the gaps but they cannot trench upon the field of legislation properly meant for the legislature", Gandhi cites the court's decision of 2012, unremedied thus far, in Girish

Deshpande vs Central Information Commission & Others.

Relying on the clause to protect privacy under Section 8(1)(g) of the Act, the judge went on to give licence to refuse most information at will to public information officers, first appellate authorities, information commissioners and courts. This ruling can and indeed has too often been used to deny information for which the Act mandates suo motu disclosure under Section 4.

The Supreme Court gave no reasoning for this unequivocal conclusion, but merely stated that the information sought was 'personal' and need not be given unless a larger public interest could be demonstrated. It chose to ignore whether the information sought stemmed from a public activity or whether or not its disclosure would amount to an unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual, which are provisions enunciated in the Act and have been elucidated repeatedly by rulings of the CIC and the courts.

It is necessary to consider the areas in which reasonable restrictions can be placed on the RTI while denying information on the grounds of privacy. These are defined in Article 19(2) of the Constitution and can be encapsulated in two words: 'decency' and 'morality'. Transgression of either would amount to an invasion of privacy. Yet, Justices KS Radhakrishnan and Dipak Misra have given short shrift to these limits and construed the Act itself in judgment repeatedly taken recourse to by those in authority seeking to deny disclosure.

And so, while we might heave a sigh of relief at the stand taken to uphold the spirit of our Constitution by the SC, we should urge the revered institution that much remains to be done not only to make the instruments of enforcement — Central and state information commissions — useful but also to ensure the effectiveness of the law to uphold what has been described by the court as a constitutional right.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Information is the oxygen of the modern age. — Ronald Reagan

Goa's empty shacks, silent shores

KRITIKA KANWAR

GOA, long regarded as a bustling destination for foreigners, is witnessing an unsettling shift. Silent shacks and nearly deserted beaches are ringing alarm bells.

The peak season begins in October and continues till January. By this time, beaches such as Arambol, Mojim and Anjuna in north Goa and Agonda in the south are abuzz with tourists — especially from Russia and Israel.

Flea markets, usually swarming with foreign tourists, had few visitors. In routine, foreigners would be enamoured with the spices, wind chimes, dreamcatchers, beach wear, leather bags and other products on display, but this time, shopkeepers and homestay owners rued that many foreign tourists preferred countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Shacks were lying empty; there were no takers for the beautifully decorated beachfront areas. Shack owners and shopkeepers were sitting idle during a season in which they used to make a fortune.

In contrast, we had struggled to find a beachfront hotel for our stay in 2023, and were turned back as all hotels were apparently booked by foreign tourists. We finally ended up in a hotel quite far from the beach, and that too at a tariff that burnt a hole in our pocket.

However, in December last year, we managed to book a decent resort at a fairly reasonable price as there were hardly any tourists around. Rooms were available at throwaway rates.

While the state tourism department might have refuted claims about plummeting tourist numbers, it has failed to address concerns like fleeing by taxi operators, hoteliers and shopkeepers that leaves tourists cheated.

A couple of our friends from Delhi visited Sri Lanka recently. They told us that the island nation was flooded with tourists from across the world. The football on the beaches was remarkable. One wonders how a country on the verge of an economic collapse was able to revitalise its tourism sector in just a couple of years.

Another reason for the diversion of tourist footfall could be safety. At the Arambol beach, a techno party of a handful of foreign tourists was disrupted by a group of Indians, who tried to strike up a conversation with girls. It was an embarrassment for us to watch the scene.

It is about time India took this as a wake-up call, or else Goa will lose its alluring charm sooner rather than later.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Promote equality for all

With reference to 'We aren't masters of our private universe' (The Great Game); homosexuality is considered a taboo in Indian society. This also holds true for same-sex marriage, which does not have legal sanction in the country.

ARVIND SHARMA, BY MAIL

Provide relaxed legislation

Refer to 'We aren't masters of our private universe'; the right to love and be loved may be vital, but the Supreme Court's recent refusal to accord legal status to same-sex unions is unanimous. Marriage entails lifelong commitment and ramifications not only for the couple but also for the prospective progeny (via adoption or surrogacy).

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Awareness on gender equality

Appropos of 'Sex ratio plunge'; the crisis of Punjab's alarming decline in sex ratio reveals the deeply entrenched patriarchal attitude. Despite legal frameworks like the PNDT Act, female foeticide persists, facilitated by corrupt medical practices and ineffective law enforcement.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

Impose strict punishment

Refer to 'Sex ratio plunge'; it is a matter of grave concern that sex ratio is fast plummeting in Punjab. This alarming decline shows that the PNDT Act is not being implemented in letter and spirit. It shows lack of political will to enforce the law strictly.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Alliance facing setbacks

Appropos of 'INDIA wilting'; INDIA bloc's decline stems from its weaknesses, but its leaders are not acknowledging this reality. Though the Congress is the largest member of this alliance, it does not command the respect of its regional allies as its performance has been below par in state elections.

SK SINGH, BY MAIL

INDIA bloc must close ranks

With reference to 'INDIA wilting'; the perception is fast building that the INDIA bloc is wilting and has not been able to put up a united and cohesive front against the BJP. Its biggest constituent, the Congress, has also not been able to provide a robust leadership to the alliance.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARWAL

Trump's new term draws near amid scepticism



KP NAYYAR
STRATEGIC ANALYST

AS the United States readies for the inauguration of Donald Trump as its 47th President, I have a sense of déjà vu. Trump's swearing-in as the 45th President is the only presidential inauguration that I skipped since I was posted to Washington as a foreign correspondent in the final full year of the Bill Clinton presidency 26 years ago.

I skipped the ceremonies on the advice of bipartisan political contacts and reliable security sources. Behind their well-meaning advice was the primary fact that I am a journalist. My badge at the inaugural ceremonies would identify me as one. Moreover, I would be in the media enclosure near the Reflecting Pool, which, on a clear day, will reflect the swearing-in of new presidents on the steps of Capitol Hill. During that poll season which saw Trump emerging victorious, the Republicans treated the media as an enemy. This was not entirely without reason. The bulk of the US media — especially the mass subscription liberal

media on the east and west coasts — was unfair to Trump throughout the campaign. He did not have a level playing field in dealings with American journalists.

I am brown in complexion. Black people are an inalienable part of the US social fabric. If they are trifled with by rednecks in a city like Washington, which is predominantly black, there will be consequences for the perpetrators of white racism. Not so with the brown-skinned minuscule minority, who are also meek compared to African Americans. This also shows very visibly in the ongoing mud-slinging against H-1B immigrants.

The underlying anger which culminated in the January 6, 2021, riot on Capitol Hill was already there when Trump was being sworn in for the first time. Trump began his presidency with a peeve that the US media had deliberately under-reported the crowds at his inauguration. If the most important day of a person's political life begins with a grievance against the institution of the Fourth Estate, he is likely to spend the rest of his public life undermining that institution. Never mind that the Fourth Estate is one of the pillars of democracy in the US. Trump did not succeed in this destructive mission as President. That was not for want of trying every day for four years from 2017.

But his next presidency may be different. The spate of resignations in the mainstream American media in recent weeks — including the dissolution and reconstitution of the Editorial Board of *The Washington Post* in October — are ominous. Partisan new owners of legacy media have chosen to kow-tow to Trump even before he has moved into the White House. Social media will mostly be the new President's facilitator instead of an outlet for free expression. Meta's latest decision to get rid of independent, third-party fact-checkers in the US is the latest assault on truth in that country.

A saving grace is that institutions in the US are strong. That is why they survived the tenure of the 45th President.



INCORRIGIBLE: Trump has criticised Biden for a 30-day state mourning for ex-President Carter. REUTERS

Officers of the Metropolitan and Capitol Police paid with their lives to save the high-domed edifice, which is emblematic of the world, of the oldest democracy on earth. On January 20, they will once again be prepared to offer the ultimate sacrifice to protect those they may not personally like and whom they have voted against in Washington, Maryland and Virginia, the tri-states which are similar to the National Capital Territory (NCT) surrounding Delhi. In a tribute to the strength of America's institutions, law enforcement agencies are allowing demonstrations against the incoming President. A major rally in Washington in support of Trump is also planned on the day before he

If the most important day of a person's life begins with a grievance against the institution of the Fourth Estate, he is likely to spend the rest of his public life undermining it.

in 2014 and Trump's second coming, as it were. Modi invited Pakistan's then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif — among other guests — and Trump has similarly invited China's President Xi Jinping. Unlike Sharif, Xi is not going to Washington. The Foreign Ministry in Beijing is keeping everyone guessing on the level of China's representation. No previous US president-elect has invited foreign leaders to his inauguration, and according to the US State Department, no Head of State has been in Washington during previous January 20 ceremonies. At the time of writing this piece, only Argentina's President Javier Milei, who is looked upon as Washington's pick by some Latin American countries, is expected to attend.

According to books written by people who were in the inner circle of Trump's White House, the President is highly superstitious. Porn star Stormy Daniels said in a documentary released last year that Trump's weird hairdo is because he believed he would be powerless if he lost or properly combed his hair. That superstitious trait may explain the vehemence with which Trump criticised Biden for ordering a 30-day state mourning for Carter. In a historic first, flags will fly at half-mast during Trump's swearing-in as a result. Even for those who are not superstitious, it is not an auspicious way to start a new presidential tenure.

Legal framework to protect digital data must be flexible



ATANU BISWAS
PROFESSOR, INDIAN STATISTICAL INSTITUTE, KOLKATA

THANKS to our growing digital dependence, the majority of our personal data is now in the digital form. To facilitate the implementation of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, which creates a framework for processing digital personal data in India, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has created the draft Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules, 2025.

By providing necessary details and in an effort to strike a balance between the need to process personal data for legitimate purposes and the right of individuals to protect their data, it seeks to fortify the legal framework for the protection of digital personal data. The government has given stakeholders 45 days to give inputs or comments on the draft rules.

The journey of data protection legislation is intriguing. The World Economic Forum (WEF) started a project called "Rethinking Personal Data" in 2010 to deepen the collective

understanding of how a principled, collaborative and balanced personal data ecosystem can evolve. The main goals of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which was created by the European Union in 2018, are to simplify the regulatory framework for international business and to improve individuals' ownership and rights over their personal data. In fact, the UK also kept the law even after breaking with the EU. Additionally, countries such as Brazil, South Korea, South Africa, Japan and Turkey — and the American state of California — adopted the GDPR as a model for protecting personal data. China's Personal Information Protection Law became operative in November 2021.

In today's social media-driven world dominated by the Big Techs, data localisation is a delicate issue. Data localisation refers to actions that restrict data flow within a jurisdiction's boundaries. Under the Data Protection Act cleared in August 2023, the Government of India had stated that it would merely inform the territories where Indian personal data cannot be taken to. Following immaculate lobbying efforts by the tech companies against a provision in an earlier draft bill that required severe localisation rules, this was viewed as a significant victory. Companies were required to keep copies of certain sensitive personal data, such as financial and health information,



A THIN LINE: Data localisation is a major issue in today's social media-driven world. REUTERS

within India under the Data Protection Bill, which was first introduced in 2019 and later withdrawn from Parliament in 2022.

Additionally, it was forbidden for companies to export any undefined "critical" personal data from India. Rob Sherman, vice-president and deputy chief privacy officer of Meta, said in 2022 that the country's data localisation regulations might make it "difficult" for the business to provide its services there. And Keith Enright, the chief privacy officer at Google, stated that norms for data localisation should be as "narrowly tailored as possible".

Significantly, the Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, reinstated data localisation, a Big Tech annoyance that had been eliminated in the Data Protection Act,

The goal of the draft DPDP Rules is to strike a balance to privacy and technological advancement.

2023. The goal is to establish a central body that will collaborate with sectoral regulators and other ministries to successfully deploy local data storage without interfering with business operations. The government is considering giving the industry two years to transition to the new law and set up their systems for compliance.

The introduction of possible obligations for "significant data fiduciaries" with relation to cross-border data sharing is an intriguing feature in the draft regulations. While businesses and organisations that gather and handle personal data are considered data fiduciaries, "significant data fiduciaries" will be chosen based on the quantum and sensitivity of the personal data they handle as well as the potential threats and India's sovereignty and

integrity, electoral democracy, security and public order. It is anticipated that the Big Tech companies, such as Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, Google and Meta, will be categorised as important data fiduciaries.

Additionally, the draft regulations permit tech businesses to put in place a system for obtaining "verifiable" parental approval prior to processing children's personal data. In essence, when companies expressed dissatisfaction over the potential difficulty of implementing the rule, the government has decided not to propose a mechanism from its end and has instead left it up to the companies to choose a system.

In the event of a data breach, data fiduciaries will be required to notify affected parties "without delay" about the breach, including its nature, scope, timing and location; the implications that the breach is likely to have for the impacted user; and the steps that have been taken or are being taken to reduce risk, among other things. Failure to take adequate precautions to avoid a data breach could result in a fine of up to Rs 250 crore.

The Data Protection Act has given the government or its agencies broad exemptions for processing the personal information of residents on the basis of "public order", "friendly relations with other states", and "national security", among other things. Additionally, the government has suggested that health

experts, educational institutions, creche and daycare facilities be excused from requiring parental agreement before processing children's personal data.

"Yes, we can't just hit the 'pause button' and let these issues sort themselves out. Building the legal, cultural, technological and economic infrastructure to enable the development of a balanced personal data ecosystem is vitally important to improving the state of the world," the 2011 WEF report said. For similar reasons, we also urgently need a concrete law. The goal of the draft DPDP rules is to strike a balance between the right to privacy and technological advancement.

In the near future, the quantum, dynamics and discoveries of the hidden potential and risks of personal data will undoubtedly vary due to the constantly shifting pattern, purview, domain, demand and scope of data transmitting into an unknown horizon. Additionally, there ought to be a dynamic attention in the pattern with technological evolution, our intrusion into the AI world and changes in the global climate, geopolitics and trade. Any legislation pertaining to the protection of personal data should have the ability to easily and continuously adapt to the changes. We can at best hope that our legislation will be able to incorporate that level of adaptation and flexibility as effectively as possible.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

- 1 Energetic (7)
- 5 Spurious (5)
- 8 Intermediate (2-7)
- 9 An extremity (3)
- 10 Sharp in taste (4)
- 12 Type of dagger (8)
- 14 Course in manners (6)
- 15 Unvarying (6)
- 17 Provided for general use (8)
- 18 Stock of cattle (4)
- 21 Singular (3)
- 22 Without hesitation (4,1,4)
- 24 Foolish (5)
- 25 Rascally tricks (7)

Saturday's solution

ACROSS: 1 Lavender, 5 Spar, 9 Spent, 10 Product, 11 Indismissible, 13 Homage, 14 Public, 17 Take one's time, 20 Rubbish, 21 Moose, 22 Call, 23 Clarinet.

DOWN: 1 Lush, 2 Vietnam, 3 Nothing for it, 4 Expose, 6 Plumb, 7 Retrench, 8 Cool customer, 12 Rhetoric, 15 Lampoon, 16 Lethal, 18 Kabul, 19 Jest.

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SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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CALENDAR

JANUARY 13, 2025, MONDAY

- Shaka Samsat 1946
- Push Shukla 23
- Push Parvathi 30
- Hijri 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 15, up to 3:57 am
- Vaidik Yoga up to 4:39 am
- Aardra Nakshatra up to 10:38 am
- Moon enters Cancer sign 4:20 am
- Push Purima
- Lohi

FORECAST

| CITY | MAX | MIN |
|------------|-----|-----|
| Chandigarh | 19 | 10 |
| New Delhi | 19 | 07 |
| Amritsar | 13 | 10 |
| Bathinda | 15 | 06 |
| Jalandhar | 13 | 10 |
| Ludhiana | 14 | 09 |
| Bhivani | 14 | 08 |
| Hisar | 14 | 08 |
| Sirsa | 13 | 07 |
| Dharamsala | 15 | 04 |
| Manali | 14 | 0 |
| Shimla | 10 | 02 |
| Srinagar | 08 | -03 |
| Jammu | 18 | 08 |
| Kargil | -01 | -12 |
| Leh | 01 | -12 |
| Dehradun | — | — |
| Mussoorie | 12 | 01 |



CONTRAPUNTO

The desire to make off with the substance of others is the foremost passion nature has bred into us and, without doubt, the most agreeable

-MARQUES DE SADE

Data Dining

Culinary smarts may not be enough in the food biz when online platforms are armed with customer data

Instant gratification is still a dream but we are getting there. From a 30-minute pizza delivery, we've come to chhole-bhature in 10 minutes. Blinkit's Bistro, Swiggy's Bolt and Snacc, Zeplo's Cafe, Swish, Zing and MagicNow are already in the super-quick delivery game, more might follow. But there's a hitch. Notice that these are tech firms that started out connecting restaurants with customers. In a sense, they were online marketplaces for food. Restaurants—big brands and small—did the cooking, they did the connecting and carrying. In the beginning they even sweetened deals by throwing in discounts. But now aggregators reportedly want to bypass brands for quicker deliveries, and restaurants don't like it.

It's a free country, so why not? National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI), which claims to represent over 500,000 restaurants, says the aggregators have topped up mountains of data about customers over the years without sharing it with them. They know what Mrs Bedi ordered over the past five years, from where, payment methods she used, discounts she applied, ratings she gave...everything. One food aggregator recently shared it had fulfilled 9.1cr biryani orders and 5.8cr pizza orders last year. That's the data mound they are sitting on.

No wonder, restaurateurs are worried. They say aggregators know customers so well, and online ordering has become such a habit, that "private labels"—new food brands created and owned by aggregators—could hurt established restaurants.

NRAI and another hospitality body, Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), argue that there's nothing fair about a marketplace competing with individual sellers. It's like a mall owner who sets up their own-brand food court, cinema and shops on the ground floor and forces renters upstairs. Of course, renters can move to another aggregator or marketplace, but NRAI and FHRAI said data dominance of leading aggregators is an entry barrier for new aggregators, just as alternative search engines struggle to compete with the market leader.

The matter seems headed to the commerce ministry and Competition Commission of India, but aggregators deny using data to undercut restaurants and argue they have built separate apps for their 10-minute services. We would take that at their word, but data occupies a grey zone in India. That said, while data can net customers, only good food will retain them. The restaurant business is a cautionary tale—by some accounts it has the highest failure rate. Aggregators donning the chef's hat should be prepared to burn their fingers.

Wait For The Calling

There's no age for asceticism. But there is an age to go to school. The Juna akhara case has lessons for all

The Juna akhara's decision to stop initiation of a 13-year-old girl into their rigorous way of life should sound caution to society at large. Reports have suggested the girl's parents said they "donated" her because, to quote them, "she always wanted to be a sadhvi". Can a 13-year-old be expected to recognise what entering monhood entails? Prayer and worship are considered beneficial in and of themselves, but it's the parents' understanding of their role, and agency of a young teen, that needs parsing.

For a large part of India, childhood is but an age. Children labour, both boys and girls are exploited, they're forced to beg and steal, they're not in school—they live adult lives, not out of choice.

Even among teeming middle classes, between unfiltered social feeds, TV reality shows, and uncurated selfie-reels (insta effortlessly replaced TikTok), children are commodified and sexualised with family approval, childhood reduced to a performative ritual of observing birthdays and dressing up for festivals on loop. Given India's reality and religiosity it isn't impossible to imagine parents agreeing in good faith to give away their daughter to rigorous practice many doubtless consider the ultimate calling.

This is not to shame the parents. But ask, what does the law say? For one, shouldn't all 13-year-olds be in school? That's perhaps the one thing middle class parents must hold on to—education till at least Class 10. Teen years are tumultuous times. It is the time to experiment, yes, but not the time to take life-altering decisions. It is the time to grow up, and for parents to shepherd, not to give up or give in. A child's "consent" is not valid in law. India's age of consent is 18 (given moral considerations), but to work is just 14 (given practical considerations). There's much left to do to secure children's rights—to start off, a mindset change among adults about what childhood is.

California driving

Fire behind you, a different hell ahead

Annab Ray

Growing up in India, LA was the land of adolescent dreams: Pamela Anderson in slow-mo, sun and sand, canyons and hills, beautiful people, and Hollywood, a neverland of light and shadow. On moving here as an adult I saw it for what it really is—high taxes, insane traffic, unreal prices real estate, crazy regulations, and the part they skipped in *California Dreaming*, fire.

I had just become an Angeleno when I was woken up at 2am by the sounds of punches on the wooden door. Opening it, I found two LAPD officers screaming at me: You have to leave. NOW. Half-awake, I looked back to where they were looking, at the mountains at the back of my house, and there I saw it: flames leaping from the top, a line of fire as long as I could see, and smoke curling up from behind. I had no idea when I had been transported to Sauron's backyard in Mordor.

Blinded by fear and packing whatever I could within ten minutes, I drove out, not knowing where I was supposed to go. Okay, I will go to my house, I thought, but I couldn't see. I could only stay the night. As I hit the road to work, there were fires on both sides, the wind carrying specks of smouldering embers, but at least there was no traffic. This was odd because even at 3 in the night, the opposite side was chock-a-block with cars driving in the other direction.

At that moment, I realised why I was driving straight to where the fire was raging. I swerved into oncoming traffic, and miraculously, other drivers let me in as I joined the crowd fleeing the fire. By 5am, I found a hotel room, while many others were turned away. We spent two days watching on TV as the Los Angeles Fire Department worked to save our neighbourhood, which they did save, for they are the finest.

Now, as the Palisades fire engulfs this city and we live in terror of peak fire season, I am more prepared for living with flames but no less scared, for this is fire in Los Angeles—eternal beauty; one moment, one spark, one gust, and then it is Hell's Inferno.

Don's Akhand America...Then What?

The US prez-elect's territorial expansionism could start a global Operation Landgrab

Jug Suraiya



His detractors say that as US prez-elect, Donald Trump makes a great stand-up comic.

As proof they might adduce his recent one-liners about making Canada the 51st US state, taking over Denmark's Greenland, seizing control of Panama Canal, and a prospect, renaming Gulf of Mexico as Gulf of America, which has "a beautiful ring to it".

Indeed, territorial takeovers out-Trump the prez-elect's promise to declare tariff wars on assorted parts of the world. Much better than tariff barriers to keep the products of other countries out, is getting entire countries in by incorporating them lock, stock and GDP into your domain, in no-holds-barred acts of mergers and acquisitions.

After all, a former US secretary of state said that America was the world's only "irresponsible" family getting into mischief. By implication asserting that US could relegate all other nations to dispensability, subsumed under the hegemony of Uncle Sam. All of this might amount to stand-up comedy that makes Jay Leno seem like a character out of a Greek tragedy.

However, when the stand-up comedian in question is about to enter Oval Office, sit behind Resolute Desk, and have at hand the command football that gives him the power to unleash 5,044 nuclear warheads faster than a home-delivery pizza, all of a sudden seriously funny is not getting into mischief.

The prez-elect's announcement that he wants to turn USA into the United Real Estates of America could trigger a chain reaction of retaliatory territorial takeover bids.

To begin with Czar Vladimir, whom Trump considers a buddy, might not be content with expanding his empire to incorporate a stoutly resistant Ukraine, and could undergo what might be called the reverse of buyer's remorse—having second, or even third, thoughts about the purchase one has made—and

suffer from seller's regret, not a caveat emptor but a caveat venditor, and say he wants to rescind Russia's 1867 decision to sell Alaska to America for \$7.2m and won't take nyet for an answer.

The French might also choose to reverse their 1803 sale of Louisiana to US for \$15m, a mere bagatelle, not even a baguette but just the crumbs of one, mon Dieu!

However, in both instances the reversal of sales might be challenged by the original inhabitants of the territories involved. In the case of Alaska these

is known as the 'amigo country' decides that it wants back the whole of Texas, all of California, Nevada, Utah, a large chunk of Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and just a slice of Wyoming.

All this real estate, amounting to almost 55% of Mexico's total area, was ceded to US by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that put an end to the Mexican-American war waged between 1846 and 1848 in which US emerged as the victor.

As compensation for the territory it acquired by exercising its right of "manifest destiny", pursued on this occasion by force of arms, US gave Mexico \$15m plus change, a total sum that worked out to about 8 cents an acre.

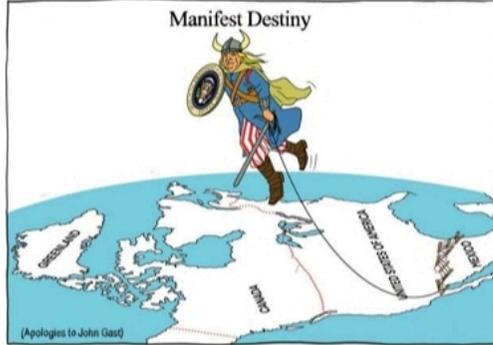
If Mexico were to call off the deal, offering to return the \$15m with interest, and ask to have half their country back, por favor, Uncle Sam could find himself in a pickle, what with John Wayne no longer around to defend the Alamo, and the first convicted felon to enter White House not quite capable of killing the legendary Duke's cowboy boots.

Close to home, Portugal, Holland, Denmark and France might respectively lay retro claim to Goa, Chuchura, Serampore and Coochbehar, while resuscitated East India Company could lay proprietary rights over the rest of the country, excepting those parts which were under princely rule.

However, in return for returning India might demand reparations from Britain for the two centuries of deprivations of colonial raj, which according to varying estimates would top up to several trillion pounds, the shelling out of which could cause the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street to succumb to fatal cardiac arrest, God Save the King.

In lieu of monetary recompense, India might accept sovereignty over UK cities of Leicester, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, and the London suburb of Southall, all these areas having been colonised and become realms where Britannia has been morphed into the avatar of a sari-clad Brindabanji.

A transformation that a stand-up comic, or a pre-lect, might find seriously funny. Or funnily serious.



(Apologies to John Gau)

'Strength only respects strength. Isro's team strength and teamwork have always been its success mantra'

On Sunday, Isro made cautious progress on a trial for a complex satellite docking manoeuvre, indignously developed. Mastery over docking is a feat only US, Russia and China can boast of. Isro's new chief, rocket scientist V Narayanan assumes office tomorrow (Jan 14). Narayanan, with 41 years of space research experience, tells **Chethan Kumar** about the space agency's work culture and India's missions that'll help it become a space super power.

The 60-year-old was born to farmer C Vaniyaperumal and homemaker S Thangammal in Melakattuvil village, Kanyakumari, and grew up in modest circumstances. The eldest of six siblings studied in Tamil medium govt schools, often disrupted by rain due to poor infra. His house received electricity only when he was in ninth grade. Before joining Isro in 1984, he worked briefly at TI Diamond Chain and MRF. Driven by a yearning to learn, he completed his AMIE in mechanical engineering followed by an MTech in Cryogenic Engineering and doctorate in Aerospace Engineering from IIT Kharagpur. From a modest Tamil Nadu village to becoming Isro chair, Narayanan's journey epitomises determination and excellence. Expects:

● **Did you always aspire to join Isro? Tell us about your journey...**

I had humble beginnings. When I ranked first in Class 10, my father asked someone in the village what to do. He was told to enrol me in a polytechnic course as that would fetch me a job. It was only later I understood multiple things, including engineering. At the time, my only concern was to find a good job. So, I can't say I had great ambitions to join Isro as a young boy. Isro was unknown to me because of my ignorance, having grown up in a village. Only after I completed my studies did I learn about Isro. Until then, all I wanted was a decent job. But I always believed in putting in my best effort whatever the task. I joined

VSSC initially, worked on sounding rocket activities, then pursued my MTech where I ranked top of class and won best student award, followed by a PhD while working.

● **Was the elevation to Isro chair a surprise then?**

It came as a great surprise, and I felt deeply privileged. I was entrusted with this responsibility. My immediate thought was about the fantastic Isro team and how comfortable I felt knowing we could achieve our goals together. It's a great responsibility, but with the wholehearted



ISRO launched PSLV-C60 with two SpaDeX satellites on Dec 30, 2024

support of the entire team, I'm confident we can fulfill our missions.

● **What will be Isro's immediate priorities under your leadership?**

Our immediate focus is on several key missions. This month, we'll launch the NVS-02 navigation satellite, the second satellite in our second-generation navigation system. We're also preparing for the first unmanned flight of the Gaganyaan programme in the coming months. Additionally, we have important missions like the Venus mission and development of

the next-generation launcher capable of placing 30,000kg in low Earth orbit. PM has also approved the first module of space station development.

● **Could you elaborate on Isro's role in supporting private industry?**

As part of space sector reforms, Isro has the responsibility to handhold the country's private industries and startups. We will support them in various space-related activities, including satellite development, data processing, and launcher development.

● **Isro now works shoulder-to-shoulder with agencies like Nasa...Your thoughts on the next few years?**

Today, India has matured significantly in space technology. Strength only respects strength. While we were in the beginning stages earlier, now we've become highly capable in several areas and are contributing significantly. We believe some activities are better done collaboratively, taking others into confidence. International collaboration will continue to grow substantially.

● **How do you plan to juggle the challenges, particularly with ambitious projects like NGLV?**

The Next Generation Launch Vehicle (NGLV) is indeed a crucial project, featuring a liquid oxygen methane propulsion system. But I believe in Isro's team strength. Our success mantra has always been teamwork, and we believe the organisation and country are above individuals. With our dedicated and devoted team, I'm 100% confident we'll accomplish all our programmes and contribute to our country's development.

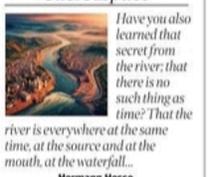
● **How do you approach team management?**

I believe people in Isro don't work just for money—it's about satisfaction and the right environment that brings them a comfortable environment to contribute to. My focus is on ensuring people are happy and comfortable, which naturally brings out their best performance. When you have a good environment, everyone contributes better.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Mahakumbh Opens Doorway To Transformation

Anandmurti Gurumaa

The Mahakumbh is a grand confluence of India's vast culture and ancient heritage. Just as a vast ocean gathers within its depths a treasure trove of precious gems and profound mysteries, preserving them over centuries, similarly, calling the Mahakumbh a custodian of India's eternal traditions, dharma, devotion, worship, and diverse philosophical schools is no exaggeration. This magnificent gathering, which has been ongoing for ages, is a unique amalgamation of numerous ideologies.

Pulsating with diverse energies, Mahakumbh opens the doorway to transformation. The origins of the Mahakumbh festival are linked to the story of the churning of the ocean, Samudra Manthan, described in the Puranas. To obtain the nectar of immortality, amrit, devas and asuras collectively churned the ocean. When

the pot of nectar emerged, a fierce struggle ensued between gods and demons to claim it. During this tumult, drops of nectar fell at four locations, and these four places became the sites for the Kumbh Mela.

Adi Shankaracharya also established the tradition that rishis, sages, and devotees of dharma should gather at these four sacred locations. Some scholars even suggest that Shiv himself organised the first Kumbh Mela. Shiv is associated with wisdom, science, and dharma. He represents the eternal principle, Shiva tattva and, in his manifest form, is the Adi Yogi—the first yogi. His vehicle, Nandi, bull, symbolises the active form of dharma.

The significance of Mahakumbh is magnified as it provides a sacred space for deep contemplation on these pillars, ensuring their harmonious progression.

There are Shad Darshanas, six schools of philosophy in India. Scholars, sages, disciples, and philosophers associated with these six philosophies gather at the Kumbh Mela. It is a confluence where spiritual masters and thinkers from various traditions come together. Some teach principles of yam and niyam, others teach asanas or Vedanta, while some extol the virtues of charity. Through such diverse teachings, a firm foundation of dharma can be established in life. In 2019, when the Kumbh was held in Prayagraj, approximately 15m people participated. Nowhere else in the world does such an extraordinary gathering of people occur in one place at a time.

In earlier times, shastric debates, were a key feature of the Kumbh Mela, where topics such as the individual self, God, creation, birth,

life, sin, and virtue were discussed from the perspectives of yug, Vedanta, and other schools of thought. While such debates are rare today, various sages and spiritual leaders still engage in discussions on the scriptures of Sanatan Dharma.

At the Kumbh Mela, everyone benefits from three key aspects: snan, holy bath; daan, charity; jnan, wisdom. For those who may not be intellectually inclined, the Purva Mimamsa philosophy suggests that this is a time for repentance and earning merit. It emphasises that even if someone has done nothing meaningful in the past 12 years, they should at least start now. They should bathe in the sacred rivers, resolve to lead a righteous life and repent for their past actions.

Human nature is often driven by greed and ego, leading to harm and injustice to others. The Kumbh serves as a reminder to seek forgiveness and turn towards a life of virtue.



Columbit based in Los Angeles



Hermann Hesse

Widening net

New US sanctions will affect supply of Russian energy

In a parting shot, the departing administration of United States (US) President Joe Biden has extended the scope of its sanctions on the Russian energy sector. The new measures, announced last week, go much further than the existing sanctions and have the potential to create additional volatility in an energy ecosystem that is already under considerable pressure. This decision, coming as it does just a couple of weeks before the start of the Donald Trump presidency, throws a political challenge to the new administration, which is known for its pro-Russian bias. Mr Trump will therefore be put to the test on its proximity to Russia and how he responds to this challenge remains to be seen. But the collateral implications for energy-dependent Europe and India will be substantial and policymakers will have to deal with these eventualities. The new aggressive sanctions span multiple domains. Two large producers and exporters have been brought into the sanctions net: Surgutneftegas and Gazprom Neft. The million barrels that these two shipped in the last year together represent almost a third of current Russian maritime exports, and are a significant proportion of the current supply in the market, including to India. In addition, sanctions against specific oil-tanker ships have been set up, including those that shuttle oil and gas across the Arctic Ocean to the main Russian regional port at Murmansk. The medium-term impact of these sanctions is unclear. Certainly, it will raise costs, since transshipment of various sorts will be required.

Another arrow in the US' quiver is new restrictions on maritime insurance providers in Russia, in particular Ingosstrakh Insurance Company and AlfaStrakhovanie Group. The former is a major supplier of insurance to cargo despatchers in India, in particular, and its restriction may lead to delays in existing shipments. India will have to come up with a suitable set of responses to these new measures that are not too disruptive. This is urgent because the safety of the shadow fleet that ships Russian oil has already become a problem. Sanctions against specific ships render them difficult to repair and make accidents more likely; and the absence of insurance means that accidents, when they occur, create major losses. They also have a major effect on the ecosystem. The Black Sea is currently threatened by leaks from two damaged Russian oil tankers, and Germany this weekend had to deal with an abandoned tanker, part of the shadow fleet, in the Baltic Sea.

To an extent, these additional measures were anticipated, though their aggressive nature is something of a surprise. Indian purchasers of fossil fuel, alongside their counterparts in China, have in fact stepped up their dependence on Gulf and Atlantic sources for oil in the past weeks. Indian state-owned oil refiners have reportedly snapped up contracts for February delivery of six million barrels of crude oil from the Gulf in particular, partly as a response to the lack of availability of Russian crude oil on the spot market. Two million barrels have also been secured, according to reports, of West Texas Intermediate. It is likely that it will take a few more weeks or months for the Russian sources of crude oil to work out modalities for supply that go around the new sets of sanctions. Until then, India will be exposed to some volatility in supply and prices. It is also possible that the new normal for Russian supply will be higher cost, less reliable, and more dangerous than existing routes. Indian refiners' dependence on the sanctions-enabled carry trade may not be possible for much longer.

Threat or opportunity

India needs to be prepared for AI-driven changes

Artificial intelligence (AI) makes inroads, Microsoft founder Bill Gates believes that employment opportunities in only three sectors are likely to remain robust in the face of the AI onslaught. A recent study by Bloomberg Intelligence indicates that jobs in banking and finance are among the most vulnerable to AI induction. This is in line with a report by Citigroup in June, which estimated AI is likely to displace more jobs across the banking industry than in any other sector. It estimated 54 per cent of jobs in banking had a high potential to be automated. Recent trends in software also indicate that a lot of jobs in that sector may be at risk. Mr Gates believes that energy, biosciences, and AI system development are three sectors that require expertise and adaptability that AI cannot easily replicate. More broadly, Mr Gates thinks that ordinary humans will only be deployed in roles that require creativity and critical thinking. Digital literacy and programming skills will be critical across industries. Thus, it will be crucial to rework educational systems to ensure populations acquire those skillsets as early as possible.

The Bloomberg study surveyed chief technology officers (CTOs) in the finance domain. The conclusions are, a net 3 per cent cut in workforce is likely over the next three-five years with many CTOs expecting more drastic reductions. Nearly a quarter of the 93 respondents predict a steeper decline of between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of the total headcount. The companies surveyed included giants like Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, and Goldman Sachs. This could amount to around 200,000 jobs being lost or rather eliminated as AI takes over tasks currently carried out by humans. Back office, middle office, and operations are likely to be most at risk. Financial entities could see margin gains as efficiency improves and they believe AI may drive revenue gains as well. In 2023, banks could see pre-tax profits 12-17 per cent higher than they would otherwise have seen because AI may increase productivity. This could add as much as \$180 billion to the combined bottom line of the respondents of the survey even as they shed employees.

Many people believe that new roles would develop for humans even as AI eliminates many routine roles. As of now, there are some signs that this is happening in finance but this is still a very narrow phenomenon. The software industry is unsurprisingly front and centre in this phase of change. Salesforce, for example, says it isn't hiring coders in 2025. It doesn't need to because AI has driven huge productivity gains and the customer focus has shifted to Agentforce, an AI-driven product. As AI makes coding easier, other software firms also believe that the "antifarm" model will gradually go extinct. However, most believe that new, more creative roles centred on the new algorithms will drive the next phase of growth for the software industry. India's large tech sector and digital ecosystem is, therefore, confronted with both a threat and an opportunity. The bulk of the information-technology services are likely to become completely AI-driven, and this could be followed by redundancies at the low end of the programming functions where the bulk of the entry-level engineers are currently employed. But creativity and adaptation will receive a big push as AI opens new pathways and that could boost activity across many sectors as this process of creative disruption continues. Policymakers must take note of the trends and support the transition. It must be ensured that the educational system is retooled to prepare the next generation.

Hai the freelance economy!

More professions are going freelance

ILLUSTRATION: AJIYA MOHANTY



When I joined my first job in Bombay in 1971 after graduating from IIM Calcutta, it was bewildering: The office that lay in front of me had about 50 per cent of its space filled with young men and women sitting in front of typewriters hammering away at their keyboards. The office that I was at was supposed to be that of India's hottest creative ad agency of the time. My 21-year-old mind started wondering: Is this how this company created all those wonderful ads in dailies? Was using a mechanical typewriter was the key to being creative?

I get a similar feeling of bewilderment today when I see/hear of companies, be they in finance, software development, or any other field, that have thousands of employees in their "office" pounding away at their personal computers. And I have started wondering whether, with the advent of artificial intelligence, what I saw in a few years of those pools of typists disappear from offices completely with the advent of the personal computer, will very soon start happening to this super-large pool of young men and women currently hammering away at their PCs.

Some early clues about what changes could happen are available from current news reports. Take this one, for example: "As of 2024, approximately 38 per cent of the US workforce, equating to over 64 million individuals, are engaged in freelance work... [and that] projection suggests that freelancing could comprise 40 per cent of the US workforce by 2027" (US Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Digging deeper, this trend is not because employees are downsizing their full-time-at-office employment but

appears to be something employees themselves are pushing to do. Wasn't it an article of faith for all of us in the middle class that staying in a job in an office as part of the permanent staff was the surest step towards a happy life?

Further digging reveals that "(approximately) 52 per cent of Gen Z workers and 44 per cent of millennials are engaged in freelancing". So, it is the younger lot who are taking to the "freelance" (upwork.com). And I thought, it must be the ones with low-quality education — people who have jumped around from one low-paid job to another — that must be making up the bulk of these "freelancers". But then again, reports say that "(over) half of freelancers possess a postgraduate degree, indicating a trend towards higher educational attainment among independent workers". Or could it be that the young women are choosing to freelance rather than spend hours every day in office because it gives them more time to spend on caring for their young children, but that too doesn't provide an answer: "The freelance workforce is nearly evenly split, with women comprising 52.3 per cent and men 47.7 per cent, so clearly there is a bigger force at work driving freelancing."

Further research reveals that this new generation values the ability to set their own schedules, choose projects that interest them, and balance work with personal life. Freelancing provides them the option to choose a location, prioritise autonomy, meaningful work, and non-traditional career paths. Further, freelancers can work for clients across borders, providing opportunities for higher earnings and diversified client-

global platforms enable skilled workers to tap into demand in high-paying markets.

Freelancers in the United States contribute significantly to the country's economy, with earnings totalling approximately \$1.27 trillion in 2023 (Forbes), so maybe it is time policymakers viewed "freelancers" as a key segment of the economy and enable legislation to reflect that.

And if you think all this is just in the United States and does not affect India, here are some statistics from the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog): The country's gig (another word for freelance) workforce grew by 23.5 million by 2023-30, up from 77 million in 2020-21.

While a substantial portion of Indian freelancers work in IT-related fields, offering services such as web development, app development, software engineering, and cybersecurity, freelancers also dominate content writing, copywriting, search-engine optimisation, social-media management, and digital-marketing roles. Online tutoring, curriculum development, and content creation for educational platforms are growing freelance sectors. In health care, freelance opportunities include yoga instructors, fitness trainers, dietitians, and mental-health counsellors who provide virtual and in-person services. And, of course, freelance journalists, bloggers, and editors contribute to media organisations and independent platforms, allowing them the freedom to cover a wide range of topics, from local issues to international affairs.

On further reflection it occurred to me that even in India, some professions have for a long time had a place for "freelancers" except that the term used so far has been "private practitioners". For instance, for decades, a sizeable proportion of medical doctors, lawyers, and chartered accountants have been in private practice and that has been a perfectly reasonable choice to make for middle-class people (my father and maternal grandfather were doctors in private practice). It is understood that today, in India, 80 per cent of qualified doctors are in private practice and so are large proportions of India's 1.3 million registered lawyers and 40 per cent of the 400,000 chartered accountants.

But what is different now is the role digital tech is playing to support the freelance economy. For example, real-time interaction via emails, chat apps, and video-conferencing tools makes it easier to provide service, and a wide reach through digital marketing strategies and online freelance platforms, and does not keep a freelance profession restricted to one town or geographic location but allows them to move lucrative markets.

So, let's hail the freelance economy as it extends across the world's professions!

The author (ajit@rediffmail.com) is devoted to unravelling the connections between technology and technology



AJIT BALAKRISHNAN

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Shakeout in smallcaps

Last week, the CNX SmallCap 100 index cracked fell by 7.3 per cent. The last time the index fell more than this was way back in December 2022 (8.33 per cent). Last week's decline came after months of churning with the index trying, but unable to head higher. With the benefit of hindsight, the index topped in mid-September last year and has been slowly edging its way down, with big declines in the third week of October (down 6.45 per cent) and early November, followed by the sharp fall last week. The two key market indices, the Nifty 50 and Sensex, peaked on September 27 and are down 11 per cent now. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) have been relentless sellers during this period. Until early December, it seemed that the smaller companies would buck the downward trend. Does last week's brutal sell-off signify a different scenario? Let's look at a few facts.

K-shaped economic growth refers to some parts of the economy experiencing strong growth while others continue to decline, like two arms of the letter 'K'. The worst kind of K-shaped growth is when a small number of rich people do very well while the vast majority languishes. We had K-shaped growth in the stock markets as well, but it is the opposite of K-shaped economic growth; the business of blue-chip, cash-rich, mega companies with access to the best resources struggled to grow, while smaller companies surged ahead.

Since March 2023, the indices tracking microcap, smallcap, and midcap stocks have risen relentlessly. The Nifty SmallCap 100 index doubled in the 18 months between April 2023 and September 2024. There was a small correction in March 2024 and one coinciding with the election setback to the Bharatiya Janata Party in June. But small stocks shrugged off the setback. Investors argued that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with the same Cabinet, signalled continuity in leadership and the markets would continue to rise unin-

dered by political uncertainties. The assumption looked valid, as coalition partners Chandrababu Naidu and Nithish Kumar looked content to remain in their home states and did not threaten to destabilise the government. The transition to Mr Modi's third term has been so smooth that we tend to forget that he is now heading a coalition government.

In further support of the theory that "nothing has changed", the Budget continued with its massive capital expenditure (₹11 trillion for the three-year period). This was immediately a bullish indicator for smaller companies. They are the main beneficiaries of government spending on renewable energy, electricity transmission and distribution, defence production, urban transportation, railways, water supply, supportive light engineering, and construction. That apart, smaller companies also dominate fast-growing and new businesses like electronics manufacturing services (EMS), health care (hospitals and diagnostics), and a variety of sunrise sectors such as recycling, smart metering, data centres, consumer technologies, and non-fund retail financial services such as stockbroking and wealth management.

On the other hand, megacap companies are in software services, consumer goods, banking, telecom, automobiles, pharmaceuticals, and commodities, which are mature, slow-growing businesses. Banks were supposed to benefit from infrastructure spending but with the government and capital markets supplying the cash for growth, who needs banks? To grow, banks and finance companies increase consumer and personal loans. But these have turned problematic because income growth for the masses has not kept pace with inflation — a byproduct of K-shaped economic growth. This is also why consumer companies are not doing well.

Once the trend of smaller companies doing well



IRRATIONAL CHOICE
DEBASHIS BASU

The rise of Black Twitter



BOOK REVIEW

J WORTHAM

Do you remember where you were in early December 2020? It was a peak pandemic, so chances are you were at home and online. And if you were Black and on Twitter, you were probably reading or tweeting about the Negro Solstice.

On December 5, an argument about the authenticity of the coronavirus ended with a pandemic denier saying that for Black people, on the upcoming winter solstice, during this extraordinary planetary conjunction, "our RNA will be unlocked."

The twinned cosmic events seemed star-crossed to a few other Twitter users, and what followed is what the chronically online like to call a "poster's holiday." Jokes flew among Black people

about turning into the X-Men, levitating, acquiring powers and beaming themselves into the future. People who were wearing their photoshopped glowing laser eyes. Someone refashioned the logo from the 2006 show "Heroes" into "Negros."

Meredith D Clark, a professor of race and political communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, uses this example to kick off her new book, *We Tried to Tell: Black Twitter and the Rise of Digital Counter-narratives*. She writes that the Negro Solstice was a "life-affirming signal that Black people were somehow surviving a second year of lockdowns — and with our humor intact."

It was undeniably one of the better chapters on late Twitter, yet few people outside the intended community knew what to make of it — if they knew about it at all. One person Clark interviewed for her book described Black Twitter as "a powerful, parallel Twitter," and it often felt that way, like being in a kitchen at a party and having a completely different — and often more interesting — conversation than the main one going

on in the living room.

Although it was all so chronologically recent — and although some denatured forms of it still exist — Clark noticed that young people around her seemed to be, already, forgetting the glory days of Black Twitter, and their importance. Clark memorialises Black Twitter, hoping to prevent further perversion of Black innovation, Black language, culture and style. (Just look at the complete and utter dereliction of "woke.")

Black Twitter's most lasting legacy, according to Clark, is pulling off a "full-scale revolution" in how American news media reported on Black people — which she correctly argues has a direct correlation to how people perceive the value of Black life and govern it. She intends the book as a warning: To continue on in the tradition of white media elites will lead to a further disenfranchisement of nonwhite people (and working-class white people, too). Her warning has prescience: It is here.

For a time, Black Twitter forced the world to pay attention to Black people and their concerns. Clark describes its

contributions as "a collective intervention on mainstream media narratives about Black life in America in the early 21st century."

She gives the example of the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, created in response to the mainstream media's use of discriminatory headlines and photographs of Michael Brown to construct a narrative of criminality after he was killed by Darren Wilson. Or the way Black Twitter comprised the acquittal of Casey Anthony with the conviction of Shamesha Taylor, a young mother put in jail for leaving her child in the car during a job interview.

Each of these instances — and there are dozens of them hundreds — lays bare the hypocrisy in our legal system and how it is normalised by unconscious journalistic biases.

Anyone who relied on Black Twitter as a source of relief and entertainment knows the community served as an antidote to the constant gaslighting that

comes with living in America.

Clark excavates deeper: She doesn't just ratify jokes and meme culture as collective processing. She frames the larger phenomenon as a necessary infrastructure of accountability that has been denied and would not be available any other way. Black Twitter exists for laughs, of course, but it also exists to resist the sanitising of America (and the world) by conspiracy theories refuting the racist assumptions that underlie Black existence in America and are often fortified by the media.

The book does not fully tangle with the cost of being in these spaces and doing this work publicly — the harassment and the data surveillance and mining whose tolls we cannot yet fully understand. Sure, people launched careers off their accounts, but we made less money than was made off us, and there are a number of uncertainty and unfairness in the way that the predominantly white industries —

sports, music, Hollywood — that have extorted and extracted value from Black creatives since the beginning of time.

Also, by omitting most of the ways Black Twitter occasionally cannibalised itself, Clark chooses to focus on a collective goodness of Black culture over — as if everyone shares the same goals of social justice, or even the definition of liberation.

Clark finished her book before the blast ratio of Elon Musk's takeover of the site could be fully comprehended, but the same question lingers over her formidable body of work: What does the future hold? That's for a different book.

Black Twitter has waned, but it is far from over. The conditions that created the need for Black Twitter have not dissipated; if anything, they are only intensifying. What Clark carefully and lovingly outlines is too necessary not to re-read: It was a rare moment in history to be in control of the narratives created about us. And at least for now, there's a blueprint to know how to start again when the time is right.

The reviewer is a staff writer for The Times Magazine and co-editor (with Kimberly Drew) of 2025 The New York Times News Service

Foul bid to control higher education

The new draft regulations issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC), on appointment of vice-chancellors and faculty in universities and colleges, aim to drastically change the country's higher education system and bring it under the control of the Central government. The provisions grant overriding powers to the chancellors in the appointment of vice-chancellors of state universities. The search committee will have no representative of the state government on it. The governor of a state, who is an appointee of the Central government, is the chancellor of the universities in that state, and so the vice-chancellors will in effect be appointees of the Central government. Under the draft regulations, there is no requirement of a PhD degree or a particular number of years of teaching experience for appointment as a vice-chancellor. Any person from business, administration or other fields can be appointed to that position. Existing norms for the appointment of faculty members and their promotions are also proposed to be changed.

The regulations, if implemented, will strip state governments of any role in the appointment of vice-chancellors. That would be a violation of federal principles and an attempt to control a very important sector. It would also run counter to the intent of the Constitution. With Entry 66 in the Union List, it has given the Union government the task of "co-ordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions". This cannot be interpreted as giving the Centre the power to override the powers of states. Setting standards, issuing norms, and coordination of activities should not be stretched to deny the states their legitimate role in education.

Universities are formed by acts of state legislatures. They are funded by state governments. The UGC has no mandate to control and regulate the functioning of the universities, even if education is in the Concurrent List of the Constitution. Appointment of vice-chancellors is a contentious issue in most states ruled by non-BJP parties. Some state governments have sought to take the power away from the governors because of the controversies and conflicts they have created as chancellors. The UGC is giving that power to the governors in an absolute fashion. State governments and teachers of universities have strongly opposed the regulations. The Central government is trying to control education in various ways, such as changing the syllabus. The UGC move, which is the Central government's move, is intended to extend political and administrative control over the universities and the entire higher education sector. It will be strongly resisted by the states, universities and others.

Centre is out to strip states of their powers to appoint VCs and faculty

Word of caution on rural roads scheme

The Karnataka government's Pragati Patha scheme, announced in the 2024-25 budget, promises to bring much needed infrastructure development to rural areas by upgrading 7,110 km of road across 189 Assembly constituencies. The scheme aims to lay 37.6 km of road in each constituency, which would improve connectivity, stimulate rural economies, and potentially uplift local communities. The total estimated cost of the initiative is Rs 5,190 crore, with 70% of the funding expected to come from external sources. Having received approval from NITI Aayog, the state government is now awaiting clearance from the Union finance ministry to begin work. At first glance, Pragati Patha appears to be a much-needed step forward for rural development, especially given that many roads in these constituencies are in a poor state, having been laid over a decade ago under schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana and Namma Grama Namma Raste Yojana. If successfully implemented, this scheme could significantly improve infrastructure, boost connectivity to key services like schools, hospitals and markets, and contribute to overall economic growth in the state's rural hinterland.

However, beneath the surface of this ambitious initiative lie several concerns. One of the immediate worries is the politics of this scheme. Pragati Patha seems as much about placating MLAs as about rural development. With the government facing financial constraints due to the launch of various guarantee schemes, several legislators have been complaining about inadequate development funds for their constituencies, and this scheme is being seen as a way to deal with their dissatisfaction. The temptation for these MLAs to use the project as a means to curry favour with the voters and supporters is high. A scheme that was designed to benefit the community could easily be exploited for narrow political gains. There are already several instances of MLAs favouring certain religious groups or supporters when deciding which roads to develop. This could lead to a situation where infrastructure is provided selectively, reinforcing divisions rather than fostering inclusivity.

There is also a risk of corruption, a common problem with such projects, in the absence of adequate scrutiny. A large portion of the funding comes from external sources at substantial interest cost. It is essential that the contracts are awarded strictly in adherence with the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurements Act, with utmost fairness and integrity. It should not be a road to political patronage, but a path to progress that connects villages to opportunities and resources. If managed correctly, this scheme could be a catalyst for rural development, benefiting communities across the state.

Pragati Patha holds promise. Make sure it isn't hijacked for petty politics

COMMENT

DATA PRIVACY

DPDP Rules and a missed opportunity

Raised with an intention to protect citizens' personal data, the rules fall short in key areas, posing a threat to privacy

ANWESHA SEN

On January 3, 2025, the long-awaited Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules were finally published, 16 months after the DPDP Act was enacted in August 2023.

However, the new rules fail to address many of the ambiguities and concerns surrounding the Act. Additionally, some provisions in the rules appear to undermine rather than protect individual privacy, raising further doubts about their effectiveness.

This article attempts to cover some of the key concerns regarding the impact of the rules on an individual's privacy and rights. There are additional areas of concern that require further debate and deliberation.

One of the most glaring issues with the DPDP Rules is their failure to clarify critical aspects of the DPDP Act, despite a gap of 16 months.

For instance, the concept of "informed consent" (Rule 2) remains a contentious issue, particularly in a country like India where digital literacy is limited.

To substantiate, the Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) found that on an average, only 12% of individuals over 15 years of age in India are computer literate.

While the Act and rules seek to ensure users' consent to data processing, the question remains: can individuals truly understand and make informed decisions about their data when many lack access to and basic knowledge of how digital platforms operate?

Moreover, withdrawing consent—often touted as a user's "right to be forgotten"—is a straightforward process. Does it mean that all of a user's data is erased? And how can users verify that their data has indeed been deleted?

Even more troubling is the ambiguity around the "right to be forgotten". The idea of individuals should be able to have their personal data erased upon request sounds promising in theory.

However, the rules do not clarify how this right can be effectively exercised, especially given the lack of clear procedures and enforcement mechanisms. Data retention, it seems, continues to take precedence, leaving users' personal

information vulnerable for longer periods than they may be comfortable with.

Further complicating the issue are provisions related to data breaches and security safeguards. The rules mention that data fiduciaries must implement "reasonable security safeguards", but these safeguards remain vaguely defined and peppered with the word "adequate".

What exactly constitutes "adequate" or "reasonable" security? If an intermediary suffers a breach despite "adequate" measures, will it be penalised for non-compliance? The rules do not provide clear answers, creating uncertainty for both companies and individuals about the repercussions of a breach.



Rule 10 contains details on processing children's data, which also raises significant concerns.

According to the rules, the data fiduciary is required to verify the consent of a child's guardian if the child does not have the ability to inform the fiduciary that they are a minor? This rule inadvertently places a heavy burden on all users to prove their identity, potentially violating personal data privacy in the process by mandating verified identity verification for all users.

One of the provisions in the DPDP Act that has been heavily challenged are the blanket exemptions for the central government. The rules continue to provide the government with sweeping access to personal data under the pretext of protecting "the sovereignty and integrity of India or security of the State".

This provision, which grants the gov-

ernment presumably unfettered access to citizens' data citing vague reasons, remains unchanged from the original Act and continues to lack any meaningful limitations or safeguards. It raises questions about the balance between national security and individual privacy rights, a balance that remains dangerously tilted in favor of government surveillance.

It is also important to highlight two key exemptions in the rules and the Act. First, Rule 15 exempts data used for "research, archiving, or statistical purposes" but does not provide further definitions or limitations for these categories.

Second, Clause 3(c)(ii) of the Act exempts all publicly available data, which opens the door for scraping such data to develop AI tools. This includes, for instance, the use of publicly available social media images for training facial recognition technology. These blanket exemptions raise concerns about the potential misuse of personal data without adequate safeguards.

One then turns to governance mechanisms for ensuring privacy. While Rule 7 outlines the process for information after a breach has happened, there are no provisions for an independent body to oversee regular audits or for grievance redressal. Rule 13(3) states that data fiduciaries and consent managers will have their own grievance redressal systems and to ensure "the effectiveness of the system in responding within such period, implement appropriate technical and organisational measures". How does one quantify what is "appropriate"? Such details are left to the discretion of those this Act is meant to govern.

Moreover, while the DPDP Rules are open for public consultation, they are currently only available in English and Hindi, which severely limits the ability of most citizens to engage with the consultation process. In a country as diverse as India, with many regional languages, this narrow accessibility undermines democratic participation.

The DPDP Rules, as they stand, represent a missed opportunity to strengthen (or rather, introduce) data privacy protections in India. While they may have been drafted with the intention of safeguarding citizens' personal data, they fall short in multiple key areas, leaving individuals exposed to potential misuse of their personal information.

The government must address these concerns and take immediate steps to make the rules clearer and ultimately more protective of individual privacy. (The author is an assistant programme manager at the Takshashila Institution)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Faith, art and the human spirit

What is the force behind astounding creativity across civilisations?

K S S RAGHAVAN

Recently, I visited Mysuru with my family. My passion for Ravi Varma's paintings led me straight to Jagannath Temple. Among the many unparalleled paintings of the Raja, quietly stands the masterpiece, Jatayu Vadhya, which depicts Ravana slashing off a wing of Jatayu, who tries to prevent the abduction of Sita. The depth of emotion in the painting grips the viewer's heart, who feels the agony of Sita and Jatayu and the arrogance of Ravana.

It has been fortunate to travel to many countries around the globe, on business and later as a tourist. Comparable to the beauty of the above painting is the one in the Vatican, The Last Judgement by Michelangelo, where God, gloriously in the centre, sends human souls to heaven or hell. Closer to home, the Ajanta paintings in Au-

rangabad, which tell the story of the Buddha, are extraordinarily charming. Very close to Ajanta, there is a group of incredible rock-cut caves, sculptures, and places of worship, collectively called the Ellora Caves, which have been created over a period of hundreds of years by different sects: Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus. The pinnacle of these monuments is the Kailasa temple. It is not a normal temple that is "built" from bottom to top but carved top-down out of a large rock—an awesome colossus. Further over a period of hundreds of years, architectural wonder of the Brihadisvara temple in Thanjavur.

A bit more on architecture when you visit the city of the seven hills, this time Istanbul in Turkey, the magnificence of Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque, which stand atop a hill, is stunning. Far away from this place, you saw another world wonder, the Florence Cathedral in Italy, where the entry corridor is sky-high, carrying us mentally to the lofty heavens. It also has the incredible octagonal dome with another mind-boggling painting of the Last Judgement on the inside.

Literature like the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and similar works in all countries has enriched human civilisation over centuries. In music, again, the inspiration and creation of poet-composers like Saint Thyagaraja and Thyagaraja Sastry have resulted in hundreds of Carnatic compositions, moving a million hearts.

What is the force that brought out such great genius in very different fields in very different places? It is easy to deduce that the deep faith in the mind of each of the creators has resulted in these superb human quests in painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, poetry, or music. Whether the creators belonged to Buddhism, Jain, Islamic, Hindu, or Christian faiths, they have given expression to their deepest devotion through their field of art.

I should confess that I am not a seriously religious person. Also, the suffering and injustice meted out to common people by religious conflicts are well documented and known. However, the immortal contribution of religions to elevate the human mind and spirit, from the beginning of civilisation, should not be ignored.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bhopal's toxic waste disposal plan raises concerns

I refer to 'Bhopal waste disposal: A toxic legacy of neglect' (Jan 12). The 1984 Bhopal gas disaster's waste disposal plan has a number of shortcomings. Fears about burning the waste causing more contamination and expose people to harmful chemicals are valid. It is also reported that hazardous elements are still present at the site. The disposal process lacks transparency and stakeholders, particularly the locals, have not

been adequately involved. The Madhya Pradesh High Court's decision to grant the state government six weeks to safely dispose of the Union Carbide waste is commendable. Before proceeding, the government should inform the public about the proposed approach, which should be vetted by experts, to alleviate fears and build confidence.

K V Chandra Mouli, Mysuru

Rehabilitate Maoists

This refers to 'Maoists surrender: Activists urge govt to look into their demands' (Jan 12). After the surrender of six Maoists, CM Siddaramaiah has proclaimed that there are no Maoists in the state, which is good news, if true. However, activists' pleas to address the demands of surrendered Maoists should not be ignored. These individuals have apparently reformed, and it is crucial for the government to help them reintegrate into society. Providing gainful employment and rehabili-

tation will help prevent them from taking up arms again. CV Aravind, Bengaluru

Respect House rules

Apropos 'Guv deliberately violating Constitution: Stalin' (Jan 12), Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi's actions are questionable. He walked out of the state assembly without reading the customary address at the beginning of the session and under the plea that the national anthem was not sung before he delivered his address and that he could not be a party to

the act of insulting the Constitution of 'Bharat' and the national anthem. However, convention dictates that the national anthem is played at the end of the session. Governor Ravi should respect this convention instead of adhering to his own interpretation. He should prioritise harmony over rigid adherence to his views.

M Basavaraj, Davangere

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

SCRAP OUT



They (AAP) have made Rohingya and Bangladeshi infiltrators their vote bank...
Dushyant Gautam, BJP leader

There is no need for propaganda to be rich in intellectual content.

Joseph Goebbels

TO BE PRECISE

IT'S NEWS LIKE THIS THAT MAKES US FEEL THE CONGRESS PARTY IS ALIVE!



IN PERSPECTIVE

South Asia braces for Trump 2.0

The incoming US president will continue to leverage India's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific region

M J VINOD

The re-election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States will pose both challenges and opportunities in US-South Asia relations. The future scenario will depend on how the US, under 'Trump 2.0', conceptualises its political, economic, trade and strategic priorities collectively and individually with the countries in South Asia. In the context of India-US ties, the challenges that China poses in the Indo-Pacific will continue to be a point of convergence between the two countries. During his first term, Trump shifted the focus from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, resulting in high levels of strategic convergence between India and the US, especially in defence and security relations. Trump's visit to India in February 2020 reaffirmed the security partnership between the two countries, which has continued to strengthen. The US is now India's third-largest source of arms, after Russia and France.

China's growing economic and strategic footprint in South Asia will add to the concerns of both India and the Indo-Pacific region. In the Indo-Pacific region, Trump played a crucial role in revitalising the Quad. India will remain a natural partner for the US, along with Japan and Australia, to counter China. However, New Delhi emphasises the need for an inclusive approach to the Indo-Pacific, rather than a purely China-centric perspective as seen in Washington.

Incumbent President Trump would expect greater involvement by India in the Indian Ocean region. Tensions in India-US ties will continue in the realms of trade and immigration. Trump is expected to continue pressing India on trade and business. During his first term, the Generalised System of Preferences status for India was removed. There will also be pressure on India to reduce tariffs on US goods and comply with intellectual property rights. These pressure points will persist under Trump 2.0. Yet, the relationship is expected to proceed along a positive trajectory, though not without hiccups and challenges.

US-Pakistan ties faced significant challenges during Trump's first term, especially due to Islamabad's policies on the war on terror. Relations deteriorated under former Prime Minister Imran Khan (2018-2022). In 2018, Pakistan was placed on the Financial Action Task Force's grey

list, and US security assistance of \$1.3 billion was cut off. Despite cooperation in counter-terrorism, immediate rapprochement seems unlikely. Pakistan's importance in US foreign policy has fluctuated based on strategic interests and its stance on terrorism. No immediate deviations from Trump's first term are expected in his second term. One wonders whether Imran Khan's followers in the US and his rapport with Trump could make a difference. For this to happen, Islamabad not only has its work cut out but also needs to get its act together.

The US ties main destination for Bangladesh's exports and its biggest source of FDI. The US-Bangladesh Business Council was established in 2021, and business delegations have been visiting Bangladesh. Military exercises and frequent diplomatic engagement between the two countries have supported the interim government led by Mohammad Yunus. Protection of minorities, especially Hindus, has been a concern, as Trump's spiritual advisor Kimble Moore pointed out. Trump himself described Bangladesh as being in a "total state of chaos". Past relations between Trump and Yunus were strained by Yunus' 2016 decision to make a big donation to the Hillary Clinton Foundation. President Sheikh Hasina and Mohammad Yunus have congratulated Trump on his victory, with the former referring to himself as the prime minister. This indicates the complexities and challenges ahead for US-Bangladesh relations under Trump 2.0.

Sri Lanka and Nepal have adopted a wait-and-watch attitude. Any increase in tariffs is bound to significantly impact Sri Lanka's exports, and countries in South Asia will have a bearing on South Asia as well. The transactional nature of Trump's leadership style means he will address issues based on a cost-benefit analysis. Trump 2.0 will generate both hope and concern, and countries in South Asia will have to learn to face the challenges and capitalise on the opportunities.

(The writer is a professor in the Department of International Studies, Central Board of Secondary Education, New Delhi, India. He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, USA. His latest book is 'The Rise and Fall of the Congress Party' (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2024). He is also a frequent speaker at various international forums and conferences. His research interests include Indian foreign policy, South Asian politics, and international relations. He has published several articles and books on these topics. He is also a member of the Indian Council of World Affairs and the Indian Political Science Association. He is also a member of the editorial board of the Journal of International Studies. He is also a member of the editorial board of the Journal of South Asian Studies. He is also a member of the editorial board of the Journal of South Asian Politics. He is also a member of the editorial board of the Journal of South Asian History. 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A generation adrift: Why are young people in India taking to crime?

RASHMI SENGAJ

Are we producing a young generation of lost people? Not only have our youth registered a sharp increase in heinous crimes, which include gang rape and murder, but we now find that more and more of them are retreating into their private world with little empathy for those around them.

In Meerut, a 17-year-old boy bludgeoned his best friend to death for blackmailing his girlfriend with personal photographs. In Gorakhpur, another 17-year-old student of Class 12 killed his mother in a fit of rage and then lived with a neighbour for three days, deceiving his father, a scientist working at the Bhabha Atomic Centre in South India, claiming the mother was not picking up the phone because she was busy with household chores. Similarly, in Old Delhi, three teenagers killed a 55-year-old medical practitioner over a petty billing dispute.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking case was in an elite New Delhi school, where a 12-year-old strangled a fellow student, Prince, simply because of a shoulder bump. CCTV footage revealed how the minor escalated the conflict into a fatal act of violence. This young boy has now been arrested for culpable homicide by the Delhi police and will likely end up in a juvenile reform facility.

Juvenile crimes between 2010 and 2014 rose by 47%, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Over the last decade, the rise has been even starker—60%. Delhi recorded the highest number of crimes committed by minors. Meanwhile, the amended Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which allows trying 16- to 18-year-olds as adults, appears to have had no deterrent effect.

Practically every second day, an incident of heinous teen violence is being reported in

the press. Several studies show this is more than just a passing phase of a generation in angst. A 2023 study of 463 Indian school students in the *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* found aggressive traits in over half these students.

Daily, police control rooms in Delhi receive at least 20 calls about student brawls, both in and around schools. While student brawls are common, incidents of students attacking teachers are becoming more frequent. In one instance, a Class 12 student stabbed a teacher after being reprimanded for not wearing his uniform. Another teacher was assaulted by a student's relative after the child failed an exam. Such violence prompted the Directorate of Education to mandate the expulsion of students who physically attack teachers.

Educationists question whether children in India have lost their moral compass. Several urge the government to reintroduce

moral education in our school system. Another glaring issue is the lack of healthy communication skills. When his mother harshly turned down his demand for a mobile phone of his own, a 12-year-old Delhi student threw a glass bowl at her. During the course of being counselled, the boy confessed he wanted to speak privately to a friend who was sick. Unable to express this, he had vented his emotion through violence.

Ramni Chappa, a principal of a kindergarten school in Delhi, is aghast at how children as young as four are being given unlimited access to smartphones, impairing their emotional and cognitive development. Rajesh Kumar, who runs a counselling and a de-addiction centre in Delhi, blames this lack of communication on the extensive use of smartphones, with both parents and their children living in a virtual world, leaving children with little or no social interaction.

Disappearing joy spaces, especially in

urban areas, limit opportunities for children to release energy and develop interpersonal skills.

Chanchal Kumar, a Delhi-based counsellor, highlights the impact of nuclear families and absentee parenting. Without sufficient emotional support at home, children often turn to peers, some of whom introduce them to harmful habits like smoking or drugs.

Does unlimited access to smartphones give rise to aggressive behaviour? It is a contentious issue. Psychologists argue that video games are more harmful as they normalise violence through interactive immersive experiences, unlike television.

Dr Vivek Benegal, professor of psychiatry at NIMHANS, Bengaluru, notes that post-Covid this problem has increased exponentially. "Why are children so angry, so scared, and so depressed? The current trend of helicopter parenting has increased stress levels among children. We find that

air pollution and increasing levels of arsenic in water across all rivers emanating from the Himalayas adversely affect brain development. Stress causes inflammation and also adversely affects brain development," says Benegal.

Benegal maintains that access to social media with its false messaging amplifies anxiety across all rivers emanating from the Himalayas adversely affect brain development. Stress causes inflammation and also adversely affects brain development," says Benegal.

Solutions exist. A 2023 study in the *Journal of Education and Health Promotion* found that anger management classes for 12B Indian school students resulted in improved negotiation skills and a lowering of anger levels. While some schools have begun teaching social values, there is a growing need for focussed interventions in anger management and emotional regulation.

(The writer is a Delhi-based senior journalist)

China's Communist Party is implementing a boarding school programme for Tibetan children, imposing a Mandarin-centric curriculum that undermines their cultural heritage and autonomy

CHRIS BUCKLEY

Across China's west, the Communist Party is placing children in boarding schools in a drive to assimilate a generation of Tibetans into the national mainstream and mold them into citizens loyal to the party.

Tibetan rights activists, as well as experts working for the United Nations, have said that the party is systematically separating Tibetan children from their families to erase Tibetan identity and to deepen China's control of a people who historically have resisted Beijing's rule. The activists have estimated that around three-quarters of Tibetan students age 6 and older—and others even younger—are in residential schools that teach largely in Mandarin, replacing the Tibetan language, culture and Buddhist beliefs that the children once absorbed at home in village schools.

When China's top leader, Xi Jinping, visited one such school in the summer, he inspected a dormitory that appeared freshly painted and as neat as an army barracks. He walked into a classroom where Tibetan students, listening to a lecture on Communist Party thought, stood and applauded to welcome him.



Schools are made to celebrate 'Sera's Emancipation Day', which commemorates the Communist Party's full takeover of Tibet in 1959, forcing the Dalai Lama into exile.

Xi's visit to the school in Qinghai province in June amounted to a firm endorsement of the program, despite international criticism. Education, he said, must "impart a shared consciousness of Chinese nationhood in the souls of children from an early age."

How China is erasing Tibetan culture, one child at a time

Chinese officials say the schools help Tibetan children to quickly become fluent in the Chinese language and learn skills that will prepare them for the modern economy. They say that families voluntarily send their children to the schools, which are free, and that the students have classes in Tibetan culture and language.

But extensive interviews and research by The New York Times show that Tibetan children appear to be singled out by Chinese authorities for enrollment in residential schools. Their parents often have little or no choice but to send them, experts, parents, lawyers and human rights investigators said in interviews. Many parents do not see their children for long stretches.

Dozens of research papers and reports from experts and teachers within the Chinese system have warned about anxiety, loneliness, depression and other psychological harm to the schools' Tibetan children.

The Times reviewed and analysed hundreds of videos posted to Chinese social media sites by Tibetan boarding schools, State media and local propaganda departments that showed how the schools operate and serve the party's objectives.

Student life is heavy with political indoctrination. Schools routinely celebrate what China calls "Sera's Emancipation Day," referring to the anniversary of the Communist Party's full takeover of Tibet in 1959, after a failed Tibetan uprising and a Chinese crackdown that forced the Dalai Lama into exile. The party accuses the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, of having ruled over a slaveholding society.

The Times also found video accounts of boarding school teachers and travelers that showed how some schools are underfunded and overstretched. We are not crediting some of the accounts by name to avoid drawing a backlash against them.

Gyal Lo, a Tibetan education researcher, became alarmed by the boarding

schools in 2016, when he saw that his two preschool-age grandnieces, who were attending one in his hometown in northwestern China, preferred to speak Mandarin, not Tibetan.

When the grandnieces, then ages 4 and 5, went home on the weekend, he said in an interview, they appeared withdrawn and spoke awkwardly in Tibetan with their parents, much changed from when he saw them the previous year. Now they behaved "like strangers in their own home," he said.

"I said to my brother, 'What if you don't send them to the boarding school?'" Gyal Lo said. "He said he had no choice."

Gyal Lo set out to investigate the changes that families were going through as the schools expanded across Tibetan regions in China. Over the next three years, he visited dozens of such schools and saw that many Tibetan students spoke little of their mother tongue and were sometimes only able to see their parents once every several weeks or even months.

Children as young as preschool age were being sent away, he said, and parental visits were limited. The Times talked to three Tibetan parents with children of elementary-school age in residential schools who said that they had no choice and that they were not allowed to visit their children at will.

Chinese officials insist that enrollment is voluntary. In a political decision, the BJP-led Government of the Centre today decided to appoint a fresh commission of inquiry to be headed by a retired Supreme Court judge to go into the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and elsewhere following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. The decision follows widespread demand from different sections for a fresh probe into the circumstances leading to the riots and the manner in which those in positions of power had exercised their authority to avert organised violence.

boarding schools and expressed alarm in 2023 at what they said appeared to be a "policy of forced assimilation of the Tibetan identity into the dominant Han-Chinese majority."

The text messages and voice memos trickled in, carrying urgent questions from Tibetans in China seeking legal advice about the treatment of children in boarding schools. One man wrote to ask about what redress to demand for a child who suffered permanent injury from a classroom fight while the teacher was absent. Another said that a child was found dead in the bathroom of a boarding school, of unclear causes, and that the child's parents wanted answers. The questions had been sent over the past three years to volunteers offering online legal advice to Tibetans. Times reporters reviewed several such messages, which were shared with us, but were unable to independently verify the accounts.

In 2021, a video surfaced online showing an elementary school teacher in eastern Tibet beating a child with a chair in his classroom. The video circulated on the internet in China more than 1,000 times before it was taken down. The school at which the beating took place has been described in state media reports as having students who lived on campus.

The video set off a public outcry. In response, the local government took an investigation and said in an official statement that the beating had left a 3-inch-long wound on the child's forehead and that the teacher had been suspended.

Physical punishment is outlawed in Chinese schools, but studies by Chinese academics have found that the practice persists in Tibetan boarding schools. A 2020

study by Chinese researchers on boarding schools for children from ethnic minorities said that some teachers "lacked concern for the students," treated them roughly and were "even resorting to physical punishment."

The Chinese government does not say how many Tibetan children are in boarding schools. The Tibet Action Institute, an international group that has campaigned to close the schools, estimates that among children ages 6 to 18, the figure is at least 800,000—or three in every four Tibetan children.

The group arrived at its estimate, which it published in a report in 2021, based on local government statistics. Lhadon Teshong, a co-founder and director of the group, likened the Chinese schools to the colonial residential schools in Canada, Australia and the United States.

"Different time, different place, different government, but same impact," she said, "in the sense of breaking cultural and familial bonds and roots, and psychologically damaging and traumatizing kids at their foundation."

Statistics collected by the Times from local government documents across Tibetan areas show similar numbers in boarding schools, with some areas notably higher than others. Education, especially in minority areas, is a politically sensitive topic. Tibetans who oppose the boarding schools risk imprisonment if they protest. Tashi Wangchuk, a Tibetan businessman who petitioned the government to preserve schooling in Tibet and spoke to the Times about his efforts, was sentenced to prison for five years in 2018.

HARISH S WANKHEDE

The ongoing debate between the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over the legacy of B R Ambedkar often sidesteps the revolutionary essence of his contributions. While Ambedkar's critiques of the Congress' paternalistic attitudes and the conservative-Brahmanical values of right-wing ideologies are well-documented, these ideological tussles frequently overshadow his profound vision for the upliftment of Dalits and other marginalised communities. Discussions about his legacy too often neglect the stark socio-economic deprivation still faced by these groups. The current discourse reduces Ambedkar's legacy to abstract debates, avoiding a focus on the very communities for whom he waged a relentless struggle.

increasingly visible in legislative bodies, civil society organisations, and middle-class cultural spheres, challenging caste-based discrimination. Additionally, the neoliberal capitalist expansion has enabled Dalit entrepreneurs to emerge, marking a significant shift for a community historically denied basic human rights. Such participation has made Dalits integral to India's democratic processes, empowering them to demand social justice and economic equity.

However, traditional hierarchies remain deeply entrenched, often disallowing the Dalits and other marginalised communities from becoming an integral segment of social progress and economic development. In urban areas, social spaces divided by linguistic and caste-based kinship do not hesitate to accept Dalits as equals. In rural areas, caste divisions are even more pronounced, sometimes erupting into violent assaults. Caste prejudices are particularly evident in marital relationships, where inter-caste unions are perceived as threats to socio-cultural pride by traditional elites. Persistent cases of sexual violence, arson, and lynching against the Dalits underscore the failure of the caste milieu to evolve into one of civilised association.

Ambedkar's work played a pivotal role in redefining the identity of lower-caste communities, especially the "untouchable" castes. By challenging the Brahmanical notions that deemed them outcasts and impure, he empowered Dalits to envision themselves as equal citizens of India. Ambedkar's term "Dalit" emerged as a modern, empowering identity, dismantling prejudicial labels with aspirations for liberty, equality, and fraternity. This versatile and inclusive identity united marginalised groups in their quest for justice without enforcing a monolithic structure. These struggles for socio-economic empowerment have significantly strengthened Indian democracy, making it more inclusive and responsive to marginalised voices.

Indian Constitution, drafted under Ambedkar's leadership, stands as a beacon of social justice. It compels governing elites to address social disparities, economic inequalities, and caste hierarchies. Policies like reservation for the diversified State institutions and democratised power structures, enabling Dalits, Adivasis, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) to gain representation in governance and access opportunities once denied to them. For Dalits in particular, these policies have fostered social mobility but impact middle class, integrating them into India's political and economic frameworks. Ambedkar's vision has thus brought democracy closer to India's poorer and marginalised sections.

The socio-economic progress of Dalits in contemporary India is noteworthy. Constitutional safeguards have allowed many to overcome historical injustices and actively contribute to national development. Dalit leaders, activists, and intellectuals are

often seen as a catalyst of social change, its benefits remain unevenly distributed. Economic liberalisation has enabled Dalit entrepreneurs, but most still endure precarious living conditions, excluded from the broader narrative of economic growth. The market, bound by traditional social networks, offers limited opportunities for marginalised communities. As a result, many Dalits remain confined to menial labour, unable to break through barriers. Despite decades of market reforms, India has yet to produce a substantial number of Dalit business leaders or entrepreneurs.

Current discussions on Ambedkar refuse to engage with substantive issues of socio-economic justice and portray him mainly as an antagonist against the nationalist social elite leadership. Populist political discourse often reduces Ambedkar's legacy to his critiques of dominant ideologies, neglecting his broader vision of empowering the oppressed. Reviving Ambedkar's legacy requires moving beyond his heroic persona and focusing on his call for the liberation of subaltern groups. By invoking Ambedkar's vision, India can work towards a more inclusive and equitable society, ensuring that the worst-off social groups are not left behind in the journey of nation-building.

(The writer teaches at the Centre for Political Studies, JNU)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

PM appeals to Big Powers to strive for peace in Ocean

Male (Maldives), January 12: Prime Minister Indira Gandhi today called upon the Big Powers to take practical steps to extend the process of détente and help the littoral states in their efforts to keep the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. Big Power naval rivalry had posed a grave threat to peace in this region, she said. Speaking at a banquet held in her honour by Maldivian Prime Minister Ahmed Zaki, Mrs. Gandhi said India and Maldives earnestly supported the concept of Indian Ocean being kept as a zone of peace.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2000

New panel to probe '84 anti-Sikh riots

New Delhi, Jan 12: In a political decision, the BJP-led Government of the Centre today decided to appoint a fresh commission of inquiry to be headed by a retired Supreme Court judge to go into the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and elsewhere following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. The decision follows widespread demand from different sections for a fresh probe into the circumstances leading to the riots and the manner in which those in positions of power had exercised their authority to avert organised violence.

OASIS | SURYAKUMARI DENNISON

A venom called envy

Many years ago, a colleague of mine and I were routinely engaged in a conversation choosing participants for inter-school literary competitions. The honour of our institution was at stake, and we had to pick worthy representatives who would excel in challenging events such as elocution, debate and recitation. Spotting talent was not difficult. At the auditions we held, several students displayed exceptional expertise. The problem was that the process of selection involved rejection. There were numerous hopefuls we were forced to exclude.

Far from acknowledging the superiority of their peers, many were

dissatisfied. Since they believed that they were just as good as, if not better than, those who were chosen, they viewed our decisions as biased. They muttered to one another that our choices were based on favouritism.

At the heart of that recurrent sorry situation was envy. Shakespeare calls envy the green-eyed monster, and in the Bible, the apostle James issues this warning: "Where there is jealousy there is also disorder and every kind of evil." Theologians in the Middle Ages regarded envy as one of the Seven

Deadly Sins. Closer to our time, Peter Shaffer's play, 'Amadeus', explores the envenomed envy in a fictionalised, dramatic portrayal of two real-life composers, Salieri is wracked with resentment at Mozart's musical supremacy.

Envy is a pitfall that easily ensnares us. We imagine that our view of those who outshine us is impartial, whereas it is often clouded by prejudice.

It is more convenient to assume that those who surpass us must have done so through unfair means, rather than admit that they deserve their success. The truth is that in belittling the





India's data protection rules need some fine-tuning

Centralising control

The Centre must not attempt to run universities by proxy appointments

In a federal setup, attempts at undermining any stakeholder in the subject matter of education, which is in the Concurrent List, will prove disruptive. The Draft UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment and Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2025, seeks to do precisely this. Demonstrating the Centre's penchant for facilitating control over institutions through gubernatorial proxies, it proposes to divest State governments of their role in the selection process for Vice Chancellor (VC) of universities. All powers are sought to be vested in the Chancellor – i.e., the Governor in most State universities – by taking away the function of constituting the search-cum-selection committee from the higher education departments. Such a committee would comprise a nominee each of the Chancellor; UGC Chairman; and of the respective university syndicate/senate. The Chancellor would appoint the VC out of three to five names recommended by the committee. Any violations, the draft warns, could attract debarment from participating in UGC schemes and denial of funding under the UGC Act. This comes against the backdrop of conflicts between State governments and Raj Bhavans on appointing VCs, which have deprived several universities, particularly in Tamil Nadu, of leadership. Naturally, opposition has come from several States, including Tamil Nadu, which passed a House resolution urging the Centre to immediately withdraw the draft. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has argued that the draft is not only against the basic federal principles enshrined in the Constitution but also poses a threat to the higher education system. Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, the AIADMK and the CPI-M have endorsed this stance.

A proposal to make non-academics eligible for the VC's job has also drawn criticism. The draft says such non-academics must have served for at least 10 years at a senior level in industry, public administration, public policy and/or public sector undertakings, with a proven track record of significant academic or scholarly contributions. Mr. Vijayan fears this could be used to appoint Sangh Parivar loyalists. However, universities have benefited from the scholarship of non-academics such as former President K.R. Narayanan and scientist N. Nayudamma; appointing academics does not guarantee visionary leadership. The proposal to extend the VC's tenure from the typical three to five years is welcome. The UGC would do well to remove anti-federal clauses from the draft regulations and allay apprehensions on other provisions. In the long run, it should aim for reforms to obliterate any governmental role in university administration, except maybe, for funding, and elevate them into truly autonomous institutions that nurture excellence.

Law by reflex

Good implementation, not stringency of law, will deter sexual crimes

The tendency to make existing laws more stringent is an administrative reflex action often occasioned by political problems set off by particular crimes. The amendments enacted by the Tamil Nadu Assembly to criminal laws on sexual crimes against women fall under this category. In response to the Opposition moves to corner the DMK regime after a rape within the premises of Anna University in Chennai, the government has moved to enhance punishments under the penal and procedural laws. That the perpetrator is a DMK sympathiser and that some details of the student survivor were leaked added political sharpness to the general criticism over such an offence happening inside the campus. At pains to deny any leniency and overcome the setback to its image after the Madras High Court formed a special investigation team, the DMK government has chosen to amend the law based on the theory that more stringent laws deter sexual assault and harassment. This belief is not founded on any statistical or empirical evidence, but is often invoked by those in government. This invariably means the use of legislative power to send out a political message that the administration is committed to women's safety. After all, necessary amendments need not have to wait for a brazen crime or a public outcry.

This is not to say the amendments are unreasonable; they enhance punishments for a range of sexual offences and extend bail-denying features to such offences as well as those under the POCSO Act. Instead welcome is the new provision for passing binding protection orders that will ensure perpetrators do not contact survivors by any means. The death penalty has been introduced for acid attack that results in the victim being reduced to a vegetative state. On the other hand, the newly introduced definition of harassment of women to cover the use of digital and electronic means and even non-verbal means may be too broadly worded and prone to misuse. Few would disagree with the enhancement of jail terms for rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking and voyeurism, but a question does arise whether the mere increase in the quantum of punishment increases the possibility of conviction or reduces the incidence of these crimes. The onus of arresting offenders, gathering credible evidence and proving it in court remains the same. Impartial investigation and resisting pressure for a cover-up while effectively implementing existing laws are more crucial for demonstrating commitment to women's safety. Making workplaces, public space and homes safer for women will work better than merely adding to the severity of laws.

In January 3, 2025, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology released the much-anticipated Draft Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules – a key moment in India's journey to regulate digital personal data. This step follows the passage of the DPDP Act, 2023, bringing India closer to operationalising its framework for safeguarding personal data.

The draft rules represent a departure from the earlier and controversial Personal Data Protection Bill, which many deemed was overly restrictive and even hostile to industry interests. The Bill underwent extensive framing, reframing and consultations over nearly a decade, only to be rescinded when committees and government stakeholders wisely decided it was untenable.

In contrast, the positive response to the DPDP Act and its accompanying rules, reflected in conversations with businesses and in media coverage, stems from the less prescriptive, principles-based approach of the draft rules.

Unlike the earlier rush to regulate under the so-called "Brussels Effect", where global digital rulemaking mirrored the European Union (EU)'s interventionist regulatory ethos, India has taken a more pragmatic stance. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), once hailed as a gold standard by privacy experts, now faces criticism for unintended consequences – favouring well-resourced corporations, stifling smaller enterprises, and failing to significantly enhance public trust in the Internet. India's measured approach thus far offers a refreshing alternative to Europe's interventionist policies.

The hits as pragmatism and flexibility

One of the draft rules' standout features is their principles-based framework for notice and consent. While the GDPR has cumbersome requirements, such as notifying users of indirect data acquisition, cross-border data transfers, and automated decision-making processes, India's rules emphasise simplicity and clarity. This helps reduce "consent fatigue", a significant issue in Europe, where users are inundated with unnecessary details, such as the location of data processing – information of little practical use.

In 2023, the European Commission introduced the Cookie Pledge Initiative to address growing frustration over incessant consent pop-ups. However, such course correction would have been unnecessary had the EU taken a less invasive approach to regulating user interfaces and consent mechanisms. The very existence of this pledge highlights the burdens created by prescriptive regulation.

India's DPDP Rules sidestep these pitfalls by focusing on outcomes rather than processes, empowering users without drowning businesses and consumers in unnecessary complexities. The



Vivan Sharan
a technology policy expert at Koan Advisory Group



Srishri Joshi
a technology policy expert at Koan Advisory Group

The largely positive response to the Draft Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules flows from its less prescriptive, principles-based approach

rules avoid dictating how entities should enable users to exercise their rights to correction, erasure, nomination, withdrawal of consent and to seek information from entities. They require only the publication of relevant information on apps and websites. In contrast, the GDPR is prescriptive about how similar information should be presented, including instances where entities may need to provide this information orally to users. Why should the state dictate every aspect of an app or website's design or user interface? India's approach, thankfully, respects business autonomy and innovation.

The processing of children's personal data requires stricter protection compared to other types of data processing – which the rules provide for. However, as more children engage with digital technologies online, they increasingly benefit from certain activities, such as monitoring and tracking, which are of value in specific contexts. Take the case of educational institutions, including supplementary education and vocational training services. They rely on activities such as behavioural monitoring and tracking to deliver targeted interventions tailored to students' academic performance. These practices leverage the benefits of learning management systems, which personalise instruction and improve educational outcomes. Recognising this, the rules thoughtfully allow exemptions for specific industries. Educational institutions, clinical and mental health establishments, allied health care providers, and child-care centres are not required to verify parental consent for tracking and behavioural monitoring, as long as they adhere to guardrails. The exemption for such industries demonstrates a nuanced understanding of industry-specific needs, reflecting the principles of thoughtful policymaking.

The misses as data localisation, overreach

However, the draft rules are not without flaws. Their provisions for restricting cross-border data flows introduce unnecessary complexity and ambiguity. Significant Data Fiduciaries (SDFs) – large enterprises handling substantial data volumes – face potential localisation mandates that extend beyond the legislation's original scope. While the DPDP Act allows the government to restrict personal data transfers, it limits such action to specific notified countries. Differentiating between SDFs and smaller entities, where the second enjoy relaxed transfer rules for the same data, creates the risk of regulatory arbitrage. Smaller entities could exploit the lighter regime to gain unfair advantage. These inconsistencies may deter investment and drive businesses out of India. The localisation provision likely stems from the challenges faced by law

enforcement agencies in accessing cross-border data for investigations. While these agencies undeniably need access to such data, a narrower sectoral approach to localisation could prove more effective than a centralised one. The Reserve Bank of India's 2018 mandate for localising payment data is a prime example of proportionate regulation. Tailored specifically to the financial sector, it effectively addressed legitimate industry concerns without causing too many business disruptions. Applying this approach to personal data could balance security and compliance with economic competitiveness.

Some areas still require greater clarity. Businesses need safeguards to verify whether users requesting information about data processing are legitimate. This necessity is acknowledged even in the GDPR. However, India's draft rules do not address scenarios where businesses face incessant information requests or provide a scope for businesses to charge a reasonable fee for requests which are excessive or even unfounded. A related ambiguity is whether the government can demand access to sensitive business data. If so, how will it ensure the protection of such information from falling into the hands of competitors? What if this information is a trade secret? These

gaps highlight the need for thinking about procedural integrity.

What lies ahead

According to IBM, data breaches cost Indian businesses an average of ₹19.5 crore (\$2.35 million) in 2024. Compliance with data protection laws should not be seen as a regulatory obligation, but as critical to protecting business reputation and ensuring continuity.

India must also move beyond reliance on notice-and-consent mechanisms to safeguard citizens' privacy in future laws. Notice and consent originate from the medical profession, where they can still be deemed to work effectively in controlled settings. However, in environments such as malls, airports, or even beaches, individuals have little opportunity to provide consent. With the convergence of the Internet of Things, 5G, and artificial intelligence enabling unprecedented data collection, India must envision privacy frameworks that do not exclusively rely on the fallible principle of consent. As public consultations refine the draft rules, prioritising preservation of the framework's flexibility and industry-specific accommodations is key. This approach will help maintain a balance between innovation, economic growth, and individual rights – something not many jurisdictions have managed to get right.

The views expressed are personal

Draft digital data protection rules and authoritarianism

In August 2024, as India marked six years since the K.S. Puttaswamy judgment reaffirmed privacy as a fundamental right, the Internet Freedom Foundation hosted its annual "Privacy Supreme" event – not as a celebration, but as a sombre reflection on its unfulfilled promise. Social activist Nikhil Dey shared chilling accounts, from Ajmer in Rajasthan, on how Aadhaar, heralded for efficiency, has excluded vulnerable residents from pensions and rations. This grim reality must be central to tech policy discussions, including the Draft Digital Data Protection Rules, 2025.

Executive overreach, scant transparency

Rulemaking typically fleshes out legislation, ensuring laws passed by Parliament are enforceable while maintaining administrative flexibility. Yet, the draft Data Protection Rules provoke concern on questions of executive overreach and vague governance. Some earlier analysis here bears repetition for these rules are a conscientious pupil in obedience of its master. Here, its parent is the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, that was rammed through Parliament as "a product of the subversion of the democratic process". There is more than a mere lack of trust in how the law was created, for its substantive provisions advance a broader policy of "total state control – a digital leash to yank us and make us stand in line than to serve the preambular objectives of the Constitution of India". Its provisions are deliberately vague, granting broad discretion under the nebulous phrase "as they see fit prescribed".

Despite the Act's swift passage on August 9, 2023, its implementation remains in limbo. Sixteen months later, the draft Rules have been unveiled for consultation. But are they truly "publicly" published as a 51-page pdf (in Hindi/English as a gazette notification), with a three-page explanatory note that reads as AI gloop, a simplistic and vague summary offers little insight into the policy choices during drafting. Comments can only be submitted through the MyGov platform that might encourage expert input but restricts broader participation.



Apar Gupta
an advocate and the founder-director of the Internet Freedom Foundation

There is a common thread with the parent Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, with its digital leash

Transparency is undermined by the government's decision to treat submissions as fiduciary, precluding public disclosure and counter-comments. This controlled feedback process resembles a "corporate consultation" rather than a public one.

Substantively, the Data Protection Rules build on a framework of intentional vagueness and executive dominance. Many compliance obligations are either self-determined by companies handling personal data or left to government discretion. Consider Rule 3, which governs consent notices. It mandates "clear and plain language" but fails to define these terms, leaving interpretation subject to India's vast linguistic and comprehension diversity. Without specific standards, notices risk being overly generic or oversimplified, omitting critical details. Similarly, while the Rules require an "itemized description" of data, they do not clarify whether the disclosure is for categories such as financial or health data, or to specific data points such as account numbers, or even metadata and inferred data. Nor do they define timelines for data breach notifications to users, raising risks for individuals in urgent situations. Such ambiguities, if purely administrative, should have been resolved by the standard setting powers of an independent regulatory authority that does not exist.

No independence for Data Protection Board

The vagueness reflects deeper structural flaws. The Act eschews the creation of an independent regulatory body, instead, consolidating power within the Union Government. Through informal interactions and gazette notifications, the government wields unchecked authority over citizens and the digital marketplace. Even the Data Protection Board (DPB), which has a limited ambit of jurisdiction to adjudicate on breaches, lacks independence. The Board's chairperson is selected based on recommendations of a search and selection committee chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, raising critical concerns. How will the

committee address the critiques of political control that plague similar appointment processes? What value does the search committee offer when it has advance knowledge that its recommendations are not binding on the Union Government?

Even after its formation, the DPB is hamstrung. Its authority is largely limited to determining data breaches, and its independence is compromised by service conditions of its members to central government employees. This contravenes long-standing recommendations, such as the 2006 Planning Commission consultation paper on regulation, which emphasised that "the selection, appointment, and removal of chairpersons and members should be insulated against any perceived interference or

manipulation that may influence the outcome". How will a subservient DPB apply data protection effectively? Rule 5 exempts data processing for subsidies from consent requirements.

In such cases, can there be any meaningful accountability? It is not unreasonable to foresee scenarios where the DPB may fail to act promptly or effectively, particularly

when complaints involve powerful government entities such as the UIDAI that handles Aadhaar. It raises fundamental doubts about what it means for community organisations that may approach it for redress on user rights for things as simple as getting a data record corrected to receive rations.

Finally, regarding Rule 22, which contains the power of the government to requisition information, there is an absence of limitations and safeguards. As many may read this column, they may still wonder why the data protection rules are too late, too little, too vague? The answer may be provided by Mr. Dey who framed his characterisation of the digital policies of the Indian state with a reference to Through the Looking Glass. When Alice probes Humpty Dumpty on how the same word can have different meanings, his reply captures the core of India's data protection regime: "The question is... which is to be master – that's all."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rat-hole mining

The tragic loss of lives in Assam's Dima Hasao mine disaster highlights the need for strict safety regulations. The continued reliance on outdated rat-hole mining practices is unacceptable (Page 1, January 12). The

government must prioritise the safety of miners by investing in safer extraction methods, improving the welfare of miners, and holding mine owners responsible for safety.

Raksha Hosur Pradeep,
Bengaluru

P. Jayachandran

The passing of playback singer P. Jayachandran has left a void in the world of south Indian light music. His dulcet voice was very comforting; he could scale the middle octaves with ease. One of his best songs

is a duet with S. Janaki in the film, *Kadal Meengal*. The lalajayaja composition, "Thaalattudhe Vaanam", is outstanding, harmonious and touching. The interludes in the perfect synchrony. The unassuming singer will remain a role

model for many an aspiring singer.
A.V. Narayanan,
Chennai

Malayalam film songs have been transformed to another level these days, but the songs sung by

Jayachandran will always find a place in the heart across generations. His voice has the power to evoke nostalgia. His songs are the perfect example of an artist who has given Chitra Joseph, Hyderabad

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Workers rescued from building collapse at Kannauj station

28 The shutting of the under-construction building on the railway station premises had collapsed on Saturday afternoon, trapping the workers. Rescue teams worked through the cold night to clear the debris and safely pull out the trapped workers. **PH**

Adani's investment for various projects in Chhattisgarh

65,000 crore. Adani announced a planned investment of ₹65,000 crore to expand the group's power plants in Raipur, Korba and Raigarh. He also committed ₹5,000 crore for the group's cement plants in the State. **PH**

Number of workers who died in Pakistan's coal mine collapse

11 Twelve workers were trapped when the coal mine collapsed in the Sanjdi area, about 40 kilometres from Quetta in the Balochistan province, on Wednesday. In three days of rescue work, 11 bodies were recovered, with rescue workers still searching for the last worker inside the structure. **PH**

Number of pilgrims expected to attend the Maha Kumbh Mela

35 crore. Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary Manoj Kumar Singh has said that 35 crore pilgrims are expected to attend the Maha Kumbh Mela taking place in the vicinity of Sangam — the confluence of rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. 24 crore pilgrims visited the Mela in 2019. **PH**

Number of civilians killed in Myanmar Junta air strike

15 A Myanmar junta air strike killed at least 15 civilians and wounded 10 others at a market in the northern Kachin state, a spokesman for an ethnic rebel group said. The junta has been accused of carrying out multiple attacks on civilian targets. **APF**

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Should voter IDs be linked with Aadhaar?

Why was the National Electoral Rolls Purification and Authentication Program launched by the Election Commission? How do already existing voters link EPIC with their respective Aadhaar numbers? What did the Supreme Court mandate in the Puttaswamy case in 2018?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R

The story so far:

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have accused each other of manipulating electoral rolls before the Delhi Assembly elections. This has reignited the debate about linking voter IDs/Election Photo Identity Card (EPIC) with respective Aadhaar numbers.

What is the history of the proposal?

The Election Commission (EC) had in February 2015 launched the National Electoral Rolls Purification and Authentication Program (NERPAP). This was to address the issue of duplicate entries in the electoral roll and to remove such entries. In order to achieve this, the EC began authenticating EPIC data by linking it with the Aadhaar database. It had linked more than 300 million voters in a span of three months. However, the Supreme Court in an interim order, in August 2015, held that the mandatory use of Aadhaar should only be for welfare schemes and PAN linking. Following this order, the NERPAP exercise was discontinued.

After the Supreme Court's final order in *Puttaswamy* in September 2018, that upheld the constitutional validity of the Aadhaar Act, the EC sought amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1950 (RP Act, 1950). The Parliament amended the RP Act, 1950 and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 in December 2020 to enable the linking of EPIC with Aadhaar. It provided the format in which Aadhaar information may be submitted to the electoral registration officer by a new voter at the time of fresh registration (Form 6; to establish identity) or an existing voter already included in the electoral roll (Form 6B; for the purpose of authentication). Any other listed document may be submitted only if the voter is unable to furnish their



Need to verify: A special camp for linking Aadhaar with voter ID card held in Madurai in 2022. FILE PHOTO

Aadhaar number because they do not have one. However, in order to keep these amendments voluntary in nature, the word 'may' have been used in the amendments. Further, the amendment also specifies that no application for inclusion of name in the electoral roll shall be denied and no entries shall be deleted due to the inability of an individual to furnish or intimate the Aadhaar number due to 'sufficient cause.'

Such individuals may furnish alternate documents like PAN card, Driving Licence, Passport, Bank passbook etc.

While the above amendments were challenged in the Supreme Court, the EC

in September 2023 informed the court that submission of the Aadhaar number is not mandatory. It added that it is looking into issuing appropriate clarificatory changes in the forms introduced for this purpose. However, it may be noted that Form 6 and 6B have not been amended till date and they continue to seek the same details as before from the applicants.

The forms require the voters to declare that they do not have an Aadhaar number to avoid providing the same.

What are the pros and cons?

EPIC linkage with the respective Aadhaar

number would definitely help in weeding out duplicate entries; that is essential. At present, more than 650 million Aadhaar numbers have already been uploaded in the process of finalising the electoral rolls. However, there are some concerns about this exercise that need to be considered.

Firstly, the errors in the Aadhaar database, however miniscule, may result in wrongful rejection or deletion of entries from the electoral roll. Secondly, Aadhaar is only a proof of residence and not a proof of citizenship. Thus, it may not help in removing voters who are not citizens from the electoral roll. It would require a separate effort from the EC.

Finally, while the linkage is to happen at the back end and a mere mention of the Aadhaar number on the EPIC/electoral roll may not by itself be a violation of right to privacy, it may still result in misuse as the electoral rolls are widely circulated amongst political parties.

What can be the way forward?

The right to vote is a constitutional right and declared so by the Supreme Court in various cases. It is part of the basic structure of free and fair elections and cannot be constricted through legislative action. Citizens are the most important stakeholders in a democracy and any electoral process should gain their confidence. There must be wide publicity about the benefits of linking EPIC and Aadhaar to clean up the electoral roll of duplicate entries, which in turn strengthens the electoral process. Any misplaced concern amongst voters about the secrecy of their vote being compromised because of this linking should be assuaged.

Meanwhile, the forms should be suitably modified without any delay, to reflect that providing Aadhaar is not mandatory, as per the submission of the EC in the Supreme Court in September 2023.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

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▼ EPIC linkage with the respective Aadhaar number would definitely help in weeding out duplicate entries; that is essential.

What is different about small language models?

What led to the shift to small language models from large language models? What are the use cases for such models? Are they better than LLMs?

Poulomi Chatterjee

The story so far:

"We've achieved peak data," former OpenAI chief scientist Ilya Sutskever said onstage at the NeurIPS conference last year. "We have to deal with the data that we have, and there's only one Internet." Mr. Sutskever's comment comes amidst speculation that the speed of progress in large language models (LLM) was hitting a wall as scaling was reaching its digital end.

Why are smaller models in demand?

The race towards building large AI models has been building up ever since OpenAI released their 175 billion parameter LLM, GPT-3, in 2020. In the next three years, the company's LLMs further increased in size with GPT-4 trained on 1.7 trillion

parameters. But, in 2024, researchers started to look at language models differently as scaling training data, scoured from the Internet, was giving marginal gains. The idea of building smaller language models emerged then. This is evident in announcements made by Big Tech firms. Most of them released a nifty language model alongside their flagship AI models. Google DeepMind released Gemini Ultra, Nano and Flash models, while OpenAI and Meta launched their GPT-4o mini and Llama 3 models. Amazon-backed Anthropic AI launched Claude 3 and Haiku alongside its Opus.

What are the pros and cons of small language models?

Small Language Models (SLMs) are cheaper and ideal for specific use cases. For a company that needs AI for a set of specialised tasks, a large AI model is not

required. Training small models require less time, less compute and smaller training data. French start up Mistral AI, an SLM provider, pitched its AI model to be as efficient as LLMs for specialised, focused applications. Microsoft released a family of small language models called Phi (the latest Phi-3-mini comprised 3.8 billion parameters).

Apple Intelligence, the AI system deployed in the latest iPhones and iPads, runs on-device AI models that can sort of match the performance of top LLMs. If LLMs are built to achieve Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), small language models are made for specific use cases.

How do use cases differ?

"Small language models are perfect for edge cases," said Rahul Dandwate, ML engineer at Adobe. "When I am using WhatsApp or any Meta application which is powered by the Llama 8B model, I am

trying to learn a new language because its reasonably good at translation and other basic tasks like this."

"But they wouldn't do well at most benchmarks that large language models are measured against like coding or logical problems. There still isn't a small language model that's as good at solving more complex problems," he said.

We still aren't fully aware why this bottleneck exists. "But the best way we can understand this is just as human beings have brains with a massive number of neurons, a smaller animal has a limited number of neurons. This is why human brains have the capacity for far more complex levels of intelligence. This is similar to how small language models and large language models work," he said.

How does it work for India?

In a country like India, where the scope of AI adoption is immense but resources are constrained, the dimintiveness of SLMs is perfect. Another AI initiative from IIT Hyderabad, Visvam, is building datasets from the ground up to build SLMs that can be used in healthcare, agriculture, education and to "promote and preserve language and cultural diversity through AI," their website stated. As the world of language model develops, it's not just enough to build frontier models from scratch. Sarvam AI's co-founder Vivek Raghavan said, "We want to build GenAI that a billion Indians can use."

THE GIST

▼ Small Language Models (SLMs) are cheaper and ideal for specific use cases. For a company that needs AI for a set of specialised tasks, a large AI model is not required.

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CACHE



ISTOCKPHOTO

How the draft rules for implementing data protection falls short

Although the draft rules provide some guidance for implementing the DPDP Act, they lack detailed guidelines to help improve the lives of India's digital nagriks. The government needs to seek appropriate expert advice, conduct wide consultations, and clarify timelines for implementation

Ihalak M. Kakkar
Shashank Mohan

After a long wait of 16 months, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has released the draft rules for implementing the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDP Act). These rules are open for public feedback until the middle of February. Various stakeholders, including civil society, academia, and industry, have been eagerly awaiting the publication of these proposed rules as they contain the baseline implementation framework of the DPDP Act.

The DPDP Act is India's first comprehensive data privacy law that applies to all spheres of commerce and industry. It lays down operational obligations for data processors, special protections for children, and rights for all users, and a body for grievance redressal called the Data Protection Board of India. At the time of release, the DPDP Act was criticised by civil society for not instituting a specialised regulator, not incorporating standard protections against government access to data, and excessive delegation of regulatory functions to the Central government.

Lack of detail
The draft rules propose operative guidance for critical mechanisms such as notice and consent to a user for data collection and processing, intimation of data breaches, collection of parental

consent on behalf of children, data localisation measures, and the procedure for setting up the Data Protection Board. Although the draft rules provide some guidance for implementing the DPDP Act, they lack detailed guidelines to help improve the lives of India's digital nagriks. Let's illustrate some shortcomings from the perspective of two critical avenues that the DPDP Act seeks to introduce – rights of users and the protection of children's data.

User rights

The DPDP Act enhances the autonomy of users over their personal data by providing them with the right to access, correct, complete, update, and erase their data. The law leaves it to the corresponding rules for clarifying the manner in which users can exercise these rights. Unfortunately, the draft rules do not make it clear how users may make these requests. They simply state that users can make requests to data processors for exercising their rights by following the steps published by businesses. This is simply restating what the Act lays down in another language.

For example, as per the right to erasure, can users ask search engines to remove links to certain websites? Courts in India have frequently asked Google to 'de-list' certain links from showing up on its public search engine. The rules could have prescribed standards to clarify the mechanism in these situations such as requiring that users share specific hyperlinks for erasure.

Since the right to erasure may also impact a third-party's online speech, the draft rules could have articulated certain modes or conditions for objection that data processors could make against such an erasure request. However, the draft rules do not bring out any such clarity.

Protecting children

Today children are increasingly using various websites on the internet including social media platforms.

To safeguard children, the DPDP Act obligates data processors to seek verifiable parental consent before accessing the personal data of children under the age of 18. The manner of obtaining parental consent was to be laid down in the subsequent rules. However, here again the draft rules fall short. There is no detailing of an exact mechanism for identifying children and collecting parental consent. The rules provide that data processors will need to adopt appropriate technical and organisational measures to ensure parental consent is obtained prior to accessing data of a child. The rules focus on how data processors must exercise due diligence for checking that parents are identifiable adults. This is a simple rephrasing of what the law lays down in the DPDP Act.

The rules were required to lay down detailed procedures for how businesses are expected to verify the identity of parents. They simply lay down illustrations where parents could either point to their existing user details on a common platform, or prove their identity

by providing details of any kind of formal identity, for example a government issued ID. Again, critical questions remain.

How will data processors identify parental relations, that is, that the adult proving their identity and providing consent is actually the guardian of the child? What if children lie about their actual age when accessing a website? What mechanisms do platforms need to put in place to gauge the veracity of an age claim? Indian families, including children, often share a single device to access digital services, how will businesses identify children in these cases? The draft rules do not provide any guidance to these practical implementation questions.

Despite a 16-month window for drafting and consulting experts for the framing of these rules, the MeitY has released a document that is vague, incomplete, and rushed. Typically guidelines are very detailed, account for consumer privacy, and provide operational clarity for businesses and data processors. Unfortunately, the proposed rules leave much to be desired.

The government needs to seek appropriate expert advice, conduct wide consultations, and clarify timelines for implementation, before finalising the rules that will form the backbone of India's first data privacy law.

Ihalak M. Kakkar is the Executive Director and Shashank Mohan is the Associate Director at the Centre for Communication Governance at the National Law University Delhi.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

My friend is now under the pump

I watched his latest performance and was not impressed. It just left me cold

S. Uppendran

"What's wrong? Why do you look so depressed?"
"I'm still thinking about the series against Australia! Aren't you sad about how we..."
"Asking the wrong person, I'm afraid. You know that cricket just leaves me cold."
"Cricket leaves you cold? Does it mean it doesn't interest you?"
"Very good! When you say that something leaves you cold, what you're suggesting is that it is something that doesn't excite or interest you."
"In other words, it's not something that sets your heart racing."

"I guess you could say that. Here's an example. People were raving about your favourite hero's movie. It left me cold."
"Nothing unusual in that. You're strange! How about this example? I love reading fiction, especially thrillers. For some strange reason, poetry leaves me cold."

"Better not tell your father that! He'll disown you. I love to listen to different kinds of music. But I like doing that at home. Live concerts leave me cold."
"Really? I quite enjoy them. But it takes some getting used to. Now, coming back to the cricket match. You know, when..."

"As I said earlier, the game leaves me cold. Let's talk about something else."
"I'm not going to be talking about the game. The Australians used a strange expression while they were giving the commentary."
"That's to be expected. What was this expression?"

"It was one that I'd never heard before – 'under the pump'. The commentators used it often during the fifth test. For example, one of them said that batsmen from both sides have been under the pump. What does the expression mean?"

"It means to be under pressure. It also carries the suggestion that you have a lot to do in a short period of time."
"So, when you're under the pump, you have to work very quickly in order to finish what you're doing."

"And this adds to the pressure. Here's an example. My boss is someone who performs well when he's under the pump. Comes up with some really great ideas."
"The sponsors have him under the pump. They said that unless he loses five pounds, they'll not renew his contract."

"That's a good example! This must your cousin who's a model."
"That's right! With its stocks taking a big hit, my uncle's company has been put under the pump to downsize."
"I hope that doesn't happen. A lot of people probably depend on that company!"

upendrankye@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on the various festivals celebrated around India on January 13 and 14

Y.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

Name the hill on the western ghats where the Makara Jyothi in honour of Lord Ayappa is lit during this period.

QUESTION 2

Traditionally a sprig of fresh *Curcuma longa* is tied around the vessel while making this dish. What is the common name of the plant and what is the dish?

QUESTION 3

Devavrata, the legendary warrior son of Shantanu and

Ganga, decided to leave his mortal body on Uttarakhand. How does one better know Devavrata?

QUESTION 4

In which State is the world-famous International Kite Festival held every year on January 14?

QUESTION 5

Simple one. What is the English equivalent of the Makara in the Zodiac?

QUESTION 6

Alanganallur, Avaniapuram, and Palamedu are places famous for which activity?



Visual question: What is the name given to this temporary makeshift hut used during the Magh Bihu festival in Assam? ANI

Questions and Answers to the January 10 edition of the daily quiz:

- This idiom means to endure with determination and originated from soldiers in the 19th century given this to bite down on to help them cope with the pain of an amputation. **Ans: Biting the bullet**
 - This idiom is named after this Greek king of the Hellenistic period. **Ans: Pyrrhic victory; Pyrrhus**
 - This phrase means to solve a complex problem in a decisive/brute-force manner. **Ans: Cutting the Gordian knot**
 - This phrase connotes someone confronting the unpleasant consequences of her/his actions. **Ans: Face the music**
 - This idiom suggests the release of something leading to great problems or suffering. **Ans: Pandora's box**
- Visual:** Identify the English word/Idiom. **Ans: Juggernaut after the rath yatra of lord Jagannath of Puri. It means a force that cannot be resisted or controlled**
Early Birds: Viswanadha Rao Batchu | Rajmohan Velayudhan | A. Anand | Ankurjyoti Hatimuria | Prashansa Lohumi

Word of the day

Diminution: change toward something smaller or lower; the act of decreasing or reducing something

Synonyms: decline, decrease, reduction, step-down

Usage: The tumour shows no sign of diminution.

Pronunciation: inward.live/diminu'tiən

International Phonetic Alphabet: /dɪmɪˈnjuːʃən/

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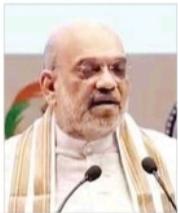
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PAPER WITH PASSION

Rising drug menace

Amit Shah's contention that seven per cent of Indians are into substance abuse is an eye-opener; the Govt must act now

India is grappling with an escalating threat that cuts across social and economic lines: the increasing prevalence of drug abuse. With seven per cent of the population reportedly engaged in narcotics use, the issue has become a pressing concern for policymakers, law enforcement agencies and society at large. Union Home Minister Amit Shah recently underscored the severity of the problem, describing it as a "cancer" that could destroy the nation's future generations. Speaking at the "Drug Trafficking and National Security" conference, Shah highlighted the government's intensified efforts against the drug menace. In 2024 alone, narcotics worth Rs16,914 crore were seized, a record-breaking figure. Comparing the past two decades, Shah noted that from 2004 to 2014, 3.63 lakh kilograms of drugs were seized, whereas from 2014 to 2024, the figure had risen seven-fold to 24 lakh kilograms. Despite this, the drug menace has only increased with even school-going children also becoming drug addicts. The discovery of at least



50 illegal labs across the country underscores this issue. With stringent actions against traditional narcotics, there is a worrying shift towards the production and consumption of synthetic drugs, a trend that demands immediate intervention.

India's geographical location plays a significant role in its vulnerability to drug trafficking. Positioned near the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand), the country serves as both a transit and a destination hub for narcotics. Social factors such as unemployment, poverty, and peer pressure further exacerbate the issue, especially among the youth, creating a vicious cycle of addiction and criminality. Since 2019, the Modi government has adopted a multi-pronged strategy to tackle the drug crisis. Enhanced enforcement efforts have led to record-breaking seizures, reflecting improved coordination and action against traffickers. However, the drug menace has only increased. India needs to focus on strengthening its law enforcement framework, ensuring that agencies have access to advanced training, technology and resources to dismantle drug networks. The regulation of precursor chemicals must be tightened to prevent their misuse in synthetic drug production. Rehabilitation facilities must be expanded to provide holistic support to those battling addiction, while nationwide public awareness campaigns should be intensified to foster a culture of prevention. The fight against drugs also requires regional and global cooperation. Neighbouring countries must work together to address cross-border trafficking, share intelligence and coordinate enforcement actions. At the domestic level, fostering collaboration between governments, non-profits and local communities is essential to sustain long-term efforts. The drug menace in India is not merely a law enforcement challenge but a societal crisis that demands collective action. The government must step up the efforts before it becomes a full-blown crisis.



People buy kites ahead of 'Makar Sankranti' festival, in Amritsar

Showcasing rural India's resilience and vision for Viksit Bharat 2047

From showcasing GI-certified products to championing organic farming, Gramcen Bharat Mahotsav 2025 underscored rural India's vital role in nation building

Rural India, often described as the soul of the nation, has been a cornerstone of India's economic and cultural identity. The Gramcen Bharat Mahotsav 2025, organised by NABARD and inaugurated by the Prime Minister, illuminated the remarkable strides made by rural communities. This event brought together policymakers, entrepreneurs, artists, and thought leaders to celebrate and further the progress of rural India while envisioning a sustainable and inclusive future. Held under the theme 'Building a Resilient Rural India for a Viksit Bharat 2047', the Mahotsav provided a platform to showcase the diverse achievements of rural India. From GI-certified products and tribal crafts to organic agriculture and women-led entrepreneurship, the festival underscored the untapped economic and cultural potential of rural areas, particularly the North-Eastern region.



PRABHNA GUPTA

spread electrification, digital connectivity, and the GI tagging of rural products. These initiatives, he stated, have bridged the gap between rural and urban areas, creating opportunities for inclusive economic growth. The Mahotsav also featured dynamic panel discussions that explored critical aspects of rural development. One panel delved into the potential of organic agriculture, discussing how climate-smart practices can address food security, environmental sustainability, and economic empowerment. Highlights included the success of the "GOBAR-Dhan" Yojana, which has already established over 2,300 biogas units, and the expansion of the organic agriculture market, now valued at Rs16,800 crore. Another panel emphasised the importance of empowering cooperatives, with NABARD's initiatives in digitising over 67,000 cooperative societies playing a transformative role in making banking more accessible and affordable for rural populations. The event wasn't just about discussions and

economic progress—it was also a celebration of India's rich cultural heritage. Vibrant performances brought to life the diverse artistic traditions of rural India. It provided rural entrepreneurs and artisans with access to broader markets, strengthened partnerships between stakeholders, and emphasised sustainable practices. The festival also resulted in actionable policy recommendations, including the promotion of digital literacy, enhanced support for organic farming, and initiatives to boost rural infrastructure and healthcare. As the event concluded, it left a resounding message: the future of India lies in the empowerment of its villages. With the collective efforts of organisations like NABARD and the unwavering support of the government, rural India is poised to lead the nation into a brighter, more sustainable future, aligning perfectly with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. (The writer is a development writer; views are personal)

Pioneering meteorology and AQ management



RAJESH VERMA

IMD has evolved from focusing on weather forecasting to becoming a key player in climate research, disaster management and air quality monitoring

The completion of 150 years of establishment of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) is a matter of great pride for every Indian. The India Meteorological Department (IMD), established in 1875, has played a pioneering role in meteorological and atmospheric studies in India. Initially focused on weather forecasting and seismology, the Department gradually expanded its scope to include climate research, disaster management, and environmental monitoring. IMD was perhaps the first institution in India to start systematic long-term measurement of solar radiation, precipitation chemistry, ozone, and aerosol optical and physical properties. Recognising the importance of atmospheric composition, IMD became an active partner in global atmospheric environment monitoring and research programs and contributed significantly towards ozone hole, air quality, precipitation chemistry, climate change, solar dimming and brightening research. The Earth's climate system has demonstrably changed since the pre-industrial era. IMD has a key responsibility in understanding the science of climate change and variability as well as adaptation and mitigation strategies. It plays a prominent role in facilitating a broader use of climate information, products and services. IMD has been mandated to operate the national meteorological observing systems, develop and maintain data archives; undertake climate monitoring; and carry out climate diagnostics, climate analysis and climate assessment. All this reliable and authentic data and information collected over 150 years has provided a proper assessment of climate change in India and has also helped in developing policy formulation for adaptation and mitigation measures. The air quality forecast and assessment system helps CAQM and other pollution control authorities in the country to make decisions for air quality management including the implementation of GRAP. The problem associated with air pollution is very complex as



many factors contribute to changes in concentrations of the main pollutants. The major factors are anthropogenic emissions, urbanisation, specific topography, emissions sources, environmental factors and meteorology. The advances in computational resources allowed the use of advanced deterministic chemical transport models, leading to more accurate air quality forecasts, replacing the previous empirical and statistical approach which has some limitations. The scientists at India Meteorological Department and Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, Ministry of Earth Science jointly developed the advanced Air Quality Early Warning System (AQEWS). The advanced modelling framework consists of a high-resolution fully coupled state-of-the-science Weather Research and Forecasting model coupled with chemistry (commonly known as WRF-Chem), and ingest data from satellites on aerosol optical depth, surface data from air quality monitoring stations across India and high-resolution emissions from various anthropogenic and natural sources including dust and stubble burning, to create more accurate initial conditions using state-of-the-art data assimilation techniques,



THE FIELD OF ENVIRONMENTAL METEOROLOGY HAS WITNESSED TRANSFORMATIVE INNOVATIONS, WITH CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGIES ENABLING PRECISE, REAL-TIME INSIGHTS INTO ATMOSPHERIC DYNAMICS AND AIR QUALITY

to improve forecasts. The chemical data assimilation is further integrated with dynamical downscaling at a 400-metre resolution to provide a very high spatial resolution air quality forecast for the Delhi region. The prediction part of the system consists of two modelling frameworks, one is based on the NCAR atmospheric chemistry transport model (WRF-Chem) and the second one is based on the Finnish Meteorological Institute model SILAM (System for Integrated modelling of Atmospheric composition). The models take into account the latest land use data cover (LULC) change information over Delhi, background aerosols and pollutants, long-range transport of dust from dust storms and particulate matter from stubble burning. The predictions are now available up to 72 hours lead time at 400 meter resolution and 10 days in advance at 10 km resolution for the Delhi region. The advanced warning system provides (a) an air quality forecast at 400 meters for the Delhi/ NCR region, (b) an air quality forecast on primary and secondary stress of Delhi/NCR at 400 meters resolution, (c) an air quality forecast at 10 km resolution for entire South Asian region, (d) real-time observations of air quality over Delhi/NCR region, (e) details about natural aerosols like dust (from dust storms) and particulate matter using different satellite datasets, (f) Near real-time information over India, (g) forecast of the contribution of non-local fire emissions. Consistent efforts are required to further improve the model performance. The field of environmental meteorology has witnessed transformative innovations, with cutting-edge technologies enabling precise, real-time insights into atmospheric dynamics and air quality. The accuracy of air quality forecasts is essential for mitigating the health impacts and economic costs of air pollution. IMD and associated institutions are continuously striving for improvement in environment monitoring and air quality prediction. IMD's historical contributions have not only improved the scientific understanding of India's unique atmospheric conditions but have also played a critical role in global efforts to combat air pollution and climate change. Many compliments to the meteorological community for their hard work in making IMD a global leader in the field of weather and climate. (The author is Chairperson of the Commission for Air Quality Management in NCR and Adjoining Areas; Views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONGRESS CHALLENGES AAP

Madam—The Election Commission of India has announced the date for polling for 70 assembly seats in Delhi. Though a tough fight between the incumbent AAP and the BJP is on the cards, the Congress has thrown down the gauntlet by fielding strong candidates against the AAP heavyweights like Arvind Kejriwal and Atishi Marlena. Unlike the two previous occasions when it didn't contest assembly elections on a serious note and drew a blank, this time the Congress is leaving no stone unturned to corner the AAP on various issues such as the liquor scam and the Sheeshmahal row. But the Congress' revival plan in Delhi has rattled the already crumbling INDIA bloc. Almost all parties of this bloc have openly thrown their weight behind the AAP. But for the Congress, the biggest shock has come from its oldest and most trusted ally, Lalu Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal. After Lalu Yadav backed West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's willingness to lead the Opposition alliance instead of Congress leaders, his son Tejasi Yadav dropped the bomb on the Congress by saying that the INDI alliance was only for Lok Sabha elections.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad
CEO CRITICISED FOR 90 HOUR PROPOSAL
Madam—L&T Chief has gone a few steps ahead of what Infosys's Narayana Murthy has prescribed and as expected, his suggestion of 90 hours a week and working even on Sundays has stirred up a debate. His remark to justify how long you can stare at your spouse is weird to say the least. Subrahmanyan should have looked at his former boss A N Nair's comment on regretting not spending enough time with his wife and children during his working life and after hanging up his boots, he was repenting it and said he is trying to wash his sins. Ultimately, at the end of the day, it is all about productivity and creating a positive work environment in the organisation and not spending long hours at the office.

Devastating wildfire in LA



In the wildfire that has engulfed Los Angeles in America, at least 11 people have died as the fire destroyed thousands of homes and more than 10,000 buildings, including schools, hospitals and so on. It has forced 180,000 people to evacuate their homes. The true death toll is not known. The fire, coupled with strong winds, has severely degraded air quality by releasing hazardous

smoke posing immediate and long-term risks to public health. The fire has already consumed around 22,000 acres of land. It is also said that climate change had made the grasses and shrubs that are fueling the Los Angeles fire more vulnerable to the burning. Firefighters have been trying their level best to contain the spread of fire, but only 11 per cent of the fire had been contained to date. It is estimated that the total damage and economic loss from this wildfire disaster could reach nearly 4 per cent of the annual GDP of the state of California. Heavy rain and a shift of wind direction also could diminish the present situation. This does not justify the right of any student to spread terror in society. If a student is experiencing mental stress due to exam pressure, they require guidance and proper mental support, not engagement in acts that cause fear and unrest in the community. In such cases, it is the responsibility of both the law and the education system to provide students with the right guidance. They must be taught that false threats are not only harmful to society but also leave an undesirable and severe impact on their personality and future. Despite being a minor, children must understand that their actions do not only affect their own future but also deeply impact the entire society. Education and guidance are the tools that can help in their development into responsible and sensitive citizens.

Bal Govind | Noida
MINOR BEHIND SCHOOL BOMB THREATS
Madam—Sending fake bomb threats to more than 23 schools in Delhi by a minor student of class 12 is not only a grave crime but also poses a severe crisis for both society and the administration. Such baseless and deplorable acts create an atmosphere of tension in schools and spread chaos across the entire city. Security agencies are forced to waste their time and resources on non-existent threats, diverting their focus and strength from genuine emergen-

cies. This incident also highlights how excessive examination pressure can heavily impact students mentally. However, this does not justify the right of any student to spread terror in society. If a student is experiencing mental stress due to exam pressure, they require guidance and proper mental support, not engagement in acts that cause fear and unrest in the community. In such cases, it is the responsibility of both the law and the education system to provide students with the right guidance. They must be taught that false threats are not only harmful to society but also leave an undesirable and severe impact on their personality and future. Despite being a minor, children must understand that their actions do not only affect their own future but also deeply impact the entire society. Education and guidance are the tools that can help in their development into responsible and sensitive citizens.

R K Jain | Barwani

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

[OUR TAKE]

Boiling seas & scorched land

Record-high sea temperatures in 2024 show the gap between climate threat and action

A multi-country study that mapped heating across eight oceanic regions has found that three of these were at their warmest in 2024. Some other datasets seem to concur. Oceanic warming broke records in 2023, too, which, in turn, surpassed the record high observed in 2022. In fact, every decade since 1984 — when satellite record-keeping of ocean temperatures started — has been warmer than the preceding one. This is the bleak backdrop to the succinct summation by Lijing Cheng, the lead researcher of the 2024 study: Broken records in the ocean have become a broken record.

It is the latter part of Cheng's pithy observation that should worry us. Warmer oceans have cataclysmic disruptions in store, greatly exacerbating the unfolding climate crisis. The heating up of the oceans accounts for more than a third of the global mean sea level rise through thermal expansion, worsening sinking risks for coastal and island habitations. It intensifies extreme weather events such as typhoons and marine heatwaves, even as these become more frequent than historically observed, in seas they were practically unheard of — India, for instance, has been seeing cyclones batter its western coast in recent years, which had been safe from such phenomena for centuries. Then, there is the impact on marine ecosystems, already visible in many sensitive regions across the planet, including in Lakshadweep. With hotter seas comes oceanic deoxygenation — risking the health, indeed, survival, of marine life.

Unusual heating has several underlying factors, including the climatic phenomenon of El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO). But there is no denying that anthropogenic factors are the most significant contributor to extreme air and sea surface warming. Indeed, 2024 marked not just the close of the hottest decade on record for the planet but also the first-ever breach of the 1.5°C target. Cheng's "broken record", therefore, is also an idiom for the warnings sounded by climate experts on warming ever since climate action became a topic of global negotiation; while the warnings continue to intensify with the intensification of the climate crisis, it is the climate action so far and the proposals for the coming decades — or more exactly, the severe deficiencies these carry — that makes the warnings a broken record. The grim temperature recordings are a reminder of how little time there is to reset course and avert climate disaster.

Time running out for MVA in Maharashtra

Just as the INDIA bloc threatens to unravel, there are signs that a subset, the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in Maharashtra may be among the first to implode. Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raute has indicated his party may go solo in the upcoming local body polls unless the Congress acts to save the alliance. This development is not unexpected. The MVA is an unnatural alliance with no common ideological ground among its three constituents. The Shiv Sena (UBT), the Congress, and the NCP-SP came together in pursuit of office. Having performed disastrously in the assembly election, there is no incentive for them to stick together now. Worse, the MVA constituents are competitive and suspicious of each other — reflected in the extended seat talks and the lacklustre campaign ahead of the assembly polls. Post results, the parties have preferred to blame each other and the polling process for the poor show, rather than introspect why the voters rejected them.

The Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP-SP face an existential threat from their rival factions, which now hold office and are better placed to patronise supporters. The *sainiks*, fed on decades of anti-Congress and anti-Hindu, may privilege friendship with the BJP over the priorities of the Thackeray family. Against this backdrop, the Shiv Sena (UBT) may want to reclaim its ideological ground, rebuild the party, and re-establish supremacy in the state, especially in Mumbai, which has the richest corporate in the country.

With the state Congress seemingly lukewarm about the alliance, it will need political statesmanship to save the MVA. Significantly, the man who can do it, NCP-SP chief Sharad Pawar, recently backed Mamata Banerjee's claim to lead the INDIA bloc. A below-par performance in Delhi will further erode the Congress's authority, already sliding following losses in multiple state polls, and quicken the break-up of the MVA, first, and then, perhaps, the larger bloc.

[STRAIGHTFORWARD]

Shashi Shekhar



The bitter battle to gain power in Delhi

The outcome will have national implications. Hence, the big push on the ground by three national parties

How do you view the Delhi assembly elections due in February 2025? Is a struggle to secure the residual powers as Delhi is now a Centre-administered state? If that is so, then why so much hoopla? The answer is clear. Our politics is not a geometric design created out of clear, straight, or concentric lines. It's a complex maze resembling the dense forests of Abjadhud in Chhattisgarh. Delhi assembly elections are unique as they have become a prestige match for three national parties.

Let's begin with the ruling Aam Admi Party (AAP). Arvind Kejriwal is in the fray and determined to secure a fourth term. A lot of water has flown in the Yamuna since he first assumed office in Delhi 12 years ago. The AAP won the title of a national political party in the 2022 Gujarat assembly elections by securing 12.9% of the total seats. In Punjab, he secured a seat in the 2022 Lok Sabha election. If we set aside the oldest party in the country —

the Congress — the AAP is the only Opposition party that has formed governments in two states.

This fact enthralls those who want non-Congress or non-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) governments. However, disturbing realities haunt the AAP too. Most of its founding fathers are no longer with the party. The party that came to power professing an anti-corruption agenda is tormented by the fact that some of its top leaders have faced months of jail terms on corruption charges. This is the reason the AAP leaders went into a public relations overdrive the moment they were released from prison to influence public opinion, teetering on the brink due to a 12-year-long anti-incumbency and corruption charges, in their favour.

For the AAP, a simple majority isn't enough. It needs a huge mandate to counter the threat to its government as it fears the BJP may lure some of its legislators. They also know a defeat will create a threat to their political existence. If the AAP is able to form the government for the fourth time in a row, then Kejriwal will be well within his right to nurse greater ambitions. He would like to expand further in other states as well as in the INDIA bloc.

The INDIA bloc is already facing issues. Timanthy Cotter, an American red line — if America's chief diplomat visits the island or US naval vessels anchor in a Taiwanese port — China might escalate militarily via a blockade or the seizure of one of Taiwan's outer islands. These risks will grow as

the Congress's pre-empt position in the bloc. Sharad Pawar, Akhilesh Yadav, and Arvind Kejriwal have obligingly supported her. Banerjee's claims will gain left if the AAP is able to form government in Delhi and the Congress fails to make a mark.

It will also send the message that the Congress is losing its political ground due to repeated losses in state elections. It's not that overnight the Congress was weakened to a level where it was unable to win even a single legislative seat in the last two assembly elections. They have steadily lost ground to the AAP. This makes the Delhi assembly elections a make-or-break contest for the Congress.

The Congress ready for 17 initial reports don't enthrall their supporters. Till now Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Vadra or party president Mallikarjun Kharge haven't addressed a single public meeting in Delhi. Isn't it a tad late for the Grand Old Party to cover lost ground when their opponents have been visiting neighbourhoods for weeks? Will the Congress pay for its lackadaisical approach in Delhi? Experts think if the Congress wins a little over 10% of the votes then it would become difficult for Kejriwal to form the government on his own. But will the BJP be able to pull it off? The BJP's urgency stems from the fact that Kejriwal's defeat in Delhi is a high-decibel campaign is necessary. The BJP's damage stems from the party that Kejriwal has led. Apart from these national parties, groups includ-



The tragedy is that important issues related to the well-being of the people will get lost in the vicious cacophony. BAUK BAI/REX/PHOTO

ing the Bahujan Samaj Party, Assa-

duddin Owaisi's AIMIM, and Dalit leader Chandrababhan's Aam Samaj Party are also in the fray. Will they be able to perform a miracle? Or will they end up playing spoiler for the national parties?

We need to remember that a majority of Muslims voted for the Congress-led INDIA bloc in the last general election. All the state assembly elections since Lok Sabha results in May 2024 have witnessed a trend where the majority of Muslims are gravitating towards the Congress. Will the minority vote for the Congress or stick with Kejriwal?

It's no surprise that the parties are leaving no stone unturned to win, which will lead to more bitterness. The tragedy is that important issues related to the well-being of the people are lost in this vicious cacophony. It's clear Indian democracy is still a work in progress and has a long way to go.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, *Hindustan Times*. The views expressed are personal.

Looming threats of a China-US standoff

Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping managed to keep United States (US)-China tensions contained in 2024, but when Donald Trump strikes back into the White House later this month, he will break this fragile stability, driving an unmanaged decoupling of the world's most important geopolitical relationship and increasing the risk of global economic disruption and crisis.

Trump will begin his second term as US president by announcing new tariffs on Chinese goods in order to force a new economic agreement on Beijing. These new tariffs won't reach the 60% blanket tariff level he threatened during the election campaign, but the top rate on all Chinese imports is likely to double to about 25% by the end of 2025.

China's leaders, meanwhile, will respond more forcefully and offer fewer concessions than during Trump's first term, despite the continuing weakness of China's economy. They fear that a conciliatory approach will stoke already rising public anger in China by appearing to accept a national humiliation. If their more confrontive approach towards the US in the past year only brought them the return of "Tariff Man" Trump and more of his threats, they might well wonder, why stick to a pragmatic path? Trump's threats are the latest in a long line of aggressions from Washington that confirm the suspicions of many in Beijing that US policymakers are intent on containing China's rise as a great power.

The most sensitive of all subjects in US-China relations is technology policy. Beijing objects to what it believes are US attempts to freeze China's technological development to slow the country's economic rise. Trump's security team will add more Chinese companies to the so-called entity list, making licensing more difficult for them, and will expand export controls into more economic sectors. Trump will also follow the Biden administration's lead on restricting the export of advanced computer chips to Chinese tech firms. Beijing has already shown a willingness to retaliate against these trade and investment measures by restricting the export of critical minerals and the technology used to process them. Critical minerals are vital to the production of a broad range of modern technologies, including electric car motors, computers, and some products Washington considers essential for US national security.

Though not at risk of a Chinese invasion in 2025, disputes over Taiwan will also make US-China relations more toxic this year. Though Trump himself appears uninterested in Taiwan, the more hawkish members of his administration are likely to push China's leaders in the opposite direction.

Two wildcards hang over US-China ties this year: Trump himself and new favourite advisor Elon Musk. Trump will try to build a better personal relationship with President Xi. Musk's many commercial interests in China could make him a useful go-between. But the forces pushing the US and China in opposite directions are much bigger than either of these possibilities, and neither is likely to determine the outcome.

The effects of the coming breakdown in relations will be felt all over the world. Most countries have no interest in a new Cold War, making one unlikely in the near term. But key US allies and trade partners such as South Korea, Mexico, and the European Union may increasingly be forced to choose sides — at least in the growing number of national security-related areas — and at a significant cost to their economies.

Neither China nor the US wants a costly confrontation in 2025, but early signals from both Beijing and Washington shows us that conflict is becoming harder to avoid.

new team, including incoming secretary of state Marco Rubio and national security advisor Mike Waltz, will push not only for a better US-China relationship but also for an explicit US guarantee for Taiwan's security. That's a bright red line for Beijing.

For now, China's leaders believe their pressure tactics have kept Taiwan's nationalist president William Lai in check, and they're confident they can win the 2024 US elections strong, and he doesn't need to provoke China to bolster his public popularity. But if Beijing perceives that Taipei has made substantial moves toward greater de facto independence or if Washington crosses any of China's other red lines — if America's chief diplomat visits the island or US naval vessels anchor in a Taiwanese port — China might escalate militarily via a blockade or the seizure of one of Taiwan's outer islands. These risks will grow as

Beijing ramps up pressure to prevent another William Lai victory. Neither China nor the US wants a crisis in 2025. Xi and Trump both hope to prioritise domestic policy this year. Xi faces serious economic challenges, growing social stability concerns, and a military leadership in disarray. Trump wants to avoid any stock market and hopes to cut deals that boost confidence in his leadership. With unified government and consolidated control of his party, Trump is in a better position than Biden ever was to ensure that Washington speaks with a single voice. But there is no foundation for an agreement that strengthens broader US-China relations. Beijing can offer to buy more of America's agricultural products and energy exports. It can make life easier for US companies that want to do business in China. Xi can greenlight more Chinese investment in the US and even play a more active role in helping to get to a ceasefire in Ukraine. But these constructive gestures won't satisfy Trump and the hawks in his administration, who believe that China's rise is bad for the US. Trump's determination to tighten the pressure on China and its unwillingness to push China's leaders in the opposite direction.

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Neither China nor the US wants a costly confrontation in 2025, but early signals from both Beijing and Washington shows us that conflict is becoming harder to avoid.

lan Bremner is the founder and board president of *Hindustan Times*. The views expressed are personal.

MALALA YOUSAFZAI | GENDER ACTIVIST & NOBEL LAUREATE

In Afghanistan, an entire generation of girls will be robbed of its future ... As Muslim leaders, now is the time to raise your voice

At an event in Islamabad, calling for an international law against gender apartheid



Leader of good conduct and good conscience

I first met Dr Manmohan Singh when he visited Tirupur as then member-secretary of the Planning Commission to understand the problems of the state's tribal communities. Though we had ploughed our way through muddy roads on a rainy day, he showed considerable interest in understanding the seemingly minor issues placed before him. He had a number of questions for me. Later, he casually remarked that what struck him was not the mastery of information but the passion with which it was communicated. There could have been no better encouragement for a young civil servant in a remote state.

A few years later, he along with two other Union ministers, AK Antony and PM Swamy, visited the northeastern states to understand the problems of the civil services and get an idea of the developmental challenges there. I took these three ministers around. At a dinner hosted by the Governor, Dr Singh took me aside and said that when I became due for central deputation, I should meet him. I did not take it seriously at that time. One had heard of Union ministers and other leaders making such promises to civil servants in the North East cadre, only to forget these on their way back to Delhi. I was to discover that Dr Singh was a glorious exception.

Then, came an instance when I had accompanied the chief minister to Delhi — by then, Dr Singh had become the Union finance minister — to lay down the demands of the state for support. After giving us a sincere hearing, he asked me to follow these up with ministry bureaucrats. Then, with his characteristic humanity, he insisted on walking us to the lift as we rose to leave. The Marxist CM, a staunch ideological opponent of Dr Singh, could not help but remark on his essential goodness.

When the state government, for its own reasons, decided to release me from central deputation, I visited Delhi but had no serious intention of calling on the finance minister. When I ran into him in the corridors of North Block, he enquired whether my name had been given for central deputation. When I confirmed that, he asked me to meet him later that day. He would ask me then whether I would like to work in the ministry of finance. Rejecting, in an uncharacteristic fashion, a panel of names that was already with the ministry to fill an existing vacancy, he insisted his officers to get another panel and to ensure

that my name was among the three included. When the revised panel came to the ministry, it had, in addition to mine, the names of two officers who were senior to me, and had reasonably good credentials. Against the advice of his senior officials, he recommended my name for appointment. In my first meeting with him thereafter, I attempted to thank him, but he disarmingly brushed it aside.

On one occasion, I found him in a somewhat nervous mood at his office. With some prodding, he indicated that Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then an Opposition leader, had brought to his notice the fact that the State Bank of India (SBI) had gone back on its commitment to open a branch in a rural area, leaving the people there crestfallen. He added that he could not afford to disappoint a respected person like Mr Vajpayee. However, when he brought the matter up with SBI, he was told the branch was not a viable proposition. I brought up this matter with then-SBI-chairman, Mr PG Kakodkar, who said he would couple the matter re-examined. A couple of weeks later, SBI reconsidered its decision. I reported this to Mr Kakodkar to mention this to the finance minister.

When I met the minister a couple of days later, he referred to SBI's decision and said he hoped the decision was taken on merit and not because he had expressed an interest. When the position of chairman of the Securities and Exchange Bureau of India (SEBI) was to be filled, he ignored the various pressures brought on him, and based on the recommendation of a committee, I was appointed to that post. I must add, for good measure, that in the name of the assignments for which I had his blessings, any request was made either by him, or on his behalf, to get any matter attended to.

Soon after I demitted office as SEBI chairman, he asked me to report to the PM's residential office and said that he was very keen that I should accept some assignment in order to put my experience to good use. I declined the offer since I had no savings, and I needed to do work which would get me a reasonable income, without sacrificing my principles. He responded saying that that was a legitimate expectation. There could be no better exemplar of good conduct and good conscience than Dr Singh.

M Damodaran served as chairman of SEBI, UTI and IDBI. The views expressed are personal.

The reforms needed in the MEA



Col Rajeev Agarwal (retired)

Former Director at Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi

India is on the rise, thanks to its consistent economic growth, political stability, and a bold, autonomous foreign policy. Whether it is the success of its G20 presidency, its strategic autonomy during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, its leadership in vaccine diplomacy during COVID-19, or its initiative in voicing the concerns of the Global South, India has established itself as a major player in global affairs.

However, with this increased global stature comes the need for an organisational framework that supports and sustains such ambitions. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) needs to keep pace with the demands of this new era and evolve to meet them. A critical examination of its staffing, structure, and operational approach reveals significant gaps that must be addressed urgently.

Areas of improvement
The MEA is staffed with about 850 Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officers tasked with formulating and executing foreign policy across 193 embassies and consulates worldwide. While the annual intake of IFS officers has increased from 12-14 to 32-35 in recent years, it remains grossly inadequate. Comparatively, the U.S. has around 14,500 foreign service officers; the U.K., 4,600; and Russia around 4,500 officers.

Given the current intake rate, India would require decades to reach an optimal workforce of 1,500 officers. To address this challenge, the Ministry should consider lateral hiring and absorbing officers from other government services, including defence personnel with experience as defence attachés and academics specialising in international relations. Such recruitment should be subject to stringent selection criteria and probation periods to ensure quality. Additionally, consultants could be engaged for specialised roles. The current perception is that they are stop-gap appointees.

The MEA's internal structure

India has established itself as a major player in global affairs. The Ministry of External Affairs needs to keep pace with the demands of this new era

requires reorganisation to reduce fragmentation and improve coordination. It has many small divisions, especially territorial ones, which often result in inefficiencies. For instance, India's immediate neighbourhood, a declared priority in its foreign policy, is managed by four separate divisions: the PAI Division (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran), the BM Division (Bangladesh and Myanmar), the Northern Division (Nepal and Bhutan) and the IOR Division (Sri Lanka, Maldives, and other nations in the Indian Ocean Region). While inputs from these are collated at higher levels, such fragmentation increases the risk of oversight and hinders cohesive regional engagement.

Similarly, the Gulf Division oversees eight Gulf countries, and the WANA Division handles the rest of West Asia and North Africa. Surprisingly, Iran and Türkiye, two pivotal nations in the region, do not fall under either division. Instead, Türkiye is managed by the Central Europe Division, while Iran falls under the PAI Division. Many similar misalignments highlight the need for restructuring and consolidating divisions to create a more efficient and integrated approach.

While officers posted abroad enjoy substantial financial and administrative support, their counterparts in Delhi face significant challenges. Housing facilities have improved, but are still inadequate to accommodate the growing cadre. Furthermore, financial incentives and allowances for officers posted in India are limited, making domestic postings less appealing than foreign assignments. Providing better housing, medical coverage, and educational facilities for their families could work wonders for the morale of these officers. Also, offering financial incentives for Delhi postings could help. After all, this is where critical assessments are made, and key policies are formulated before being executed abroad.

The MEA has long debated the

balance between generalist and specialist roles within the IFS. Language skills, a key aspect of diplomatic expertise, often fall victim to the rotational posting system. Officers undergo rigorous training in one foreign language during their initial years and are typically posted in countries where that language is spoken. However, subsequent postings often do not align with their linguistic expertise, reducing the long-term benefits of this training.

To address this, at least one language-trained officer should be posted in each embassy to reduce dependence on interpreters. Often, in tricky negotiations, language skills have proved to be a game changer, and the Ministry could leverage this aspect. Moreover, as officers progress in their careers, they should be encouraged to become specialists or subject matter experts.

As technology increasingly influences foreign policy, the MEA must build capacity in fields such as cybersecurity, space policy, and artificial intelligence. Expecting all IFS officers to master these highly technical areas alongside their core responsibilities is unrealistic. Instead, the Ministry should hire and retain domain specialists who can focus exclusively on these issues throughout their careers.

Steps in the right direction
Despite these challenges, the MEA has made significant efforts to evolve. The establishment of divisions such as Policy, Planning and Research, and the Centre for Contemporary China Studies, reflects its intent to adapt to emerging global trends. The dynamic leadership of Dr. S. Jaishankar has been instrumental in the display of innovation and greater assertiveness in foreign policy and also, as he emphasises, in aligning foreign policy with India's aspirations to become a 'Viksit Bharat' (Developed India).

As India moves towards its 100 years of independence in 2047, its foreign policy must evolve in tandem with its global ambitions.

Building the dream capital

Naidu has set the ball rolling, but he has to develop Amaravati in just three years

STATE OF PLAY

V. Raghavendra
raghavendra.vj@thehindu.co.in



Five years after the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government abandoned the Amaravati project, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has set the ball rolling to construct the "people's capital".

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has approved capital works to the tune of about ₹50,000 crore. This includes construction of the Legislative Assembly and the High Court buildings. It has also taken steps to invite tenders for works and accorded administrative sanction to 20 engineering works valued at ₹1,468 crore.

In its submission to the Supreme Court, where cases relating to the capital are pending disposal, the government said that it would complete the project in three years instead of six months as ordered by the High Court on March 3, 2022. It pointed out that the timelines set in 2014 when the TDP came to power were "overtaken by past events".

The government is confident of accomplishing the task within the promised time period. However, this is easier said than done because of the sheer size and number of offices and residential spaces that need to be built, as per its target.

In addition, there is the issue of mobilisation of funds. Loan repayment obligations will impose a huge burden on the public exchequer. But this is inevitable since the State desperately needs a capital after Hyderabad ceased to be the common capital of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

last year, as per the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014.

A silver lining in the cloud is the Central government's promise of providing ₹15,000 crore as aid. It plans to arrange this amount from the World Bank and other multilateral lending institutions. Delegations of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and so on have conducted a social impact assessment study to lend funds to the Amaravati project. In fact, the World Bank has given in-principle clearance for the loan. The Housing and Urban Development Corporation Limited is also providing a loan of ₹11,000 crore.

The master plan was prepared by the London-based Foster + Partners and no major changes have been made to it by the State government.

The Assembly building, spanning 103 acres, will feature a 250-meter-tall structure, offering a panoramic view of the city. There will be five administrative towers of which three will have at least 39 floors. Besides these, the government is planning to build a host of buildings. The cost of construction of these have gone up by 42% over the last five years, according to the Municipal Administration Minister.

The establishment of offices of various Central government departments, and reputed educational institutions,

for which lands were allotted in 2014-19 is an important component in the overall capital development plan.

While infrastructure works, such as connecting the trunk roads in Amaravati to the NH-16, are in various stages of construction, the Centre recently approved a new 57 km long railway line from Errupalem in Khammam district of Telangana to Nambur in Guntur district via Amaravati. This is bound to give fillip to the development of Amaravati.

For now, the government is busy with the tender floating process. The construction of these buildings is expected to gain momentum this month. Having committed to completing the works in just three years, the government is expected to work ceaselessly. If it does not meet its ambitious deadline, the project will drag on further to the overall detriment of the State. Raising and efficiently using funds for the capital is also a tough task as the government has already been grappling with a shoestring budget. However, Mr. Naidu has an advantage as politically, his government is on sound footing. The TDP-Jana Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party alliance occupies 164 out of 175 seats in the Assembly.

In fact, the YSRCP was also firmly in the saddle with 151 seats. But it jeopardised the capital project by choosing to follow the South African model of three capital cities and failing to implement it. The YSRCP paid the price for its folly by losing the election; and so did the people, who have not seen any development.

Over the last few years, Andhra Pradesh was constantly running into trouble regarding its capital. Finally, it is set to have one.

Is Trump justified in asking EU to buy more oil and gas from the U.S.?

The European Union's oil and gas imports from the U.S. are already increasing at a rapid pace, as the bloc does not want to purchase these products from Russia

DATA POINT

Sambhav Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump threatened to impose tariffs on many countries if they do not fulfil certain conditions. In November last year, he said he would impose sweeping tariffs on imports from Canada, China, and Mexico if these countries failed to stem illegal border crossings into the U.S. and the trafficking of drugs — in particular Fentanyl, which is a deadly opioid. He has also threatened the European Union (EU) with tariffs, as the U.S. runs a trade deficit with the bloc. This means that its imports from the EU are higher than its exports. Data show that the U.S. had a trade deficit of more than \$208.7 billion with the EU at the end of 2023, second only to China with which it had a trade deficit of \$279.4 billion. The third on the list is Mexico (trade deficit of \$152.4 billion). With Canada, the U.S. had a trade deficit of \$67.9 billion.

Chart 1 shows the U.S.'s trade deficit with select countries at the end of 2023. The other countries which have been threatened with tariffs are also part of the list of countries with which the U.S. runs the highest trade deficits.

It is debatable whether imposition of tariffs is the most efficient way of dealing with this. In 2023, the U.S. imported €40.7 billion worth of motor cars and vehicles from the EU. This was the second biggest commodity in terms of value, from the bloc. If there are higher tariffs on the import of European cars, these cars would become more expensive. This would benefit U.S. car manufacturers.

At the same time, consumers in the U.S. have been importing cheaper goods from countries such as China. They imported over \$35 billion worth of smartphones in 2023 from China. If the higher tariffs proposed by Mr. Trump

come into force, consumers will need to look for alternatives. This means that they will spend more on these products.

This means manufacturers will benefit, but not consumers.

Mr. Trump's solution to bridge the EU's trade deficit with the U.S. is also questionable: he has asked the bloc to buy more oil and gas from the U.S. By the end of 2023, the EU had sourced close to 43% of its Liquefied Natural Gas needs from the U.S. Just three years before that, in 2020, the EU had sourced below 20% from the U.S. (Chart 2). This means that the EU's dependency on the U.S. had more than doubled in just three years. This was because sanctions were imposed on Russia after it invaded Ukraine. Thus, import of gas from Russia had to be cut, which benefited the U.S.

In July 2024, the EU sourced close to 15% of its crude oil from the U.S. compared to just 8% in July 2020. In the same period, crude oil imports from Russia were reduced from 23% to 2% (Chart 3). So, the question is, why is Mr. Trump threatening the EU when the bloc's dependency on the U.S. for oil and gas is already increasing at a rapid pace?

The U.S. exported 31.8% of its crude oil production in 2023 compared to just 18.7% five years prior. It exported 16% of its natural gas production in 2023 compared to 9.6% five years prior (Chart 4). Are producers in the U.S. equipped to sustainably increase production if the export share increases further, given that the U.S. is also the biggest consumer of oil and natural gas domestically?

Finally, of all the top 10 oil refineries (in terms of processing capacity) that operate in Europe, most are owned by private players (Chart 5). While Mr. Trump's trade is directed against the governments in Europe, will the bloc be able to convince the private refineries, whose best interest is to choose the cheapest and most viable oil, to get supply from the U.S.?

Shifting the balance

The data for the charts were sourced from Eurostat, the U.S. Energy Information Administration, and the International Trade Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.

Chart 1: The chart shows the U.S.'s trade deficit with select countries at the end of 2023. Values in billion USD



Chart 2: The chart shows EU's imports of liquefied natural gas from the U.S. and Russia. (Figures in %)

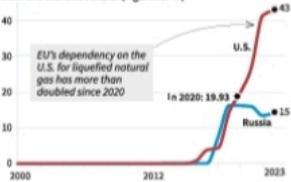


Chart 3: The chart shows EU's crude oil imports from the United States and Russia. (Figures in %)

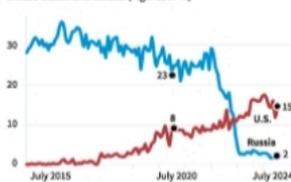


Chart 4: The chart shows the U.S.'s exports of crude oil and natural gas as a share of production. (Figures in %)

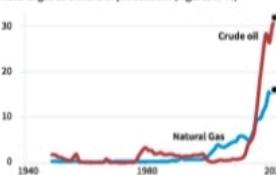


Chart 5: The chart shows the largest crude oil refineries in Europe by capacity (in thousand barrels per day)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 13, 1975

Idol made plaintiff in Sivapuram Nataraja case

Los Angeles, Jan. 12: A religious idol allegedly stolen from India has become a plaintiff in a \$5.5 million suit to wrest it from a millionaire industrialist and art collector, Mr. Norton Simon. The complaint in the case was amended on Friday to include the idol — the Sivapuram Nataraja — after the Government of India said that under Indian law the idol is a "juristic person... thereby entitled to vindicate property and may sue or be sued to vindicate its rights."

The complaint, filed by the American Civil Liberties Union against Mr. Simon, seeks return of the idol or \$5.5 million if it is not returned. The suit originally asked for \$2.5 million in lieu of the idol.

The suit contends that Mr. Simon knew the idol had been stolen when he bought it for a million dollars in 1973 from a New York art dealer.

"The whole thing on the part of the Indian government is rather preposterous," Mr. Simon said. "The piece was in a private collection in Bombay for years... it was shown to Government officials, there is printed literature describing it... and all these years they did nothing."

However, the collector said, "I think there is a grave question as to whether it was ever stolen, and if it was, why (the Indian government) were inactive all these years it was in a private collection. There was certainly no reason to consider it anything but perfectly appropriate from our standpoint to purchase the piece."

The idol is at present in the care of a woman in London, who was given the art object to restore it. A British court has ordered her not to dispose of the idol until its actual owner is determined.

The amended complaint said the suit was also launched on behalf of "the worshippers of Nataraja who have been deprived of their right of worship, and therefore, deprived of their right of freedom of religion."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FROM THE JANUARY 12, 1925 EDITION AS THERE WAS NO EDITION ON JANUARY 13, 1925

New invention in telegraphy

Paris, Jan. 11: A Havas Agency message says the *Matin* announces that a young French engineer has invented an apparatus by means of which radio-telegrams could be printed instead of read aloud.

Opinion

MONDAY, JANUARY 13, 2025



REMEMBERING VIVEKANANDA
Prime Minister Narendra Modi
Swami Vivekananda is an eternal inspiration for youth, who continues to ignite passion and purpose in young minds

The job question

While employment numbers are no doubt up, the quality of jobs being generated is important

AHEAD OF BUDGET 2025, the imperative of generating more productive jobs dominates the policy discourse despite optimistic statements that the employment situation has dramatically improved since the National Democratic Alliance came to power in 2014 vis-à-vis the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime. Interestingly, the Union minister for labour and employment used the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) KLEMS data for this purpose — rather than the official Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) — although this does not provide details of where the employment has been generated or, for that matter, the quality of jobs. Last year, the labour ministry used KLEMS data together with the PLFS to counter a Citigroup report that India will struggle to create sufficient jobs even with a 7% growth rate by stating that 80 million-plus employment opportunities were generated from 2017-18 (July-June) to 2021-22 despite the economy being hit by Covid-19. As organised sector employment is sluggish, there are fewer opportunities for those who move from the countryside to cities for work. The brunt of adjustment is borne by the unorganised sector that includes self-employment and casual labour. Even these opportunities have dwindled, due to shocks like demonetisation in November 2016, the introduction of goods and services tax, and lockdown to battle Covid-19, triggering reverse migration.

The quality of jobs again comes to fore with the labour minister's statement that India created 172 million jobs between 2014 and 2024, of which 46 million were generated in 2023-24 (July-June). The main reason for the fall in unemployment in the past decade has to do with the rise in employment in agriculture in the rural areas. Most of these jobs are unpaid family labour, said professor R Ramakumar, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. "This is not quality employment, it's not meaningful productive employment in any form," he added, according to a report in FE. This is indeed a reversal of the process of modern economic development which is associated with a shift in population away from agriculture. The PLFS shows a substantial increase in employment in agriculture from 44% of total employment in 2017-18 to 46.1% in 2023-24, amounting to 76 million going back to the farms. The labour minister, however, thinks this is an impressive performance under the current dispensation — in contrast to the UPA regime — as its policies focused on the holistic development of agriculture, which is now evidenced in the data.

The upshot is that while employment is up, its quality is in question. Experts and statisticians believe that KLEMS is not the ideal source for assessing employment as the RBI doesn't collect any data but only make estimates based on data sourced from official sources. According to former member of the National Statistical Commission PC Mohanan, KLEMS estimates are only as good as the population number they use for their projections. "The worker population ratio number from the PLFS is inflated with the (India's) population estimate, and is then used to give employment estimates," he added. KLEMS thus indicates that 46 million jobs were added in 2023-24 while the PLFS data shows only 14 million. The fact that reverse migration continues only reinforces an observation of the late historian Eric Hobsbawm that India still remains "one of the few examples left in the world of an enormous population still largely dependent on agriculture," as less than half of the workforce still lives off the land. The continuing reverse migration reflects distress and has serious distributional consequences.

Delta cracked the code for post-pandemic profits

DELTA AIRLINES' competitive moat is only growing wider and deeper. The Atlanta-based airline on Friday reported fourth-quarter earnings that beat expectations on sales and profit based on strong demand for the premium services — world-class lounges, free entertainment and food, comfortable seats, etc. — that flyers are more willing to pay for since the pandemic.

Analysts took issue with the company's 2025 guidance of more than \$7.35 a share, which is 11% higher than 2024's earnings adjusted to add back losses from last summer's computer glitch, because the estimate looks too conservative. They are probably right. Chief executive officer Ed Bastian likes to brag that Delta makes up half of the US airline industry profits. The driver of those outsized profits is clearly the premium products on which the airline has been investing for the last decade and a half. Premium revenue in the quarter rose 6 percentage points faster than main-cabin sales, that will continue. Out of the 3% to 4% of new capacity Delta plans to add this year, 85% will be premium-cabin seats, the company said on a conference call with analysts.

How did Delta become the most profitable US airline with a growing competitive advantage?

The answer lies to how the airline prioritises its spending. Delta reinstated its dividend in 2023 at a low level after suspending it during the pandemic. Investing back in the business is clearly Delta's highest priority. The company decided 15 years ago that it would be a premium-brand airline and has plowed money into airport upgrades, new lounges, and technology to lure customers. Delta executives didn't know such a strong trend of travellers wanting to be pampered would emerge from the pandemic. Still, the company had positioned itself perfectly to ride the wave with offerings such as lounges, in-seat entertainment, high-speed internet, lie-flat seats, and other perks that attract customers.

The airline invested \$4.8 billion last year and plans similar capital expenditures this year.

The competitive moat pertains to the financial side of the business as well. Delta has made reducing debt a priority, helping the airline to regain an investment-grade rating with all three major rating companies. Delta paid down \$4 billion of debt and plans to do more this year as it pushes gross leverage (debt divided by Ebitda) from 2.6 times to 2 times or less this year and toward a stretch goal of one time.

Spending on employees is another priority. This may sound like a corporate cliché, but Delta backs this up with a profit-sharing programme that will divide \$1.4 billion among employees on February 14. It's telling that the only unionised portion of Delta's workforce is pilots. The rest of its employees, including flight attendants, don't belong to a union, and it's not because labour organisers aren't interested. Delta increases pay of all employees to keep up with union counterparts at other airlines but avoids the confrontational bargaining among employee groups that takes place with each new union contract.

Investors may feel slighted with their position toward the bottom of the list. The dividend now stands at 15 cents a share, well below the 40 cents at the beginning of 2020. Share buybacks aren't even on the table. The investor payoff comes from owning a company that leads the industry on profit growth and balance-sheet strength. This strategy won't always result in the biggest stock gains. Last year, Delta rose 50% while United soared 135%. Over the long run, investing in the company and employees will provide steady growth that underpins returns that can't be matched by short-term financial engineering. Delta is demonstrating what can happen when an airline keeps its priorities straight.



THOMAS BLACK
Bloomberg

GAUGING GROWTH

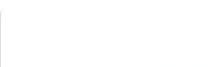
DRAWING FIRM CONCLUSIONS ON GDP NUMBERS BASED ON NSO'S FIRST ADVANCE ESTIMATES IS TRICKY

How 'final' are GDP estimates?

THE 6.4% GDP growth estimate of the National Statistical Office (NSO) has drawn myriad responses on the state of the economy. It has now been used as a basis for conjecturing the final numbers which will come out in May. Several forecasters are talking of a scaling down of this number. At times there is a bit of an exaggeration with economists talking of a significant slowdown. A couple of points are relevant here.

The first is that after averaging 8% for the last three years, the growth number this year had to be lower and hence when the government stood by its forecast of 6.5-7% for the year and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) lowered it to 6.6% in the December policy, it was expected. Therefore, slower growth was already a known fact and the number only was on the table for discussion. Now, the NSO has drawn up these forecasts based on extrapolations. Hence this is just an improvement over what it does at the beginning of the year when there is absolutely no data available and the forecasts are based on models which make several assumptions. This advance estimate is based on the knowledge of the first half of the year or eight months' data for the variables involved. Therefore, it is not based on any specific collation of data from various entities. This year has been unusual as elections were held, which has had backspending by the government and had an impact on private investment too.

But such a forecast is necessary because it has to be used in drawing up the Budget. The revised fiscal ratios will be based on a revised GDP number in normal terms, which will be around ₹2 lakh crore lower than what was estimated at the beginning of the year. The past is impor-



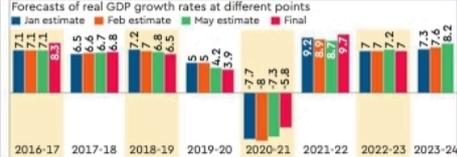
MADAN SABNAVIS
Chief economist, Bank of Baroda

tant because for FY26, the GDP forecast has to be made. It can be around 10.5% again, which will then feed into the Budget model where tax ratios are juxtaposed with these GDP numbers.

The Excel files of economists have already run fresh forecasts based on the 6.4% number for both FY25 as well as FY26. The important question here is, how good are the first advance estimates of the NSO considering that they come when only nine months of the year are over and are available for an even shorter period? To give us an idea, the table provides the forecasts for GDP at four points of time. There is a first advance estimate in January, followed by the second advance estimate in February and the provisional estimates out in May. There is also the ultimate number which comes with a lag of a year — which is what will be seen in any time series chart of the GDP growth rate.

The first thing that strikes the reader is that the final numbers tend to be at some variation with the earlier estimates. This means that while more data comes in and the assumptions or extrapolations are replaced with actual data, revisions would be made that can lead to different conclusions. In 2016-17 for instance, which was the year of demonetisation, growth was projected at 7.1% on three occasions but ended up at a high of 8.3%.

The final estimates have shown varying patterns compared with the first advance estimate. In four of the seven years, the final numbers were better including 2020-21 during Covid-19. On two occasions, it came in lower while it was spot on for 2022-23. Therefore, it would be hard to ascribe a direction for the final GDP growth numbers based on past data. This is because the revisions would be coming from different sectors at various



Source: Press releases of NSO on national income estimates

points of time. Therefore, it may be difficult to assume that the final number would be better though it is tilted in this direction based on the seven observations.

In fact, even the May provisional estimate may not provide the certainty in the estimate as data is still in the process of being absorbed. In the last four years, the provisional estimates were better than the first advance estimates on three occasions.

Therefore, drawing any firm conclusions on the final GDP growth numbers based on the NSO's first advance estimates is tricky. The economy has a very large unorganised sector on which data is not readily forthcoming, which leads to several imputations. The goods and services tax has brought about significant progress in terms of formalisation of the economy where several micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) units have got registered. Similarly, borrowings by MSMEs from the financial system would entail providing data on their finances, which also helps in getting closer to their value addition to the GDP numbers.

It is not surprising that several forecasts have been lowered after the NSO brought out its first advance estimates. There is always a "follower" reaction whenever there is any estimate on growth by either the government, the NSO or the RBI. The rationale would be puzzling given that the economic environment prevailing till January was known and did not trigger any revision in forecasts or even overall view on the state of the economy. It would be of interest to see how the second advance estimates in February would view the economy.

Views are personal

In the name of nation-building



RISHI RAJ
rishi.raj@expressindia.com

Normalising overwork in the pursuit of economic growth echoes dangerous historical precedents; corporate leaders must address systemic challenges rather than resort to rhetoric

A NEW TREND has started of India Inc members waxing eloquently on the need for working extraordinarily long hours, and how it's needed if India has to become a global economic powerhouse. In this quest it's often forgotten that they are treading into the private space of citizens, which a liberal, democratic society needs to respect.

While Infosys co-founder NR Narayana Murthy's call for a 70-hour workweek started it all, as he felt that the country needed it, Larsen & Toubro (L&T) chairman and managing director SN Subrahmanyam took it to another level by advocating a 90-hour workweek, citing the need for nation-building. He went overboard, saying, "I regret I am not able to make you work on Sundays. If I can make you work on Sundays, I will be happier because I work on Sundays. What do you do sitting at home? How long can you stare at your wife? How long can the wife stare at her husband? Get to the office and start working!"

He also compared Indian workers to their Chinese counterparts, stating, "Chinese people work 90 hours a week, while Americans work only 50 hours. If you want to be on top of the world, you have to work 90 hours a week." Subrahmanyam's remarks were made at an internal event and he could have curbed the damage by clarifying that he was speaking in jest but regrets it. What is more disturbing is the statement that the company subsequently issued. "At L&T, nation-building is at the core of our mandate. For over eight decades, we have been shaping India's infrastructure, industries, and technological capabili-

ties. We believe this is India's decade, a time demanding collective dedication and effort to drive progress and realise our shared vision of becoming a developed nation," is what the company said, defending Subrahmanyam.

Earlier, Ola founder Bhavish Aggarwal had dismissed weekends as a "Western" concept, forgetting that his cab-hailing and other ventures did not have roots in ancient India.

The common thread in the statements of these India Inc leaders is that they use "nation" and "economic greatness" to back their exhortations. The comparison, or perhaps obsession, with China is another common refrain.

While economic growth is a legitimate goal, pushing it to extremes risks fostering a dangerous precedent of equating long hours with patriotism, drawing parallels to oppressive historical regimes. Corporate leaders who cite China's work culture to justify excessive hours often ignore the broader context. China, an authoritarian state, imposes a rigid, top-down approach to governance and labour. This system stifles individual freedoms, sacrifices worker welfare, and suppresses dissent — realities that starkly contrast with India's democratic ethos. Will these leaders accept the broader implications of emulating China's system, including its treatment of ordinary citizens and corporate leaders? Such selective admiration reflects an oppor-

tunistic mindset rather than a genuine commitment to progress.

Moreover, suggesting that employees forgo personal time for "nation-building" is both overreaching and paternalistic. Workplaces are entitled to set rules including working hours, but the decision to prioritise leisure or family time is a private matter. When leaders make disparaging comments about how individuals spend their time off — as Subrahmanyam did with his remarks on spouses — they cross a line into unwarranted moral policing.

The rhetoric of "nation-building" as a justification for labour exploitation has a dark history. From Hitler's Germany to Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China, oppressive regimes have invoked similar narratives to coerce extraordinary efforts from their citizens, often at immense human cost.

Adolf Hitler framed labour as a patriotic duty, with massive public works programmes like the Auto-bahn touted as symbols of national pride. Beneath this veneer, forced and slave labour became widespread, with millions toiling in inhumane conditions to fuel Germany's militarisation.

In the USSR, under Stalin's Five-Year Plans, workers faced impossible production targets, long hours, and brutal penalties for failure. Labour camps (gulags) housed millions of political prisoners and dissidents who were exploited for infrastructure projects under the

guise of socialist construction. Similarly, in China during the Great Leap Forward, workers were mobilised into unsustainable industrial efforts, leading to widespread famine and millions of deaths. Mao's propaganda glorified labour, masking the suffering it inflicted on the populace.

Today's corporate leaders risk replicating these mistakes by conflating long hours with productivity and patriotism. India indeed has a unique opportunity to shape this century, but the path to greatness lies in sustainable, inclusive growth. Corporate leaders should channel their influence into creating equitable workplaces, advancing innovation, and addressing systemic challenges rather than resorting to rhetoric that risks alienating the very workforce they seek to inspire.

While in the past it was political leaders in Germany, Russia, or China who goaded citizens to work hard to make their country great, in contemporary India corporate leaders are doing so. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, known for working extraordinarily long hours and not taking any leave, is not heard saying that he regrets not being able to make central government employees work on Sundays. India's first PM Jawaharlal Nehru, who was tasked with building independent India, did not lecture citizens but had Robert Frost's lines on his desk. "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep."

Perhaps it's time for overworked India Inc members to take a break and catch up on history and literature.

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Gearing up for Trump 2.0

Apropos of 'A complex world order' (FE, January 11), indeed, the geopolitical land scape is shadowed by conflict thanks to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. They impact the global supply chain and cross-border trade. China and the US look like they are gearing up to start an economic war. The US is not appearing to be losing its sheen as the global superpower with a powerful dollar and

technological prowess. China also stands strong with a mindset to face Trump's bouncers. At this juncture of a possible economic war between global majors, other countries have to play second fiddle and take note. India gains via the Ukraine war with cheap oil from Russia, and faces trouble on the Gaza war, as it sees the Red Sea maritime route blocked by Yemen's Houthis. Now, we also have to look at withstanding Trump's tariff and visa constraints and framing

strategies to sustain contingencies.

—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Work or overwork?

The backlash faced by the Larsen and Toubro CEO is due to the fact that those working in the tech sector are already working insane hours. Top dogs in the corporate sector probably have an army of household help and therefore are not concerned about keeping their homes in order. Many companies in the tech sector make

their profits by arbitrage of the working hours of their employees, charging their overseas clients multiple times of what they pay their workers. The skewed demand and supply equation of labour makes it easy for the employers to exploit their employees. Using nationalism as a fig leaf to justify this exploitation cannot be overlooked or condoned.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

thehindubusinessline.

Farm the climate

Agriculture needs to adapt better to climate change

The Indian farming ecosystem has seen a big change in recent years — the acceptance of climate change as an imminent concern, rather than an issue that needs to be tackled in the medium term. Policymakers, bankers, researchers, weather experts and seed companies are of the view that cropping techniques, patterns and technologies must adapt rapidly.



At the recently concluded *businessline* Agri and Commodity summit, it was agreed that 'natural farming' can insulate India's crops against increasingly frequent extreme weather events. If the Indian Council for Agricultural Research is working on drought and flood resistant varieties, Nabard is promoting new financial mechanisms such as the Agri Fund and the Carbon Fund, working in tandem with States and multilateral agencies. In terms of the delivery of climate-proofing solutions, primary agricultural credit societies have been identified as important nodal institutions. The Centre plans to expand their role beyond giving credit. However, the drive to set up two lakh multi-purpose cooperatives would require the cooperation of the States. There is growing recognition of the potential of earning carbon credits through climate-smart practices, although the processes need to be firm-ed up, so that genuine farmers rather than dubious 'consultants' and 'experts' with global links benefit. Funding for such practices must be accompanied by clear-cut conditions, so that back-end inputs too are 'green'.

However, there are gaps in the current thrust. India's farm research systems are primarily geared towards increasing yields through resource-intensive hybrid varieties. It is not clear whether varieties that combine stress resistance and yield improvement are in the pipeline. More efforts should be made to select natural varieties for their resilient traits. A research focus on yields alone may prove limiting in the long run as the prospect of crop damage assumes more serious proportions. The Prime Minister's Office has called for reforms in the ICAR system. While foodgrain output has increased despite vagaries of the weather, it is better to be prepared for eventualities.

It is also important to realise that the impact of harsh weather on crops is pronounced in the rainfed heartland, which constitutes 50 per cent of the cultivated area, as against irrigated regions. Climate proofing policies should focus on the unirrigated regions in particular. Multi-cropping as well as promotion of millets on typically small patches of land can protect output and incomes. Research has shown that monocropping in rainfed regions has reduced returns to farmers, while exposing them to uncertainty. There needs to be more conceptual clarity on the entire gamut of processes that encompass sustainable farming. The allocation towards the PM Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana, which has seen just over ₹2,000 crore being spent over about four years, can be increased alongside reforms in research and market linkages.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



PRAGYA PRATISHTHA

In February 2024, the global materials science community was stunned by a groundbreaking achievement when the US-China research team successfully synthesised a functional semiconductor from graphene. This milestone promises to revolutionise industries such as electronics, energy storage, and medical devices, with applications that could reshape computing and numerous other technological sectors. With its remarkable properties — strength, conductivity, and flexibility — graphene has emerged as a game-changer worldwide, offering immense possibilities for innovation. China has strategically positioned itself as a global leader in the graphene market, investing heavily in research, infrastructure, and production. By 2023, China controlled over 70 per cent of global graphene production, contributing significantly to the sector's rapid growth. As projections show the market reaching \$6.25 billion by 2031, China's leadership is evident through its comprehensive national policies, such as 'Made in China 2025', which have fuelled significant advancements in graphene technology.

However, China's dominance also underscores the importance of securing access to critical resources like graphite. For countries like India, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity, particularly as demand for graphene is growing in industries like electronics, aerospace, and energy.

INDIA'S PROGRESS

India is making strides in the field of graphene, with a growing number of institutions and companies tapping into its potential. At the Centre for Nano Science and Engineering at IISc Bangalore, researchers have developed a chemical vapour deposition system that produces various 2D materials, including graphene. Tata Steel has also taken significant steps by growing graphene from steel surfaces and exploring its potential for plastic recycling.

Additionally, IIT Roorkee-incubated Log 9 has patented graphene-based ultracapacitors, demonstrating its promise in energy storage applications. Other innovative companies like Tirupati Graphite and Nanomatrix

India can make a mark in global graphene market

KEY STEPS. Dedicated industrial parks, boosting R&D funding and fostering international collaborations will add to the momentum



Materials are driving growth in graphene production and antiviral applications. Digital University Kerala, in partnership with Tata Steel and C-MET, has established the India Innovation Centre for Graphene, further contributing to research and innovation in this field.

These efforts highlight India's growing presence in sectors such as automotive, electronics, construction, and defence, despite ongoing challenges like limited R&D funding and fragmented infrastructure.

GROWTH POTENTIAL

The Indian graphene market is thriving and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 20.1 per cent between 2017 and 2027. This growth is driven by the expanding demand for graphene across various industries, particularly electronics, which holds the largest market share. The government's initiatives, such as Make in India and Production Linked Incentives, have helped boost the electronics sector, creating a solid foundation for graphene's application.

India is making strides in the field of graphene, with a growing number of institutions and companies tapping into its potential

However, while progress has been notable, patent filings related to graphene in India are still limited, with the majority of applications coming from foreign companies such as Lockheed, BASF, and PPG Industries, along with few domestic institutions like IITM and ARCL.

A significant achievement has been the granting of a patent to PCBL for its innovation in graphene-based rubber compounds, showing India's potential for innovation in this field (Patent No IN544320).

Despite these advancements, India's production remains a fraction of global leaders like China and Brazil. Market fragmentation, lack of industrial scalability, and skilled workforce are challenges India must overcome if it is to compete effectively on the global stage. Moreover, the high cost-to-volume ratio of producing high-grade graphene poses a formidable challenge, potentially leading to concentration of production in a few global hubs, similar to the semiconductor industry.

THE PATH AHEAD

India is on the cusp of an exciting opportunity in the global graphene market, but to fully capitalise on its momentum, a strategic approach is needed. Establishing dedicated graphene industrial parks, boosting R&D funding, and fostering international collaborations with

leading graphene innovators are key steps. A potential collaboration with the National Graphene Institute at the University of Manchester could further accelerate India's research capabilities. Additionally, forming national forums and a National Graphene Industry Alliance could also be instrumental in advocating for industry needs and providing incentives for industries to adopt graphene-based solutions.

Workshops and educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the unique benefits of graphene will play a pivotal role in spurring demand.

These initiatives will not only increase the production capacity of the industry but also create a sustainable, growth-oriented ecosystem around graphene. India's advancements in graphene research and development demonstrate its growing capabilities. With the right policies, collaborations, and investments, India has the potential to emerge as a strong player in the global graphene market, contributing to technological innovation and economic growth.

The future is bright, and India's proactive involvement in this emerging field will be crucial to shaping the next wave of technological evolution.

The writer is Assistant Director, Centre for Contemporary China Studies, Ministry of External Affairs. Views are personal

We must embrace frontier technologies quickly

They are catalysts for transformation, promising solutions to pressing challenges on a scale and speed hitherto unimaginable

Debjani Ghosh

India is at a tipping point. Our ambition to become a developed nation by 2047 calls for transformative, all-encompassing change. Incremental progress will no longer suffice in a world evolving at breakneck speed. Achieving this goal demands exponential transformation across every sector of our society and economy.

In any other era, this ambition might have been dismissed as unattainable. But today, we find ourselves at the threshold of a technological revolution powered by frontier technologies — an era where innovation is breaking barriers and redefining the limits of what is possible.

Frontier technologies exist at the dynamic intersection of science and technology, driving transformative impacts across sectors in ways previously unimaginable. Consider the example of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Awarded for advancements powered by artificial intelligence (AI), it underscores how AI breakthroughs are reshaping the landscape of innovation. The Nobel was given to the founders of AlphaFold, an AI tool that solved the structure of over 200 million proteins in a single year — a feat that would have taken humanity billions of years using traditional methods.

This groundbreaking achievement is fast-tracking drug discovery for diseases

like cancer and Alzheimer's, moving us closer to affordable, personalised medicine.

Imagine the impact of deploying such technologies across India's vast healthcare ecosystem — transforming diagnostics, improving outcomes, and making quality care accessible to every citizen, even in the most remote areas.

CHALLENGES IN AGRICULTURE

In agriculture, India faces twin pressures of population growth and climate change, which demand urgent innovation. Enter techniques like boosted breeding, a revolutionary technique that enables plants to inherit 100 per cent of their parents' genetic material — without any DNA editing. This innovation boosts crop yields and creates climate-resilient varieties, addressing food security challenges head-on.

Sealing such technologies could position India as the food basket of the world, achieving self-sufficiency while leading the charge in sustainable agriculture. India's renewable energy ambitions are equally bold. Frontier technologies are redefining the energy landscape, with the integration of solar, wind, and green hydrogen leading the charge. Green hydrogen, for example, is already decarbonising industries such as steel and shipping while providing a robust energy storage solution.

As India accelerates production, it stands on the cusp of becoming a global hub for renewable energy innovation,



INNOVATION. Getting a boost from AI

driving both economic growth and environmental resilience.

These technologies promise solutions to humanity's most pressing challenges — climate change, food shortages, and equitable healthcare delivery.

However, the rise of these technologies brings with it profound ethical and regulatory challenges. From potential misuse to the disruption of existing systems, the risks are real and must not be ignored.

To harness the full potential of frontier technologies, India must act decisively and early. By spotting these trends early, understanding their implications, and proactively shaping their development, we can ensure these technologies work for us — not against us. Early adoption of frontier technologies allows us to:

Shape standards and markets: Leading in technology means setting global standards, which ensures Indian

interests are prioritised.

Maximise economic impact: Frontier tech could contribute trillions to global GDP. If we act now, we can capture a significant share of this value.

Address risks proactively: Technologies like AI and quantum computing carry risks — from job displacement to national security threats. Acting early allows us to build robust frameworks that mitigate these risks. We must lead with a framework that is safe, inclusive, and responsible — one that balances opportunity with caution. And that's the main agenda of the NTTI's Frontier Tech hub.

Our goal is to partner with experts across industry, academia and government to accelerate India's readiness for innovation and adoption of frontier technologies.

The road to 2047 begins today. By 2035, the midpoint in our journey, we must have a clear vision for how frontier technologies will shape critical sectors. This requires:

Investing in R&D: India's current R&D spend is just 0.7 per cent of GDP — far below global benchmarks.

Building partnerships: Collaborating with industry, academia, and global leaders to foster a thriving innovation ecosystem.

Creating ethical frameworks: Establishing policies that ensure technologies are used responsibly and inclusively.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, NTTI Ayaz

BELOW THE LINE



welfare and job creation. With freebies taking centrestage, the question remains: Are these sustainable solutions or just pre-poll carrots? Delhi's voters must weigh handouts against long-term governance. Will promises win over performance? Only time — and the ballot box — will tell.

The politics of promises

As the Delhi assembly elections draw near, political parties are showering voters with grand promises. The Congress party has unveiled its ₹8,500 monthly 'Yuva Udaan Yojana' for unemployed youth, appealing to a crucial demographic. Meanwhile, AAP and BJP have their own mix of schemes, focused on women's

The battle of bungalows

The war of attrition between AAP and BJP just got an oquient twist! After being evicted from the infamous SheeshMahal — dubbed so for its alleged extravagant makeover — Delhi CM Atishi hit back, accusing the BJP of vendetta politics. While BJP leaders call it a PR stunt, AAP's Sanjay Singh threw down the

gauntlet, inviting everyone to tour the CM's bungalow to debunk "golden toilet" myths. He didn't stop there; he wants the doors of RajMahal (official residence of the PM) to be open for public scrutiny. The gloves are off, and the battle of bungalows is heating up. Who wins? Delhiites will decide. Meanwhile, the taxpayer might just sigh, "Not again!"

Workaholic woes

It seems the corporate elite is locked in a bizarre race to outdo each other in redefining "dedication". Narayana Murthy's 70-hour work-week suggestion was barely digested when L&T Chairman SN Subrahmanyam decided to up the ante with a

90-hour pitch. His reasoning? "How long can you stare at your wife?" Work hard, sure, but remember: life is not just about making time for work. And sometimes, a little extra "staring" at your loved ones might just be the break you need. **Thrust on ideology** Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy does not mince words. At the release of former Governor CV Vishvasagar Rao's book, UNWIK, he said, "Lack of ideology in politics is the main reason for the increasing party defections. Leaders are changing parties for posts. Students who followed the party ideology will be loyal to the political organisation forever. Revival of ideological

student politics is the need of the hour." "Government means the combination of opposition and ruling party with a strength of 119 MLAs. The role of the opposition is to point out the shortcomings in the government. However, we are losing the spirit of democracy," he said. Communist party and BJP legislators used to give advice and suggestions when the ruling party and opposition locked horns on some issue in the assembly, he said, adding, "My government is displaying democratic spirit. Not a single instance of expelling opposition members from the assembly was reported in the last 13 months."

Our Bureaus

TELANGANA



(Clockwise from left) Raj Gonds of Marlavai, a tribal village in Jainoor mandal of Telangana's Kumram Bheem Asifabad district; the grandson of Gussadi dance maestro late Kanaka Raju beating a traditional drum at his house in Marlavai village; Kanaka Venkatesh, a third generation teacher from a Raj Gond family, showing an exhibit at the photo gallery in the remote hamlet; (below) A tribal man sits by the busts of Austrian anthropologist couple Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf and Elizabeth in Marlavai. P. SRIDHAR

An enduring legacy of empowerment and change

An Austrian anthropologist couple's deep bond with the Adivasis of a remote tribal village of Telangana, and their groundbreaking work in anthropology catalysed transformative changes, from literacy programmes to land rights advocacy. Their immersive work not only preserved the Raj Gond community's heritage but also sparked progress that continues to uplift future generations, reports **P. Sridhar**

At the entrance of Marlavai, a village nestled deep in the tribal heartland of Telangana's Kumram Bheem Asifabad district, a commemorative arch reading 'Adivasula Aathmabandhu Haimendorf Betty Elizabeth' stands like a sentinel. At first glance, it might seem like an ordinary welcome, but it conceals the fascinating tale of an unlikely bond forged between a tribal community and an Austrian anthropologist who made this land his home.

Tucked away at the forest's edge, Marlavai was once a nondescript tribal village, located about 300 kilometres from the State capital Hyderabad. Life here followed a rhythm as old as the hills - simple, quiet, and steeped in the traditions of the Raj Gond tribe. That changed in the 1940s, during the reign of the Nizam, when Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf and his wife Elizabeth arrived here. Drawn by their passion for anthropology, the couple lived in a modest mud-walled, thatched-roof home, immersing themselves in the community's way of life for two years.

Visitors to this tranquil hamlet are drawn to the memorial that houses the tombs of Haimendorf and Elizabeth, lying side by side. Nearby, a photo gallery stands in their honour, offering glimpses into the lives of the couple who made Marlavai their second home.

Haimendorf's legacy continues to live through his pioneering contribution to promote literacy among the aboriginal people as an instrument of transformative change among the indigenous Raj Gond community. His deep commitment to their welfare earned him the title of 'Athma Bandhuva' - a soul friend, a revered figure whose influence is palpable even decades later.

A deep bond

His landmark tribal welfare initiatives were far ahead of their time. Through meticulous field studies conducted along with his wife Elizabeth in the 1940s, Haimendorf identified the socio-economic challenges faced by the Raj Gonds under the Nizam's rule in the erstwhile united Adilabad district. Their work went beyond academic interest, delving into actionable solutions to uplift the community, securing the couple a unique place in the hearts of Marlavai's people.

It leaves one to ponder: what drew this learned couple, hailing from privileged backgrounds in Austria, to a remote tribal village thousands of miles away? What made them not only embrace Marlavai as their second home but also choose its soil as their eternal resting place?

"It is the warmth of the Raj Gonds and the strategic location of Marlavai in the geographical centre of the erstwhile Adilabad district that made them reside in Marlavai in the 1940s," says Thodsam Chandu, the first doctor from the Raj Gond tribe in the State and a former District Medical and Health Officer of Adilabad.

He says he was in class VI when he first met Haimendorf in Tiryani, a village in Kumram Bheem Asifabad, in 1976. "He encouraged me to pursue higher education. I had the rare opportunity of meeting him later while pursuing an MBBS course in Hyderabad during the 1980s," he reminisces.

In 2012, Dr. Chandu witnessed a poignant moment when Haimendorf's family arrived in Marlavai to enshrine his ashes alongside his wife Eli-



The real tribute to Haimendorf would be to set up Teacher Training Centres and Vocational Skill Development Training Centres, among other institutes of higher learning, in the Agency areas.

PURKA BAPU RAO,
District president, Adivasi Hakukulu Porava Samiti

zabeth's in the village they had cherished. Reflecting on this, he describes the couple's profound connection to Marlavai as a transformative chapter for the tribal communities of the erstwhile composite Adilabad districts.

Haimendorf's contributions were monumental. His painstaking research led to the establishment of Teacher Training Centres in Marlavai and Ginnedhari villages under the 'Gond Education Scheme', an initiative that empowered Adivasi youth through education. He also championed land rights for tribal families, facilitating the redistribution of nearly 1,80,000 acres of forest land - a lifeline for countless families. Remarkably, Haimendorf achieved fluency in the Gondi language, while Elizabeth, fondly referred to as Jangu Bai by local Adivasi women, became a beloved figure among the community.

Kanaka Tukaram, son of the late Gussadi dance maestro Kanaka Raju, gestures toward the sprawling banyan tree near the Government Ashram High School in Marlavai. "This is where Haimendorf once held court," he says, recalling the days when Adivasis from distant villages gathered under its shade to converse with the anthropologist. The tree, like the village itself, stands as a silent witness to an extraordinary relationship that bridged continents, cultures, and centuries.

"My son, Yadav Rao, is determined to carry forward the cultural legacy of his grandfather in preserving the iconic Gussadi dance for posterity," Kanaka Tukaram declares with pride.

The photo gallery set up in memory of the famous ethnographer in the village has a rich collection of pictures depicting the milestones of his extraordinary journey through the tribal heartlands and capture his efforts to understand and

uplift the Gonds, from 1942 to 1944.

"The names of Haimendorf and Elizabeth will forever remain etched in our hearts," says Kanaka Venkatesh, a third-generation teacher from a Raj Gond family.

Shaping the future

For Venkatesh, the connection to Haimendorf's legacy is personal. His grandfather, Kanaka Hanu master, was among the first teachers trained at the teachers' training centre established by Haimendorf in 1942. Inspired by that, Venkatesh and his family have continued the tradition of teaching. His father, Sone Rao, and sister, Anuradha, are educators too.

Haimendorf facilitated tribal darbars at Keslapur and Jodeghat, providing a platform for Adivasis to voice their grievances directly, explains M.Lingu, general secretary of the Haimendorf Youth Association in Marlavai. "That paved the way for the concept of bringing governance to the doorsteps of people."

Haimendorf's assignment to conduct an intensive field study of Adilabad's tribal region was pivotal. It came at a time when unrest among Adivasis was at its peak following the martyrdom of Kumram Bheem, the legendary tribal leader who fought for Adivasi rights with the rallying cry of 'Jal, jangal, aur jameen' (water, forest, and land) in September 1940. The Nizam's regime, eager to understand and quell the discontent,

sought Haimendorf's expertise, says an elderly villager from Marlavai, requesting anonymity. In recognition of his efforts, Haimendorf was appointed adviser to the Nizam's Government for Tribes and Backward Classes. The role helped him sensitise authorities to the land issues plaguing Adivasis and push for solutions. His initiative resulted in the allotment of title deeds to thousands of tribal families, providing a semblance of security and mitigating longstanding land disputes to a significant extent.

THODSAM CHANDU,
First doctor from the Raj Gond tribe in Telangana

Despite these strides, challenges persist. "There's still a long way to go," the elderly villager

remarks, adding that Adivasis need better access to higher education, protection from exploitation by non-aboriginal people, and stronger safeguards for their interests.

The ashes of Haimendorf, who passed away in London in 1995, were ceremoniously enshrined beside the tomb of his wife Elizabeth in Marlavai in 2012, in adherence to the customs of the Raj Gond tribe.

Such was his bond with the village that he named his son Nicholas after Athram Lachu Patel, the village headman at the time, recalls Patel's grandson, Athram Bhagwantha Rao, quoting the village elders.

Sitting in his modest mud-walled home in Marlavai, Athram reminisces about how the legendary Gussadi dance master, Kanaka Raju, often spoke of the renowned anthropologist's deep affection for their village.

Haimendorf's book titled 'The Raj Gonds of Adilabad - A Peasant Culture of Deccan' chronicles his immersive research work on tribal culture, customs, myths, economy and the socio-economic conditions of the aboriginal people, remarks Manohar, a teacher working in a tribal welfare educational institution in Uttoor (Adilabad district).

His ethnographic monographs provide a meticulous account of tribal customs, traditional practices, marriage rituals, and funeral rites, offering a valuable window into Adivasi culture.

Gaps persist despite efforts

However, a large chunk of the Adivasi population in Adilabad's tribal heartland continues to be deprived of access to higher education, notes Purka Bapu Rao, district president of the Adivasi Hakukulu Porata Samiti (Tudum Debbu).

Bapu Rao laments the lack of a university in the tribal-dominated district and the defunct state of the Teacher Training Centre (TTC) in Uttoor. Access to technical and higher education for aboriginal people holds the key to empowering them and enabling them to defend their rights, he emphasises.

"The real tribute to Haimendorf would be to set up TTCs and Vocational Skill Development Training Centres among other institutes of higher learning in the Agency areas," he opines, underscoring the urgent need for educational infrastructure to honour the anthropologist's enduring contributions.

Declining minor forest produce has cast a shadow on the livelihoods of Adivasis, forcing them to rely on rain-fed agriculture and tenant farming for sustenance.

Resolving the long-pending podu (shifting cultivation) land issues and granting title deeds to eligible Adivasi farmers under the Recognition of Forest Rights (FRFR) Act is crucial, the Adivasi leader points out.

He underscores the need for strict enforcement of laws such as the Land Transfer Regulation Act of 1970 to curb the unchecked influx of non-tribals and prevent tribal land alienation.

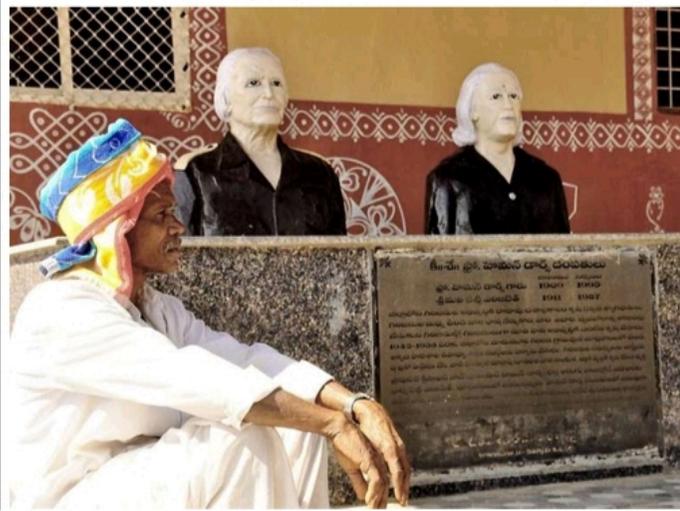
The Government Ashram High School in Marlavai, with a student strength of 253, is a beacon of education for tribal children. A digital library is also being set up near the school, says Srinivas, Assistant Tribal Development Officer at the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) in Jainoor.

The ITDA operates 133 Ashram Schools across the erstwhile undivided Adilabad district, addressing the educational needs of tribal children in Kumram Bheem Asifabad, Adilabad, Nirmal, and Mancheril districts.

A host of events, including cultural competitions in Gussadi dance and other tribal art forms, along with a blood donation camp, have been lined up to commemorate the 38th death anniversary of Elizabeth this weekend, in Marlavai.

Elizabeth, also a renowned ethnographer, died on January 11, 1987, in Hyderabad while Haimendorf passed away in London on June 11, 1995.

The couple's groundbreaking research and relentless efforts to preserve tribal culture and heritage have left an indelible legacy among tribal communities across South Asia, points out a village elder.



MADHYA PRADESH



12 trucks loaded with toxic waste from the Union Carbide factory parked inside Ramky Group's Pithampur Industrial Waste Management facility. A.M.FARUQUI

Bhopal's 40-year-old past is Pithampur's paranoid future

On the morning of January 2, 12 trucks arrived in Pithampur industrial town near Indore, carrying 358 tonnes of toxic waste from the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy. **Mehul Malpani** reports on how people in the town, allegedly already living with ecological problems, are protesting against the waste disposal

It's close to sundown and a family is gathering in the courtyard of their home near the ancient Bokneshwar Mahadev temple in Tarpura village, Pithampur town of Madhya Pradesh's Dhar district. The Puri family members have been priests at the temple for generations. There's a discussion about the town's tense atmosphere, and the matriarch asks if she and her family of at least 15 will die. Their home is opposite an industrial waste-treatment plant.

On January 3, the usually peaceful town of Pithampur, about 35 km from Madhya Pradesh's financial capital Indore, erupted in protest. People across genders and ages were out on the streets of what is one of the largest industrial areas in the State. As the day progressed, two people attempted self-immolation. The next day, an angry group of protesters pelted stones and tried to march to the waste-treatment plant.

It is now a few days past the protests and life in the densely-populated town has resumed its regular pace, with markets open, roads full of traffic and trucks honking. However, in Tarpura village, located on a *pahadi* (hill) on Pithampur's outskirts, the number of security personnel grows larger closer to the plant.

The people's anger is directed towards the Madhya Pradesh government's plan to dispose 358 tonnes of toxic chemical waste at the Pithampur Industrial Waste Management Private Limited, owned by the Ramky Group. The waste was generated from a disaster 40 years ago.

In the early winter of 1984, on the intervening night of December 2 and 3, M.P.'s capital Bhopal woke up to a nightmare. The toxic gas, methyl isocyanate (MIC), leaked from the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) factory, killing thousands. The health impact is still felt among those who live here. The waste had been lying at the now-abandoned factory in Bhopal for four decades.

While small protests in the industrial town, as well as in Indore, had been going on since the shifting of waste gained steam around the end of December 2024, the anxiety grew, bursting into protests against the disposal there. On the morning of January 2, 12 trucks carried spill-and-leak-free containers loaded with the waste to the facility in Pithampur.

While the Central Government estimates, based on a report by the Officer of the Welfare Commissioner, Bhopal Gas Victims, say that 5,479 people have died due to the disaster as of 2022, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activists have claimed that the numbers surpass 15,000. Government estimates also show that while thousands suffered physical disabilities in the aftermath of the accident, it has also had health implications on more than 5 lakh people over the decades.

The worry and the trauma that Bhopal has been living with has travelled to Pithampur. Fear, fuelled by fake news has made people anxious about another disaster. The refrain is: we will not let Bhopal's waste be burnt in Pithampur.

Waste on the way

From their terrace, Vijay Puri, 24, the matriarch's grandson, and other family members point at the plant and to the police barricades outside. He reiterates his grandmother's concern: "Why has the government brought Bhopal's waste here?"



The consequences of this disposal may not be visible immediately but over the years there may be leakages from the buried residue during the rains. If that happens, it is going to pollute the ground-water

RAJESH CHOUDHARY
Lawyer and activist

He and his family draw attention to a statement by Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav after the waste reached the town on January 2. "He claimed that the toxicity of the waste lasts 25 years, so now it is not harmful. If it is not harmful, why can't they just burn it in Bhopal? What was the need to bring it here with so much security and theatrics?" Vijay asks.

The waste was packed and loaded into the containers by over 100 specially-trained workers who did 30-45 minute shifts to avoid long exposures. On the night of January 1, the trucks left the Union Carbide premises with a heavy security cavalcade via a 250-km green traffic corridor.

The government's actions have come after the Madhya Pradesh High Court, hearing a 20-year-old case seeking the disposal of the waste, pulled up the State authorities in a December 3, 2024, order. It directed them to take action within four weeks, to remove and dispose of the waste that had been in the factory.

Due to the public outcry following the movement of the waste, the State Government filed an affidavit before the HC, seeking six weeks' time to instil confidence in people. On January 6, the court gave the government the time, also directing the media not to publish "any fake news".

Questions and answers

In Pithampur and nearby villages have many questions, including whether the waste disposal will be done safely. Swatantra Kumar Singh, director of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy Relief and Rehabilitation Department, says it will be incinerated at 1,200 degrees Celsius. "A batch of 90 kg will be incinerated, after which the toxicity feedback rate will be examined. If it is within limits, the waste will be incinerated in batches of 270 kg and will take about three months. Otherwise the process will be slowed, and may take up to nine months," he says.

It will be supervised by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and the Madhya Pradesh Pollution Control Board (MPPCB). The smoke, Swatantra says, will be released into the air through a four-layer filtration system and the re-

sidue, expected to be around 900 tonnes, will be fully covered with a two-layer membrane and buried under a landfill site.

The government has also highlighted a Supreme Court-directed trial in 2015 in which 10 tonnes of the same waste from the UCIL factory was incinerated at the treatment plant. It was after this trial and submission of a success report that the SC had first issued directions for the incineration of the remaining waste at Pithampur.

The people in Pithampur are not convinced. "What will happen if even 10% of what happened in Bhopal happens here? Our children will die in 10-15 years," says Lakshmi Sahu, 28, who runs a tea shop opposite the Pithampur bus stand, the epicentre of the January 3 protests. Residents of Sagar district, Lakshmi and her husband, who is a vegetable vendor, moved to Pithampur about eight years ago for work and are now raising their two children here. "It's not easy for us to keep our shops shut for two days but we did that during the protests to save our children's future," she says, as her five-year-old daughter plays.

Vijay shows an old well near the Bokneshwar Mahadev temple, now covered with a grill. Several people in the village say that the well was a major source of water for them before the authorities covered it after the 2015 trial disposal of the 10-tonne UCIL waste. "During the monsoon, when the water pours onto the landfill sites, a foul smell also spreads in the locality," Vijay says.

Rumours are rife

The government and the police blame misinformation, and say that people are being paranoid. Dhar Superintendent of Police Manoj Kumar Singh says that the situation in the area is now peaceful and that various departments, including the police, are working to dispel misinformation. Seven cases have been filed in connection with the protests, and the SP says they are checking surveillance footage to identify miscreants.

The stone-pelting at the treatment facility on January 4 morning was also a result of a rumour that spread in the area, an officer says. A social media message claimed that one of the trucks

parked within its premises had disappeared, disposal of waste had begun, and some workers inside the plant had fainted.

The police have arrested three men in connection with the rumour and the district authorities have issued several messages regarding the waste disposal process. Dhar Additional SP Indrajeet Bakabhar says that the public were pacified only after community representatives and activists were taken inside the factory to see that all 12 trucks were sealed.

In Tarpura village, Ram Prasad, 38, a vegetable vendor says that ever since the waste arrived there, several people from the village would climb onto their rooftops and count the trucks. Social media is rife with 'content creation'. An Instagram video shows a girl telling her mother to pack an oxygen cylinder before going to Pithampur because "there will be no oxygen there due to the burning of toxic waste".

The fear around the disposal of the waste has caused panic among migrant workers too. Inder Sharma, a labour contractor from Bihar's Khagaria district, says that nearly 70-80 workers he had brought have left for their hometowns.

Decades-long mistrust

In 2008, 40 kg of Union Carbide's toxic waste was transported to Pithampur in the dead of night, during a curfew in Indore. This had caused protests at the time. Since the early 2010s, the people of Pithampur have been opposing the plans to burn the waste in their town, three years after the Gujarat government refused to allow incineration at a facility in Ankleshwar. The current task of disposal has been handed to the Ramky Group's plant for ₹126 crore.

Behind the anger and fear of Bhopal's waste is also the scepticism of the "Ramky factory" as it is known locally. Apart from Tarpura, various villages or localities — such as Dhamnad, Chirakhn, Akoliya, Bardari, and Silotiya — located around the plant, claim they have been adversely impacted by it. Residents allege that the residue of the industrial waste at landfill sites and two drains from the factory have contaminated local water bodies and the groundwater.

Rajesh Bhariya, 36, a farmer in Tarpura, says that even borewells are not used to water the crops in the village and that farmers rely only on dew for moisture in the winter crops. "The groundwater is red, almost like petrol. If you use it in crops, your current crop will go bad and it will also affect the yield of the next crop," he says.

He points to the chickpea field where his mother, Sarju Bai, 70, is working. "You can see the size of the plants. They are much smaller than usual, because of the lack of water," he says.

His mother intervenes to talk about a well in the valley behind her fields. "We used to drink water from it until six to eight years ago. Now look at its condition," she says. The well has a layer of foam on its surface. A drain from the plant flows less than 5 m away. Some 100 m further into the valley, a larger drain flows.

In Chirakhn village, which falls under Indore district, a group of men have gathered under a tree at the panchayat office. Here, they don't have regular drinking water, the supply of which goes to other villages nearby. Maniram Patel, 72, says, "You will see black spots or some kind of infection on the skin of most people in the village. Sometimes when we are forced to drink water from borewells, we immediately get mouth ulcers."

Dhar district's Chief Medical and Health officer Dr. Rakesh Shinde, however, says, "To check the claims of increase in diseases, we are conducting door-to-door surveys in the eight villages near the facility. We have so far found nine cases of oral cancer but there is no evidence that suggests a link with the waste disposal (at Ramky factory)." He adds that cases of skin diseases have also not been found in staggering numbers.

Srinivas Dwidivedi, MPCCB's regional officer in Indore, who also has charge of Dhar, denies the claims of water contamination and says, "Water samples are collected from tubewells in Tarpura village every three months and there is no contamination." However, he says they are yet to check the Bokneshwar temple well.

Keeping the fire burning

While various government departments are working to win the public's trust, activists are trying to ensure that the intensity of the public outrage does not dip until the next hearing in the High Court on February 18.

Rajesh Choudhary, a lawyer and activist, whose intervention petition was accepted by the HC during the January 6 hearing, is now gathering documents related to the case.

"The consequences of this disposal may not be visible immediately, but over the years there may be leakages from the buried residue during the rains. If that happens, it is going to pollute the groundwater," he says, claiming that some of the drains from the treatment plant and industries fall into two water bodies — the Kishanpura lake and Yashwanth Sagar reservoir — both of which are in Indore district and are major sources of water in the area.

Back in Bhopal, which has been a battle ground for all issues related to the 1984 gas tragedy, activists extend their support to the protesters in Pithampur and reiterate their demand that the waste be disposed of by the Dow Chemical Company, a United States-based chemicals manufacturer which acquired UCIL in 2001.

"We don't want any other place to suffer like Bhopal has," says Rashida Bee, a survivor of the tragedy, who runs the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationery Karamchari Sangh, an organisation working for the survivors.

Activists accuse the government of "fooling" people by taking out the 358-tonne toxic waste. They say the "real waste" is buried underground. Rachna Dhingra of the Bhopal Group for Information and Action, an NGO, says that with each monsoon, the toxic contents of the waste buried underground and near a pond close to the UCIL factory is further spreading and contaminating water in a larger area.



Lakshmi Sahu at her tea shop in Pithampur. Her family moved from the district of Sagar about eight years ago for better

FIRST COLUMN

THE CHAINS OF DEPRIVATION

The feeling of deprivation dominates most of us, leaving many of us caught in an endless cycle of unfulfilled desires



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

Feeling of deprivation dominates life, one should not be surprised by this statement and this applies to all of us with some exceptions. You have guessed it. These fortunate souls are devotees of God. Let me substantiate what I have stated. Do you agree that we have many unfulfilled desires; all of us have? Some of these are deep desires; those remain unfulfilled throughout our lives. The first one is to have plenty of money. What is plenty? Yes, it varies from person to person, but don't we change the quantum? I have done it throughout my life. What I had hoped for when I was a child has been exceeded many times over, but I still feel that more is what will really please me. By the way, I am one of those fortunate souls, whose needs have always been fulfilled, barring a few short spans. An extreme example is that of having a cycle and desiring a scooter. Once that is obtained, a car will be nice to have. This goes on till one gets to desire a private jet. Then, come sexual feelings. From childhood, these feelings are never far away from our thoughts. And these are fanned by what we are exposed to by ads and what we choose to associate with like going on internet. Even children do so and giggle with friends. One may question why this feeling is so widespread. Because the creation can only be sustained by procreation. Even Lord Krishna has allowed this activity when He stated in the Bhagavad-Geeta, "I am passion in beings, according to religious principles," (7.11) But what human beings do not even animals do, i.e. make sex an overpowering urge. Even marriage does not satisfy it, though one feels in childhood that it would. Because sexual acts have a purpose, and cannot be made a burning desire.



The third enemy of us human beings are fearful thoughts. The underlying reason is our being small, very small in the overall context. We are also mostly ignorant, i.e., do not know what is good for us. Our intelligence is mostly flawed. There is spiritual intelligence, which is what the Bhagavad-Geeta is all about. Don't we avoid reading it? Because it will expose how little we know. This feeling of safety can only come from God, because only He can ensure it. Unfortunately, many of us avoid taking shelter of God, even though we know about Him.

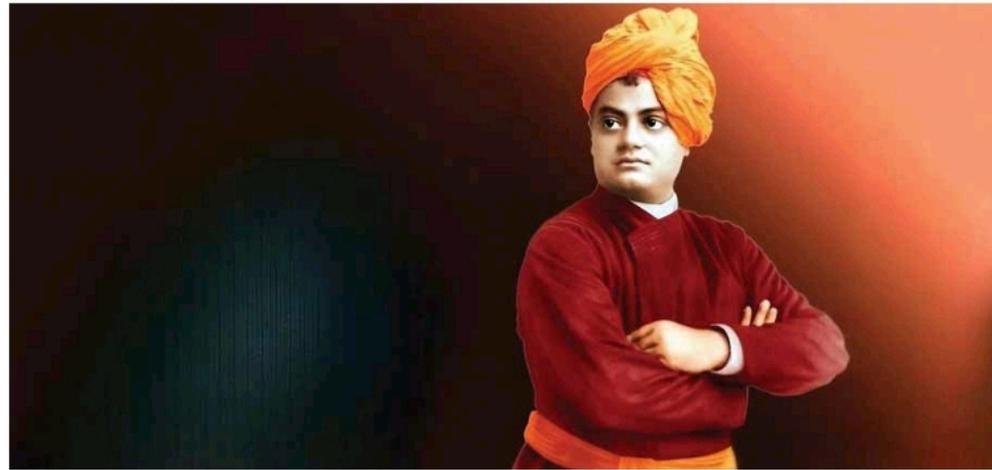
Why don't we? Whatever we may say we really don't have much faith in God. Most of us feel that God is superior to us but not someone we must take shelter of, though God is everything. (7.19) Then, spiritual practices are considered utterly boring. Do we feel that they should be enjoyable like watching television? They are 'tapa' (austerities), as they should be. Our deeply embedded emotions like greed, lust and enviousness would not let us take shelter of God. The feeling that we can manage on our own also defeats us, even though we keep failing repeatedly in whatever we wish to achieve. But everyone is not unintelligent. Many do take shelter of God and would never have second thoughts. Isn't this proof enough that they must be getting rewarded. Yes, God begins to guide and help them. One would know what is really desirable like peace, not unlimited sense enjoyment. God is so kind that He provides what we really need and He protects what is worth protecting. (9.22) God only can extricate us from our suffering caused by our past impious acts. (18.58) The list goes on, but one will only experience them if one gets started. (The writer is a spiritual teacher, views are personal)

Vivekananda: A vision for an inclusive world

As we celebrate Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary, it is crucial to revisit his teachings, not just as historical artefacts but as living ideas relevant for today



AMAL CHANDRA



Swami Vivekananda, born Narendranath Datta on January 12, 1863, is one of India's most remarkable spiritual leaders and thinkers. His birth anniversary is more than a mere occasion to honour his memory; it is an invitation to reflect on his profound legacy and the enduring relevance of his ideas. While his role in revitalising Hinduism and introducing Indian philosophy to the Western world is well-documented, some aspects of Vivekananda's thought remain less explored yet deeply significant. In a world grappling with numerous social, ethical, and philosophical challenges, his teachings serve as a quintessential guide. Vivekananda was much more than a spiritual icon; he was a pragmatic philosopher who firmly believed in the application of spiritual principles to practical life. His famous assertion that 'service to humans is service to God' exemplifies his view that spirituality should be lived, not merely theorised. He encouraged people to engage in social service, emphasising that true religion manifests in the form of compassion, kindness and action. This perspective feels especially resonant in our modern times, where there is often a disconnection between spiritual practices and real-world issues. Vivekananda's message is a call to integrate spirituality with daily life, urging individuals to act with empathy and responsibility toward others. One of the most forward-thinking aspects of Vivekananda's philosophy was his vision of education. He was deeply critical of the colonial education system, which he believed produced clerks rather than thinkers and visionaries. For Vivekananda, education was not merely about accumulating knowledge but about developing the whole person—intellectually, morally and spiritually. He emphasized the need for self-reliance and character-building, which he saw as the true objectives of education. In today's educa-



HE WAS A PATRIOT WHO DEEPLY LOVED INDIA, YET HIS NATIONALISM WAS INCLUSIVE, ROOTED IN THE CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL WEALTH OF THE NATION RATHER THAN IN AGGRESSION OR EXCLUSION

tional discourse, which increasingly values holistic development and critical thinking, Vivekananda's ideas are strikingly prescient. His approach encourages educators and policymakers to think beyond conventional curricula, fostering environments that nurture creativity, ethics, and personal growth. At a time when women's rights were severely restricted, he advocated for their education and empowerment, highlighting the significant role women could play in shaping society. He often drew from India's spiritual heritage, pointing to historical examples of women who had achieved great intellectual and spiritual heights. In a world that continues to struggle with gender disparities, Vivekananda's vision offers a timeless reminder of the importance of creating opportunities for all, irrespective of gender. His thoughts encourage us to work towards dismantling barriers and fostering a society where everyone can achieve their potential. Another fascinating aspect of Vivekananda's thought was his balanced approach to nationalism and internationalism. He was a patriot who deeply loved India, yet his nationalism was inclusive, rooted in the cultural and spiritual wealth of the nation rather than in aggression or exclusion. His famous speech at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 exemplified his belief in the unity of humanity. In his view, true patriotism did not mean hostility toward others but an appreciation of one's culture while respecting and learning from others. This approach is particu-

larly relevant today, as we navigate the complexities of national pride in a globalised world. Vivekananda's inclusive nationalism provides a framework for fostering pride in one's heritage while promoting global solidarity. Less commonly discussed, yet equally significant, is Vivekananda's respect for science and rational inquiry. Unlike many of his contemporaries who saw religion and science as oppositional forces, Vivekananda believed they could complement each other. He encouraged the cultivation of a scientific temper, advocating for a worldview that embraced both rationality and spirituality. His open-mindedness toward scientific discoveries and his belief in the power of reason present a balanced perspective that is incredibly relevant in today's age of rapid technological advancement. Vivekananda's stance reminds us that faith and reason need not be in conflict but can coalesce to enrich our understanding of the world. Vivekananda was also a pioneer of interfaith dialogue, advocating for the respect and understanding of all religious traditions. He saw the diversity of faiths not as a barrier but as a testament to the multifaceted nature of truth. His inclusive attitude towards different religions stands as a powerful counter to the sectarian violence and religious intolerance that plague many societies today. Vivekananda's vision of interfaith harmony reminds us of the need for empathy and respect in a world often divided along religious lines. His approach encourages us to find common ground and to cel-

brate the richness that diverse spiritual traditions bring to humanity. The legacy of Swami Vivekananda is multifaceted. He was a monk, a philosopher, a nationalist, and a reformer, whose ideas continue to inspire millions worldwide. His teachings invite us to reflect on our personal and collective responsibilities, urging us to work towards a world that is more just, compassionate, and inclusive. Vivekananda's emphasis on the practical application of spiritual principles, disagreement with the imposition of vegetarianism, advocacy for education that nurtures the whole person, progressive views on gender, inclusive nationalism, and respect for both science and interfaith dialogue, all remain remarkably relevant. His vision offers solutions to many of the challenges we face today, from educational reforms to gender equality, from religious harmony to ethical living. As we celebrate his birth anniversary, it is crucial to revisit Swami Vivekananda's teachings, not just as historical artefacts but as living ideas that can guide us toward a better future. His message is clear: 'Arise, awake'—true greatness lies in the ability to apply timeless principles to the needs of the present, to foster a world where humanity can thrive in all its diversity. Swami Vivekananda's life and work remain a beacon, illuminating the path to a world that values compassion, justice, and the collective wellbeing of all its inhabitants. (The writer is a policy analyst, political commentator, and columnist. Views expressed are personal)

The future of turmeric exports: India's path to securing global market dominance

By adapting to domestic production practices with the changing global demand and fostering a collaborative ecosystem, India can secure its future exports in the global market

For centuries, India has been known as the 'Land of Spices', producing and exporting a wide variety of products, renowned for their distinctive flavour, aroma and health benefits. One such spice is turmeric, known as the 'Golden Spice of India', which has spread through trade beyond South Asia to different parts of the world. Today, turmeric is cultivated in many South Asian countries, China, Africa and the Caribbean and has multiple end-uses spanning industries such as food, condiment, dye, nutraceuticals, cosmetics and medicine. With global demand rising and growing demand for high-quality curcumin for preventive healthcare, sever-



ARPITA MUKHERJEE

slow decline, with new exporting countries like Fiji coming up. Global demand is also shifting towards turmeric, which has high curcumin content and organic varieties. Developed markets like the EU and the USA are emerging as key centres for the consumption of high-quality turmeric that meets stringent sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) and quality standards. The share of the USA in the imports of turmeric increased from 13.80 per cent in 2017 to 18.98 per cent in 2023, making it the first largest importer followed by India. We continue to import significant amounts of turmeric (especially dry), mainly from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar. Much of our



exports are in raw and powder format, where processing and further product developments are done in markets like the European Union (EU). Within the EU, countries like the Netherlands and Germany have become key exporters along with other countries like the USA. Some reasons for lower value addition in India include the inability to supply more than 10 per cent of the global requirement of turmeric with higher than 5 per cent curcumin, high use of pesticides and insecticides, lack of market knowledge and limited R&D and innovative products. The country must evolve from just a raw turmeric supplier by innovating, ensur-

ing quality, and adopting sustainable and good agricultural practices to maintain India's global dominance and move up the global value chain. Several companies have made strides in this direction by producing curcumin extracts for pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals. Products like Vicco Turmeric Cream combine turmeric with modern cosmetics, linking Ayurvedic

traditions with contemporary personal care. High-curcumin variants, such as Lakadong turmeric, are gaining international recognition for their medicinal benefits. The number of Geographical Indication (GI) turmeric has increased to six as of December 31, 2024. However, to achieve the Indian Government's objective of making India the global hub for turmeric production and to meet the Ministry of Commerce and Industry's projected target of USD1 billion by 2030, further action is required. Establishing a National Turmeric Board, announced by the Prime Minister, is one such step towards consolidating and implementing com-

prehensive regulations governing the entire turmeric value chain, imperative to enhance the sector's global competitiveness. Additionally, although the standards of domestically produced turmeric align with international regulations, such as the CODEX, global turmeric users require higher curcumin content, with sustainable farming practices and for that targeted R&D is needed to improve the curcumin content of the produce. Export processes and compliance requirements need to be streamlined and simplified. Signing mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) for standards and organic may help. For example, the MRA for organic products signed between India and Taiwan in 2024, is a step in the right direction. Similar MRAs need to be signed between India and its key turmeric export destinations like the EU and the USA, which will reduce the cost and time of certifications and testing. By aligning domestic production practices with the changing global demand and fostering a collaborative ecosystem, India can secure its future exports as a reliable and preferred supplier of high-quality turmeric in the global market. (The writer is professor, at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. With inputs from Eshana Mukherjee. Views are personal)