

## Editorial



## A legend, made

Gukesh is first among a cohort of young Indian chess geniuses to reach pinnacle

Eighteen-year-old D. Gukesh has history by becoming the 18th world chess champion, which will make him the youngest to do so and emulating the doyen of Indian chess, Viswanathan Anand, the only other Indian to achieve the honour. Gukesh managed his feat after a blunder made by the reigning world champion, Ding Liren of China, on the 55th move, R2, in the 14th and final classical game of the match. The game was headed towards a draw, but with Gukesh pressing for an advantage in a rook-bishop-pawn endgame and having an extra pawn, it took just one misstep for Ding to lose his crown. Ding was in poor form prior to the match but the Chinese GM proved his mettle by winning the first game, setting up a strong contest. Gukesh won Game 4 to tie the match and after a series of draws, Gukesh played an enterprising Game 11 to take the lead; Ding fought back brilliantly to tie the match again with a strong win in Game 12. The strategies of both players were evident. Gukesh played strong openings and exhibited tenacity in trying to gain advantages in near equal positions as the games progressed. Ding's plan seemed to be to secure a stalemate in the classical games and to drag the match into the shorter rapid and if need be, blitz formats, and to use his strength in terms of experience. Sticking to his strategy of pushing through equal positions, Gukesh had the last laugh.

The Chennai-born Grandmaster's mental toughness and wisdom beyond his age have been his calling card. His steady rise was due to his dedication and his accelerated path to glory was helped by the work done by his seconds – Gukesh revealed their names only after the match – besides the mentoring by GM Anand's West-Bridge Anand Chess Academy. His versatile game, built on an innate ability to calculate moves deeply on the board, kept him in good stead against his much experienced opponent. The surge of young Indian talent – to the echelons of world chess in recent years – compatriot GMs Arjun Erigaisi and R. Praggnanandhaa are in the top 15 along with Gukesh – raised expectations of another Indian world champion in chess. The youngsters have pushed each other to do their best. Gukesh won a strong Candidates tournament to emerge as Ding's challenger and his prowess was evident following his individual gold winning performances in the Chennai and Budapest Chess Olympiads, the latter being India's first gold in the team event. His next frontier would be to reach the heights scaled by the world's strongest chess player, Magnus Carlsen. Gukesh becoming the world champion would also motivate his Indian compatriots and will add a fillip to the growth of modern chess as a sport and vocation in the country of its birth.

## Price worries

The inflation trajectory suggests a rate cut may remain elusive for some time

From a 14-month high of 6.2% in October, consumer price inflation moderated to 5.5% last month. Much of this minor respite stems from a decline in the inflation rate of some food items. For vegetables, it cooled from a 57-month peak of 42.2% to just under 30%, while foodgrain prices rose at the slowest pace in 28 months, and pulses cooled to just over 5% after a prolonged spell of double-digit spikes. Despite these pockets of relief, overall food inflation remained sharp at over 9% for the third straight month, with edible oil prices firming up 13.3%, the highest in 30 months as a global price spike has coincided with an import duty hike by the Centre. It is no surprise coconut oil prices are up over 42%, even as items such as garlic (85.1%), potato (66.7%), cauliflower and cabbage (well over 40%), are pinching consumers. While recent conversations about the economy have focused on decelerating urban demand, the price rise trend is hitting rural consumers harder with close to 6% inflation in November as well as higher food prices.

Despite assertions by the government that food prices are volatile and should be ignored for monetary policy purposes when growth is stumbling, higher spends on meals are spilling into other items' prices. Manufacturing and services firms have reported intensifying cost pressures last month compelling them to hike prices at the highest pace in 12 years. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which had originally estimated October-December inflation to average 4.8%, raised it to 5.7% at its monetary policy review last week. This implies inflation this month – which will be the last data before the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meets next – could still be high at 5.4%. This would be well above the central bank's median target of 4% – the MPC now expects average inflation to attain that level only by the second quarter of 2025-26. The government, whose clamour for an interest rate cut was ignored by the MPC last week, may be hoping its new appointee at the helm of Mint Street, another Finance Ministry insider, may oblige with more urgent and bigger rate cuts to support growth. While some assert a rate cut in February's MPC meet is virtually cemented, going by current trends, the data may not back such a move as growth might recover a bit and inflation may cool a tad more, thus diminishing any urgency. That the Centre would have presented its Budget 2025-26 by the next MPC meet, may help the rate cut case going forward. If it demonstrates fiscal prudence and steps to ease citizens' living costs.

## Pakistan at the UNSC, the points of its compass

On January 1, 2025, Pakistan enters the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as an elected non-permanent member for a two-year term – its eighth.

Pakistan's entry is significant in that, effectively, half of the 10 elected members of UNSC will be from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Those elected for 2025-26 were Denmark, Greece, Pakistan, Panama and Somalia. They will replace Ecuador, Japan, Malta, Mozambique and Switzerland as their terms end on December 31. The new members will join Algeria, Guyana, the Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone and Slovenia, who are existing non-permanent members.

Afghanistan will be a natural focus with Pakistan sure to use its Council stint to repair its frosty relations with the Taliban. In this, it has Russia and China to readily assist it in the diplomatic rehabilitation of the Taliban. With the OIC countries, one hopes that the Council gets the support it needs for a ceasefire in Gaza to salvage from the rubble whatever is left of the Palestinian cause and stabilise the region. Peacekeeping is another of Pakistan's stated priorities given its role as a major troop contributing country for UN peacekeeping. However, Pakistan's default mode will be to focus on India.

## What India should expect

India-Pakistan relations are still strained. Even if one assumes that some backchannels are busy working the lines, it is given that enhanced bilateral cooperation does not necessarily result in enhanced multilateral cooperation, especially in the UN. This is true not just of Pakistan but also of countries India considers as "close friends", even in the Global South. For example, some OIC countries with which India has very close bilateral relations, line up behind Pakistani drafts in the UN which have anti-India language. They even argue – ingeniously – that the offensive language is not aimed at India. Fortunately, there is help usually from unexpected friends in such groups, enabling India to tide over the issues successfully.

To state the obvious, India should be prepared for Pakistan's anti-India initiatives in the UNSC. There was a brief period in 2021 when there was some synergy between the Missions of both countries in the UN when both nations were in the Council, but that was an aberration. Pakistan is back to its multilateral default mode of being anti-India. And in this, it now has a more assertive "iron brother" in China offering it an "all-weather friendship". Pakistan's first stated priority is to "combat terrorism", which it hopes will absorb it of the tag of "terrorist state". It will also try – as it



**T.S. Tirumurti**  
was Permanent Representative/ Ambassador of India to the United Nations, New York (2021-22) and President of United Nations Security Council for August 2021

always does – to slip that tag onto India. The list of Pakistan-based and Pakistani terrorist organisations associated with the ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda under UNSC Resolution 1267 mandated sanctions, including the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Jaish-e-Mohammed, is long and instructive. In retaliation, Pakistan has presented several "dossiers" to the UN Secretary General, that have fancy claims of Indian terrorist attacks on Pakistan – anything to keep the anti-India pot boiling.

After its stint in the UNSC in 2021-22, India's proposal (with the United States as co-signatory) to list Pakistani terrorist Abdul Rehman Makki, deputy leader of the LeT, under the 1267 sanctions regime was approved by the UNSC – including of course by China – making this the first listing (with India as a proposer) for terrorist acts in Jammu and Kashmir. It was a blow to Pakistan, which it must be waiting to avenge.

However, even proposals under 1267 sanctions are given a religious colour by Pakistan. It made desperate attempts, with trumped up charges, to find four Indian Hindus as terrorists, with the intention of getting at least one Hindu listed. The Council rejected every one of Pakistan's requests – not once but twice – thanks to the U.S. and other western countries. Member-states have seen through Pakistan's game.

## On Kashmir

Its next, and most obvious, stated priority will be Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Pakistan pushed for discussions on J&K in the Council through its "friends" when India abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution. Two closed "consultations" were held in the UNSC, with China acting as the cat's paw. But nothing happened. At least four of the five permanent members (P-5) have little appetite for this issue. When a Pakistani journalist in New York asked this writer – when India entered the UNSC in January 2021 – about the "unfinished" business of Article 370, the reply he got was this: that the only "unfinished" business was the return of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) to India.

With elections having been conducted and a popular government in place in J&K, Pakistan would find it hard to make an issue, China, which, incidentally, occupies a part of PoK after Pakistan ceded it to them, will only be too happy to keep the pot boiling. The Pakistani Ambassador to the UN made a case in the media on how the recent decision by the International Court of Justice decision on Palestine applies to J&K. One cannot stop Pakistan from trying to do what it wants as its presence in the UNSC will give it the lever to call for discussions on J&K. India is aware that the P-5 usually does not like to prevent

discussions, but decides whether it should be open or closed and whether there should be an outcome.

## The use of Islamophobia

Pakistan has used Islamophobia as a weapon to dilute the fight against terrorism and, going by its recent attempts, to target India. When the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GTS) was discussed in 2021, and again in 2023, Pakistan, supported by the OIC, sought to introduce Islamophobia as a "justification" for terrorism. India stood alone and had the reference removed. But when India left the Council at the end of 2022, the United Arab Emirates and others inserted, *inter alia*, Islamophobia into the UNSC Presidential statement for the first time in February 2023. In March 2024, the U.S., China and Russia voted in the UN General Assembly in support of an OIC resolution to appoint a UN Special Envoy for Combating Islamophobia. With the right wing on the rise in the West, one has not heard the last on this subject in the Council with the OIC countries.

Early this year, Pakistan raised the issue of the bilateral India-Pakistan India Waters Treaty in the Council, which is a purely bilateral agreement with its mechanism to resolve disputes. This is a misuse of the UNSC with the only benefit of catering to a domestic audience.

During its stint between 2021-22, India played a robust and positive role in strengthening international peace and security. While many UNSC members misuse "Arria formula" meetings (a dispensation where any UNSC member can circumvent the Council and hold informal meetings on any issue), India avoided doing this and stuck to its priorities in the Council. Pakistan will have no such compunctions.

It is unfortunate that Pakistan ignores the many multilateral synergies between India and Pakistan to work together on UN issues. Both countries have similar interests: in UN peacekeeping, as they are large troop-contributing countries; in combating climate change, as they face severe climate change-induced floods and natural disasters; in achieving Sustainable Development Goals 2030; in focusing on the debt burden of the Global South; or in reforming multilateral financial institutions. Sometimes even functional contacts with Indian diplomats are frowned upon by its Mission.

Pakistan's internal political churning, economic collapse and misplaced priorities have prevented it from strengthening multilateralism and the UN in a world wrecked by conflicts. While its turn will be high on rhetoric against India, it is difficult to see how UN member-states will be persuaded to play its game.

## The missing spotlight on urban local government polls

Urban local governments (ULGs) function as units of decentralised local self-governance, and are responsible for delivering civic services at the first mile, ensuring quality of life for citizens. The 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) was introduced in 1992 to codify this role of ULGs. Over 30 years later, the objectives of this landmark amendment are yet to be realised. The ongoing discourse on simultaneous elections, popularly known as One Nation One Election (ONOE), is a unique opportunity to spotlight a basic requirement of local democracy, i.e., elections to ULGs – a consideration that has generally been absent in deliberations on the ONOE.

## 'State subjects' as reasoning

The 79th report of the Parliament Standing Committee on Law and Justice on the 'Feasibility of Simultaneous Elections', submitted in 2015, while advocating simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, was silent on elections to ULGs. A discussion paper (2017) by the NITI Aayog, on 'Analysis of Simultaneous Elections', kept ULGs out of its purview, arguing that the third-tier institutions are State subjects and that the sheer number of such institutions across the country makes it "impractical, and possibly impossible, to synchronise elections". Similar reasoning is put forward in the 2018 draft report of the Law Commission of India on simultaneous elections. But in a refreshing departure, the High Level Committee (HLC) constituted by the Government of India to provide a road map for implementation of simultaneous elections, deliberated on local body elections and recommended synchronising them within 100 days of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

India has over 4,800 ULGs that oversee nearly 40% of the population, a figure which is estimated to cross 50% by 2050. Cities are the backbone of the country's economy, contributing over 60% to India's GDP. Well-governed cities



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Head, Participatory Governance at the Janagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy



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Manager, Policy Engagement at the Janagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy

The ongoing discourse on simultaneous elections, or ONOE, is the right opportunity for change

accelerate economic growth, and promote social and cultural well-being. Thus, ensuring regular elections to install democratically-elected governments in our cities every five years ought to be a matter of mainstream political discourse and policy formulation. The HLC report, which was accepted by the Union government in September 2024, touched upon the procedure of elections to local governments and is a good start in this direction. However, deeper analysis is necessary to understand and address the current state of affairs of elections to ULGs.

## Uncertainty and delays in elections

It may come as a surprise to many that despite the constitutional mandate of holding elections to municipalities every five years, elections are routinely delayed across thousands of ULGs – sometimes by several years. According to the Compendium of Performance Audits on the Implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 (published by the Comptroller and Auditor General, or CAG of India in November 2024), elections were delayed in over 60% of ULGs across India. Such ULGs are directly governed by State governments, violating the principle of decentralisation as envisaged in the Constitution. This also adversely impacts accountability as citizens lack representation and have limited avenues for airing their grievances and development needs. Elections that are held on time are the *sine qua non* for democracy – not just for Parliament and the State legislatures but also for every municipality in the country.

Holding elections to ULGs is not enough. After the results are announced, the elected councils have to be operationalised with State governments calling for their first meeting to enable elections to the offices of Chairpersons and standing committees. A study undertaken by Janagraha found that there was a delay by 11 months on average in the formation of councils after the declaration of election results of the municipal corporations in

Karnataka. In effect, ULGs continue to function under the administrative control of State governments. This defeats the electoral mandate given by the people, making elected city councilors powerless to attend to the development needs of their electorate.

## Disempowered State Election Commissions

Another important issue is the disempowerment of the State Election Commissions (SECs), which are constitutional bodies responsible for supervising and conducting ULG elections. The CAG report notes that only four out of the 15 States assessed have empowered their SECs to carry out ward delimitation. The report further notes that elections to ULGs were delayed due to a delay in ward delimitation by State governments or because of court cases regarding reservations. Given the high political ramifications of ward delimitation and reservation exercises, it is necessary that these functions are carried out by independent authorities such as the SECs.

A holistic analysis of the challenges in conducting elections to ULGs promptly is important in the ongoing national discourse on the synchronisation of elections. There is an urgent need to build on the beginning made by the HLC to effect the reforms necessary in ULG elections.

The Government of India has proposed setting up an implementation group to prepare a plan of action that would execute the HLC's recommendations. The government has also expressed its intent to have consultations across the country on this topic. It is hoped and expected that the agenda for reforms to ensure regular and scheduled elections to ULGs will feature in these dialogues and that the Union and State governments will come together to make local democracy in our cities operational and vibrant.

The views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Parliament and business

The proposal to move a no-trust move against the Chairperson of the Upper House and the Vice-President of India has some merit. The Chairperson has been seen to be completely partial to the ruling party on several occasions – as can be visually seen from the proceedings of the Rajya Sabha on a daily basis by

any discerning viewer. People can judge what they see.

V. Padmanabhan, Bengaluru

If the Opposition has decided to act against the Rajya Sabha Chairman, it could be only because the parties concerned have reached the end of their tether. For any independent observer, it was evident that

the Chairperson has been adopting a 'more loyal than the king attitude' when it came to discussions on issues which were inconvenient or not to the liking of the ruling dispensation.

C.G. Kuriajose, Kothamangalam, Kerala

The development is a new sign of degrading political dialogue and the lack of

minimal cooperation in Indian politics. The invocation by some politicians of conspiracy theories is also concerning. Ironically, the use of the popular term, 'deep state', is being seen in the prevalent rhetoric. It is important for all involved to abandon hearsay and focus on pressing issues that concern Indians. Given the mountain of work to be tackled, the

government and the Opposition must work hand in hand to justify the faith the electorate has placed in them.

Anany Mishra, Bhilai, Chhattisgarh

It is unfortunate that the ruling BJP and the Opposition parties in our country do not view each other as ideological opponents but as real-time

enemies. This has led to the situation where they do not engage in fair and useful debate in both the Houses of Parliament. The unfortunate developments are a blot on the functioning of the world's largest democracy.

Gopalswamy J., Chennai

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



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Number of sentences commuted by Joe Biden**

**1500** President Joe Biden is commuting the sentences of roughly 1,500 people who were released from prison and placed on home confinement during the coronavirus pandemic and is pardoning 39 Americans convicted of non-violent crimes. **AP**

**Naxalites killed in encounters this year in the Bastar division**

**215** Seven Naxalites including two women were killed in an encounter with security forces in Chhattisgarh's Narayanpur district on Thursday, a senior police official said. With this incident, at least 215 Naxalites have been killed this year in the Bastar division of the State, as per the police. **PTI**

**U.S. producer inflation shows biggest year-on-year increase**

**0.40** in per cent. U.S. producer inflation climbed in November, data showed Thursday, logging its biggest year-on-year increase since February 2023. The producer price index came in at 0.4% last month, seasonally adjusted, the Labour Department said. **AP**

**Number of casualties as migrant boat sinks off Tunisia**

**9** Tunisia's coastguard has recovered the bodies of nine migrants while six others are still missing after their boat sank off the Tunisian coast, a judicial official said on Thursday, in the latest boat disaster in the Mediterranean. The coastguard has so far rescued 27 people who were on the boat. **REUTERS**

**Fatalities in the Manipur conflict since May 2023**

**250** A Delhi-based Meitei organisation urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to ban all Kuki militant groups in Manipur and to stop alleged appeasement of the Kukis under the name of 'Suspension of Operations' (Soo). **PTI**  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Beijing's war against air pollution

Beijing in 2015 had pollution levels similar to those in Delhi today. However, through coordinated effort over several years, Beijing reduced its pollution by one-third between 2013 and 2017; by learning from Beijing's approach, Delhi can implement effective strategies to tackle its air pollution problem

EXPLAINER

Rohit Azad  
Shouvik Chakraborty

**B**eijing, with a yearly average air quality index (AQI) of 144, was as polluted in 2015 as Delhi is today (Delhi's average is 155 for 2024). But in the interim, Beijing has managed to cut its pollution level by one-third with the most significant fall spanning between 2013 and 2017 (Chart 1). To be sure, Beijing's pollution control programme dates back to 1998 which laid the foundation for this aggressive last phase of the programme, which was termed a "war against air pollution".

**Why discuss Beijing in the context of Delhi?**

Beijing is the capital of an emerging economy, as is Delhi. So, if Beijing could manage what it did at its stage of development, Delhi could and needs to, as well.

There are many similarities between Beijing in 2013 and Delhi today. Chart 2 compares the sources of pollution for the two cities.

For Delhi, we have used the winter months' data because that is the most updated emission inventory available. Moreover, much like Beijing, the regional contribution to pollutants by neighbouring areas/states of the national capital region (NCR) is also high, especially during the winter months. While local emissions need to be controlled, without a concerted collective effort by the entire NCR region, just as Beijing achieved, it would be difficult to win this battle against air pollution.

**What did Beijing do?**

With rapid economic growth in Beijing, the ambient concentration of pollutants increased rapidly by the late 1990s. By 2017, Beijing's energy consumption had grown by 74% compared to 1998. Unfortunately, a rapid increase in urbanisation and energy consumption meant higher emissions of pollutants. Things were particularly made worse because the heating in Beijing's residential properties was heavily coal-dependent.

Beijing's 20-year anti-pollution programme can be divided into three phases – 1998-2008; 2009-12; 2013-17. One common theme that ran through the entire effort was not shock-and-awe but a careful and slowly built-up plan with people's participation, which was run autonomously by the local government of Beijing.

Sources of pollution in Beijing were broadly identified as energy structures and coal combustion (contributing 22% to PM2.5), transportation structures (31%), and construction and industrial structures (33%).

For the first source, three steps were taken – ultra-low emission renovation and clean energy alternatives in power plants, renovation of coal-fired boilers, and elimination of civil bulk coal consumption used for residential heating.

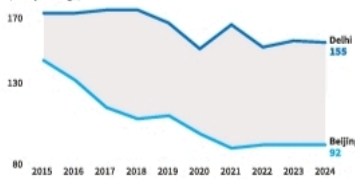
For transportation infrastructure, the government first retrofitted cars and public service vehicles with diesel particulate filters (DPF) and gradually tightened emission standards. Then it went for scrapping, through subsidies instead of decree, of 'yellow-labelled' vehicles (heavy pollutant-emitting vehicles). Subway and bus infrastructure was overhauled and expanded at a rapid rate, along with optimising the urban layout.

As for the industrial and construction activities, tightening environmental requirements, intensifying end-of-pipe

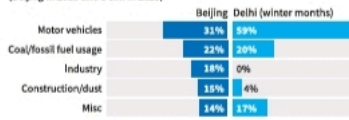
### Turning the tide on pollution

Beijing's battle against air pollution provides a useful framework for Delhi. With improved transportation, stricter regulations, and regional collaboration, Delhi can follow a similar path to cleaner air

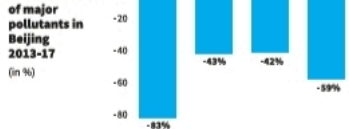
**Chart 1: AQI in Beijing vs Delhi 2014-24**  
(Yearly average)



**Chart 2: PM2.5 source apportionment for Beijing and Delhi**  
(Beijing in 2013 and Delhi in 2023)



**Chart 3: Fall in emissions of major pollutants in Beijing 2013-17**  
(in %)



Source: Data on Beijing has been taken from 'UN Environment 2019 - A Review of 20 Years' Air Pollution Control in Beijing', United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi, Kenya, and, for Delhi, from a report titled 'Real-Time Source Apportionment and Forecasting for Advance Air Pollution Management in Delhi' submitted to the Delhi pollution control committee

(EOP) treatment, eliminating obsolete industrial capacity, creating a green construction management model, efficient washing facilities, and implementing video monitoring with penal action against violators of construction sites were some of the steps taken.

The last leg of the plan (2013-17) especially focused on the need for regional cooperation, with five adjoining provinces around Beijing coming together to chalk out a collective plan for reducing ambient pollution in the region. This cooperation had a remarkable effect in reducing the level of pollution.

**What did Beijing achieve? And how?**

As a result of this meticulously planned strategy at multiple levels, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and PM2.5, the four major pollutants targeted under the policy, fell by 83%, 43%, 42% and 59% respectively between 2013-17 (Chart 3). Since most activities produce multiple pollutants, albeit to differing degrees, targeting a source meant reducing all the associated pollutants.

Chart 4 shows how by targeting each source, multiple pollutants were controlled.

The single most important factor in Beijing achieving its goal, apart from planning to the last detail, was the financial investment that the government committed to.

Chart 5 shows a whopping six-time jump in investment within just four years. All the steps enumerated above required heavy investment and the government did not shy away from making and fulfilling those commitments.

**What can Delhi learn from the Beijing experience?**

There are ideas galore on controlling pollution, and Beijing is a perfect example to learn from. We list some here, there are more.

Firstly, since private transport is the biggest contributor to local pollution, an efficient and comfortable bus-metro integrated transport system needs to be in place. Delhi's DTC bus fleet is not only old but also grossly inadequate for a population of this city's size. The metro is an excellent means of transport but is quite expensive, with almost zero last-mile connectivity provided by the State. Old vehicles need to be scrapped at the earliest through a well-thought-out subsidy-for-scrap programme, instead of banning them. Exclusive cycling and walking lanes should be built throughout the city. Other ideas, such as cross-subsidisation through affordable public transport and expensive private transport (cars and motorcycles) using congestion or high parking charges, as well as separate fuel costs for the two modes of transport, could be experimented with. An urban layout is needed where places of work and residence are brought closer, alleviating the need for long-distance travel.

Secondly, Delhi's electricity is still supplied primarily through coal fired plants. The energy system needs a serious overhaul both from the sides of supply and demand. Subsidising solar roof tops and connecting it to the grid with electricity bill discounts could be one such step in this regard.

Thirdly, much like the Beijing plan, Delhi needs to coordinate with neighbouring regions, instead of being at

loggerheads, to control other sources which originate in these regions. Such a step may work in their collective interests.

Last but not least, the people of Delhi need to fight for the right to clean air and hold the government accountable instead of normalising poor AQIs as being better than severe ones. Prolonged exposure to pollutants, even in the poor AQI zone (for a larger part of the year), may be as dangerous as a short period of severe AQI in October and November every year. This change in attitude itself may go a long way in building pressure on the governments.

Unfortunately, it is not the lack of ideas but political will which is stopping Delhi from acting. It is the same reel playing out every year. Air in the very harmful zone for weeks with schools closing down, the young and the elderly gasping for breath through the day is the new normal in the winter months in Delhi. And what does the government do? The Centre blames the State and vice versa while they have both been in office for a decade. Neither of them is serious or even vaguely interested in solving the problem.

Schools, offices, and individuals look for solutions in the form of air purifiers, but private protection for a public bad is by definition exclusivist, with especially the disadvantaged, who contribute the least to the problem, getting a raw deal. Delhi deserves a better response. It is high time that the government, both at the Centre and the State, listened and acted.

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THE GIST

Beijing's approach to air pollution involved a long-term, coordinated effort with a focus on regional cooperation and comprehensive policies across multiple sectors.

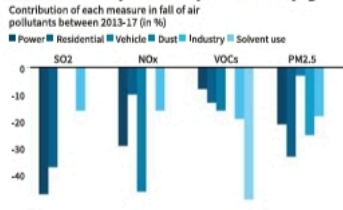
Key measures included improving transportation infrastructure, retrofitting vehicles, scrapping old vehicles, and enhancing industrial regulations.

Delhi can adopt similar strategies, focusing on integrated transport systems, regional collaboration, and stricter emission controls to combat its pollution crisis.

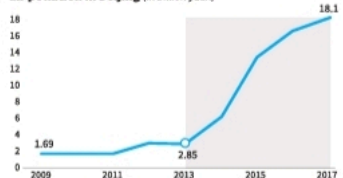


Pedestrians walk along the Kartavya Path engulfed in thick smog, near India Gate, in New Delhi, on November 18. **AFP**

**Chart 4: Measure-specific fall in pollutants in Beijing**



**Chart 5: Financial investment to control air pollution in Beijing (in billion yuan)**





## Should the executive have the power to pardon?



Sanjay Hegde

Senior advocate based in Delhi



Alok Prasanna Kumar

Co-founder and Karnataka lead of Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

## PARLEY

United States President Joe Biden's recent decision to pardon his son Hunter Biden for any federal crimes he committed or may have committed between January 1, 2014, and December 1, 2024 has brought renewed focus on the expansive clemency powers granted to the President by the U.S. Constitution. The President's volte-face has provoked strong condemnation from both Republicans and Democrats. Should the executive possess clemency powers? Sanjay Hegde and Alok Prasanna Kumar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Aaratrika Bhaumik. Edited excerpts:

**Should the executive power of clemency rest with the legislature to avert misuse?**

**Sanjay Hegde:** Vesting clemency powers in the legislature could prove equally susceptible to corruption and majority rule. Historically, the power to pardon originated from the British monarchy as an attribute of sovereignty, enabling the king to absolve any wrongdoing. Even today, the Constitution acknowledges scenarios where it is imperative to trust a high officerholder to judiciously exercise such discretionary authority when required.

**Alok Prasanna Kumar:** I agree. During the debates on the U.S. Constitution, Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, acknowledged that the exercise of clemency is inherently political and cannot be reduced to a purely legal process. He argued that this power should be vested in a single constitutional officerholder, instead of being subjected to the whims of collective discretion. He also pointed out that the power of pardon introduced an element of mercy, which he believed was necessary to temper the rigours of the criminal justice system. He saw it as a means for true justice to prevail in cases where the law could not account for circumstances or moral factors beyond the scope of judicial proceedings.

**Should an independent clemency commission replace the existing system to ensure more objective and informed decision-making?**

**APK:** Even if an independent clemency commission were established, its advice would not be binding on the President. While the President may seek a range of information to make a reasoned decision, as former President Harry Truman famously stated, "the buck stops here." Transparency is important, and in today's age of social media and a free press, the public



U.S. President Joe Biden with his son Hunter Biden at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois. REUTERS

will likely be aware of the reasons behind a presidential decision. However, that does not guarantee that every decision will be immediately acceptable to the public at large.

**SH:** The public doesn't always agree with clemency decisions. One of the most notable examples is when U.S. President Gerald Ford pardoned his predecessor, Richard Nixon. He believed that the country had endured enough during the Watergate scandal and that the matter should be put to rest, as Nixon had already been punished by losing the presidency. He felt that a criminal trial would only prolong the nation's agony. At the time, special prosecutor Leon Jaworski chose not to challenge this decision.

In contrast, the clemency system in India has not been widely abused. Former Presidents such as A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Pratibha Patil have only sat on files, exercising a pocket veto whenever they disagreed with government advice. The pardon jurisdiction for non-capital offences has rarely been exercised.

**Would expanding the scope of judicial review over executive clemency decisions prevent potential overreach or misuse?**

**SH:** I don't think the U.S. will ever adopt such a system. President-elect Donald Trump has expressed an inclination to pardon rioters involved in the January 6, 2021, Capitol attack. There are also speculations that President Biden may pre-emptively pardon several individuals before he demits office. I doubt the judiciary will step in to second-guess the President's authority in these matters.

In India, both the President and the Governor



When it comes to clemency, defining what constitutes abuse or misuse is challenging, especially when the power itself is not clearly defined. For example, in 20 years, one might argue that granting clemency to Hunter Biden was one of Joe Biden's best decisions. We lack the foresight to deem such decisions egregiously wrong at this moment.

ALOK KUMAR PRASANNA

act on the aid and advice of the Cabinet. In fact, the Supreme Court in *Eparur Sudhakar v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (2006) affirmed that a Governor's grant of pardon could be challenged in court if it was found to be mala fide or based on irrelevant considerations.

**APK:** I don't believe that clemency decisions can be judicially reviewable. The concept of mercy is inherently subjective, and there cannot be one inalienable understanding of it. We also have to understand that constitutional functionaries inevitably bring their personal biases to bear on these decisions. While courts, as seen in India, may intervene in instances of procedural violations, there are no definitive legal benchmarks to determine what constitutes an appropriate exercise of clemency. Ultimately, it is unreasonable to assert that mercy should have one fixed meaning under the Constitution, or that clemency should be confined to a specific category of political cases.

**Should U.S. Congress play a greater role in the process? For instance, the Protecting Our Democracy Act, reintroduced in Congress last year, mandates the White House disclose all materials the President relies on when exercising clemency powers.**

**SH:** Even if Congress were to pass a law, it could only serve to guide the process. Clemency powers are unique – they speak to the inherent humanity shared by both the one who grants mercy and the one who receives it. There may be cases where a penalty has been imposed and the legal process is complete, yet new evidence emerges that calls for reconsideration. It is impossible to legislate strict standards, especially since they would never be binding. We have seen this discretionary authority play out when President Andrew Johnson pardoned Dr. Samuel Alexander Mudd, the physician who treated John Wilkes Booth's broken leg after he assassinated Abraham Lincoln.

**APK:** No law can entirely prevent its misuse. If

someone in a position of authority is determined to break the law, there is little the law itself can do to stop them. While mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that such actions have stringent repercussions, total prevention is impossible to attain. For instance, we see police officers routinely abuse their powers of arrest.

When it comes to clemency, defining what constitutes abuse or misuse is challenging, especially when the power itself is not clearly defined. For example, in 20 years, one might argue that granting clemency to Hunter Biden was one of the best decisions made by Joe Biden. We lack the foresight to deem such decisions egregiously wrong at this moment.

**What reforms are necessary in India's clemency process, and what lessons can be drawn from the Hunter Biden case?**

**SH:** Given the nature of the power, one can at best have guidelines. However, ultimately executive discretion has to be trusted. We have seen our former Presidents exhibit varied views regarding the death penalty. One can also see how gubernatorial discretion played out in the release of A.G. Perarivalan, one of the convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. The Governor obstructed his release despite the Tamil Nadu government's recommendation. Ultimately, the Supreme Court had to intervene and order his release. The use of clemency powers in the case also signified the closing of a long and painful chapter. While public curiosity may lead to second-guessing these decisions, it is often not in the greater public interest to do so.

**APK:** I believe comprehensive reforms are needed in the system of release of convicts. The Supreme Court is already cognisant of a batch of petitions on this issue. We need to prioritise reformative justice. Reformation is only achievable when individuals are given the assurance that, through good behaviour and genuine repentance, they may earn an early release – serving, for instance, seven years instead of 14. While these convicts have been incarcerated for legitimate reasons, the state must focus on their rehabilitation, as some of them have the potential to become valuable members of society. We should expedite processes like parole and remission, ensuring mercy extends beyond just death penalty cases.



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## NOTEBOOK

## The difficulty of documenting a tragedy

It is difficult to say whether the sense of detachment that photojournalists acquire over the years is real or not

Thulasi Kakkat

A photojournalist reacts to an accident or a calamity much like an emergency worker. But since most of us have no training in saving lives, or rescuing people, what really drives us to reach these places like first responders? To see fellow human beings lying trapped under debris, waiting to be rescued or worse, needs a mental makeup of a different kind, especially since we really cannot do much apart from recording it on camera.

At the site of a disaster, a photojournalist is expected to truthfully and objectively convey reality. It is generally accepted that there is no moral responsibility to interfere with the events that are unfolding in front of the lens. While looking into the face of a tragedy, we are there to tell the story in a single frame. However, every photojournalist would agree that there have been instances where they have grappled with the dilemma of what is right and wrong.

For instance, not too long ago, there was an accident in Kerala. Three migrant labourers, who were widening the gutter on the side of the road, were seriously injured when the concrete wall of the building nearby collapsed on them. One of them succumbed to injuries and the other two were extricated from the rubble after hours of hard work by rescue personnel.

A few days after the incident, a photojournalist said something to me with a hint of remorse. While news channels were showing visuals of the tragedy, he was still half an hour away from the accident site. He wanted to rush there to get the image of the workers caught under the debris. It was only after he clicked the photo that he saw the agony in the eyes of the injured. While he had rushed there to merely do his job, he regretted that his first thought was to get a "good" picture as soon as possible. He said he then prayed that the workers would be taken to safety as soon as possible.

Tragedies leave an impact on a photojournalist in different ways. In August, when landslides triggered by torrential rainfall occurred in Wayanad, wiping out two villages entirely, hundreds were trapped beneath the earth. The first thought that came to my mind captured the magnitude of the tragedy: maybe this is how civilisations ended. I covered the 2018 floods and landslides in Kerala and I have been asked several times whether such events leave me untouched. It is a fact that the tragedy is not mine and yet it is. It is difficult to say whether the sense of detachment that photojournalists acquire over the years is real or not.

One of the most difficult situations that I was forced to handle took place in June 2024. More than 45 Indians were killed in a fire that broke out in a building in Kuwait and the bodies were brought back home to Kerala. The homes of the victims were pictures of grief. I vividly remember the scent of the incense, the dirges that seemed to go on for hours, and the shock on the faces of the family members. One instance in particular left a lingering ache. A 27-year-old man's body was placed in a freezer at the centre of the living room of his house. There was silence in the hall and the thought that I would be shattering it with the click of my camera was unbearable. The man's mother, who was sitting close to the freezer, suddenly began talking to him. She begged him to wake up, and called out the names of those who had come to see the body of his son. She was clearly in denial. In the midst of this, I hurriedly clicked two pictures. They always bring a lump to my throat.

Just as we can see the photographer in a photograph, we can equally see the effect that a tragedy has had on the photographer reflected in the frames. We photojournalists go back home every time after we cover a tragedy with the hope that the images will serve as an irrefutable truth of what happened. And what should not happen.

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## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

## The end of an era



People walk on a dirt road leading to the notorious Saydnaya prison, synonymous with the worst atrocities of ousted Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's rule, such as arbitrary detention and torture. People in Damascus gathered on on December 9 to celebrate day after Assad fled, even as Islamist-led rebels swept into the capital. APF

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 13, 1974

## Criteria for opening new post offices

New Delhi, Dec. 12: The Union Minister of Communications, Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma, told Mr. P.R. Shenoy in the Lok Sabha yesterday that profit was not the main criterion for opening new post office. But for opening public call offices, profit is one of the criteria but not the main one. So far as rural areas were concerned, a new post office in a

normal area should earn at least 25 per cent of the cost as income, 10 per cent of cost in hilly area and 15 per cent in other very backward areas. In urban areas the income from the new post office should be at least equal to the cost of the post office.

In rural areas, new post offices are opened at a distance of 4.8 kms from an existing post office and for villages with gram panchayat, schools and NES blocks, the distance from the nearest post office is reduced to 3.2 kms. A loss upto Rs. 500 per annum is borne by the Government in rural areas if the population to be served is less than 2,000 and upto Rs. 750 per annum for a population of 2,000 or more.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 13, 1924

## Vaikom Satyagraha

Cochin, Dec. 11: The Satyagrahis are picketing at the four barricades as usual. Mr. Vinobha of the Wardha Satyagraha Ashram met by appointment the Vaikom oppositionist leaders at the residence of Mr. Indanthurithi Nambiyathiri and discussed with them the situation. He was accompanied by Mr. T.R. Krishnaswamy Iyer, Manager of the Ashram; and the prominent oppositionist leaders included Mr. Indanthurithi Nambiyathiri, Mr. M.K. Raman Pillai, Mr. Vadakkumkoor Valia Rajah and Venkatram Iyer.



## IN THE LIMELIGHT

## Plague of tiring sequels, buzzkill cliffhangers, and half-films

In franchising projects for better monetisation, pan-Indian films are depriving audiences of the satisfaction of a complete product; big-star filmmaking is now plagued by a lack of know-how in building IPs for the long run

Bhuvanesh Chander

A two-film-strong, 340-minute-long cat-and-mouse game, comes to an end in director Sukumar's *Pushpa 2: The Rule*. A climactic scene ambiguously ends the arc, urging audiences to ready themselves to leave, only to be compelled back to their seats for 40 more minutes. The extended climax of the Allu Arjun-starrer meant as a segue to a third *Pushpa* film, is an excruciatingly tedious episode that leaves you with a poor aftertaste — it is a cold shower moment in this otherwise 'wildfire' of a film.

This is a new fad picked up by commercial filmmakers of the pan-India movement — franchising for better monetisation or to secure a working formula for the future. Most big-ticket films these days either end with a cliffhanger, depriving audiences of the satisfaction of a complete product, or add a surprise climactic cameo to end on a high note and make way for a sequel. Suriya's *Kanguva* was undoubtedly an untested attempt in Tamil, but the makers were quick to jump on this bandwagon, with a surprise cameo by Karthi and a hook to keep us waiting for the second part. With the disastrous reception at the box office, would a *Kanguva* sequel materialise?

## One story, two films

Amid an avalanche of sequels, a deeper issue plaguing big-star filmmaking in India — ironically popularised by *Pushpa: The Rise* — is the trend of splitting the story of one film into two, to justify a sequel. Remember when we used to insert a DVD for each half of a film? Now, each of those halves is extended, with songs and action sequences, to become a film on its own.

In Upendra's KGF-mimic *Kabzaa*, writer-director R. Chandru's interconnected narrative arcs tell the story of how an Air Force pilot gets into the crosshairs of a gangster as well as a powerful maharaja. The writer takes ample time to set up the world and its characters, introduces a conflict late, and just as they culminate into a late-biting moment, ends with a surprise cameo by Shivarajkumar and Sudeep Kichcha.

One might blame S.S. Rajamouli's 'Why Kattappa killed Baahubali' shlick for this trend but there is a distinction between endeavours written and conceived as two-film projects — like *Sapta Saagaradaache Ello* or *Ponniyin Selvan* or *Salaar* — and films originally planned as one, split unnecessarily for purely commercial reasons. In *Ponniyin Selvan*, the concerns were whether the length of two films was enough to fit in Kalki's story. With *Devuru*, however, it has become apparent that the formula is not working; Koratala Siva uses a climax similar to Kattappa-Baahubali, but if you are wondering why it did not stick, the answer lies in how overstretched the film's narrative feels. Given *Pushpa's* USP lies in its exaggerated staging and larger-than-life language, one can argue that Sukumar had to give more space to his sandalwood kingly hero. Even if so, a few other cases allow no space for any reasoning.

Shankar's *Indian 2* feels like a blatant attempt at monetising half a story. The film follows Senapathy's return, triggered by four YouTubeurs who expose their corrupt parents under his guidance. We

Sequel spiral: A still from *Pushpa 2: The Rule*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

get four scenes each to establish the families, four to mark their fallout, a killing spree with little explanation, and a bizarre #GoBackIndian scene. The climax features a prolonged 30-minute chase sequence, ending with a cliffhanger promising more in a third instalment. Added for garnish are unnecessary songs and action set pieces. At 160 minutes, the film could have easily been trimmed to 90 minutes, raising the question: why must we pay full price for an incomplete narrative?

## Securing an idea for future

Audiences now hold their breath towards the end of a big-ticket film, wishing it to be a contentful standalone feature. If cliffhangers have become a buzzkill, surprise cameos in the climax are no longer surprising. One wonders if such an endeavour is worth taking the risk, should the first film flop at the box office. Like in the case of *Kabzaa* or *Kanguva*, the cameos might have garnered some applause in theatres or some momentary propulsion at the box office, but what happens to these new characters when the sequels are dropped? A film that needs a star cameo or a cliffhanger to get audiences back to its world exposes itself as an inferior product.

Securing an idea for the future drives a filmmaker like Venkat Prabhu to end *The Greatest of All Time* with a contrived,

genre-bending twist and a sequel announcement, knowing fully that it may never pan out given Vijay's decision to retire from movies. Take cues from Prashanth Neel on securing a sequel. *KGF 2* ends with Rocky sinking into the depths of the ocean, but not without hinting at *KGF 3*. There are no gimmicks — and Rocky is gone for good — and the *KGF* films boast enough lore to justify bandwidth. Neel, refraining from hacking a story for the sake of it, takes a leaf out of the story we thought we knew everything about and makes it a prequel.

In the case of star cameos, Lokesh Kanagaraj's *Vikram*, starring Kamal Haasan, deserves all praise. The hold Suriya's spectacular cameo as Rolex had on the audiences led many other creators to emulate the same. Through Santhanam's fear of this mysterious figure, one could feel the shadow of Rolex throughout. *Vikram*, naturally setting up his entry.

However, one cannot say the same for how Lokesh handled Haasan's cameo in the climax of *Vijay's Leo*. Despite peppering the second half with moments from *Vikram's* world, the cameo seemed contrived and forgettable.

The climatic segues to a sequel, like the one in *Pushpa 2: The Rule*, also point at a lack of confidence from the filmmakers. Wouldn't the audiences throng the screens if they knew *Pushpa Raj* was

returning with his beard-swiping swag? A surprise announcement adds mystery to how the film would take the story forward. Remember the frenzy when Ridley Scott announced *Gladiator 2*? Or when you knew Sunny Deol was returning to *Gadar*?

## How to cash in on past glory?

Scott's sequel is a great showcase of how you can cash in on past glory, a knack many modern greats lack. Eyebrows were raised when Scott announced *Gladiator 2*. It was not that the filmmaker had lost his game; the question was on the story a *Gladiator* sequel would take. The film might have fallen short, but the attempt to birth a fresh story on Maximus Decimus Meridius' son was genuine and well-received.

Could one, however, say the same about *Indian 2*? Interestingly, one does not have to look beyond Tamil cinema to take inspiration. Just last year, Karthik Subbaraj silenced naysayers with his compelling *Jigarthanda Double X*, which stood out from 2014's *Jigarthanda* in tone and treatment while also ensuring it stays true to the theme.

The issues with this trend also point to a lack of know-how among commercial southern Indian filmmakers in building their Intellectual Properties (IPs) into long-term assets — a major reason for insincere attempts at cashing in on established IPs. Hollywood's mantra of IP building can be loosely credited to two well-known strategies: a) tapping into other formats and mediums, and b) quality merchandising of movie IPs.

Hollywood studios like Marvel and Warner Bros. have long tapped into longer and shorter formats to produce spin-offs and mediums like comic books, novels and animation to immortalise their characters in the minds of the audiences. This is why a fan will buy an Iron Man mask or a *Stranger Things*-themed t-shirt even after decades; collectables have always been a potent market for takers. In recent years, every film has come up with a fandom-targeted website that allows users to spend more hours pondering the world of the film. The value of iconography and merchandising only increases in a world of transient intangible media. Just last year, the 'Barbenheimer' phenomenon led to an ocean of merchandise, underscoring the importance of tangible memorabilia. Popcorn buckets are still trending in the U.S.

How many of these pan-Indian films managed to sell quality memorabilia? For all the flashy clothes and accessories *Pushpa Raj* wears, the makers could have focused on making some noteworthy memorabilia.

Pan-Indian films particularly focus on transient results in this amnesiac world, creating an impact that only another sequel film could reignite. Strengthening IPs secures ideas for the future, lets the creator tap into the nostalgia of the audiences, and brings in additional business.

Making a successful sequel is nothing unheard of in India. Bollywood has its fair share of *Bhool Bhulaiyaa*, *Gadars*, *Golmaal*s and *Housefull*s. Malayalam cinema has started success with the *CBI* series, the *Aadu* franchise, the *Drishyam* films, and the *Harithar Nagar* films. While the *Dandupalya* films and sequels to *Gaali*, *Mufli*, and *Love Mocktail* worked well in Kannada, audiences are glued to catch the *Kantara* sequel. Despite their flaws, *Till Tula* and *Yatra 2* were received well in Telugu, while *HIT* seems to be a fan-favourite. Tamil creators can learn enough from many debacles (*Saamy Square*, *Maari 2*, *Sandakozhi 2*, *Pichakkaran 2*, *Velaivila Pattadhari 2*, and so on) and success stories (*Chennai 28 II*, the *Singham* series, *Aarambam 4*).

Perhaps now is the time to outgrow sequels, half-films, and climactic cameos. The big picture needs strategy, not gimmicks. Forced franchising is neither flower nor fire.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
S. Upendran

"There you go again. You always do it. You always point my mistakes."  
"It's not 'point my mistakes,' but 'point out my mistakes.'"  
"You see, you're doing it again. Why do you always point my, I mean, point out my mistakes?"  
"I thought you wanted to improve your English."

"I do. But you always..."  
"Look, let's not get into an argument. What was it you wanted to tell me?"

"I read somewhere that one of our scientists has discovered a new machine." "Discovered a new machine! You mean 'invented,' don't you?"

"Not again. 'Discovered' or 'invented,' what difference does it make?"

"It makes a big difference. When you 'invent' something, you're creating or making something new, something which didn't exist before. For example, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone."

"Yes, I know that. And Edison invented the electric bulb."

"That's right. Before Edison invented it, there was no such thing as the electric bulb. So when you say you've invented something, what you're claiming is that you've created something new."

"That seems clear enough. What about 'discover'?"

"When you say you've 'discovered' something, you mean you've found something that was already there."

"What do you mean by that?"

"For example, it's possible for you to discover a pirate's hidden treasure."

"That would be wonderful!"  
"Yes, it would indeed. By discovering the treasure, all that you've done is to find the jewels that the pirates had hidden. You have not created anything new, you understand?"

"I think I'm beginning to. Could you give me another example?"

"Sure. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, discovered the laws of gravitation. He didn't invent them, but merely discovered them."

"So when scientists find a new star in the solar system, they say they have 'discovered' a new star, not 'invented' it."

"Correct again. That's because they have not created the star, but only found it."

"Well, I think I've understood the difference between 'discover' and 'invent.'"

"That's good. And I..."

"...guess what I discovered recently?" "Pirate's treasure!"

"No, I've discovered that our friend Urmila is a terrible cook!"

"Some discovery! I knew that ages ago. If you're going to eat anything she makes, you need a cast-iron stomach."

"Cast-iron stomach? What's that?" "It's a very strong stomach that can withstand bad food or anything nauseating. If you don't have a cast-iron stomach, it's very difficult to be a travelling salesman."

"That's true. They are well-known for their cast-iron stomachs."

"In that case, I think Urmila should marry a travelling salesman!"

Published in *The Hindu* on May 24, 1994

## THE DAILY QUIZ

## A quiz on noted film personality Raj Kapoor on his birth centenary

V. V. Ramanan

## QUESTION 1

What was the original given name of Raj Kapoor and the name of his two brothers who were also noted actors?

## QUESTION 2

Name the 1935 film where he debuted as a child artist and in which film did he get his break for the lead role opposite Madhubala?

## QUESTION 3

What was the first film under the R.K. Films banner and from where did it get its logo?

## QUESTION 4

Which iconic duo, synonymous with Raj Kapoor's

films, made their debut in the 1949 flick *Barsaat*?

## QUESTION 5

For which prestigious international awards were the *Awaraz* and *Boot Polish* nominated?

## QUESTION 6

On which film was Raj Kapoor working at the time of his passing, and which was later completed by his sons?

## QUESTION 7

Which Hrishikesh Mukherjee classic is dedicated to Raj Kapoor?

## QUESTION 8

Which film had Raj Kapoor, his father Prithviraj, and eldest son Randhir?



Visual Question:

Name the person Raj Kapoor is hugging in this picture.

## Questions and Answers to the previous

day's daily quiz: 1. Who designed the transmission system and received the first signal? **Ans:** Guglielmo Marconi

2. Name the source and destination of the transmission. **Ans:** Cornwall, England, to Newfoundland, Canada

3. What was the transmitted message? **Ans:** The letter S in Morse code.

4. What did detractors believe would happen during the experiment? **Ans:** Earth's curvature would disrupt the transmission

5. Name the device invented by Edouard Branly that helped in transmitting long-range signals. **Ans:** Coherer

Visual: Name this German scientist who shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with answer to question 1 for his contributions to wireless communication. **Ans:** Ferdinand Braun

Early Birds: Dodo Jayaditya | Tamal Biswas | Piyali Tuli | Sonali Das | Tito Shiladitya

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

## Word of the day

## Duress:

compulsory force or threat

Synonyms: pressure, intimidation, coercion

Usage: Under duress, she signed the contract.

Pronunciation: newth.liv/dyresspro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /dʒʊrɪs/

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



The  
Hindustan Times

ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[ OUR TAKE ]

## Supreme Court draws the line

Directive to lower courts to keep off pleas seeking to undermine the Places of Worship Act is timely

The Supreme Court's order restraining lower courts from admitting or passing orders in any fresh plea seeking surveys of mosques to determine whether temples lie beneath them until the apex court is hearing the 1991 Places of Worship Act case is a landmark intervention that comes not a moment too soon.

Over the past two years, a flurry of pleas arguing that Islamic holy shrines were built after demolishing temples, and therefore should be replaced, has inflamed communal passions, unearthed long-buried sectarian grudges, and threatened to irreparably rupture the social fabric. Unfortunately, most of these disturbances came on the back of lower court orders, as exemplified by the violence during a court-ordered survey in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal town last month that killed four people and injured 20 others.

The 1991 law — which was drafted at the height of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and locked the religious character of shrines as they existed at the time of Independence — was enacted to forestall this precise eventuality. But it appeared increasingly effete as petitioner after petitioner found ways around its guardrails, prompting new sets of disputes to mushroom — from Varanasi and Mathura to Baduan and Ajmer. Even the Taj Mahal wasn't spared.

This newspaper has repeatedly called for a decision on the applicability of the 1991 law at the earliest possible juncture because this is key to expeditiously resolving disputes. It is in no one's interest, and certainly not the country's, to let such sensitive issues fester, undoing the work done by the country's founders in building a multi-cultural, multi-faith democracy. The top court's commendable move on Thursday kindles hope that the unfortunate trend of incendiary and communal petitions can be arrested, and a considered, deliberative and transparent process can take its place. The Court's direction will also prompt the Union government to make its stand clear on this important issue, something it has avoided doing even as the pleas acquired a distinctly political edge.

The apex court has taken a momentous step. It must now consider deciding on the case swiftly and laying down the law once and for all. The Places of Worship Act represented a compromise struck to avert hurling India into a cauldron of communal disputes that holds the potential to tarnish its justifiable reputation as a tolerant and diverse republic. It was passed after extensive debate in Parliament and then was endorsed by the apex court in its 2019 Ram Temple verdict. It deserves its day in court.

## Nudging government to conserve wetlands

The Supreme Court's order on Wednesday to states to protect 30,000 additional wetlands, over the 2.01 lakh already being conserved under a 2017 order, is a timely intervention. The three-month deadline that the apex court has set for demarcation and ground-truthing of satellite data on these wetlands should prod governments into action in an area of conservation that receives scant attention. Ground-truthing efforts so far have been undertaken for less than half of the wetlands covered under the 2017 order, and demarcation of boundaries is complete for a minuscule fraction; this pool includes India's 85 Ramsar sites or wetlands designated to be of international importance as per the 1971 convention. A deadline and high courts being directed to *suo motu* monitor the conservation of Ramsar sites might just help state administrations shake off lethargy.

These ecosystems are key functionalities in the hydrological cycle and are critical to the country's biodiversity. They also play central roles in water storage, purification, flood and erosion mitigation, groundwater recharge, protecting against cyclones and saline ingress (along the coast), and even influencing microclimates. In many regions of the country, they support livelihoods for several communities.

The lack of State enthusiasm in protecting these, despite several policies, has allowed cities to encroach on them, and even swallow altogether them in places, which in turn has exacerbated problems of urban flooding and drainage. Elsewhere, much of it has been turned into agricultural fields or, in the worst case, garbage dumps. In our era defined by severe weather phenomena, the imperative to protect wetlands can't be overstated.

## The US deep state and its discontents

The idea of a State within a State is not entirely imaginary. With the political rise of Trump, the spectre of a deep state has become a bugbear in Right-wing circles

The political firestorm over an alleged transitional "deep state" — comprising the investigative journalist network, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), the Open Society Foundations (OSF) of the billionaire financier George Soros, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the government of the United States (US) — to "destabilise India" has brought crucial questions to the fore.

What exactly is a deep state? Is it a conspiracy theory or a real entity? And if it does exist, what are its effects domestically within the US and worldwide? For several decades, the term deep state has ricocheted in American politics to refer to a shadowy hybrid network of governmental, corporate, and non-governmental elites who wield enormous power, control policymaking levers, undermine elected politicians, and thwart the interests of the American people.

The famous farewell address of President Dwight Eisenhower in 1961, where he warned about "the acquisition of unwarranted influence by the

military-industrial complex" that could "endanger our liberties or democratic processes", was the first high-level acknowledgement of an unholy nexus of vested interest groups which was siphoning wealth and pushing excessive defence expenditures during the Cold War.

Although Eisenhower was a Republican, the notion that a coterie of military officials, unelected bureaucrats, armament manufacturers, hawkish lobbyists, and journalists who justified endless wars and confrontations with foreign enemies was secretly manipulating American domestic and foreign policies gained popularity in the Left-liberal segments in the US. During the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) under President George W. Bush, the anti-war and peace movements in the US frequently derided the deep state and the "surveillance state" for dragging America into costly foreign conflicts and false pretences and illegally curtailing civil liberties at home.

With the political rise of Donald Trump and his unique brand of populism, the spectre of a deep state also became a bugbear in Right-wing circles. According to Trump, a vast association of career civil servants, diplomats, intelligence agencies, law enforcement officials, contractors, "fake news" media outlets and mainstream intellectuals was in concert to delegitimise him, undermine his domestic and foreign policy priorities

during his first term as president (2017 to 2020), and wreck his re-election. Trump's crusade against special interests and undemocratic forces reached an apogee after the 2024 US election, with the President-elect announcing a new department of government efficiency (DOGE) to "drain the swamp". Like Eisenhower, Trump felt frustrated by the factions and blocs within the vast American "permanent state" and its network of allies in the private sector, which resisted and blocked his agenda.

Given that at least two American presidents have publicly derided a nefarious "State within a State", the idea of a deep state in the US is not entirely imaginary. The persistently low levels of public trust and confidence in the government in the US also make this concept credible. The deep state is, of course, fuzzy due to its informal basis and it varies over time in ideological leanings and focus. At least in the domestic arena in the US, both Leftists and Rightists have felt victimised by the deep state and its shenanigans.

In foreign policy, irrespective of whether the incumbent US administration was Democratic or Republican, a pro-liberal internationalist worldview has historically held sway in Washington. This meant that apart from hardcore economic, military and geopolitical interests, the US government also selectively pursued controversial objectives such as the pro-



Sreeram Chaulia

## Battle against low visibility takes off in Indian aviation

As we head into the annual winter chaos in aviation — the fog that envelops large parts of North India in December and January — a feeling of dread begins to accompany all ticket bookings by passengers coming into the region. Will my flight actually fly, and will I catch my connecting flight? How many hours of delay will I encounter? Will my flight take off at all? Is the Delhi airport and other affected airports equipped to handle the mayhem?

Last year, the fog and poor handling by almost all stakeholders led to mayhem at airports in the North, with the capital facing the brunt of it. Delhi, as a major hub for many early-morning departures, leads to a cascade of delays across the country. To manage perceptions more than anything else, the then Union civil aviation minister had set up "war rooms" to tackle this annual nuisance since there is virtually no government can do on its own to mitigate these disruptions. The airlines, aircraft, and ground infrastructure need to come together in near-perfect harmony, almost like in a ballet performance to ensure things run relatively smoothly. Well, the good news is that, after a chaotic and badly managed 2023, things look set to improve this winter. We seem to be getting more adept at fighting this war, or at least the army is in place for some squabbles of the air.

We finally have three operational runways at Delhi International Airport Limited (DIAL) equipped with what is known as CAT-II Instrument Landing Systems, enabling precision landing in pretty low visibility conditions, which is perhaps the most welcome news. In addition, the runway has newly installed visibility sensors and systems to provide real-time visibility data. Follow Me vehicles and jeeps have been equipped with GPS devices to assist operators in navigating through fog and maintaining situational awareness. DIAL claims that all airside personnel involved in low-visibility operations have undergone specialised training to handle the situation effectively.

Delhi airport says it has a plan to manage the ground situation better as well. Extra processing zones have been introduced to manage off-schedule international departures, and a "swing zone" to optimise resource allocation for international operations will be operationalised. This area is designed to handle busy hours with extra immigration coun-

ters and X-ray lanes to speed up the process for departing passengers. These zones can help the airport serve twice as many passengers. Additional terminal exits have been identified to expedite passenger evacuation in case of cancellations.

DIAL also says that it will provide extra counters for airlines to re-book passengers in case of flight disruptions, and a few extra security processing zones have been established to handle the rescreening of passengers disembarked due to delayed departures. Additional staff members have been deployed in terminals to assist passengers, apart from a dedicated task force of 180 non-operational staff trained to support terminal operations during low visibility. On paper, at least, DIAL seems to be in a better position than last year.

Airlines appear better prepared this year, too. Almost all airlines have some percentage of crew that are not yet trained in handling low-visibility conditions, but Indigo and Air India's performance will set the tone and determine outcomes. With close to 80% of its pilots trained in low-visibility aircraft operations, Indigo has implemented a comprehensive plan to tackle fog-related disruptions, including positioning crew close to airports to fill in quickly when required. The airline's operations control centre will actively monitor visibility conditions to ensure that trained crew is available, even when assigned crew overshoots duty timing limits. Diverted aircraft will also be sent to airports where maintenance engineers are available to ensure smooth operations.

Air India, too, said that it had initiated several measures to minimise inconvenience to fliers due to the fog season. The airline said it has an average daily departure of 1,200 flights, of which Delhi, its primary hub, accounts for around 250. A spokesperson said the airline has an "adequate pool of cockpit crew fully trained in low-visibility operations" to ensure that morning delays do not cascade into network-wide delays. He added that the operating aircraft are being properly equipped for low-visibility operations too.

But sources in the airline maintained, as things stand, around 50% of Air India's total operations and crew are trained in low-visibility operations, which might be inadequate, considering that trained crew is required for international operations too. This led to embarrassing situations for the carrier last year, where its flights to other countries in low-visibility conditions had to be diverted to other airspaces since the commander in charge was not trained to land in such situations.

I'll just add one point here for airlines to remember: Communication is key. Inform passengers about delays or cancellations in time, not once they have already reached the airport. This can save everyone a lot of grief and reduce the stress on the terminal facilities.

By all indications and based on what my sources tell me, passengers on Indigo are likely to find themselves on firmer ground than Air India. Fliers must also remember that for all the war and troop readiness, real life, like any battle, always springs surprises. As the maxim goes, focus on the journey and not the destination.

Anjali Bhargava writes on governance, infrastructure and the social sector. The views expressed are personal



Anjali Bhargava



The airlines, aircraft, and ground infrastructure need to come together in near-perfect harmony, almost like in a ballet performance



Due to its cryptic nature and the vast sums of money it commands, the US deep state is the usual suspect whenever something goes awry

motion of democracy, human rights, and liberal values in certain countries and regions. The *coups d'état*, covert interventions, regime change operations, and softer democracy promotion projects in which the US has been involved, are open secrets. Stephen Kinzer's book, *Overthrow*, chronicled a "century of regime change" missions carried out by the US on multiple continents.

After the "colour revolutions" in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005), the usage of non-governmental think tanks, civil society organisations and plant news media outlets to create conditions for US government-desired political changes was highlighted. If a US-funded NGO or a think tank takes the lead in sapping a regime in a particular country, the logic behind it is of plausible deniability by the US government as its officials are not directly involved.

This sordid track record of meddling does not mean there is always a hidden American deep state conspiracy in every country where protest movements break out or revolts happen. Nor is it that the US covert operations are always decisive in dislodging a regime, which might have forced it to do so out of acts of omission and commission.

Still, due to its cryptic and obscure nature and the vast sums of money it commands, the US deep state is the usual suspect whenever something goes awry. Speculation about American sabotage is rife not only in authoritarian countries but also in democracies across the Global South.

While the accusations against OCCRP and OSF for carrying out an orchestrated anti-India smear campaign are subject to investigation, the interlinked web of connections among the US government machinery and their non-governmental allies such as Soros was visible and obvious.

Under the Joe Biden administration, which represented the traditional liberal internationalist ideology, coordination between segments of the US government machinery and their non-governmental allies such as Soros was visible and obvious. India might find relief from this nexus once Trump, the antithesis of liberalism, returns to the White House. With the next American president, himself declaring all-out war against the deep state, a longstanding irritant in the India-US strategic partnership could ease, at least for a while.

Sreeram Chaulia is the author of *Friends of India's Closet Strategic Partners*. The views expressed are personal

ARVIND PANAGARIYA | CHAIRMAN, 16TH FINANCE COMMISSION

With aggressive growth and pending reforms, the economy could reach \$9 trillion. It's doable. A lot of the pieces are in place.

HT



## A candlelight revolution in the making in South Korea

The dramatic turn of events in South Korea, initiated by President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law on December 3, has plunged the country into political crisis. However, the martial law was lifted just hours later through a motion passed by the Korean National Assembly. Meanwhile, the opposition parties have already initiated the process of impeaching the president. The immediate and massive public outcry against the declaration could turn into renewed activism among citizens, reminiscent of past "candlelight revolutions".

While South Korea is widely recognised for its vibrant popular culture, as well as its astonishing economic transformation, it is often forgotten that Korea is a young democracy. The horrific memories of decades of authoritarian and military dictatorship remain vivid in the collective consciousness and continue to shape public sentiment and Korean politics. South Korea's democratic transformation in the late 1980s after decades of struggle, which subsequently propelled it to become one of Asia's most dynamic democracies, serves as a source of pride for the South Korean people. The existence of a brutal dictatorship in North Korea further leads South Koreans to cherish their democratic achievements and remain vigilant in defending them.

The recent declaration of martial law is the first since South Korea's democratic transition. However, since the establishment of the country in the late 1940s, there have been 16 instances of martial law being declared. The last was in 1980, by the country's last military dictator, Chun Doo-hwan, leading to the Gwangju Uprising, a student-led movement that started in the southwestern city of Gwangju that was brutally suppressed. The incident is regarded as a dark moment in modern Korean history, but a pivotal event that paved the way for the country's democratisation in 1987.

While the instrument of martial law remains available to the state in situations of national emergency, such as war, its invocation by President Yoon to confront the political challenges posed by the opposition party is widely viewed as unconstitutional and a gross abuse of political power. The martial law, which was a successful instrument for overcoming political opposition during the military rule, proved to be political suicide for President Yoon, reflecting political miscalculation and naivety. The dramatic sequence of events on the one hand serves as a reminder of the authoritarian impulses that can still surface within Korean body politics, but on the other hand highlights the resilience of its democracy.

President Yoon, representing the conservative

People Power Party, served as the country's Chief Prosecutor before assuming office in 2022. Since taking power, he has struggled to advance his political agenda amid ongoing confrontations with the opposition Democratic Party, which holds a majority in the National Assembly. Over the past two years, President Yoon's approval ratings have plummeted, currently around 20 percent, due to several alleged scandals involving him and his wife, accusations of political favouritism, and occasional gaffes.

With mounting pressure from opposition parties and growing public outcry, the political future of President Yoon remains uncertain. Calls for his resignation persist, though he weathered an impeachment attempt on December 7, when the ruling party's boycott prevented the opposition from securing the necessary quorum. The opposition, lacking the two-thirds majority to pass an impeachment motion in the National Assembly, will need several votes from the ruling party lawmakers. Passing an impeachment motion in the National Assembly is only the first step. Once passed, the constitutional court must review the case and determine whether the abuse of power warrants removal from office. Yoon's position appears more vulnerable after another impeachment motion scheduled later this week. The situation could shift dramatically as ruling party members, responding to growing public protests and anger, may support the impeachment, following the pattern of their recent break from party lines to vote for repealing martial law.

With increasing calls for protests from trade unions, civil society organisations, and growing momentum in universities, it appears that South Korea is on the verge of yet another candlelight revolution. The citizen-led peaceful political dissent, characterised by humorous protons, banners, and candlelight to fight against injustice and political corruption have become a feature of Korean politics post-democratisation, often referred to as *Jeogori* (candlelight) movements or revolutions. This method of protest began in the 1990s and has been employed on several occasions since then, with the most recent significant movement occurring during the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye in 2016-2017. If it happens again, Yoon's fate could potentially mirror that of several of his predecessors in the post-democratic

period, many of whom ended up in jail, especially Park Geun-hye, who was impeached and sentenced to life in prison.



Jo In V John

Jo In V John is director, Korea Centre, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. The views expressed are personal



DIS/AGREE  
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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



C.R. Sasikumar

Impending Trump presidency, fall in number of student visas for Indians, invite a question:  
What is the allure of a foreign degree?

## Rebuild our universities

Obsession with foreign degrees detracts from a symmetrical dialogue between Indian and Western institutions



AVIJIT PATHAK

AS A LIFE-LONG student, I have always believed that our quest for knowledge ought to transcend all borders and boundaries. Yet, this cross-cultural exchange of ideas and academic traditions should be dialogic and symmetrical. It is said that many of us from this part of the world have become pathetically dependent on Euro-American universities and research centres. And this sort of one-way traffic has damaged our self-worth, and caused severe harm to the self-confidence of our academic institutions. It is sad to see young students leaving the country, and moving towards Canada, the US, the UK, Australia and Germany. It is certainly not a matter of pride if, as the statistics provided by the Ministry of External Affairs indicates, more than 1.33 million Indian students are pursuing higher education abroad in 2024. In contrast, as the ASHE 2021-22 report reveals, merely 46,878 students — mainly from Asian and African countries — are enrolled in India.

While I have no hesitation in articulating my discomfort with the colonisation of our imagination by foreign universities, I also believe that we need to work on our own academic centres and universities in order to resist this trend. Think of, for instance, our expertise in damaging our own institutions. Rabinranath Tagore's Santiniketan — a university that once strove for the oceanic merger of cultures, and the interplay of science, arts and aesthetics — is now just another average university tormented by local politics and poverty of pedagogic imagination. We are witnessing how the regime is determined to write the obituary of JNU. Unless we respect our institutions, generate adequate funds, we cannot prevent young minds from leaving India.

Further, this obsessive craze for foreign universities cannot be combated unless we — I mean teachers and educators — acquire the courage to de-colonise our consciousness, interrogate the hierarchy of civilisations that the likes of Thomas Babington Macaulay propagated, and trust our own

worth. Isn't it absurd that some of our "subaltern" theoreticians who write on the plight of Dalits, Adivasis and minorities prefer to leave India, and settle down in "elite" Euro-American academic centres like Columbia University, or the School of Oriental and African Studies? Isn't it ironic that some of them would occasionally visit Indian campuses like rock stars, and teach us the sociology of Mahatma Gandhi, or Birsā Munda? As these "stars" seduce the young researchers, they too seek to follow the same path, leave India, and further reproduce the culture of academic asymmetry.

During my teaching career in a leading public university in the national capital, I have never seen any leading professor from Harvard, Cambridge or MIT using his/her sabbatical, and engaging in teaching and research in our university. But then, ask an average Indian professor or a student and you will find that the sole ambition she/he cherishes is to visit abroad at any cost for decorating her/his CV. No, it is not a real and symmetrical exchange of ideas. Instead, it is like reproducing the prevalent inequality: Metropolitan "western" universities vs the universities of the "third world"! Possibly, we like to degrade ourselves. Hence, instead of creating high quality Indian journals, we feel proud of publishing in "foreign" journals. Not solely that. A leading "liberal" public university, as it is believed by many, prefers only people with PhDs from "foreign" universities for the recruitment of the faculty. A slavish orientation of this kind, needless to add, demoralises those who seek to work in Indian universities, and try to create a vibrant academic culture.

My discomfort with the obsession with foreign degrees does not mean that I am pleading for the closure of the mind. Instead, I am pleading for symmetrical dialogue and conversation — a respectable exchange of ideas between Indian and Euro-American universities. In fact, to be genuinely educated is to be truly cosmopolitan. Hence, I love to imagine an Indian student pursuing humanities/social sciences from, say, Varanasi or Kochi studying Ashis Nandy as well as Zygmunt Bauman, Bipan Chandra as well as Eric Hobsbawm, or for that matter, Kalidasa as well as Shakespeare. I

want the leading professors from our universities to start high-quality Indian journals, and acquire the confidence to invite the "stars" of Oxford and Princeton to publish their papers. I want Indian students to question the existing inequality in the academic transaction, and enrich themselves in a way that with absolute pride and confidence they can say: "Well, I am doing my PhD from Delhi School of Economics; or I am applying for a teaching position in Jadavpur University."

Will it be possible? Or, are we condemned to exist like academic beggars?

The writer taught at JNU



DEBRAJ MOOKERJEE

WHENEVER A MAVERICK enters an office of significance, it gives rise to general anxiety all around. Continuity is the cornerstone of reliability in public policy framing; an opinionated boss can unsettle these still waters. The impending US Presidency under Trump has already stirred the waters, especially in the larger domain of policies related to immigration, naturalisation, student visa issuance, and so on. He is seen as protectionist. He does not particularly like foreigners. And he wants to throw out all those who are staying in the country illegally.

In the immediate term, we might fret over the fact that the US is restricting visa access for Indian students. But there is so much more at stake. The bigger picture is even more troubling, for entirely different reasons. The Indians do well overseas is an accepted truism. A corollary to this is the presence of Indians worldwide in the field of higher education, as both students and teachers. A further extension of the co-relationship is the middle-class Indian (and not just Indian) fetish for foreign degrees and, thereafter, a prosperous and settled NRI tag.

The Indian middle class's anxiety over any possible change in the US's student intake policy on account of Trump taking office is somewhat understandable. The important question to ask, however, is: What would be the long-term impact of restricted access to American universities for foreign students, including those from India? America as a country and American universities in particular have been deeply enriched by people not born in that country. In a sense, one could argue that America is great because its universities are great. With the advent of the knowledge economy, those who produce knowledge necessarily stay ahead of those who consume knowledge. Without the cutting-edge intellect of international students, not to mention the super bright STEM out-performers from India, American universities, over time, are likely to lose the edge under a protectionist regime.

The 21st century began with the hope of a new world order in which societies began to move towards a more equitable international ecosystem. The last 10 years, however, have witnessed backtracking on the progress achieved earlier. This is dismaying. For long now, we have heard the West tell us, through bodies like GATT, WTO, World Bank, and so on, that free trade was the way forward for all countries to profit and prosper. Once the West began to experience the adverse effects of "free

trade" when confronted with more efficient economies of scale mobilised by developing nations, it began to backtrack. The West has always been self-assured vis-a-vis a rapid expansion of lifestyle and comfort in the face of unchallenged domination in world trade. This self-assurance dissipated somewhat as they began to feel the pinch after countries like China and even India, to a lesser extent, along with other BRICS countries, began to challenge their access to the high street of world commerce.

Trump's protectionist policies, including the restriction of student visas, immigration opportunities, permission to work in the US and disallowing citizenship through natural rights are all part of a piece — the only way to win the fight is to not allow the opponent into the ring.

Here in India we too have some tough questions to answer. Why are our higher education institutions not the first choice of millions of students? Why are we losing students to foreign universities? The projected outflow on account of students travelling overseas to secure higher education is \$70 billion by 2025. Why this exponential increase?

As reported in this newspaper, students travelling to the US have dropped in numbers. But that's because they have chosen to study elsewhere, the UK, Australia and Canada. Just wishing for these students to stay and study in India is not enough. We need to have the courage to ask what is the comparable level of higher education they can hope to get in India. Thanks to NEP, most students in the university system in India are hamstrung, yoked to a system that is fast spiralling into chaos. American universities

are great, but without our students, they won't be a drop in the ocean. First, there will be a drop in quality; worryingly, the brightest of students who go on to become faculty will not be teaching in those universities. This is what will happen in the long term. India might, on the other hand, retain the brightest of students, but it won't have the appropriate higher education ecosystem to nurture their excellence. Whatever it did have — and it did at one time, since so many exceptional talents have emerged from that system — these individuals, who have excelled in various fields across the globe, will progressively be devalued by NEP's formula for diluted disciples and mindless meanderings into unproductive and nonspecific knowledge domains.

Nations act in their own interest and that is understandable. But the world of knowledge and its expansion is not a zero-sum game. Throughout history, ideas have travelled to enrich history. Historians and chroniclers travelled the world and told stories while learning new ones. They spread knowledge and culinary and cultural practices. Ironically, the world was more one than it is now.

The writer teaches at Ramjas college, University of Delhi

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"As Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba is not running for the party's executive role again, he would perhaps want to bow out as the president who did his bit to strengthen internal democracy and hand over the party's reins to a competent successor."

—THE KATHMANDU POST

## Lead by law, not ideology

Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav's recent comments do not behove the office of a judge. They go against SC's views on impartiality



FAIZAN MUSTAFAA

ON DECEMBER 8, Allahabad High Court judge Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav spoke at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad event, where he issued a few controversial comments that betrayed his ideological tilt. The Supreme Court has taken notice of these comments and sought a report from the High Court. This is, however, not a case of impeachment on grounds of proven misbehaviour.

In the past, Justice Yadav has said that "scientists believe that cow exhales oxygen" and the protection of the animal should be a fundamental right of Hindus. He also demanded that Parliament bring in a law to honour Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, Ved Vyas, Valmiki, Ramayan and the Gita. Of course, as a citizen, Justice Yadav is entitled to an ideological position and can express his opinion on any subject. He has rightly pointed out that the Hindu Personal Law has problems. Justice Yadav's assessment that the Muslim Personal Law needs urgent reforms is also correct. But he has made a few sweeping remarks which are neither factually correct nor legally tenable.

Justice Yadav reportedly used a slur to refer to Muslims. He used the "us" versus "them" vocabulary to assert that children of one community were "tolerant" while young people in "another community had grown up witnessing animal slaughter". His diatribe seems ignorant of the initiatives to bring about reforms amongst Muslims. Syed Ahmad Khan, Shibli Nomani and Muhammad Iqbal were well-known votaries of reforms in Muslim law. The Muslim clergy led the reform process which led to the passing of the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939.

In contrast, Hindu women had to wait till 1955 to get the right to dissolve marriage. Muslim women always had a right to inherit property not only as daughters (albeit in a 1:2 ratio with their brothers) but also as wives, mothers and sisters from the very inception of Islam. Hindu women got this right much later and the daughter became a co-partner only in 2005.

Justice Yadav's speech betrays his inclination towards religious majoritarianism. In a democracy, the electoral majority, and not the religious majority, has a right to choose a government. In a recent by-election to the UP assembly, the BJP candidate won by over one lakh votes in the Kundiari constituency where Muslims are in a numerical majority. Moreover, the Constitution does not allow even this electoral majority to turn majoritarian. Thus, a law unanimously passed in Parliament can

be struck down by the courts if it violates the Fundamental Rights or is contrary to the Constitution.

While one may agree with some of Justice Yadav's arguments about the uniform civil code, his position overlooks the nuances in the UCC debate. As a matter of fact, personal law is Entry No 5 in the Concurrent List. It's clear that the framers of the Constitution did envisage legal pluralism.

Unlike the US, India does not have a tradition of describing judges as conservative and liberal. The links between the ideological position of judges and their decisions has not been minutely studied in the country but there are few pointers in that direction. The *Sarla Mudgal* case involved four Hindus who had embraced Islam to marry the second time. Instead of reprimanding these men, Justice Kuldip Singh observed that "the time we achieve the goal of uniform civil code... there is an open invitation to Hindu husband... to become a Muslim."

In *Baf Parli* (2005), Chief Justice R.C. Lahoti and D.M. Dharmadhikari, while refusing to recognise Jains as a minority, explained the role of the National Minority Commission. They said that "the Commission instead of encouraging claims from different communities for being added to a list of notified minorities under the Act should suggest ways and means to help create social conditions where the list of notified minorities is gradually reduced and done away with altogether." In *Anjumana Madarsa Uloom* (2007), Justice S.N. Srivastava of the Allahabad High Court held that Muslims are no longer a minority in UP.

In a 2018 verdict, which was later set aside by a divisional bench, Justice S.R. Sen of the Meghalaya High Court said that India ought to have been declared a Hindu nation. He asked for the conferment of Indian citizenship to all the Hindus of the world. In *Mohammed Salim* (2014), the Uttar Pradesh High Court held that the Ganga and Yamuna were living entities entitled to all fundamental rights. A Supreme Court bench led by the then Chief Justice J.S. Khehar bench stayed this verdict.

The Supreme Court's Restatement of Judicial Values, which was adopted by the full court on May 7, 1997, talks of reaffirming the impartiality of a judge. It underlines that judges should not, even in a personal capacity, undertake any activity that erodes their credibility and makes them appear partisan. "A judge must at all times be conscious that he is under the public gaze and there should be no act or omission by him which is unbecoming of the high office he occupies and the public esteem in which that office is held," it notes. A judge is not supposed to express views on political matters. Let the law and not the ideological leanings of judges determine the outcome of cases.

The writer teaches constitutional law and is Vice-Chancellor of Chhatrapati National Law University, Patna. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### INSULT TO OFFICE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No, your honour' (IE, December 12). Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav's speech at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad event shows how he has flagrantly breached his own oath of office to abide by the Constitution in letter and spirit. His provocative language against the Muslim community is unsuitable for judgeship. Studies have shown that members of racial, ethnic, minorities or vulnerable groups often face harassment, arbitrary and abusive treatment, by law enforcing agencies, and unfair treatment by prosecutors and the courts. Suitable action by the Supreme Court is warranted to preserve people's faith in the majesty of law.

L.R. Murmu, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No, your honour' (IE, December 12). The recent remark made by sitting Allahabad High Court Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav raises major issues regarding judicial impartiality. His comments at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad gathering, where he framed issues through an "us" versus "them" lens, undercut our Constitution's secular values. Shouldn't the Supreme Court take swift action to preserve the validity of its judicial system and to safeguard minority rights? The courts must not turn into an arena for divisive speech; they should instead focus on discussing the citizens' rights with fairness.

Anshu Bharti, Bagesara

### THE LONG GAME

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Don't lean on the RBI' (IE, December 12). Inflation, now above the RBI's tolerance band, has

eroded consumer purchasing power, dampening urban consumption and slowing overall economic activity. While some policymakers argue for rate cuts to spur growth, the RBI has rightly chosen patience. Knee-jerk reactions to short-term data fluctuations could jeopardise long-term economic stability. By keeping its policy stance neutral, the RBI retains flexibility to act decisively when credible evidence emerges of sustained inflation moderation or deeper growth challenges. The RBI's focus on durability over expediency serves as a reminder: Sound economic policy is the about quiet fixes but about laying the ground-work for stable and inclusive growth.

Sankar Paul, Nadia

### AN ACCESS QUESTION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The young must adapt' (IE, December 12). There is an essential aspect of the writer's proposal that demands further scrutiny—digital inequity. The article depicts proposed sophisticated technological solutions and enhanced parental and educational oversight. Nonetheless, it overlooks the fundamental issue of unequal digital access, which could undermine the efficacy of these strategies. Across India's diverse socio-economic landscape, many children remain bereft of basic internet access, making any digital regulation potentially ineffectual in these areas. To rectify this, it is crucial that any discussion on content regulation include the issue of ensuring that every child has access to the digital divide. Policy initiatives must not only focus on content creation but also ensure that digital tools are accessible and affordable across all segments of society.

Ayush Dwivedi, New Delhi



## SCIENCE

# What is Disease X and why the world should prepare for it

COVID-19 is regarded as the first instance of a real Disease X. When SARS-CoV-2 emerged as an unknown pathogen causing a global pandemic, it exemplified the scenario that Disease X was meant to represent — an unpredictable, novel threat requiring rapid global response and adaptation

C. Aravinda

## The story so far

The recent outbreak reported in the first week of December 2024 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has claimed over 400 lives and remains unclassified, has raised concerns that it could be an instance of Disease X. This unsettling event has reignited discussions about Disease X. Disease X is not an actual but a hypothetical disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) coined the term in 2018 to describe an unknown pathogen that could potentially unleash a devastating epidemic or pandemic. It was conceptualised by the WHO to prepare for future outbreaks that are difficult to predict or identify. While investigations continue to determine the cause in Congo, the outbreak underscores the importance of Disease X.

## WHO's priority list of pathogens?

COVID-19 is widely regarded as the first instance of a real Disease X after the WHO introduced the concept in 2018. When SARS-CoV-2 emerged as an unknown pathogen causing a global pandemic, it exemplified the scenario that Disease X was meant to represent — an unpredictable, novel threat requiring rapid global response and adaptation. The concept of Disease X traces its origins in the aftermath of the West African Ebola epidemic of 2014-2016, which resulted in over 11,000 deaths and revealed significant gaps in global epidemic preparedness. After the outbreak, the WHO brought together scientists and public health experts to address how future outbreaks of similar scale could be prevented.

The WHO's priority list of pathogens is a strategic tool published in 2018 that is designed to focus global attention and resources on the most serious infectious disease threats. This list identifies diseases that have epidemic or pandemic potential for which there are insufficient or no medical countermeasures such as vaccines or treatments. The need for such a list arises from the urgency to guide research and development, allocate funding, and enhance preparedness. It helps policymakers, researchers, and health organisations prioritise efforts toward controlling the diseases. The current list (not exhaustive) includes Ebola virus disease, Marburg virus disease, Lassa fever, Nipah virus, Rift Valley fever, Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever, Zika virus, and Disease X. Each of these pathogens has been flagged due to factors like high mortality rates, potential for rapid spread, and the lack of adequate preventive or therapeutic options.

## What is Disease X?

Disease X is not a specific illness but a placeholder for an unpredictable and



Swab samples being taken for a COVID-19 test. FILE THE HINDU

as-yet-undiscovered pathogen capable of sparking a global health crisis. The WHO included it in the Blueprint for Priority Diseases in 2018 to focus on the risks of emerging diseases that science has yet to encounter. The term sits at the intersection of two categories (among four) popularised by Donald Rumsfeld's matrix: "known unknowns" (threats we are aware of but cannot fully understand) and "unknown unknowns" (threats we are not aware of and understand). Disease X embodies both, as it acknowledges the likelihood of a future pandemic without specifying when, where, or how it might arise.

The potential culprits behind Disease X are varied. It originates from Pathogen X, which could be a virus, a bacterium, a parasite, fungi, helminths, or even a prion — a misfolded protein capable of causing severe neurological diseases. Historical data supports this uncertainty. Since 1940 (from where authentic records are available), researchers have identified more than 300 emerging infectious diseases, about 70% of which have zoonotic origins, meaning they are transmitted from animals to humans. This process, known as zoonotic spillover, is often linked to human encroachment on wildlife habitats, deforestation, and the intensification of agriculture. Meanwhile, the growing risks of antimicrobial resistance, bioterrorism, and accidental lab leaks add further layers of unpredictability.

## Patterns in emerging diseases

While the exact nature of Disease X remains unknown, epidemiological patterns provide critical insights into how new diseases emerge and spread. The emergence of viruses such as HIV, SARS, MERS, and Ebola was closely linked to ecological disruptions caused by human activity. Deforestation, urbanisation, and climate change have pushed humans and wildlife into closer contact, increasing the

**The interconnectedness of our world makes it easier for localised outbreaks to escalate into pandemics. While epidemiology cannot predict the exact moment or source of Disease X, it can help identify high-risk regions and behaviours**

likelihood of pathogen transmission. Epidemiologists estimate that over 1.7 million undiscovered viruses exist in wildlife, with hundreds of thousands potentially capable of infecting humans. The frequency of novel outbreaks has also increased significantly since the mid-20th century, reflecting a combination of environmental, demographic, and global factors.

Regions with high biodiversity and inadequate healthcare systems, like the Congo Basin, are particularly vulnerable. The interconnectedness of our world, with frequent international travel and trade, makes it easier for localised outbreaks to escalate into pandemics, as seen with COVID-19. While epidemiology cannot predict the exact moment or source of Disease X, it can help identify high-risk regions and behaviours that increase the likelihood of its emergence.

## Challenges of predicting Disease X

Forecasting the next Disease X is daunting, as its emergence depends on numerous unpredictable factors. Zoonotic diseases are the most likely source, given their history of driving major epidemics. However, other scenarios, such as pathogens mutating to evade treatment, laboratory mishaps, or deliberate biological attacks, cannot be ruled out. Climate change is also reshaping disease transmission dynamics, expanding the range of vector-borne illnesses like malaria and dengue fever while pushing pathogens to adapt to new

hosts and environments.

The sheer number of potential pathogens adds to the complexity. Scientists estimate that only a fraction of viruses capable of infecting humans have been identified, leaving a vast pool of unknown threats. Genomic sequencing and artificial intelligence are beginning to play an important role in narrowing this vast field of possibilities, but even with these tools, predicting the exact origin, timing, and behaviour of Disease X remains out of reach. What is certain, however, is that the conditions that gave rise to pandemics like COVID-19 and SARS continue to exist, making the emergence of Disease X a question of when, not if.

At the heart of preparation is the need for robust surveillance systems to detect new outbreaks early. Advances in genomic sequencing, artificial intelligence, and real-time data sharing are essential tools for developing diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines. Strengthening healthcare infrastructure, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, is also crucial. Organisations like the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) are now investing in "prototype pathogen" platforms that can be adapted to target unknown diseases within 100 days of their identification.

## Need for global collaboration

Fighting Disease X will require an unprecedented level of international cooperation. The WHO's ongoing efforts, such as its list of priority pathogens and the proposed Pandemic Treaty, aim to foster a unified global response to health emergencies. These initiatives recognise that pandemics do not respect borders and that fragmented efforts will be insufficient to counter a threat as elusive as Disease X. Governments must work together to share data, pool resources, and ensure equitable access to diagnostics, treatments, and vaccines.

The outbreak in the DRC serves as a sobering reminder of the risks the world faces. Disease X is no longer a distant hypothetical but an urgent call to action. By strengthening public health systems, investing in research and innovation, and fostering global solidarity, the world can prepare for the unpredictable and safeguard future generations from the devastating consequences of the next pandemic. Frameworks like the Nagoya Protocol, which ensure equitable sharing of benefits from genetic resources, could be expanded to include biological materials like pathogens. It would promote global collaboration, ensuring fair access to research and medical countermeasures during outbreaks. A novel disease anywhere is a threat to everyone.

(Dr. C. Aravinda is an academic and public health physician. The views expressed are personal. aravindaalmsjr10@hotmail.com)



A dengue prevention camp in Chennai. FILE PHOTO

## Tackling the challenge of seasonal illnesses

Serena Josephine M.

In October 2024, Tamil Nadu's State Public Health Laboratory (SPHL) took a closer look at cases of fever caused by respiratory viruses. An analysis of 326 respiratory samples from patients with influenza-like illness (ILI) across 38 districts found that 75.4% of respiratory illnesses in children and adults were caused by Influenza A and B viruses. Respiratory Syncytial Virus A and B were also commonly detected among patients with ILI.

Every year, seasonal illnesses keep doctors and public health authorities busy. But certain disease patterns have become clearer. "We have observed some obvious patterns. One is in vector-borne diseases that have a very specific trend. It starts after August and goes up to January. This has been the trend for the last three years. There may be a small rise from one year to another, but the trend is continuing. The increases may be due to erratic rainfall or more rains," T. S. Selvarajayagam, Director of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, said.

Next are acute diarrhoeal diseases, occurring in and around May. "Cases peak from April to June. We have some clusters

**An analysis of 326 respiratory samples from patients with influenza-like illness across 38 districts found that 75.4% of respiratory illnesses were caused by Influenza A and B viruses. Respiratory Syncytial Virus A and B were also commonly detected**

as well due to local water issues," he said. "Airborne diseases — respiratory infections — rise during the winter season. There is a small rise in seasonal flu in March too. But otherwise, cases are seen throughout the year," Dr. Selvarajayagam added. This year, mumps was a cause for concern.

There has been a steady flow of patients with fever to hospitals over the last few months. Suresh Kumar, consultant, infectious diseases, Apollo Hospitals, said cases of H1N1 and H3N2 were common. "We are seeing more cases of chikungunya. Cases have been surfacing over the last three to four months and have picked up in the last few weeks. Fever cases started to rise following rains in November," he said. A lot of patients who had flu and cold were experiencing lack of taste and loss of appetite, he said.

Jamini Sankar, medical director, Kanchi Kamakoti CHILDS Trust Hospital, said: "We saw several cases of mycoplasma infections over the last month. This does not respond to commonly prescribed antibiotics. These infections are a cause for concern this season," she said.



A fever surveillance camp. FILE PHOTO

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

## Sweetened drinks 'increase risk of cardiovascular diseases'

R. Sujatha

A large-scale study in Sweden has suggested that consuming sweetened drinks significantly increases the risk of serious cardiovascular disease. An occasional treat is acceptable, though, the study has added.

Researchers studying the effects of the consumption of different types of sugar on health risks have found that generally higher sugar intake raises the risk of certain cardiovascular diseases. Sugary drinks in particular carry higher risks. Extremely low sugar consumption is also associated with poorer cardiovascular health. The study indicated that the lowest risks of cardiovascular diseases were found among people who ate occasional treats. The scientists advocate avoiding fizzy drinks, since such beverages have excessive added sugar that can increase the risk of stroke or aneurysm, heart failure, and atrial fibrillation.

## Source of the sugar

"The most striking finding from our study is the divergent relationship between different sources of added sugar and cardiovascular disease," said Suzanne Janzi, PhD candidate at Lund University and corresponding author of the article in *Frontiers in Public Health*. "This surprising contrast highlights the importance of considering not just the amount of sugar consumed, but its source and context," Ms. Janzi said.



The lowest risks of cardiovascular diseases were found among people who ate occasional treats. GETTY IMAGES

The scientists collected data from two other studies: the Swedish Mammography Cohort and the Cohort of Swedish Men, which included diet questionnaires administered in 1997 and 2009, allowing for monitoring participants' diets over time.

They looked at three classes of sugar consumption — toppings such as honey, a pastry as a treat, or sweetened beverages such as fizzy drinks — and seven cardiovascular diseases: two different types of stroke, heart attacks, heart failure, aortic aneurysms, atrial fibrillation, and aortic stenosis.

The participants were monitored until they died, were diagnosed with one of the cardiovascular diseases, or reached the end of the follow-up period in 2019. The

research found that during the study period, 25,739 participants were diagnosed with a cardiovascular disease.

## Sweet drinks increase risk

The data helped to break down how the different types of sugar intake affect the risk of different cardiovascular diseases. The analysis showed that consuming more sweetened drinks significantly increased the risk of ischaemic stroke, heart failure, atrial fibrillation, and abdominal aortic aneurysm.

"Liquid sugars found in sweetened beverages make you feel less full, potentially leading to overconsumption," Ms. Janzi said.

Different cardiovascular diseases were affected differently by increased sugar intake, possibly because consuming additional sugars affected participants' individual risk profiles differently. Increased sugar in general raised the risk of ischaemic stroke and abdominal aortic aneurysm, as well as increasing the risk of heart failure in participants with a normal BMI. However, the highest risks of a negative health outcome arose in the lowest intake category for treats. Occasional treats were associated with better outcomes than no treats at all.

## Low intake not beneficial

"While our observational study cannot establish causation, these findings suggest that extremely low sugar intake may not be necessary or beneficial for cardiovascular health," she added.

In India, the study resonates with our food habits, which include a large consumption of sweets and carbohydrates. "Carbohydrates are not inherently harmful. One should pay attention to the type and the amount consumed, which can increase the risk of heart disease," said G. Sengottuvelu, clinical lead, Structural Heart Disease Programme at Apollo Hospitals.

"Excess carbohydrates in the form of sugars and refined carbs may be more harmful than dietary fats. Added sugars, sugary beverages, or processed foods can contribute to obesity and metabolic syndrome, which is linked with insulin resistance, high triglycerides, and low HDL (good cholesterol)," he added.

They are associated with increased visceral fat deposition and accelerated atherosclerosis. Insulin resistance causes systemic inflammation with progression of plaque formation, the specialist explained. Government Omandurar Multi Super Speciality Hospital dietician Meenakshi Bajaj said though the Indian dietary guidelines limit added sugars to 10% of the daily energy requirement, some dieticians recommend stricter restrictions given Indians' disposition to metabolic diseases. "Traditional Indian sweets contain not just sugars but also nuts, milk, seeds, trans fats, and saturated fats that prevent overconsumption, but this is not so with sugar-sweetened beverages. They could be replaced with herb infused water, tender coconuts, and fresh unsweetened home-made juices," she added.



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

PF a swipe away

ATM withdrawals to cut bureaucratic delays

THE Labour Ministry's initiative to enable Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) subscribers to withdraw funds directly from ATMs by 2025 is a landmark step toward simplifying social security. This reform exemplifies the integration of advanced technology with public service to enhance efficiency and accessibility. Currently, EPFO withdrawals are marred by procedural delays, taking up to 10 days for funds to reflect in bank accounts. The proposed PF withdrawal cards aim to eliminate such red tape, providing real-time access to funds. However, prudence prevails with the capping of withdrawals at 50 per cent of the total balance, ensuring financial discipline and safeguarding long-term savings. The broader agenda under EPFO 3.0, which includes increasing contribution limits and converting provident fund savings into pensions, indicates the government's commitment to modernising the country's social security systems. This aligns well with India's growing emphasis on digitalisation and ease of living for its workforce, which has swelled by 70 million EPFO members since 2017.

In a related welcome step, the ministry is finalising a scheme for gig and platform workers, who often remain excluded from traditional employer-employee arrangements. The inclusion of this rapidly growing workforce in social security nets, with benefits like health coverage and financial aid, is a vital stride in formalising labour markets and addressing future workforce challenges.

These measures signal a shift toward a technology-driven welfare framework. By reducing human intervention and operational inefficiencies, the government underscores its commitment to improving citizen-centric services. While challenges like implementation hurdles and awareness gaps must be addressed, the potential benefits far outweigh them. Ultimately, this is not merely a technological upgrade but a profound leap toward equity and convenience in labour welfare, fostering trust in public institutions and bolstering the workforce's resilience.

Dishonourable

Allahabad HC judge has done a big disservice

ONLY a strong institutional response will serve the cause of justice following the communally charged remarks by a judge of the Allahabad High Court. Demands have been put forth for an inquiry against Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav, suspension of his judicial work and even impeachment. The Supreme Court has sought details of the controversial speech amid protests that this brazen violation of the code of conduct casts doubts on the judiciary's independence and neutrality. Addressing an event organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad on the Uniform Civil Code, Justice Yadav said the country would function as per the wishes of the majority. Replete with communal slurs, his speech also alluded to the media attention it would generate. A line has been crossed, and what's worse, all too knowingly.

Impartiality is the cornerstone of the Constitution and the rule of law. An individual who has taken oath to uphold these principles making an exhibition of his prejudices does a huge disservice to both his constitutional role and the judicial system. The impact is not confined to communal unrest; it erodes public faith in the judiciary's integrity. A denial or a rebuttal will not suffice. There must be consequences. The top court, the expectations, will send a firm message on what is not acceptable.

A Supreme Court Bench's observations after its suo motu cognisance of objectionable remarks by a Karnataka High Court judge need reiteration. The perception of justice to every segment of society, it said, was as important as the rendition of justice. It was intrinsic for judges to be aware of their own predispositions, it noted, because it was only on the basis of such awareness that they could remain truly faithful to deliver objective and fair justice. Hear, hear, Justice Yadav.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

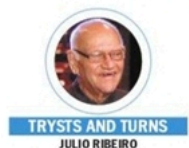
LAHORE, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1924

**The Kohat Findings—III**

THE most extraordinary conclusion arrived at by the Special Magistrate, and which is virtually endorsed by the Government of India, is that the authorities did all or very nearly all that could be expected of them in the circumstances. The former records the deliberate opinion that "reasonable measures were taken to avert the outbreak," characterises as inaccurate and misleading the Hindu statement that the authorities did nothing to stop looting or burning, and finds justification for the order to the troops to stand by instead of actually stopping looting, incendiarism etc, in the following words:—"The authorities had to keep in mind a possible descent by the tribes and to retain a reserve to deal with such an eventuality should it occur. Had this happened, the Kohat riots might well have developed into a small frontier war. That it was averted is a tribute to the authorities, and a point that has not received sufficient publicity." "While the Government of India," says the latter, "have been able, in the light of after events to point out instances where a different course of action would have been wiser, they desire it to be clearly understood that the authorities faced a most difficult situation with coolness and courage. The loss of life and property in these riots was deplorably great, but the provocation that started the rioting was so grave, the retaliation so fierce and the whole environment so inflammable, that without coolness and courage on the part of the authorities, the loss might easily have been far greater. Credit is due to them for localising the trouble within Kohat and its environs and in particular for restraining the transferritorial tribesmen from descending upon Kohat."

Musings on a book and a movie

Both 'Autocrats' and 'Amaran' offer insights into authoritarian leadership, fear and unity



TRYSTS AND TURNS  
JULIO RIBEIRO

MY dear wife, who left this world when she was 84, used to bemoan the rigours of old age. My reaction to her lament was always the same — "What is the alternative?" I would ask. Death answered the query, while the one she left behind occupies himself by reading and watching movies on television. A book I read and a movie I saw last week absorbed my time and my attention. I write on my reflections on that book and the film.

The ouster of the Syrian Strongman, Bashar al-Assad, by rebels in his own country prompted me to write this article. My neighbour Mona Roy had sent me a book titled 'Autocrats' — *Charisma, Power and their Lives* written by her family friend Rajiv Dogra, a distinguished Indian Foreign Service officer, now retired. Dogra is a scholar and a writer. Two of his previous (he has written seven) books *Where Borders Bleed* and *'Duranda Curses'* are a must read.

When reading his latest book 'Autocrats', I got the uneasy feeling that he had Narendra Modi in sight. But Rajiv is a trained diplomat, unlike me, a policeman who served for four full years as Ambassador without any grounding in diplomacy.

Incidentally, Rajiv Dogra was Ambassador to Romania, simultaneously accredited to Albania and Moldova, as I also was a few years earlier. The intelligentsia in Romania recognised him as a scholar. He was honoured with an honorary doctorate by the University of Oradea and made an honorary professor in the University of Targoviste.



HARMFUL: An element of fear does prevail today in the minds of the minority population of our country. m

Rajiv's assertion that the 'word authoritarian does not convey the immense harm that an all-pervasive atmosphere of fear does to a society' attracted my attention. Since such an element of fear does prevail today in the minds of the minority population of our beloved country, I read his book with more care than normal. The book had a profound effect on me and I would recommend that it be read by all patriots who think and question.

The modern authoritarian's cult of personality, for instance, can be compared to that of the ancient Roman emperors, like Nero and Caligula, who were deified by their compatriots. In the 20th century, Benito Mussolini of Italy had his image imprinted on every bar of soap so that none would or could forget him even in the bath.

I did not find any reference to Modi in the book. Was that diplomacy at work? Or did the author want his readers to draw their own conclusions? He does mention Indira Gandhi, 'who did not flinch at anything to maintain herself in power even if her actions proved a danger to democracy.'

Dogra lists some characteristics of an autocrat which 'should be taken as a sign of worry':

1. Belief that he or she is special and unique.
2. Lack of empathy for others.
3. Need for excessive admiration.
4. Obsessive sense of self-importance.

Rajiv mentions many world leaders through the ages with autocratic tendencies. Some could even be described as tyrants or dictators, but all were autocrats. Hitler, of course, leads the pack, as does Mussolini. On the other end of the scale is Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, whose balancing act in a camouflaged dictatorship, earned him more

What I worry about is the spread of fear and divisiveness in a multi-religious, multi-cultural society that has been spawned by our present regime.

plaudits than curses. Yet, he detained for two years many political opponents and allowed only one party, one newspaper, one trade union and one language. Rajiv concludes that 'the quest for a benevolent, all-performing dictator has more often than not led to a bitter dead end.'

That there are many similarities that can be listed in the actions taken by strongmen in the course of history is an accepted conclusion that readers will draw on reading 'Autocrats'. The author has meticulously studied their doings and their differing personalities and family backgrounds. The facts will fascinate students of history and politics, alike. Even cursory readers like me will benefit from the knowledge that the book so lucidly disseminates.

Applying this knowledge to present-day India and specifically Narendra Modi, I would not place him in the slots allotted to tyrants and dictators. He is authoritarian alright. So is Indira Gandhi. Does India need an authoritarian leader to steer our democracy? My view is it does. What I worry about is the spread of fear and divisiveness in a multi-religious, multi-cultural society that has been spawned by the present regime. Will that lead the country to

prosperity and greatness? I harbour serious doubts on this score. Of course, time alone will tell. But can the country afford the price it is bound to pay at the end? Can the caste divisions, embedded in the culture of the majority, be surmounted so that the 80 per cent-strong majority becomes one, as intended?

While mulling over the answers to my own questions, I found that my oversight would not allow me to read for more than three hours at a time. My need to keep my mind occupied led me to the television. The fine print of the written word is substituted by pictorial representations of life on television.

I found a movie titled 'Amaran' made in Tamil Nadu by leading movers of the state's film industry. I saw the film dubbed in English. I could relate to the script and the story because it was based on the courage and devotion to duty of an army officer, Major Mukund Vardhanaraj of the Rajput Regiment, seconded for duty to the 44 Rashtriya Rifles, which operates mainly in Jammu & Kashmir to keep terrorists in check.

My friend Rahul Bose, the actor, had a big part to play in the movie, but the principal character was a Hindu Tamilian officer married to a Malayali Christian girl, whom he had met while they were students in Wilson Christian College. Their trials in getting their respective parents to consent to an inter-faith union was compounded by the fact that the mothers of both the boy and the girl were not happy with the protagonist's choice of a career in the army.

The rapport of the officer with his own men was built on his determination to lead them personally in battle, unlike the Duke of Plaza Torro, who led his regiment from behind whenever there was any fighting.

I loved the film and the message of patriotism, true qualities of leadership as well as the inter-religious amity it exuded. Readers should see it. And I wish that my country's acknowledged leader, PM Modi, sees it and recommends it to his faithful followers.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The deadliest foe of democracy is not autocracy but liberty frenzied. — Otto Hermann Kahn

Moments of sunny side up in 1971 war

COL BIMAL BHATTIA (RETD)

A SPOT of humour, a witty remark or the oddity of a situation are priceless in war. Two days after my 20th birthday in the trenches, the balloon went up with Pakistan's multiple raids deep inside India by F86 Sabre jets. Our aircraft responded in full measure. One of our fighters returning from a mission jettisoned an empty drop tank over us. Alone famer nearby appeared amused: 'Duje wich kudya hona' (pilot must have jumped into the other aircraft!)

During our advance to Shakargarh, the Company Commander, Major Kohli, was summoned to the rear, requiring me to lead. Around 4 am, having covered 20 km, we came under heavy fire. Just before daybreak, I found the Brigade Commander beside me, accompanied by the Commanding Officer. I briefed him on the extent of fire (tracer projectiles are visible in dark). That he was kneeling beside me showed that war is a great leveller, driving people to mother earth.

'I'm Sukhi Chand, but they call me Dukhi Chand,' is how a senior officer of a sister battalion introduced himself in a moonlit night as I indicated the route for his battalion.

Andy, my buddy, set about brewing tea and the billowing smoke attracted a few sabres. That's when the plucky Kohli picked up a slug and flung it towards me. 'Binny catch, garan hai' (it's hot). Early inoculation proved valuable. Resting with my back against a tree after the first night's artillery pounding, my eyes opened to the spluttering of a sabre's front guns, as I valued for cover. Lesson: Artillery shells come whistling. Sabres scream, but skimming the earth at treetop level, make a silent approach.

Trapped in a narrow village lane by a sabre that came in for the kill, my patrol's evasive actions flustered the pilot, making multiple runs. If only he had the sense to come in along the lane, he would have sighted and skewered us easily. This was like schoolchildren playing hide and seek.

Ordered to check the depth of the Bein river skirting Pakistan's stronghold, a night patrol went up and lay prone. Kohli whispered to sepoy Swaran Singh to check. He moved up, plunked into the river and scurried back. 'Kini hai?' (how much) asked Kohli. 'Thale gilla hai, belt sukki hai,' (my bottom is wet, the belt dry) he reported in unprintable caste Punjabi.

An enthusiastic officer stripped the rifle of a captured Pakistani soldier. Unable to reassemble the rifle, frantic calls to evacuate the PW unnerved him. 'Just open his blindfold and ask him to assemble it,' Kohli advised helpfully.

Stout and ever-cheerful, Gurdial Singh made light of a sabre's fusillade on us, then zooming up and disgorging bombs. 'Lid kar gaya,' (he's evacuated). It is he who mustered his section to whitewash a mosque in the adjoining Badwal village after the ceasefire and won many hearts.

My unit was 9 MAHAR and the Indian Army is full of such gutsy and spirited men.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**A world free of n-warfare**

Refer to 'A Nobel plea', the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Nihon Hidankyo serves as a poignant reminder of the devastating consequences of nuclear warfare. As we reflect on the catastrophic events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the ongoing wars in Ukraine, West Asia and other parts of the world highlight the devastating impact of conflict on human lives. The threat of nuclear escalation looms large and the international community must take collective action to prevent such a catastrophe. Experience underscores the importance of abolishing nuclear weapons. Let us join forces to create a world where nuclear weapons are a relic of the past and where the prospect of peace, security and human dignity is within reach for all.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

**Go by spirit of Constitution**

With reference to 'Case for secularism', India is a confluence of many religions, cultures, languages, civilisations and diversified geographical phenomena. It is the secular character of the Constitution that brings it all together. Comparing this with any other country will be incorrect. But individuals and political parties, in their bid to survive and grab power, promote differences among the masses. The ruling BJP even in absence of any viable policies for the economic and social uplift of the poor, achieved prominence solely because of its communal drive against the minorities. Educated youth are without jobs. Growing economic and social disparities are gaining dangerous levels. The courts should also be conscious of the spirit of the Constitution while dealing with cases related to secular aspects.

AG RAJMOHAN, ANANTAPUR (AP)

**Cooperative space exploration**

Refer to 'A new & private race to the moon'; the article highlights India's Rs 1,000 crore investment in space startups. While private space ventures can speed up technological progress, they also raise concerns. Like the climate crisis caused by rapid industrialisation, exploiting space resources could deepen

inequalities. If private companies dominate space exploration, the benefits may be confined to a few wealthy nations. Furthermore, the private race to the moon is not solely driven by curiosity but also has military and geopolitical ramifications. Space exploration should adopt a global cooperative approach, ensuring fair outcomes and avoiding imbalances caused by industrialisation on earth.

CHANCHAL S. MANN, UNA

**Judicial integrity must**

Apogee of the news report 'Oppn initiates move to impeach judge over controversial remarks', the judge made insensitive comments about the Muslim community and its practices and used offensive language against it. It is not the first time that he has garnered attention for his controversial words. Earlier too, his oral remarks in court, and even judgments, have made headlines. Such statements can undermine public trust in the judiciary and raise questions over its integrity. That the apex court has taken note of this incident and sought details of the speech is a welcome move. People may argue about freedom of speech but the fact is that a judge's impartial conduct in office and during public events should be above reproach.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

**Community-driven approach**

Apogee of 'Reimagining anti-drug strategies in Haryana', the state's innovative anti-drug strategy demonstrates the power of a compassionate, community-driven approach to address the issue of substance abuse. The key to this initiative is the active involvement of local communities, village-level committees and volunteers working together with the law enforcement agencies and healthcare providers to ensure timely interventions. Rehabilitation centres and helplines have been expanded, with a focus on treating addiction as a health issue rather than a criminal offense. By combining education, technology, and rehabilitation, Haryana has set a benchmark for other states. This forward-thinking model not only combats drug addiction, but also fosters a supportive environment for recovery and resilience.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK



# Why it's politically incorrect to be privileged



**SIDDHARTH PANDEY**  
HISTORIAN & CULTURAL CRITIC

EVER since the Israeli invasion of Palestine entered its new chapter last year, I have been in touch with a friend living in West Bank, who runs a famous school there. We have known each other from our university days at Cambridge, where we did our PhDs together. While departing, I was gifted a lovely ceramic cup by her, emblazoned with elegantly swirling floral motifs rendered in earthy hues. The object has sat on my desk for the past five years, holding my stationery and, thereby, by imagination together, often reminding me of the school that my sole Palestinian acquaintance runs.

Every time I have written or recorded a message of concern and prayer for her and her family, I have felt the language falling short of its purpose, even though it remains the fundamental means to communicate one's feelings.

In our latest conversation, my friend assured me that she and her family were safe and away from the conflict zone. But she added a

caveat: that the ongoing genocide and its escalating horrors have robbed her of any feeling of enjoyment of even the most basic privileges. Thus, having water, electricity, shelter and everything else has injected a permanent sense of 'guilt' in her, making her question whatever she possesses.

Anyone with even an iota of sensitivity can relate with such a predicament, albeit from one's own context. We have, most unfortunately, reached a point in our evolution as a species where there is hardly anything that cannot potentially fall under the ambit of 'privilege'. Such are the increasing inequalities and inequities that now, even to breathe clean air or have a window with the view of a healthy landscape comes with a premium.

Consequently, over the last few years, the word 'privilege' itself has garnered an astonishingly bad reputation. Unless fully and repeatedly acknowledged, it has also ineluctably got associated with being 'politically incorrect'.

Tellingly, in my experience, an honest acknowledgement of one's wherewithal also doesn't necessarily guarantee the absence of negative criticism — such is the immorality automatically expressed by the term 'privilege'.

A fair amount of this criticism is rightly levelled at those in power, from authori-



UNEMPLOYMENT: Since last year, thousands of Indian workers have been applying for jobs in Israel. REUTERS

ties to institutions, who deny ordinary people the dignity to live. These establishments are more than often hands-in-glove with discriminatory practices and atrocities of all kinds. Hence, the burgeoning critique of their offensive, politically incorrect actions is not only required but also the need of the hour.

The protests in support of the Palestinians the world over are an effort in this direction, as are the boycotts by literary communities of Israeli cultural institutions complicit with the genocide.

Increasingly, there are also calls cast in black-and-white: you are either with the Palestinians or not, and any kind of affinity with the Israelis fundamentally

marks a betrayal of the larger cause, a debasing of political correctness.

While, in principle, there can be no doubt regarding the above, in reality, the idea of associations and the experience of relationality is frequently more complex, and ridden with contradictions. It is ironic, especially as an Indian citizen, that one of the most widely reported developments that directly pierces through this black-and-white reading comes from the marginalised sections of society.

Since the end of the last year, thousands of Indian workers have been applying for jobs in Israel amidst persistent joblessness and the lack of opportunities back home. These openings have

become possible because Israel suspended the work permits of scores of Palestinians after the beginning of the Gaza offensive.

From carpenters to floor-tile fitters and plasterers to ironworkers, Indians from the lowest segments of society have been queuing up for applying to these 1,00,000 advertised posts, assured as they are of earning much more than they ever would on home-turf. Many of them have termed this a 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity' since making anywhere between Rs 1 lakh to Rs 2 lakh per month on Indian soil strikes them as the stuff of dreams.

The dangers posed by the war-ridden region have been overlooked, especially in light of Israeli assurances. On the other hand, there have been testimonies by some expressing great anxiety, too. But again, the absence of opportunities in India, eventually, gets the better of their fears.

While critics have been quick to point out how this situation illustrates the hollow claims of economic progress by the current Indian dispensation, my concern here is more ideological and existential in nature. To whom does political correctness belong? Is there an angle of privilege attached to the ones espousing it? Is it not easier for me and the likes of me, coming from a decidedly better-off econom-

ic background than all of these workers, to be unequivocal in my denunciation of anything connected with Israel, let alone looking forward to working there as a 'lifetime opportunity'? And doesn't this recognition, then, challenge and unsettle the clearest objectivity we often attach to political correctness in the name of morality and ethics?

The implication, here, isn't that the workers don't have ethics. Rather, it is that to what extent does one's socioeconomic background determine the high moral ground of 'conscience'.

Even more complicated and simultaneously, the scenario forces us to think of one marginalised section of society (the Palestinians) as 'opposed' to another oppressed section (the Indians), given that here, two political realities collide and correspond jarringly with each other. How can we as 'critical thinkers' understand the Indian labourers' disposition towards Palestinians? Even if they were to espouse support for the latter, wouldn't their 'choosing' to work on Israeli land upset our unambiguous understanding of political correctness?

And, in what ways should I continue to express my sympathies to my friend and her folks, while also thinking empathetically about my own marginalised countrymen, without the two clashing with each other?

## The weakening Chinese economy needs a stimulus



**HUANG YIPING**  
MEMBER, PEOPLE'S BANK OF CHINA

CHINA'S GDP growth slowed during the first three quarters of 2024, from 5.3 per cent to 4.7 per cent to 4.6 per cent, raising fears that the country would not achieve its annual growth target of around 5 per cent. But the latest data suggests that China's economy is finally turning the corner.

Economic activity in China has been relatively weak since the Covid-19 crisis. This was not unexpected, at least not at first: three years of pandemic lockdowns strained household, corporate, and local government balance sheets. Declining business confidence — partly a response to a regulatory crackdown on finance, the property sector and the platform economy — did not help matters.

In early 2021, when the US emerged from the worst of its pandemic lockdowns, American households quickly began spending the money they had accumulated. Chinese households, by contrast,

continued to accumulate savings even after the lockdowns were over: between January 2020 and August 2024, household bank deposits in China swelled by \$9 trillion, with the wealthy accounting for a significant share.

China's government introduced some supportive policies over this period, but in contrast to past disruptions, it refrained from implementing aggressive stimulus policies, owing to concerns about possible side effects. The massive stimulus package the government introduced after the 2008 global financial crisis spurred growth. However, it also fuelled a real-estate bubble, drove up local government debt, and reduced investment efficiency.

The government's calculations changed at the end of the third quarter of 2024, when it became clear that China's economy would need more help to lift its growth trajectory. In late September, People's Bank of China Governor Pan Gongsheng unveiled three measures: a reduction in banks' reserve ratio, a policy-rate cut, and the creation of monetary-policy instruments to support the stock market.

Moreover, on October 12, Lan R'an, China's Finance Minister, announced that new fiscal measures would focus on addressing local governments' debt prob-



BOOSTER: China's economy needs both structural reforms and more macroeconomic stimulus. REUTERS

lems, stabilising the real-estate market, and supporting employment. He followed this announcement in early November with a \$1.38 trillion trillion debt-swap plan for local governments.

Both Pan and Lan have suggested that more stimulus measures are in the pipeline, with Lan noting that China's central government still has plenty of room to increase its debt and deficits. But recent data on high-frequency economic indicators, which tend to be the quickest to respond to macroeconomic-policy changes, suggests that the government's actions began taking effect almost immediately.

In October, total 'social finance' (total financing to the real economy) was up by 7.8 per cent year on year, and

outstanding bank loans had increased by 7.7 per cent. Retail sales had risen by 4.8 per cent year on year, and by 1.6 percentage points from the previous month. The manufacturing purchasing managers' index reached 50.1, after three months of sub-50 readings, and increased again, to 50.3, in November.

In more good news, the surveyed urban unemployment rate dropped by 0.1 percentage points in October, to 5 per cent. Even the property market improved marginally, though land sales and real-estate investment remained weak. If these positive trends continue, GDP growth will probably return to around 5 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2024.

The outlook for 2025, however, is less clear. If China is

to achieve 5 per cent GDP growth next year, assuming this is the government's target, policymakers will have to overcome three key challenges, starting with stabilising the property sector, which contributes about 20 per cent of GDP growth and accounts for 70 per cent of household wealth.

The second challenge is local governments' balance sheets. A shortage of funds has lately been driving local authorities to cut spending, such as by reducing officials' salaries, and grasping for revenues, such as by chasing corporate back taxes and even detaining private entrepreneurs from other regions. None of this is good for growth.

The fundamental problem is that spending responsibilities now exceed fiscal revenues, which are no longer being bolstered by land sales and local-government investment vehicles. The central government must urgently transfer a significant amount of general-purpose revenue to local authorities. More fundamentally, China needs to reconfigure the balance of fiscal responsibilities across levels of government.

The third major challenge that China will confront in 2025 is US President-elect Donald Trump, who has vowed to impose 60 per cent tariffs on all imports from China during his first year in office. Given that China's

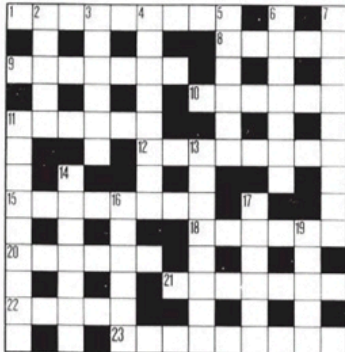
exports to the US account for 3 per cent of its GDP, such tariffs, and even much lower ones, would have a material impact on growth in 2025. The investment bank UBS, for instance, predicted that China's GDP growth would slowdown to 4 per cent in 2025.

There has been much debate in China over whether the economy needs structural reforms or more macroeconomic stimulus. The truth is that it needs both. A decisive stimulus package, with a robust fiscal-policy component, must come first; this will make the biggest immediate difference. But once the package is in place, the government should turn its attention to structural reforms, with a focus on boosting confidence among consumers, investors, and entrepreneurs.

Over the past year, China's government has published several policy documents aimed at restoring confidence. But with market participants not fully convinced, it must go further: implementing — boldly and visibly — some of the measures it has announced, such as stronger protections for private enterprises. Reining in local officials' scrutiny of old tax records would also go a long way toward strengthening business confidence.

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### QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- With all available resources (4-5)
  - Given on oath (5)
  - Devotedly fond (7)
  - Obscurely bright (6)
  - Room below ground level (6)
  - Exceptional (8)
  - US national legislature (8)
  - Husky (6)
  - Lethal (6)
  - Airman (7)
  - Relinquish voluntarily (5)
  - Fanciful story (5-4)
- DOWN**
- Disproportionate (5)
  - Haughty (6)
  - Specific (8)
  - Extensive landed property (6)
  - Clause modifying a will (7)
  - At serious risk (2,3,4)
  - Take severe disciplinary action (5,4)
  - Something easily done (8)
  - Having no legal force (7)
  - Raising of a siege (6)
  - Unoccupied (6)
  - Earth thrown up in excavation (5)
- Yesterday's solution**
- Across:** 1 Albania, 4 Admit, 7 Doom, 8 Scot-free, 10 Pack a punch, 12 Solely, 13 Plunge, 15 Brass tactics, 18 Chitchat, 19 Sign, 20 Total, 21 Expanse.
- Down:** 1 Add up, 2 Broccoli, 3 Accrue, 4 Articulate, 5 Munk, 6 Tremble, 9 Wax lyrical, 11 Inaction, 12 Solicit, 14 Escape, 16 Singe, 17 Hint.

### SU DO KU



### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

9	2	1	7	8	3	5	4
4	7	1	6	5	3	8	2
8	5	3	2	4	9	1	6
7	1	2	3	9	6	5	4
6	3	8	5	1	4	9	7
5	9	4	7	8	2	6	3
3	6	9	8	2	7	4	1
1	4	7	9	3	5	2	8
2	8	5	4	6	1	7	9

### CALENDAR

DECEMBER 13, 2024, FRIDAY		
■ Shukla Sarnvat	19:46	
■ Mangharsh Shukla	22	
■ Mangharsh Parvate	28	
■ Hajar	14:46	
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 13, up to 7:41 pm		
■ Shiva Yoga up to 11:54 am		
■ Bhumi Nakshatra up to 7:50 am		
■ Kriika Nakshatra up to 5:48 am		
■ Moon enters Taurus sign 1, 19 pm		

### FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	23	04
New Delhi	23	04
Amritsar	20	04
Bathinda	23	04
Jalandhar	20	03
Ludhiana	22	06
Bhiani	19	04
Hisar	22	02
Sirsa	22	03
Dharamsala	17	03
Manali	15	03
Shimla	16	04
Srinagar	09	-03
Jammu	20	06
Kargil	01	-09
Leh	-01	-11
Dehradun	24	07
Mussoorie	17	07



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

— Ramnath Goenka

## SC MUST EVOLVE CLEAR GUIDELINES TO CURB JUDICIAL MISDEMEANOUR

The judiciary forms the central axis of democracy in India, being the custodian of the Constitution and protector of the citizens' rights. However, the utterances and actions of a few judges are calling into question the credibility and integrity of the institution. The slightest weakening of public trust in the impartiality of the judicial system can have grave implications. The judiciary needs to ensure that the rule of law is maintained and justice is delivered without prejudice. With increasing instances of judicial misdeemeanour, it becomes necessary to reflect on how their words and actions might impact the perception of justice when they cross the line between personal views and professional obligations.

A recent example that sparked public debate involves political and communal remarks by an Allahabad High Court judge. It was brought to the notice of the president, parliament and Supreme Court. When a judge makes a public statement that appears to align with a particular ideological perspective, it raises concern about bias. While judges, like any citizen, have the right to personal opinions, their public comments should not undermine the perception of impartiality. The Indian judiciary has had a stellar record of standing firm in cases that challenge the government or political entities. But lately, judgements on some key issues have been delayed, creating an impression that the judiciary is not as decisive or accountable as it ought to be.

There is a need for clear guidelines for the conduct of judges, especially in public. The judiciary should also have an effective mechanism to deal with allegations of judicial misconduct to ensure that accountability is upheld without undermining the institution's independence. This will go a long way in preserving public trust in the system. The judiciary needs to strive for the highest standards of professionalism, accountability and transparency. At a time when public trust in institutions is becoming fragile, it is imperative that judges exemplify the values of fairness, impartiality and independence at all times. The judiciary is a self-regulating branch, but there are very few instances of judges held to account for their actions. The lack of a clear and independent mechanism to address complaints against judges can lead to opacity and distrust. The Supreme Court should frame a clear and stringent code of conduct for judges before it is too late.

## FDI REBOUND SIGNALS NEW OPPORTUNITIES

W HILE opening a global investment summit in Rajasthan this week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said India was thriving as an investment destination on the back of democracy, demography, digital data and delivery. One might have taken the four Ds with a pinch of caution, except data released the same day by the department for promotion of industry and trade supported the claim. Foreign direct equity investment increased 45 percent in the first 6 months of the current fiscal, going up to nearly \$30 billion in the first half-year compared to \$20.5 billion in the April-September period last year. What is significant is the turnaround after a contraction of inflows for three consecutive financial years since 2021-22. Significantly, it is the 'new economy' that attracted most investments—services, banking and insurance, followed by computer software and hardware.

That this is not a flash in the pan was established by cumulative data. FDI inflows since April 2000—including equity, reinvested earnings and other capital—have crossed \$1 trillion, firmly establishing India among the world's top investment destinations. Unofficial data, too, corroborates that the nation is on a rebound. A survey of 107 global investors by investment firm Collier Capital revealed nearly two-thirds of the respondents saw India ahead in the Asia-Pacific region on the risk-reward balance, followed by Japan and South Korea. India's advantage, these respondents felt, was its exit opportunities and the liquidity it offered at an early stage, compared to other markets.

FDI flows are important as they boost growth in crucial sectors like infrastructure and technology, adding jobs and generating wealth. Healthy inflows help maintain a respectable balance of payments and support the rupee's value, which has taken a beating of late. It is therefore necessary for the government to continue monitoring the FDI policy closely and tweaking it where necessary to ensure a friendly and flexible business environment. This is not an easy task, as the global investment scenario can undergo a sea change within days. For instance, the flagging Chinese economy did a quick turnaround recently with a slew of policy stimuli that sucked capital out from other competing markets including India. On the other hand, US president-elect Donald Trump threatening to create tariff barriers against Chinese exports could create a window of opportunity as investors look for better-placed alternatives.

### QUICK TAKE

#### THE CUP RUMMETH OVER

IFA is the evangelical church of football. Its job of growing the sport's flock has seen it taking in new members far before the UN has. It also took the World Cup to Japan and South Korea in 2002, and to Qatar in 2022. So it's no surprise the 2034 event has gone to Saudi Arabia. Given that even three airconditioned stadiums in the more temperate climes of the US and Mexico have worried experts about heat stress at the 2026 Cup, the unease for 2034 is natural. The other worry is about the working conditions facing the thousands of South Asians who will likely build the new venues.

LAST month, we celebrated the 75th anniversary of the adoption of our Constitution, less than a fortnight after marking, with considerably less ceremony, the 135th birthday of our first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The former was, in essence, a celebration of the democracy that our founding Constitution-makers established in an India after centuries of various forms of despotic rule. The latter acknowledged the man who, more than anyone else, ensured that our democracy became much more than a collection of words on a constitutional charter.

Despite the lofty aspirations of the Constitution, it was by no means axiomatic that a country like India, riven by so many internal differences and diversities, beset by acute poverty and torn apart by partition, would be or remain democratic. Many developing countries found themselves turning in the opposite direction soon after independence, arguing that a firm hand was necessary to promote national unity and guide development.

Chaos continued after independence: we were soon at war with Pakistan; refugees continued to flow across the frontiers. Within five months of freedom, the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, was assassinated. Two and a half years later, another giant of the freedom struggle and the only one with the stature to challenge the prime minister, his deputy Sardar Patel, passed away.

With these deaths, Nehru could have very well assumed unlimited power. There was no one to challenge his authority had he chosen to misuse it. And yet, he himself was such a convinced democrat, profoundly wary of the risks of autocracy, that at the crest of his rise he authored an anonymous article warning Indians of the dangers of giving dictatorial temptations to Jawaharlal. "He must be checked," he wrote of himself. "We want no Caesars." And indeed, his practice when challenged within his own party was to offer his resignation; he usually got his way, but it was hardly the instinct of a Caesar.

As prime minister, Nehru carefully nurtured the country's infant democratic institutions. He paid deference to the country's ceremonial presidency and even to its largely office vice-presidency; he never let the public forget that these notables outranked him in protocol terms. He wrote regular letters to chief ministers, explaining his policies and seeking their feedback.

He subjected himself and his govern-

ment to cross-examination in parliament by the small, fractious but undoubtedly talented opposition—allowing them an importance out of all proportion to their numerical strength, because he was convinced that a strong opposition was essential for a healthy democracy. He gave complete freedom to his own backbenchers to challenge him and his government; thus it was that Peroze Gandhi's relentless attacks on Finance Minister T T Krishnamachari brought about the latter's resignation.



SHASHI THAROOR

Fourth-term Lok Sabha MP from Thiruvananthapuram and the Sahitya Akademi-winning author of 24 books, most recently *Arundhati: A Life*

on, and took criticism of its conduct from his own party men as well as the chest-thumping opposition. Nehru understood the importance of strengthening the fledgling institutions of Indian democracy. He took care not to interfere with the judicial system. On the one occasion that he publicly criticised a judge, he apologised the next day and wrote an abject letter to the chief justice, regretting having slighted the judiciary. And he never forgot that he derived his authority from the people of India. Not only was he astonishingly accessible for a person in his position, but he started offering a daily darshan at home for an hour each morning to anyone coming in off the street without an appointment, a practice that continued until the dictates

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## BALANCE FLEXIBILITY & RIGOUR IN NEW DEGREE PROGRAMMES

THE University Grants Commission (UGC) is set to roll out the accelerated degree programme (ADP) and extended degree programme (EDP), two ambitious initiatives aimed at providing flexibility to college students. While the programmes have garnered appreciation for flexibility and inclusivity, they have also sparked a debate among educators, administrators and students. It's critical to examine the potential benefits, limitations and broader implications of these schemes.

The ADP allows students to graduate in 2.5 years instead of the traditional three years. In an honours programme of four years, graduation is allowed after the sixth or seventh semester.

At first glance, this time-saving measure seems appealing. Proponents argue students can enter the workforce or pursue higher studies earlier. Additionally, it could reduce financial burden by cutting down on living and tuition expenses. However, critics point out the gains may be only marginal.

What advantage does a student derive by completing their degree just 4-5 months earlier? Moreover, condensing a three-year programme into 2.5 years could lead to a hurried academic experience. The final semester often includes essential co-curricular activities such as internships, capstone projects, or research work. By fast-tracking their education, students might miss out on these opportunities, potentially impacting the job market less prepared than their peers.

On the other end of the spectrum, the EDP allows students to stretch their degree beyond three years, accommodating those with unique learning needs or personal commitments. The EDP offers a supportive alternative to the traditional model by easing the pressure of rigid timelines. However, this raises concerns about academic rigour and student motivation. Could the availability of more time lead to complacency among students? Will institutions struggle to maintain engagement with EDP learners? These are valid questions institutions must address to ensure the EDP's flexibility does not compromise educational quality.

The UGC has emphasised that the initiative is designed to cater to diverse academic needs and abilities of students. The guidelines stipulate that only 10 percent of the sanctioned intake will be eligible for ADPs, with institutional committees tasked with scrutinising applications. Selection will be based on a student's past academic perform-

ance, and degrees earned through ADP or EDP will specify the mode of completion. However, the UGC insists degrees earned through ADP, EDP, or standard programmes should be treated equally. If all degrees are considered equivalent, what incentive exists for students to opt for the accelerated track other than graduating slightly earlier? Similarly, what prevents students from delaying their completion without significant consequences?



The UGC's accelerated and extended degree programmes are a significant shift in India's higher education landscape, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity and adaptability. Data from similar schemes in the US, UK and Canada suggest they need clearer guidelines and careful monitoring.

Implementing these programmes is likely to be a logistical and pedagogical challenge for institutions. Faculty members, already burdened with teaching and administrative duties, will need to adapt their methods to cater to diverse learning timeframes. Institutions will also need to ensure the curriculum remains rigorous and relevant for both tracks, which may require substantial investment in faculty training and academic resources. Managing applications, ensuring compliance with UGC guidelines, and monitoring the progress of students will require robust systems and coordination. Smaller institutions with limited resources may find it particularly difficult to accommodate these changes.

Flexibility in degree programmes is not a novel concept. Countries like the US, the UK, and Australia have long offered similar options. For instance, in the UK, universities offer two-year 'fast-track' degrees that allow students to graduate sooner by increasing the intensity of coursework. These programmes cater to highly motivated students with clear career goals but often come with a higher workload.

Conversely, extended degree options in countries like Canada cater to non-traditional students, including working professionals and caregivers. While these programmes offer much-needed flexibility, they risk diminishing the sense of urgency and focus on academics. Data from these countries suggests that the success of such schemes depends on a strong support system, clear guidelines, and careful monitoring.

The ADP and EDP represent a significant shift in India's higher education landscape, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity and adaptability. However, their success hinges on thoughtful implementation and continuous evaluation. Through personalised counselling, institutions should guide students in selecting the most suitable track based on their academic goals and capabilities. Additional support services should be available, such as mentorship, academic workshops, and mental health resources.

Institutions also must study successful models from other countries based on which they can refine their approach. Needless to say, institutions must ensure academic standards are upheld across all tracks through stringent assessments and regular feedback mechanisms.

As India ventures into this new territory, it is crucial to balance flexibility with rigour. Whether the ADP and EDP will set a new benchmark for higher education or present unforeseen challenges will depend on how effectively they are implemented. For now, they represent a bold experiment in reimagining academic flexibility and inclusivity: one that could redefine the educational experience for generations to come.

(Views are personal) (johnk@rediffmail.com)

of security finally overcame the populism of his successors.

It was Nehru, too, by his scrupulous regard for both the form and the substance of democracy, instilled democratic habits in our country. His respect for parliament, his regard for the independence of the judiciary, his courtesy to those of different political convictions, his commitment to free elections, and his deference to institutions over individuals—all left us a precious legacy of freedom.

Nehru's opening remarks while introducing the objectives at the newly established Constituent Assembly on December 13, 1946 gives us a view of the immense responsibility he placed on himself to ensure that the embodiment of his democratic vision for the country responded fittingly to the situation and did justice to its enshrinement in the process of Constitution-making. He had to preserve the past idea of India and march towards its future idea.

Nehru said, "As I stand here, sir, I feel the weight of all manner of things crowding around me. We are at the end of an era and possibly very soon we shall embark upon a new age; and my mind goes back to the great past of India to the 5,000 years of India's history, from the very dawn of that history which might be considered almost the dawn of human history, till today. All that past crowds around me and exhilarates me and, at the same time, somewhat oppresses me. Am I worthy of that past? When I think also of the future, the greater future I hope, standing on this sword's edge of the present between this mighty past and the mighty future, I tremble a little and feel overwhelmed by the mighty task. We have come here at a strange moment in India's history. I do not know, but I do feel that there is some magic in this moment of transition from the old to the new, something of that magic which one sees when night turns into day; and even though the day may be cloudy one, it is day after all. For when the clouds move away we can see the sun later on."

The American editor Norman Cousins once asked Nehru what he hoped his legacy to India would be. "Four hundred million people capable of governing themselves," Nehru replied. The numbers have grown, but the fact that each day 1.4 billion Indians govern themselves in a pluralist democracy is testimony to the deeds and words of this extraordinary man and the visionary giants who accompanied him in the march to freedom.

(Views are personal) (office@tharoor.in)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### False indictment

Ref: Judiciary, legislature should curb misuse of matrimonial laws (Dec 12). It has become prevalent to indict innocent men in false cases by wives or female friends. This tendency can't be allowed to persist. The Centre should either amend existing laws or bring in a new law to ensure innocent men are not brought to book in false cases.

VK Kumar, Thiruvananthapuram

#### Gender balance

The suicide case of the young Bengaluru techie suggests how sinister women can also be and how immoral a judge could be. Men are not only vulnerable but could be victims as well. The editorial rightly observes that laws should not go too far in favouring women alone.

Sanath Kumar T S, Thrissur

#### Local leadership

Ref: Congress needs to revamp its Kerala unit (Dec 12). While Rahul and Sonia Gandhi continue to be the face of Congress, the party's regional struggles in Kerala are glaring. The Congress managed just 21 seats in 2021, a stark contrast to its 99-seat win in 2001. The Congress needs stronger, more inspiring local leaders to reconnect with people.

Ritika Sarkar, Bengaluru

#### Recognition, remuneration

Ref: Pawn to queen: A call to empower ASHA workers (Dec 12). ASHA workers are the first point of call in any inaccessible and inhospitable terrain to render medical assistance. They need better recognition and remuneration as they are the most reliable frontline during vital urgent assignments.

Sachidananda Satpathy, Sambalpur

#### Indispensable ASHAs

ASHA workers are indispensable to India's healthcare, yet their motivation requires more than just financial support. These intrinsic motivators not only empower ASHA workers but also serve as a source of inspiration in their roles, leading to better health outcomes. However, without addressing systemic barriers such as insufficient resources and excessive workload, their capacity for meaningful work may remain constrained.

Narayanan Kizhumboorthy, Thrissur

#### Gushki's glory

Congratulations to Gushki D for his remarkable accomplishment in winning the World Chess Championship to become the youngest world champion. This is a result of his talent, hard work and determination. This victory should inspire millions of youngsters to dream big.

N Mahadevan, Chennai



# THE IDEAS PAGE

**DIS/AGREE**  
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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

Impending Trump presidency, fall in number of student visas for Indians, invite a question:  
What is the allure of a foreign degree?

## Rebuild our universities

Obsession with foreign degrees detracts from a symmetrical dialogue between Indian and Western institutions



AVIJIT PATHAK

AS A LIFE-LONG student, I have always believed that our quest for knowledge ought to transcend all borders and boundaries. Yet, this cross-cultural exchange of ideas and academic traditions should be dialogic and symmetrical. It is sad that many of us from this part of the world have become pathetically dependent on Euro-American universities and research centres. And this sort of one-way traffic has damaged our self-worth, and caused severe harm to the self-confidence of our academic institutions. It is sad to see young students leaving the country, and moving towards Canada, the US, the UK, Australia and Germany. It is certainly not a matter of pride if, as the statistics provided by the Ministry of External Affairs indicates, more than 1.33 million Indian students are pursuing higher education abroad in 2024. In contrast, as the AISHE 2021-22 report reveals, merely 46,878 students — mainly from Asian and African countries — are enrolled in India.

While I have no hesitation in articulating my discomfort with the colonisation of our imagination by foreign universities, I also believe that we need to work on our own academic centres and universities in order to resist this trend. Think of, for instance, our expertise in damaging our own institutions. Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan — a university that once strove for the oceanic merger of cultures, and the interplay of science, arts and aesthetics — is now just another average university tormented by local politics and poverty of pedagogic imagination. We are witnessing how the regime is determined to write the obituary of JNU. Unless we respect our institutions, generate adequate funds, we cannot prevent young minds from leaving India.

want the leading professors from our universities to start high-quality Indian journals, and acquire the confidence to invite the "stars" of Oxford and Princeton to publish their papers. I want Indian students to question the existing inequality in the academic transaction, and enrich themselves in a way that with absolute pride and confidence they can say: "Well, I am doing my PhD from Delhi School of Economics; or I am applying for a teaching position in Jadavpur University."

Will it be possible? Or, are we condemned to exist like academic beggars?

The writer taught at JNU

## Ideas need to travel

Thanks to NEP, most students in the university set up in India are hamstrung, yoked to a system that is fast spiralling into chaos



DEBRAJ MOOKERJEE

WHENEVER A MAVERICK enters an office of significance, it gives rise to general anxiety all around. Continuity is the cornerstone of reliability in public policy framing; an opinionated boss can unsettle these still waters. The impending US Presidency under Trump has already stirred the waters, especially in the larger domain of policies related to immigration, naturalisation, student visa issuance, and so on. He is seen as protectionist. He does not particularly like foreigners. And he wants to throw out all those who are staying in the country illegally.

In the immediate term, we might fret over the fact that the US is restricting visa access for Indian students. But there is so much more at stake. The bigger picture is even more troubling, for entirely different reasons.

That Indians do well overseas is an accepted truism. A corollary to this is the presence of Indians worldwide in the field of higher education, as both students and teachers. A further extension of the co-relation is the middle-class Indian (and not just Indian) fetish for foreign degrees and thereafter, a prosperous and settled NRI tag.

The Indian middle class's anxiety over any possible change in the US's student intake policy on account of Trump taking office is somewhat understandable. The important question to ask, however, is: What would be the long-term impact of restricted access to American universities for foreign students, including those from India? America as a country and American universities in particular have been deeply enriched by people not born in that country. In a sense, one could argue that America is great because its universities are great. With the advent of the knowledge economy, those who produce knowledge necessarily stay ahead of those who consume knowledge.

Without the cutting-edge intellect of international students, not to mention the super bright STEM out-performers from India, American universities, over time, are likely to lose the edge under a protectionist regime.

The 21st century began with the hope of a new world order in which societies began to move towards a more equitable international ecosystem. The last 10 years, however, have witnessed backtracking on the progress achieved earlier. This is dismaying. For long now, we have heard the West tell us, through bodies like GATT, WTO, World Bank, and so on, that free trade was the way forward for all countries to profit and prosper. Once the West began to experience the adverse effects of "free

trade" when confronted with more efficient economies of scale mobilised by developing nations, it began to backtrack. The West has always been self-assured vis-a-vis a rapid expansion of lifestyle and comfort in the face of unchallenged domination in world trade. This self-assurance dissipated somewhat as they began to feel the pinch after countries like China and even India, to a lesser extent, along with other BRICS countries, began to challenge their access to the high street of world commerce.

Trump's protectionist policies, including the restriction of student visas, immigration opportunities, permission to work in the US and disallowing citizenship through natural rights is all part of a piece — the only way to win the fight is to not allow the opponent into the ring.

Here in India we too have some tough questions to answer. Why are our higher education institutions not the first choice of millions of students? Why are we losing students to foreign universities? The projected outgo on account of students travelling overseas to secure higher education is \$70 billion by 2025. Why this exponential increase?

As reported in this newspaper, students travelling to the US have dropped in numbers. But that's because they have chosen to study elsewhere, the UK, Australia and Canada. Just wishing for these students to stay and study in India is not enough. We need to have the courage to ask what is the comparable level of higher education they can hope to get in India. Thanks to NEP, most students in the university system in India are hamstrung, yoked to a system that is fast spiralling into chaos. American universities

are great, but without our students, they won't be for long. First, there will be a drop in quality; worryingly, the brightest of students who go on to become faculty will not be teaching in those universities. This is what will happen in the long term. India might, on the other hand, retain the brightest of students, but it won't have the appropriate higher education ecosystem to nurture their excellence. Whatever it did have — and it did at one time, since so many exceptional talents have emerged from that system — these individuals, who have excelled in various fields across the globe, will progressively be devalued by NEP's formula of diluted disciples and mindless meanderings into unproductive and nonspecific knowledge domains.

Nations act in their own interest and that is understandable. But the world of knowledge and its expansion is not a zero-sum game. Throughout history, ideas have travelled to enrich history. Historians and chroniclers travelled the world and told stories while learning new ones. They spread knowledge and culinary and cultural practices. Ironically, the world was more one than it is now.

The writer teaches at Ramjas college, University of Delhi

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"As Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba is not running for the party's executive role again, he would perhaps want to bow out as the president who did his bit to strengthen internal democracy and hand over the party's reins to a competent successor."

—THE KATHMANDU POST

## Lead by law, not ideology

Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav's recent comments do not behove the office of a judge. They go against SC's views on impartiality



FAIZAN MUSTAFA

ON DECEMBER 8, Allahabad High Court judge Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav spoke at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad event, where he issued a few controversial comments that betrayed his ideological tilt. The Supreme Court has taken notice of these comments and sought a report from the High Court. This is, however, not a case of impeachment on grounds of proven misbehaviour.

In the past, Justice Yadav has said that "scientists believe that cow exhalates oxygen" and the protection of the animal should be a fundamental right of Hindus. He also demanded that Parliament bring in a law to honour Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, Ved Vyasa, Valmiki, Ramayana and the Gita. Of course, as a citizen, Justice Yadav is entitled to an ideological position and can express his opinion on any subject. He has rightly pointed out that the Hindu Personal Law has problems. Justice Yadav's assessment that the Muslim Personal Law needs urgent reforms is also correct. But he has made a few sweeping remarks which are neither factually correct nor legally tenable.

Justice Yadav reportedly used a slur to refer to Muslims. He used the "us" versus "them" vocabulary to assert that children of one community were "tolerant" while young people in "another community had grown up witnessing animal slaughter". His diatribe seems ignorant of the initiatives to bring about reforms among Muslims. Syed Ahmad Khan, Shibli Nomani and Muhammad Iqbal were well-known votaries of reforms in Muslim law. The Muslim clergy led the reform process which led to the passing of the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939.

In contrast, Hindu women had to wait till 1955 to get the right to dissolve marriage. Muslim women always had a right to inherit property not only as daughters (albeit in a 1:2 ratio with their brothers) but also as wives, mothers and sisters from the very inception of Islam. Hindu women got this right much later and the daughter became a co-parcener only in 2005.

Justice Yadav's speech betrays his inclination towards religious majoritarianism. In a democracy, the electoral majority, and not the religious majority, has a right to choose a government. In a recent by-election to the UP assembly, the BJP candidate won by over one lakh votes in the Kunkundi constituency where Muslims are in a numerical majority. Moreover, the Constitution does not allow even this electoral majority to turn majoritarian. Thus, a law unanimously passed in Parliament can

be struck down by the courts if it violates the Fundamental Rights or is contrary to the Constitution.

While one may agree with some of Justice Yadav's arguments about the uniform civil code, his position overlooks the nuances in the UCC debate. As a matter of fact, personal law is Entry No 5 in the Concurrent List. It's clear that the framers of the Constitution did envisage legal pluralism.

Unlike the US, India does not have a tradition of describing judges as conservative and liberal. The links between the ideological position of judges and their decisions have not been minutely studied in the country but there are few pointers in that direction. The *Sarbh Mudgal* case involved four Hindus who had embraced Islam to marry the second time. Instead of reprimanding these men, Justice Kuldip Singh observed that "till the time we achieve the goal of uniform civil code... there is an open inducement to Hindu men to... become a Muslim".

In *Bar Puri* (2005), Chief Justice R.C. Lahoti and D.M. Dharmadhikari, while refusing to recognise Jains as a minority, explained the role of the National Minority Commission. They said that "the Commission instead of encouraging claims from different communities for being added to a list of notified minorities under the Act should suggest ways and means to help create social conditions where the list of notified minorities has gradually reduced and done away with altogether." In *Anjumana Madrasah Uloom* (2007), Justice S.N. Srivastava of the Allahabad High Court held that Muslims are no longer a minority in UP.

In a 2018 verdict, which was later set aside by a divisional bench, Justice S.R. Sen of the Meghalaya High Court said that India ought to have been declared a Hindu nation. He asked for the conferment of Indian citizenship to all the Hindus of the world. In *Mohammed Salim* (2014), the Uttar Pradesh High Court held that the Gangas and Yamuna were living entities entitled to all fundamental rights. A Supreme Court bench led by the then Chief Justice J.S. Khehar stayed this verdict.

The Supreme Court's Restatement of Judicial Values, which was adopted by the full court on May 7, 2017, talks of reaffirming the impartiality of a judge. It underlines that judges should not, even in a personal capacity, undertake any activity that erodes their credibility and makes them appear partisan. "A judge must at all times be conscious that he is under the public gaze and there should be no act or omission by him which is becoming of the high office he occupies and the public esteem in which that office is held," it notes. A judge is not supposed to express views on political matters. Let the law and not the ideological leanings of judges determine the outcome of cases.

The writer teaches constitutional law and is Vice-Chancellor of Chhatrapati National Law University, Patna. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### INSULT TO OFFICE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "No, your honour" (IE, December 12). Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav's speech at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad event shows how he has flagrantly breached his own oath of office to abide by the Constitution in letter and spirit. His provocative language against the Muslim community is unsuitable for a judge. Studies have shown that members of racial, ethnic, minorities or vulnerable groups often face harassment, arbitrary and abusive treatment, by law enforcing agencies, and unfair treatment by prosecutors and the courts. Suitable action by the Supreme Court is warranted to preserve people's faith in the majesty of law.

L.R. Murgan, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "No, your honour" (IE, December 12). The recent remark made by sitting Allahabad High Court Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav raises major issues regarding judicial impartiality. His comments at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad gathering, where he framed issues through a "us" versus "them" lens, undercut our Constitution's secular values. Shouldn't the Supreme Court take swift action to preserve the validity of its judicial system and to safeguard minority rights? The courts must not turn into an arena for divisive speech; they should instead focus on discussing the citizens' rights with fairness.

Anshu Bhardi, Gurugram

### THE LONG GAME

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Don't lean on the RBI" (IE, December 12). Inflation, now above the RBI's tolerance band, has

eroded consumer purchasing power, dampening urban consumption and slowing overall economic activity. While some policymakers argue for rate cuts to spur growth, the RBI has rightly chosen patience. Knee-jerk reactions to short-term data fluctuations could jeopardise long-term economic stability. By keeping its policy stance neutral, the RBI retains flexibility to act decisively when credible evidence emerges of sustained inflation moderation or deeper growth challenges. The RBI's focus on durability over expediency serves as a reminder: Sound economic policy is not about quick fixes but about laying the groundwork for stable and inclusive growth.

Sanakar Paul, Nadia

### AN ACCESS QUESTION

THIS REFERS TO the article, "The young may not adapt" (IE, December 12). There is an essential aspect of the writer's proposal that demands further scrutiny—digital inequity. The article adeptly proposes sophisticated technological solutions and enhanced parental and educational oversight. However, it overlooks the fundamental issue of unequal digital access, which could undermine the efficacy of these strategies. Across India's diverse socio-economic landscape, many children remain bereft of basic internet access, making any digital regulation potentially ineffectual in these areas. To rectify this, it is crucial that any discourse on content regulation includes robust measures to bridge the digital divide. Policy initiatives must not only focus on content creation but also ensure that digital tools are accessible and affordable across all segments of society.

Ayush Dwivedi, New Delhi



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Empowering young innovators

Prime Minister Modi highlights the role of young minds in tackling real-world challenges with creativity and technology

The best way to predict the future is to invent it, said Alan Kay. And indeed how true it is for a nation. A nation that invents and finds solution to its problems marches on the path to progress. Echoing the same sentiment, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the pivotal role of innovation in nation-building during his interaction at the Smart India Hackathon (SIH) 2024, emphasising how young minds are shaping the future through creativity and technological ingenuity. The event, which included participation from over 1,300 student teams across India, showcased groundbreaking ideas aimed at solving real-world challenges. The SIH is a testament to the transformative power of education and innovation in building a self-reliant India. The event not only bridges the gap between academia and industry but also fosters a culture of collaboration and problem-solving. At the National Institute of Technology (NIT) Srinagar, which hosted the grand finale of the software edition for the first time, 25 exceptional teams from 21 states convened to present their innovative solutions.

The hackathon addressed 250 problem statements submitted by 54 ministries, departments, state governments, public sector units (PSUs), and industries, covering sectors like healthcare, sustainability, education, disaster management and agriculture. With a 240 per cent increase in participation compared to the previous year, SIH 2024 is the largest edition to date, involving over 86,000 teams at the institute level and 49,000 at the national level.

Among the standout participants was the 'Big Brains Team' from NIT Srinagar, led by Syyeda Aiem D Saleem. The team worked on an AI-powered Virtual Reality Friend, a tool designed to assist children with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. The project, developed under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, aims to help children enhance social and interactive skills in a simulated environment. PM Modi lauded the team's empathetic approach, emphasising the global relevance of such solutions and their potential to transform lives. PM Modi's interaction with the participants highlighted his vision of leveraging local innovation to address global challenges. He stressed that solutions tailored for India's unique needs could resonate globally, contributing to the world's progress. "Every child has the right to grow and prosper, and innovative solutions like these ensure no one is left behind," he remarked. By providing a platform for young minds to explore, collaborate and innovate, the Smart India Hackathon is shaping the next generation of problem-solvers and leaders. As India aims to establish itself as a global innovation hub, initiatives like SIH play a crucial role in realising this vision, reaffirming the transformative power of education and technology in nation-building.

## PICTALK



Young women visit a snow covered park after snowfall in Shimla

PI

## The transformative role of interactive learning in education

This modern approach is not just a shift in teaching strategies but a leap toward preparing students for the dynamic demands of the future workforce

The landscape of education has evolved significantly, with technological advancements and the integration of AI making interactive learning a favoured approach. Because interactive learning fosters engagement, critical thinking and long-term memory, it makes it possible for knowledge to be assimilated more thoroughly. This is unquestionably an improvement over the conventional approaches, which mostly emphasise rote memory and depend largely on textbook-based techniques. The abilities needed in today's dynamic environment are better suited for interactive learning. Passively absorbing knowledge using conventional teaching approaches results in surface learning, which is ultimately counterproductive. According to National Training Laboratories research, passive learning techniques like reading and lectures only have recall rates of 5-10 per cent.

**The Advent of Interactive Learning:** A more hands-on approach is provided by interactive learning, which combines technology, teamwork, and real-world problem-solving. This increases engagement and extends retention. Digital tools, project-based learning, and group discussions are all included in this approach's scope. Students in interactive classrooms often formed those in traditional lectures by 6 per cent on examinations, according to Harvard University research. Here are some ways that interactive learning approaches work better than conventional strategies:

**1. Enhanced Retention:** According to National Training Laboratories research, active learning strategies like practice-by-doing and group discussions had higher retention rates, ranging from 50 to 75 per cent. Students may directly apply STEM principles

through hands-on experiences. According to research from the American Society for Engineering Education, pupils who participated in interactive STEM activities learned much more than those who received standard instruction.

**2. Encouraging Critical Thinking:** Interactive learning promotes creativity and critical thinking by allowing students to investigate other viewpoints and pose questions. According to a McKinsey & Company research, interactive learning environments foster critical thinking and reflection while increasing student engagement and fostering productive social interactions. Another immersive method of student engagement is gamification, which boosts students' incentive to tackle challenging issues and permits in-depth learning.

**3. Real-World Application:** Project-based learning, which links education to real-world issues and increases the applicability of information in practical contexts, is a crucial element of interactive learning. In contrast to students who studied using traditional

al techniques, students who participated in project-based programs demonstrated superior application of information to real-life circumstances, according to a 2022 research by Edutopia.

**4. Future Ready:** Through more engaging and relevant instruction, interactive learning equips students to overcome obstacles more effectively than traditional approaches ever could. To educate students for the uncertain and constantly changing times, education must emphasise abilities like problem-solving, teamwork, and flexibility in today's competitive labor market.

Interactive approaches also boost motivation and encourage teamwork, which aids students in honing their communication and teamwork abilities. The global EdTech market is expected to grow to \$404 billion by 2025, according to EdTechXGlobal. Students that use an interactive learning technique not only perform better academically but are also better prepared to handle problems in the real world.

(The writer is Founder Zamti; views are personal)



AARUL MALAVIYA

Madam — The ongoing conflict in Gaza and Israel's military action against Hamas have drawn global attention. In this context, Israeli Ambassador to India, Reuven Azar, praised India's soft power policy, underlining its relevance in international diplomacy. He acknowledged that Israel, due to its heavy reliance on military strength, has lagged in areas like information management and public relations. India has strengthened its global position through diplomacy, cultural influence, and dialogue as key tools of soft power.

Initiatives like yoga, cultural exchanges, and multilateral diplomacy have not only earned India international goodwill but also enhanced its global image. Despite its firm stance against terrorism, India has effectively combined dialogue and public relations to make its policies inspirational for the global community. In contrast, Israel's excessive reliance on military power weakens it in ideological battles, further complicated by adversarial propaganda from Arab media. Military strength alone is insufficient; tools of soft power, such as dialogue, empathy, and media management, are essential for long-term success. India's example demonstrates that balancing soft and hard power not only safeguards national interests but also garners global acceptance. Israel should take inspiration from India's strategy to refine its policies and strengthen its information and public relations framework.

**R K Jain | Barwani**

**TACKLING ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS**  
Madam — Apropos of the headlines 'Identify illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, orders LC' (December 11), it is welcome that prominent Ulemas and Muslim leaders have taken up the issue of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants with the government and thus politicised the issue in favour of the Muslim community, Delhi, and the entire country. There are countrywide agitations and

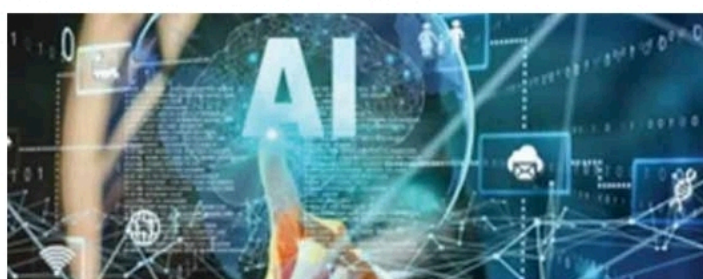
(The writer is Founder Zamti; views are personal)

## AI's boost to the spirit of service

From streamlining efforts to enhancing inclusivity, AI is reshaping how volunteers connect, contribute and make an impact

Volunteering has long been a vital pillar of community development, social change, and global solidarity, offering individuals a meaningful way to contribute to society while fostering personal growth. In today's interconnected and fast-paced world, the concept of volunteering is undergoing a dynamic transformation, largely driven by advances in technology. The International Volunteer Day (IVD), celebrated globally on December 5, 2024, under the theme "Economic and Social Development," highlighted the pivotal role of volunteers in shaping a better world. Sub-themes emphasised their contributions to alleviating crises and supporting underprivileged populations affected by natural disasters, man-made crises, or socio-economic challenges. Volunteers have consistently been on the frontlines of crisis management, stepping in where governments and organisations often encounter limitations. Whether during pandemics, natural disasters, or humanitarian emergencies, their role remains indispensable, particularly for vulnerable populations.

The advent of advanced technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), is significantly reshaping the landscape of volunteerism. AI enhances the efficiency, inclusivity, and accessibility of volunteering initiatives, ensuring they have a far-reaching impact. By leveraging AI-driven tools, organisations are creating platforms that align volunteer skills with opportunities, reduce mismatches, and optimise efforts. This transformation not only improves the volunteer experience but also amplifies the positive outcomes for communities in need. AI-powered platforms such as "HelpFinder" are revolutionising how volunteers are matched with organisations. By analysing data on individual skills, interests, and locations, these platforms ensure that volunteers are placed where they can make the most meaningful contributions. This precision reduces mismatches, boosts retention rates, and fosters a sense of accomplishment among volunteers. During crises, AI-powered systems can quickly



ly analyse data to identify affected areas and volunteer availability, enabling swift deployment to critical zones. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, AI-driven platforms like "OneRescue" coordinated volunteer initiatives for contact tracing, mental health support, and supply distribution, proving invaluable in mitigating the crisis.

Corporate social responsibility initiatives also benefit from AI. Tools like "Benevity" facilitate employee engagement by connecting them with volunteer opportunities that align with organisational goals. These solutions ensure streamlined coordination, impactful volunteering, and sustained enthusiasm among participants. AI-powered chatbots further enhance volunteer experiences by providing instant support, answering queries and assisting with training.

In India, a nation of 1.45 billion people, the ethos of service is deeply ingrained in its culture. Family values, religious teachings, and community traditions emphasise the importance of helping others. Today, AI is augmenting these efforts. Chatbots are used to handle volunteer queries related to vaccination drives, maternal health, women's and children's safety, and more. In the UK, AI-driven systems have optimised food bank logistics and facilitated grocery deliveries to vulnerable individuals, demonstrating how technology empowers volunteers to make a tangible difference.

AI ENHANCES THE EFFICIENCY, INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF VOLUNTEERING INITIATIVES, ENSURING THEY HAVE A FAR-REACHING IMPACT. BY LEVERAGING AI-DRIVEN TOOLS, ORGANISATIONS ARE CREATING PLATFORMS THAT ALIGN VOLUNTEER SKILLS WITH OPPORTUNITIES, REDUCE MISMATCHES AND OPTIMISE EFFORTS

viduals, demonstrating how technology empowers volunteers to make a tangible difference.

Innovative applications like "Be My Eyes" enable volunteers to assist visually impaired individuals remotely, while platforms like "GoodSAM" connect trained volunteers with emergency services in real time. For example, volunteers alerted through GoodSAM can provide critical assistance such as CPR or use an Automated External Defibrillator (AED) before professional help arrives. Virtual volunteering has further expanded opportunities for professionals to contribute their expertise remotely. Platforms like "Catchafire" and the UN's Online Volunteering Service facilitate mentoring, legal advice, language translation, and more, breaking geographical barriers and making volunteering more inclusive. Digital tools have eliminated traditional obstacles to volunteering, such as physical distance, time constraints, and accessibility issues. People with disabilities, caregivers, or those in remote locations can now volunteer from their homes. This inclusivity aligns with the 2024 IVD theme, fostering collaboration among diverse communities toward the shared goal of economic and social development. By harnessing the right technology and resources, volunteers can work together to

address pressing global challenges.

In natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods, volunteers equipped with drones and AI tools can map affected areas and deliver supplies more efficiently. Apps like "Zello" enable seamless communication during emergencies, transforming smartphones into walkie-talkies for coordination. In efforts to combat poverty and hunger, volunteers support food banks, organise community kitchens, and deliver resources. Digital tools like "ShareTheMeal," a United Nations World Food Programme crowdfunding app, empower individuals to donate meals with a simple tap, making a significant impact on global hunger.

Education is another critical sector where volunteering, supported by technology, has made remarkable strides. Online platforms have democratised access to education, reaching remote and underserved communities. Initiatives like "Code.org" empower volunteers to teach coding skills, equipping students with the tools needed for a technology-driven future. Gender-focused volunteer programmes address inequality by providing legal aid, counselling and advocacy for women's rights, further demonstrating the transformative power of volunteering.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## INDIA'S SOFT POWER POLICY

Madam — The ongoing conflict in Gaza and Israel's military action against Hamas have drawn global attention. In this context, Israeli Ambassador to India, Reuven Azar, praised India's soft power policy, underlining its relevance in international diplomacy. He acknowledged that Israel, due to its heavy reliance on military strength, has lagged in areas like information management and public relations. India has strengthened its global position through diplomacy, cultural influence, and dialogue as key tools of soft power.

Initiatives like yoga, cultural exchanges, and multilateral diplomacy have not only earned India international goodwill but also enhanced its global image. Despite its firm stance against terrorism, India has effectively combined dialogue and public relations to make its policies inspirational for the global community. In contrast, Israel's excessive reliance on military power weakens it in ideological battles, further complicated by adversarial propaganda from Arab media. Military strength alone is insufficient; tools of soft power, such as dialogue, empathy, and media management, are essential for long-term success. India's example demonstrates that balancing soft and hard power not only safeguards national interests but also garners global acceptance. Israel should take inspiration from India's strategy to refine its policies and strengthen its information and public relations framework.

**R K Jain | Barwani**

(The writer is Founder Zamti; views are personal)

## UNEP honours Madhav Gadgil



India's veteran ecologist and nature scientist Madhav Gadgil has been named as one of the six 'Champions of the Earth' by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) for 2024. He is renowned for his seminal work in the ecologically fragile Western Ghats region of India, which is a unique global biodiversity hotspot. Gadgil made an extensive study on the Western Ghats region, chairing the Western

Ghats Ecology Expert Panel in 2011, and came out with a list of grim and grave findings for the Western Ghats region.

The panel's report, which is popularly known as the Gadgil report, recommended in 2011 that the entire hill range be declared an ecologically sensitive area and recommended a ban on mining, quarrying, industries, new thermal power plants, hydropower projects, and large-scale wind energy projects. Gadgil's bold and honest recommendations faced opposition from some of the state governments, political bigwigs, industries, and local communities. Braving all odds, he championed the protection of the earth and the environment. Gadgil's research has helped to protect marginalised people, promote community-driven conservation of ecosystems and influence policymaking at the highest level.

**M Pradyu | Kannur**

it is a national priority and a security threat.

**Vinod Johri | Delhi**

## VOTERS' NAME DELETED

Madam — The deletion of the eligible voter's name before the election has encroached upon the entire country and is intensifying terrifically. The senior AAP leader Sanjay Singh highlighted an application for the deletion of 3,800 voters' names in just the RK Puram constituency. Such incidents are frequently observed before polls, which wrest the voting rights and thwart them to contribute to choosing preferred leaders. It's an out-and-out violation of the Universal Adult Franchise in the largest democratic country. It's a grave issue that demands urgent action. The EC must not turn into a complaint tool instead of a neutral body and deploy every effort to address it and ensure the voter's right.

**Jakir Hussain | Kanpur**

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# 18 E. EXPLAINED

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

## ALLEGATIONS AGAINST FORMER ISI CHIEF HAMEED, NOW UNDER ARREST

MANAMAN SINGH CHHINA  
CHANDIGARH, DECEMBER 12

FORMER CHIEF of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lt Gen Faiz Hameed (ret'd) was indicted on Tuesday on a series of charges, including "engaging in political activities," misuse of authority and government resources, and violation of the Official Secrets Act.

According to Pakistani daily Dawn, Hameed conducted his alleged misdeeds "at the behest of and in collusion with vested political interests".

This news comes four months after the Army began court martial proceedings against the man who was Pakistan's top spymaster from June 2019 to November 2021, and considered to be a close ally to former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who is now in jail.

Once considered to be in the running to be the Pakistan Army Chief, Hameed resigned from service in 2022, soon after Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif appointed (then) Lt Gen Asim Munir to replace the outgoing Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa as Pakistan Army Chief.

**What are the allegations against Lt Gen Hameed?**

The Field General Court Martial (FGCM) against the retired general was ordered following adverse observations made by the Supreme Court of Pakistan last year. On November 14, 2023, the court noted the gravity of the allegations raised against Hameed in a petition filed by the owner of a real estate company.



Lt Gen Faiz Hameed was the ISI chief from 2019 to 2021.

Moez Ahmed Khan, the owner of the Top City Housing scheme, a private housing society in the Chowki Hamedan area of Islamabad, had accused Hameed and his associates of extortion. He claimed that in May 2017, paramilitary Pakistan Rangers and ISI officials including Hameed had raided Top City offices and his home, and allegedly stolen gold and diamond jewellery after falsely accusing Khan of terrorism.

The petitioner said that he was subsequently forced to "pay Rs 4 crore in cash" and "sponsor a private TV network for a few months" in a deal brokered by Hameed's brother, Sardar Najaf.

**What action has been taken against Hameed?**

In April 2024, a Court of Inquiry headed by a Major General of the Pakistan Army was convened against Lt Gen Hameed. The Summary of Evidence has culminated in the court martial.

In a press release, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said: "Complying with the orders of Supreme Court of Pakistan, a detailed court of inquiry was undertaken by Pakistan Army, to ascertain correctness of complaints in Top City case made against Lt Gen Faiz Hameed (Ret'd). Consequently, appropriate disciplinary action has been initiated against Lt Gen Faiz Hameed (Ret'd), under provisions of Pakistan Army Act."

The retired general has been put under arrest. However, unlike civilians, he has not been put in jail. Hameed has been housed in a guest room of an Army officers' mess in Rawalpindi, with an Army officer and some troops deputed to guard him.

## ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD WERE OVER 50% OF US ADULTS' DIETS: STUDY

A NEW analysis of the dietary habits of Americans has found that between 2003 and 2018, the share of Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs) eaten at home increased, while that of Minimally Processed Foods (MPFs) decreased.

Though these trends have been noticed earlier, the study aimed to determine whether UPFs are primarily consumed At Home (AH) or Away From Home (AFH), "to inform policies and messages to improve dietary quality." It found that UPFs comprised more than 50% of both the total AH energy intake and the total AFH energy intake.

Published in *The Journal of Nutrition* earlier this month, the study "Trends in Adults' Intake of Unprocessed/Minimally Processed, and Ultra-processed foods at Home and Away from Home in the United States from 2003-2018" was led by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

It examined data from the 2003-2018 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, a national annual survey of more than 34,000 adults.

On two separate days, participants

were asked about the foods they ate in the last 24 hours. Using an existing framework for grouping foods by the level of processing, foods were assigned to one of four categories: unprocessed or minimally processed, processed culinary ingredients, processed, and ultra-processed. The last category contains foods with heavy use of artificial sweeteners, food colouring, and emulsifiers. Increased consumption of processed foods, like french fries and cookies, has been linked to heart diseases, weight gain and other health issues.

Researchers found that overall, UPFs comprised more than half of all calories consumed at home, rising from 51% in 2003 to 54% in 2018. They said these findings "highlight the ubiquity and increasing proportion of UPFs in United States adults' diets regardless of whether foods are consumed At Home (AH) or Away From Home (AFH)". Julia Wolfson, the study's lead author, said, "We need strategies to help people choose less processed foods" for both AH and AFH consumption. "Strong nutrition labels warning of high ultra-processed food content may be warranted," she added.

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AMITABH SINHA  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 12

THE PARIS Agreement was supposed to save the world from the worst impacts of climate change. But nine years after it was finalised — on December 12, 2015 — it is perhaps more fragile than ever, appearing increasingly ineffective and helpless in containing the rapidly worsening climate situation.

In these nine years, annual global emissions have grown 8% from about 49 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent to 53 billion tonnes. Average annual global temperatures have increased from 1.1 degree Celsius above the pre-industrial average to 1.45 degree Celsius above that level. And, latest assessments suggest that 2024 is almost certain to be the first year to breach the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold.

The main goal of the Paris Agreement — holding global annual average temperatures within 1.5 degree Celsius of pre-industrial averages, two degrees Celsius in the worst case scenario — seems more distant than ever. In a clear sign of growing frustration with the treaty, a number of developing countries, led by the small island nations, have begun exploring alternative approaches for a more effective fight against climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel of Experts is currently hearing a case which seeks to define countries' obligations on climate change, and the consequences arising out of those obligations.

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Before the Paris Agreement, came the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. In keeping with the principles of equity and differentiated responsibilities enshrined in the 1992 UN

Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol placed the bulk of the obligations of fighting climate change on rich and developed countries, while asking developing nations to contribute according to their respective capabilities.

But unnered with the rising economic power of China, and afraid of the constraints that climate obligations put on their own economies, developed countries worked hard to dismantle the Kyoto Protocol. Although their first attempt, made in 2009 at the Copenhagen conference, failed, developed countries managed to have their way six years later in Paris.

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of the developed world. Nothing illustrates this better than the finance deal reached in Baku this year. Developed nations, under the legal obligation of UNFCCC, are supposed to provide finance and technology to developing countries to help fight climate change. Developed nations had themselves promised to raise \$100 billion annually for this purpose from 2020. The Paris Agreement has a provision for increasing this amount post 2025.

Several assessments have shown that developing countries need trillions of dollars a year for climate action. However, in Baku, developed countries agreed to raise the \$100 billion amount to just \$300 billion a year, and that too only from 2035. The lack of adequate finance almost crushes any hopes of more ambitious climate action from developing countries.

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With Donald Trump returning to power next year, the United States is almost certain to exit the Paris Agreement once again. In general, the trust in the Paris Agreement is dwindling, particularly amongst the countries that are most threatened by climate impacts. This is why Vanuatu, a small island nation north-east of Australia, galvanised similarly-placed nations to get a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly last year seeking advice from the ICJ on what countries' climate obligations were. The ICJ was asked to make its assessment not just on the existing climate-specific legal arrangements represented by the UNFCCC and its two treaties, Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement, but also in light of other international laws like the universal declaration on human rights.

## 1991 Act: What SC stopped, why

Order applies to both pending suits and those that may be filed in future. In its Babri Masjid ruling, SC said 1991 Act was part of 'basic structure' of Constitution. This may be relevant as it hears challenge to 1991 law

APURVA VISHWANATH  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 12

THE SUPREME COURT on Thursday barred civil courts across the country from registering fresh suits challenging the ownership and title of any place of worship, and from ordering surveys of disputed religious places until further orders.

"As the matter is sub judice... we deem it appropriate to direct that no fresh suits may be filed nor registered or proceedings be ordered till further orders of this court... We also direct that in pending suits, the courts would not pass any effective interim orders or final orders including orders of survey till the next date of hearing," the Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Sanjay Khanna said.

**Case before the court**

The Bench, also comprising Justices P V Sanjay Kumar and KV Viswanathan, was hearing petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Places of Worship Act, 1991.

The law, brought in the wake of the Ayodhya movement, prohibits conversion of any place of worship and provides for the maintenance of the religious character of places of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947.

PLACES OF WORSHIP ACT: A TIMELINE

**1991:** Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act enacted: said "religious character" of a place of worship will remain as it was on August 15, 1947. Only exception: "Ram Janna Bhumi-Babri Masjid". The Ayodhya agitation was raging at the time; Babri Masjid was still standing.

**Oct 2020:** First petition filed challenging the Act; five more filed subsequently — on grounds of arbitrariness on date, and the fact that it takes away judicial review.

**Aug 2021:** Five women filed suit in Varanasi seeking permission to pray at

the Gyanvapi mosque.

**May 2022:** After case reached SC, then CJ D Y Chandrachud orally observed that a survey "may not necessarily fall foul" of the Places of Worship Act.

**2022-2024:** At least six suits were filed claiming past existence of a Hindu temple at the site of a mosque or dargah. Surveys were ordered in three of these cases.

**Dec 2024:** SC barred further survey orders, further "effective" orders, and the registering of fresh suits.

— AJJOY SINHA KARPURAM

Only the Ram Jannabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute was kept out of the purview of the law since the case was already sub judice.

**What the order impacts**

The order applies to both civil suits that are already pending (there are several; below) and to those that may be filed in the future.

The order bars the "registration" of cases by civil courts. Consequently, they also cannot order a survey, or seek a report from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), as they have done in several recent instances.

All these civil cases have raised questions on the title of mosques, arguing that they were built on Hindu religious structures that

were razed by medieval rulers.

The SC also observed that court orders in these civil suits could be challenged on the grounds that they violate larger constitutional principles of secularism and the rule of law, irrespective of the Places of Worship Act.

**Challenge to the 1991 Act**

Meanwhile, the SC will have to hear the constitutional challenge to the 1991 Act. These petitions have been pending since 2020. It remains to be seen if the Centre will defend the law or argue against it.

The petitioners have challenged the law on two main grounds. First, that it takes away the power of judicial review by abating claims that existed at the time of passing the law and prohibiting fresh claims in courts. Second, that it is arbitrary in retrospectively picking August 15, 1947 as the cut-off date for determining the religious character of a place of worship.

In 2019, in the five-judge Constitution Bench ruling in the Ayodhya case, the SC had referred to the 1991 law as forming a part of the "basic structure of the Constitution".

While the 1991 law was not directly under challenge in that case, the SC observations could still be relevant in determining the constitutional validity of the law.

## PENDING SUITS ON MOSQUE-TEMPLE DISPUTES



Gajendra Yadav

**SHAHI JAMA MASJID, SAMBALH**

Case: Suit filed on November 19 claiming mosque was built on ruins of an ancient temple that was dedicated to Lord Kalki.

Status: Civil Judge (Senior Division), Sambhal ordered survey, which triggered violence on November 24, in which several people were killed. On November 29, SC asked court not to proceed with suit for now.



Wikimedia Commons

**ATALA MOSQUE, JAUNPUR**

Case: Suit filed in May 2024 seeking declaration that Atala Devi temple existed at site; possession of property; restraining order against non-Hindus.

Status: Survey ordered; Jaunpur court was to hear plea for security to surveyors on December 16. Petition filed at Allahabad HC challenging registration of suit.



Wikimedia Commons

**KAMAL MOULA MOSQUE, BHOJSHALA COMPLEX, DHAR**

Case: Petition filed before MP HC in 2022 challenging 2003 ASI order allowing Muslims to offer namaz on Fridays.

Status: In March 2024, HC sought "scientific survey". In April, SC disallowed digging that changes character of premises.



Renuka Puri

**GYANVAPI MOSQUE, VARANASI**

Case: Suit filed on behalf of Adi Vishveshwar in 1991. In 2021 five Hindu women sought permission to worship there.

Status: Sessions Judge ordered ASI survey; upheld maintainability of 2021 suit in 2023. Maintainability of 1991 suit was also upheld in 2022.



Wikimedia Commons

**SHAMSI JAMA MASJID, BUDAUN**

Case: Suit filed in 2022 by Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha claiming temple to Lord Nand Mahadev stood at site; seeking injunction to pray.

Status: Fast-track court in Budaun is currently hearing arguments on maintainability of the suit.



Wikimedia Commons

**QUWWAT-UL-ISLAM MOSQUE, DELHI**

Case: In 2020, suit filed seeking restoration of Hindu and Jain deities inside mosque in Qutub Main complex.

Status: Civil Judge rejected suit in 2021 stating it was barred by provisions of Places of Worship Act, 1991. Challenge to this order is pending.



Apurva Vishwanath

**SHAHI IDGAH MOSQUE, MATHURA**

Case: Several suits filed since 2020 seeking removal of mosque; also question validity of 1968 "agreement" that allowed mosque and a new temple to co-exist.

Status: In August 2024, Allahabad HC rejected Hindu suit to maintainability of suits. Mosque committee has gone to SC.



Wikimedia Commons

**TEELA WALI MASJID, LUCKNOW**

Case: In 2013, suit filed by Hindus seeking survey of mosque allegedly built after Aurangzeb demolished temple.

Status: Maintainability of suit pending before Allahabad HC; suit seeking injunction to allow Hindu devotees to pray pending before Civil Judge.



Wikimedia Commons

**AJMER SHARIF DARGAH, AJMER**

Case: Suit filed in September 2024 claiming there is evidence of a temple to Lord Shiva at the site.

Status: Civil Judge issued notices to Union Ministry of Minority Affairs, ASI, and State: Ajmeri Dargah Committee on November 27.



Express

**MALALI JAMA MASJID, MANGALURU**

Case: Suit filed in 2022 by VHP claiming "temple like" structure was found beneath the mosque during renovation; requested survey of premises.

Status: On January 31, 2024 Karnataka HC ordered the UN General Assembly to first decide on maintainability of suit.

## Nine years after it was finalised, a critical look at the Paris Agreement

AMITABH SINHA  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 12

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EXPLAINED CLIMATE



## Marketing reforms

India's agri-marketing system needs an upgrade

The Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare recently circulated a draft "National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing", inviting public comments and suggestions. Despite vast improvements in agricultural output and productivity over the years, agricultural marketing has not evolved with time. Agricultural reforms should, therefore, not remain limited to factor-market reforms, but should also include efforts to liberalise constraints to marketing. This will benefit all stakeholders, including farmers and consumers. In this context, the draft policy calls for the need to achieve barrier-free trade in agricultural produce under a uniform pan-Indian framework.

There are 7057 regulated wholesale markets established under the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) Acts of states and Union Territories (UTs). However, the average density of these markets is just one in 407 square kilometres (sq km), much lower than the prescribed norm of one in 80 sq km. Moreover, only 1,410 markets are linked to the electronic-national agricultural market (e-NAM) network from 23 states and four UTs, while more than 1,100 markets remain non-functional. Further, around 450 markets have little or no infrastructure and are operating in unfavourable conditions. In this regard, the draft policy has done well to propose measures like increasing the reach of farmer-consumer markets so that farmers can directly sell their produce in retail to the consumers, developing gramen haats into Gramen Agricultural Markets (GRAMs), especially in hilly and the Northeast regions, and strengthening high-level precision facilities oriented to agri-processing and exports at district and state levels.

To digitise the marketing process to reduce information asymmetry and bring about transparency, the policy has also recommended consolidating and expanding e-NAM beyond APMC markets to public and private purchase centres and gramen haats. More importantly, the policy has called for increased private-sector participation, preferably in public-private partnership (PPP) mode, to address the infrastructure gap in APMC markets, along with the creation of an "Empowered Agricultural Marketing Reform Committee" of state agricultural marketing ministers on the lines of the empowered committee of state finance ministers on goods and services tax to push the states to adopt the reform provisions in the state APMC Acts.

Several farmer organisations have raised concerns that increased private-sector participation may lead to monopolisation to the detriment of the farmers and reduce their bargaining power. However, allowing direct farm-gate purchases of farm produce by bulk retail buyers without having to go through the state-notified mandis or pay the various levies and fees that these markets charge can ultimately tilt the terms of trade in farmers' favour in the long run. Establishing a quarterly "Ease of Doing Agri-trade" index, as recommended by the draft policy, will also foster healthy competition among states. Notably, the draft policy acknowledges that, since agricultural marketing is a state subject under Entries 14 and 28 of List-I (State List) of the VII Schedule of the Indian Constitution, both the state and Union governments will have to work together. After having to withdraw farm laws in the past, the government has done well to adopt a consultative and persuasive way to push agricultural reforms. Nonetheless, there is a need to invest in better storage and marketing infrastructure, including decentralised storage and warehouse facilities, and resurrect derivatives trading for agri-commodities in the country.

## Demand-supply mismatch

Affordable housing shortage must be addressed

Housing affordability is getting worse across Indian cities. In recent years, demand in the affordable segment has suffered as the target group concerned was deeply affected by the pandemic. Further, interest-rate hikes on housing loans and a sharp rise in residential prices have made it challenging for low-income buyers to enter the market. Consequently, the share of affordable housing in overall sales has substantially declined in recent years. Pandemic-induced distress, coupled with rising costs of construction and labour costs, prompted real estate developers to shift their focus away from affordable housing and lean towards the premium and luxury segments. Together, these factors have resulted in a demand-supply mismatch for affordable housing units. A recent study conducted by Knight Frank and the Confederation of Indian Industry highlights the magnitude of the problem.

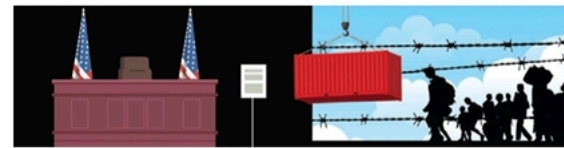
The study shows that India will face an affordable housing shortage of 31.2 million units by 2030. There is already an existing shortage of 10.1 million units. It also points towards a moderation of sales in the affordable category. In 2018, 54 per cent of all residential sales in the top eight cities of India were concentrated in the affordable category. In 2024, this share declined to 26 per cent. This continues to happen despite the housing market witnessing a robust upswing amid increasing urbanisation, rising income levels, and growing formalisation of the economy. The inadequate supply of affordable residential units in the country is concerning and calls for immediate attention. To add to the problem, house prices have significantly increased in the past few years, especially in the affordable housing segment. For instance, the study shows that, between 2019 and 2024, the average launch prices in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region increased at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8 per cent for residential units below 30 square metres (sq m), while average prices of residential units of 60-160 sq m witnessed a CAGR of only 4.4 per cent. Decline in development owing to the projects' financial infeasibility, lack of affordable land availability, and high loan dependency of both developers and potential buyers are some of the obstacles.

Unaffordable housing is a drag on the economy. It erodes the urban wage premium for workers and makes it increasingly costly for employers to retain talent. Moreover, a supply shortage creates conditions for wealthy real estate developers and agents to exploit the tight market, squeezing excessive profits from renters and crowding out first-time homebuyers. In this context, governance of housing markets must include more robust planning. Government policies such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and the National Urban Rental Housing Policy may not be enough. Developing satellite cities and addressing the physical infrastructure deficit in those areas can help spread economic activities and reduce pressure on mega cities. Creating housing facilities for industrial workers, maximising land use by allowing a higher floor area ratio, and ensuring adequate finance for both home buyers and developers may also alleviate the problem to a large extent. Another potential solution lies in repurposing vacant lands owned by various public-sector undertakings and state authorities.

# The man who will shape 2025

Trump's views on tariffs and trade reflect a majority perspective in the US that the world will need to adapt to

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Never in recent memory has the fate of the world at the approach of a New Year hinged on one person as it does today. In recent weeks, it has seemed that key political and economic decisions in the world's political capitals are on hold until Donald Trump's assumption of office as President of the United States next January.

The US is, by a wide margin, the world's pre-eminent power. The actions of its President are bound to impact the rest of the world. However, Mr Trump is not just another US President. In respect of both foreign and economic policy, he represents a sharp discontinuity, one that is potentially disruptive for the US as well as the rest of the world. That is why the world watches with bated breath.

In the realm of geopolitics, the world awaits Mr Trump's moves in respect of two hot spots, West Asia and Ukraine. Economic policy-makers are bracing for Mr Trump's moves on two of his key promises: Higher tariffs on imports into the US and a crackdown on illegal immigration.

The demonisation of Mr Trump is so common in the Western mainstream media that he isn't being given credit for anything by something that few would disagree with: The world could do with fewer wars. It is worth quoting from a speech Mr Trump made in March 2023:

"We need PEACE without delay. In addition, there must also be a complete commitment to dismantling the entire globalist neo-con establishment that is perpetually dragging us into endless wars, pretending to fight for freedom and democracy abroad, while they turn us into a third-world country and a third-world dictatorship right here at home. The State Department, the defence bureaucracy, the intelligence services, and all the rest need to be completely overhauled and reconstituted to fire the Deep States and put America First."

If that is not radical thinking, one knows not what

is. The big question is whether the Deep State will let Mr Trump get on with the agenda he has in mind. In West Asia, Mr Trump has been presented with a fait accompli of sorts with the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria. The issue is not whether Mr Trump can extricate the US from Syria. It is how he intends to deal with plans for the creation of a Greater Israel and the neo-con project to deal with other hostile regimes, notably Iran. There is the power of the Israel lobby in the US. Mr Trump himself has been hawkish on Iran. For Mr Trump to put his vision of peace into practice where West Asia is concerned will be quite a challenge.

On Ukraine, there is scope for greater optimism. Mr Trump has been emphatic that Ukraine must negotiate an end to the conflict with Russia. The Biden administration attempted to ease the pitch for Mr Trump there too by allowing Ukraine to fire long-range missiles into Russian territory. Russia responded with a new missile to which NATO apparently has no counter-measure. After a two-week break, Ukraine has again fired long-range missiles into Russia. A strong retaliation from Russia is on the cards.

Russia has made it clear that it is not willing to freeze the status quo and that any settlement will now have to be pretty much on Russia's terms. We should not be surprised if Mr Trump decides to end America's involvement in Ukraine by forcing President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hand.

On the US home front, there is no ambiguity whatsoever. An increase in tariffs and the deportation of illegal immigrants are both certainties. The only question is how far and how quickly Mr Trump will go in implementing these measures.

Tariffs are an article of faith with Mr Trump. He deeply and genuinely believes that tariffs are needed to realise his vision of a prosperous United States.



**FINGER ON THE PULSE**

T. RAM MOHAN

## Clearing the way for air taxis

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent declaration that air taxis will soon become a reality in India signals the advent of second-generation reforms in the drone ecosystem. Just three years ago, developing and operating drones in India seemed unthinkable. However, the country has since undergone a dramatic transformation, rapidly evolving into a vibrant hub of drone technology and innovation. And it is now poised for the next phase of progress in the sector.

The Drone Rules of August 2021 marked the first-generation reform in India's drone industry. However, this milestone came with its share of challenges and an intriguing backstory. After years of deliberation and growing demand to open the drone sector, the Ministry of Civil Aviation introduced drone regulations in March 2021. While these rules aimed to encourage private enterprise, they imposed excessive restrictions, threatening to stifle industry growth.

The turning point came when Mr Modi intervened, holding several meetings that brought together ministries, security agencies, and other key stakeholders to ensure alignment on a more progressive approach. The August 2021 rules replaced the March 2021 rules, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Over 90 per cent of Indian airspace was declared green zones for drone operations, and the Unmanned Aircraft System (Traffic Management) (UTM) framework was approved. To energise and encourage entrepreneurs, the Bharat Drone Mahotsav 2022 was organised, fostering innovation and leadership within the drone ecosystem. The government complemented the opening of the drone sector with transformative initiatives aimed at mainstreaming drone usage. The Svamitva scheme, for instance, has used drones to survey and map over 290,000 villages, providing property ownership certificates to millions who previously lacked formal documentation. Similarly, in November 2021, drone-based surveys were mandated for large mines, enhancing efficiency and accountability. In agriculture, over 3,000 drones are deployed for aerial spraying in 300,000 acres — and the number is expected to grow further. The Drone Didi initiative has empowered rural women

by training over 1,000 female drone pilots, bringing drone technology into practical use in rural areas.

To support the growth of the domestic industry, the government banned the import of foreign drones; introduced a production-linked incentive scheme, and liberalised exports. Initiatives like IDEX Challenges have spurred startups to develop drones for national defence, enabling exports to other nations. Consequently, India's drone market has grown from near nonexistence in 2021 to \$654 million by 2024, and is projected to reach \$1.43 billion by 2029 at a compound annual growth rate exceeding 17 per cent. The number of operational drones is expected to rise from 10,803 in 2024 to 61,393 by 2029, signalling a robust and innovation-driven future for India's drone ecosystem.

With drone technology breaking new ground, air taxis are poised to revolutionise urban mobility, offering a promising solution to the crippling traffic congestion that plagues many cities. In India's metros, commuters spend an average of two hours — or nearly 7 per cent of their day — travelling to work, one of the highest rates globally. Drone taxis offer a chance to reduce commute times. Similarly, drone ambulances could drastically enhance emergency response times, potentially saving countless lives.

Beyond medical use, air taxis have applications in law enforcement and disaster evacuation, particularly in scenarios where traditional transportation methods prove impractical. Several nations, including the US, Israel, China, and the UAE, are already advancing drone taxi programmes. China, in particular, set a landmark in October 2023 by granting type certification to a two-passenger drone taxi. Dubai is also moving forward, with vertiports under construction to support future operations.

Building on first-generation reforms, India has emerged as a competitive force in the global drone industry. Many startups are advancing indigenous drone taxi designs. However, to unlock the sector's full potential, next-generation policy reforms are essential. Drone taxis, designed for vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) in congested urban areas, require dedicated vertiports akin to airports or bus terminals.



**OFF THE GRID**

AJAY KUMAR

His commitment to tariffs dates back to the late 1980s — in 1989, he had called for a 15 to 20 per cent on Japanese imports to curb the trade deficit. Those in doubt may want to read Robert Lighthizer's *No Trade Is Free*. Mr Lighthizer was US Trade Representative in the previous Trump administration and had Mr Trump's enthusiastic backing for his ideas. He was a contender for the post of Treasury Secretary or Commerce Secretary this time around but didn't make that cut. It would be a mistake to think that the case against free trade arises from ignorance of basic economic precepts. It is a carefully thought through position. Mr Lighthizer's main points are as follows.

First, the efficiency argument for free trade is flawed because the benefits accrue to a few, while the losers are more numerous. And no, the losers aren't compensated through the gains from trade. For example, manufacturing workers cannot be easily trained to do skilled work in services. The relocation of whole communities is not a simple matter either. Secondly, the services sector does not create jobs on the same scale as manufacturing. Only manufacturing can provide well-paying jobs for the vast majority of Americans.

Thirdly, the US needs manufacturing because it is not in the interest of national security to be dependent fully on others for goods such as steel and pharmaceuticals. Manufacturing exports are nine times bigger than services exports and hence are vital to containing the US trade deficit. Manufacturing is a big source of innovation and has driven innovation in services, so it is not that services can be delinked from manufacturing.

Fourthly, it is incorrect to suppose that the US trade deficit is self-correcting through a fall in the value of the dollar. The US has been running trade deficits for decades — and these keep growing. The US is the world's reserve currency, so the dollar attracts capital inflows, which comes in the way of dollar depreciation. America's leading trade partners, notably China, tend to manipulate their currencies to keep their exchange rates low. 'They also include 'unfair trade' — subsidising domestic companies and protecting non-tariff barriers.

Mr Lighthizer's punchlines. All the great economies of the world were built behind a wall of protection and often with government money. The National Democratic Alliance government's initiatives to boost segments of manufacturing through a combination of subsidies and tariffs are in line with Mr Lighthizer's thinking and that of Mr Trump.

Economists may ridicule Mr Trump's belief in tariffs as an instrument for remaking the US. However, as his convincing win in the recent presidential elections shows, his anti-globalisation stance captures the mood of the majority of the American electorate. In the New Year, the world has little choice but to adjust to Mr Trump's way of thinking.

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## Xi Jinping's 'Marxist nationalism'



### BOOK REVIEW

GUNJAN SINGH

In the last few years, there have been many different attempts by scholars to understand and analyse the thoughts of Xi Jinping. This is because as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), he has managed to change the discourse on China's domestic and foreign policy. Given the opaque nature of the CPC's functioning, one is always left wondering how and why things happen and what the world can expect from Xi. Understanding Xi's policies are also crucial because China is central to the international system. That is why this

book by Kevin Rudd, who channels his years of experience of working with China, is an essential read.

The author conducts a detailed and nuanced reading of all the texts, speeches and directives by Xi and concludes that the Chinese leader is determined to strengthen ideology, change global norms in China's favour, and leave a legacy of his thoughts as the driving mandate for the CPC.

The major theme of the book is that Xi has abandoned Deng Xiaoping's dictum to "hide the strength, and bide the time". Under Xi, China is ready to flex its muscles. The primary argument is that China under Xi is moving left on the economy and right on foreign policy. The author calls this "Xi's Marxist Nationalism". The clampdown on the private sector has been the norm under Xi, who perceives its existence as an aberration to CPC tenets. The trend is towards the "contraction of the private sphere and expansion of the public sphere controlled by the party".

When it comes to domestic policy, the posturing is closely dependent on nationalism. This is apparent with the rise of "wolf warrior" diplomacy. These two trends are crucial because Xi does not want the Chinese state to become a challenger to the "political and operational primacy of the Leninist Party". The Leninist Party is the soul of China and being "red" is mandatory. No surprises that Xi has executed the longest anti-corruption drive in the CPC's history, with the projected goal of preserving the party's sanctity.

It is possible to conclude, then, that when it comes to domestic policy under Xi, it's the party that reigns supreme in its truest form, and ideology dictates this. Deng's era of putting ideology on the backseat is over and so is the centrality of reform and opening up. This much is obvious from the fact that mentions of "reform and opening up" have been vanishing from official state documents. Under Xi, the primary stage of socialism is over and "China could now be less than

25 years away from this critical transition to a more advanced form of socialism", and this stage, Mr Rudd predicts, may end somewhere after 2035 and before 2049. Xi is also trying to bridge the Chinese culture and Marxism.

One can also see the rise of the kind of cult leadership similar to the one that developed under Mao Zedong. "Xi had become 'the core', the 'marshall', the 'general', the 'great leader' and now the 'pilot at the helm' of his increasingly Leninist Party," Mr Rudd writes, adding, "In only five years, a cascading set of actions and announcements had... built Xi Jinping's new Mao-like status, reinforced by an almost Mao-like cult personality." These statements underscore Xi's centrality in the party apparatus, apart from the abolition of the term limit on the presidency, making him leader for life.

When it comes to foreign policy, Mr Rudd writes that "Xi Jinping's China was now engaged in a full-blooded ideological and nationalist struggle

against the Western world". This has been possible because Xi believes that the United States has been continuously distracted by its role wars in the wide Middle East, and has become a less decisive force in shaping China's overall strategic calculus."

Xi also believes that China is now almost a global equal of the United States. Such policy directives have also pushed for an increased focus on territorial and neighbourhood policies of Beijing.

Taiwan is also a crucial factor today as Xi has intrinsically linked it to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and reunification is the ultimate goal. Mr Rudd paints a vivid picture of the possible outcome and scenarios vis-a-vis a future conflict across the Taiwan Straits, the outcome of which will have a major impact on the future of China.

Xi has been pushing for a change in the international discourse and norms, especially the idea of human rights. The

book provides a nuanced perspective on how Xi has gradually become assertive in international institutions like the United Nations. The saga here is to alter the accepted norms of the Western world and strengthen Chinese viewpoints. The concepts of Community of Common Destiny (CCD), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) are, the author argues, part of the alternatives of the existing world order.

Mr Rudd has also dealt with the question of what happens after Xi, which has been perplexing China watchers. He concludes that Xi will only be comfortable handing over power to the generation that has been educated and moulded by the "Xi Jinping Thought". Under Xi, the mistakes of Mao have been glossed over and the achievements of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao forgotten, making it increasingly apparent that to understand China of today and the future, one will have to become a student of Xi Jinping Thought.

The reviewer is associate professor, O.P.Jindal Global University





# THE ASIAN AGE

13 DECEMBER 2024

## Parl held to ransom by both govt & Opp.

The Winter Session of Parliament has witnessed a series of curious events with some having precedents but not the others. Most notable among them was the notice to remove Jagdeep Dhanekar as vice-president and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha but no less surprising were the Treasury benches disrupting proceedings even as the Opposition insisted it wanted the Houses to function at all costs.

It is the first time in the history of the Rajya Sabha that a mandatory 14-day notice has been given for the removal of its chairman. Article 67 (b) of the Constitution says a vice-president may be removed from office by passing a resolution in the Rajya Sabha which is agreed by the Lok Sabha. The notice precedes the resolution seeking his removal.

India is an electoral democracy where people are elected to their legislative posts through polls with the backing of political parties. The practice for the elected representatives so far, however, has been to present themselves as representatives of the entire electorate. It is from this position that they derive their moral authority to act in the name of all people. Those holding portfolios of executive power such as ministers have often been accused of acting in a partisan manner, but the Presidents and Vice-Presidents have been honourable exceptions.

**After the disruptive interventions of the Opposition washed out the first week of the Winter Session, it is now the turn of the Treasury benches to ensure that no meaningful discussion occurs**

Given that the NDA has a majority both in the Council of States as well as in the House of the People, and that the alliance has already voiced its support for him, Mr Dhanekar faces no immediate threat of losing his chair. It is up to him to contemplate if he has been true to his constitutional responsibility, or whether he should press ahead with the thought that his performance will form part of the resume that he prepares for his next position.

After the disruptive interventions of the Opposition washed out the first week of the Winter Session, it is now the turn of the Treasury benches to ensure that no meaningful discussion happens in the Houses. The behaviour of the ruling party members borders on strangeness when they raise media reports pointing to what they feel are questionable links Opposition leaders have with questionable people. Why they would stall the Houses instead of putting the Opposition leaders in the dock by allowing them to function remains a mystery.

It has now dawned on the Opposition that they are the biggest losers in the game of disruption and it wants the Houses to function. It should at least now realise that the people have sent its members here to hold the government to account for its sins of commission and omission. Democracy becomes a winning proposition when all the players recognise their roles and act responsibly.

Subhani



## Tap private sector for climate change goals



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

There was huge disappointment across all developing countries at the deal which finally emerged at the COP29 climate summit in Baku, Azerbaijan, last month. The developed countries had agreed to increase the fund commitment to help developing countries to green their economies from \$100 billion annually, made at the landmark 2015 Paris summit, but which was not fulfilled consistently, to \$300 billion annually. The demand from the developing countries was for \$1.3 trillion if Net Zero emissions were to be achieved by 2050 and the global temperature kept below 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era levels.

The assurance was given by the developed countries that the gap in funding — between \$300 billion and \$1.3 trillion — would be covered by tapping sources other than governmental funding, including multilateral development banks and private investors.

There was justifiable scepticism on the part of the developing economies whether this target would ever be reached. The scepticism on the part of developing economies is indeed justified because raising funds from the market to meet climate change goals is unrealistic because the private investors look for returns in a reasonable time frame. The debate about the participation of the private sector in playing a substantial role in responding to climate change challenges has been going on for quite some time. An argument was offered during the COP28 summit in Dubai in 2023 that the private sector's global carbon emissions were 70 per cent, and that it had a responsibility

to help with the task of supporting projects which will help de-carbonise the economy. It is an argument that needs to be kept alive and many of the private sector players are willing to do their bit. Again, there is scepticism how sincere and effective the private sector efforts would be.

In this either-or situation, there have been some interesting developments in Africa. They have not received enough attention, and they have not been talked about. The African leaders and policymakers feel that they should not depend any longer on the largesse of the developed world to meet the challenge of sustainable growth and climate change. They feel that they should find their own ways of raising funds collectively in Africa and turn to the markets in Africa and across the world.

The African Development Bank has joined hands with the Climate Investments Funds' Capital Markets Mechanism, and the CIF has announced its bond listing at the London Stock Exchange. The announcement was made in Baku on November 12. The CIF has been in existence since 2008 and it has been supporting climate change projects across countries. But the fund's value is a mere \$12 billion, which can be termed a drop in the ocean. But it opens the door to a global market which should be of great importance as the century passed and the challenges posed by climate change would only increase.

It must be recognised that the long-term trend is that of declining growth in the developed economies due to a variety of reasons, including the shift in manufacturing base away from these countries and to Asia. So, the ability of the

**The challenge is to make de-carbonisation a profitable venture. This would require a smart strategy of making it demand-driven. People now understand the hazards of climate change.**

governments of the advanced economies would shrink in the future. Their responsibility as the largest polluters remains undisputable and it is borne out by the cumulative CO2 emission figures, with the share of the United States at 29 per cent (457 billion tonnes) and that of Europe, technically referred to as EU 28, at 22 per cent (353 billion tonnes), with China at a relatively distant third position at 12.7 per cent (200 billion tonnes) and India's minuscule three per cent (48 billion tonnes). Russia, with its cumulative CO2 emissions of six per cent (101 billion tonnes), stands between China and India.

At the Africa Climate Summit held in Nairobi in July this year, releasing the third edition of the United Nations Development Programme's Africa Investment Insights Report, Maxwell Gomera of UNDP Africa Sustainable Finance Hub said: "Through the UNDP Africa Investment Insights Report, we turn Africa's climate challenges into investment opportunities for the private sector, as per the continent's own ambition captured in national NDCs." Africa's trust in the markets might look naive given the fact that the global markets have been under stress even since the worldwide financial crisis of 2007-08 and the Covid-19 pandemic interruption of 2020-22. Countries are struggling to get back to pre-Covid-19 levels of growth. The general sentiment across the globe, among the youth, farmers and workers, is against free markets and

in favour of protected markets behind tariff walls. It is clear that governments cannot bear the burden of providing basic services to the people if the markets do not flourish. The socialist utopia simply cannot be resurrected. The private sector must recover its animal spirits, and it must be pressed into the service of combating climate change as well. India and China and many other emerging market economies have successfully tapped the private sector to spur growth. So, the private sector can be an effective pathway to sustain the climate change action plan. The example of the African Development Bank with the Climate Investment Fund shows that there can be collaboration between governments and the private sector.

The challenge is to make de-carbonisation a profitable venture. This would require a smart strategy of making it demand-driven. People now understand the hazards of climate change, from droughts and floods to heat waves and cold waves. They are feeling the pain and the discomfort. When people demand change, things happen. As long as developing countries depend on the developed economies, the developed economies will continue to call the shots. The technological breakthroughs for the green economy should now flow from the developing economies. Funds for research and development must be stepped up in these countries. This could also lead to the advanced economies turning to the Asian, African and Latin American countries for technology transfers. This is not a wholly unrealistic expectation. It needs intellectual and entrepreneurial breakthroughs. With a bit of daring, it can be done. Call it the Christopher Columbus spirit. Set out to reach the old eastern ideal of ecological and economic balance and you will end up at new places and new horizons open up.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

## LETTERS HELP HUSBANDS

The unfortunate case of the Atul Santosh suicide shows that there are a significant number of husbands suffering silently because of stringent anti-dowry provisions being used by cold calculating women to squeeze them dry of their financial assets. While the war of the roses will never be eliminated in a husband-wife relationship, the allegations made against the judge in what can be safely taken as a dying statement must worry the nation most of all. News of corruption in the judiciary always came out in whispers, but the suicide note of the deceased makes it clear as to how the judges can drive anybody to despair with financial demands.

Anthony Henriques  
Mumbai

## A BAROMETER!

THE BUZZ surrounding the Oxford Word of the year — "brain rot" — is not without reason. The annual tradition of dictionaries picking a Word of the Year has become more than a mere linguistic exercise — it serves as a cultural barometer, reflecting the collective ethos, mood and preoccupation of society at a specific moment of time. Thus Cambridge has named "manifest" as its selection and Collins chose "brat".

Sankar Paul  
Chakdaha, West Bengal

## SELFISH CONGRESS

THE AAP and the Congress have both announced that they will not form an alliance in Delhi for the upcoming elections. Both are constituents of the INDIA bloc and fought the Lok Sabha elections together in May this year. Hence their fighting separately now may affect both the parties and will be an advantage to the BJP. Sadly, it appears that both the parties have not learnt any lessons from the Haryana Assembly elections which they contested separately as well. The AAP is carrying the weight of anti-incumbency on its shoulders and the Congress wanted no part of it. We have to wait till February to know the outcome of such selfishness.

D.B. Madan  
New Delhi

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Dilip Cherian  
Dilli Ka Babu



## Das leaves behind robust legacy: Will it be smooth sailing under Malhotra?

As the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) prepares for a leadership transition, all eyes are on revenue secretary Sanjay Malhotra, who has been appointed as the RBI governor for a three-year term starting Wednesday. His appointment comes as the financial world speculates on the future of the outgoing governor, Shaktikanta Das, whose extended tenure concluded with the recent monetary policy announcement.

Mr Das, a veteran babu with an uncanny ability to sidestep contentious queries, has kept everyone guessing about his plans. Even as whispers of a behind-the-scenes campaign for an extension swirl — fuelled by rumours of his visit to the Chennai hospital — added to the prolonged intrigue.

Mr Das' tenure has been pivotal, marked by stability and a steady hand during turbulent times. Appointed after the unexpected exit of Urjit Patel in 2018, Mr Das steered the RBI through the pandemic-induced economic upheaval. His administration delivered bold monetary measures, including the latest CRR cut, which is expected to infuse ₹1.6 lakh crores into the banking system.

Yet, the government's choice of Mr Das — and now Mr Malhotra — signals a clear preference for seasoned administrators over candidates selected solely on performance metrics. While Mr Das' leadership underscored continuity and control, it also spotlighted a shift away from independent-minded central banking.

As Mr Malhotra steps into this high-stakes role, the financial community will keenly watch how he balances the RBI's autonomy with the government's expectations. The baton has been passed, but the challenges of inflation, growth, and global financial headwinds remain as pressing as ever.

**CBI MOVES TOWARDS MULTIDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATIONS**  
The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) is getting a makeover — or at least, that's the idea behind the new rules the government has notified. The aim? To bring in more diversity at the superintendent of police (SP) level by opening up the doors to professionals from outside the Indian Police Service (IPS).

Until now, only 15 of the 75 SP-level department posts could be filled by officers from non-police backgrounds. That number has now been bumped up to 18. It may not seem like a seismic shift, but in bureaucratic speak, even small tweaks signal intent. The new rules allow half the SP posts in CBI to be filled through deputation and the rest through promotions. And it's not just the IPS officers in the mix anymore. The expanded pool includes members of All India Services, Central Police Organisations, organized Group 'A' services of the Central government, and even state police officers.

This shift isn't just about filling seats but equipping the CBI to handle complex financial crimes and multidisciplinary investigations better.

Financial shenanigans today often demand expertise beyond traditional policing—think forensic auditing, financial analysis, and cybercrime tracking. Having onboard officers with such skill sets is a step towards a more holistic approach to crime-solving in the 21st century needs more than just a badge and a baton. It needs minds that think differently — and now, the CBI seems ready to embrace that change.

**SEBI'S DILEMMA: EXTERNAL HIRES AND INTERNAL FRUSTRATIONS**  
Sebi is no stranger to turbulence, but the latest row might signal deeper cracks within its ranks. The appointment of Shikha Gupta, a former taxion head at Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL), as executive director (ED) has reportedly ruffled feathers among Sebi's employees. Their contention? A deep-seated belief that such positions should go to internal candidates, not external hires parachuting in.

This discontent comes amid a swirling controversy surrounding Sebi chairperson Madhabi Bhandwani. Her tenure has been marred by allegations tied to the Hindenburg report. Adding fuel to the fire is Ms Gupta's rumored connection to Buch — her husband's longstanding association

with HUL, raises questions about impartiality. While the optics aren't ideal, is the uproar entirely justified? Critics argue that external appointments, though unsettling, can bring fresh perspectives. Shikha Gupta's corporate experience could potentially inject Sebi with innovative approaches, especially in navigating taxation complexities. Yet, this optimism is overshadowed by Sebi's internal dynamics. Its employees appear to view this as another instance of sidelining its own talent — a sentiment exacerbated by memories of Pramod Rao's appointment from ICICI Bank in 2022, which triggered similar dissent.

The larger issue here is the perceived erosion of Sebi's autonomy. When top roles are filled with outsiders, particularly those linked to private sector powerhouses, it's easy for whispers of cronyism to gain traction. For Sebi to maintain its credibility, it must address this trust deficit. Transparent hiring practices and robust communication with its internal teams would go a long way in quelling such reverberations.

Ultimately, the question Sebi faces isn't just about Ms Gupta's appointment — it's about whether the regulator is doing enough to balance internal aspirations with the need for external expertise. Getting that balance right is critical for its future.

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## GST imperatives

GST Council should not introduce 35 per cent slab

Deepak Sood

The Modi government after a prolonged consultative process, brought in historic tax reforms with the introduction of Goods and Services Tax in 2017, bringing on board the States to be a part of the economic reform journey.

With introduction of the GST in 2017 a slew of Central and State taxes were subsumed into a single national tax, simplifying the complicated and fragmented tax framework that had resulted in tax cascading (tax on tax).

The cascading effect of levies meant more tax on consumers and complicated compliance burden for the trade and industry.

The Centre and States have done well in transforming the indirect tax regime implemented through the GST Council, presided by the Finance Minister.

## TAX BUOYANCY

Positive results are seen in the form of buoyancy in the indirect tax revenue.

In the first year of its operation the average monthly revenue was ₹86,174 crore which has grown in the current year to a monthly average of ₹1,78,543 crore, showing a CAGR increase of 11 per cent.

Even though things have stabilised quite well there are many areas that require attention to bring parity in many goods where there are classification disputes or are open to interpretation causing revenue loss/evasion.

There are many products suffering from an inverted duty structure.

The GST Council had set up a Group of Ministers on rate rationalisation. The objective is that going forward we have a more simplified/rational tax structure.

## SIN GOODS TAX

It has been reported in the media that the Group of Ministers on GST rate rationalisation has recommended introduction of a new tax slab of 35 per cent over and above the existing four slabs for an array of items, which are considered as 'sin' goods. Some even describe them as 'sin' goods.

The logic for such a high tax slab is attributed to health concerns; and as such consumption of such goods needs to be discouraged.

The 35 per cent slab is also seen as a revenue raising measure for the Centre and States.



TAX RATES. Balancing revenue and growth KIRITK

In a way, the two premises are contradictory. If there are health concerns and consumption of so-called demerit goods needs to be discouraged, where is the question of government revenue going up?

Drop in consumption would result in decline in revenue to the exchequer.

GST is after all a consumption tax. And if the argument is that demand for these items is inelastic to price rise, that means consumption would not come down anyway.

The proposal to bring in a new tax slab of 35 per cent plus cess, as reported in the media, would also lead to illicit trade escaping the GST net.

**COMPLIANCE FACTOR**  
Higher rates lead to incentives to avoid taxes while lower slabs invariably encourage trade and businesses to comply with the tax regime.

Reasonable GST rates would also mean higher tax revenue for the exchequer as the gross tax collection is a direct function of consumption which rises on lower sale prices.

Additionally, the idea was to reduce the number of GST rate slabs from four to three in order to simplify the tax regime.

However, adding another slab would be contrary to this objective.

There might be a temptation later to include more and more products under that category, which may further slow down consumption and fuel inflation.

For the sake of buoyancy in the revenue to the exchequer and robust consumption demand, the GST rates need to be moderate rather than excessively high.

At a time when the Indian economy needs a demand booster, the tax rates should be on the lower side.

The writer is Secretary General, ASSOCHAM

## Political cocktail in Bangladesh

TOUGH CALLS. The turmoil and shifting alliances between major players in Bangladesh are a challenge for India



PRATIM RANJAN BOSE

Bangladesh is set for another churn. Political equations are rapidly changing. The first signs of this lie in the spike in anti-India rhetoric.

The rest will be clear with the return of Tarique Zia, the exiled chief of Bangladesh Nationalist Party, in Dhaka. The chances are, he may return soon.

Tarique was sentenced in six cases. He was acquitted in two on December 2. Four were pending. His mother, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was acquitted in key cases on November 27. She was released from house arrest by the military, before Muhammad Yunus took oath as interim head.

Tarique has been offered a red carpet as part of an emergency plan to give the constitutionally illegal 'interim government' the shape of an all-party government — minus ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and Jatiya Party — which will conduct an early election.

The current dispensation wants to diversify its risks and put up a show of national unity against Hasina to the world. They are keen for an assured power transition to BNP.

The big question is: Would Tarique take this short-cut to power or, would he prefer to assume power through election, which BNP would inevitably win?

What makes BNP's choice particularly difficult is the potential isolation of Bangladesh on the foreign policy front. Donald Trump's victory in the US has limited the fall-back options of the Yunus administration, beholden to the Biden administration, to China and Pakistan.

That's too narrow a choice for any Bangladeshi government. Should Tarique, the Prime Minister in waiting,

**Whether BNP's Tarique Zia would join the interim government or would he prefer to come to power through an election remains to be seen**



ECONOMIC PAIN. The political disturbance has resulted in soaring food prices and low industry capacity utilisation KIRITK

board a sinking ship or should he wait to start with a clean slate, by waiting for a popular mandate? The answer will be out soon.

That said, the BNP has to share the blame for lawlessness and economic destruction in the last four months. Food prices are soaring. The country's largest industrial house Beximco reported idling or closure of 24 units in November.

## ANTI-INDIA RHETORIC

The recent spike in atrocities against minorities and anti-India rhetoric is a part of an age-old survival formula in Bangladesh and Pakistan, exercised by any embattled regime.

In its early days, students and Islamists acted as the political arms of the Yunus administration. They silenced every potential critic of the interim government, using mob power.

With Yunus promising to remain seated till the "reforms" are over; Dhaka was abuzz with the potential end of the BNP-Awami League binary, with an Islamic coalition and a party led by students taking centre stage.

The apprehensions gained momentum due to sustained legal bans on Tarique and Khaleda Zia. However, everything did not go according to plans

and events took their own course. The student force fizzled out in no time. Many coordinators of the July protest claimed allegiance to Islamic forces. The rest became unpopular even among the student community due to their high-handed attitude.

But Islamists, led by a well organised Jamaat-e-Islami, became over ambitious. They not only restored their establishments, once destroyed by Hasina, but went out to capture the entire political space.

Atrocities on religious minorities were a definite fall out of the free run of the Islamists. But the bigger impact was felt when they tried to infringe on electoral ally BNP's space. Clashes between BNP and Jamaat activists became commonplace. BNP started criticising the government.

## THE HINDU FACTOR

In a parallel development, Hindu minorities became united under the popular leadership of ISKCON monk Chinmay Krishna Das. To the dismay of Islamists, this created a new political equation in Bangladesh.

Hindus have over nine per cent vote in nearly one-third of 300 Parliamentary seats. In the past, this vote was either scattered or dedicated to Awami League.

Das broke that design. He was keen to exchange support for protection of Hindus and other minorities. This was an opportunity for BNP to dump Jamaat that historically brought five-six per cent vote. They discussed possibilities with Das.

The possibility of Hindu support to BNP irked Jamaat. Das was arrested against the wishes of many in Yunus' team. Ideologue Farhad Mazhar has openly demanded his release.

However, that failed to change the ground scenario because in the socio-political reality of Bangladesh, Hindus are identified with India. Meanwhile, the student force reunited. Mob power was back with the government.

## SECURITY CONCERN

The Yunus administration is now bound to raise anti-India (and pro-Pakistan) pitch as a last resort. This will leave behind a long-term security challenge for India. Many in Bangladesh are worried about the consequences of release of terrorists during July-August.

The big lesson for India is, it should never put all its eggs in one basket (Hasina).

The writer is an independent columnist

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 13, 2004

## Ministry cracks the whip on vanishing cos

Prioritising investor protection, particularly small investors, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) has initiated prosecutions against vanishing companies under the Companies Act as well as other legislations. "On review of the ongoing actions against the vanishing companies, those companies that came up with public issues during 1993-94 and 1994-95 and vanished with public money, focus has been laid out on taking timely and effective action against such companies, their promoters and directors," said the MoS Company Affairs, Mr Prem Chand Gupta.

## Tatas trying out Chinese auto parts for ₹1-lakh car

Tata Motors Ltd, which has promised launch an entry level car with ₹1 lakh price tag, is trying out Chinese auto components for the ambitious project, company sources said here today. "We are looking at whether Chinese auto parts, cheaper by 30-40 per cent, could be key to our efforts to launch ₹1-lakh car in India," said an official from Tata International Ltd.

## VAT joint panel meeting today

The first meeting of the joint committee on VAT is slated to meet on December 13 (Monday) under the Chairmanship of West Bengal FM, Mr Asim Dasgupta.

## Makhana gains popularity, but producers should benefit

Mohit Sharma

Makhana, also known as fox nut, has emerged as one of India's most talked-about superfoods in recent years. With its rich nutritional profile and multiple health benefits, the humble seed from Bihar has earned global recognition. North Bihar has long been the centre of its production.

In fact, prolonged issues of floods in the region have inadvertently turned makhana into a blessing in disguise, as it assisted farmers recover losses and rejuvenate the local economy.

Makhana's appeal skyrocketed after it received the Geographical Indication (GI) tag as 'Mithila Makhana' on April 2022, a certification that marked its uniqueness and authenticity. This recognition attracted an influx of entrepreneurs, start-ups, and traders, all eager to tap into the growing global market. The surge in demand, however, has led to a major supply-demand imbalance, pushing prices to unprecedented levels.

The production process is highly labour-intensive, with minimal

mechanisation. Harvesting Makhana requires highly skilled labour, traditionally sourced from the Mallah community which constitute about 2.5 per cent of Bihar's population. But the younger people from the Mallah community may not be interested in continuing this work.

The reliance on manual labour, combined with a lack of modernization in farming techniques, constrains production capacity and limits scalability, leading to prices soaring. At the same time, producers — largely farmers — are not reaping the benefits. There are very limited examples that farmers have received high price spread (producer's share in consumer's rupee) as compared to the traders.

The GI tag for Mithila Makhana, granted to 21 districts in Bihar, has undoubtedly raised the profile of this valuable commodity. However, a closer look at the figures reveals a disconnect between the GI tag and its real-world impact on the producers.

According to the GI registry, only 67 authorised users are registered under the GI tag — surprisingly, the majority of them are based in Kishanganj, while



MAKHANA. Boosting production, benefiting farmers. ASSOCHAM

Darbhanga, Madhubani, and Sitamarhi are among the primary production centres.

For a commodity which has about 70,000 primary producers, such a small number of authorised users are not going to confer economic benefits. As a result, the benefits intended for the local community are not trickling down. Moreover, the absence of a proper traceability mechanism, like, HSN code for Makhana, further complicates efforts to maintain trust and transparency in international markets.

## POLICY INTERVENTIONS

First and foremost, the government

must provide price guarantees to shield growers from market volatility.

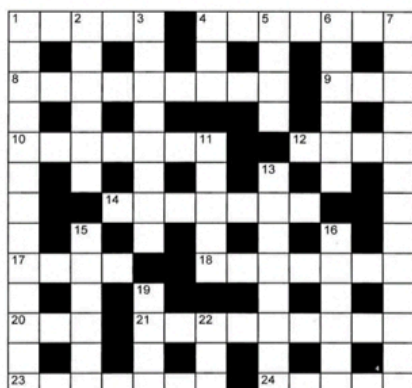
There needs to be a concerted effort to register all genuine producers under the GI tag. The current small number of authorised users, does not reflect the actual scale of Makhana production in Bihar.

Expanding the registration process to include more genuine producers — especially from the primary production hubs like Darbhanga, Madhubani, and Sitamarhi among others will ensure that the benefits of the GI tag flow to the grassroots level and community development is taking place.

Lastly, the government must intervene to regulate the influx of market entrants to prevent the formation of monopolies or price manipulation by powerful lobbies. A balanced, fair-market approach, with active government regulation, is necessary to ensure that Makhana remains a boon for both producers and consumers.

The writer is faculty of Agri Business at Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, Bihar. Views expressed are personal

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2588



## EASY

## ACROSS

01. Part of flower (5)
04. Item of kitchen furniture (7)
08. Escapes from prison (6,3)
09. Spasmodic facial twitch (3)
10. Gratify a whim (7)
12. Intend (4)
14. Flavouring from umbelliferous plant (7)
17. Cool, using breath (4)
18. Cocktail, aperitif (7)
20. Toward the stern (3)
21. Dramatic actor, playwright (9)
23. Longed for (7)
24. Use cash (5)

## DOWN

01. Lending-place for readers (6,7)
02. Walks upon (6)
03. Windermere district (8)
04. Two performers (3)
05. Newts (4)
06. One posing for picture (6)
07. Made as new (engine) (13)
11. Derby racecourse (5)
13. Intrepid (8)
15. She-lawyer (M of V) (6)
16. To split (6)
19. To stupefy (4)
22. (To) help (3)

## NOT SO EASY

## ACROSS

01. Lending place into something that naturally unfolds (5)
04. He may put bandages on one smartly turned out (7)
08. Erupts, the way one does when getting away from gaol (6,3)
09. Twitch of facial muscles that ice causes internally (3)
10. Gratify appetite at home and start dinner with glue mixture (7)
12. Average one will have it in mind to achieve (4)
14. Is to be found in a requirement of flavouring (7)
17. Sound the whistle as boxer delivers it (4)
18. Push back can one used for cocktail (7)
20. Craftsman take it in, astern (3)
21. Being elderly, is in the wrong train for a serious actor (9)
23. Badly wanted some time to fashion the end (7)
24. Pass the time and use the necessary (5)

## DOWN

01. Piece of advice from Polonius ignored by reader here? (6,7)
02. Street is up: study inside bits of the steps (6)
03. Crimson country was a district for poets (8)
04. Two people give a party with upper-class entry (3)
05. Creatures that went, topless, on top of the sand (4)
06. An easy target for one having his portrait done (6)
07. Direct one in, do, if this made to look like new (13)
11. Racecourse for the salts (5)
13. Less free of trouble, but how bold she is! (8)
15. Sailor's left with first-class return for lady barrister (6)
16. Low haunt I'd entered to do a bit of arithmetic (6)
19. This snooker shot may astound one (4)
22. It is first given by way of resuscitation (3)

## SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2587

ACROSS 2. Angel 5. Bass 7. Bark 8. Raindrop 9. Reversal 11. Must 12. Hundredweight 15. Moor 17. Pressure 19. Raincoat 21. Beef 22. Keep 23. Tuned



## Skilling India

Careful execution key to PM Internship Scheme

**T**he PM Internship Scheme (PMIS), announced in the FY25 Budget, is aimed at addressing the demand for a skilled workforce and reducing the large numbers of educated unemployed. There can be no denying the need for such a training scheme, given the scale of the issue at hand — low productivity of the existing workforce, poor skillsets of the 371 million youth (15-29 years) and the difficulties in making supply and demand 'meet' even where the skill sets exist, or can be raised with a bit of training.



PMIS' scope is ambitious, and rightly so. As a Standing Committee report of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs has noted, PMIS aims at providing internships to one crore youth over five years with an outlay of ₹63,000 crore (over ₹60,000 per candidate). PMIS has been conceived as a one-year skilling programme in PPP mode, with the Centre paying for 90 per cent of the monthly internship stipend of ₹5,000. While the company concerned will do the training, the Centre will screen the applications and match the candidates' suitability with the needs of the enrolled companies. For the pilot scheme that is in process, 280 companies have enrolled. The scheme has identified 500 top companies, based on their average CSR spends over the last three years. The pilot has received over six lakh applications for over a lakh internship posts in 280 corporates (one aspirant can apply for multiple internships). The Centre will electronically match the applications with the skill sets required by the companies concerned, besides crucially also prioritising socio-economic inclusiveness. After this round of screening, the companies concerned can — or rather, should ideally be able to — pick interns as they deem fit.

The macroeconomic context for the scheme is stark. According to the ILO's India Employment Report 2024, unemployment rate among youths in 2022 was six times greater for those who had completed secondary education or higher (18.4 per cent) and nine times higher for graduates (29.1 per cent) than for persons who could not read or write (3.4 per cent). The skew becomes worse when gender, rural-urban gap and caste are taken into account. If these companies are able to successfully train lakhs of youth through PMIS, it would lift labour productivity and reduce unemployment.

The Standing Committee makes some important observations to improve the scheme. While collaboration with the top 500 corporates is good for a start, engagement with SMEs and start-ups would help. The panel suggests systems to monitor post-internship outcomes. Industry bodies can be involved here so that all stakeholders benefit. But this should not translate into pressure tactics on companies to employ the interns. Nor should companies be forced to take as interns all those referred to them by the government. PMIS can work as a skills scheme, provided it does not bring back 'inspector raj' in the running of business. That would turn the clock back on over three decades of reforms.

## OTHER VOICES.

### The Guardian

**Trump's threat to the media: time to pass the Press Act**  
Fears of a press crackdown under Donald Trump's second term deepened with his nomination of Kash Patel as FBI director — given his calls for retribution against journalists. Yet a rare chance to protect press freedom has emerged. The bipartisan Protect Reporters from Exploitative State Spying (Press) Act, the strongest press freedom legislation in US history, is on the brink of a vote. While President-elect Trump has urged Republicans to block it, the Senate could still deliver it to Joe Biden before the lame-duck session ends in January. The Press Act would ban secret government demands for journalists' communications from tech giants such as Google or Verizon and protect reporters from jail for refusing to reveal sources. (jowicki, december 10)

### CHINADAILY

#### US and Canada thrown from their high horse

Tuesday marked Human Rights Day. To "observe" it, the United States added two Chinese companies to a trade restriction list for allegedly enabling human rights violations. Canada announced sanctions on eight former and current Chinese officials, citing alleged "state-led" human rights violations. Those in glasshouses should throw stones. Both countries have glaring human rights issues that give them no saddle on which to sit on a high horse lifting at windmills by smearing and vilifying China by spreading lies about alleged human rights abuses in the country. The US and Canada — and others — are in no position to lecture countries about human rights, nor do they have any grounds to act as a judge and arbitrarily impose sanctions. (jowicki, december 12)

GURBACHAN SINGH

**H**ousing is expensive in India. This is usually attributed to factors like population size, land scarcity, high construction cost, black money, nuclear families, vacant properties, low floor space index, monopolistic agencies like Delhi Development Authority, and the behaviour of developers and various intermediaries.

Each of these factors can be important in some areas and yet the big picture for India is different. Home prices are high mainly due to the high price of land. This is, in turn, because only 0.2 per cent of the national land mass is occupied by the top ten cities in India (Das, Prashant, et al. 2019, Real Estate in South Asia). There is a similar story across urban India more generally. And, the prevailing "regulations" on real estate development go way beyond the zoning laws that are needed for orderly development.

There are excessive restrictions on supply in different ways — open and subtle. Factors like slow and discretionary approvals, and corruption are parts of the more familiar story. But this is not all.

Existing cities keep getting extended but it is very costly and messy to expand housing and infrastructure in this fashion. We have serious congestion, and high prices. We need several altogether new cities.

Urbanisation in India is still at 34 per cent; we are way behind China even after considering their excesses. Very few new cities have come up over the last 77 years in India (cities like GIFT City and Anaravati are exceptions). This needs to change. It is true that the government is spending heavily on infrastructure but this is mainly on highways, ports, etc; it is not on infrastructure for new townships. Nor has the government proactively, decisively and clearly used an enabling policy for real estate companies to provide infrastructure for some new cities in a phased manner under State "masterplans". So, the supply of new homes is very limited relative to the needs of the economy.

#### RURAL LAND

Relatedly, the price of urban land that is already approved and has infrastructure is high. And, the nearby areas too can get somewhat expensive. Now let us come to the price of the main rural land. The phenomenon of under-allocation of land for urban India, of course, implies excess land in rural India. This suggests a very low price there. But this is not what we observe. Why?

# Why urban housing is unaffordable



**BOTTLENECKS.** The lack of enabling policies for expanding urban land and for real estate companies in providing infrastructure in cities is affecting supply

Farmers are, by and large, reluctant to sell land, even though the income from farming is dismally low. The reluctance is, in turn, due to some very disparate factors that include low real interest rates on alternative assets like bank deposits, limited meaningful alternative livelihood opportunities, and expensive housing in cities.

All these are the very reasons why the pricing provisions in the Land Acquisition Act, 2013 Act were stringent in the first place. So, although the price of rural land is less than that of urban land, it is not very low.

Overall, we see then that the high price of homes in urban India is mainly due to the inadequate additional supply due to policy reasons, and the rural land is not available at very low prices for reasons that show up in the pricing provisions in the 2013 Act.

We have a vicious circle here. Given the reluctance to sell land in rural India, we have limited urbanisation. And, given the inadequate urbanisation, there are limited alternative opportunities in

**The main policy solution is to phase out the policies that restrict the supply of housing in existing and new cities**

urban India. So, there is indeed reluctance to sell land in rural India.

The main policy solution is to phase out the policies that restrict the supply of housing in existing and new cities. The additional approvals of land, and the additional provision of the enabling of the provision for infrastructure can, after a slight lag, substantially increase supply of homes and reduce urban real estate prices.

This can, in turn, make it less difficult to amend the pricing provisions in the 2013 Act, which can reduce the price of rural land. It will also help if the other concerns are addressed so that farmers are less reluctant to sell their land.

#### MISALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

The suggested policies can reduce home prices. In contrast, a scheme like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) reduces costs for the buyers mainly through a subsidy in one way or another. So, it is public money at work. What we need is public policy instead.

At present we have too much rural land and too little urban land. Due to such and other misallocation of resources, we have, what economists call, a dead-weight loss. This is a loss to the economy as a whole. And, it is huge in this case and it recurs year after year.

Reducing such a loss is itself an important part of the answer to the

question of the feasibility of many new cities.

It is true that public money and state capacity are limited but there can be an enabling policy under which companies and even cooperatives and public sector agencies can build new cities, charge the buyers for the infrastructure that they provide, and carry out the marketing in the broad sense of the term. Think of Gurugram — at least in its early stages.

Additional housing has been meaningful due to the ample work opportunities there. An important driver is the low price of real estate initially, though with some risk. But there are lessons from Gurugram so that fewer mistakes are made elsewhere.

Given that the land price is at present high, even where it is a consequence of policy, the emphasis is on high-rise construction which tends to be capital intensive. This is the situation in a labour abundant economy. But it can be different if land is cheaper. Then we can have simple low-rise constructions in much of India. Then there is greater scope for increasing employment. In conclusion, the "market" prices of homes are high in India mainly due to policy reasons and they can be lowered mainly with policy changes.

The writer is an independent economist. He taught at Ashoka University, RI (Delhi) and JNU

# M&As can drive India's growth further

Apart from making capital available for infra development, they will open doors for new tech and markets

Daisuke Nozaki  
Dipak Daga

**I**ndia has seen a rise in mergers and acquisitions (M&A), with over 600 M&A transactions being registered annually since 2018.1 The combined value of these transactions has increased from \$50 billion to \$60 billion annually, between 2014 and 2017, and to \$110 billion annually now. M&A activity in India has spanned all sectors and deal sizes, but has been especially remarkable for transactions exceeding \$1 billion.

The M&A transactions have been of three kinds: domestic, such as Tata Group's acquisition of Air India; increased appetite of foreign players to step-up in India, such as Belgian Proximus Group acquiring a majority stake in Route Mobile; and global ambitions of Indian players, such as Bharti Airtel acquiring a stake in UK's BT Group.

The acceleration of M&A activities could be significant for India. M&As have powered several economies: M&As as a percentage of GDP over the last 30 years, from 1994 to 2023, for the US has averaged 8.6 per cent, for the UK 9.8 per cent, and for South Korea 3.7 per cent. It has been 2.4 per cent for India,

suggesting there is room for M&As to drive India's growth further.

M&As could unlock economic progress in India in multiple ways, such as the following:

**Impactful scale and exponential growth.** Through domestic deals: M&As usually consolidate fragmented sectors, increase efficiency, and achieve economies of scale. Strategic acquisitions by Carnegie Steel in the late 19th century, and the attendant synergies, caused annual US steel production to surge from 13,000 tonnes in the 1860s to 11.2 million tonnes in the early 1900s — more than the combined steel production of England & Germany then.

More recently, we have seen the consolidation of R&D, manufacturing platforms, material sourcing and manufacturing bringing significant growth in the global automotive sector, especially during the 1990s. Sectors such as insurance and auto components in India can benefit substantially from consolidation, bringing more efficiency, R&D intensity, and, indeed, stronger players.

**Capital availability and infrastructure development support.** Through foreign players' stepped-up India play: M&As enable availability of



**SYNERGIES.** Will complement growth

essential capital to a country for scaling infrastructure and boosting productivity. Investments in infrastructure-related sectors through M&As have driven overall economic growth in several countries, it unlocks the pace and scale of capital that may not otherwise have been accessible to local infrastructure developers. For example, Brookfield acquired Jio's 1,35,000 communication towers in a 30-year agreement for \$3.4 billion, boosting Jio's 5G potential and unlocking capital for Jio's further growth in telecom.

Open doors to new markets and technology, through global ambitions of Indian players: M&A can give companies immediate access to new markets and

help achieve ambitious expansion plans. Acquisitions also pave the way for organisations to receive and embrace advanced technologies and innovation that can transform their processes and products.

**Plug portfolio gaps, creating a more holistic, competitive Indian brand** to reckon with globally: Strategic and bold overseas M&As have paved the way for Indian companies to enter new markets, and segments. For example, Tata's acquisition of Jaguar Land Rover has enhanced its global play and presence in the luxury car segment.

**Programmatic M&A**, which is when companies pursue multiple small or medium-size acquisitions to achieve specific growth, innovation and/or efficiency objectives, with distinctive execution across all stages of M&A — from strategy and sourcing to due diligence, deal and integration — plays a critical role in driving growth. It can complement organic growth and propel India towards its aspiration of going beyond a \$30 trillion economy by 2047.

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✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to [bletter@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bletter@thehindu.co.in) or by post to "Letters to the Editor", The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

#### Shift likely in RBI's focus

With reference to RBI's responsibility in ensuring India's continued growth, Malhotra (December 12), the new RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra appears to have a different approach to his predecessor towards monetary policy, given his stress on economic growth and absence of any reference to containing inflation. Growth of course is extremely important, but inflation must continue to be addressed and in focus. A balance needs to be struck between the measures to tackle inflation and policy formulations aimed at economic growth. Malhotra's statement that 'information, knowledge and expertise' is available

within RBI as well as outside is noteworthy and points to his likely approach towards policy formulation through consultation with all quarters of repositories of knowledge. His earlier active participation, contribution and experience in fiscal policy formulation at the Centre would definitely stand him in good stead while guiding the Monetary Policy Committee.

**Kosaraju Chandramouli**

Hyderabad

#### Collective farming

Apropos 'Transforming agriculture' (December 12), the collective farming model can by all means help marginal and small farmers use

modern techniques of production and reap good returns individually and collectively. The most important merit in collective farming is that the

aforded farmers will not fall an easy prey to unorganised money market players, who charge exorbitant rates of interest for their loans. Collective farming can be a game-changer in the agricultural sector. But farmers should understand the spirit of the model and come together to ameliorate their economic condition.

**S Ramakrishnaswamy**

Chennai

#### A sustainable approach

The collective farming approach for small farmers, with back-end

support of funding and guidance from social enterprises and NGOs, is a novel idea to ensure their sustainability. Additionally, imparting skills and innovation in the farm segment by nurturing the children of the small farmers to actively participate in developing innovative and resourceful products backed by digital technologies would improve the produce and yield scalability in the long run.

Also, there is a need for forming exclusive FPOs consisting of members from this marginal segment, for securing competitive prices for their produce, seed protection, better yield, etc.

**Sitaram Popuri**

Bengaluru

#### Provide social security

It refers to 'institutions trust that when freebies go overboard' (December 12). There is no doubt that Maya Samman Yojana in Jharkhand and Ladli Behna Yojana in Maharashtra have clinched the deal for the ruling alliances in these States, but all political parties to look beyond these welfare schemes and provide social security, skills and jobs so that women from underprivileged sections get to lead a dignified life and not merely depend on these freebies from State governments. All political parties will have to keep populism aside for the better economics.

**Raj Govind**

Noida