

Building on missions

What the Indian state should learn from the Mahakumbh

The Mahakumbh Mela, which began on Monday and will last 45 days, is a triumph of organisational ability and ingenuity. It will likely be the largest human gathering in history; over 400 million visits are expected to take place. Before 9:30 am on the first day of the festival, in fact, six million had already arrived and bathed at the confluence of the two sacred rivers in Allahabad. Those numbers will likely be eclipsed on Tuesday, the day of Makar Sankranti. Managing such a vast throng is an extraordinary challenge, but one that the Indian state somehow manages every time the Kumbh or Mahakumbh rolls around. Some see this as a cause for celebration, even optimism. If the state can conduct such globally significant events without mishap, surely an all-round improvement in governance is possible?

In fact, this view gets it entirely backward. The success of "mission mode" enterprises within government such as the Kumbh Mela is symptomatic of a broader malaise. State capacity in India has always been severely limited. Historically, this constraint has been overcome through broad expansions of ability and upskilling of state functionaries but through prioritisation and the creation of "missions". In the 1970s and 1980s, India had Project Tiger for wildlife preservation, and Operation Flood, which transformed India's dairy sector. Subsequently there was the oilseed mission; the Delhi Metro, which carved out its own administrative space; and multiple others. These successfully achieved limited aims. But they do not always create a broad spillover of expertise into other related domains of policy and governance. In fact, they often suck up the most skilled, experienced, and forward-thinking individuals from elsewhere in government. Their successes are more a reflection of the fact that political prioritisation allows them to shunt circuit political and regulatory obstacles and to create new, if temporary, institutions. The wrong lessons are taken from their success. People assume that this shows the capability of the Indian state rather than showing the need for removing such constraints overall. This is the same problem as is observed with special economic zones, or SEZs; rather than removing the regulatory requirements that hold back manufacturing and exports, SEZs create local or limited carve-outs to those requirements.

This should not, in any way, detract from the actual achievements of such missions, especially the Mahakumbh. Instead, the need is to identify the learning that has external validity. For example, if a mission has been successful because bureaucrats involved have been chosen for their expertise, how can this be replicated across government? If mission mode programmes manage to avoid the delays imposed by certain regulations, then should not those regulations be revised in general, to improve project execution across the board? If the links between the public and private sector are managed well in such mission mode programmes, can similar mechanisms not be implemented elsewhere? Instead, the success of missions is often personalised; they are seen as reflecting the abilities of specific administrators or bureaucrats, rather than demonstrating a functional problem with how the Indian state approaches problems. Politicians may be satisfied with a state that can effectively implement missions while being inadequate elsewhere because the importance of political choices and prioritisation is enhanced in such a reflection. But it is clearly suboptimal from the point of view of the average citizen. Celebrate the Mahakumbh Mela by all means. But also learn the correct lessons from its success.

One step back

Draft UGC regulations add to Centre-state tensions

The recent draft regulations issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) over the appointment of vice-chancellors (V-Cs) in universities have opened up another friction point in Centre-state relations. The new draft regulations, issued on January 7, purport to clarify ambiguities in the process of appointing V-Cs in regulations set out in 2018. Though the new draft regulations specify a definitive appointment procedure, they appear to be appropriate for the Centre's overseeing powers over state-funded universities. As such, the draft regulations are unlikely to resolve the tensions that already abound with several states and their governors over the appointment of V-Cs.

At the heart of the controversy is the governor, the Centre's representative in states, and the new qualifications for the V-C role. By convention, the governor is chancellor of state universities. The new rules vest in the governor dominant powers in V-C appointments. Under the 2018 regulations a search committee comprising "eminent persons" in higher education would shortlist three to five candidates either by public notification, a "talent search process", or a combination thereof. The chancellor (in this case the governor) appoints a candidate from among the recommended names. In state-funded universities, the search committee is constituted in accordance with the state laws concerned. The draft regulations sweep away these specific laws and specify the composition of the search committees. To start with, the search committee is to be constituted by the governor and will comprise a member nominated by the chancellor (governor), the UGC chairman, and a member of the apex body of the university (the executive council, or senate). Thus, this structure precludes the role of state governments in the appointment of V-Cs in state-funded universities and, in effect, make V-Cs agents of the Centre. Given the controversies in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and West Bengal — where the issue is before the Supreme Court — the regulation is likely to amplify the fierce opposition to central interference in a number of issues that states traditionally consider their preserve.

No less concerning is the provision that V-C appointments need not be limited to academics with certain qualifications (such as, say, minimum years of professorship). Individuals with industry, public policy and administration, or public-sector undertakings can qualify for the post. It is unclear what objective is served by widening this talent pool for V-Cs. Since a V-C's job is to act as the administrative and academic head of the university, a grounding in higher academics is usually considered essential in determining the quality of education, the direction of funding for university academic and research programmes, and the appointment of professors and lecturers. The overall purpose embedded in the long title of the draft regulation is to ensure "Measures for Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education". Though state governments have admittedly not always played a helpful role in improving the quality of education in their universities, it is hard to see how the new selection and appointment criteria will make a qualitative difference. Recent experience with central universities has shown that the Centre's proclivities have been to impose ideological/political templates on academic study and the type of personnel appointed. The old regulations were not perfect but the new ones add unnecessary controversy in already fraught Centre-state dynamics.

Can global markets keep rising?

Financial history favours investing outside the US

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Risk assets had a good run in 2024, with Bitcoin, gold and US equities in particular outperforming. The S&P 500 index in the US experienced its second consecutive year of returns exceeding 25 per cent. The last time US equities delivered two consecutive years of over 20 per cent returns was during the dot-com bubble in 1997-98. As has been the norm, emerging market (EM) assets lagged, with EM equities up only 8 per cent for the year, and European equities rising by 9.5 per cent. American exceptionalism was alive and well: Gold outperformed equities, as it has over the last 25 years, rising by 27.5 per cent, and Bitcoin was the star with a return of 120 per cent.

I am less positive than many on the US equity markets and American exceptionalism. I worry about elevated valuations, surging retail sentiment, and the risk of an inflationary resurgence. The risk of bond markets starting to rise is also top of my mind.

If you look at the CAPX (cyclically-adjusted price-to-earnings) ratio, the only time it has been higher was during the dot-com bubble of 1999-2000. On alternative valuation metrics of price-to-book or price-to-sales, we have already crossed the dot-com bubble levels. I find it difficult to believe that we have any further scope for multiple expansion left. As data on financial market returns over the last 25 years shows, starting point valuations matter greatly when forecasting long-term returns. Can you really make good long-term returns from US equities when your starting point is arguably the most expensive in history? Financial history would suggest this is a bad bet.

On inflation, we are still not at 2 per cent on the personal consumption expenditure (PCE) deflator, and there are signs that inflation is proving to be more sticky than originally thought. Jobs, interest rate-sensitive consumption and the US economy are proving to be more resilient than forecast. The US Federal Reserve itself seems to

have turned decidedly more cautious regarding further rate cuts and their timing. We have yet to see what Donald Trump actually delivers on the tariff front and immigration, but were he to follow through on his campaign pledges, it would not be impossible for the next Federal Reserve move to be a hike, rather than a cut in rates. This is in no one's forecasts for 2025. It would be a shock to the markets.

Bond markets seem shaky globally, with fiscal challenges facing developed markets becoming evident, alongside a lack of political will to address these issues. Can markets handle bond yields crossing 5 per cent, which no longer seems beyond the realm of possibility. From an equity perspective, I believe it makes sense to tilt portfolios towards EMs and Europe, taking a contrarian bet against the continuation of American exceptionalism. It has become the default assumption that America will outperform forever and that any other geography is a waste of time. The consensus and positioning are clear on this. Many active investors today have never experienced a period of US underperformance, as US equities have outpaced all other markets for 16 years straight. It has, however, not always been so — just consider relative regional performance in the lead-up to the global financial crisis (GFC). Given relative valuations, investor positioning and the current overvalued dollar, I see merit in being contrarian here. No asset class or region outperforms forever.

However, it always makes sense to consider the other side. What is the bullish thesis for the US? Where could we be wrong? Just going through some of the bullish notes on the US from various banks and commentators, the following arguments are clear. Many do not worry about valuations, as it is not a timing indicator. Markets can remain overvalued on conventional metrics for years. The reality is that if we go back to the dot-com bubble,

equity markets continued to rise for another two years after the CAPX ratio had reached current levels. This can happen again! During the dot-com bubble, markets delivered four consecutive years of 20 per cent-plus returns. The fact is that you could be right about this being a new bubble, but markets may still deliver a strong performance in 2025 regardless. US economic growth expectations are still only about 2.1 per cent, but the economy is performing very well, and there is a clear upward bias to these numbers. US growth continues to surprise positively, with the Fed cutting into a soft landing. A scenario of growth surging positively, with financial conditions accommodative and the Fed cutting rates has historically been very good for financial assets. Interest rate cuts into a soft landing have historically been very bullish for equities.

Many believe that the huge investments in artificial intelligence (AI) are not a waste or a bubble. The surge in capex will front-load corporate profits and supercharge productivity. The US is already experiencing labour productivity of over 2 per cent, much higher than any of its G7 peers. Higher trend productivity will lead to higher economic growth, better corporate profitability and lower inflation. The US is the world leader in AI, both in terms of technology and investments. Just four American companies — Alphabet, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft — are set to spend upwards of \$240 billion on AI-related capex in 2025. No one else is even close. On the related cost of economic performance, if AI is a platform-shifting technology like the internet, who knows or can predict the positive effects of all this investment?

It remains a mystery if the signs of a recession in the US, or even the economy slowing. Many recessionary leading indicators like the yield curve or Sahm rule have actually reversed in the last couple of months. Absent a recession or slowing economy, it is rare for equity markets to sell off significantly. The Fed is still looking to cut rates, not raise them, again not the typical setup for falling markets. There are absolutely no signs of a recession in the US equities from here to assume that we are repeating the dot-com bubble. Given where we are in terms of retail sentiment, the narrowness and tech-heavy nature of the market advance, and relative valuations, markets are in a zone of high vulnerability. The odds favour investing outside the US, no matter how hard that may be to get through investment committees. You may choose to play the greater fool theory, remain bullish and overweight the US, and assume that you can exit the markets before it all comes falling down, but most of us are not nimble enough to play this game. Buyer beware.

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A school for ease of doing business

Business is the engine of wealth creation and economic growth. The state has consistently strived to create an environment conducive to business. Since businesses thrive in an environment of freedom, reforms over the years have aimed at removing the shackles on freedom. Early initiatives reshaped the legislative framework to provide businesses with greater freedom to enter markets, compete, grow, and exit, facilitating a transition to a market economy.

However, a market economy presents its own challenges. To address them, the governance edifice has undergone two major transformations. First, there has been a substantial increase in the role of regulations as the primary tool for market governance. Second, regulators have emerged as key institutions, tasked with overseeing market operations through regulations. Regulations, through regulations, address market failures, prevent abuse of freedom, and protect the rights of market participants. They also provide a structured path for business transactions such as capital raising, mergers and acquisitions, and resolution of financial distress.

Rise of regulators: Since the transition to a market economy, regulators have proliferated across various domains. They operate primarily in four key areas: Professions (advocates, accountants, doctors), markets (securities, insurance, competition), utilities (electricity, telecom, petroleum), and standards (health, safety, environment). Some sectors have regulators at both the Central and state levels. Self-regulatory organisations and front-line regulators further enrich the regulatory landscape. As more sectors open to private participation, the number of regulators continues to grow, with new ones being proposed to address emerging challenges and seize new opportunities. Like the government, regulators serve the public interest, with responsibilities that include consumer protection, development, and regulation. They exercise quasi-legislative, executive, and quasi-judicial powers, mirroring the functions of the government. In essence, they operate as "governments within a government", overseeing governance on behalf of the state within a defined framework, yet with a distinct approach. Globally, the landscape of economic governance has evolved, with regulators increasingly taking a central role, often surpassing traditional government structures in influence and scope.

Growth of regulations: Some regulators have developed a reactionary tendency to introduce new regula-

tions whenever a market failure occurs — or even when the failure stems from the shortcomings of the state or existing regulations — without discerning whether it resulted from a firm's misdeeds or inadequate supervision. This reflexive approach has led to an accumulation of unnecessary regulations, and at times, poorly designed regulations. These, in turn, have created avenues for circumvention, necessitating even more regulations.

Over time, the regulatory landscape has grown increasingly complex. Secondary legislation, including rules and regulations issued by the executive, and tertiary legislation, such as circulars and notifications issued by the bureaucracy, have proliferated. The sheer volume of such subordinate legislation has outpaced primary legislation, with tertiary legislation often eclipsing both combined.

Unfortunately, many of these regulations and circulars impose restrictions or prohibitions, eroding the freedoms granted by primary laws. Consequently, compliance departments in many firms now outnumber operations departments in size. To counteract this, reforms now aim at easing these burdens. Evidence of such reforms is the market regulator's press release dated December 18, 2024, where the term "ease of doing business" appears 20 times, reflecting both the volume in the restatement imposed over time and the bureaucratic rigidity required to undo them.

Capacity constraints: Regulations often involve navigating "polycentric" issues in business, where multiple stakeholders interact in fluid situations. A minor change in one variable can trigger widespread ripple effects, creating a complex and unpredictable web of interdependent changes. With the increasing sophistication and globalisation of markets, regulations have become more complex and nuanced. Regulators are expected to proactively design and modify regulations in response to market dynamics, without unduly restricting business freedom, while also monitoring and enforcing these regulations.

Despite decades of regulatory experience, a significant gap persists in the availability of human resources equipped to ensure the efficient functioning of a market economy. While academic institutions have tailored traditional courses in law, economics, accounting, and management to address the demands of a market economy, a dedicated, comprehensive, and structured programme aimed at building regulatory capacity remains

elusive. Consequently, regulators and businesses rely on professionals trained in conventional disciplines, often requiring extensive adaptation. This not only hampers efficiency, but also limits the potential gains from reform.

Building capacity: Regulators need experts capable of balancing freedom with oversight, while businesses require professionals who can harness this freedom to drive growth while adhering to regulations. With the right talent in place, regulators, businesses, and professional firms could better appreciate each other's perspectives, fostering collaboration and significantly improving the ease of doing business. This calls for an institutional arrangement that cultivates a cadre of professionals adept in regulatory design and implementation to improve the ease of doing business.

India could lead an initiative to establish an International Institute of Regulatory Studies, positioning regulations as a multidisciplinary field that integrates law, economics, management, accounting, and behavioural sciences. Initially, it could offer short-term specialised training programmes for regulators, developing faculty and content for comprehensive courses. As the initiative gains momentum, it could introduce a one-year executive programme aimed at mid-career professionals, followed by a two-year postgraduate programme for fresh graduates aspiring to regulatory careers. Eventually, it could launch a PhD programme in regulatory studies.

Establishing the institute: The institute could be established as a public-private partnership. India, with its robust governance framework, could serve as the ideal location for the institute, providing a strategic and supportive environment. A rotating chairmanship, beginning with India's Prime Minister/finance minister, would reinforce global representation and inclusivity. Business leaders contributing to the institute's capital or corpus could hold positions on a rotating basis, fostering engagement and shared ownership among stakeholders. Initial contributions would support the institute through its establishment phase, enabling a transition to self-sustainability over time.

By addressing the critical gap in regulatory capacity, the institute would play a transformative role in shaping a more efficient, collaborative, and business-friendly global market economy. This would be another "Make in India" initiative, fostering world-class regulatory professionals equipped to excel in and serve global markets.

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Decoding the middle class



BOOK REVIEW

CHINTAN GIRISH MUDI

What makes a person identify themselves as a member of the middle class? Does this have to do with their occupation, annual income and purchasing power? Or is the sense of belonging based instead on a set of beliefs, values and behaviours that they hold on to?

Journalist Manisha Pandey's book *Middle Class India: Driving Change in the 21st Century* is an excellent companion to have by your side while exploring these questions. It is divided into three parts. Part I looks at the middle class in pre-

Independence India, focusing on the period from 1937 to 1947. Part II concerns itself with the time frame between when India freed itself from the clutches of British colonial rule in 1947 to economic liberalisation in 1991. Part III is about the post-liberalisation scenario, from 1991 until the present day.

The book is worth reading because, as Ms Pandey points out, the middle class makes up 31 per cent of India's population. By 2047, this segment is expected to hit the 60 per cent mark. That is a huge section of people, considering that the country's population is estimated to be over 1.4 billion currently. Ms Pandey writes, "One of the factors behind India's increasing influence globally has been its middle class, which has seen unprecedented growth since the economic liberalisation of 1991. Between 1995 and 2021, the middle class grew at a rate of 6.3 per cent per year."

While these numbers are impressive, Ms Pandey tempers the celebration with critical commentary. What seems like a

mundane subject becomes interesting thanks to the author's approach and treatment. She traces its transformation from professional guilds of artists and entrepreneurs to a network of local

people seeking employment as administrators with the British Raj, and she also studies how the middle class grew disillusioned with the British colonisers even as it sought to emulate British values. The same class that had once boycotted foreign goods and embraced swadeshi had become obsessed with consumption when the economy opened up.

This book pushes us to think about the role of the British education system in giving Indians "the confidence to demand what was rightfully theirs" and initiating social reforms like widow remarriage and prohibition of sati. The system, of course, was set up not to benefit Indians but to create what Thomas Babington Macaulay called "a class Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, opinions, morals and

intellect". It was meant to provide the colonial government with interpreters, clerks and copyists fluent in English. It also ended up producing lawyers, teachers, journalists and intellectuals who wrote fiery speeches, drafted petitions, led public demonstrations, sang *Vande Mataram*, and went to jail for protesting.

Ms Pandey persuades us well to stop thinking of the middle class as a static, ahistorical entity. There is ample evidence to back up her proposition. Indian history shows us that the middle class has risen to the occasion to fight for what it considered morally and ethically right "in the past. A striking example is its active participation in the anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare. However, the same class accepted the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi without much resistance and were

largely silent about violence against religious minorities under the ruling regime. Ms Pandey does not beat about the bush. She says quite explicitly that middle class loyalties tend to "lie with the state" because its members are driven mostly by job security and social prestige rather than justice and rights.

The author compels us to acknowledge that "the bulk of the Indian middle class is formed by upper-caste Hindus, who are extremely class-conscious". The financial ability to travel widely, study abroad, consume books and films, and learn about other cultures has not catalysed a major shift in its social and political attitudes. It has assigned a lower status in the caste hierarchy continue to experience discrimination in educational institutions, workplaces and neighbourhoods. While reading this

book, it is chilling to recall the response that the Mandal Commission Report drew from middle class students in 1990. They resorted to self-immolation to protest affirmative action. One of the biggest contradictions of the middle class, as Ms Pandey shows, is how it seeks upward mobility for itself but denies this to others.

The author serves aware that generalisations can only capture broad patterns, not give a nuanced picture. She looks briefly at the emergence of a Dalit middle class and a Muslim middle class, their economic and political aspirations, and their relationship with the state. The reviewer is a writer, journalist and educator. He can be reached at chintanwritingon Instagram and X

IMD at 150: Precision, progress & promise



RAJAN KELKAR
FORMER DIRECTOR
GENERAL, IMD

MANY government organisations are engaged in scientific research and several work directly for the welfare of the people. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) is unique in that it is mandated to do both. Another exclusive feature that distinguishes the IMD from other organisations is that it is required to make accurate predictions of the future. The time scale ranges from the next few hours to days, months, years or decades and the space scale ranges from an airport or a village to a district, state, country, continent or ocean.

Established on January 15, 1875, the IMD has strived to harness the science of meteorology for the service of the nation through weather monitoring and science-based weather and climate prediction.

Its activities have helped enhance farm outputs, manage water resources, ensure aviation safety and mitigate disasters. The IMD touches the lives of individuals, influences policy and helps envisage the future world.

The IMD has, indeed, come a long way in its journey of 150 years. In the last decade, in particular, there has been a perceptible increase in the scope and precision of IMD's forecasts on all space and time scales. This is a visible outcome of the augmentation of IMD's techno-scientific base of advanced models supported by radars, satellites and supercomputers.

The loss of life associated with tropical cyclones has been reduced from several thousands to near zero. Droughts and floods that are recurrent features of the monsoon have now become fully manageable.

India's British rulers had a natural fascination for observations: astronomical, seismological, geomagnetic and, of course, meteorological. For nearly 80 years before IMD came into being, local governments, railways and port authorities were setting up observatories for recording the weather.

There were also numerous individuals who pursued astronomy and meteorology as a serious hobby. These included civilian and army officers, doctors, professors, geographers, sailors, surveyors and missionaries, who meticulously maintained meteorological records.

In an exception, one of the earliest observatories in India was established at Thivandrum not by the British but by the Maharaja of Travancore. India, is there, fortunate to possess meteorological records that



ILLUSTRIOUS SERVICE: The IMD was established on January 15, 1875. FILE PHOTO

span two centuries, constituting a valuable resource for climate change studies.

By 1875, India had 86 meteorological observatories and it was time to bring them together under the umbrella of a single agency. The Government of India decided to call it the India Meteorological Department, with a jurisdiction extending from Quetta to Rangoon and Leh to Colombo. It was to be headed by the Imperial Meteorological Reporter to the Government of India. The designation was later changed to Director General of Observatories and again to Director General of Meteorology, reflecting the changing responsibility that the post carried.

It goes to the IMD's credit that it never worked in colo-

The effect of climate change on the Indian monsoon is apparent more on the micro scale, like cloudbursts, intense precipitation, landslides, lightning strikes and urban flooding. The IMD needs to tackle these issues.

nial style. Indian scientists were recruited by the IMD as early as in 1885 and Indians were occupying most of the senior positions by 1920. Much before India got independence, the IMD had an Indian as its head. Many British meteorologists in the IMD made seminal contributions to our understanding of the monsoon and tropical cyclones and several Indian meteorologists in the IMD helped build new scientific institutions.

The Sanskrit words 'Aditya Jagate Vrihithi' incorporated in the IMD's logo are taken from India's age-old wisdom literature. They assure us that as long as the sun shines, we will have our monsoon rains. However, it is also true that while the monsoon comes

every year and has never failed to do so, it does not always give us its best.

Returning to the present times, it is of significance that the 2024 monsoon yielded an 8 per cent excess rainfall for the country as a whole, and it was very close to the IMD prediction. What is also important is the fact that since 2017, the monsoon rainfall has been normal, meaning that it has consistently remained within the margin of plus or minus 10 per cent of the long-term average. The year 2024 was the eighth year in this series of good or satisfactory monsoons.

In parallel, India's annual foodgrain production shot up from 275 mmt in 2017 to a record-breaking 330 mmt in 2023 and is expected to surpass this figure in 2024. From the viewpoint of the nation's food security, this rise is very substantial.

It is, of course, a result of sustained efforts in multiple areas, but it has once again highlighted the fact that the monsoon continues to hold a strong grip on Indian agriculture and, through it, on the overall economy.

It also needs to be noted with caution that long epochs of successive good monsoon years have been very few historically. It will, therefore, be worthwhile to attempt predictions of monsoon rainfall over longer time scales, like a decade or two, so that long-term policy decisions can be taken.

While the monsoon is under the constant shadow of

climate change and concerns are expressed about its future, it seems to have been doing well so far in the overall scenario.

The effect of climate change on the Indian monsoon is apparent more on the micro scale. Situations like cloudbursts, extremely intense precipitation, landslides, lightning strikes and urban flooding are occurring with increasing frequency, causing severe damage to crops and property and loss of life.

The IMD needs to tackle these issues through targeted warnings. In this context, its plans to give forecasts on the gram panchayat level are welcome.

The IMD was established in 1875 against the backdrop of the havoc caused by the severe tropical cyclone in the Bay of Bengal in 1864 and two famines in 1866 and 1871, with the expectation that advance information of storms and monsoon failures would become available. Over its 150 years' journey, this has largely been achieved.

However, with the current accelerated growth of the nation and its march towards a trillion-dollar economy, the demand for meteorological services has been coming from many new quarters, besides the IMD's traditional users.

The newly approved and highly ambitious Mission Mausam offers the IMD a great opportunity to re-equip itself and become future-ready.

With the largest museum, Raisina Hill to be a cultural beacon



RAJNISH WATTAS
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SOON, the burnt ashite of the British Raj, once ensconced in the North and South Blocks atop the magnificent Raisina Hill, will squirm in their graves as their crown-crested chairs will be replaced by iconic Indian antiquities, like the Dancing Harappan Girl and the Chola Nataraja, among myriad others.

The upcoming National Museum (replacing the existing one) of India, to be called Yuga Yugeen Bharat (meaning the timeless and eternal India) Museum (YYM), is set to come up at the North and South Blocks as part of the Central Vista Redevelopment Project in New Delhi. The museum, making adaptive reuse of the existing structures, spreading over 1.54 million sqm and having 950 rooms, will be the largest museum in the world. It will be bigger than the British Museum in London and the Grand Louvre in Paris, which covers around 70,000

square metres," says a government note. This mammoth opus would make India sit on the high table of culture in the world.

However, the humungous task of setting up of such an ambitious and gigantic museum is at once exciting and challenging. It's not a simple task of commissioning a new building designed to a programme. It's a project to retrofit two separate blocks that have been built in hybrid neoclassical styles and for use as offices by our colonial masters. Converting them into a world class state-of-the-art national museum is a daunting task.

The challenges are at multiple levels, both functional and aesthetic. They entail massive architectural modifications and refurbishing of interior spaces to function as museum galleries. They will call for the best Indologists, museum exhibitors, art scholars, interior designers and numerous other related art experts to curate the content, to tell the narrative in an engaging, imaginative and interactive mode.

What is a museum? It comes from the Greek word *mouseion*. It was used for ancient temples dedicated to the Muses, the patron goddesses of arts and sciences. The concept of the museum as a place for the people developed slowly. Enlighten-



NEW ADDRESS: Yuga Yugeen Bharat Museum will come up at the North and South Blocks. FILE PHOTO

ment ideals and values — critical scrutiny of all assumptions, open debate, scientific research, progress and tolerance — have marked the museum since its foundation," says Susan A Sernau, an art historian.

There are numerous examples across the world of existing spaces being converted into museums. The two most iconic museums — the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay of Paris — were originally a palace and a railway station, respectively. While the Louvre is famous for its star exhibit of Mona Lisa painting by Leonardo da Vinci, the Orsay is redolent with its biggest collection of Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro and other world famous Impressionist artists. The Tate Modern at London,

India's most ambitious museum project will both be a challenge and a historic moment to showcase 'the timeless and eternal India.'

standing along River Thames, was created by converting an old derelict power station into an imaginative museum by architects Herzog and de Meuron.

Before the 20th century, the preferred style for museums was neoclassical or Renaissance, celebrating grandeur and ceremonial language to convey its role as a temple of art. Museum design is a specialised field and some architects of the 20th century have created masterpieces of modern architecture. Museums, like the Guggenheim in New York designed by iconic architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the one at Bilbao by Frank Gehry, are works of sculptural art by themselves.

For the YYM project, let's examine the advantages first. The location is near perfect.

For what can be a symbolically more powerful message than that India holds its cultural and civilisational richness at the highest level, above the axis of state power, at Kartavya Path? The seat of Imperial hubris will now be a temple of art, culture, democracy and diversity. Anyone passing by Vijay Chowk will view the YYM looming large, like a latter day Acropolis, as an embodiment of antique, beautiful and civilisational jewels of India.

It will be the biggest gesture of decolonisation and dismantling of the erstwhile ensemble of brute Imperial power by the soft power of a nation aspiring to be Vishv-nations to a world torn asunder by wars, conflicts and confrontations.

It will also equip the high-society, no-entry zone of the North and South Blocks with a magnificent place between the two, which will be accessible to the public, enabling an upfront view of the magnificent Indo-Saracenic hybrid architecture of Edwin Landseer Lutyens and Herbert Baker. The present cold space of state power will become a people's plaza — alive with art, colour and vibrancy that museum precincts the world over generate.

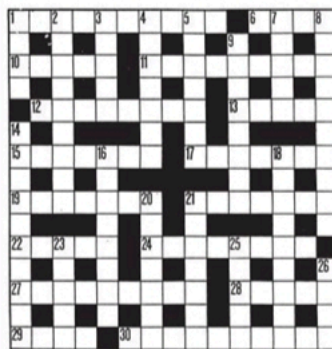
The imposing challenge of the project will be the retrofitting of the nearly 100-year-old buildings, ensuring struc-

tural safety for the country's jewels of antiquity and civilisational wealth for another 100 years. All building services will need to be upgraded to the state-of-the-art levels, without tampering with or damaging the heritage interiors. Many clusters of smaller office rooms and warrens of service areas will have to be merged to create larger gallery spaces to showcase the priceless exhibits.

The YYM agenda is ambitious. Union Minister of Culture and Minister of Tourism Gajendra Singh Shekhawat states that it will "transcend the traditional museum experience and embody the spirit of inclusivity. It will be a museum of the people, centring community narratives — a testament to India's legacy as the mother of democracy." In this context, the ministry recently organised an inter-ministerial stakeholder consultation and capacity-building workshop. India and France have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the development of the project as France is renowned for its expertise in such projects — exemplified by the Louvre, the Grand Palais, and the Hotel de la Marine.

Museums are integral to our cultural imagination and national identity. Let's not get this one wrong. May the timeless and eternal India shine.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Everywhere (4,3,3)
- 6 Look over intently (4)
- 10 Farewell (5)
- 11 Censure (9)
- 12 Become involved (4,4)
- 13 Literary or artistic style (5)
- 15 Readily reduced to powder (7)
- 17 Obsolete (7)
- 19 Spontaneous (7)
- 21 Word of same meaning (7)
- 22 Scent followed in hunting (5)
- 24 Actor (8)
- 27 Break continuity in (9)
- 28 Specified sequence (5)
- 29 Reversed mirror (4)
- 30 Go downhill (10)

Down's solution

- Across: 1 Dynamic, 5 Begins, 8 In-between, 9 Tip, 10 Tart, 12 Sustain, 14 Vulgar, 15 Stable, 17 Command, 18 Hunt, 21 Odd, 22 Like a shot, 24 Silly, 25 Resquey.
- Down: 1 Delft, 2 Nab, 3 Mute, 4 Create, 5 Banality, 6 Ges-a-bile, 7 Zephrone, 11 Role model, 13 Manually, 14 Vacuum, 16 Walker, 19 Drip, 20 Bang, 23 Huc.

DOWN

- 1 Practical joke (4)
- 2 Stringed-instrument musician (9)
- 3 Deep sky-blue (5)
- 4 Lay down the law (7)
- 5 Left out (7)
- 6 Menorial mound of bones (5)
- 8 Writer's assumed name (3,2,5)
- 9 Capital of Jamaica (8)
- 14 Perhaps even (2,8)
- 16 Break-in to commit robbery (8)
- 18 Symphonic poem by Sibelius (9)
- 20 Salad vegetable (7)
- 21 Encase (7)
- 23 Modify (5)
- 25 LieHe (5)
- 26 Faithful (4)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

- JANUARY 14, 2025, TUESDAY
- Shaka Samvat 1946
 - Posh Shaka 24
 - Magh Purnimite 1
 - Hijari 1440
 - Krishna Paksha Tithi 1, up to 3.22 am
 - Vishkumbha Yoga up to 2.58 am
 - Punar Nakshatra up to 10.17 am
 - Moon in Cancer sign
 - Kumbh Mahapurn

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	23	08
New Delhi	19	09
Amritsar	15	05
Bathinda	17	06
Jalandhar	15	05
Ludhiana	15	08
Bhiwani	16	08
Hisar	16	07
Sirsa	17	07
Dharamtala	20	05
Manali	13	-02
Shimla	16	03
Srinagar	11	-05
Jammu	20	07
Kargil	-01	-12
Leh	01	-12
Dehradun	—	—
Mussoorie	13	02

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Modi's J&K outreach

Restoration of statehood remains elusive

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi has gifted Jammu & Kashmir the Z-Morh tunnel, which will make the tourist resort of Sonamarg accessible throughout the year. Last week, the PM virtually inaugurated the Jammu railway division, and he is expected to flag off the Delhi-Srinagar Vande Bharat train on Republic Day. So far so good. The BJP-led Centre is going all out to boost J&K's economy and reduce 'Dilli se diiri', but what about its promise to restore statehood? It's been three months since the Assembly elections were held — after a decade-long gap — and the NC-Congress alliance formed the government. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah keeps raising the all-important demand — he did so in the PM's presence on Monday too — but he has refrained from exerting pressure on the Centre to set a timeline.

Modi has tried to reassure Omar and the people of J&K that "right things will happen at the right time". The PM has claimed that he always keeps his promises — and the CM has been quick to vouch for that, praising him effusively for keeping his word on holding the Assembly elections. Curiously, in his speech at a poll rally in Srinagar last year, the PM had asserted that the BJP would fulfil the commitment of restoring statehood; however, in his address after the tunnel inauguration, he took a circuitous route to talk about the matter. This should have perturbed Omar, but it apparently didn't.

The CM has made it obvious that he won't follow in the footsteps of his counterparts in Opposition-ruled states who are constantly at loggerheads with the Centre. Omar's recent attack on the INDIA bloc, of which the Congress is the most prominent member, was music to the BJP's ears. His own party's MP, Aaga Syed Mehdi, has stirred the pot by saying that the CM should not be seen by the people as 'Delhi's representative'. At stake here are the aspirations of local residents — and Omar's credibility.

Maha Kumbh 2025

A test of faith and logistics

THE Maha Kumbh Mela, a confluence of spirituality and culture, began in Prayagraj on Monday with the *Shahi Snan*, drawing millions to the sacred event. However, while the festival symbolises devotion and tradition, its history is marred by tragic incidents, such as the deadly stampede of the last Maha Kumbh in 2013 that claimed 30 lives. As against the 120 million devotees who visited the mela in 2013, this year, with over 450 million expected attendees, including 1.5 million foreign tourists, the event highlights both India's cultural vibrancy and logistical challenges. The Uttar Pradesh government has allocated Rs 7,000 crore to transform the 4,000-hectare site into a state-of-the-art temporary city, complete with 1,50,000 tents, AI-enabled surveillance and enhanced security. Yet, the spectre of past tragedies looms, reminding us that managing such massive crowds requires unwavering vigilance and innovation.

Improved planning, better coordination between agencies and the use of AI-driven monitoring systems offer hope for a safer Maha Kumbh. The stakes are high — beyond its spiritual significance, the event is projected to inject Rs 2 lakh crore into Uttar Pradesh's economy, providing a lifeline to tourism and local businesses. If all goes well, this edition could mark a turning point in India's global tourism reputation, attracting more visitors to its rich cultural tapestry. The festival also highlights India's soft power. Cultural events, international collaborations and sustainability initiatives further elevate its global appeal.

However, amid the grandeur, challenges persist. Overcrowding, strained resources and the potential for mishaps must be addressed proactively. The Maha Kumbh is a testament to India's ability to balance tradition with modernity. As the world watches, this spectacle can reaffirm India's ethos of faith, unity and resilience, provided every effort is made to ensure safety and dignity for all devotees congregating at the 45-day mela.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 1925

The presidency

WE have already announced that in view of representations made to the Governor that it was desirable to give members of the Punjab Legislative Council more time for discussing the nomination of candidates for the office of president, His Excellency has postponed the council meeting that was scheduled for today. The first meeting of the council will now be held on the 16th, and this matter will come up for consideration. We have expressed our gratification at the action taken by His Excellency because it is both right and wise in itself. If, however, this action is to produce good results, it is essential that both the government and the council should realise the seriousness of their responsibility in this matter. The government is not and cannot afford to be a neutral party in this case because it has a considerable number of votes at its disposal. These votes, under the strict letter of the law or more precisely the recommendations of the Joint Committee, could be given, except in the case of members of the government, to whomsoever the official and semi-official members chose to give them, but which, judging from past experience in analogous cases, will in all probability be cast in favour of the person whom the government itself will have decided to support. So far as these votes are concerned, and their number is large enough to turn the scale in any fairly close contest, the government has it in its power to use them to prevent the return of an impossible or otherwise undesirable president and to facilitate the return of someone who has the capacity to conduct the deliberations of the council with knowledge, fairness and impartiality.

Keep Taliban close, Afghan people closer

There has to be a plan other than feeling good about having scored one over Pakistan



SOUTH SIDE
NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

THREE-AND-A-HALF years after their takeover of Afghanistan, the Taliban are no longer the only militant group to have wrested control of an entire country from its legitimate government. The Syrian Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is the second fundamentalist Sunni group, also a designated terrorist group, to take over a country. Somalia's al-Shabaab has been beaten back with Ethiopia's help, else there might have been three of them, but it's still not ruled out.

The difference between Afghanistan and Syria is that the Taliban is lining up already at the door of the HTS leader and de facto head Ahmed al-Sharaa. The French and German foreign ministers were first up. Known better by his nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Julani, he has quickly shed his combat gear for tailored suits, and has talked down the extremism among followers with HTS, and his own al-Qaeda past, allaying fears — at least for now — of a second Afghanistan, a theocratic state, though the last word on this is yet to be spoken. America willing, HTS may soon lose its terrorist tag. The US has already removed its \$10-million bounty for him.

On the other hand, even by the duplicitous standards and shifting goalposts of geopolitics, no government has been able to find a good enough justification to put lipstick on the Taliban's gender apartheid. So, while many countries have diplomatic engagement with the regime, and some have full-fledged diplomatic representation, the Taliban might yet be beaten by HTS to formal recognition. In the end, it boils down to what the international community, and individual countries,



HIGH-LEVEL CONTACT: India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri (left) held talks with Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai last week.

decide to believe. At this point, India believes that the Taliban hold the keys to its security concerns on its north-western borders. That is why Delhi, which was silent on the Israeli strikes in Gaza that have now killed nearly 45,000 Palestinians, flattened homes, hospitals and schools alike, has found its tongue to condemn Pakistan's December airstrikes inside Afghanistan, apparently aimed at militants of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), but killed 45 civilians instead.

No doubt Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions helped the juices flow and set the stage for a "constructive" meeting two weeks later in Dubai between Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, the highest level of contact that India has offered the Taliban so far.

But let's also keep our memories long. For all their apparent defiance of Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban retain many links to their first patron, Muttaqi, who grew up and obtained his Islamic education in Pakistan, and was part of the Balochistan-based Quetta Shura of the Taliban, continues to be personally invested in that country in several ways. So too other members of the de facto government.

Delhi's channels to the Haqqani network, which is

In the graveyard of empires, everyone is playing their own game, including the Taliban.

blamed for the 2008 bombing of the Afghan embassy, may be out of a spy thriller, and inevitable, given Sirajuddin Haqqani's status as Afghanistan's interior minister. But the arrivals at the new international airport in Khost in Haqqani land are... who exactly? The Taliban's supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, based in Kandahar, is in touch with the who's who of Pakistan. And despite the hostility, Pakistan's links with sections of the TTP go back a long way.

So why did Pakistan take the extreme step of bombing Afghanistan's border badlands? Those who have observed the Pakistan military for years believe that the Army chief, Gen Asim Munir, is desperate to rekindle US interest in the Af-Pak region, the Pakistan military's cash cow for four decades until it dried up in

the summer of 2021. ISI chief Muhammad Asim Malik's very public visit to Tajikistan, where the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance is based, and his meeting with President Eмомali Rahmon may have been another smoke-and-mirrors move that seems to have riled the Indian media more than anyone in Afghanistan. The Muttaqi-Misri photo op has similarly hit the intended audience. In the graveyard of empires, everyone is playing their own game, including the Taliban.

Engaging with the Taliban for the sake of India's security is an imperative that cannot be trifled with. The question thus is not if India should be talking to the Taliban, but if it should be repeating the mistake it made in Bangladesh (and Myanmar) in Afghanistan? Or as Raghav Shama, associate professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs, asks, does India have a blueprint for its engagement with the Taliban, and what the deliverables are? Simply put, there has to be a plan other than feeling good about having scored one over Pakistan.

Delhi's dealings with the Taliban to the exclusion of what has been India's invaluable strategic asset Afghanistan — the people of that country — bring back the smell of all eggs in one basket. China's robust presence in

Afghanistan is ostensibly the other reason why India wants to be in Kabul. But it's the Chinese now offering scholarships to Afghan students, while India's pusillanimity on this front has prevented it even from inviting back those whose studies here were interrupted, after abruptly cancelling thousands of visas ostensibly on security considerations in 2021.

India may quietly take up its unfinished projects such as the Shatoh Dam for supply of drinking water to Kabul, which the Taliban have been asking Delhi to do for at least three years. Last year, the government sent engineers to run a check on the Indian-built Salma Dam in Herat. India does not have China's deep pockets, but it has — or had — the goodwill of the Afghan people, and it is with them that it should be rebuilding bridges.

Every country in the West has made space for its friends and allies in Afghanistan, even while engaging with the Taliban at an arm's length. India used to have some 40,000 resident Afghans at one point, most of them students. Not one was a security threat. Now, they are down to a few thousand here. Some went back to their uncertain destinies in Afghanistan, while others got third-country visas, puzzled and disappointed by India's rejection.

Losing the Afghan people to Pakistan, China, Turkey, Iran or countries in Europe should be a far bigger concern for India than the ISI chief's visit to Tajikistan.

India, which reopened its mission in Kabul in 2022 with a 'technical team', should accept the Taliban's appointments to its diplomatic missions in Delhi, as it has already done in Mumbai, but it should also reopen its doors to Afghans. Citing security fears for not processing Afghan visas is as good as saying that Indian security agencies are incompetent. The Taliban want India to start issuing visas. Delhi could start by inviting Afghan women to return to their studies here, gently hinting to the Taliban to learn from HTS. Indians imagine their country as part of the "great game", but great games are not for timid players.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I would never call a neighbour an enemy. But I would request the neighbour to be a good neighbour. —Hamid Karzai

Two contrasting state funerals

RAJAN KASHYAP

IN recent weeks, we witnessed live telecast of the state funerals of two uncommon world leaders, Dr Manmohan Singh and Jimmy Carter. Both statesmen were equally renowned for their humility, integrity and simplicity. Dr Singh served for 10 years as the Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy, while Carter held for four years what is arguably the world's most powerful elected position — President of the United States of America. When they departed at the ripe age of 92 and 100, respectively, they were extolled for successfully guiding their nations with wisdom, humanitarianism and decency.

Astonishingly, their funerals were a study in stark contrast. The former PM's passing was marked by an acrimonious debate between leaders of the ruling party and the Opposition. Manmohan Singh was an epitome of sobriety and grace. The opposing political parties squabbled over the very venue for the last rites, Nagambh Ghat, considered too crowded for the vast number of distinguished admirers of the great Sikh. It was startling to observe that there was inadequate seating space even for the wife and daughters of the departed leader.

The TV cameras focussed on the leading lights of the ruling dispensation rather than on the members of the grieving family. For the prime occasion, the electronic media had been unable to garner eulogies from Dr Singh's prominent friends and colleagues. It was a day later that one saw vignettes showcasing his remarkable achievements, and especially the personal touch that was sadly missing at the ceremony.

Beamed worldwide, Carter's funeral in Washington, DC, was a professionally presented international event. The gathering included former Presidents and their wives, besides the incumbent and the President-elect. As per tradition, almost every gentleman wore a black tie, the exception being Donald Trump, who chose to sport a blue necktie, the colour of his Republican Party. The eulogies were short, crisp and emotive. The grandsons of the late ex-President occupied a pride of place. They fondly remembered him by narrating personal anecdotes.

The most sparkling tribute was by Steve Ford, son of Gerald Ford, an adversary who had lost to Carter in the 1976 election. Steve read out a eulogy that his father (who died in 2006) had composed; it was meant to be read out if Carter were to outlive Ford — and he eventually did. The two archrivals had become so close that they had composed a eulogy for each other. As the tributes were read out one after another, I could not make out the political affiliation of any of the speakers. All were together in celebrating the life of their ex-President.

The accolades at the US event recreated for the viewers a living image of a great human being. Our media and leaders have missed a great opportunity. Wish we in India would learn from the American example.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Provide adequate compensation

Refer to 'Workers in peril': workers play a major role in building roads, flyovers, bridges, dams and tunnels. In recent years, the infrastructure sector has been a key driver of the Indian economy, and workers are the real heroes of this success story. The long operation to rescue labourers trapped in an Uttarakhand tunnel, two deaths at an under-construction building in Chhattisgarh and the mishap at a railway station in UP attest to the need for implementing the Building and Other Construction Workers' Act, 1966, in letter and spirit. In case of death and serious injuries, victims' families must get adequate compensation.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

Punish defaulters

Apropos of 'Workers in peril': news reports about the collapse of buildings, bridges and flyovers and accidents in tunnels and mines where workers get trapped are becoming an everyday affair. Such mishaps can be avoided if provisions of the Building and Other Construction Workers' Act, 1966, are complied with sincerely and the safety of workers is ensured. The building regulations and the quality of the construction material should be checked; no relaxation should be allowed to contractors. Construction workers' contribution to infrastructure development is immense and their safety cannot be ignored. The employers who are defaulters on this count must be severely punished.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Authorities must take action

Refer to 'Workers in peril': the editorial has rightly highlighted the situation of the workers who are made to engage in dangerous tasks. In the past also, there have been many reports wherein such daily-wage labourers were employed to clean septic tanks, falling under the purview of municipal bodies. These hapless workers are the breadwinners of their families and they risk their lives to earn a livelihood. The authorities concerned should take into consideration the workers' safety before employing them in such hazardous tasks. State governments should also take necessary steps so that such tragic incidents don't recur.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

Law must facilitate governance

Apropos of 'Disclosure curbs enfeebling RTI law': the main objective of the RTI Act was to ensure good governance and transparency, which were direly needed in our bureaucratic style of functioning. However, over time, the Act was misused by self-styled activists to the extent that honest government officials became defensive in their decision-making. Some activists file applications seeking trivial and even personal information, which can be misused. The Act needs to be balanced to avoid such situations. While the spirit of the law is good, it has to be viewed in a wider perspective. It has to be a means to facilitate governance and not hamper it.

TEJINDER SHARMA, KURUKSHETRA

Centre must assure farmers

With reference to 'To firm up joint course, farm unions to meet in Patiala today': the meeting is an important step towards breaking the deadlock between the Centre and farmers. The farm unions must prioritise their key demands and offer solutions to the government, especially regarding crops that can replace paddy. On the other hand, the Centre should introspect and come up with a written resolution to assure farmers that any crop that conforms to the standards shall get a minimum profitable return. This step is necessary to convince farmers to end their protests and leave the highways free for unhindered movement.

HARSIMRANVIR SINGH, PATIALA

Must protect art & culture

With reference to 'We don't care': India is a veritable treasure trove of artistic works, but it is a great pity that we don't care about them. People don't try to protect the works, unless these have something to do with religion. There are thousands of monuments across the nation in a state of neglect. Unless tourists come to visit a place, neither the authorities nor the people seem to bother. Our ancestors created marvellous works that have survived to this day. We must question ourselves when did we change and why.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI



A thought for today

There is science, logic, reason; there is thought
verified by experience. And then there is California

EDWARD ABBEY

Moh, Maya & Mewa

Pilgrimages are giant earners. India's multiple
pilgrimage sites offer states plenty of business

Twinned forces, liberalisation and religiosity, made the pilgrim's progress to religious tourism a short walk. Austerity and hardship on pilgrimages are hoary concepts, almost totally replaced by comfortable religious tourism – if you're okay with wintry dips at a Kumbh, risk a crush at a temple site, or are ready to brave a landslide or two in the Himalayas. An abundance of pilgrimage sites lie scattered countrywide, and it is the exuberant plurality of Hinduism that makes no single pilgrimage a must-do or rank above any other. Where you go is on you (in so many ways, actually). Will it be the charhams – Puri in the east, Rameshwaram (south), Dwarka (west) and Badrinath (north) – or the 12 jyotirlingas that'll take you to 8 states? Are holy-dips like Kumbh and Gangasagar your thing, or maybe one of the 80+ temple towns? It could be that one stop of all things ancestry & karma – Gaya or modernites might stick to Belur, Shirdi or Auroville. Goddesses call too – then it's Janmukhi or the Valishno Devi or Assam's Kamakhya or one of over 50 other sites. Upshot – bucket lists of pilgrimages may be as long as you want.

The 45-day Kumbh, defined by astrological timing (once in 12 years) and locations (4), began yesterday with over 1cr estimated to take the holy dip. Also a Makar Sankranti annual pilgrimage, Bengal's Gangasagar witnessed 65L rolling visitors by govt estimate. Administrations have always organised the gargantuan events like clockwork, largely glitch-free – a feat remarkable given the inefficiency baked into day-to-day governance India-wide. From infra to medical and communication centres, drinking water and sanitation, security to transport and parking, everything is geared to hosting and shepherding people – loudspeakers exhorting people along the riverbank to keep walking – crowds paced to flow like the river. Even airports turn indulgent, allowing small bottles of 'ganga' water, packaged by pilgrim-site business ecosystem. With a budget of about ₹6.9k or, Kumbh authorities are expecting a revenue of ₹25k cr from rentals, taxes and sale of worship essentials, flowers and prasad. Luxury hotels are expected to earn ₹6k cr.

Pact is, any pilgrim site attracts tens of thousands of devotees through the year, and up to lakhs on special days. And govt waits eagerly. One man's god is another's financial activity – nowhere does it ring truer than during India's massive religious spectacles. It is one reason why the attempt over the last decade-plus to convert a decentralised Hinduism into a more monolithic religion gets checked. As they say, moh the maya, better the bottom line.

Soak It Up

If we are going to use more and more groundwater,
we need to put more rainwater underground

India got abundant rain in 2024's monsoon, but saved less water underground. Latest data shows a slight slip from 2023, when groundwater recharge was estimated at 449bn tonnes, or 45 times the capacity of Bhakra Dam's reservoir Gobind Sagar. The drop amounts to just about 2bn tonnes and wouldn't matter if we weren't such a groundwater-dependent country. But our cities have spread horizontally by swallowing tanks, ponds and local streams, and now their vertical rise depends on the water underground. Rising agricultural yields also mirror the falling water table. In fact, 2023's reduced groundwater recharge largely resulted from increased groundwater extraction for agriculture in Punjab, Haryana and western UP. So there can be no letup in groundwater recharge, especially when the nature of rainfall has changed.

Old-timers remember the monsoon as a time of long, steady and frequent wet spells. Now, there are fewer wet days and more bouts of very heavy rain. Scientists blame global warming. They say warmer air holds more moisture for longer, so when it dumps it, the result is a deluge. New data from US govt's Climate Prediction Center shows 2024 had the highest recorded 'extreme' rainfall events although the year's overall rainfall was 27th lowest in the past 46 years.

Rainfall alone does not recharge groundwater but it takes care of about two-thirds of the replenishment. Govt data shows that India averages 3,880bn tonnes of precipitation – rain and snow – yearly, of which only 436bn tonnes, on average, is absorbed by the ground. So, increasing rainwater harvesting should be a national priority. Dams are costly, ecologically destructive and controversial. Distributing the water they hold through canals and pipelines is also expensive. Letting water soak into the soil, the way nature intended, is wiser.

PIN me down

Once it was ghosts that scared, today it's passwords

Bikram Vohra



When I was a kid I was scared of dragons and someone called the bogeyman. Then it was ghosts. After which scorpions and snakes. These pale into insignificance against my current phobia which is passwords, OTPs and PINs. I truly live in dread of them. I quake.

The other day I am told how important I am to this company and all agents are busy handling other customers so please hold. I finally get this guy (or bot, never sure which) who tells me that for my security they need verification that I am me. What is your mother's birth date? Mum would now have been 102, what would you have done, sent her a cake?

Then I am asked to put in my mobile phone pin code and this is where the panic sets in. If it is not the PIN then it is the last four digits of your Aadhaar card. So now the hunt begins for the card and obviously you press the wrong key and now that profile has been replaced by an ad where desperate hammerings on the x in a corner reset your efforts.

If this torture was not enough try the bank that asked me to confirm my last three transactions. Perfectly valid question assuming humans traipse through their day keeping in their mind their ATM transactions for just such an occasion.

For the sake of sacred security, they ask us to create passwords that come off like Einstein's equations. What's wrong with buzz2? Too easy to crack. Who on earth is going to crack my limp, pallid account? But I must be secure. With an asterisk, a capital letter, a symbol, lowercase and a number my current password reads something like B%k22zarn2024.

Off and on you are also faced with a set of pictures and have to recognise the frames with cars or bridges and it is a tense battle of nerves. The biggest orgy of course is the disembodied voice that tells you your menu has changed so please listen to the options carefully. Why are they constantly changing their menu? Can't they get their act together? Press 1 for... press 2 for... and so on till press 9, none of which indicate what hoops you need to jump through to get to one of those live agents who are helping other customers.

Finally, after you have had a bath, shaved, changed your clothes and had a nap the human voice connects and then says, please hold. Hold hold, my horses, my sanity, my patience? Sorry, you have been timed out.

Olympics 2028: LA's Now Disqualified

The world shouldn't risk watching a Games sequel to today's real-life disaster movie. California has been building up a tinderbox for decades and wildfires are now a year-round phenomenon there

Albert S Fu



Columnist based in Pennsylvania

The Palisades wildfires have taken out a big chunk of Malibu. A decade after the 1984 LA Olympics, scholar and activist Mike Davis has famously argued *The Case for Letting Malibu Burn*. He wrote that periodic firestorms of magnitude are inevitable as long as residential development is tolerated in the fire ecology of the Santa Monica. With the hills of Los Angeles once again burning, and dramatic images of destruction, firefighters, and evacuees evoking distress across the world, we should remember that all of this is sadly predictable. When Davis noted a long history of fires in the region, it was to question the long-term sustainability of Los Angeles and its suburban sprawl. The question is salient again, and another LA Olympics is around the corner.

Prone as it is to disaster, Los Angeles is much better known for sunshine, beaches, and Hollywood glamour. Indeed, its glitz was part of the city's pitch for the 2028 Summer Olympics. Historically, California's fire season starts in late summer, with some of the worst fires occurring in autumn. But now we see wildfires being a year-round phenomenon. July is no safe haven. There is no chance that we will see a conflagration during the Games too. Therefore, we must ask if the world is ready for an Olympic sequel to today's real-life disaster movie.

In addition to wildfires, there is also the risk of earthquakes. Then there are human-generated disasters. For generations, local morning news has issued warnings of beach closures due to water contamination, smog alerts regarding air quality, and drought-related water conservation emergencies. Cities like Los Angeles have a precarious relationship with their environment, creating an enormous feedback loop threatening human and natural ecosystems.

In the case of fire, climate change is a major driver. A hotter and drier landscape becomes a tinderbox when the Santa Ana winds ignite or fan the flames we will see encouraged even though awareness of wildfire dangers has increased. In the early 2000s, companies building homes claimed shelter-in-place and defensible space strategies would save communities from catastrophe. This includes designing eaves, gutters, and vents to prevent ignition as embers are blown toward houses.

Homeowners associations managing these communities began to hire private contractors for brush clearance and other fire protection measures. In a way, there was a recognition that people were moving toward wildfire and the other way around. This facade of safety would help California maintain its mythic Eden-like image.

Davis called this a perverse fact: "After every major California blaze, homeowners and their representatives take shelter in the belief that if wildfire can't be prevented, nonetheless, its destructiveness can be tamed."

Another aspect of Los Angeles' unsustainable lifestyle is the city's energy consumption. Sure, California has made significant progress in reducing its reliance on

more of in the future. However, urban planning and cuts to public services are equally important.

Much of the current devastation is a byproduct of sprawl into the wildland-urban interface, where homes directly border fire-prone landscapes. While California has recently pushed back against zoning for single-family detached homes, it cannot simply replace 70 years of such structures being built. Additionally, the state struggles to address the problem of these communities drawing on imported water sources to sustain not only their thirst, but also a lush landscape of non-native plants.

Overall, the same kind of development continues to be

sources that emit a great deal of greenhouse gases. Currently more than half of electricity generation is from nuclear and renewable sources. But regardless of source, the thirst for power requires a network of cables transmitting electricity within and from outside the state. This equals a risky landscape, as strong winds can down power lines. Some of the worst wildfires in recent history have been sparked by electrical equipment or power lines failing.

Related to energy consumption, the LA sprawl of stucco homes with red-tile roofs lacks a robust public transportation network, relying on fossil fuel-powered vehicles, exacerbating the effects of climate change and extreme fire weather.

For generations, California has prioritised the automobile over public mass transit. The 1980s new wave band Missing Persons wrote the song *Walking in LA*, which went "you won't see a cop walkin' on the beat... a kid walkin' home from school... nobody walks in LA." Instead, a vast network of congested freeways stretches miles inland. These roads became jammed with traffic as wildfires issued evacuation orders. In a stunning video, firefighters use a bulldozer to move abandoned cars blocking their way to reach threatened communities.

Even without a disaster, LA mayor Karen Bass has noted the logistical challenges of providing public transit for athletes and spectators during the Olympics. The city is deploying strategies such as electric buses alongside new solar projects to achieve a net-zero emissions event. In case of a disaster, we need to ask if the city and organisers can provide transportation for participants and locals. There are also significant challenges for outdoor events if smoke affects air quality.

Lastly, Los Angeles is not alone. The Mediterranean or hot-dry summer climate, which includes Australia, Chile, Europe, South Africa, and Turkey, has long had problems with wildfires. They are all experiencing climate change and increased fire severity. Los Angeles and much of the world stand at a crossroads. Enriching a more sustainable and resilient future will require a fundamental shift in how cities are planned, built, and lived in.

The writer teaches environmental and urban sociology at Rutgers University

India & NRIs Need An Insider Job In Trump's America

Taking a leaf out of Jewish playbook, Indian-Americans must deploy their community strengths to protect their interests, as well as New Delhi's, against rising anti-immigrant sentiment

Ashwin Sanghi



Columnist based in India

If you are on social media, you couldn't have missed the heated arguments over the H-1B visa programme. Many top global firms in tech, engineering, and healthcare in US are of Indian origin. US holds a lottery each year to permit 85,000 professionals to be employed by American corporations.

The H-1B programme has been a key factor in US global competitiveness. Some of the top US companies are led by immigrants. But it's equally true that some companies have exploited the system to recruit cheaper foreign labour, thus depriving qualified Americans and driving down wages.

Now, contrast the annual H-1B number with the over 3.5mn people who cross over into America illegally every year. Unsurprisingly, immigration was a key issue during US elections. But most Indian-Americans imagined the angst was with illegal immigration – not the legal kind. What they didn't realise is that politics is often driven by emotion.

The important thing is that Indian-Americans comprise just 1.35% of the US population but contribute disproportionately. Their median annual household income is \$153,000, double the American average, and they account for 56% of income tax revenues. They have co-founded 72 of 648 US unicorns, they lead 16 Fortune 500 companies, and own 60% of America's hotels. Collectively, they generate 11-12mn American jobs. Could it be that the very prosperity of this group is fuelling racism in a tough economy? Sure. Success often breeds contempt.

The Carnegie Endowment's report on Indian-American Attitudes shows that 55% of this demographic identified as Democrats in 2020 but only 47% do so now. That's a significant swing towards the Republican camp. Many of them must be wondering about the wisdom of the political choice they made. They shouldn't. The reality is that neither Democrats nor Republicans are for – or against – them.

Around 51% of Indian-Americans are Hindu. This subgroup has always been more comfortable with Democrats. For this group to swing Republican shows just how badly the Democrats messed up. Recall the badgering of India and Hindus by Democrats such as Ihan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Pramila Jayapal. The needling of India through USCIRF reports; the SWAT raids on BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in New Jersey; attempts to pass resolution SB403 for perceived caste discrimination in US; the propping up of Khalistan territory; a regime change operation in Bangladesh at the cost of Hindu lives – the list is long.

Contrast that with Trump who unequivocally

condemned "the barbaric violence against Hindus" in Bangladesh. His statement accused the Biden-Harris team of having "ignored Hindus across the world and in America". He further said he would "strengthen our great partnership with India and my good friend, PM Modi." His earlier participation in the Howdy Modi event in Houston and the Namaste Trump event in Ahmedabad may have been for strategic reasons but it was also enthusiastic. Further, Trump's headline stance on Islamism resonated with many Hindus.

But could all of that come undone with the H-1B fracas? Probably not. This is a learning moment for Indian-Americans. They should take a page out of the Mahabharat. In that epic, Shalya plays a fascinating role. Initially aligned with the Pandavas, he is tricked by

Duryodhan into joining the Kauravas. Acting on Krishna's advice, Shalya becomes Karn's charioteer during the war. However, he subtly questions Karn's strategies, exaggerates Arjun's superiority, and sows seeds of doubt at crucial moments. In modern geopolitics, Shalya might well be seen as a lobbyist, an influential force working quietly behind the scenes to shape outcomes.

A striking example of a contemporary "Shalya" is the pro-Israel lobby. US hosts a pro-Israel lobby organisation, despite the Jewish population accounting for only 2.2% of the population. Consider this: half of America's 800 billionaires are Jewish. Is it any wonder that US unilaterally relocated its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem? Or that military aid to Israel reached a whopping \$18.3bn last year?

Having Indian-Americans in the limelight – Vivek Ramaswamy, Kash Patel, Usha Vance, Sundar Pichai, or Sriram Krishnan – does not ensure their interests are protected. In America, as elsewhere, it's usually about money.

Given the provisions of Federal Election Campaign Act, it is illegal for foreign nationals, govts, or corporations to directly or indirectly contribute money to US political campaigns, or parties. But the Jewish community in US is able to protect Israel and Jewish interests irrespective of the administration at the helm. That's what Indian-Americans need to learn from.

In the Ramayan, it was the maid Manthara who altered the political landscape of Mithila. It was Vibhisana's insights that influenced the outcome of Ram's war with Ravana. It was Hanuman's intervention that prompted Sugriva to field his army behind Ram. What was common to all these characters? They were insiders. Insiders wield unparalleled power to shape decisions, whether through persuasion or strategic support. By leveraging their economic strength, intellectual capital, and cultural heritage, Indian-Americans must play a vital role in protecting their own interests as well as those of Bharat.

The writer is an author of several works of fiction

Calvin & Hobbes



Calvin & Hobbes

CALVIN: WOULD YOU SET THE TABLE FOR ME, PLEASE?

HOBBS: I DON'T THINK SO, I'M NOT ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT SETTING THE TABLE.

CALVIN: I DON'T THINK YOU SHOULD HAVE TO DO SOMETHING UNLESS YOU'RE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT IT.

HOBBS: I DON'T THINK YOU SHOULD HAVE TO DO SOMETHING UNLESS YOU'RE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT IT.

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C



Reviving RTI a democratic imperative

The Supreme Court has done well to act on a petition to revive the idea of Right to Information (RTI) which is almost dead in the country. It has criticised the delay on the part of the Central and state governments in appointing Information Commissioners and asked what was the use of creating the institution if there were no people to run it. The court noted that the Central Information Commission (CIC) has eight vacancies for the posts of Information Commissioners. There are about 23,000 appeals seeking information from government departments. Information Commissions are defunct in some states and some have stopped accepting petitions under the RTI Act. The court has directed the government to file an affidavit within two weeks specifying timelines for completion of the selection process and for the selection committee to finalise its recommendations. It also wants the appointments at the Central Information Commission to be made.

The RTI Act is set to complete 20 years this year. It was enacted by the Manmohan Singh government to ensure transparency in governance by making available on demand information about the actions and decisions of governments and local administrations. This was a measure to empower the citizens. But the Act has now lost much of its potency because governments have steadily undermined it and choked the institution to near death. Vacancies in the commissions are not filled, responses to queries are not sent in time and sometimes not sent at all. The penalty for not sending the replies in time is not enforced. In many places, those who seek information under the Act are attacked and harmed. There have even been murders of RTI activists. There is a nexus between politicians, officials and other vested interests to keep information inaccessible. Governments have facilitated such cover-ups and secrecy. The intent behind the RTI law is defeated in many ways.

Attempts to reduce the scope of the RTI law and to impose restrictions on its working started soon after the law came into force. It was only when it started getting implemented that governments realised what a potent tool it was in the hands of citizens. The terms of service of the Central Information Commission were changed and the post was stripped of its autonomy. From the very beginning, demands were made to appoint commissioners from all walks of life. The Supreme Court also highlighted this a few years ago but the governments always appointed retired bureaucrats to the job. The court should ensure that the governments do not jolly-dally on its orders and get away with their violations. Openness of governance is basic to democracy which becomes meaningful only when the citizen's right to know is legally protected and enforced.

Governments have continued to undermine the idea, almost rendering the Act toothless

What the wildfires portend

The wildfires raging in California's Los Angeles serve, again, as reminders of the dangers posed by climate change to lives and the way they are lived on earth. The areas destroyed by the fires include some of the richest and glitziest in the world. They have been reduced to rubble and ashes in a matter of hours or days. Thousands of acres have gone up in flames and some of the richest persons and celebrities have been forced to abandon their mansions. Many lives have been lost and plants and trees have been destroyed. Fire forces of the world's top nation have been unable to bring the conflagration under control. This is not the first time that wildfires have damaged California. It has been prone to these fires because of its climate, geography and other features. Other places on earth with different features, meanwhile, remain vulnerable to other forms of climate disaster — these incidents are growing in scale and intensity.

The fires are extreme climate events like cyclones, typhoons, floods, droughts and other natural disasters that have hit the world more frequently in recent years, causing loss of lives and displacement of people. Sea levels have risen, icebergs and glaciers have melted, and seasons and known natural phenomena to which all living things are used are changing. The world has gone beyond the 1.5°C limit set for temperature rise by the Paris climate meet. There is wide agreement that this is because of the warming of the earth, caused by the increased burning of fossil fuels and emission of greenhouse gases. This increase has accelerated over the years, in spite of attempts to control it.

America is witnessing an extreme climate event when an extreme end of climate change, Donald Trump, is set to take office as President. He has maintained that the idea of climate change is a Chinese conspiracy against America. He is likely to undo whatever meagre measures have been taken in America to reduce the emissions. It has been estimated that Trump's actions and non-actions can add four billion tonnes of carbon emissions to the atmosphere by 2030. But beyond Trump, the world is guilty of failing to do the minimum needed to slow down the warming and the climate change. A climate scientist has said that he shifted, two years ago, from Pasadena in Los Angeles — which has been ravaged by fire — to a safer location because he knew it was coming. However, the intensity and frequency of these extreme events show that soon, we could be running out of our safe-location options.

Fires hit California as concerns mount over frequency, impact of extreme events

India's gig jobs: Potential awaits a plan

A disruptive economy is altering the job landscape but what about employee security?

K C SMITHA AND ANIL KUMAR VADDIRAJU

It is argued that digital technology constitutes the fourth industrial revolution. The gig and platform economy is at the heart of this structural transformation, disrupting a range of sectors such as ride-hailing transport services, professional, education, home services, and retail. Globally, there are 200 million gig workers. The ILO (2022) reports that 8% of web-based and location-based platforms are concentrated in India, second only to the US with a 29% share. By 2020, an estimated 8 million gig economy jobs were present in India which could increase to 90 million in the long-term. Over the past decade, there have been substantial changes in the workplace as technology has become increasingly incorporated into various job types. These new technological interventions are incorporated into work as disruptions to the way the old economy operated. Uber, Ola, Zomato, and Swiggy represent this new gig economy, where tech corporates float platforms that are 'lean' without significant asset ownership — no cars, no restaurants — and where there are no workers, only a world of self-employed, independent contractors who use these platforms to engage with consumers.

Gig workers can be broadly classified into platform and non-platform-based workers. Platform workers are individuals whose work is based on online software apps or digital platforms while non-platform gig workers are generally casual wage workers and own-account workers in the conventional sectors, working part-time or full-time. According to the NTTF Aayog report (2022) and IBEF (2022), the gig workforce in India is 7.7 million and is expected to expand to 23.35 crore (23.5 million) by 2029-30.

The gig economy encompasses freelancers, online platform workers, delivery partners, self-employed, on-call workers, and other temporary contractual workers. These new business models and working arrangements have been ushered in by the development of technology and the ensuing digitalisation in metropolitan cities. Economic liberalisation and the dig-

ital revolution, the rise of mobile and internet, and the expansion of retail e-commerce have enabled India's gig economy.

All digital/app-based jobs share the existential issues of precarity, instability, unemployment, and informal employment circumstances within the 'formal' sector organisations. Due to contractual obligations, there are no workplace entitlements. Social inclusion in the platform economy is hampered by structural issues, particularly for women. There has not been a shift in the manufacturing sector to the service sector in Indian cities, which would have increased work opportunities for the young people. To put it



another way, gig economy employees typically lack social security in the form of EPF or pension, exposure to expertise, and little to no negotiating power. This has an impact on their pay and their working conditions. There has been a sizeable difference in the compensation before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, those who were working before the outbreak were earning between Rs 12,000 and Rs 15,000 per week but their earnings after the outbreak are only between Rs 5,000 and Rs 7,000.

The policy shift
Following the pandemic, it is reported that incentives were significantly reduced, which had an impact on the average monthly income. These new developments in Indian cities have led to a growing 'informalisation' in terms of lack of jobs, and the lack of income security further increases the vulnerability. A mismatch of skills between informal workers and the demand for jobs in Indian cities is rampant. To aid workers, the government recently passed the Code on Social Security 2020, providing

them with advantages like life and disability insurance, accidental injury coverage, health and maternity care, old age protection, and other benefits. Following this code, social security initiatives will be primarily funded by the federal and state governments, with a small contribution of 1-2% of yearly revenue from the aggregator. Also, the contribution made by the aggregator/platform will not exceed 5% of the amount payable to the gig and platform workers. In addition, the code proposed to establish a National Social Security Board which will supervise and formulate schemes for the well-being of gig and platform workers. Health coverage worth Rs 3 to 4 lakh extended to families of delivery workers has been put into place as a pilot in New Delhi, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad.

Rajasthan was the first state to introduce a law for gig workers, enacting the Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, on July 24, 2023. This law established a welfare board and unique IDs for workers, and a system to monitor payments through a Central Transaction Information and Management System (CTIMS). Other states such as Karnataka and Telangana are developing policies to provide minimum wages, health benefits, accident insurance and other benefits to gig workers. In the meantime, a gig worker welfare board was promised to be established with an allocation of Rs 3,000 crore in Karnataka. A Rs-4-lakh insurance coverage for gig workers has been announced in the state budget. At present, no reliable governance measures are in place for gig workers.

The gig economy and the formal-informal divide are closely related. The availability of jobs in cities and the skills of informal labourers are consistently out of sync. The political economy trend of unemployment has exacerbated extreme poverty and prevented India's cities from realising demographic dividends which are essential for boosting productivity and, in turn, economic growth. While there are numerous opportunities in the gig economy, particularly for city-based migrants looking to make a living and obtain flexibility in their schedules, governance policies need to emphasise social inclusion through improved regulation and state protection.

(Smitha is an assistant professor and Anil Kumar is a professor in the Department of Political Science, Government College, at the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A pillar of support

Their daily chats became a comforting sight for me to come home after university. They soon became close friends. And later when I was alone, I shared a bond with her so special it is hard to explain. An avid reader and environmentalist she loved discussing and enjoyed reading my novels in the *Deccan Herald*.

Massuring, gracious, humble and extremely talented she is a model for young women who want to have some one to look up to. My mother and she were the best of friends and often spent long evenings chatting. She would sometimes stop by after completing her art session at an art gallery close by. Her paintings featured in a local art exhibition. Incidentally, my own daughter, as a school girl, documented her beautiful home for a competition on 'sustainable building techniques and practices'.

Aunt had a calming voice and seemed to have simple and sensible

solutions for the troubling situations. When my father passed away, leaving a void in our lives, her words of comfort were a balm to my soul. I had called her, worried about my mother living alone, when my mother herself was a brave heart and did not fear being alone. Aunt was quick to reassure me, saying, "We may not have the speed to work, but we know how to manoeuvre our daily duties. I can understand how worried our children get thinking about us. Give mummy time, leave her be. All will be fine." Her calming words had a profound effect on me and soothed my frayed nerves. And yes, all is fine, just as she said.

Sadly, Aunt Leilamani passed away recently, leaving behind a legacy of kindness, wisdom, and substance. We will miss her, but her quiet presence will continue to inspire us. A heartfelt eulogy to Aunt Leilamani and all the unsung warriors at home. So long, Aunt Leilamani, till we meet again.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Centralising power a blow to democracy

Apropos 'Foul bid to control higher education' (Jan 13), your editor rightly highlights the Union government's unilateral attempt to control universities and colleges through UGC guidelines. The partisan use of Governors to influence the appointment of Vice-Chancellors and the erosion of state governments' power to appoint faculties in government colleges are particularly concerning. This blatant power grab undermines democracy, where states and the Union government should engage in healthy discussions and coordinated action. The Union government's

intentions are clear: to assert financial and academic control over institutions not limited to higher education; the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners has also been compromised, with the Chief Justice of India being replaced by the Union Home Minister. The BJP's attempts to centralise power and control various government wings will inevitably lead to authoritarian governance, making a mockery of democracy.

A R Ravichandran, Bengaluru

Politicising higher ed

This refers to 'Foul bid to control higher education' (Jan 13). The proposed UGC regulations have sparked widespread concern among state governments, faculty, and universities. The centralisation of power, granting chancellors the authority to appoint vice-chancellors without state government input, undermines state autonomy and may lead to increased political influence in higher education. Furthermore, the abolition of doctoral qualifications or teaching experience for vice-chancellor appointments is shocking.

This may compromise academic sanctity and allow non-academics to occupy key positions.

Mallu Ganapathay, Bengaluru

CAG report worrisome

The CAG report's revelation that the Delhi government's liquor policy resulted in a loss of Rs 2,026 crore is disturbing. Although the report's timing, coinciding with elections, raises suspicions, it is crucial to examine the report's findings. The question remains: why was the report published before being presented to the assembly? Moreover,

one wonders whether the CAG has investigated other policy decisions, such as demonetisation, which had far-reaching consequences, including significant financial losses and widespread job losses. Perhaps the CAG's silence on these matters is telling. After all, policy decisions can have unintended consequences, and all elected governments have made mistakes.

K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

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

SPEAK OUT

...You should have at least four (children). Those who have four children in the Sanadhy community will be rewarded with Rs 1 lakh by the Parshuram Kalyan Board...You should not back out when it comes to having children, or else *vidhami* will take over this country. The Brahmins are already becoming a minority.



Pandit Vishnu Rajoria, MP Parshuram Kalyan Board chief

Faith minus vulnerability and mystery equals extremism. If you've got all the answers, then don't call what you do 'faith'.

Brene Brown

TO BE PRECISE

PM Modi to youth: "Step out of comfort zone, time for quantum jump"



IN PERSPECTIVE

Beyond no detention policy

Scrapping the policy should be complemented with holistic approaches to improve children's learning

MANSOOR ALI KHAN

The Central government's recent decision to amend the rules under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 and permit schools to detain students in Classes 5 and 8 if they fail to meet the promotion criteria based on year-end examination results has sparked a conversation. Some have welcomed the decision while others have strongly opposed it and expressed significant concerns.

Although efforts in this direction began in 2019 when the act was amended after which several states and UTs decided to detain students, the recent move allows central government-run schools to also exercise this option. The decision to abolish the no-detention policy was primarily driven by concerns over declining student learning outcomes.

Several surveys including the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) conducted by the NGO Pratham in 2022 stated that only 69% of class eight students could read a class two-level text. Similarly, the survey highlighted the students' arithmetic skills — only 44.6% of the class eight students could do division. The survey also pointed out that there was scope for improvement in schools in both the government and private sector. While 41.8% of the class eight students could do division in government schools, the percentage was higher in private schools: 53.8%.

Originally, Section 16 of the RTE Act had stated: "No child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education (classes 1 to 8). However, now with the abolition of the no detention policy, the new rules state that students in classes five or eight who do not clear the exam will be given remedial coaching and allowed to attempt a re-examination in two months. However, the government's decision to abolish the policy without implementing complementary measures to enhance children's learning outcomes reflects a short-sighted approach.

This shift would once again place emphasis on the year-end examination as a tool to assess students' learning outcomes rather than as a stepping stone for schools to explore holistic approaches to improve

children's learning. Breaking the norms Educational institutions and governments must make efforts to follow the principles of the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation which mandated several formative and summative assessments so that there is no pressure of a single year-end examination. These assessments can be innovative and remove the focus from rote learning. Besides having regular assessments, schools should focus on foundational literacy and numeracy and have tailored interventions and remedial classes so that they address the gaps during the upper primary classes and ensure a strong learning base.

Schools should promote experiential and activity-based learning. Students should be allowed to experiment and engage in hands-on activities. A leaf could be taken from the Karnataka Government's Nali Kal teaching pedagogy that promotes joyful learning in lower primary classes in government schools. The teaching pedagogy which promotes multi-grade, multi-level, activity-based teaching and learning has been well-received among students and parents. Furthermore, teachers can create personalised learning plans for students that take into account their strengths and weaknesses. This, however, should not be limited to academic outcomes but also consider extra-curricular activities. Schools must also incorporate life skills education — such as communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and decision-making — into the curriculum.

Schools must also create a supportive environment by integrating social and emotional learning into the curriculum and providing access to counsellors. A happy, stress-free life is more likely to excel academically and socially. More importantly, the teachers must be empowered and governments should invest in their continuous professional development, equipping them with innovative pedagogical strategies and subject-specific expertise. Instead of imposing top-down training programmes, teachers should be empowered through professional development opportunities tailored to their specific needs and requirements.

While many stakeholders debate on the abolition of the no-detention policy, this conversation should be an opportunity for introspection and reform. This can only be done when the focus is not just merely on promoting students but truly educating them. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that education serves as a tool for empowerment rather than a series of hurdles. This vision requires collaboration among educators, policymakers, parents, and communities — a partnership that puts the child at the centre.

The author is general secretary, Manas School of Independent CBSE Schools Association, Karnataka

For spending efficiency

Subsidy reforms need a fresh push, open-ended sops are irrational

THE CENTRE HAS, over the last one and a half decades, been implementing a multi-pronged strategy to "rationalise" its subsidy expenditure. It sought to set limits on these expenses via decontrol of retail prices of auto fuels, removal of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) subsidy for those who can afford market prices, and by introducing "fixed-rate-subsidy" for phosphorus and potassium (P&K) fertilisers. Simultaneously, a series of administrative and technology-enabled steps like end-to-end computerisation of public distribution system operations have helped improve efficiency of delivery. Better targeting and new products like nano urea have allowed significant savings to the exchequer. Also, the 2020-21 Budget saw a radical shift to complete recognition of subsidy financing in the Budget, with one-time settlement of the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) accumulated loans of ₹3.8 lakh crore to the National Small Savings Fund. Since subsidy funds are now being transferred to the FCI rather promptly, it doesn't have to take costly short-term loans.

While all this is kudos, the fact is that a substantial part of the subsidy regime continues to be open-ended. Further reforms are very much warranted, to make more public monies available for meeting other pressing requirements, including for fixed assets creation and spending on health and education. For instance, it is common knowledge that sections of the 810 million beneficiaries of the free-grains scheme are undeserving of the largesse. True, the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) is now shorn of the hugely expensive "extra" element (doubling of the distributed grain quantities), the implementation of which in the aftermath of Covid had cost the exchequer a staggering ₹3.43 lakh crore. Also, over 95% of the PMGKY grains are now being distributed using electronic point of sale devices at fair price shops, with biometric Aadhaar authentication.

Yet, as this newspaper reported recently, food subsidy expenses for FY25 may cross ₹2.25 lakh crore, up ₹20,000 crore from the Budget estimate. The PMGKY beneficiary pool needs to be redefined without further delay, by making use of data sources like the census and surveys on household consumption. Dynamic and calibrated adjustments need to be made in the light of fresh data, and in keeping with verifiable official estimates of poverty incidence. As for fertiliser subsidy too, the issue prices (MRP) to the farmers haven't been revised for long years for both urea and P&K fertilisers, though costs have spiralled out of control due to a large import element. The fixed-subsidy policy for P&K, announced in 2010, has existed only on paper. Diversion and misuse of the subsidy for soil nutrients are still being reported, but direct benefit transfer is yet to be implemented.

Consumption of LPG by Ujjwala Yojana beneficiaries has lately improved to over four refills/year, as prices have not changed since March 2024. Oil companies are up with a ₹35,000-crore subsidy bill, while only ₹12,000 crore is budgeted for FY25. The additional spend is justified as clean cooking fuel at affordable prices for the low-income population is of great economic value. To be sure, as a fraction of the Budget, the three explicit subsidies have been on the decline — from 12.7% in FY23 to 9.3% in FY24 — but might end up a bit higher than 7.9% budgeted in the current year. It is feasible to rein in these expenses well below 1% of the GDP, without causing any hardship for the intended beneficiaries.

Don't bank on your banking job outlasting AI

OVER THE PAST few months, I've had occasion to speak at a number of conferences concerned with the impact of artificial intelligence on financial jobs. My audience's interests vary — they are students, young professionals, bank executives, investors, customers, and regulators. And in some cases, they are interested in learning how to exploit opportunities to sell to established financial institutions or to compete with them.

I have one answer for all of them. AI advances of the last five years or so will completely eliminate some large categories of financial jobs that have been around for many decades. However, like financial innovations of the past, it will also create jobs in two different ways. The improved efficiency and power of AI methods will create entirely new opportunities, and the improved performance of financial systems will stimulate growth in the sector.

But even if the net result is more and better jobs for humans, there will be massive disruption. Because both AI and financial jobs are big categories, it's easy for discussion of the impact to lose focus. I'll start with a specific version, a brief history of "know your customer".

In 1970, the US Bank Secrecy Act and similar legislation in other jurisdictions created the first specialised KYC jobs. There was little automation of any kind. In the 1990s, international bodies such as the Bank for International Settlements and Financial Action Task Force were the drivers of regulation, with global standards replacing patchwork national rules. KYC changed from documenting basic customer information to ensuring complex due diligence procedures had been carried out — the focus shifted from the product to the process. This required more automation, and hiring more specialised KYC personnel, including more higher-ranking and higher-paid employees.

In the 2000s, the US Patriot Act turned KYC to a major arm of the government's law enforcement. This vastly increased the necessary information collection and processing, and the numbers of KYC specialists, who now included lawyers, information technologists, and analysts.

Nearly all of this will soon be done by AI. A relatively small number of technologists — AI specialists, not KYC specialists — will be needed, along with a few very senior people to set policy and investigate major cases. The armies of investigators can be replaced by algorithms running 24x7, collating customer information with all kinds of structured and unstructured data on the internet, and deploying the understanding of the world that AI has developed in recent years.

What will happen to the hundreds of thousands of bank employees working in KYC? I hope they all have backup plans. The AI technology implemented to perform KYC is likely to open up more opportunities than it destroys. After all, knowing your customer does more than exclude some dicey counterparties, it helps you serve them better, and to find new customers.

While details vary, the basic KYC pattern will be repeated in other bank departments such as operations, compliance, and risk management. Computerisation makes the process more efficient, but growth in finance and increasing demands for information keep the head count growing. Role tasks are delegated to machines, which are faster, cheaper, and more accurate, but humans are needed for their knowledge of the world — for knowing that "Richard" and "Dick" can be the same name, and that there are no cattle ranches in Antarctica, for viewing with suspicion a low-level government employee asking for a loan to buy a yacht. Recent advances in AI mean computers are now much faster, cheaper, and more accurate than humans for these tasks as well.

The financial system of 2030 will create much more economic value than that of 2025, and will offer much more opportunity for good, high-paying jobs. But most of the 2030 jobs will be quite different from 2025 ones. Much of the 2025 economic value of finance will be performed by machines, and the successful 2030 human financial workers will be the ones who exploit the power of AI, not those who try to compete with it.



AARON BROWN
Bloomberg

INDIA-CHINA TIES

BEIJING'S 'ILLEGAL, COERCIVE, AGGRESSIVE AND DECEPTIVE' STRATEGY WILL TEST NEW DELHI

The tortuous normalisation

CHINA'S TENDENCY TO spring a surprise at every juncture in the tortuous trajectory of its dynamics with India is redoubtable.

There was a perception that this were on an upswing after China and India agreed to disengage and resume patrolling in Depsang and Demchok in October 2024, and which was followed by both sides trying to normalise their relationship after a straining four-year military stand-off.

The mirage of rapprochement has been hit by China's illegal and deceptive actions that have repercussions for the Line of Control (LoC). China created two units in Xinjiang's Hotan prefecture, and portions of these new administrative units lie in the Union Territory of Ladakh. The timing of this development is interesting since it comes soon after the meeting of the two special representatives (SRs) — India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and China's foreign minister Wang Yi. An agreement signed during then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's official visit to Beijing in 2003 put in place the SRs framework that was tasked with looking into ways to resolve the boundary question from a political perspective. New Delhi immediately lodged a diplomatic protest, stating that it had never agreed to Beijing's illegal occupation of Indian territory, and that promulgation of the new administrative units could not alter India's position.

China's unilateral actions thus try to create a false impression of an accord. Deception has been China's stock-in-trade in dealing with territorial disputes. The Philippines foreign minister accused China of using "fake narratives" in connection with the ongoing maritime dispute in the South China Sea with a design to spreading confusion among the public, and interfere in its domestic affairs. The war of words escalated after China

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KALPIT MANKIKAR**
Respectively vice-president for studies and fellow, China studies, ORF

released an audio recording in 2024, purportedly between a senior Philippine naval officer and a Chinese diplomat, to create a perception that there was an informal understanding between the two nations with respect to a dispute regarding the Second Thomas Shoal.

China has also greenlighted what is being termed as the world's largest hydroelectric project on the Yaluang river in Tibet. The new plan is said to have three times the electricity-generating potential of the Three Gorges Dam on China's Yangtze river — the world's largest hydropower project till date. New Delhi has raised ecological concerns with Beijing, and underscoring issues related to transparency and the need for consultation with lower riparian states. There are sensitivities expressed regarding the downstream states of the Brahmaputra river. These fears are not unfounded since China has earlier tried to weaponise water. Construction of dams on the Mekong river has wreaked havoc on lower riparian states in Southeast Asia. Closer home, during the 2017 military confrontation in the Doklam trilateral in Bhutan, Beijing refused to share hydrological data with New Delhi. Such information is crucial, since it helps in forecasting the possibility of flooding and other contingencies. There is also a sinister conjecture about whether



China is trying to play God. Union defence minister Rajnath Singh recently voiced concerns as to whether climate change was indeed responsible for natural disasters that are occurring at regular intervals in Union Territories like Ladakh and only a few border states like Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. He argued that while the Himalayan ranges stretched to other states, only the "border states" were facing the brunt of the natural disasters.

Efforts are on by the security establishment to ascertain whether or not any "enemy nation" is involved.

Beijing has been trying to portray itself as a responsible stakeholder in the efforts to combat climate change and emissions. At the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced China's aim to become carbon neutral by 2060. This, China seeks to put a green sheen on the Yaluang river plan, situating the hydroelectric project as part of its shift away from fossil-fuel energy sources in order to meet its goal of net-carbon neutrality. It has sidestepped concerns about how the power project could affect the fragile ecosystem of the Tibetan Plateau, local residents, and downstream nations. This gives New Delhi an opportunity to show the world the yawning gap

between Xi's noble words and devious deeds on his commitment to the environment. If 1.4 million Chinese were displaced for the construction of Three Gorges Dam, how many will the current hydroelectric project drown should be a talking point. Besides, engineers would need to drill through hard mountain rock to construct tunnels that will divert some quantity of the river's flow to generate power. In the aftermath of the earthquake in Tibet this month, the onus is on Beijing to declare how safe is the drilling activity in a seismically vulnerable mountainous terrain. Lastly, Beijing wholeheartedly promotes the notion of win-win cooperation, yet in practice it is the interests of China that take precedence over sharing of natural resources with its neighbours in a fair and equitable manner.

Shortly after a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in October — their first since a border clash in Galwan in 2020 — the two sides reached an agreement to de-escalate tensions along the LoC. With the new developments, it could cast fresh uncertainty for the India-China ties that seemed to be on the mend in recent times.

To conclude, a Filipino general has argued that Beijing's belligerent behaviour goes beyond the bland terminology of grey-zone warfare, classifying it as "ICAD," meaning "illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive". This redesignation has come in response to China's increasing use of maritime militias and water cannons against Filipino civilian vessels in the South China Sea. While Xi's military coercion gambit may have failed to achieve the desired outcome, we will have to be cognisant of non-conventional measures through which China may hobble India on the LoC and beyond. In the months to come, Beijing's "ICAD" strategy will test New Delhi's cautious normalisation.

Building a cyber-resilient India in the AI era



IRINA GHOSE
Managing director, Microsoft India and South Asia

IN THE PAST two years, advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have been nothing short of revolutionary. Significant improvements in machine learning algorithms have enabled AI systems to become more accurate and efficient. Deep learning techniques have allowed AI to process and understand complex data sets, driving breakthroughs in natural language processing, image recognition, and autonomous systems. These innovations are transforming industries, enhancing productivity, and accelerating technological progress.

Security: The backbone of AI transformation

As AI continues to advance, the importance of cybersecurity by design has become increasingly evident. AI's integration across industries has introduced new vulnerabilities, making security-first approaches critical. AI systems are often targets for cyber threats due to the valuable data they handle and the critical functions they perform.

Cybercriminals are leveraging advanced technologies, including AI, to launch more varied and sophisticated attacks. Microsoft data finds that across the world, about 600 million identity attacks occur every day. Password attacks have surged to 7,000 per second, up from just 579 in 2021, while the global cost of cybercrime is projected to hit \$10.5 trillion by 2025, up from \$3 trillion in 2015.

As the digital landscape grows increasingly interconnected, defenders

face a critical challenge — the data and insights from various security tools are often siloed or, at best, loosely integrated. This fragmented approach makes it difficult to gain a holistic view of threats or assess their potential impact on critical assets.

This growing threat landscape underscores the need for a unified, AI-driven cyber defence strategy. To address this, Microsoft launched the Secure Future Initiative (SFI), embedding security principles into every stage of technology development — ensuring solutions are secure by design, by default, and by operation. Microsoft has dedicated the equivalent of 34,000 engineers to advance the objectives laid out in SFI, making it the largest cybersecurity engineering project in history.

Trust and security: A boardroom priority

Security is no longer just an IT issue — it is a boardroom priority. As India embraces AI's potential, trust and security will be the backbone of its transformation. Leaders must foster a security-first culture that permeates every level of the organisation, empowering employees to adopt secure practices. Our data shows that India's workforce is very optimistic about AI; 92% of knowledge workers in India use AI at work as compared to the global figure of 75%, reflecting employee confi-

As AI becomes more integrated into business and daily life, the need for robust cybersecurity measures becomes an imperative for the country

As cyber threats continue to evolve, our collective investment in AI and its integration into security strategies will be critical

dence in AI to save time and boost creativity and focus. As cyber threats become more sophisticated in speed and scale, we need to be as diverse as the threats we are defending ourselves from. Looking at security as a team sport can enable organisations and their employees across functions to be resilient against these growing threats. Moreover, cybersecurity skilling will continue to play an integral role in addressing the shortage in skilled workforce for the field. It is crucial to continue building

a strong pool of diverse cybersecurity talent in the country to ensure a vibrant and diverse workforce for it in India.

As we look to the future, the role of AI in security will expand even further. On the defence front, AI is revolutionising how organisations detect and respond to cyber risks by enabling real-time analysis of vast data sets and uncovering patterns and anomalies indicative of potential breaches.

Looking ahead to 2025, I believe we will see even more advancements in security due to AI. The industry is evolving rapidly, and it's crucial that we stay ahead of the curve. An upskilled workforce will be important for organisations to do the work to get their employees on board with the fact that security needs to be everyone's priority.

As cyber threats continue to evolve,

our collective investment in AI and its integration into security strategies will be critical to stay ahead of these sophisticated threats. With AI tools like Copilot for security, organisations can enhance defences, reduce analyst training time, and improve operational capacity. For instance, LTI Mindtree leveraged Copilot to strengthen its security operations and expertise.

India's cyber defence: A pivotal need

India is leading the generative AI revolution. It is leveraging AI to drive economic growth and societal advancement, reaching the grassroots to ensure that everyone in India is brought together. This rapid adoption increases the urgency to fortify cyber defences. The rapid adoption of AI in India is driven by a young, digitally savvy population open to embracing new technologies. India's demographic advantage provides a fertile ground for AI innovation that can enhance productivity, drive economic growth, and improve overall quality of life. As AI becomes more integrated into various aspects of business and daily life, the need for robust cybersecurity measures becomes an imperative for the country. This challenge involves creating awareness on following secure practices, integrating advanced technologies, and fostering collaboration.

India is at a pivotal point now to harness AI for long-term inclusive growth, and cybersecurity will be a critical building block in ensuring its continued progress to an AI-first nation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India and Indonesia

History is set to be made as Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto is honoured as the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations. This highlights the strengthening bilateral ties between India and Indonesia, two of Asia's largest democracies with deep cultural and historical connections. The visit signifies a growing partnership between the two nations,

which have collaborated on various fronts, including trade, defence, and maritime security. In the context of a rapidly changing global order, this engagement underscores the importance of regional cooperation in navigating shared challenges and opportunities. The invitation to President Subianto reflects India's commitment to fostering stronger ties with its Southeast Asian neighbours, a region critical to its Act East Policy. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

For the nation?

Appropos of "In the name of nation-building" (FE, January 13), exhorting employees to work more in the name of "nation-building" is nothing but a play by companies to improve return on investment and return on assets. Nation-building is a current flavour to appeal people to make sacrifices. A 70- or 90-hour workweek in the name of nation-building sounds patriotic for corner office occupants whose

families have facilities. But in case of most employees, their families depend on them for tasks as simple as going to the market or helping children with schoolwork. Executives must remember that a supportive work culture paves the road for development, not one where employees are reduced to the work hours put in. —Bimal Gadhwal, Ahmedabad

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Indians abroad

Absence of opportunities remains
the main driver of migration

At the inauguration of the 18th edition of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Indian diaspora as India's "ambassadors to the world", having "seamlessly assimilated" into the local society, served the community, and contributed to India's growth and prosperity. The strength of the India-origin community worldwide of over 35 million – about 15.85 million NRIs and 19.57 million PIOs, who are foreign nationals – is their ability to adapt and thrive in different fields, including in politics, where Indian-origin people have become leaders of more than 30 other countries. Where they retain their Indian passports, the diaspora is known for its distinguished services in many professional spheres. The PBD's purpose is to celebrate this success and discuss issues of importance; President Droupadi Murmu handed out about 27 Pravasi Bharatiya Samman awards. The event, which was first held in 2003, is organised around January 9, when Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915. The latest event, held in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, brought more than 3,000 delegates from across 70 countries, with much of the focus on how the diaspora can help in developing India (Viksit Bharat programme).

The achievements of the Indian diaspora are, no doubt, a matter of pride for all Indians, but it is important that the event is not limited to a simple self-congratulatory or laudatory exercise. The issues for the diaspora, particularly for those who are still Indian nationals, are more acute now. The increase in far-right populist governments, particularly in the West, is making visa and entry conditions for Indians more difficult, and it is important for the government to address such issues. Intractable global conflicts, especially in West Asia where more than nine million Indians live and work, are also putting lakhs of Indians in peril, and the PBD engagement would benefit from discussions between the community on how best to increase awareness and enhance safeguards for them. Given the broad spread of the diaspora, it is necessary to ensure that India's ties with its diaspora be inclusive, and non-partisan on political issues. Recent actions by the government to deny or revoke OCI cards for those perceived to be critical of the government bely this necessity. Above all, it is important to acknowledge that one of the biggest drivers of Indians migrating is the lack of economic opportunities within India. While there are no easy fixes for this, the loss to India of some of its most talented people must be counted, even as the country celebrates their incredible success and impact on the global stage.

Presidential reprieve

Despite the discharge, the U.S. will have
to deal with a polarised Trump era

President-elect Donald Trump was handed an "unconditional discharge" in a felony case in New York, where he was earlier found guilty on 34 counts of falsifying business records to make \$1,30,000 in hush-money payments to an adult film star over an alleged affair. Following his conviction last May, one of four criminal indictments that he faced at the time, Mr. Trump went on to win the November 2024 election and will be sworn into office on January 20. In accordance with the legal immunity for official acts that is offered to the office of the President of the U.S., a position affirmed recently by the Supreme Court, three indictments that had not yet reached the stage of a conviction or acquittal were either dismissed or came to a halt owing to procedural complexities. His indictment for his role in instigating a mob attack on the U.S. Capitol in January 2021 and his indictment for mishandling classified documents discovered at his home in Florida, after his 2020 election defeat, were withdrawn by then Special Counsel Jack Smith because the Department of Justice "forbids the federal indictment and subsequent criminal prosecution of a sitting President". A state-level case in Georgia relating to allegations of tampering with the 2020 election's vote-counting process was paused pending a decision by an appeals court. In the New York case, following his appeal to delay the sentencing, the Supreme Court ruled that sentencing could proceed after the judge, Juan Merchan, said that he would hand down an unconditional discharge – implying no jail time, monetary fine, or probation – given that this would be "the most viable solution" in such unprecedented circumstances.

Other than facing the routine conditions of a ban on convicted felons owning guns and being required to provide the State of New York criminal database with a DNA sample, Mr. Trump has emerged unscathed from the legal quagmire prior to his 2024 victory. The deeper questions that America will wrestle with, however, transcend these legal minutiae – they relate to the fact that Mr. Trump, his 2024 campaign, and the MAGA movement more broadly, remain polarising and there is near-complete breakdown of bipartisanship within political circles as applicable to critical issues of social and economic policy, including the economy and jobs, reproductive rights, the criminal justice system and immigration reform. Liberal and progressive Americans must, understandably, be hoping, in the light of his comprehensive victory leading to a federal government trifecta, that Mr. Trump will strike a conciliatory note on Inauguration Day, and follow that up with a more bipartisan approach to policymaking in the four years ahead. The cost of not doing so appears to be high indeed.

The Trump card, global politics and outcomes for India

Who is Donald Trump? Dissecting the psychology of the next U.S. President is a popular pastime. His bold, distributed speaking style, his outspokenness, his focus on deal-making, his real estate background that defines his coercive leadership and politics, cast him very differently from his predecessors. He is a polarising figure, wading constantly into controversy, stubbornly resilient, a master of populist rhetoric, presenting himself as the voice of the "common people" arraigned against an out-of-touch political establishment.

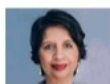
It's America first

What is Mr. Trump's approach to the "rules-based international order"? We know from his first Presidency, that he expounds an "America First" doctrine. He debunks multilateralism in global politics, and he trashes international agreements that he believes do not favour the United States. He prefers bilateral agreements over multilateral ones: witness his approach to the Paris Climate Agreement (from which he withdrew and is likely to withdraw again) and trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. He is dismissive of international institutions like the United Nations and regional bodies such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, saying that these disproportionately benefit other nations at the expense of the U.S. To the delight of his acolytes, he places American sovereignty over global governance.

In the Trumpian worldview, strategy revolves around the bully pulpit, strong personal branding, a willingness to take risks, unconventional deal-making, winner-take-all in place of win-win. Practical outcomes rather than theoretical constructs are emphasised.

Donald Trump's transactionalism is legend. His MAGA ("Make America Great Again") policy will have implications influencing global geopolitics. This will entail a rise of protectionism in global trade (free trade is an anachronism in this scheme of things), escalating tariffs and trade wars and increased economic uncertainty. Intensified competition with China where Beijing is clearly framed as an economic and ideological adversary will affect global stability, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

Mr. Trump's scepticism about global institutions will inspire adventurism in global politics and nationalisms that override international law. Polarisation in global politics will be increasingly in evidence, and debates on



Nirupama Rao
a former Foreign
Secretary and
Ambassador of India

free trade, immigration and globalisation will become increasingly fractious. Climate policy and action will be downgraded. Instability in global markets will affect nations, whether developed or developing, across the board. The world is in for "interesting" and tumultuous times.

American isolationism under MAGA (since Mr. Trump has clearly signalled opposition to U.S. direct involvement in external conflict), can encourage powers such as China and Russia already united in their opposition to the U.S.'s power and influence, to expand their global footprint, using both economic and military means. MAGA could be synonymous with disruption beyond American shores and power realignments.

Ties with India, the line for New Delhi

The strategic outlook for India-U.S. relations under a second Trump Presidency is mixed. Relations between the two countries have witnessed a steady evolution and multi-faceted growth over the last two decades across partisan divides. That trend is expected to continue especially since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Trump have a warm friendship. India has stressed constructive engagement with the U.S. as a key strategic partner. India's growing geopolitical clout and a mutual interest with the U.S. in countering China (particularly because of the over-assertive Chinese military posture and transgressions across the Line of Actual Control) provide a strong impetus for a growing strategic partnership. India-U.S. defence cooperation will continue to strengthen together with partnerships in critical technologies (provided the new administration does not use export controls as pressure points) and business. Trade frictions could, however, be a complicating factor.

The countering of Chinese influence in the region by the incoming U.S. administration suggests that groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad or the U.S., Australia, India, and Japan), where India is an important constituent, will be strengthened. The maintenance of the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific requires the continued involvement of the U.S., even though India is cautious about an over-reliance on America and seeks to ensure its very own strategic autonomy. India's Indo-Pacific vision stresses regional cooperation, multilateralism and multipolarity. India would do well to continue to emphasise its own strategic priorities, as shaped by history,

geopolitics, national security, its economic interests and civilisational identity. Its border security, a strong defence posture, military modernisation, intensified counterterrorism efforts through strengthened intelligence, anti-radicalisation, and a continued focus on fighting cross-border terrorism, remain of central concern.

The compulsion of economic growth is central to its strategic outlook. India's energy security, diversification of energy sources, building renewable energy and the maintenance of stable relationships with key energy suppliers are vital. Peace and stability in South Asia are important, as also vigilance about containing and neutralising destabilising influences in the region, particularly from China and Pakistan. Security of the Indo-Pacific as a key maritime and economic passageway is a strategic priority. India's partnerships with Japan, Australia, with the European Union and with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, apart from the U.S. are essential to the balancing of China's rise, to ensure India's access to key technologies, to defence preparedness, and for its trade and economic development.

Key for its strategic future are its digital transformation, space exploration, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity for its digital infrastructure and building resilience against cyber threats from hostile nations and non-state actors. India's priorities should incorporate a deployment of soft power in an emphasis on democratic and constitutional values, pluralism, humanitarian engagement and diaspora outreach. The relationship with Russia must continue to be in focus because of the complex and diversified nature of India's strategic partnership with that country, and because of the counterweight it provides to the growing Sino-Russian alignment in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.

On Trump again

The reality of the second Trump Presidency, and Mr. Trump's victory in the elections, indicate that established patterns of history and geopolitics that served as guides to the future may no longer apply as the positioning system for a global order that will instead be disruptive, polarised and unstable. Global politics, all said, may never be the same. As the American analyst, Ian Bremmer, recently noted, a G-Zero world has arrived, and the law of the jungle may provide the new global playbook.

The world is in
for 'interesting'
and tumultuous
times with the
Trumpian
worldview to
take effect soon

Transforming 'men'-talities, redefining masculinity

As another International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women passes (by November 25), we face a stark truth: despite decades of advocacy, nearly one in three women worldwide has endured violence at the hands of men. While men are often the perpetrators, they can also be key agents of change. Addressing violence against women requires addressing men's roles and questioning traditional notions of masculinities based on strength, aggression and control. These notions need to be replaced by a culture where equality, empathy, and non-violence define alternative notions of manhood.

Violence against women can be seen, somewhat paradoxically, as a quintessential "men's issue" – a societal issue that demands the active engagement of men. From early childhood, boys are influenced by norms that tell them strength is dominance, that emotions are a weakness, and that asserting control is the way to protect their status. These deeply entrenched ideas not only harm women but also limit men's lives and their relationships, trapping them in cycles of suppressed emotions and aggressive behaviours. Recognising and reshaping these norms is essential for creating healthier relationships and a safer world.

The subject of men and masculinities has become a prominent focus within the development sector. Over the past two decades, academic research and grass-root efforts have revealed the importance of engaging with men, highlighted strategies that work, and shown how men are increasingly stepping out to challenge traditional gender norms. This growing shift reflects a recognition among men of their role in advancing gender equality.

An India report

UNESCO's Transforming MENTalities initiative has aimed to shift the way men engage with gender issues – not just as allies but as active participants in social transformation. This initiative challenges rigid and stereotyped ideas of masculinity and



Tim Curtis
Director, UNESCO
South Asia Regional
Office, part of Team
UN in India



Ravi Verma
Executive Director,
International Center
for Research on
Women (ICRW) Asia

fosters positive, supportive roles for men, engaging them as champions for gender equality. As we inch closer to Agenda 2030 – working to create an inclusive and equal world – UNESCO, in collaboration with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), is proud to present the report, "Engaging Men and Boys: A Report on Pathways to Gender Equality in India". This report documents 10 pioneering programmes across India that engage men and boys to address gender inequality.

Some of the interventions

Through impactful initiatives, these programmes encourage critical dialogues that are aimed at questioning traditional gender norms, reshaping concepts of masculinity, and fostering inclusive attitudes. By emphasising education, open discussions, and community-driven actions, these programmes empower participants to become advocates for gender equality within their household and within communities and institutions they are part of.

For example, "Mardon Wali Baat (A man's thing)", an initiative by The VP Foundation, uses storytelling and social media to foster conversations around positive masculinities with young men on campuses and in communities. This intervention helps young men critically examine the limiting narratives they have grown up with, empowering them to embrace values of respect and equality. Similarly, Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS), a collaboration between the ICRW and the Department of Education in the State of Rajasthan, uses interactive classroom activities to help adolescent boys see the harm in toxic masculinity and adopt more equitable gender attitudes. In one session, a boy reflected, "I used to think boys should only do outdoor chores. Now, I believe we should work alongside women at home." These moments of transformation create ripple effects that can reshape entire communities.

Initiatives such as "Deh Rekha (caring for each other)" and "Hamari Shaadi (our marriage)"

encourage men's active participation in family nutrition and planning, tackling gender bias through small, everyday actions. These interventions prove that when men and boys are invited to engage with gender equality as a part of their lives, rather than as an abstract idea, change becomes possible.

The defining role of public figures

Change also becomes possible when men and boys have positive role models demonstrating equitable behaviours. These initiatives underscore the importance of role models who actively participate in household and care-giving responsibilities, reject violence as a solution, practise empathy, and embrace vulnerability. Public figures, in particular, can help normalise gender equality. For instance, a well-known Indian cricketer recently sparked a national conversation on shared parenting and responsibility by publicly committing to paternity leave. Actions such as these highlight how equitable relationships are rooted in care, respect, and partnership, redefining what it means to "be a man" in ways that uplift both individuals and communities.

The path to true equality is long, and the active participation of men is crucial in this journey. Beyond rejecting violence, men can challenge the stereotypes and cultural norms that perpetuate it. They must see themselves as essential contributors to change, helping dismantle toxic ideas of manhood. This requires a willingness to question the privileges that patriarchy grants the world and to explore ways to address the pressures and expectations that accompany these privileges. By reflecting on and reshaping their roles, men can play a transformative part in building a more equitable society for all.

In the new year, let us celebrate those men and boys who are "Transforming MENTalities" and championing equality. Together, by redefining masculinity, we can create a world where every individual, regardless of gender, is free from violence and empowered to thrive.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The border and Bangladesh

It is baffling why Bangladesh should be concerned if India is erecting fences on the India-Bangladesh border. Perhaps, it was "open doors" till now and with diplomatic relations changing, Dhaka is reacting. Illegal migration may also be a part of vote bank politics.

Govardhana Myneddu,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

The Governor, actions

The repeated Quixotic antics of certain Governors

grossly erodes the respect one accords to the posts they have been enjoying all along. That the government has such personalities as Governors, especially in Opposition-ruled States, and not reacting to their "overactions" only shows deteriorating political morality. It is time to restore the image and the prestige of key constitutional posts.

A.G. Rajmohan,
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

The headline says it all: "Arrogance shown by the

[Tamil Nadu] Chief Minister Stalin is not good, says Raj Bhavan" (January 13). It is even more astounding that Raj Bhavan has to use the words "abuse" and "childish" in its social media post. It should be the other way around. His excellency must uphold his high dignity and also the honour associated with the post he holds. Tamil Nadu needs a Governor who is more cooperative and understanding.

Parthasarathy N.,
Chennai

Examination postponement

I am writing to express my concern regarding the decision by the National Testing Agency (NTA) to postpone the University Grants Commission (UGC)-NET examination (scheduled for January 15, 2025, "due to festive"). While the importance of cultural festivities is acknowledged, such abrupt changes disrupt the preparations of the student community, many of whom have been preparing rigorously for this test for

months. Examinations such as the UGC-NET are critical for academic and professional progress, and last-minute rescheduling creates unnecessary stress and logistical challenges. It is imperative that examination timetables are meticulously planned, taking into consideration significant dates. I urge the authorities to ensure a more considerate and systematic approach in future scheduling.

K.M. Vishnu Namboodiri,
Tiruvalla, Kerala

R. Jayachandran

The passing of the playback singer has left a void in the hearts of music lovers. Jayachandran's voice transcended geographical and linguistic boundaries, captivating generations with its depth and resonance. His legacy as a singer, musician and devotee will continue to inspire generations to come.

Padmanabha Suryanarayana,
Kochi, Kerala

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

Resisting transparency, eroding public trust

Last year, presiding officer Anil Masih was caught on CCTV camera manipulating votes in the Chandigarh major elections to help the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secure victory. The incident underlined the importance of infusing transparency in the electoral process to detect and prevent election fraud. It is ironic then that even before the year ended, the Central government brought an amendment to Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict public access to election-related records.



Anjali Bhardwaj
Transparency activist associated with the Satark Nagrik Sangathan and the National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information



Amrita Johri
Transparency activist associated with the Satark Nagrik Sangathan and the National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information

The amendment came days after the Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to provide information under Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules. Copies of Form 17C and CCTV footage of the Assembly elections in Haryana were among the records sought by the petitioner.

Rule 93 of the Conduct of Election Rules provides a framework for people to obtain information related to elections. Rule 93(2) originally stated that other than the records specifically exempt under Rule 93(1), all papers relating to elections shall be available for people to inspect and take copies of. The amendment to Rule 93(2) narrows the scope of people's right to information by adding a qualification that only "papers as specified in these rules relating to the election shall be open to public inspection". Records related to the electoral process, including Form 17C, video recordings and CCTV footage, will potentially get caught in the cross hairs of the new amendment.

Delays that led to doubts
The role of the ECI in the matter is particularly disconcerting. One of the safeguards in the Representation of the People Act, 1951, to prevent the ruling party from arbitrarily misusing its power to frame rules is that the rules can be made only "after consulting the

The amendment to Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict public access to election-related records, has no place in a democracy

Election Commission". It is baffling why the institution vested with the responsibility of ensuring free and fair elections is opposed to transparency, especially at a time when serious questions have been raised about the sanctity of the electoral process.

In the general elections of 2024, the ECI did not put out voter turnout figures in absolute numbers after the completion of voting in the initial phases. This, coupled with an unusually high revision of 6% in voter turnout in some phases of the election, without any explanation, prompted a public demand for disclosure of Form 17C. Part I of this Form is filled by the Presiding Officer of each polling station at the close of voting and is submitted to the Returning Officer of the constituency. It contains information on the voter turnout and the number of votes recorded in the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM). Part II is filled on the day of counting by noting the votes secured by each candidate as recorded in the EVMs. The documents reveal whether or not voter turnout tallies with the votes polled and counted.

Several political parties also sought copies of Form 17C after the general elections, claiming an abnormally large increase in voter turnout between the figures declared by the ECI at the close of polls on the day of voting and the final turnout declared a few days later. For instance, an ally of the BJP, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), claimed a massive increase between the two figures in some constituencies in Odisha, raising doubts about the integrity of the election process. In the Assembly elections held in Haryana and Maharashtra, similar concerns were raised and applications were again filed seeking copies of Form 17C and other election records.

Refusal to disclose information
Unfortunately, all these requests were stonewalled by the ECI. In a petition to the ECI, the BJD complained that even its

candidates were denied copies of Form 17C, despite making requests under the Representation of the People Act and the Right to Information Act, 2005.

Further, when the matter of proactive disclosure of Form 17C was agitated in the Supreme Court, the ECI opposed it on the spurious grounds that there is no legal mandate to share Form 17C with anyone other than the candidates and political parties through their designated polling agents. In fact, it claimed that there is a "one-to-one relationship between each Form 17C and its possessor" and its unrestricted disclosure is amendable to mischief as people may morph the images. Further, it argued that there is no technical facility to scan the documents.

The ECI's reluctance to share copies of Form 17C is inexplicable. Copies of Part I of Form 17C are given to polling agents who are present at the booth and there is no prohibition on their further dissemination. In Digital India, the claim that Returning Officers don't have the technical facility to scan and upload a couple of thousand pages is scarcely credible.

On December 26, 2024, more than six months after the general elections, the ECI released a set of 42 statistical reports terming it a "Treasure Trove for stakeholders including academicians, researchers, election watchers worldwide". This too had no data from Form 17C, which would conclusively resolve the vexed issue of difference between votes polled and counted.

Transparency is key to ensure public trust and participation in the electoral process. In 2024, the Supreme Court struck down the electoral bonds scheme as being violative of a voter's fundamental right to information. A challenge to the new amendment has already reached the apex court. Rather than wait for the verdict of the judiciary, the ECI and the BJP would do well to realise that this amendment has no place in a democracy and withdraw it.

The promised land record

The Congress government is trying to streamline the land ownership process

STATE OF PLAY

M. Rajeev
rajeev.madhabhushig@thehindu.co.in



Ever since the Congress government came to power in Telangana, it has taken a series of measures to streamline the land ownership process, rectify deficiencies in the previous system that had caused sleepless nights for farmers, and improve revenue administration. Farmers began to struggle when, in 2020, the Telangana Assembly enacted the Telangana Rights in Land and Pattadar Passbooks Act, popularly known as the Record of Rights Act. The previous Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) government had also introduced the Dharani portal, a land record management portal, billed as one-stop solution for land-related issues. However, the portal was rife with errors. There was often a mismatch between the physical records and the digitised records, and 18.36 lakh acres of land were pushed into the prohibited list even though farmers had been tilling them for decades. The portal was operated by a foreign company.

To make matters worse, the new law left no scope for grievance redress at the local level. The power of redress was mostly vested with the District Collector or Chief Commissioner of Land Administration. The BRS government also did not prepare rules for effective implementation of the Act.

Then the BRS government also scrapped the village revenue officers and village revenue assistants system, arguing that it was a residue of the feudal system and that the officers and assistants were fudging revenue records. Village

revenue assistants had been helping revenue officials in villages with the collection of village revenues, such as agriculture tax and irrigation tax. The village revenue officers and village revenue assistants of 10,950 revenue villages across the State were removed overnight and accommodated in other departments. This hit revenue services at the grassroots level. This forced farmers to approach courts at different levels and as a consequence, the judiciary was faced with a pile of cases.

The government also faced allegations that BRS leaders were taking advantage of the loopholes in the Dharani portal to usurp lands from farmers at throwaway prices.

In short, land management became a messy affair.

Immediately after it came to power, the Congress government constituted a committee headed by senior party leader M. Kodanda Reddy to study the lapses in revenue administration and recommend measures to strengthen the system. The committee comprising experts recommended repeal of the Records of Rights Act and suggested that the Dharani portal be replaced with a new farmer-friendly portal, Bhumata.

Last December, the Assembly enacted the Telangana Bhu Bharaati (Record of Rights) Act, 2024, with a provision to issue Bhudhaar cards, to all

land owners for issuing title deeds and reducing disputes at the village level. "The lack of unique identification number for land parcels is leading to boundary disputes and is also a hurdle in maintaining accurate revenue records. There is a need to create unique land parcel identification numbers for each parcel," the Act said. Last week, the Governor gave assent to the Act. It is hoped that this new law will reduce property-related disputes in rural areas and bring financial stability to citizens by enabling them to use their property as a financial asset for taking loans.

More importantly, the law provides for a redress mechanism. It also provides for expeditious adjudication of lands entered in the prohibited list and aims at creating a user-friendly and hassle-free online portal for record of land rights. Revenue Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy has assured the people that the rules for the new Record of Rights Act are being prepared and has promised that the law will come into force in three months. The government has also brought back the system of village level officers and village revenue assistants. The process for verifying their certificates has started.

While these are welcome steps, implementation and transparency are key to success. The problems in the Dharani portal and the problematic Record of Rights Act were said to be major reasons for the BRS' defeat in the Assembly elections. If the new portal is more efficient than the earlier one, and farmers have local support for grievance redress, there will be even greater trust in the Congress, which received overwhelming support in rural areas during the elections.

The way forward for PM-KISAN

The scheme, which started off strong, has been providing assistance to fluctuating numbers of farmers over the past six years

DATA POINT

T. Ramakrishnan

The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), which provides yearly income support of ₹16,000 to eligible farmer families in three instalments, has been through highs and lows both in terms of coverage and payout. It became operational from December 2018.

Originally intended for small and marginal farmers, the scheme, which was launched in February 2019, was later extended to all farmers who owned land when the National Democratic Alliance retained power in May 2019. The government made it clear in Parliament that there was no proposal to expand the scheme further to bring in tenant farmers under the fold. At the time of expansion in 2019, the scheme was expected to cost ₹87,217.5 crore to the public exchequer for 2019-20 with the total number of beneficiaries being around 14.5 crore. However, in the last six years, neither did the amount disbursed exceed ₹70,000 crore during any year, nor did the number of beneficiaries touch the 14.5-crore mark.

As Table 1 shows, allocation for the scheme in the beginning of 2019-20 and 2020-21 was ₹75,000 crore each. But in both years, the expenditure on account of disbursement ranged from around ₹49,000 crore to ₹61,000 crore. The year-on-year growth rate for 2020-21 was close to 25% while it moderated to around 10% next year. However, it was in that year (2021-22) that the absolute figure of payout was the highest (around ₹67,150 crore). With the authorities tightening coverage of the scheme, the annual aggregate amount disbursed began going down and saw a 13% dip in 2022-23. Last year, the amount was ₹62,000 crore.

Table 2 gives an account of the varying number of beneficiaries at the time of payment of instalment

at a given time. Since the scheme was inaugurated, the government has made payments 18 times. The last payment was made in October 2024. The number of beneficiaries started rising in the second year of implementation and this trend continued until the fourth year. Since then, governments, both at the Centre and in States, have been weeding out ineligible persons. At the same time, they have been taking steps to "saturate the scheme with all eligible farmers."

A "major saturation drive" commenced on November 15, 2023 to include more than 1 crore farmers. Another round was carried out from June 2024 and more than 25 lakh farmers were made beneficiaries. At the all-India level, the total number of beneficiaries, at the time of the release of the 18th payout, was approximately 9.59 crore. Of them, farmers from Scheduled Castes (SCs) accounted for 12% and those from Scheduled Tribes (STs) accounted for 9%. While women constituted a little more than 20% of SCs and others, their share among STs was around 29%. In December last year, the government informed the Lok Sabha that it did not maintain any separate data for Other Backward Classes, who were included in the category of "others."

A perusal of the data, as given in Table 3, on the year-wise distribution of funds in 10 States reveals that all of them have experienced ups and downs. For instance, Tamil Nadu, an important rice-producing State, had 44.6 lakh beneficiaries in 2020-21; now it has 21.5 lakh. The amount disbursed rose only to go down — from around ₹2,594 crore during 2020-21 to ₹1,439 crore during 2023-24. In Manipur, the number of beneficiaries decreased by about 70% between 2022-23 and 2023-24.

Farmers have been demanding a hike in the annual payout. While considering this, the government should incentivise those who efficiently use water, electricity, and other inputs during production.

PM-KISAN: Highs and lows

The data for the charts were sourced from Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha replies and Budget documents



Table 1: The table shows the allocation for the scheme and the amount transferred since 2018-19

Year	Allocation	Revised Estimate	Amount transferred
2018-19	0	20,000	6,905.5
2019-20	75,000	54,370.15	49,196.4
2020-21	75,000	65,000	60,989.9
2021-22	65,000	67,500	67,147.4
2022-23	68,000	60,000	58,253.8
2023-24	60,000	60,000	61,886.5
2024-25*	60,000	N.A.	41,687.3*

*After the 18th instalment (Aug-Nov 2024)

Table 2: The table shows the number of beneficiaries at the time of select instalments of payment

Instalment	Number of beneficiaries
1st (Dec 2018-Mar 2019)	3,16,19,876
5th (April 2020 - July 2020)	9,26,93,619
9th (Aug 2020 - Nov 2021)	10,34,41,242
13th (Dec 2022 - Mar 2023)	8,12,34,383
16th (Dec 2023 - Mar 2024)	9,04,27,479
18th (Aug 2024 - Nov 2024)	9,58,97,635

Table 3: The table shows the year-wise distribution of funds in 10 States from different regions of the country. Since the scheme came into effect in December 2018, the table shows numbers from 2019 as it was the first full inaugural year

State	2019-20		2023-24	
	Number of beneficiaries	Amount disbursed	Number of beneficiaries	Amount disbursed
Andhra Pradesh	49,90,936	2,710.5	44,88,790	2,813.79
Assam	12,29,282	1,396.4	16,54,726	1,358.68
Bihar	62,03,177	2,921.7	80,59,752	4,891.74
Karnataka	50,68,281	2,789.8	51,66,182	2,963.36
Maharashtra	91,29,512	4,898.9	96,94,408	5,888.33
Manipur	2,74,496	86.7	1,06,768	74.63
Punjab	23,10,245	1,262.7	10,26,631	582.67
Rajasthan	55,76,237	3,382.8	70,19,074	4,103.84
Tamil Nadu	36,84,641	2,130.9	23,21,564	1,438.76
Uttar Pradesh	1,98,83,400	11,066.6	2,26,33,008	13,808.24

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 14, 1975

IIT intake to be frozen at present level

New Delhi, Jan. 13: All the five Institutes of Technology in the country have been directed by the President in his capacity as Visitor to restrict the intake of students for undergraduate courses at the present level and increase the number of admissions for post-graduate and research courses.

The decision to freeze admission at the undergraduate level has been taken on the basis of findings of the reviewing committees set up for each of the five IITs, in March 1970. The Reviewing Committee had submitted their reports two years ago and the Visitor's orders on the report were issued recently.

The review of the working of IITs has shown that far from becoming institutions of advanced learning in the fields of engineering and applied sciences, they have tended to become institutions to turn out engineering graduates like any other engineering college. The total intake in all the five IITs has been around 7,200 students at the undergraduate level, 2,000 students at the post-graduate level and 1,500 research scholars. It has been decided that the emphasis should be more on post-graduate and research courses than on first degree courses.

Even at the post-graduate and research levels, the IITs have been advised to explore new courses of an inter-disciplinary nature. An illustrative list of such courses has been forwarded with the suggestions that these should be developed mainly on a sponsorship basis, to ensure closer collaboration with user-industry and other research organisations.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 14, 1925

Sun's rays and wireless

Leaflet (Oxford), Mid. Jan. 13: When an eclipse of the sun takes place on Saturday, January 24th, American and British wireless authorities intend to co-operate in tests designed to elicit further scientific information regarding the effect of sun's rays on wireless transmission. A bank of the totality of the eclipse passes over the eastern portion of the United States and over the Atlantic ocean to between Shetland and Faroe Islands. As its path follows in a general way that of Transatlantic transmissions, the test signals will be sent from the British Government stations to Leaflet and Northolt on January 24th.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The death toll from the Los Angeles wildfires

24 After a weekend spent blocking the explosive growth of fires that destroyed thousands of homes and killed at least 24 people in the Los Angeles area, firefighters got a slight break with calmer weather but cast a wary eye on a forecast for yet more wind. At least 16 people are missing. AP

Odisha's pension for persons jailed during the Emergency

20,000 In 7. The government of Odisha announced a monthly pension of ₹20,000 and other benefits for people jailed during the Emergency. The State will also bear the medical expenses of people jailed during the period. PTI

China's combined import, export trade with Russia in 2024

244.8 In \$ billion. Combined imports and exports with Russia totalled \$244.8 billion in 2024, according to China's General Administration of Customs, up slightly from \$240.1 billion. Trade between both nations reached a record high last year. AP

EU's humanitarian aid for the nations of Ukraine and Moldova

148 In million euros. The European Union announced a new humanitarian aid package of 140 million euros for Ukraine and a further 8 million euros worth of aid for Moldova. The funding is to help with food, shelter, water and heating for Ukraine's people. REUTERS

Number of AIDS-related deaths in Tripura since 2015

512 The Chief Minister informed the Assembly that the State also recorded 7,707 HIV-positive patients till 2021, 8,943 till 2022 and 10,126 till 2023. The State witnessed the highest number of 74 deaths due to AIDS in 2021-22. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What led to the Azerbaijan Airlines jet crash?

Why has the Azerbaijani President said that the airliner was shot down? What are the rules regarding aviation safety in conflict zones? What are the legal issues which come into play? Was international humanitarian law breached?

EXPLAINER

Murali N. Krishnaswamy

The story so far:

On December 25, 2024, an Azerbaijan Airlines flight, 4K-AZ65, en route from Baku in Azerbaijan to Grozny, the capital of Chechnya in Russia, with 67 passengers and crew, faced a series of serious technical difficulties. The weather appeared to have been a factor as the crew attempted to divert to Makhachkala in Russia. There was another diversion to Aktau in Kazakhstan by the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea, but the plane impacted the ground about three kilometres from Aktau's airport, and 38 passengers were killed. There are conflicting reports on the cause, linked to a series of holes in a part of the fuselage and a survivor passenger's video footage. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said "we can say with complete clarity that the plane was shot down... We are not saying that it was done intentionally, but it was done". Azerbaijan has said that the aircraft "was ordered" to fly across the Caspian Sea after it was denied landing at two Russian airports. Data from the black boxes have been decoded in Brazil, where the twin-engine aircraft, an Embraer ERJ-190AR, was manufactured.

What are the other details?

The flight data site, Flightradar24, has told *The Hindu* that "We can confirm that the flight was operating in an area affected by GPS jamming and spoofing, hence we did not see a large portion of the flight. The last portion of the flight was operated in an area of good coverage."

The website of Azerbaijan Airlines says the airline, which is a member of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), is in full compliance with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards. The airline has announced the suspension of flights to several cities in Russia on the directive of the Azerbaijan State Civil Aviation Authority following preliminary results from an investigation into the crash.

A report on the President of Russia's official website, titled "Telephone conversation with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, December 28, 2024", says: "The presidents had a detailed discussion of issues regarding the December 25 crash... Vladimir Putin apologised for the fact that the incident happened in Russian airspace... It was noted during the conversation that the Azerbaijani passenger airliner was flying according to schedule and repeatedly tried to land at Grozny Airport. At that time, Ukrainian unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) attacked Grozny, Makhachkala and Vladikavkaz, and Russian air defence systems were repelling these attacks. The Russian Investigative Committee initiated a criminal case under Article 263 of the Criminal Code (violation of the rules for traffic safety and operation of the air transportation systems). Initial investigation is underway..."

A media report says that the flight data have been analysed by the Aeronautical Accident Investigation and Prevention Center (CENIPA), Air Force Command, the central investigative body that is overseen by the Brazilian Air Force. Investigators from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Russia are also involved.

On January 3, 2025, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, said 17 international experts including those from ICAO and the Interstate Aviation



Grotesque crash: Emergency specialists at the crash site of the Azerbaijan Airlines plane near the city of Aktau, Kazakhstan on December 25, 2024. REUTERS

Committee (IAC), the body representing some of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), were invited to ensure an "impartial and objective incident investigation".

What does the accident highlight about conflict zones?

Dr. Hassan Shahidi, President and CEO, Flight Safety Foundation, Virginia, U.S., has told *The Hindu* that the operation of civilian flights in conflict zones is a complex issue that involves assessing the risks posed by ongoing hostilities. ICAO guidelines stress the importance of states providing up-to-date risk assessments and advisories to airlines about potential threats, including military activity, missile launches, or other hazards. Airlines, in turn, must conduct their own risk assessments. Under international law, specifically the Chicago Convention and its Annexes, the responsibility for ensuring the safety of civil aviation lies with states. If the crash is found to be caused by actions directly linked to Russia, whether intentional or negligent, questions of state responsibility and accountability under international law may arise, which may include legal actions and findings of criminal liability.

As the flight is said to have been subjected to severe electronic and communication interference, Dr. Shahidi said, "spoofing (sending false signals) and jamming (blocking or disrupting signals) can have severe impacts on aviation safety, particularly on navigation and communication systems. These technologies could interfere with Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS), for example, GPS, ADS-B and transponder signals and communication systems. Enhanced cybersecurity measures, alternative navigation systems, and robust incident reporting mechanisms are needed to mitigate these risks."

An ICAO spokesperson has told *The Hindu* that ICAO has readied itself to support this investigation in the interest of aviation safety and security, deputing an ICAO expert to be deployed onsite as an observer to the international investigation team. He said, "The

investigation, as prescribed by Annex 13, shall be conducted with the sole objective of preventing future accidents and incidents, through the collection and analysis of safety data and information. Annex 13 calls for a preliminary report to be produced within 30 days of the accident, with a final report to follow within 12 months."

Conflict zones, with state and non-state players, pose immense risks to civil aviation and countries are responding to this growing threat with several initiatives. Canada's Safer Skies initiative is one such example that was in response to the shooting down of a Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 in 2020 after take-off from Tehran.

After the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in 2014, the Dutch Safety Board's final report gave rise to the "Risk Assessment Manual for Civil Aircraft Operations Over or Near Conflict Zones (Doc 10084, Restricted)" by ICAO.

The IATA Tactical Operations Portal gives aviation subscribers real-time alerts related to airspace and airport operations. It operates based on a five-level alerting system. Another group is the Expert Group on Risk Information overlying Conflict Zones (EGRICZ), which is an informal international group that puts out information on airspace conflict zone risk assessments. There is also the Safer Skies Consultative Committee which is a formal international platform that examines conflict zone threats.

Where are GPS interference hotspots?

Flightradar24 says that the jamming of signals has been prevalent in the area around the Black Sea, while spoofing is common around Iraq, Ukraine, Russia, and also the eastern Mediterranean Sea. It says that flight crew are aware of GPS jamming and spoofing and are trained in advanced risk management.

Have nation-states been involved in air accidents?

As the paper, "Navigating the Legal Horizon: Lawyering the MH17 Disaster" (2017), by Marieke de Hoon in the *Utrecht Journal of International and European Law*, points out, there have been about nine major cases. Some of them include the shooting down of a Cathay Pacific

airliner by China in 1994; Libyan Arab Airlines flight 114 by Israel in 1973; Korean Airlines flight 007 by the then-Soviet Union in 1983; Iran Air flight 655 by the United States in 1988; the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 by 'Libyan agents' in 1988; Sibir Airlines flight 1812 by Ukraine in 2001; and MH17.

What about the legal issues?

Dr. Mohammad Owais Farooqui, Assistant Professor, Department of Public Law, College of Law, University of Sharjah, UAE, has told *The Hindu* that the accident poses important legal questions with regard to jurisdiction under the principles of international law.

It has drawn attention to the absence, ownership, and management of responsibility and authority in international aviation regulation, compensation, and state responsibility. In the investigations, there should be focus on how the existing international legal works and the bases, for example, the Chicago Convention and the Montreal Convention, regulate such occurrences, he says.

The law applicable to the liability for damage in this context is the Montreal Convention. Azerbaijan Airlines may be financially responsible for making compensation payments, but things get complicated if state responsibility is engaged, more so in a missile strike scenario. If there is evidence that a state is involved, principles of state responsibility under the international law may prevail over the Montreal Convention and the responsible state may be under obligation to make reparation under customary international law.

Another area of law is international humanitarian law, he says. The Chicago Convention specifically bans the use of weapons against civil aircraft in flight, and if a state is involved, its conduct may amount to a breach of this law, especially if not in accordance with the principles of necessity and proportionality.

The Azerbaijan case, he says, highlights the necessity for more authoritative and codified regulation of international civil aviation activity, the enhancement of liability regulation at the global level, and cooperation within the international legal framework.

THE GIST

The website of Azerbaijan Airlines says the airline, which is a member of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), is in full compliance with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said "we can say with complete clarity that the plane was shot down... We are not saying that it was done intentionally, but it was done". Azerbaijan has said that the aircraft "was ordered" to fly across the Caspian Sea after it was denied landing at two Russian airports.

Azerbaijan Airlines may be financially responsible for making compensation payments, but things get complicated if state responsibility is engaged, more so in a missile strike scenario.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



In valis: Efforts underway to rescue the labourers trapped inside an illegal rat-hole coal mine, in Dima Hasao district, Assam, on January 9, 2025. PTI

Rat-hole mining: why the practice continues in spite of its hazards

Labourers mainly from Assam, Nepal, and adjoining Bangladesh risk the hazards of rat-hole mining — asphyxiation because of poor ventilation, collapse of mines due to lack of structural support, and flooding — to earn thrice or four times as much as working in farms or construction sites

Rahul Karmakar

On January 6, 2025, nine workers were trapped in a flooded coal mine in Assam's Dima Hasao district. Bodies of four of the workers have been recovered, and rescue work is still ongoing. In this article, dated November 29, 2023, Rahul Karmakar explains the dangers of rat-hole mining.

The story so far:
An oral question from the Supreme Court to the Union government continues to remain unanswered even as rescue workers recover bodies of workers who died trapped in a flood rat-hole coal mine at Dima Hasao district in Assam. On January 11, 2019, the top court had asked whether rat-hole mines could possibly operate in the northeast hills without the "connivance" of officials. "Lives are lost due to illegal mining. What about the officials who allowed this to happen?" the court had asked the government.

What is rat-hole mining?
Rat-hole mining, of two types, is so named as it involves digging tunnels 3-4 feet deep, barely allowing workers to crawl in and out. They have to squat while extracting coal with pickaxes. The side-cutting type of mining is usually done on hill slopes by following a coal seam — dark brown or black-banded coal deposited within layers of rock— visible from the outside. The second type called box-cutting entails digging a circular or

squarish pit at least 5 sq. metre in width up to a depth of 400 feet. Miners who drop down in makeshift cranes or using rope-and-bamboo ladders dig horizontally after finding the coal seam. The tunnels are dug in every direction from the edge of the pit, resembling the tentacles of an octopus. Some workers from Assam lost their lives in the coal mines of Meghalaya, dug using this crude method, before and after the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banned it in April 2014.

Why is such mining banned?
The government has little control over the land in Meghalaya, a Sixth Schedule State where the Coal Mines Nationalisation Act of 1973 does not apply. The landowners are thus also the owners of the minerals beneath. Coal mining boomed after Meghalaya attained statehood in January 1972. However, the terrain and expenses involved discouraged mine owners from employing advanced drilling machines. So, labourers mainly from Assam, Nepal, and adjoining Bangladesh risked the hazards of rat-hole mining — asphyxiation because of poor ventilation, collapse of mines due to lack of structural support, and flooding — to earn thrice or four times as much as working in farms or construction sites. Apart from issues of safety and health, unregulated mining led to land degradation, deforestation, and water with high concentrations of sulphates, iron, and toxic heavy metals,

low dissolved oxygen, and high biochemical oxygen demand. At least two rivers, Likhia and Myntdu, became too acidic to sustain aquatic life. These factors led to the NGT banning rat-hole mining in Meghalaya in 2014 while observing: "...there is unmet number of cases where, by virtue of rat-hole mining, during the rainy season, water flooded into the mining areas resulting in the death of many..." Illegal mining and transportation of coal, as mentioned in the interim reports of a one-man committee appointed by the High Court of Meghalaya, has continued despite the ban and the loss of lives. At least 17 miners were drowned in an illegal mine in the East Jaintia Hills district's Ksan in December 2018 after water gushed in from a river.

What led to the NGT ban?
Environmentalists and human rights activists began flagging the hazards of rat-hole mining in Meghalaya two decades ago. The campaign intensified after Impulse, a Meghalaya-based NGO, began addressing the issue of human trafficking and child labour in such mines. Three reports prepared by the NGO, first with the Nepal-based Esther Benjamin Trust in May 2010, the second with Aide et Action in December 2010, and the last with Human Rights Now in July 2011, estimated that about 70,000 children mostly from Bangladesh and Nepal were employed in these mines

because they were the right size to work in them. The State's Department of Mining and Geology refuted the claim but, under pressure from the National Human Rights Commission, admitted in June 2013 that 222 children were employed in rat-hole mines, specifically in the East Jaintia Hills district. The NGT ban came a year later.

What is the way forward?
Unlike in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, coal seams in Meghalaya are very thin. This, miners say, makes rat-hole mining more economically viable than opencast mining. The State has an estimated reserve of 576.48 million tonnes of low-ash, high-sulphur coal belonging to the Eocene age (33-56 million years ago). The stakes for a section of locals have been so high that the State government has been under pressure to facilitate the resumption of mining legally. In May 2023, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma said the Coal Ministry approved mining leases for four of the 17 prospective licence applicants. This would lead to the commencement of 'scientific' mining ensuring minimal environmental impact through sustainable and legally compliant extraction procedures. Anti-mining activists, who are assaulted by miners off and on, said that 'scientific' would eventually be a fancy tag in a State where profit has driven coal mining.

THE DAILY QUIZ

As the Z-Morh tunnel in J&K becomes operational, a quiz on tunnels across the world

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

- QUESTION 1**
Name the longest rail tunnel in the world which is also the first flat route through the Swiss Alps?
- QUESTION 2**
Name the railway system connecting the U.K. and France which has the world's longest undersea segment?
- QUESTION 3**
Name the under-construction tunnel in India which is slated to be the highest in the world once completed?
- QUESTION 4**
Name the 27 km long structure, which is technically a ring and not intended for transportation, that runs under the France-Switzerland border?
- QUESTION 5**
What is the significance of the tunnel passing through the Appalachian Mountains of southwest Virginia in the U.S.?



Visual question:
Name this tunnel-road structure. KSL

- Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:** 1. Name the hill on the western ghats where the Makara Jyothi in honour of Lord Ayappa is lit. **Ans: Ponnambalamedu**
2. The common name of *Curcuma longa* tied around the vessel of this dish. **Ans: Turmeric and Pongal**
3. The more commonly known name of Devavrata, the legendary warrior son of Shantanu and Ganga. **Ans: Bhishma**
4. The Kite festival is held in this State every year on January 14. **Ans: Gujarat**
5. The English equivalent of the Makara in the Zodiac. **Ans: Capricorn**
6. Alanganallur, Avaniapuram, and Palamedu are places famous for this activity. **Ans: Jallikattu**
Visual: The name given to this temporary makeshift hut used during the Magh Bihu festival in Assam. **Ans: Bheo-ghar**
Early birds: Tamal Biswas| Siddhartha Viswanathan| Tito Shildaditya| Piyali Tuli| Naimisha



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

**K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran**

"What news?"
"I am in receipt of a letter from my father. He says that in the eventuality of my not going to my village to see him this week, he will proceed here next month."
"Why don't you say 'I received a letter from my father. He says that if I don't go to his place, he will come here next week?' Be simple and straightforward in your speech and writing. There is a tendency among our people to use big words and roundabout expressions."
"It is impressive to use big words."
"It is impressive to the person who uses big words but not to the listener or reader. Lionel Trilling, a great critic, once said: 'We are fast losing the ability to say clearly and simply what we want to say. A time will come when people will be unable to say: 'They fell in love and married.' They would say: 'Their libidinal impulses being reciprocal, they activated their individual erotic drives and integrated them within the same frame of reference.'"
"I like it. It is impressive."
"It is impressively unintelligible. You will have to read the sentence several times to understand what it means. Some are addicted to this kind of language. Alexander Haig, a former U.S. Secretary of State, apparently was much addicted to it. The story goes that one of Haig's aides asked him for a pay increase. Haig could not say 'no'. Instead he replied: 'Because of the fluctuating predisposition of your position's productive capacity as juxtaposed to Government standards, it would be momentarily injudicious to advocate an increment.' The perplexed aide replied: 'I don't get it.' Mr. Haig replied: 'That's right.' When someone was asked to give advice on how to be a successful public speaker, he said: 'Well, in promulgating your esoteric cogitations and articulating superficial, sentimental and psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your extemporaneous decantations and unpremeditated expatiations have intelligibility and veracious veracity without redomontade and thrasonical bombast. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity, pusillanimous vacuity, pestiferous profanity and similar transgressions.'"
"It is fantastic. It is terrific."
"Do you understand what is said?"
"No. It is impressive, though. What does it mean?"
"It means speak simply, naturally and do not use big words. So you are impressed by big words. I am reminded of the village schoolmaster described by Oliver Goldsmith: While words of learned length and thund'ring sound amazed the gaping rustics ranged around
Still they gazed and still the wonder grew
How a small head could contain all he knew."
"O.K. you have given me examples of bad English. I know what to avoid. What are the essentials of good writing?"
"We will discuss them in the coming weeks."
Published in *The Hindu* on September 20, 1994.

Word of the day

Segue:
the act of changing smoothly from one state or situation to another, proceed without interruption, in music or talk.
Usage: He segued into another discourse.
Pronunciation: newsth.live/seguepro
International Phonetic Alphabet: /sɛɡweɪ/

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

'We will bring in more transparency in drug testing and operations'

Over the past year, the state health department has tackled major disease outbreaks and deaths, launched several initiatives, and promised corrective action or stringent measures when things didn't go as planned. This year, the department's focus areas include strengthening maternal care, ensuring transparency in drug procurement and testing, setting up a dedicated helpline, and upgrading taluk hospitals, according to Karnataka's Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao, who spoke with *DH's* Utkavi Balakrishna. *Excerpts:*

You announced strong measures to tackle maternal deaths after your department drew a lot of flak for deaths reported last year. What is the budget allocated and timeline for implementing these measures?

The maternal death rate in Karnataka has been declining. We will launch a mission with a Rs 96 crore allocation to bring preventable maternal deaths to zero shortly. We are trying to identify gaps, and reasons for maternal deaths, and whether they

could have been prevented. Our approach is multi-pronged, and the timeline is immediate. Regular, detailed maternal death audits will continue, and we'll increase visits from auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) and doctors to pregnant women. We'll also assess whether these women fall into high-risk categories early on.

What are you doing to streamline drug procurement and testing processes?

We've taken a significant step by merging the drug control and food safety departments into a single authority, headed by a commissioner. We will focus on improving our drug testing labs and ensuring that all test results are uploaded to the department's portal for public access. Karnataka State Medical Supplies Corporation Limited (KSM-SCL) will be completely overhauled. Tamil Nadu has the best procurement system in the country; we are bringing something similar here and making the process more competitive. We are calling tenders now for supply to begin from April.



What has been done since the Justice Cunha commission's interim report?

Two Cabinet subcommittee meetings were held with the deputy chief minister as chairman, and the report was discussed in detail. A unit has been established to oversee the implementation of the inquiry commission's recommendations. KSM-SCL's MD has issued notices to recover approximately Rs 170 crore from 274 suppliers of medicines and other materi-

The Tuesday Interview
With
Dinesh Gundu Rao
Health Minister, Karnataka

als related to Covid-19 management. FIRs have been filed against the then director of the medical education department, the financial assistant, and the health equipment officer over irregularities in PPE kit purchases. Additionally, notices have been issued to 35 suppliers to recover around Rs 35 crore related to Covid testing misconduct. The health department is also investigating allegations of misconduct in purchasing PPE kits and liquid oxygen.

Many of the demands put forth by the ASHAs remain unfulfilled...

Karnataka is among the top five states in terms of remuneration given to ASHAs. We have agreed to give them Rs 10,000 per month, effective from April 1. We will work to improve the RCH portal, as the ASHAs said they faced challenges using it. We have also agreed to give ASHAs who have worked for five years or more a 15-day paid leave per year, with an option to accumulate it year on year too.

What measures are being taken to prevent infectious disease outbreaks, especially dengue, this year?

We'll convene a meeting with the urban and rural development departments by mid-to-late February, well ahead of the monsoon season, to discuss surveillance strategies for vector-borne diseases like malaria, dengue, and chikungunya. Our teams will conduct surveys, collect serum samples from primary and community health centres in cities and towns, and put our existing plan on alert mode.

What is the status of the projects announced in last year's budget?

Tenders for critical care blocks in Udupi and Davanagere will be allocated soon. In Vijayapura, we are upgrading an existing unused structure as a critical care block and providing necessary equipment. Additionally, we will soon formally launch the daycare chemotherapy centers that will operate in a hub-and-spoke model in each district hospital, which will seat 10 beds for chemotherapy patients.

What projects do you plan to include in this year's budget?

We are not looking at any new big projects currently; we want to focus on implementing existing programmes and improving systems. Taluk hospitals need additional strengthening. We are expanding Gruha Arogya and the Puneeth Rajkumar Hrudaya Jyoti STEMI scheme this year. We also want to introduce a state-of-the-art ambulance service and establish a dedicated helpline that was discontinued years ago.

Extreme weather events — from the catastrophic Los Angeles fires to the crippling heatwave in India last year — are the consequences of a warming planet, say scientists

DAVID GELLES AND AUSTYN GAFFNEY

As Los Angeles burned for days on end, horrifying the nation, scientists made an announcement Friday that could help explain the deadly conflagration: 2024 was the hottest year in recorded history.

With temperatures rising around the world and the oceans unusually warm, scientists are warning that the planet has entered a dangerous new era of chaotic floods, storms and fires made worse by human-caused climate change.

The wildfires ravaging America's second-largest city are just the latest spasm of extreme weather that is growing more furious as well as more unpredictable. Wildfires are highly unusual in Southern California in January, which is supposed to be the rainy season. The same is true for cyclones in Appalachia, where Hurricanes Helene and Milton shocked the country when they tore through mountain communities in October. Wildfires are burning hotter and moving faster. Storms are getting bigger and carrying more moisture. And soaring temperatures worldwide are leading to heat waves and drought, which can be devastating on their own and leave communities vulnerable to dangers such as mudslides when heavy rains return.

Around the world, extreme weather and searing heat killed thousands of people last year and displaced millions, with pilgrims dying as temperatures soared in Saudi Arabia. In Europe, extreme heat contributed to at least 47,000 deaths in 2023. In the United States, heat-related deaths have doubled in recent years.

"We're in a new era now," said former Vice President Al Gore, who has warned of the threats of global warming for decades. "These climate-related extreme events are increasing, both in frequency and intensity, quite rapidly."

The fires raging in greater Los Angeles are already among the most destructive in US history. By January 10, the blazes had consumed more than 36,000 acres and destroyed thousands of buildings and at least 10 people were dead, and losses could total \$100 billion, according to AccuWeather.

Although it is not possible to say with certainty how specific weather events unfold, whether it was worsened or made more likely by global warming, the Los Angeles fires are being driven by a number of factors that scientists have linked to fire weather and that are becoming increasingly common on a hotter planet.

Last winter, Southern California got huge amounts of rain that led to extensive vegetation growth. Now, months into what is typically a dry season, Los Angeles is experiencing a drought. The last time it rained more than a tenth of an inch was on May 5. Since then, it has been the second driest period in the city's recorded history.

Temperatures in the region have also been higher than normal. As a result, many of the plants that grew last year are parched, turning trees, grasses and bushes into kindling that was ready to explode.

That combination of heat and dryness, which scientists say is linked to climate change, created the ideal conditions for an urban firestorm.

"Winter fires in Southern California require a lot of extreme climate and weather events to occur at once," said Park Wil-



A car and homes burnt by the Palisades Fire in Los Angeles, California. At least 16 people have died and over 100,000 people are still under evacuation orders. Over 12,000 structures have been destroyed in the fires. AFP

A new era: How climate change is driving disasters

liams, a climate scientist at UCLA. "And the warmer the temperatures, the more intense the fires."

A third factor fuelling the fires, the fierce Santa Ana winds, which blow West from Utah and Nevada, cannot be directly linked to climate change, scientists say. But the winds this week have been particularly ferocious, gusting at more than 100 mph, as fierce as a Category 2 hurricane.

Fires across the West have been getting worse in recent years. In 2017, thousands of homes in Santa Rosa, California, burned to the ground. The next year, the Camp fire leveled more than 13,000 homes in Paradise, California. In 2021, roughly 1,000 homes burned near Boulder, Colorado.

And from the boreal forests of Canada to the redwood forests of Oregon, large fires have been incinerating vast areas of wilderness.

"In the last couple years, we've seen an increase in extreme weather events and increasing amounts of billion-dollar disasters," said Kaitlyn Trudeau, a senior research associate focused on wildfires and the West Coast at Climate Central, a nonprofit research group. "It's very clear that something is off, and that something is that we're pumping an insane amount of carbon into the atmosphere and causing the climate systems to go out of whack."

As the Los Angeles fires consumed some of the most valuable real estate in the world, an unfolding tragedy became fodder for political attacks.

President-elect Donald Trump blamed California Governor Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, for the disaster. Trump inaccurately

claimed that state and federal protections for a threatened fish had hampered firefighting efforts by leading to water shortages.

And on January 9, Elon Musk, the world's richest man and analyst of Trump's, inserted himself into the debate over the role climate change plays in wildfires.

In Los Angeles, residents displaced by the fires watched in exasperation as the unfolding disaster was politicised.

"People are just wanting to blame somebody else," said Sheila Morawit, a climate activist who lives in Pacific Palisades and saw her neighbourhood burn. "What about all the dryness? What about the temperatures? There's so many pieces that are all pointing back to climate change."

News that 2024 was the hottest year on record was hardly a surprise. The previous hottest year was 2023. All 10 of the hottest years on record have come in the past decade. "We sound like a broken record but only because the records keep breaking," said Gavin Schmidt, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, which monitors global temperatures. "They will continue to break until we get emissions under control."

But the world is not getting emissions under control. In fact, countries last year released record amounts of planet-warming gases into the atmosphere, even as the consequences of climate change have become painfully clear. U.S. efforts to cut emissions failed last year.

The inevitable result: more heat and more extreme weather. In late September and early October, Hurricane Helene, which

scientists said was made worse by climate change, roared across the Southeast, unleashing deadly floods and landslides in several states, including North Carolina.

Months earlier, researchers showed that the devastating floods that swamped Porto Alegre, Brazil, would not have been so severe were it not for human-caused global warming. In May, scientists found the fingerprints of climate change on a crippling heat wave that gripped India, and found that an early heat wave in West Africa last spring was made 10 times more likely by climate change.

Art delaCruz, CEO of Team Rubicon, a nonprofit organisation that mobilises veterans and other volunteers to assist after disasters, was at home in Los Angeles when the fires broke out. His house is safe for now, and he is now preparing to deploy volunteers who will help clear roads and distribute aid.

Team Rubicon was founded after a group of former Marines went to Haiti to volunteer after the devastating earthquake in 2010. But delaCruz said that most of the disasters his organisation responds to around the world are linked to climate change.

"It's simple physics," he said. "Warmer air holds more water. The storms are increasing in frequency. The storms are increasing in severity. And the damage is unbelievable." There is no rain in the forecast for Los Angeles for at least another couple of weeks. But scientists are already concerned about what will happen when the rains do arrive.

Heat waves. Drought. Fires. Superstorms. Floods. Mudslides. These are the growing threats of a rapidly warming world. **The New York Times**

Systems thinking in the age of AI

MOHAMMED ANZYS

Conversations with my 10-year-old daughter often offer me fresh insights. Her reasoning and refreshing perspectives on most topics surprise me. Recently, she casually mentioned that she preferred Perplexity AI, an artificial intelligence-powered search engine, because it provides accurate and focused responses to her queries. Her matter-of-fact statement made me realise how often we underestimate technology's impact on our children.

While today's children are digital natives, they are often unaware of structured ways to make sense of the systems around them. They intuitively explore the world of technology but often lack the tools to connect the dots, understand patterns, or foresee outcomes in an intricately connected world.

As we move further into the generative AI era, where machines create, analyse, and influence, our need for a systematic way to think will need more than technical skills. They will need to embrace systems thinking.

Systems thinking is a holistic analytical approach that emphasises understanding how different parts of a system interrelate and function within larger contexts. It is a mindset that helps see the big picture, identify patterns, and grasp the interconnectedness. Developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1950, this methodology is now applied across fields to enhance problem-solving and decision-making.

For children, systems thinking is essential to thrive in an AI-driven future that demands critical thinking, adaptability, and the ability to navigate interdependence. With challenges like climate change and global supply chains, systems thinking will empower children to look beyond surface-level issues. It encourages them to recognise the relationships and feedback loops that shape outcomes.

Generative AI isn't just changing how we work; it's redefining the problems we solve. As AI operates within systems—creating art, writing code, or optimising logistics—children who understand systems thinking will be better equipped to collaborate with AI tools, anticipate ripple effects, and foster an innovative mindset.

With systems thinking, children will learn to ask meaningful questions like: How do systems work? What would happen if one part changed? Would there be unintended consequences? Such inquiries

will differentiate passive users from creative innovators.

Generative AI raises ethical questions, such as the intellectual property of AI-generated art and bias in AI systems. Teaching children systems thinking equips them to approach these dilemmas with nuance. They learn to identify stakeholders, weigh trade-offs, and consider long-term implications—essential skills in an era when technology often outpaces regulation.

Systems thinking teaches children to solve problems by seeing challenges as interconnected puzzles rather than isolated events. Children learn that systems, like teams, don't operate in silos and thus grasp the importance of diverse perspectives in solving complex problems. In a world of constant change, systems thinking teaches children to adapt and embrace uncertainty.

Teaching systems thinking Start with stories: Stories are powerful tools for helping children explore concepts. For example, a story about a forest ecosystem can teach children how plants, animals, and weather harmoniously interact.

Interactive simulations: Tools like LEGO coding or digital platforms can help children build and test their systems. These hands-on activities make abstract concepts come alive.

Encourage 'what if' questions: Ignite curiosity by prompting children to explore scenarios like: What if a key character in a story made a different choice? What if a supply chain was disrupted?

Link to real-world issues: Topics like climate change, urban planning, or AI ethics can be used to introduce systems thinking, as they will demonstrate how interconnected systems shape the world around us.

The Generative AI era marks a profound transformation. As machines create, analyse, and influence, our need for a systematic way to think will need more than technical devices, and rapid innovation will create unforeseen opportunities and challenges. As generative AI shapes the future, systems thinking will help children understand complex issues, make informed decisions, and handle change purposefully. Teaching systems thinking in schools is a valuable investment in our children and future. As AI becomes more common, we need leaders who can see the bigger picture and work with a clear vision and purpose.

(The writer is India MD of a global company that provides software solutions for property and casualty insurers)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

Maldives backs India's stand on Indian Ocean

Male (Maldives), January 13 Strategically situated, the Indian Ocean archipelago of Maldives today joined India in calling upon the United Nations to refrain from stepping up their activity in the Indian Ocean as the region needed peace for its development. Maldives' support was conveyed to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by Prime Minister Ahmed Zaki of the Maldives during their meeting this morning which resulted, in Mr. Zaki's words, in "very good understanding" in all matters discussed.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2000

Govt may set up panel soon for Constitution review

New Delhi, Jan 13 Bent upon setting up a commission to review the Constitution in spite of resistance by the Opposition, the BJP-led NDA government is likely to announce the terms and references for the panel, authoritative sources said today. The Union Law Ministry has already circulated a draft note among the Cabinet members on the terms and references for the commission. The issue could not come up for discussion before the Cabinet on Wednesday.

OASIS | ADITI PANT

Letting things be: The art of acceptance

It is easy to get caught in the bustling energy of urban clamor and believe that every moment requires our intervention. We rush to fix what we think is broken, to untangle what seems messy and to resolve what feels unsettling. However, sometimes, there's a profound wisdom and beauty in simply letting things be.

On the last day at work before Christmas break, I was preoccupied and a little rushed. When a situation seemed to go in a direction I had not anticipated, I quickly jumped to provide a rationale to resolve it, in the process making it more jumbled and convoluted. After moments

and moments of quiet reflection I did realise that clinging to outcomes can be stressful and futile, while allowing things to unfold naturally can bring peace.

There is a story that our initial perception can be fleeting, and attempting to fix our perceived outcome can be pointless. A student asks a Zen master, "Master, what is the nature of reality?" The master softly replies, "Look at the river flowing." The student examines the water gurgling past him and says, "I see,

it's always changing." The master responds, "No, the river is and has always been the same, it's your perception that changes." Our desire to act is often based on our own interpretation, not reality. We don't always need to steer the

waters—sometimes, we must trust their course. To let things be is to trust in the flow of life; the gentle art of accepting that not everything needs to be resolved right away, or perhaps, at all. There is wisdom in stepping back and embracing the space between action and resolution.



In these moments of stillness, clarity often arrives not through effort, but through patience. By allowing things to breathe and unfold in their own time, we empower ourselves to be present, to watch, and to find contentment in the uncertainty.

Sometimes the most Zen approach is to simply accept the situation as it is and in a world that pushes us to act, the quiet power of doing nothing can perhaps be the most profound act of all. When we let things be, with compassion, they come and go on their own without causing a ripple in the waters of our soul.

Live and Let DEI Thrive, Organically

Be diverse, but activism can't impinge on biz goals
Apple is going against the grain by persisting with DEI programmes, measures designed to make people of all backgrounds — regardless of ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality and gender — feel included in the workplace. It has asked shareholders to vote against a proposal to scrap its DEI programmes, even as its tech rivals are scaling back or scrapping similar schemes before Donald Trump's return to the White House.

In 2023, the US Supreme Court ruled that race-based affirmative action in college admissions is unconstitutional. This means corporate America will have to make extra effort to be inclusive. Instead, it is dialling down DEI programmes to be on the right side of the law, and in step with the Republican rhetoric on the issue. Meta joined the DEI-scrapping bandwagon last week taking the zeitgeist plea. This followed an announced relaxation of content moderation that re-emphasised politics across social media platforms. Apple does not share Meta's 'discomfort' over Trump's return. But that is not to suggest it will find the going easy with its DEI programme amid mounting legal challenges to the interpretation of equal opportunity. It is confident its hiring process allows the company to pursue a more inclusive agenda. Meta is not so sure. Yet, it wants the content it carries to include a broader spectrum of political views. Trump is holding out the olive branch to Silicon Valley over immigration. It may have to return the gesture through politically acceptable hiring.

This may not be too difficult because the process of neutralising the working environment is continuous. It may have been overdone, by some estimates, and dialling back need not conflict with a company's values. The Apple board is correct, though, to warn shareholders of activism that impinges on business goals. Companies need greater resilience against the ebb and flow of politics to be able to deliver to investors. They can use lawmakers' dependence on jobs to carve out political immunity. Sometimes, the politically incorrect course is the right one.

BRICSEIIU, Finding Purpose in Heft

BRICS is now BRICSEIIU, and it's sturdier for it. Indonesia's full membership into BRICS+ last Monday is an opportunity for strengthening multilateralism. With the world's most populated country, No. 2 and No. 4 nations, in the club, quantity does translate into geopolitical quality. It strengthens the hand of member countries like India that have served as a bulwark against BRICS morphing into an 'anti-West' forum. This means seeking and pursuing a 'free and active' foreign policy intent on balancing alliances and partnerships with new opportunities.

Unlike China and Russia, both major players and UNSC permanent members, or new members with major leverage such as leading oil and gas producers Iran and the UAE, India, Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia have no axe to grind with G7 countries. Their interest lies in developing access to funding, technology and trade opportunities. Spanning across the globe, this quartet within the current decet can work collaboratively to balance players with clearer geopolitical and geo-economic interests and agenda. They can also ensure that BRICS serves as the forum for countries that are big enough to matter, but lack the leverage to make their voice count. Given its diversity spanning the economic spectrum, India can anchor the quartet not as counterpoint within BRICS but as the compass — GPS, if you will — keeping the group true to its purpose.

The emerging quartet should leverage this partnership beyond BRICS to multilateral and plurilateral fora. This should allow the growing intergovernmental organisation to emerge as an ambitious yet pragmatic body that serves to articulate the needs of developing countries as they balance growth and development with other global challenges.



THINK ABOUT IT

Trying to come across as alpha, epsilon male Zuckerberg gets Machiavellian

'Masculine Energy'? Just Say 'Aggressive'

Mark Zuckerberg's been reading his Machiavelli. The creator of Facebook — the 2003 website that uploaded photos of female Harvard students in pairs, without permission from the university's online directories, and then asked users to choose which person was 'hotter' — isn't new to 'endangering gender' tactics. But his latest comments on why companies need more 'masculine energy' aren't new. The 15th-16th c. Florentine master political theorist, in his posthumously published 1532 treatise, *The Prince*, advised that 'it is better to be adventurous than cautious, because fortune is a woman, and if you wish to keep her under, it is necessary to beat and ill-use her; and it is seen that she allows herself to be mastered by the adventurous rather than by those who go to work more coldly'. Machiavelli wrote that it is up to masculine 'virtue' to tame her. 16th c. feudal Europe, one assumes, had different notions about the 'feminine' and women than 21st c. tech America. But equating being gung-ho and 'adventurous' with 'masculine energy' — implying that 'productive aggression' is a male trait — merely perpetuates gender clichés. Even if Zuckerberg probably means 'just the right Goldilocks' mix of testosterone and estrogen, he comes across as pure Niccolò-deon. Trying to schmooze Trump by flexing his tech bro-ness is a bit limp-wristed.

With continuity expected, India needs to quietly make progress in core aspects of the relationship

America-India First

Keep Calm And Carry On



Pranab Dhal Samanta

STATE OF PLAY

Immigration can't be the centrepiece of the India-US relationship because Donald Trump and his MAGA brigade are on a political hunt. Both countries have traversed a large strategic expanse over the past two decades to now allow themselves to be defined by policy, a domestic over-reign matter for any country. The strategic reorientation in the India-US relationship has happened around a convergence of national security interests, resulting in removal of political, legal and policy obstacles to further cooperation in sensitive areas like defence, nuclear, space and other areas that were 'no go' in the past.

Over the years, that has come to form the core of the relationship, which has rested and flourished on the pillars of political bipartisanship. There is no reason yet to infer that Trump has any different ideas. But it's not going to be business as usual either. The MAGA agenda is going to define Trump 2.0 and, by all accounts, this time, his administration is preparing to make a more organised and serious execution effort.

So, what adjustment does this mean for India? While one's easily tempted to forecast, the fact is, this is mostly going to be a wait-and-watch affair in the initial months. However, a fair assessment of areas where MAGA will have to express itself vividly to make a political impact for Trump can be made. This may provide a working frame for India.

The first would be on changing the global rules of order in manner that not just American primacy but its supremacy is re-established. This seeks to respond to the domestic anger that countries have benefited and grown at the US expense, with some like China looking to challenge America's global dominance. While the US still undertakes global responsibilities, its ability to control errant states, like in West Asia, is both reduced and challenged.

From a MAGA perspective, these countries fall in three broad categories: adversaries like China; allies that need fixing, like in Europe; and errant countries that need disciplining, possibly Iran.

While there can be additions, subtractions and reclassifications within these categories, the positive for India is that it doesn't fall in any of them. In fact, the signalling of continuity with Quad foreign ministers being invited to the inauguration on January 20. And all three foreign ministers — of India, Australia and Japan — announced their presence within hours of each other.

Notably, the Biden administration also showed a similar continuity to move ahead with Trump 1.0's India commitment in 2020. For instance, the in-principle go-ahead for selling an armed version of Predator drones was made by Trump 1.0, but was taken to fruit under Biden. Launch of ICET and recent relaxation in MTCR rules to enable sale of space launch vehicles and parts to India is part of the same continuity.

Can there be setbacks? Yes. With Trump, surprises are always going to be part of the calculations. What is by far from an Indian standpoint, it's advisable to secure the core issues and explore the doables, rather than push for early harvest deals, especially when there's no immediate impediment or concern.

The other MAGA front will be bureaucracy, a steel frame that Trump wants to recast through the DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) project. This is Trump's power fight with the one arm of the American state that has not just resisted but also challenged him institutionally.

A lot of the MAGA agenda could get trapped in this fight. But, here again, India could benefit from political continuity if it focuses on the core areas of the relationship and not get diverted on to issues that frame India as subject of domestic political debate. The bureaucratic buy-in to the overall India relationship is positive, but expectations vary particularly on democracy and rights issues.

It's possible that India may end up with relief on some of them. This is because Trump will want to reorder the set of expectations with all countries, including India. That could be another bag of surprises. But if the stakes attached to core aspects of the partnership remain high, India can renegotiate and manage these expectations better.



Hello, goodbye

The trickiest MAGA front for India will be the final one, which involves the economic repurposing of the US. In fact, the H-B visa debate is an economic issue, grounded in the reality of America's tech industry and demand for STEM graduates. Trade tariffs that Trump has spoken about will impact the balanced nature of India's growing trade with the US.

Again, these are key domestic MAGA issues where India can't get dragged into as a foreign policy hurdle. But it's from the strategic fundamentals, which have laid the path for semi-conductor and other investments in India, that a way forward could emerge in due course if India is seen through Trump's larger picture, as not an obstacle but partner in the MAGA endeavour.

India is not yet a political target for Trump. To remain so, it's important not to seek the limelight, but quietly make progress in the core aspects of the relationship, recognising that the immigration debate in the US is a domestic sovereign matter that must not be conflated with India's foreign and security policy approach towards the new government in Washington.

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Bid Biden Bye, So, What Now?

Seema Sirohi

Joe Biden is leaving the India-US strategic relationship with a solid docket of achievements — from the seabed to the stars, and beyond' — to quote the White House's lyrical drafters. There's much to celebrate and much to anticipate as Donald Trump takes office on Monday.

Over the last four years, India and the US have made qualitative and quantitative leaps, especially in tech and defence, making the partnership one of the (few) 'bright points' for an administration entangled in two wars and faced with a mismatch between an ambitious rhetoric and stark reality from Africa to Latin America.

The relationship grew robustly despite hurdles. There was a constant flow of visits by top officials of both sides. India (except VP Kamala Harris), a successful G20 summit, initiation of India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), growth of Quad, an agreement to establish Beijing's subversive tactics in the US and beyond.

NSA Jake Sullivan's farewell trip to New Delhi last week was to celebrate the progress: integrating key supply chains, breaking new frontiers in space, enhancing undersea domain awareness, launching a joint AI project for product to support all-domain command and control, starting research projects for processing technologies for critical minerals, reducing US export control barriers, and aligning strategies around national security implications of AI.

It is taking steps to remove the last three GAO organisations, including Bhahba Atomic Research Centre (BARC), from the entities list to allow for civil nuclear cooperation. Why wait until the last day to do it is anyone's guess. India's nuclear tests, which triggered US sanctions and a blacklisting, were way back in 1998.

What about the bumps in the relationship? Looking at ICET where much has happened, but only up to a point after which Russia took over and hesitation surfaced. Despite Indian assurances that integrity of tech won't be compromised or shared, US officials remain sceptical. They want harmonisation of India's export control laws with theirs.

The underlying expectation: India should align more with the US political agenda. Green lights such as Strategic Trade Authorisation (STA) status that India has not helped. The 'stop-start, stop-start' process reminds New Delhi of the two predecessor agreements — High Technology Cooperation Group (2001) and Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (2002), which didn't make much headway but did start the conversation. It makes ICET the third bite at the apple, an analogy that is not helpful.

The two US indictments against Gautam Adani and others have injected a certain amount of bitterness in the conversation. Going public didn't play well in New Delhi. Whatever the nature of the evidence, it was a choice to go after Adani. That the US legal system is sacrosanct is not cutting it when cases against Trump are falling by the wayside. How the Biden team frames the two indictments for Trump officials would determine future developments.

The White House meeting with Sikh leaders was another major irritant. Although India didn't officially raise it, the US side explained it as a coincidence. It begs the question: where were US officials going with it? They're not dealing with an India of the '80s and '90s. These principles won't give you strategic advantage. It irritates everyone and takes a lot of effort to repair an insider told me.

From Bangladesh to Myanmar to Pakistan, India sees developments differently. Forces unleashed and now at play in Bangladesh have upset Indian equities, to say nothing of the pernicious narrative being promoted that Indian policies were helping inflame Awami League (AL) supporters. Meaning only AL homes were lit with Indian power lines. American silence on the lack of democracy has angered Delhi.

Myanmar is a replay of old times, and the US wants to sanction 'the hell out of them', a policy that didn't work in the past and gave China the upper hand. Why not help them find a way out of the current political chaos? As for Pakistan, the less said the better.

There are other things we have normalised like bad air. Our cities are mired in the world's most polluted cities. They have no footpaths, suffer shameful traffic jams, and garbage sits in mountainous piles along city edges, irrespective of the ruling party.

Let us take our basic rights of clean air or water for granted. Indians lose their lives routinely because of administrative failure, be that fighting and winning elections is a desperately expensive task in India. Ideals often stand in the way.

Still, the controversy over the Delhi CM's reported extravagance is just a symptom of a larger malaise, not just in India but across the world, where those in public office somehow feel they are above the law. A certain culture of entitlement has crept into politics everywhere, whether it was former British PM Boris Johnson's 'partygate' — where the general public were made to isolate during Covid while he made merry — or the way political leaders commission vanity projects, even as commuters die on potholed roads.

In Delhi, no government has been able to clean the venerable Yamuna. In a viral video a few months ago, a devotee taking a dunk in the floating chemical foam for shampoo and was seen washing her hair with

lights Beijing's subversive tactics in the US and beyond.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Flowing With The Current

SWAMI SIVANANDA

To many people, especially Tamils, Makara Sankranti is used for the New Year. The corn that is newly harvested is cooked for the first time on that day. Joyous festivities mark the celebration in every home. Servants, farmers and the poor are fed and clothed and given presents. On the next day the cow, which is regarded as the symbol of the holy mother, is worshipped. Then there is the feeding of birds and animals.

In this manner, devotee's heart expands slowly during the celebration, first embracing with its long arms of love the entire household, then servants, then the cow, and all other living creatures. Without even being aware of it, one develops the heart and expands it to such proportions that the whole universe finds a place in it.

To spiritual aspirants, this day has a special significance. The month period during which the sun travels northwards is highly favourable to them in their march towards the goal of life. It is as though they are flowing easily with the current towards the Lord.

Pongal in south India is closely connected with agriculture. To the agriculturist, it is a day of triumph. He would have by then brought home fruits of his part of lot. Symbolically the first harvest is offered to the Almighty — and that is Pongal. To toil his task, his duty, but the fruit is now offered to Him — that is the spirit of karm yoga.



Bonku Babu's Friend

Satyajit Ray

During the weekend, Bonku Babu went to the house of Sriprati Majumdar's house, to spend the evenings with other regulars. On a number of occasions, he had come back thinking, 'Enough, enough, enough! The reason was simply that he could put up with the pranks played by the boys in his school, but when grown, even middle-aged men started making fun of him, it became too much to bear.

At these meetings that Sriprati Babu hosted in the evenings, nearly every evening, Bonku Babu, sometimes bringing his endurance to the point of breaking point. Only the other day — less than two months ago — he was talking about ghosts. Usually, Bonku Babu kept his mouth shut. That day, for some unknown reason, he opened it and declared that he was not afraid of ghosts.

That was all. But it was enough to offer a golden opportunity to the others. On his way back later that night, Bonku Babu was attacked by a 'spook'. As he was passing a tamarind tree, a tall, thin figure leapt down and landed on his back. As it happened, this apparition had smeared black ink all over itself, possibly at the suggestion of someone at the meeting.

Translated from Bengali by Gopa Majumdar

Chat Room

Make an Offer We Can't Refuse

Apogee 'How to Up Your Tax Appeal' by Sugata Ghosh (Jan 13), it's surprising that our economy is not growing at the pace predicted by many policymakers, including RBI. The main cause of slowing growth has been poor demand for products and services in the wake of persistent weakening of purchasing power of people belonging to the middle and lower middle classes, who contribute significantly in boosting private consumption. It may be recalled that private consumption accounts for more than 60% of our GDP and cannot be ignored by the policymakers for much longer. Even if we need to frame concrete measures in the budget for boosting the purchasing power of the consumers lest our economy experience more headwinds in its march to growth, Mahesh Natarani Indore

When Will You Make Them Accountable?



Anjana Menon

Elections provide a real reckoning of the state of our democracy. It's when voters are wrenched out from tightly shut closets and dirty laundry is aired. Ahead of the Delhi polls next month, staggering figures have emerged of how much then-CM Arvind Kejriwal spent on renovating his residence.

In response, he alleged the PM spent far more on his home, reducing it to a sludge on who scored better at squandering public funds. The sobering truth is that our elected political class rules with impunity and little accountability and could well be dubbed our new imperial overlords.

The controversy on the spends, using taxpayers' money, came to light after a CAG report said that renovating the CM's house cost the public more than ₹63 cr; spiralling to ₹1.2 cr, the estimated budget. The makeover included a refrigerator worth ₹2.2 lakh, a microwave oven for ₹1.8 lakh, and

two steam ovens for ₹5.5 lakh. In Delhi, where summer brings power cuts and people use the use of air-conditioners, it turns out even toilets in the CM's bungalow needed A/Cs. Possibly between their culinary excesses and the aftermath in wastewaters, they needed absolute privacy too, which must explain fancy curtains worth nearly ₹1 cr.

None of this would have alarmed the average Indian voter, who is, by now, numb to socialisation of public funds for political grandstanding and leadership whims. What makes it peculiar for Kejriwal is that he came to office on the plank of frugality —



No more metaphysics, please

there was an extraordinary ordinariness to him — held tight in the signature muffled wrapped around his head, his best-up middle-class car, and his background as a revenue officer. He rode on Gandhian Anna Hazare's pushback against a corrupt, crony capitalism and rent-seeking that marked the fall of Congress-led UPA.

But that was nearly 14 years ago, and it doesn't take too long to know that fighting and winning elections is a desperately expensive task in India. Ideals often stand in the way. Still, the controversy over the Delhi CM's reported extravagance is just a symptom of a larger malaise, not just in India but across the world, where those in public office somehow feel they are above the law. A certain culture of entitlement has crept into politics everywhere, whether it was former British PM Boris Johnson's 'partygate' — where the general public were made to isolate during Covid while he made merry — or the way political leaders commission vanity projects, even as commuters die on potholed roads.

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THE IDEAS PAGE

How, not why MSP

In a democracy, governments will intervene in agri markets with price distorting mechanisms that favour consumers. This needs to be balanced by assured price supporting mechanism for farmers



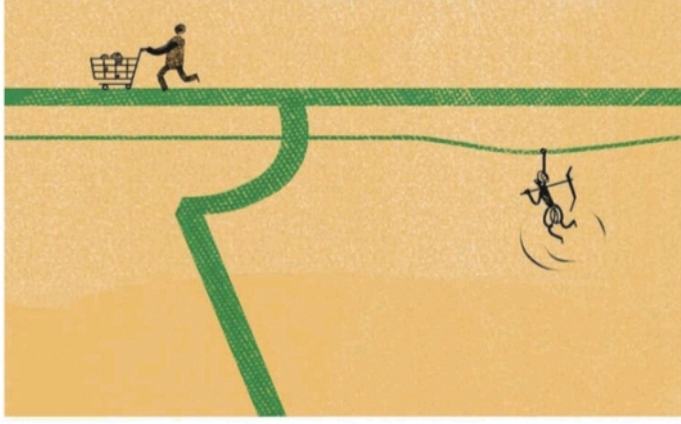
DESHKAAL
BY KAVITA KURUGANTI,
KIRAN VISSA AND
YOGENDRA YADAV

IT IS DISAPPOINTING to see a distinguished agricultural economist damn the flagship demand of the country's farmers as no less than a "folly". And that too at a time when a farmer leader is on a fast unto death in support of this demand. No doubt, farmers and activists can commit follies. But so can economists, especially when driven by an ideology.

In arguing against the demand for legal guarantee for MSP, Ashok Gulati ("It would be a folly", *IE*, January 10) acknowledges that farmers deserve better prices and that they don't get the MSP announced by the government, but vehemently opposes legal guarantee as the solution for it would distort agricultural markets and would not be "in line with the liberalisation of the economy". Over the last few years, many commentators and economists have revised their scepticism about the demand for MSP entitlement, shifting the debate from why to how. The farmers' movement too has nuanced its demand to meet initial objections. It is, therefore, particularly disappointing that Gulati has refused to move with the times.

There is a national hypocrisy on this issue: Everyone loves MSP as long as it is not implemented. No one argues that the government should declare a fair "minimum price" or that it must not "support" farmers in realising this price. The trouble begins when farmers start expecting — worse, demanding — that this promise be made real, when a concrete proposal for assured realisation of this promissory note is put forward. Gulati reflects the same moral ambivalence. He does not question the idea of an MSP — though he hints MSP may have become an outdated concept — and talks about ways to make it more "effective". At the same time, he offers no concrete solution other than creating a price stabilisation fund for pulses and oilseeds. Freer markets — free of price distorting interventions in favour of the farmers or the consumers — seem to be his solution. He wants an end to the "inherent consumer bias in the agri-price policy" that results in price suppressing policies that penalise the farmers. But the eminent professor doesn't seem to know what an ordinary farmer actually knows: In a poor country with electoral democracy, no government can afford to allow food prices to go up. While the government will be happy to use his expertise to avoid robust intervention to implement MSP, they would continue to interfere in markets and international trade against farmers, as they have done for 33 years post-liberalisation. So, this price-suppressing bias of the government will have to be counter-balanced with an assured price support mechanism for farmers. That is legally guaranteed MSP. Thus, the demand is not a plea for "compassion" as Gulati thinks; it is anchored in an unwritten social contract between the Indian state and farmers. Having breached its part of the contract, now the state wants to abrogate it, leaving the farmers to face climate change and unfair global competition.

Gulati conflates the demand for assured



MSP with a demand for universal state procurement or for a legally punitive ban on trade below the MSP. Both these strawmen are easy to demolish: The former is impossible, the latter is counter-productive. He does not bother to notice that these two early formulations of the demand have given way to more sophisticated mechanisms for the assured realisation of MSP. In our article last week ("MSP guarantee is feasible", *IE*, January 7), we had proposed a bouquet of four inter-related policies to ensure that every farmer can realise at least the MSP. First, the government should widen the food basket in the Public Distribution System and expand its current levels of procurement at MSP. Second, there should be a well-funded and carefully-targeted market intervention scheme to prevent prices from falling below the MSP. Third, the import-export policy should be tweaked to ensure that it is not price suppressing for domestic markets. Finally, if all these measures fail to yield MSP (as would be the case in many crops, given the needs of poor consumers), the government should be legally mandated to compensate farmers by way of the Price Deficit Payment for the difference.

Gulati does not engage with this proposal, or a better formulation that he knows, in its entirety. His only response is to the price deficiency payment, which he rejects as a legally-mandated MSP would impede price discovery and promote collusion. Here again, he uses a convenient, weaker opponent in the failed "Bhuvanar" experiment in Madhya Pradesh. Unfortunately, Harish Damodaran's otherwise persuasive advocacy of MSP ("Add a new layer to MSP: PDF", *IE*, January 10) also relies on the MP model where the farmer gets compensated based on the receipt from the trader. This can lead to collusion between farmers and traders. We had suggested a different modality, drawing upon Haryana's Bhavantar scheme for bajra, that does not ask farmers for a receipt of sale (Yadav wrote an article on Haryana's Price Deficiency Payment Scheme in *The Print*, November 3, 2021). Farmers can be compensated on a pro-rata basis, depending upon official data on area sown, average productivity in the locality and the average price deficit. Gulati chooses not to engage

Strangely, Gulati chooses the example of rapid recent growth in fishery, meat, poultry, milk and horticulture to prove that "market-based systems have performed much better than the government-controlled MSP regime". This fast growth is a result of changing consumer preferences or opening up of export markets, that has nothing to do with having or not having MSP. Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the cumulative growth of MSP crops mustard (82 per cent) and green gram (113 per cent) outdoes horticulture crops (51 per cent) and milk (78 per cent). Besides, the example of milk illustrates that such a growth need not trickle down to farmers in all kinds of markets — that it needs state intervention.

with this more robust counter-proposal.

Strangely, Gulati chooses the example of rapid recent growth in fishery, meat, poultry, milk and horticulture to prove that "market-based systems have performed much better than the government-controlled MSP regime". This fast growth is a result of changing consumer preferences or opening up of export markets, that has nothing to do with having or not having MSP. Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the cumulative growth of MSP crops mustard (82 per cent) and green gram (113 per cent) outdoes horticulture crops (51 per cent) and milk (78 per cent). Besides, the example of milk illustrates that such a growth need not trickle down to farmers in all kinds of markets — that it needs state intervention.

Gulati also alludes to "several cost estimates" being floated by "some activists", but dismisses it *a priori*. We have revised the estimate we offered last week (to include all 20 crops covered by MSP, except sugarcane, jute and copra for which independent mechanisms exist, and to correct for one computational error for mustard) based on state-wise, crop-wise calculation of price deficit for 2022-23. As per this calculation, the upper limit of government expenditure for guaranteed MSP price deficit payment that year would have been Rs 26,565 crore (0.6 per cent of budget and 0.1 per cent of GDP) going by present MSP or Rs 1,68,227 crore (4.26 per cent of budget and 0.62 per cent of GDP) if we go by the revised MSP (C2-50 per cent) demanded by the farmers. If the public sector banks could afford to write off Rs 2.08 lakh crore of debts and the government could waive Rs 1.09 lakh crore of corporate taxes in the same year (2022-23), why this unease about supporting farmers who feed the country?

Since Gulati seems to agree that MSP should be made "effective", would he like to suggest an assured mechanism for that? Or is his opposition due to the unease of a die-hard free market ideologue?

Kuruganti is co-convenor of Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), Vissa is co-founder of Rhythms Swarajya Vedika, a farmers' organisation in Telangana and AP, and Yadav is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor of Bharat Jodo Abhiyan

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"While the majority of Americans still support capital punishment, for the first time most young Americans oppose it — with support falling slightly among young Republicans too. That should give heart to abolitionists in the US and globally."

— THE GUARDIAN

Growing together

Claims about rising inequality over-estimate income share of the richest, don't account for drastic reduction in poverty



RAM SINGH

INCLUSIVE GROWTH is critical for us to become a developed nation by 2047. A leading indicator is improvements in the living standards of those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Another is the direction of changes in income inequality. Apart from being a moral issue, distribution of national income determines the composition of aggregate demand and hence, the allocation of resources to different production processes, which, in turn, will affect the pace towards Viksit Bharat.

The only direct source of information about income distribution in India is survey-based PRICE ICE360 data. It shows that income inequality has decreased in recent years, and the middle class has expanded.

However, headlines claim that income inequality is rising. Most such claims focus on the income shares of the richest 1 per cent, as estimated by the World Inequality Lab (WIL). Little attention is paid to its nature and limitations.

The WIL estimates for low- and middle-income households are based on a source that takes income to be less than expenditure for as many as 80 per cent of Indian households. As an inevitable consequence of using this implausible scenario — in which all households but the top 20 per cent spend more than they earn — the income of the bottom 80 per cent is underestimated. The outcome is an overestimation of the national income shares of top incomes and an underestimation of the low- and middle-income groups' shares.

Still, WIL estimates show that the national income share of the bottom 50 per cent rose from 13.9 per cent in 2017 to 15 per cent in 2022, whereas the share of the top 10 per cent fell from 58.8 to 57.7. The national income shares of the top 1 per cent are estimated to have been rising since 1991. Since 2014, however, the rate of increase has added up to a little over one percentage point.

Additionally, top income estimates by WIL and PRICE ignore two factors — reduction in marginal tax rates over time and improvements in tax administration. Part of the increase in the reported top income levels is attributable to the peak rates plummeting from 93.5 per cent in the 1970s to 39 per cent now, a phenomenon described as the Laffer Curve. Moreover, better tax administration accounts for at least a 25-basis-point rise in the top incomes since 2014.

Further, the extent of inequality is exaggerated, as WIL and PRICE estimates ignore welfare transfers to low-income groups and tax paid by high-income groups. For instance, in the assessment year 2024, the top 1 per cent of individual taxpayers accounted for 17.5 per cent of reported income, but their contribution to total tax paid was 42 per cent. If we consider all taxpayers, the top 1 per cent accounted for 49 per cent of reported income but 72.77 per cent of the total tax paid.

Simply put, the actual post-tax disposable income of top-income taxpayers is 65-

75 per cent of the incomes used in headline-grabbing estimates. For low-income groups, in contrast, estimates are based on incomes smaller than their actual income, which is augmented by welfare transfers. Correcting for these omissions will substantially reduce the inequality estimates.

A major determinant of inequality is the rate of return on capital vis-à-vis the GDP growth rate. When the former is higher, the national income share of capital owners rises over time. It worsens inequality, as capital tends to be owned by a relatively small group. Conversely, when the economy's growth rate is higher than the post-tax returns on capital, an increasing share of national income goes to labour. This reduces inequality, *ceteris paribus*.

Taking the average CPI inflation during the last decades as 5.5 per cent, the average real rate of return on capital is less than 2 per cent. During the last five years, the weighted average real lending rates, an indicator of the return on productive capital, have been less than 4.0 per cent. In contrast, the average GDP growth rate has been above 6 per cent.

The cost of equity is another good proxy for return expectation from capital. According to a 2024 report of NSE and EY, India Inc.'s average cost of equity is 14.2 per cent. Adjusting this for risk, inflation, and taxes, the expected returns are less than the growth rate. So, the macro dynamics of the production process are conducive to inclusive growth.

Of course, some companies, especially in the small- and mid-cap segments and start-ups, have delivered returns well above GDP growth rates. This has benefited more than 14 per cent of Indian families through mutual fund investments.

Yet another testimony of economic dynamism is the finding that inherited wealth is not the primary determinant of individual incomes. Sixty per cent of the top-income reporters are not from the wealthiest families. India has produced the largest number of first-generation billionaires who owe their rise to the booming start-up ecosystem.

V Anantha Nageswaran, Chief Economic Advisor, is spot-on in emphasising poverty reduction as the litmus test of inclusive growth. The NSSO's Household Consumption and Expenditure Surveys 2023 and 2024 show that consumption growth during 2011-12 and 2023-24 has almost eradicated extreme poverty. Since 2011-12, consumption inequality has also come down. The food basket has become healthier as shares of milk products, fish and meat, and fresh fruits have increased. These improvements are even more striking for the bottom 20 per cent of households, even if we ignore the food items received free of cost. The proportion of rural households consuming fresh fruits rose from 63.8 per cent in 2011-12 to over 90 per cent in 2023. The proportion of the poorest 20 per cent households with vehicle ownership rose from 6 per cent in 2011-12 to 40 per cent in 2023.

These gains by the traditionally disadvantaged groups are matched by equally impressive gains on the educational front — the increases in the gross enrolment ratio are the highest for SC and ST students. While there is little room for complacency, Indian growth is inclusive on most counts.

The writer is director, Delhi School of Economics. Views are personal



SUMANA ROY

"PROFESSOR, YOU SHOULD perhaps put your trigger warning at the head of the Draupadi story for the next class," a student whispers into my ears. I thank her, though I don't know what to do with this piece of information. Both the student and I had first read Mahasweta Devi's story in Bangla; her classmates were reading it in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's English translation, where much of the violence, the coarseness and corrosive character of Dopey Mehen's life, had been gentrified. It's the same register in which newspaper reports detailing such crimes on women in India come to us — not a single report comes with a "TW" (Trigger Warning) of course.

Trigger warnings are an unexpected way of experiencing literature, a newly institutionalised reader-response criticism. It is not hard to understand the culture of protectionism that has given birth to such necessities, but there's also something else that is undeniable — it is primarily an upper-class phenomenon. I'm not the first person to say this — students in my class, while discussing Devi's story, point it out themselves: A woman like Draupadi wouldn't have access to a world with beep alerts that warn her of the violence of men in a world that is a relentless test of one's unpreparedness and resilience. This phenomenon is

As if words were arrows

There is a new genre called Hurt Sentiment Literature

also a manifestation of what I understand as "about" culture. To put a "TW" before a literary text is to prepare the reader for what they are to expect, and, though only related tangentially to the idea of genre, it is actually a perpetration of this new culture where everything must come to us in paraphrase: "I will not read something because it is about this." More than the bewilderment with this idea of an antiseptic life, this room with curtains that allows us to draw them the moment we are forewarned, is my inability to understand this new culture of coding literary texts, a kind of classification with its biases and consequent anticipatory generic responses to settings and situations. There's a more common name for trigger warnings outside a controlled culture such as academia or publishing — it is "hurt sentiments". While the unit of "trigger warning" is the individual, that for "hurt sentiments" is usually a group. Like examiners, they pick on words and phrases, and, usually resort to the most childish manner of interpretation — the safety-laziness of the liberal — they read to be "hurt", as if words were arrows and their dartboards.

A complaint was recently filed at Canacona police station against the Goan writer Datta Damodar Naik for "hurting religious senti-

ments". Naik had apparently called the temple priests of Shree Samsthan Gokarn Paragali Jeevottam Math "dacoits and looters". As I read the report, I found myself thinking of the many songs that call little Krishna our "mukhan chor Nandkishore". Why haven't cases been registered against the singers — or the anonymous writers — of these songs that call Krishna a thief? Why aren't "TA" alerts given to prepare readers for the violence in the Mahabharata? "Literature" derives from "littera", meaning both, characters in the alphabet and written communication. The latter would quite obviously have been written with the intent of getting a response — a letter from the receiver. The same impulse, of something in the DNA of the literary text that prompts one to act, whether to sit up and write a letter or rush on to the street, compelled by a vision of radical and equal love, is the reason why all literature is activism — it makes us act, the not word for "activism", the way Krishna's words move Arjuna to action. That is the primary effect of literature — it makes us move, the reason for the emergence of an expression such as "I was moved by...". This is the same question that the rasa theorists wanted to investigate — what is the difference between emotion and art-emotion, *rasa*?

But the Hurt Sentiments Reader's response

is not activism. "To him, his society assumes a parental status, his reaction to it is almost filial, veering between affection and gratitude on the one hand and resentment and rebellion on the other." Though the artist K G Subramanyam writes this to explain the relationship between "tradition" and the "creative individual" in *The Living Tradition*, I think it is also useful to explain the category of the "Hurt Sentiments" Reader: "Most traditional forms have more than pragmatic constituents, such as the emotional proclivities of a people, or their attitudinal archetypes or certain generic characteristics that unite them into a culture group and thereby invest them with a special sense of group identity. The disappearance of that group identity makes them feel culturally impoverished or disoriented."

It seems now that there only two possibilities that remain: That publishers use a HSP (Hurt Sentiment-Proof) mark on books, like certificates issued by film censor boards, or we have a new genre called Hurt Sentiment Literature, where we go to a bookshelf to get hurt, like we go to the thriller, to sweat in our armpits.

Roy, a poet and writer, is associate professor at Ashoka University. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ARBITRARY UGC

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Sarkar & Campus" (*IE*, January 13). The draft UGC Regulations 2025 which allows senior industry experts and public administrators to apply for a VC's post is a subterfuge to attempt to erode the autonomy of universities. With no fixed qualification for the calibre and eminence of an industry expert, this is an arbitrary step that could have grave consequences. VCs appointed by the Centre would not inspire confidence. The excellence of this sector should be free from political bangles.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

SEXISM AT WORK

THIS REFERS TO the article, "No, Mr Subramanyam" (*IE*, January 13). V&T chairman's statement about working 90 hours a week is a stark reminder of the need for a paradigm shift in corporate attitudes. Just look at the implicit sexism in Mr Subramanyam's objectionable comment about starting at one's wife! Women often bear the disproportionate burden of household responsibilities even when they contribute equally to the workforce. Corporate leaders should recognise and respect the time and energy invested by women in family roles.

Sankar Paul, Noida

MANUFACTURED ROW

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Anthem row intensifies in TN as Ravi slams CM 'arrogance'" (*IE*, January 13). Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi leaving without addressing the Assembly on account of the national anthem not being played at the beginning of the session smacks of politicking. There is no nation-wide practice. In Nagaland, the anthem was sung for the first time in the Assembly in 2021, two years into Ravi's governorship. So why is Ravi manufacturing this controversy?

L R Murnu, New Delhi

A GREAT DISSERVICE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "An ill-judged speech" (*IE*, January 13). Justice Shekhar Yadav's speech deserves condemnation from all sections of society. The office of a judge is one of reticence, which has to be practiced both inside and outside the court. Judges have to be cautious of the platforms they appear on. Their speeches have to be carefully crafted. Polarising remarks must be avoided because their office is bound by public trust. Spreading hatred between communities will do a great disservice to the judiciary and to the nation at large.

Nupur Sharma, Chazabud

What is the Genome India project? Why does it matter?

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 13

THE DEPARTMENT of Biotechnology recently announced a new platform and framework for sharing its human genome dataset, sequenced under the Genome India project.

Comprising 10,000 genome sequences of healthy individuals from 99 ethnic populations in the country, this dataset has helped create a baseline map of India's genetic diversity. The second phase of the project will see researchers sequence genomes of people with specific diseases.

What is a genome? How are genomes sequenced?

Every individual inherits from their parents an instruction manual that decides how their body develops and functions — from their height and the colour of their hair, to the diseases they may inherit or are predisposed

to. This manual, known as the genome, is made of twisted paired strands of deoxyribonucleic acid, commonly known as DNA.

Each strand of DNA comprises four chemical units, or bases, denoted by the letters A, C, G, and T. Just like the order of letters determines the meaning of a word, the order of these bases determines the meaning of the information encoded in the DNA. Various combinations of these bases — there are around three billion pairs in the complete human genome — thus determine the unique genetic makeup of each individual.

Sequencing simply refers to determining the exact order of the bases in a strand of DNA. To do this, researchers first extract genetic information from blood — virtually every single cell in the body contains a complete copy of one's genome. But handling the entire genome is difficult.

Researchers thus cut the genome up into smaller pieces, tag these pieces, and decode these smaller chunks of genetic material.

This information is then re-assembled using the tags to create a whole genome.

What is the Genome India project? Why is it important?

With some 4,600 distinct populations spread across the country, India is genetically very diverse. The Genome India project, approved in 2020, aims to capture this diversity. Researchers from 20 scientific institutions have come together to sequence 10,000 genomes under the project — the Department of Biotechnology aims to eventually sequence up to a million genomes.

This can be helpful in a number of ways. It can help identify genetic basis or risk factors for various diseases, which can in turn be used to develop targeted therapies and diagnostic tests. Newer therapies for several diseases by modifying, deleting, or adding certain genes, which makes it impor-

tant to first identify the genes that lead to certain diseases.

■ Of the 135 million genetic variations identified in the 10,000 genomes sequenced so far, some seven million were not found in other global databases. A uniquely Indian dataset may thus help identify specific genetic variations found in Indian populations.

■ This may further help scientists identify the frequency at which certain genetic variations, which are known to cause disease, appear in the population, and thus recognise how common a disease might be. For example, the MYBPC3 mutation known to lead to cardiac arrest at a young age is found in 4.5% of the Indian population but is rare globally.

■ An Indian database can also help identify resistance-indicating variations — the genes (or lack thereof) that might make certain medicines or anaesthetics ineffective in certain populations. For instance, people belonging

to the Arya Vysya community of South India lack a certain gene that precludes them from properly processing common anaesthetics, which can even have fatal effects on them.

What will the second phase of the project entail? How will the data be shared?

The second phase will involve sequencing genomes of people with specific diseases. This will enable researchers to compare diseased genomes with healthy ones, and help them identify genes that cause or predispose a person to certain diseases. Researchers may also be able to study the genetic changes that occur when someone is afflicted with a certain disease.

The team is currently in discussion with experts to identify the diseases for which genomes should be sequenced, and the number of genomes that need to be sequenced for each disease to produce meaningful results. Among diseases most likely to be included

would be different types of cancers, chronic conditions such as diabetes, various neurological or neurodegenerative diseases, and certain rare diseases found in Indian populations.

The data produced by the project, however, will not be universally available for the time being. "We have to be very careful how we share this highly sensitive data. The data will only be available to research institutes that partner with us for the study," Dr Suchi Ninawe, senior scientist from the Department of Biotechnology, said.

To maintain the anonymity of the data, it will also be double-blinded. Samples sequenced by a partner institute will be encoded before being uploaded to the central database, and then encoded once again when shared with researchers. Ninawe said. Scientists wishing to utilise the data will have to respond to a call for proposals, and collaborate with the Department of Biotechnology. Their research will be funded by the government.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

HOW THE UNITED STATES' NEW AI-CHIP RULE WILL WORK

THE US government on Monday said it will issue a new regulation to regulate the flow of the most sophisticated US-designed Artificial Intelligence chips and technology to other countries.

Which chips will be restricted?

The rule will restrict the export of chips known as graphics processing units (GPUs). These are specialised processors originally created to accelerate graphics rendering. But beyond their gaming applications, the ability of GPUs — such as those built by US-based industry leader Nvidia — to process different pieces of data simultaneously, has made them valuable for training and running AI models.

For example, OpenAI's ChatGPT is trained and improved on tens of thousands of GPUs. The number of GPUs needed for an AI model depends on how advanced the GPU is, how much data is being used to train the model, the size of the model itself, and the time the developer wants to spend training it.

What is the new regulation?

To control global access to AI, the US is expanding restrictions on advanced GPUs used to train advanced AI models.

The limits on GPUs for most countries in the new rule are set by compute power, to account for differences in individual chips. Total processing performance (TPP) is a metric used to measure the computational power of a chip. Under the regulation, countries with caps on compute power or support the most demanding AI applications on the planet," he said.

But the caps do not reflect the true

limit on the number of H100 chips in a country. Companies like Amazon Web Services or Microsoft's Azure cloud unit that meet the requirements for special authorisations — also known as "Universal Verified End User" status — are exempt from the caps.

National authorities also are available to companies headquartered in any destination that is not a "country of concern". Those with national Verified End User status have caps of roughly 320,000 advanced GPUs over the next two years. "The country caps are specifically designed to encourage companies to secure Verified End User status," Kaushik said, providing greater visibility to US authorities about who is using them, and helping to prevent GPUs from being smuggled into China.

Which places can get unlimited AI chips?

Eighteen destinations are exempt from country caps on advanced GPUs, according to a senior administration official. These are Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Spain, Sweden and Taiwan plus the United States.

What is being done with 'model weights'?

Another item being controlled by the US is known as "model weights". AI models are trained to produce meaningful material by being fed large quantities of data. At the same time, algorithms evaluate the outputs to improve the model's performance.

The algorithms adjust numerical parameters that weigh the results of certain operations more than others to better complete tasks. Those parameters are model weights. The rule sets security standards to protect the weights of advanced "closed-weight", or non-public, models.

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HARISH DAMODARAN

AMID SHORTAGES of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and a general lack of investments in manufacturing, the urea industry has seen significant installation of new production capacities and progress towards achieving the government's goal of *atma nirbhar* (self-reliance).

Between 2011-12 and 2023-24 (April-March), India's domestic urea production has risen from 22 million tonnes (mt) to 31.4 mt, as imports have fallen from 7.8 mt to 7 mt after peaking at more than 9.8 mt in 2020-21. The current fiscal has so far seen a further 31.7% drop in imports (Table 1), which could end up below 5 mt — the lowest since the 4.7 mt of 2006-07.

Greenfield projects

The increase in output is mainly due to six new plants — three of Hindustan Urvarak & Rasayan Ltd (HURL), and one each of Chambal Fertilisers & Chemicals, Matix Fertilisers & Chemicals and Ramagundam Fertilisers & Chemicals Ltd (RFCL).

These plants, which run on natural gas, together produced 7.55 mt of urea in 2023-24 (Table 2). Three of them — Matix, Chambal, and HURL-Gorakhpur — produced beyond their rated capacities in 2023-24. The new plants are located in the "new Green Revolution" areas of eastern Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Telangana.

"We have a 20% market share in Eastern India. Besides being the sole urea producer in West Bengal, we also supply to Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam, and Tripura," Nishant Kanodia, chairman of Matix Fertilisers, said. The company's plant at Panagur, near Durgapur, was the country's biggest single-unit and most energy-efficient urea manufacturer in 2023-24.

A seventh 1.27-mt urea plant, coming up in Talcher in Odisha's Angul district at an estimated cost of Rs 17,080.69 crore, is about two-thirds complete. Unlike the six gas-based units producing ammonia with technology licensed from KBR (US) or Haldor

TABLE 1
UREA: PRODUCTION VS IMPORTS (in lakh tonnes)

	Production	Imports		Production	Imports
2011-12	219.92	78.34	2019-20	244.55	91.21
2012-13	225.87	80.44	2020-21	246.03	98.26
2013-14	227.19	70.88	2021-22	250.76	91.36
2014-15	225.93	87.49	2022-23	284.95	75.80
2015-16	244.61	84.74	2023-24	314.09	70.42
2016-17	242.01	54.81	Apr-Nov '23	208.84	47.65
2017-18	240.26	59.75	Apr-Nov '24	205.07	32.55
2018-19	238.99	74.81			

Source: The Fertiliser Association of India

TABLE 2
RECENTLY COMMISSIONED UREA PLANTS (in thousand tonnes)

Company	Plant/Location	Start Date	Capacity	Production
Chambal Fertilisers	Gadepan-III	Jan 2019	1,270.5	1,384.2
RFCL	Ramagundam	Mar 2021	1,270.5	1,114.5
Matix Fertilisers	Panagur	Sept 2021	1,270.5	1,498.7
HURL	Gorakhpur	Apr 2022	1,270.5	1,350.1
HURL	Barauni	Oct 2022	1,270.5	1,057.2
HURL	Sindri	Nov 2022	1,270.5	1,143.8

Note: Capacity and production are in thousand tonnes. Production for 2023-24, Gadepan is in Rajasthan's Kota district; Ramagundam is in Peddapalli, Telangana; Panagur is in Paschim Bardhaman, West Bengal; Gorakhpur is in UP; Begusarai is in Bihar; Sindri is in Dhanbad, Jharkhand.

Topsoe (Denmark), and urea from Saipem (Italy) or Toyo Engineering (Japan), the Talcher project will use coal as feedstock.

"The coal is from the Talcher mines. Given its high ash content, there is provision for blending it up to 25% with petroleum coke sourced from Indian Oil Corporation's Paradip refinery. The government is pushing this project, as the feedstock is substantially indigenous (pet-coke is a byproduct of domestic refineries, though they process imported crude oil) and based on a first-of-its-kind technology in India (coal gasification)," an industry source told *The Indian Express*.

The lump sum turnkey contract for the Talcher plant's coal gasification and ammonia urea packages has been awarded to Wuhan Engineering Company Ltd of China.

Make versus Buy

A basic question with regard to the new plants is whether the investment — Rs 61,575 crore including Talcher — is worth it.

The landed price of imported urea in India, based on the last tender of National Fertilisers Ltd (NFL), the largest government-owned urea manufacturer, is \$370.403 per tonne. Natural gas is being delivered to domestic urea plants at an average uniform "pooled" price of \$14.35 per mmbtu (million metric British thermal units) in terms of gross calorific value, which is \$15.9 (1.08 times) on a net calorific value basis.

Taking an energy consumption of 5 g-cal/gcalorie (Gcal) per tonne and 0.25 Gcal per mmbtu, the feedstock cost alone in the urea manufactured by the new plants comes to \$318 per tonne at \$15.9/mmbtu. Adding a \$175 fixed cost — which greenfield projects are entitled to for a period of eight years (supposedly to cover all other charges, including interest, depreciation, overheads and profits) — takes the total to \$493 per tonne.

It is, thus, cheaper today to "buy" (import) than "make" (produce) urea at home.

How much to make

With seven terminals for handling imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) and pipelines crisscrossing much of the country, the economics of make-versus-buy urea has undergone a change in the last decade.

The LNG terminals at Mundra, Dahej and Hazira (Gujarat), Dabhol (Maharashtra), Kochi (Kerala), Ennore (Tamil Nadu), and Dhamra (Odisha), and the pipelines network have made it easier to import and transport gas, instead of urea, to the hinterland. Import of urea now makes more sense for feeding the western and southern markets closer to the ports.

This allows for a different *atma nirbhar* urea strategy of "making" more in Northern and Eastern India, while exploring greater "buy" options for Peninsular India. This could be combined with shutting down some of the older energy-intensive plants, and curbing urea consumption.

Between 2011-12 and 2023-24, India's consumption of urea has gone up from 29.6 mt to 35.8 mt, while the increase for DAP (10.2 mt to 10.8 mt) and complex fertilisers (10.4 mt to 11.1 mt) has not been much.

The unbalanced consumption growth has been driven by farmgate prices of urea being frozen at Rs 5,360 per tonne (without neem-coating) since November 2012. A more rational pricing would promote judicious application of urea by farmers and, in turn, reduce the unsustainable pressure on both "making" and "buying" the nitrogenous fertiliser.

The amendment passed in 2022 left it to the Centre to frame rules for the transfer of elephants for "religious and other" purposes. However, the Centre has sought to guard against misuse of microchips by deciding that DNA tests will be the only way to detect captive bloodlines in elephants. The project to map the genotypes of all captive elephants in the country profiled 270 animals in the first six months after its launch in August 2022.

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EXPLAINED WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

Animal welfare, people's safety: issues in use of elephants in ceremonies

JAY MAZOOMDAAR
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 13

A DISTURBED male elephant in his late 40s ran amok and injured 24 people at an annual feast celebrated at a mosque in Malappuram district in Kerala last week.

Less than three weeks previously, the Supreme Court had put on hold restrictions imposed by the Kerala High Court on the use of elephants in temple festivals (or other traditional ceremonies). In November 2024, the HC had said the use of elephants amounted to the "commercial exploitation" of the animals in the name of religion and tradition. Twenty-four captive elephants died in Kerala in 2024; a total 154 elephants have died in captivity in the state since 2019. On the other hand, these domestic elephants killed 196 people, mostly at festivals, in Kerala between 2011 and 2023.

What the courts said

The HC, which initiated *suo motu* pro-

ceedings on inaction by the Kerala government in the protection of animal rights, ordered that a captive elephant in a temple or festival should be kept at a distance of at least 3 metres from another elephant. 5 m from flaming torches, 8 m from the public and percussion displays, and 100 m from fireworks (Re: *Captive Elephants*).

These restrictions were challenged by the Thiruvambady and Paramakkavu *devaswams*, which organise the iconic annual Thrissur Pooram, the largest religious ceremony in Kerala, saying they were "impracticable".

The top court agreed with the petitioners that "courts should not get into law making", and stated all directions of the HC that were contrary to the Kerala Captive Elephants (Management and Maintenance) Rules, 2012 (*Thiruvambady Devaswam and another v Union of India*).

The SC also invoked the principle of *volenti non fit injuria* (to a willing person, injury is not done) to rationalise that devotees willingly took the risk by attending festivals

at which captive elephants were paraded.

Alok Hisarwala Gupta, founder of the Centre for Research on Animal Rights, and Trustee of Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations (FIAPRO), which represents more than 200 Indian animal protection bodies, said the 2012 Rules were "routinely violated".

"On January 5, 2025, for example, five elephants were paraded inside the closed compound walls of Thrissur's Thiruvambady temple," Gupta said.

What elephants suffer

Palkath Sreekuttan, the elephant involved in last week's tragedy in Malappuram, is a highly stressed animal that injured its keeper and others during a temple festival at Koyilandy in Kozhikode in January 2024. He was given a short break, but soon reemployed.

A 2019 study by researchers from the Hyderabad-based Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB) found that participating in long religious ceremonies put

elephants under extreme stress, which could lead to hyperglycemia, suppression of immune responses, delayed wound-healing, and neuronal cell death.

In the study analysing the concentration of stress hormones — glucocorticoid metabolites — in 870 dung samples from 37 captive elephants and concluded that the concentration was higher in elephants that were chained and made to work longer hours than animals in zoos or forest camps.

Captive elephants typically bob and sway their heads — behaviour that indicates extreme levels of stress due to noise and light exposure, overexertion, the strain of repeatedly kneeling or lifting their trunks, and the lack of exercise due to long hours of standing at one spot.

Supply from the wild

In September 2021, hearing a petition on the ill-treatment of elephants at the Srirangam temple in Tamil Nadu's Tiruchirappalli district, the Madras High Court ordered that no elephant should be

made captive, except for treatment if it found unable to support itself in the wild (*Rangarajan Narasimhan v The Chief Secretary and Ors*).

This was a reiteration of the ban imposed on capturing wild elephants for trade in 1977. Trading in captive elephants was banned in 1986. However, people in legal possession of captive elephants are allowed to gift the animals to anyone capable of their upkeep. Experts say that to how elephants from the wild continued to feed the demand from temples, primarily in the southern states.

Breeding elephants in captivity is not easy since males in mating (heat) turn violently aggressive and are usually contained in isolation. The strategy of luring loose captive females in oestrus in natural forests in the hope that wild bulls in musth will find them is not very productive either.

"The bulk of the young captive elephants are still sourced from the wild and, in the absence of effective scrutiny, passed off as captive-bred elephants," a senior forest officer in

Assam said. In some cases, microchips meant to identify domestic elephants are removed and planted in wild-caught elephants to dress them up as domestic.

The increasing incidence of man-elephant conflict are also used to justify sending the animals to temples. "When the Wildlife Amendment Bill came up in Parliament for discussion a couple of years ago, several members suggested that problem elephants should be captured and sent to temples to make both villagers and temple trusts happy," an MP from Kerala said.

The amendment passed in 2022 left it to the Centre to frame rules for the transfer of elephants for "religious and other" purposes. However, the Centre has sought to guard against misuse of microchips by deciding that DNA tests will be the only way to detect captive bloodlines in elephants. The project to map the genotypes of all captive elephants in the country profiled 270 animals in the first six months after its launch in August 2022.

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THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

PRESERVE AND CHERISH THE PALE BLUE DOT, THE ONLY HOME WE'VE EVER KNOWN.

—CARL SAGAN

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

India has a real opportunity. But growth slowdown is a signal of declining confidence in government

THE DOWNWARD REVISION of India's growth prospects to 6.4 per cent in FY 25, down from 8.2 per cent, the lowest growth forecast since the pandemic, should be dominating the news cycle. The official response to this was predictable. India is still one of the faster growing economies. This downturn is "cyclical." Growth is often indeed cyclical. But in Indian official economic discourse, the term cyclical is not an analytical word. It is a word of evasion. If the slowdown were cyclical in a genuine economic sense, it would have been anticipated. But we had to drastically revise down our own projections. This suggests that we have a very weak underlying analytical and data framework for the conditions under which we think the cycle will be up or down.

Second, this downturn comes on the heels of a very short upturn. Are our very high growth episodes now really going to be that short? The world is uncertain. Predictions can go awry. But most official statements, whether from the finance ministry or the RBI, suggest that we have very little idea of what growth/inflation mix to plan for, and what might drive that mix. Perhaps this itself contributes to denting confidence in the Indian economy.

But the faith in "cyclical" is a fatalistic evasion. We still have a "monsoon" economy mindset. Like the seasons, the economy will correct itself. Perhaps this is appropriate for an economy where good rain and modest agriculture growth in this cycle have saved us from what might have otherwise been a bigger slump. Capital formation in the private sector has been expanding at a snail's pace for close to a decade now. High net worth individuals continue to flee India; private consumption is virtually stagnant, wages are stagnant, there is a slump in manufacturing, household savings are declining, the middle class is squeezed, small retail loan defaults are rising, albeit from a small base. India's cash-rich large companies seem to struggle for investible projects. Three and a half decades after liberalisation, India is still massively reliant on public spending and the monsoon to shore up growth. This is an astonishing thought.

But here is what should be worrying the government more. Investors may not say it openly out of fear or politeness. But privately, even amongst those industrialists who will vote BJP, there is a crisis of confidence in the

government. This, ironically, often stems from things the government thinks it is doing well, not just from things it is not doing. Here are three new issues that investors are talking about.

It is no secret that growth has been driven by increases in government capital expenditure. But there are two worries about the nature of this capital expenditure. It is dominated by Roads and Railways. In principle, these are two important items. But there is increasingly a worry that India is doing its capital expenditure more mindlessly.

Unlike the capital expenditure on the Golden Quadrilateral, PMGSY or other road projects, the efficiency and productivity gains from the type of projects we are now funding seem to be far less. Smaller investments that can produce greater efficiency gains are being neglected at the cost of capex mania. Capex is driven more by a penchant for spectacular infrastructure nationalism than economic sense. Second, transition into construction labour may hold current employment levels steady, but construction labour in India is seldom a pathway to enhancing the quality of lives and of human capital. So, the government's success is actually being treated as a potential liability. Given how dependent India is on government capex, there has not been, since the Planning Commission was abolished, any analytically worthy assessment of India's capex priorities and the costs it entails.

Second, there is amongst investors talk of a "governance delusion" in India. While the government announces new schemes galore, its spectacular schemes are now seen as failures. As is often the case in India, the government was good at distributing one-off goods: Opening bank accounts, gas and electricity connections and so forth. But these schemes simply cannot paper over systemic weaknesses. Its grandiose schemes are now littered like torn-up advertisements, which is what many of them turned out to be or were meant to be. There was no scheme for which excitement was greater than Swachh Bharat. It was an economic, moral and social necessity. But after the initial success in building toilets, even the health gains of reducing open defecation were reduced because of an inability to prevent waste discharge into groundwater. Travelling around India it is hard to avoid the impres-

sion that it is at least as filthy if not filthier.

Since the Kumbh Mela is on, it might be pertinent to ask where Namami Gange virtually disappeared. How slow our progress has been in sewage treatment plants. But failure of these schemes is part of the credibility crisis of the government. This is the governance delusion. When not executed well, they signify misallocation of energy and capital. And they have lowered confidence that India can address long-standing routine problems that make it an unattractive country.

From a regulatory point of view, the government's four cardinal sins are, first, reneging on minimum government expenditure. Admittedly, this is a complex issue. But there is an almost offensive insensitivity in the finance ministry to concerns about needless regulatory confusion and complexity, whether in taxation or GST. And defenders of the prime minister will often blame it on the bureaucrats. This is a bad move, it makes the government look weak and evasive. Second, the sheer incoherence of the government on corruption. There was always going to be centralised and wholesale corruption. The demands of political finance make that inevitable. But the reputation for retail corruption at the level of transactions is back with a vengeance. Third, there is diminishing confidence that India's political economy will push for real reform. The government is quite comfortable with a political economy of growth for the top 10 per cent, combined with gestures of a "welfare architecture" for the bottom; Indian capital has made its Faustian bargain with the state. Finally, and this must be repeated ad nauseam, India's capital concentration and championing of three or four large players is sucking out the competition and energy of India's private sector. The fear of any moderately successful enterprise that it can be "expropriated" to benefit existing big players is real. This is a conscious choice the government has made.

India has a real opportunity. But the growth slowdown is a signal of declining confidence in the government. Nothing cyclical about it. Or as the nursery rhyme goes, "Michael ki cycle kharab ho gayi."

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

Record-breaking temperatures last year should put environmental agencies on alert. Business as usual won't work

FOR MOST of last year, global temperature data sets had indicated that it was going to be the hottest on record. Last week, the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service confirmed that the average temperature in 2024 was 1.6 degrees Celsius more than that of the pre-Industrial Revolution era — 1 per cent more than the record set in 2023. The blistering heat does not yet mean that the world has defaulted on the Paris Pact's threshold — the grim milestone is measured in decadal averages, and not on the basis of yearly temperature increases. But the forest fires raging in the US are the latest in a series of destructive events over 12 months that frame the seriousness of the climate crisis. According to a UN Environment Programme (UNEP) stock-taking in October last year, if countries do not change course drastically, the world will see warming of more than 3 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

The UNEP study estimates that global emissions need to drop to about 42 per cent of the 2019 levels in the next 10 years to keep temperature rise below the Paris Pact threshold. Data on global warming mitigation targets put the seriousness of this challenge in perspective. If all countries were to meet their current Paris Pact pledges by 2030, emissions would drop by only 10 per cent. The UN report was released about a month before the UNFCCC's COP 29 in Azerbaijan. Yet, the annual climate meet saw very little by way of creative interventions in talks to reduce emissions. Countries are expected to announce new climate mitigation plans, Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs, by the end of February. However, the recent history of climate negotiations offers very little hope that these pledges would be ambitious enough to maintain the sanctity of the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold. At Baku, progress on the issue was stalled after a negotiation bloc of developing countries objected to any agreement that would give the UNFCCC oversight over how the NDCs are framed or implemented.

Most global Met agencies do not forecast that 2025 will be as hot as 2024. But policymakers would be wrong to read that as a respite. Several national weather bodies, including India's, reckon their countries will continue to experience high temperatures. More importantly, globally, the temperature rise is likely to be only marginally lower than in the past two years. The UK's Met Office, in fact, believes that 2025 could be the third hottest year on record. Environmental agencies all over the world have their work cut out.

DJOKOVIC ONCE MORE

Sinner and Alcaraz are tennis's future. But at Australian Open, it may well be Djokovic who fans are magnetically drawn to

A NEW GRAND Slam season brings with it new storylines. Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal have sailed into the sunset, leaving Novak Djokovic to fly the flag of arguably the greatest generation of players that men's tennis has seen. With 24 Grand Slam titles and the Olympic gold — the only achievement that eluded the greatest resume in men's tennis history — in the bag, Djokovic has arrived at his favourite Major after enduring one of his most disappointing seasons; the Olympics aside, he failed to win a title. The rivals against whom he built his legacy have stepped aside. He is at the Australian Open: A venue where the GOAT won 10 titles but the anti-vaxxer in him faced the trauma of detention and eviction. He is up against rivals — Sinner 23, and Alcaraz, 21 — who are closer in age to his children than him, who have established themselves. But the Serb's determination to make more history can never be doubted.

With his success across three decades, on all surfaces, Djokovic has established himself as the best of the previous generation. But a few months away from his 38th birthday, he is now attempting to match Janik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz, the most dominant forces in the game now. Towards that end, Djokovic is seeking new ideas to unlock the drive that has powered him to success in the past and, in a first-of-its-kind partnership, even hired former rival Andy Murray as coach.

Sinner and Alcaraz are not only tennis's future but also its present. The two swept the Majors in 2024, winning two each. But it may well be Djokovic who the fans will be magnetically drawn to. His tennis may need improvement, his tactics may need changing, but it is the feeling and temperament of his game through the fortnight that will determine whether the legend rediscovered his best self. A new challenge — like the one the youngsters present — may provide him exactly that.



ALAKA SAHANI

WHEN WRITER-DIRECTOR PIYAL Kapadia spoke to me ahead of the theatrical release of *All We Imagine As Light* in India, she described her Grand Prix-winning film as "chhotu (small)". Notwithstanding the fact that this "chhotu" film did not take home any trophies from the Golden Globes ceremony last week, its journey so far should serve as an example of what a story told with conviction and craft can achieve.

The Golden Globes, like other coveted awards, and film festivals, are meant to celebrate such conviction and journeys. The *Bratistalk* walked away with the Best Actor (Adrien Brody), Best Director (Brady Corbet) and Best Drama trophies. The epic about a Jewish architect who survived the Holocaust and emigrated to America may have now emerged as a front-runner this award season, but according to Corbet, it did not start out like that.

In his acceptance speech, Corbet said, "nobody was asking for a three-and-a-half hour film about a mid-century designer" as it was not seen as a box-office draw. "I was told that this film was un-distributable, that no one would come out and see it, that the film wouldn't work. But I want to use this as an opportunity to lift up filmmakers... Films don't exist without the filmmakers," he said.

Anxiety about box-office results often de-

ONCE UPON A STORY

Bollywood must let go of the fear that art comes in the way of commerce

IN recent times, however, Hindi cinema has been struggling. Remaking South Indian films — 2024's last Hindi release 'Baby John' was a remake of the Tamil-language 'Theri' (2016) — or using tropes from Tamil or Telugu movies proved to be disastrous, compromising the identity as well as freshness of Hindi cinema. Contrast this with how Malayalam cinema has retained its originality by prioritising local stories and the art of storytelling.

termines the nature of a film. In a Redditi chat, Kapadia said she made *All We Imagine As Light* in the way she did so she could be "free of the baggage of the market". She added: "Co-producers, distributors and sales agents do not influence my decision making. The film that I make is authentic and genuine to me." This may not sound pragmatic to a trade analyst, especially after the astounding worldwide business done by movies like *Street 2* (Rs 850 crore) and *Pushpa 2* (Rs 1,800 crore).

Fortunately, in cinema, the lure of money doesn't always overpower the desire for excellence in artistry, craft and storytelling. Recognition will continue to be a huge draw for filmmakers and artists. That is why, in spite of enjoying global success for her films in the 1990s, Demi Moore was gutted when a producer told her that she was "a popcorn actress". She assumed that she could do movies that were "successful and made a lot of money", but that she couldn't be acknowledged as a fine performer. "That corroded me over time," said the actor at the Globes, after she collected her first ever acting award for *The Substance*.

The "popcorn" reference pertains to entertainment crowd-pullers — the kind of movies that dominate the Indian market. They are made with commerce in mind and serve the star system. Notwithstanding the

acclaim that movies like Kiran Rao's *Lupatuz Ladies* (2023) and Shuchi Talati's *Girls Will Be Girls* have received — despite not giving in to market demands and casting new actors — box-office numbers will always be a priority.

In recent times, however, Hindi cinema has been struggling. Remaking South Indian films — 2024's last Hindi release *Baby John* was a remake of the Tamil-language *Theri* (2016) — or using tropes from Tamil or Telugu movies proved to be disastrous, compromising the identity as well as freshness of Hindi cinema. Contrast this with how Malayalam cinema has retained its originality by prioritising local stories and the art of storytelling.

Hindi filmmakers need to learn from them and let go of the fear that art and experimentation come in the way of commerce. Or, for reassurance, replay director Jon M Chu's speech after receiving the first Golden Globe Award for Cinematic and Box Office Achievement. Chu's *Wicked* registered a record opening of \$114 million and followed it up by creating several new box office records. "In a time where pessimism and cynicism rule the planet, we can still make art that is a radical act of optimism, that is empowerment, that is joy," said Chu.

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JANUARY 14 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

RAJIV AND CONGRESS

CONGRESS-I PRESIDENT RAJIV Gandhi is in two minds: whether to retain his mother's highly personalised style of organisational management or permit a limited democratic functioning at different levels with greater accountability. During informal discussions with senior leaders, Gandhi was understood to have expressed his desire to hear about a minimum organisational burden, especially of a routine nature.

SRI LANKA'S DEMAND

SRI LANKA'S GOVERNMENT asked the

Government of India to "immediately" return its patrol boat and crew, which were captured within the Indian territorial waters by the Indian Coast Guards. The Sri Lankan demand was based on its claim that the vessel was immune from the jurisdiction of the Indian authorities as it belonged to the Sri Lankan navy.

PAK POLLS QUESTIONED

TWO TOP MRD leaders, Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi and Air Marshal (ret'd) Asghar Khan, described General Zia-ul-Haq's announcement of the national polls as a "bigger fraud" than the December 19 referendum.

Jatoi said that there was no question of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) taking part in the partyless polls which, he felt, would hasten the end of the military regime. Khan said the coming polls would further reduce Zia's credibility.

DEADLY TRAIN FIRE

AT LEAST 27 PEOPLE were killed and 58 injured when a passenger train caught fire near Bheramara railway station in the Kushiadist about 300 kilometres from Dhaka. Unofficial reports said about 150 people were feared killed and over 300 injured following the fire.

With continuity expected, India needs to quietly make progress in core aspects of the relationship

America-India First

Keep Calm And Carry On



Pranab Dhal Samanta



Seema Sirohi

Bid Biden Bye, So, What Now?

STATE OF PLAY

Immigration may be the centrepiece of the India-US conversation just because Donald Trump and his Maga brigade are on a political hunt. Both countries have traversed a large strategic expanse over the past two decades to now allow themselves to be defined by policy, a domestic sovereignty matter for any country.

The strategic reorientation in the India-US relationship has happened around a convergence of national security interests, resulting in removal of political, legal and policy obstacles to further cooperation in sensitive areas like defence, nuclear, space and other areas that were 'no-go' in the past.

Over the years, that has come to form the core of the relationship, which has rested and flourished on the pillars of political bipartisanship. There's no reason yet to infer that Trump has any different ideas. But it's not going to be business as usual either. The Maga agenda is going to define Trump 2.0 and, by all accounts, this time, his administration is preparing to make a more organised and serious execution effort.

So, what adjustment does this mean for India? While one's easily tempted to forecast, the fact is, this is mostly going to be a wait and watch affair in the initial months. However, a fair assessment of areas where Maga will have to express itself vividly to make a political impact for Trump can be made. This may provide a working frame for India.

The first would be on changing the global rules of order in manner that not just American primacy but its supremacy is re-established. This seeks to respond to the domestic anger that countries have benefited and grown at the US expense, with some like China looking to challenge America's global dominance. While the US still undertakes global responsibilities, its ability to correct errant states, like in West Asia, is both reduced and challenged.

From a Maga perspective, these countries fall in three broad categories: adversaries like China; allies that need fixing, like in Europe; and errant countries that need disciplining, possibly Iran.

While there can be additions, subtractions and reclassifications in these categories, the positive for India is that it doesn't fall in any of them. In fact, the signalling is of continuity with Quad foreign ministers being invited to the inauguration on January 20. And all three foreign ministers—of India, Australia and Japan—announced their presence within hours of each other.

Notably, the Biden administration also showed a similar continuity to move ahead with Trump 1.0's India commitment in 2020. For instance, the in-principle go-ahead for selling an armed version of Predator drones was made by Trump 1.0, but was taken to fruition under Biden. Launch of ICET and recent relaxation in MTCR rules to enable sale of space launch vehicles and parts to India is part of the same continuum.

Can there be setbacks? Yes. With Trump, surprises are always going to be part of the calculations. Which is why from an Indian standpoint, it's advisable to secure the core issues and explore the doables, rather than push for early harvest deals, especially when there's no immediate impediment or concern.

The other Maga front will be bureaucracy, a steel frame that Trump wants to recast through the DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) project. This is Trump's power fight with the one arm of the American state that has not just resisted but also challenged him institutionally.

A lot of the Maga agenda could get trapped in this fight. But, here again, India could benefit from political continuity if it focuses on the core areas of the relationship and not get diverted on to issues that may frame India as subject of domestic political debate. The bureaucratic buy-in to the overall India relationship is positive, but expectations vary, particularly on democracy and rights issues.

It's possible that India may end up with relief on some of them. This is because Trump will want to reorder the set of expectations with all countries, including India. That could be another bag of surprises. But if the stakes attached to core aspects of the partnership remain high, In-



Hello, goodbye

dia can renegotiate and manage the expectations better.

The trickiest Maga front for India will be the final one, which involves the economic repurposing of the US. In fact, the H-B visa debate is an economic issue, pointing to the reality of America's tech industry and demand for STEM graduates. Trade tariffs that Trump has spoken about will impact the balanced nature of India's growing trade with the US.

Again, these are key domestic Maga issues where India can't get dragged into as a foreign policy hurdle. But it's from the strategic fundamentals, which have laid the path for semiconductor and other digital investments in India, that a way forward could emerge in due course if India is seen through Trump's larger picture, as not an obstacle but partner in the Maga endeavour.

India is not yet a political target for Trump. To remain so, it's important not to seek the limelight, but quietly make progress in the core aspects of the relationship, recognising that the immigration debate in the US is a domestic sovereign matter that must not be conflated with India's foreign and security policy approach towards the new government in Washington.

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Joe Biden is leaving the India-US strategic relationship with a solid docket of achievements—from the seabed to the stars, and beyond, to quote the White House's lyrical drafters. There's much to celebrate and much to anticipate as Donald Trump takes office on Monday.

Over the last four years, India and the US have made qualitative and quantitative leaps, especially in tech and defence, making the partnership one of the (few) 'bright points' for an administration entangled in two wars and faced with a mismatch between ambitious rhetoric and stark reality from Africa to Latin America.

The relationship grew robustly despite hurdles. There was a constant flow of visits by top officials (except VP Kamala Harris), a successful G20 summit, initiation of India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), growth of Quad, an agreement to estab-

lights Beijing's subversive tactics in the US and beyond.

NSA Jake Sullivan's farewell trip to New Delhi last week was to celebrate the progress: integrating key supply chains, breaking new frontiers in space, enhancing undersea domain awareness, launching a joint AI project for product to support all-domain command and control, starting research projects for processing technologies for critical minerals, reducing US export control barriers, and aligning strategies around national security implications of AI.

He announced that the US is taking steps to remove the last three G7 organisations, including the US, from the research Centre (Barc), the entities list to allow for civil nuclear cooperation. Why wait until the last day today is anyone's guess. India's nuclear tests, which triggered US sanctions and blacklisting, were way back in 1998.

What about the bumps in the relationship? Looking at ICET where much is happening, but only up to a point after which fears about India's friendship with Russia take over and hesitation surfaces. Despite Indian assurances that integrity of tech won't be compromised or shared, US officials remain sceptical. They want harmonisation of India's export control laws with theirs.

The underlying expectation: India should align more with the US political agenda. Green lights such as Strategic Trade Authorisation (STA-1) status that India has not help. The 'stop-start, stop-start' process reminds New Delhi of the two predecessor agreements—High Technology Cooperation Group (2002), and Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (2012), which didn't make much headway but did start the conversation. It makes ICET the third bite at the apple, as an analyst put it.

The two US indictments against Gautam Adani and others have injected a certain amount of bitterness in the conversation. Going public didn't play well in New Delhi. Whatever the nature of the evidence, it was a choice to go after Adani. That the US legal system is sacrosanct is not cutting it when cases against Trump are falling by the wayside. How the Biden team framed the two indictments for Trump officials would determine future developments.

The White House meeting with Sikh activists was another major irritant. Although India didn't officially raise it, the US side explained it as a coincidence. It begs the question: where were US officials going with it? 'You're not dealing with an India of the '80s and '90s. These pinpricks won't give you strategic advantage. It irritates everyone and takes a lot of effort to repair it, an insider told me.

From Bangladesh to Myanmar to Pakistan, India sees developments differently. Forces unleashed and now at play in Bangladesh have upset Indian equities, to say nothing of the pessimistic narratives being promoted that Indian policies were helping unify Awami League (AL) supporters. Meaning only AL homes were lit with Indian power lines. American silence on the lack of democracy has angered Delhi.

Myanmar is a replay of old times, and the US wants to sanction 'the hell out of them', a policy that didn't work in the past and gave China the upper hand. Why not help them find a way out of the current political paralysis? As for Pakistan, the less said the better.

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

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lish a national security semiconductor fabrication plant, a joint effort to map Earth, and a mission to the International Space Station.

China is seen as the major reason for the growth in tech. But there's another equally important propeller: Beyond strategic compulsions, it's the people-to-people links that create a bridge of ideas and influence. Look around and the presence of Indian Americans in both the outgoing Biden administration and the incoming



What about bumps in the relationship? Much is happening with ICET. But after a point, fears about India's friendship with Russia take over and hesitation surfaces

Trump team is hard to miss.

Gaze at Capitol Hill and find the new House of Representatives has six Indian American members—the largest in history; having grown from one in 2013. Interestingly, Congressman Krishnamoorthi is the topmost Democrat on a key Congressional committee on strategic competition with China that high-

When Will You Make Them Accountable?



Anjana Menon

Elections provide a real reckoning of the state of our democracy. It's when skeletons are wrenched out from tightly shut closets and dirty laundry is aired. Ahead of the Delhi polls next month, staggering figures have emerged of how much then CM Arvind Kejriwal spent on renovating his residence.

In response, he alleged the PM spent far more on his home, reducing it to a slugfest on who scored better at squandering public funds. The sobering truth is that our elected political class rules with impunity.

two steam ovens for ₹6.5 lakh.

In Delhi, where summer brings power cuts and pleas to minimise the use of air conditioners, it turns out even toilets in the CM's bungalow needed AC. Possibly between their culinary excesses and the aftermath in washrooms, they needed absolute privacy too, which would explain fancy toilets worth nearly ₹1 cr.

None of this would have alarmed the average Indian voter, who is, by now, numb to misallocation of public funds for political grandstanding and leadership whims. What makes it peculiar for Kejriwal is that he came to office on the plank of frugality—

there was an extraordinary ordinariness to him—held tight in the signature muffler wrapped around his head, his best-up middle-class car, and his background as a revenue officer. He rode on Gandhian Anna Hazare's pushback against a culture of corporate capitalism and rent-seeking that marked the fall of Congress-led UPA.

But that was nearly 11 years ago, and it doesn't take too long to know that fighting and winning elections is a desperately expensive task in India. Ideals often stand in the way.

Still, the controversy over the Delhi House of Representatives is just a symptom of a larger malaise, not just in India but across the world, where those in public office somehow feel they are above the law. A certain culture of entitlement has crept into politics everywhere, whether it was former British PM Boris Johnson's 'partygate'—where the general pub-

it. There are other things we have normalised like bad air. Our cities top the list of the world's most polluted cities. The poor, the homeless, suffer shameful traffic jams, and garbage sties in mountainous piles along city edges, irrespective of the ruling party.

We can't take our basic rights of clean air for granted. We can't diagnose their lives routinely because of administrative failure, be that falling bridges, derailed trains, religious stampedes or inadequate healthcare.

Yet, we never ask our political class why our taxes are not prioritised for delivering our basics and improving our quality of life. All too often, we fall into the old freebie trap, and get roused by religious clapping and chest-thumping on economic progress, which can also be viewed as rising income inequality. We let them get away with their plundering.



THE SPEAKING

Flowing The Current

SWAMI SIVANANDA

To many people, especially, the Makara Sankranti and the New Year. The newly harvested is first time on that day. Activities mark the celebration every home. Servants and the poor are fed and given presents. On the day, the cow, which is as the symbol of the is worshipped. Then, feeding of birds and in this manner, devotion expands slowly during the first month of the year, long arms of love the household and neighbours and the poor, and all other lives. It is as though they expand it to such place that the whole universe in it...

To spiritual aspirants has a special significance. The six-month period of the sun travels north highly favourable to march towards the It is as though they expand it to such place that the whole universe in it...

Pongal in south India brought about the agricultural triumph. He would brought home fruits and oil. Symbolic harvest is offered to —and that is Pongal. His task, his duty, but now offered to Him in spirit of karm yoga.



Bonku Friends

Satyajit Ray

During the week-end Bonku Friends. It was the evenings with the lars. On a number of occasions, he had come to 'ing. Enough, never. The question was whether he could put up with it. He played by the boys' rule, but when grown middle-aged men in fun of him, it is much to bear.

At these meetings, Babu hosted in the nearly everyone p-

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ghosts. Usually, Bonku kept his mouth shut for some unknown reason. He was not afraid. That was all. But he offered a golden opportunity to the others. On his way back, Bonku was 'blacked by a 'spook'. The ghost was in this figure leapt dander on his back, landed, this apparition smeared black ink self, possibly at the of someone at the

Translated from Gop

Chat Room

Make an C We Can't Up

Apurva: 'How to Up' by Sushanta Ghosh. It's surprising that it is not growing at the rate by many policy-makers. RBI, the slowest growth in demand for products in the wake of the pandemic, and lower middle class contribute significantly to private consumption. It is recalled that the