

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[ OUR TAKE ]

## A coming of age for Indian chess

D Gukesh's rise as the youngest world champion is a tale with two pieces — one of individual and family sacrifice, and the other of legend Viswanathan Anand's payback to Indian sport

Chess inspires multiple metaphors. It's the sport of kings for some, the king of sport for others. It's a mesh of stratagem and politics, intellect and farsightedness. It's a representation of violence on the battlefield and, at the same time, a civilised test of wits governed by rules that must never be bent.

At the ultimate level of a great game that has stood the test of time, an Indian once again climbed to the pinnacle this week. The world's second-youngest Grandmaster at 12 years, 17 months and 17 days in 2019 is now the youngest world champion in history at 18 years, 8 months and 14 days. By defeating China's defending champion Ding Liren in Singapore on Thursday, D Gukesh capped a fairytale journey. But within parenthesis of his achievement lie two important stories that must not be overlooked.

The first is a story of sacrifice. Gukesh's father, Rajini Kanth, gave up his profession as an ENT surgeon in 2018 to accompany his son to tournaments around the world, and Gukesh's mother, Padma, a microbiologist at the Madras Medical College, took on the mantle of sole breadwinner. Gukesh stopped going to school when he was in Class 7, turning up only to write exams. Instead of living like a normal teenager, he would be locked in his room for hours — either obsessively playing online or mastering the intricacies through books and historical boards that were memorised and internalised. As his skill grew, he lived out of a suitcase, travelling from one tournament to another while his family ensured they would cut whatever corners they had to so that he got every opportunity to pursue excellence.

The fruits of this journey have been sweet, and Gukesh's rise has been phenomenal. He was the youngest to win the Candidates — the ticket to challenge the world champion. He won individual golds in back-to-back chess Olympiads in Chennai (2022) and Budapest (2024). And he is now the youngest world champion, bettering the legendary Garry Kasparov's mark of 22 years, 6 months and 27 days set in 1985. Late on Thursday, Kasparov said about Gukesh: "His victory caps a phenomenal year for India. Combined with Olympiad dominance, chess has returned to its cradle and the era of 'Vishy's children' is truly upon us".

And that is the second story. For "Vishy's children" are taking over the world. When Viswanathan Anand won the first of his five World Championship titles in 2000, India had five GMs. In 2018 and 2019, India produced 15 GMs. Those batches, most of them trained directly by Anand, included Gukesh (Elo 2783, world No 5), India's current highest-rated player Arjun Erigaisi (2801, world No 4), R Praggnanandhaa (2737, world No 17), and Nihal Sarin (2676, world No 49). Since 2019, India has added 25 more to the GMs list that stands at a staggering 85. The WestBridge Anand Chess Academy, which was started in December 2020, is striving to fulfil Anand's dream of converting GMs to Super GMs.

If ever an example was needed of someone giving back to Indian sport, it is Anand. All-England champion Pulela Gopichand started a badminton revolution at the Gopichand Badminton Academy in 2008, producing champions such as Saina Nehwal, PV Sindhu, V Sai Pranee, P Kashyap and K Srikanth. Anand has taken it a level higher with a chess revolution that has established India as the world's powerhouse — the open and women's Olympiad champion, and now the home of the reigning world champion.

## Burning green: Health costs of landscape fires

The cascading effects of forest fires and stubble burning on human health and environment are severe

A recent report in The Lancet estimated that, globally, around 1.53 million excess deaths occurred each year during 2000-19 due to smoke from "landscape fires", a term that encompasses forest fires, agricultural fires, and planned fires. The study correlated deaths to exposure to particulate matter (PM) 2.5 and ozone. Cardiovascular deaths contributed 0.45 million and respiratory diseases 0.22 million to this annual toll of where life was snuffed out by the "burning green".

Forest fires have been in the news over the past few years. They attained notoriety for devastating vast tracts of land in North America and Europe, destroying homes and businesses, and displacing thousands of people. The Canadian wildfires of 2023 broke records and involved all 13 provinces and territories. As smoke from Canada wafted across the border into the US, people living in upper midwestern states realised that neither walls nor tariffs by presidential decree could keep their health and economy protected from wildfires raging in their neighbour's forests. The smoke from Canada even reached Europe, California, of course, has its annual ordeal by forest fire, with high levels of damage and displacement. As of November 25, 2024, a total of 7,818 wildfires have burnt down 1,044,126 acres in the American state this year. In Greece, the wildfires of August 2024 scorched 100,000 acres of land.

The US leads the list of countries on economic damage from wildfires, with Indonesia, Canada, Portugal, and Spain following. A 2022 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Spreading Life Wildfire: The*

*Rising Threat Of Extraordinary Landscape Fires*, highlighted the danger posed by a combination of the climate crisis and land use change, with an anticipated increase in landscape fires even in regions of the world that were hitherto unaffected.

According to recent estimates, nearly 36% of India's forests are at risk of wildfires. States with high forest cover (such as Odisha, Chhattisgarh and those in the northeast) are at high risk. Burning forests is sometimes adopted as an easy way to clear land for agriculture, real estate, or industry. Apart from forest fires, burning crop waste has been an annual hazard that contributes to high levels of pollution in northern India.

Forest fires have a highly damaging impact on human health. Smoke emanating from the burning of dried forest vegetation contains a dangerous cocktail of toxic chemicals. Their inhalation introduces them to our lungs and, from there, to the bloodstream. This leads to an assault on various tissues in the human body. They also irritate the conjunctiva of the eyes and the respiratory tract. Together, these chemicals cause widespread inflammation and spike up oxidative stress through free radicals. They can cause thrombosis (blood clotting) by triggering pathways of coagulation and platelet activation, blood sugar (dysglycaemia) and blood fat (dyslipidaemia) disorders, apart from depression and immunity. They can damage genes, altering their structure and functions through harmful mutations.

PM2.5, carbon dioxide, ozone, aromatic compounds, and nitrogen dioxide attack the lining of the blood vessels and promote blood clotting, leading to paralytic brain strokes, heart attacks, pulmonary embolism, electrical disturbances in the heart (arrhythmias), respiratory disease, pre-diabetes, and diabetes. Prolonged exposure can also cause cognitive dysfunction. Fine particulate matter is particularly abundant in the smoke which emanates from



K Srinath Reddy

## Uniquely Indian traits that produce civic indifference

I often wish Richard Sennett, that great and inspiring writer on cities and civic life in the western world, had a chance to live in Bengaluru for a couple of months. Maybe then he would have seriously revised some of his important, though sadly inappropriate, insights into what western cities can have become. When he advocated, in *The Uses of Disorder*, an "unfettered urban place" that would promote visual and functional disorder, it was because he believed that predetermined planning deadened humans and restricted "effective social exploration". In other words, such as *Flesh and Stone*, he lamented that the demand for increased speed, efficiency, and comfort while travelling was to the detriment of the unexpected encounter, which would produce the capacity to empathise.

Don't get me wrong: I am a loyal fan of Sennett's writing and his critique of bland, sanitised gridded spaces that facilitate and enhance individualism. Maximising comfort, speed, and efficiency should not be the only goal of life in the city.

Sennett's critique notwithstanding, the insipid, challenge-less, and, yes, comfortable and efficient, western city is what most middle-class Indians yearn for. They have it in all the gated communities at the city's edges, a promise of planning that has all but failed more widely. Still, there is no escape from the state of permanent disorder in a grotesquely unequal society such as ours once one leaves the gates

of these communities. The yawning pits that promise the arrival of cables underground, the cratered road surfaces that challenge the spine, and the "footpath" that teems with the kind of life that Sennett would never have imagined put paid to the kind of leisurely flaneurism, Sennett undertook in Lower Manhattan, something that enabled his many insights. There are unexpected encounters aplenty, as temporary occupations of the street can leave you waiting, even if it is inside your air-conditioned car, for the celebration, mourning, or protest, to end/pass.

I am not sure if these daily anarchic encounters with the Other produce greater compassion, as Sennett romantically believes. Take the case of Bengaluru. The city's cheek-by-jowl diversity has begun to act as a leveler that Sennett had not at all anticipated.

Taxpaying denizens of the Garden City must remain content with parks scattered in homeopathic doses across the city. But the gracious and generously arching avenue trees pose an unexpected threat, given the savage cuts to branches and roots alike by those in "pursuit of happiness". To match the threats from above are the horrors below, especially when there has been an unseasonal or unusually good rain, as happened this season. Swirling waters impeded the flow of traffic, making journeys hazardous even in the most expensive luxury vehicles.

Increasingly, the forces of nature show no respect for the gates of the better-off. Middle-



Janaki Nair



If the climate crisis is rooted in collective human follies over several decades, acts of arson in forests are instances of immediate criminality that must be curbed

the combustion of vegetation. In addition to these provocateurs of inflammation, benzene and formaldehyde, which are released from the combustion, can cause cancers through mutagenesis.

Cardiovascular events are most common among elderly persons exposed to environmental smoke from burning vegetation or wood burnt in house fires. Three principal mechanisms have been identified: Modulation of autonomic balance and neural input into the heart, the release of pro-inflammatory mediators by irritated lungs leading to widespread systemic tissue inflammation, and the penetration of particulate matter into blood circulation.

Acute PM2.5 exposure, with resultant autonomic stimulation, increased coagulability of blood, and inflammation can trigger heart rhythm abnormalities, heart attacks and exacerbated heart failure in those already having heart disease. In persons with atherosclerotic plaques in their arteries, exposure to high levels of PM2.5 can cause these plaques to become

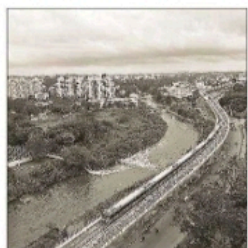
**SMOKE FROM THE BURNING OF DRY FOREST VEGETATION CONTAINS A DANGEROUS COCKTAIL OF CHEMICALS. BUT THIS IS PART OF THE HARM TO HEALTH WE WILL NEED TO GUARD AGAINST HEAT-RELATED ILLNESS TOO**

"unstable" and even rupture and trigger blood clotting — leading to acute, unheralded heart attacks and sudden death.

While extreme heat or lightning can spark forest fires by igniting dry leaves and twigs, humans too may trigger them by carelessly discarding unextinguished cigarettes or beedis, lighting campfires, or cooking fires that leave behind burning embers. Such careless acts not only harm human health but also take a toll on forest-dwelling animals while depleting the biodiversity of plant life. If the climate crisis has been mostly anthropogenic, thanks to collective human follies over several decades, such acts of arson are instantaneous acts of criminality that must be curbed through public education and behaviour change.

During landscape fires, human health must be protected from air pollution (smoke) and dehydration (heat). Those who are at high risk of adverse health effects (elderly persons and those with pre-existing heart or lung disease or diabetes) must wear N-95 masks for protection against particulate matter and noxious gases. Those at highest risk should stay indoors and use air filtration devices. Maintaining adequate hydration is vitally important to reduce the risk of blood clotting and soothe inflamed body tissues. While we do this, we must also soothe our inflamed planet by working on slowing down the pace of climate change and applying the brakes on global warming.

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Every Indian city is founded on a rich mix of illegalities that breeds layers of rent-seeking intermediaries. Bengaluru is no exception

class hand-wringing over inefficient municipal services, in a city where practically no one pays for parking, matches the blasé violations of building laws in which all, especially the endowed, indulge. In the *raja kalvas* built or built over, water bodies choked with sewage and industrial waste, and illegally drilled borewells in private properties in the Cauvery-protected areas, blindness to civic law reigns supreme.

Every Indian city is founded on a rich mix of illegalities that breeds layers of rent-seeking intermediaries. Bengaluru is no exception. But on recent visits to Thailand and Cambodia, I realised that respect for building laws, driving rules, everyday civility, and cleanliness are not the exclusive historical experience of advanced capitalist cities. East or West, Bangkok's population matches Bengaluru's (11 million to my city's 13.5 million). Its roads are mercifully free

of honking, or impatient overtaking. Pavements are not a tedious obstacle race; even in crowded flower markets and food zones, there is enough space for citizens to walk safely. The ubiquitous "spirit houses" do not abut the street or noisily compete to assault the senses, as our multiple shrines do. There is no garbage on the streets despite high levels of plastic usage. And finally, there is a degree of civility, now only a faint memory in our cities.

How do other countries stay civil, law-abiding, and free of garbage? Or what is uniquely Indian that produces civic indifference? Indians are inured to class difference, but are equally unconscious of other sets of privileges and hierarchies. We are hardened in our caste-based society into believing that the mess on our streets and hames is someone else's responsibility. We have not developed a respect for public spaces or for each other in ways that are humane, just, and empathetic. In the "war of all against all" that the Indian city has become, individualism, and not community values, are heightened.

Meanwhile, the State dutifully caters to the fragile sentiments of the majority. Recently, the municipal body thoughtfully provided hundreds of tanks of precious water for immersion of Ganesha idols, whose quantity has reached unsustainable levels. Will the recent announcement that not just Ramanagaram but even Tumkur may be joined to Bengaluru only extend the cacophony? At just announced Super App help people navigate hell on the streets, with the integration of a Public Eye, and draw cheers? Or should we simply hope for the levelling effects of nature where humans have failed?

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## Behind Iran's restraint in West Asia conflict

On November 27, a 60-day ceasefire deal between Lebanon's Hezbollah and Israel, brokered by the United States (US) and supported by France, came into effect. From late September, the exchange of fire between Hezbollah and Israel had rapidly escalated. Over the next two months, Israel relied heavily on airstrikes that targeted several high-level leaders, including Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, the group's arsenal, launching sites, and strategic crossings along the Lebanese-Syrian border to degrade Hezbollah.

Iran's missile barrage into Israel on October 1, stated to be a reprisal against the killing of Nasrallah and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, failed to reverse Israel's escalation in Lebanon and invited a direct response against Iran. Iran's two largely



Deepika Sarawat

demonstrative strikes against Israel and lack of active support for Hezbollah indicate a restraint that has surprised many.

However, Iran's conduct during the conflict, including support for a ceasefire in Gaza and Lebanon, is shaped by its defence strategy and constraints of regional geopolitics.

Since the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war, Iran bolstered Hezbollah's stockpile of drones and rockets, calculating that the group's forward strike capabilities will serve as deterrent against Israel. Over the last year, both Iran and Hezbollah followed an intentional escalation management strategy under which they absorbed losses to avoid a full-scale war with Israel.

Iran's "axis of resistance", including Hezbollah and Hamas, was meant to serve the limited purpose of defensive deterrence. They were not

to be sacrificed by getting involved in a full-blown conflict with Israel, let alone dragging Iran into a direct conflict with Israel. Instead, to bolster its axis, Iran had supported "unity of fronts" — Hezbollah opening a northern front, and Houthis attacking Red Sea shipping and Israel's southern ports to force a ceasefire in Gaza. However, Iran leveraged its superior intelligence capabilities, air power and US backing to force a ceasefire, delimiting the Lebanon axis. Iran had supported "unity of fronts" not only leaves Iran vulnerable to Israeli attacks, but also has ripple effects across the entire axis, as seen in the Turkish-backed Jihadists' offensive in Syria.

Iran's apparent restraint is also explained by regional conditions. Since October last year, Iran has mounted a regional diplomatic campaign mobilising support for a ceasefire in Gaza and a united Islamic voice against Israel. While pushing back against the US-backed diplomatic normalisation between Israel and Gulf States, Iran's intensified regional diplomacy has been about keeping its own rapprochement with Riyadh and other Arab capitals alive.

The sheer number of countries in the region that participated in the Israeli air defence against the Iranian aerial attack in April left little

doubt in Tehran that any overt escalation ran the risk of driving its Gulf neighbours closer to Israel. The multiple regional tours by Iranian foreign minister Abolmohsen Rahnepour have relayed the message that Iran does not seek expansion of the conflict. Tehran has also sought assurances that nations in the region will not facilitate hostile action against it by Israel and the US. At a time when Israel has asserted its military dominance and the incoming Trump administration has indicated a renewed pressure campaign against Iran, Iran appears to have doubled down on diplomacy.

While making new overtures to the West on the nuclear issue, it has also renewed calls for a new regional arrangement in the Persian Gulf that will reduce reliance on the US and encourage stakeholders to address conflicts through dispute resolution mechanisms. Iran's hope from this approach is that its Gulf neighbours will seek to avoid a repeat of the regional insecurity that followed Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and counsel him against intensifying "maximum pressure" against Iran.

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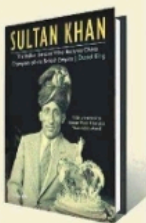
### { EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

### TRACING INDIA'S CHESS LEGACY

D Gukesh became the youngest world chess champion this week, a historic achievement that places him at the pinnacle of a sport long cherished in India. He defeated Chinese Ding Liren in a battle of wits that tested both players psychologically and physically. At just 18 years old, Gukesh's victory is a testament to his brilliance, hard work, and the growing prominence of Indian players on the global chess stage.

This week, we recommend Daniel King's *Sultan Khan: The Indian Servant Who Became Chess Champion of the British Empire*. King delves into the life of Mir Sultan Khan, a chess prodigy from colonial India who rose to fame in the 1920s and 1930s despite limited resources and formal training. The biography captures Sultan Khan's extraordinary journey, highlighting his genius, the challenges of colonialism, and his impact on Indian chess. As Gukesh charts a new course for the sport, Sultan Khan's story reminds us of the legacy that underpins this momentous achievement.



Sultan Khan: Daniel King Year: 2020

Opinion

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2024

# No permanent crutch

Fewer EV buyers availing subsidies is the sign of a maturing market

**R**EPORTS INDICATING THAT the number of electric two-wheelers for which buyers claimed subsidies dropped to a three-year low this fiscal should not ring any alarm bells. Of around 6.49 lakh e-scooters sold in April-October, subsidy was claimed for about 3.29 lakh, or just over half the units. Compare this with FY24, when of the total sales of 9.48 lakh, 89% of consumers availed subsidy. Similarly, in FY23, the number was 93%. While the number of consumers availing subsidy has declined, the total number of units sold has, in fact, risen by 37% compared to the same period last year. Hence, any talk of policy inconsistency is uncalled for. The subsidies are provided as part of the government's FAME scheme, which has run two full courses, with the subsidy amount getting reduced in the second iteration from the first.

The third variant of the scheme, which started from October, has been enhanced as the PM Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PM E-Drive), where the subsidy amount has been cut from a high of 85% in FAME II to 30%. FAME II ended in March, and between April-September, there was an interim scheme known as Electric Mobility Promotion Scheme (EMPS), with a much smaller outlay. So, even otherwise, the total subsidy claimed would have been less. Further, FAME II ran into controversy with allegations that some manufacturers had wrongly claimed the subsidies. As a result, stricter localisation norms as well as audits have been put in place in the PM E-Drive scheme, making it harder for companies to claim reimbursements.

But moving away from the micro details of the subsidy scheme, what's important is that the new variant underlines a significant evolution in the approach towards fostering electric mobility. While some stakeholders may be concerned about the reduced subsidies compared to the earlier FAME-II programme, this shift underscores a maturing electric vehicle (EV) market and marks a progressive step towards a self-sustaining industry. When subsidies were first introduced, they were a critical enabler for manufacturers as well as consumers. However, as EV adoption has grown and the industry's technological and manufacturing capabilities have expanded, a recalibration of government support is both logical and necessary. Subsidies are intended to catalyse growth in nascent markets, not to serve as a permanent crutch. By tapering subsidies, the government is sending a strong signal that the sector must now transition to market-driven growth. Electric two-wheeler and three-wheeler segments have already achieved considerable penetration in the market, and the reduced incentives reflect this success.

The decision to introduce strict localisation requirements like mandating over 50% of components to be sourced locally is also a commendable move. This aligns with the government's broader "Make in India" initiative and aims to strengthen domestic manufacturing capabilities. Such measures are crucial for building a robust and self-reliant EV ecosystem that can compete on the global stage. Further, the phased reduction of incentives over the scheme's duration follows global best practices. Countries such as Norway and China, leaders in EV adoption, have similarly scaled back subsidies as their markets matured. This way, the government's approach aligns with the international trend and ensures that public funds are allocated judiciously. As battery costs decline and economies of scale improve, the need for subsidies will diminish naturally. By accelerating this timeline through policies like PM E-Drive, the government has laid down the groundwork for a sustainable and competitive EV market.

# Netflix's flip-flop on parental leave: Just PR?

**HERE'S SOME FREE** advice for HR departments: If you don't want your employees to make use of the benefits you offer, avoid launching a media blitz to promote just how great they are.

This seems to be the obvious lesson Netflix Inc. has learned nearly a decade after it first allowed new parents to take unlimited leave during the first year of their baby's life — a policy that was seemingly unrivaled among US companies back then, and remains so today.

But *The Wall Street Journal* reported this week that the company has been walking back the generous parental leave guidelines it debuted in 2015. The reversal is part of a broader cultural shift at Netflix as it moves away from one-time core values of "freedom and responsibility".

Back when the parental leave benefit was introduced, the company's chief talent officer wrote in a widely covered blog post that "we want employees to have the flexibility and confidence to balance the needs of their growing families without worrying about work or finances." Behind the scenes, she told other executives she did not expect that many people would take a full year, the WSJ reported.

Surprise! Within 24 hours of the policy's announcement, requests started pouring in.

Netflix treated the one-year parental leave policy like a gimmick — a way to garner good PR and attract and retain talent amid a tight labour market. But its popularity shows that to employees, it was a much-needed and -wanted benefit that had the potential to significantly improve their lives.

The way Netflix implemented and talked about the policy should have been the first red flag. Telling workers they have the option to take unlimited parental leave is not the same thing as giving everyone a year off after they have a baby. The approach created an ambiguity — which the company only deepened with its vague and inconsistent behavior. Employees at one time were told new parents generally take four to eight months off. Later they were instructed to talk to their managers about what made most sense for them and the company. Another communication said they should follow local norms, while some were told anything over six months had to be approved by a manager. One manager rightly pointed out that such messaging "reads like we are limiting an existing benefit without saying outright that's what we're doing."

The side effects of unlimited parental leave are the same as those that come with offering an unlimited vacation policy — a popular Silicon Valley startup perk deployed in the war for talent. Employees often end up taking less time off because they're worried they'll be perceived as slackers and end up hurting their careers.

There's some suggestion that is just what happened at Netflix. The WSJ reported that executives in leadership meetings said they were concerned that it appeared like a lot of employees who were on parental leave or just returning were being impacted by layoffs. (Netflix told the journal that employees on leave were not targeted.)

Netflix and its peers initially adopted these kinds of family-friendly benefits in part to attract and retain women in an industry dominated by men. We now have entered an era where diversity is not where diversity is not where corporate America's priority list as it once was. Companies have been rolling back their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts under pressure from right-wing activists and in anticipation of a Trump administration likely to target companies that promote "woke" policies.

But there are more subtle ways to unwind your commitments to creating a diverse workplace than slashing your DEI team. That includes eliminating or rolling back policies that attract and support employees who need a different way of working than the status quo — whether that's the flexibility of working from home or generous parental leave.



BETH KOWITZ  
Bloomberg

**E**SI EGGLESTON BRACEY, Unilever's chief growth and marketing officer, calls it the "joy and experience economy." The essential ingredients for an experience economy is that people want to invest in themselves and are willing to pay a premium for not just a product but for memories. Bracey said at an event in Mumbai last month. Bracey should know, as Unilever, one of the largest consumer goods companies in the world, has been engaged in giving customers the "experience" of feeling good. Unilever is one among many, but there are still many companies in India which need to realise fast that the next competitive battleground lies in staging experiences. Those connected with their consumers will be streets ahead in benefiting from the experience economy.

Recognition of the emergence of the Experience Economy was championed by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore and with their best-selling book "The Experience Economy" in 1994. The concept sees the economy as ever-evolving, with offerings moving from low-value tangible things to high-value intangible things. Commodities are fungible, goods tangible, services intangible, and experiences memorable.

Starbucks is a classic example of paying premium for memories via experience. Today, Starbucks is the third-largest food outlet in the world, with over 32,000 stores worldwide and a market cap of over \$110 billion. When it first launched in 1971, the concept of paying a premium for something as mundane as coffee did not exist. However, by the early 2000s, customers were paying 10 times more for Starbucks coffee than that of a regular coffee shop.

Airbnb's Icons Extraordinary Experiences project is another example, offering unique activities hosted by celebrities and experts. Bollywood's Janvi Kapoor, one of the first 11 Icons, offers an overnight stay at her family home in Chennai, where guests can learn her beauty secrets and enjoy her favourite South Indian dishes. Other notable experiences include a stay in the house



AJAY MATHUR  
SABA KALAM  
Respectively director-general and programme specialist, International Solar Association

**ONCE VIEWED AS** prohibitively expensive and technologically limited, solar energy now stands as one of the most affordable and efficient forms of energy generation worldwide. From a nascent 1.22 GW in 2000, the world's solar capacity has surged to an impressive 1,419 GW in 2023, charting a CAGR of about 36%. Today, solar capacity represents a staggering three-quarters of all renewable capacity additions worldwide. This remarkable growth is primarily due to relentless advancements in solar technology, cost reductions, efficient solar cells, and investors prioritising investment in solar energy.

**New age solar technologies:** We are now seeing a leap in innovative solar technologies. Quantum dot solar cells have achieved a record-breaking efficiency of 18.1%, offering a promising approach to enhance solar energy capture and power atmospheric water harvesting technologies. Researchers are creating self-healing solar panels to extend the lifespan and reduce the maintenance of existing solar cell technologies. The solar sector is now also increasingly prioritising recycling end-of-life panels and implementing circular economy practices to minimise environmental impact, with new processes recovering up to 96% of panel materials.

**Plummeting costs:** The 2024 World Solar Report, recently published by the International Solar Alliance, shows average auction prices for utility-scale solar

defeated several top-ranked players, including Magnus Carlsen's conqueror Ian Nepomniachtch and American chess sensation Fabiano Caruana. As Gukesh basks in the glory of his achievement, it is essential to recognise the support system that has enabled his success — his family, coaches, and sponsors. India is poised to become a chess superpower. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Gukesh's triumph

India's chess prodigy D Gukesh has made history by becoming the youngest world chess champion, achieving this feat at the age of 18. This remarkable achievement is a testament to his exceptional talent, dedication, resolve and a source of inspiration for millions of young Indians. In the championship, Gukesh



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# POWER POINT

BUSINESSES THAT FAIL TO ADAPT TO THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY RISK BEING LEFT BEHIND

# Premium for memories

featured in the Disney movie *Up*. For beauty companies, customers will create a life-long relationship with a particular brand only if they are made to "feel" good. This enhances their self-esteem. Unilever's research suggests that more progressive advertising has the potential to deliver 74% better brand power — a key measure of consumer attraction for brands. Progressive ads, in fact, deliver a 13% uplift in purchase intent and increase credibility by around a third.

One example of this is Dove's Real Beauty campaign, which began two decades ago after research showed that only 2% of women worldwide saw themselves as beautiful — an insight that led to an idea that tripled Dove's sales. Take the #StopTheBeautyTrend campaign, a trend-setter of sorts. One of the recent campaigns, released in 10 languages, featured the real-life stories of five women, all of whom failed the arranged marriage test because they were overweight, dark-skinned, or had a spot on their face. The voice-over at the end of the ads says, "Khamiyan nahin, khoobiyaan dekhiye." (Look at the beauty, not the flaws.)

By taking up the onus to make beauty more positive and more inclusive, Dove addressed the deep-rooted insecurities and self-esteem issues of young women, with which customers could empathise.

Here's another example. Nothing can be more commoditised than a detergent powder pack. But Surf Excel has made it a brand that is closely in sync with the evolution of women in India — from the earlier homemaker whose opinion didn't matter to the family to a confident individual who lives life on her own terms.

When its competitors were focusing on the product, Surf spoke to the people (consumers). Another example of selling "experience" was the *Daag Ache hai* (dirt is good) campaign. Extensive research found parents in India felt that the academic and career needs of their children were being met by schools, but what was lacking was imparting character development and value development. This had a greater cultural significance in India, given the traditional high value Indians place on karma, which when taken in a positive light meant "good deeds".

The campaigns showed children selling their clothes while doing good — whether helping a friend or a stray dog or a stray dog. The meaning of dirt changed for the consumer and from being a bad thing, it became a symbol of "goodness".

Understanding the experience economy is important, as a study by Kalam Capital says high-end market trends towards experiences is moving to mass markets across lots of different sectors. By 2030, over two-thirds of the global population is expected to be middle class, with most of this growth coming from emerging markets, underpinned by female income growth and new generations entering the workforce.

So, brands need to take into account consumer needs that may not be obvious on the surface, that may not be well-articulated, or maybe that which the consumer cannot pronounce. Apple, for example, did that precisely. No consumer would have envisaged that her mobile phone can also double as a camera and make internet

# FOSTERING WOMEN'S PROGRESS

Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan

Women are breaking glass ceilings, challenging gender roles and their participation is increasing in all spheres... It is important to establish a level playing field for women in all spheres

surfing a pleasurable experience. It's also not just about what you sell, but how you make your customers feel throughout their journey with your brand. India is primed to make a significant shift towards embracing the experience-based economy. In fact, the shift is already underway, albeit at varying degrees across different sectors. E-commerce giants like Flipkart and Amazon have revolutionised the online shopping experience by offering seamless navigation, personalised recommendations, and hassle-free returns. Similarly, Swiggy and Zomato have transformed the way people dine by providing a wide range of culinary options at their fingertips, coupled with quick delivery and real-time tracking.

In the physical retail space, this is playing out big time. Indian retailers across categories are opening bigger brick-and-mortar stores along with expanding their existing stores as consumers are increasingly looking for a better experience in physical retail. According to Anarock data, the share of stores smaller than 2,000 square feet declined to 52% in the first half of 2023-24, as against 61% a year ago. The share of stores sized 2,000-5,000 sq ft increased during this period, to 21% from 19%, as did that of those sized 5,000-10,000 sq ft (11% from 9%) and 10,000-15,000 sq ft (13% from 9%).

Commoditised products and services are also being differentiated through experiences. Today, even simple experiences such as seats on an airplane has come pricing — different pricing depending on leg space, seating positions, and food options.

The advent of big data and advanced analytics has helped organisations parse the factors that drive not only what customers say about the things that satisfy them but also the actual customer behaviour that creates economic value. Businesses that fail to adapt to this paradigm shift risk being left behind in a fiercely competitive marketplace. Research shows that 25% of customers will defect after just one bad experience. And losing one existing customer is equal to acquiring three new ones.

Technological advancements have made solar energy more affordable, while new applications are further driving adoption

# A new wave in solar technology

**AJAY MATHUR  
SABA KALAM**  
Respectively director-general and programme specialist, International Solar Association

solar photovoltaic (PV) projects have consistently decreased across all regions. Utility-scale solar PV costs averaged \$40/MWh in 2024. India topped the global charts in solar PV capacity granted through auctions, securing a notable auction price of \$34/MWh, reflecting a 23% decrease. Meanwhile, Europe saw a more modest decline of 11%, with an average auction price of \$67/MWh for projects in 2024.

**Investors betting big on solar:** Solar energy investments accounted for 58.3% of total renewable energy investments (\$673 billion) in 2023. Investment in solar PV technology within the power sector is expected to surpass the \$500 billion mark by 2024, outstripping the combined investment in all other generation forms. Investment in utility-scale solar has increased from \$12.2 billion in 2015 to \$199 billion in 2023. Decentralised (small-scale) solar investments have grown significantly, from \$31 billion in 2015 to \$187 billion in 2023. In 2023, the energy yield from each dollar invested in wind and solar PV was 2.5 times higher than what the same investment would have generated ten years earlier.

**Reduced benchmark cost and expanding market:** The benchmark cost, representing the capacity acquired per million dollars, is a critical indicator of market efficiency and competitiveness. An analysis of over 600 transactions since 2015 shows that the benchmark cost per megawatt has significantly decreased, a 50% reduction during the 2015-2022 period from \$2.01/MW in 2015 to \$1.14/MW in 2023.

As of 2023, China dominates the solar PV market, with 43% (609 GW) of the cumulative capacity of solar panels installed globally. The US contributes 10% (137.73 GW) to the global cumulative PV market, indicating the country's significant scale of solar adoption. Japan, Germany, and India each captured a 5-6% share, reflecting their commitment to integrating solar power within their respective energy mixes.

Emerging solar markets like Brazil, Australia, Italy, and Spain each contributed about 2%, showcasing the diverse global interest in solar investment. Solar PV manufacturing has nearly doubled in capacity for wafers, cells, and modules in 2023. China maintained the highest share in component manufacturing in 2023, with 97% in wafers, 89% in cells, and 83% in module installation capacity.

**Surge impacting social well-being:** The sector is critical in job creation, promoting gender equality, and fostering economic and social equity, especially with its decentralised solar solutions. Employment in the solar PV sector rose to

7.1 million jobs in 2023, up from 4.9 million in 2022, reflecting a significant increase from the previous year and underscoring the sector's role in job creation and economic development. Solar-powered irrigation systems are transforming agriculture. The global solar pump market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 5.8% from 2021 to 2027, driven by declining costs of solar PV technology, cost competitiveness of solar-powered pumps, especially when compared to diesel-powered water pumping, and increased awareness among farmers. One of the key factors driving the adoption of solar systems has been the introduction of pay-as-you-go business models, allowing users to pay for their systems in small, regular instalments.

Technological advancements have made solar energy more affordable, while new applications are further driving adoption. The key challenge remains to enable solar power in all countries — not just the OECD countries and China, and to some extent in India and Brazil. We must promote technology and finance transfer, especially to the least developed and island developing countries, to ensure no one is left behind.

This article summarises the recently published *World Solar Report 2024 on Technology, Markets, and Finance* by the International Solar Alliance (ISA), launched at ISA's seventh Assembly Meeting of Member Countries on November 5, 2024

**A growing problem**  
Apropos of "90% vs the rest" (FE December 13), industrialists would always prefer to set up shop in states with better infrastructure facilities, including skilled labour. As the result, despite the various incentives offered by state governments, the regional imbalances for industrialisation get sharper. Competition among the

states for FDI is a good sign and will ensure greater efficiencies. Unfortunately, after the headlines, nothing much is heard or done about the setting up of industrial projects in the state. Regional imbalances and disparities are not good for the nation, and this must be resolved quickly. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com



## FIRST COLUMN

### HARMONISING WITH CHANGE

While change is often seen as a source of progress, its relentless pace can leave many mentally drained



RRAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Whether we like it or not, we have to constantly adapt to the changing time, changing thoughts, and changing future. Today, change has become so rapid that some people, especially professionals, have to keep a constant watch on the emerging trends and must be perpetually prepared to gear up in order to keep pace with change. As a consequence of keeping themselves in high gear constantly over a long period of time, many feel that rapid changes shake up their nerves and are physically and mentally so exhausting and taxing that life has become more of a problem than a pleasure. However, we must not have the impression that every change is an anathema.

No! On the contrary to common belief, change is generally a welcome feature of life, and stagnancy is always considered boring. It is the rapidity and high frequency of change, or the enormity of change, that forces responsible people to miss the necessary physical and mental rest, keeping them always on the move and causing them worry. But the question that arises is, what has led to this condition of rapid and ever-growing change? Observation and analysis tell us that it is science and technology that are responsible for this predicament, as they compel individuals to lead an increasingly faster life in a highly competitive world. They force people to move like machines, which, too, are moving faster day by day and are changing enormously in design and functions. But if we go deeper into the problem, then we would find that science and technology are, in fact, at the service of mankind; therefore, it is man



who decides what kind of gadgets and goods he requires and at what pace—not vice versa. The evolution of science is based on man's needs, desires, motives, emotions, set of values, conscience, and external influences, including exposure to media and to society's approval, appreciation, or criticism of his acts. Hence, these factors are the major driving forces that lead to new inventions or new forms and designs. It is these factors that determine the purpose and use to which science and technology should be put. It is these which set new trends. It is these that lead to the rejection of the old and the change to the new.

Therefore, the rapidity of change depends, to a great degree, on the rapidity of rejection of the old system, old set of values, prevalent fashions and customs, and existing norms and beliefs. This, in turn, depends on how rapidly a person is dissatisfied or discontented with the present goods, facilities, services, practices, norms, status-symbols, and security needs. This dissatisfaction or discontentment may, in some cases, be justified and may, in most cases, be due to a lack of man's inner stability and inner happiness stemming from a wrong set of values and wrong attitudes. A thorough analysis of the present situation would lead us to the conclusion that the current situation, which is leading us either to tension or depression or short-lived pleasure, is due to our own consumerist attitude, which is geared mainly to cater to man's indulgence in sensual pleasure or comforts.

In order to bring a change to this callous attitude and wrong lifestyle, we need to reform our mind by adopting a spiritual attitude through a spiritual set of values, or what is called 'Spiritualism', which is a turnaround of thoughts and a way of living. Today, those people who are trying to cope with change without bringing change to their mindset, value system, and lifestyle through spirituality have really missed the message of the wise. Therefore, it is high time that we as a society realised that simplicity of lifestyle, by embracing spiritual values, alone would be the remedy to the present precarious situation that would empower us to manage rapid change with vigor and enthusiasm.

(The writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist; views are personal)

# Bangladesh's secular fabric under siege



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

The suppression of dissent, coupled with the growing boldness of extremist ideologies, risks steering the nation towards a fundamentalist Islamist state



It is increasingly clear that fundamentalist Islamist organisations, which are pathologically hostile to India as well as to all secular and democratic persons and organisations in Bangladesh, are increasingly calling the shots in that country under the rule of its interim government. An indication of this is the relentless persecution of Shahriar Kabir, an internationally acclaimed author, journalist, champion of human rights, democracy and secularism, and a tireless campaigner to bring to justice the perpetrators of war crimes during Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971. He continues to languish in Kashipur jail under terrible conditions. Despite being designated as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, a magistrate's order giving him Division One status, which would give him a separate room and other facilities remains to be carried out. This is because the deputy commissioner of Ghazipur district, where Kashipur prison, where he is lodged, is located, has not signed the order, which will be effective only after his signature is affixed to it. Nor, according to reports, does he seem inclined to sign it soon.

As a result, Kabir, who is 74-years-old has to live among common prisoners and sleep on the floor during a cold winter as his health continues to deteriorate. Earlier, during a remand hearing at Dhaka's Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court on 20 October, Kabir had complained that he was not receiving adequate medical treatment in jail. On November 2, he was taken to Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Medical College Hospital for a check-up. According to its deputy-director, he suffered from various old age-related ailments but these were not critical.

Kabir has high blood pressure and diabetes and a large accumulation of stones in his kidney. Blood is coming out with his stool. Given the role of the deputy commissioner, who presumably has nothing personal against him, it is difficult not to feel that he it is the interim government, led by Nobel laureate Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus, that wants to deny him Division One status. That it continues to do so despite considerable international demand for his release is clearly the result of pressure from

“A SPIRITUAL LEADER, PHILOSOPHER, MYSTIC POET AND SOCIAL REFORMER, LALON ARTICULATED A WELTANSCHAUUNG WHICH ENCOMPASSED THE ESSENCE OF THE BHAKTI CULT AND SUFISM, REJECTED ALL DISTINCTIONS OF CASTE, CLASS AND CREED, OPPOSED THEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS AND RACISM

organisations like the Hefazat-e-Islam (Hefazat) and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat). Hefazat's hand in Kabir's persecution is clear from the fact that one of the several charges on which he has been jailed was filed with Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal on August 20, 2024, by Mufti Harun Izzar Chowdhury, Hefazat's joint secretary. It showed him, along with Sheikh Hasina, as one of the 23 accused, charged with crimes against humanity and mass killing in connection with the violent clashes between Hefazat's supporters and members of security forces and Awami League activists during its rally in Dhaka, on May 5, 2013, to press its 13-point charter of demands. The latter included demand for a stricter dress code as ordained by Islam, a ban on statues, candlelight vigils and public mixing of men and women, besides the scrapping of the Awami League government's women's development policy. Also, it demanded the designation of Ahmadiyas as "non-Muslims."

The charter underlined the fundamentalist ideology of Hefazat which was formed in 2010 to oppose the Awami League government's women's development policy promising women equal rights to property. Comprising mainly of Sunni clerics heading a network of 19,199 Quami madrasahs and its students in Bangladesh, it has considerable power to mobilise in the streets. Its intensely anti-India orientation was reflected in its violent protests against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence on March 26, 2021. Thirteen 13 persons were killed and scores injured in clashes between its supporters and members of the security forces and Awami League's supporters. While the Hefazat is not calling all the shots in the interim government,

it certainly has a wide measure of influence and has its way wherever it wants, however small or big the event or the demand is. The "Mahati Sadhusanga and Lalon Mela" (great gathering of sadhus and Lalon fair) hosted by Muktidham Ashram and Lalon Academy in Madya Narasingpur, Kashipur Union Parishad in Naranganj, was scheduled to begin on November 22, 2024. There was to be singing, dancing, festivities and food. Baul singers and devotee from all over Bangladesh were coming over for the occasion. The district administration, however, ordered its cancellation. A report in The Daily Star (November 23, 2024) quoted Fakir Shah Jalal, founder of the ashram and academy, said, "All arrangements had been made, but the administration did not permit the event, citing warning from some members of the 'Muslim' community. Even when we requested to hold the event indoors, without loudspeakers, it was denied."

A spiritual leader, philosopher, mystic poet and social reformer, Lalon articulated a weltanschauung which encompassed the essence of the Bhakti cult and Sufism, rejected all distinctions of caste, class and creed, opposed theological conflicts and racism. It is not surprising that such a person would be an anathema to fundamentalist Islamists. The report in The Daily Star, cited above, had stated that Hefazat-e-Islam leader Maulana Abdul Auwal had warned the administration in a speech to stop the event or face intervention by protesters.

Other Islamist organisations are also flexing their muscles. Speaking at a grand convention of the District Quami Madrasah Council in Dhaka on November 25, Mamunul Haque, the secretary general of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, described the August 5 revolution as a significant step toward an Islamic revolution in

Bangladesh, adding that the country was destined to undergo an Islamist transformation.

Not surprisingly, Ahmadiyas and Sufis have come under attack. Several of the former's mosques were attacked on August 6. A violent mob destroyed Baba Pagla Ali's Sufi shrine at Sherpur district on August 29; another such mob vandalised and looted Ismail Pagla's shrine in Sirajganj district on September 3.

Meanwhile two Islamist terrorist outfits—Ansar al-Islam (erstwhile Ansarullah Bangla Team) and Hibiut Tahrir (Tahrir) are increasingly active. Despite the ban on Tahrir, its supporters organised, on August 9, a rally in Dhaka city and demanded the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Bangladesh. Also, the statues of two police officers who died fighting the terrorists at the Holey Artisan Bakery in July 2016, have been destroyed and a Hibiut Tahrir poster has been found at the site. Despite the arrest of its media coordinator in Dhaka in early October, its activities continue, albeit clandestinely, in many parts of Bangladesh.

This is because the interim government is pursuing a much softer line against both Ansar al-Islam and Tahrir than Sheikh Hasina's government. An example is the release of the 'chief' of Ansar al-Islam on bail on August 26. As a consequence, while the Hefazat and Jamaat are riding high and terrorist bodies are quietly active, champions of secularism like Shahriar Kabir are imprisoned and organisations opposing communalism are apprehensive and defensive. In a situation like this, one can hardly rule out Bangladesh slowly sliding towards becoming a fundamentalist Islamist country and even an exporter of terrorism.

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

## The rise of preventative fillers: A new era in beauty standards

India's Millennials and Gen Z are embracing early cosmetic treatments like fillers as part of their self-care routines

In recent years, a noticeable trend has emerged among India's Millennials and Gen Z, the increasing popularity of early cosmetic treatments like fillers. This shift highlights evolving beauty standards influenced heavily by social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, where idealised images of flawless skin abound.



HEMA PANT

These platforms perpetuate an image-driven culture, encouraging young people to consider cosmetic enhancements as a means to maintain a youthful appearance and meet contemporary beauty ideals. Recent data from Deloitte underscores this trend, revealing that 65 per cent of Millennials and 58 per cent of Gen Z in India

have a positive outlook on using technology and aesthetic treatments to improve their lives. This optimism is coupled with a heightened focus on self-care and personal enhancement, which has led to the rising popularity of preventative fillers. Often referred to as 'Baby Botox', these treatments involve minimal amounts of Botox or dermal fillers used before

the onset of wrinkles, appealing to those who wish to stave off the visible signs of ageing before they even begin. A significant demographic shift is evident in data from NASSCOM, which indicates that Millennials and Gen Z comprise 52 per cent of India's population. This figure highlights the growing influence of these younger generations who are increasingly well-versed in cosmetic procedures and less stigmatised by them. The normalisation of such treatments owes much to open discussions on social media, where people share their experiences and results, contributing to a growing acceptance. The American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery

reports that 64 per cent of practitioners have noted a rise in patients under 30 seeking cosmetic procedures, reflecting this broader cultural acceptance. The allure of preventative fillers lies not only in the desire to maintain a youthful appearance but also in the empowerment that comes from taking control of one's aesthetic journey. Young individuals today are more informed and proactive about their beauty routines, often seeking expert advice to make informed decisions. This proactive approach to beauty and self-care represents a significant cultural shift toward embracing enhancements as a normal part of life in a digital era. However, while the



appeal of preventative fillers is undeniable, young people must approach these treatments with caution. Overuse can result in 'filler fatigue', a condition where excessive treatments lead to skin stretching and the need for more frequent interventions.

A balanced approach that integrates overall skin health with aesthetic goals is essential to ensure that beauty enhancements do not compromise one's natural appearance. Education plays a vital role in this process. Young individ-

uals are encouraged to seek guidance from reputable professionals who prioritise safety and use high-quality products. By doing so, they can make informed choices that align with their personal beauty goals without succumbing to the pressures of fleeting trends. This emphasis on education and safety empowers them to navigate their beauty journeys with confidence, fostering a sense of self-assuredness in their natural selves. The rise of early cosmetic treatments among India's youth illustrates a significant cultural shift towards embracing self-care and beauty enhancements in a digital era. As these generations navigate their identities in a visually oriented world,

they increasingly turn to options like fillers to maintain their youthful allure. By prioritising education and safety, young individuals are empowered to make informed decisions about their beauty routines, fostering confidence in their natural selves. As this trend continues to evolve, it will be intriguing to observe how it shapes the ongoing conversation around beauty in modern society. The future of beauty is likely to be shaped by these young, informed consumers who value both innovation and authenticity, setting new standards for generations to come.

(The writer is Medical Director, Sculpt Clinics; views are personal)

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PAPER WITH PASSION

## One Nation One Election

India's democratic system is on the verge of a transformative change with the 'One Nation, One Election' initiative

The concept of 'One Nation, One Election' has been a subject of significant debate in India's political discourse. On December 12, 2024, the Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved draft legislation to implement simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha, state assemblies, and local bodies within 100 days. This proposal seeks to streamline India's electoral process, reduce the economic and administrative burden of frequent elections and enhance governance. The 'One Nation, One Election' initiative aims to align the election schedules of the Lok Sabha, state assemblies, municipal corporations and panchayats. The proposed legislation is likely to be introduced in Parliament during the ongoing Winter Session, reflecting the government's intention to initiate nationwide consultations on this transformative reform. The draft legislation incorporates 11 recommendations made by a high-level committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind. These recommendations aim to address the frequent disruptions caused by the current staggered election schedule, which is a drain on economic, social, and political resources. One of the primary suggestions involves synchronising the election dates for the Lok Sabha and state assemblies in the first phase, followed by municipal and panchayat elections within 100 days. To ensure smooth execution, a dedicated implementation group will oversee the reforms.

Constitutional amendments, such as the introduction of Articles 324A and 325, are proposed to facilitate simultaneous elections, create unified voter rolls. Elections demand significant financial resources and conducting them simultaneously could reduce costs related to security, logistics and administrative expenses. Frequent elections also result in prolonged enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, halting developmental activities, which a unified schedule could minimise. However, implementing this ambitious reform involves substantial logistical and constitutional challenges. Synchronising elections requires amendments to several constitutional articles, including Articles 83, 85, 172, 174, and 356, which must be ratified by a majority of state legislatures. Building political consensus among parties with diverse regional interests is another critical requirement. Furthermore, the Election Commission will need to mobilise resources, including additional EVMs and VVPATs and ensure readiness of polling staff and infrastructure nationwide. Besides, simultaneous elections might overshadow local issues due to the dominance of national narratives, potentially affecting regional representation. Coordinating nationwide elections within a short timeframe also poses logistical challenges. Moreover, synchronising subsequent elections in cases of mid-term dissolutions could create governance gaps, leading to policy paralysis. While the proposal promises efficiency and cost-effectiveness, its implementation demands careful consideration of constitutional, logistical, and political complexities.



A vendor displays miniature figures of Santa Claus ahead of Christmas celebrations, in Noida

PTI

## Why simplicity and equality must redefine weddings

There is a pressing need to rethink our approach to weddings; advocating for a shift towards simplicity, equality and genuine joy rather than crass display of wealth

Weddings have long been a grand celebration where two people unite, signifying not just the union of two souls, but also the joining of two families. These joyous occasions are infused with rituals, traditions, and celebrations designed to enhance the richness and pride of cultural heritage. Within the shimmering lights, the grand feast, and the spirited festivities, there exists a frequently ignored reality: the rising expenses these celebrations impose on families, especially those in the middle and lower-middle classes. Dowry, once regarded as a remnant of outdated and oppressive traditions, has taken on a contemporary guise. The concept of 'dowry' may no longer be prevalent in everyday language, yet its core remains hidden beneath the polished surface of what we now refer to as 'gifts'. What was once viewed with disdain has now been embraced, illuminated by a fresh perspective that aligns with contemporary feelings. What's the final take-away? Families, particularly the bride's, face immense



financial strain due to these 'gift' expectations, which frequently manifest as expensive items, vehicles, and cash contributions. In many cases, what are presented as gifts are actually disguised demands. Middle-class families, determined to avoid the label of being stingy, frequently push themselves to the limit to maintain their standing. The expectation to host lavish weddings adds an extra weight, as in many cultures, these ceremonies are seen as a reflection of the family's standing in the community.

In severe situations, for struggling families, this can be devastating; for individuals find themselves compelled to deplete their life savings or other assets, while others are

drawn into loan schemes. This debt, incurred at the expense of societal expectations, is repaid over years—and even decades—creating a relentless cycle of instability. The most concerning aspect of this situation is its ongoing nature and the way it sustains economic and gender disparities. When a groom traditionally requests gifts for the bride, it often creates an unfair financial burden on the bride's family, even if the demand is subtle. It merely reinforces the outdated notion that a family must 'pay' to marry off their daughter. This approach truly detracts from the principle of equality in relationships and adds unnecessary stress to what should be a welcoming event.



RACHNA LAKHPATI

Now is the moment for society to reevaluate its values and confront these detrimental customs. Marriage ought to be a celebration of love and togetherness, rather than a cause for financial distress or societal expectations. A shift away from materialism is essential, emphasising the importance of mutual respect, understanding, and equality. Families and communities should collaborate to foster an atmosphere that values simplicity and authenticity over extravagance and false displays of wealth. Both governments and social organisations can play a vital role in addressing this issue by implementing laws against all forms of dowry and raising awareness about its psychological and financial consequences. A debt-free, joyful beginning to married life is the greatest blessing any couple could hope for. The true essence of celebration is not found in the extravagance of the occasion, but rather in the commitment to a shared future rooted in love and respect.

(The author is a freelance writer and a motivator; views are personal)

Conversation is a delicate business. It is made even more fragile by being central to all human interaction. The more knowledgeable individuals feel that communication is only partially through words. It can also be through eyes, through touch, through gestures, and even through silence. The list can go on. This makes communication not only complicated but also a sensitive matter. Communication can be with oneself. It can be between two persons, or in groups. It can be a short distance or a long distance. The possibilities are immense.

The pitch of the voice could be an intervening variable, and sometimes the more well-versed practice cross-communication. It means giving one message through one medium and another through another. In other words, it can be one message through words and another message through the eyes.

If technology intervenes, it becomes even more complex. The technological interventions can be through a medium such as a handset, a telephone, or, in some parts, a piece of paper. In the past, pigeons have been known to serve a useful purpose. The permutations and combinations are immense, and each has a value, just as each medium has a context. Like in the case of many essentials in life, there is no primer available and there is no one author who has covered comprehensively all aspects of communication. Hence, much of this is on learning by practice. Much of this is also learning by grief because in the absence of a proper 'Guru' one can only learn by trial and error. Many relationships get under strain or break because one meaning is intended, but another meaning gets conveyed. This can sometimes be incomplete or even distorted. Put simply, coding and decoding a message is a complex process and has to

do with many variables, most of which may not be under the control of the parties involved. Hence, it could become like fiddling with wires in the dark. The solutions are not difficult if they are systematically put into operation. In early childhood, when a person is being taught words, it would be helpful if the person is also helped to choose the better word to communicate his ideas. Proper pronunciation should also be taught. If the circumstances permit by linguistics or multi-linguism can be practiced. This would help adjustment to different levels of people; people of different ages and from different contexts. The solutions are known just as much as the problems are known.

But there is little systematic attempt to put it in a frame and help better communication. It is obvious that communication can be between two people of equal age, between somebody who is older and somebody younger, people of the same gender, people of the opposite gender, people with prior antecedents of relationships, and people with no prior antecedents of relationships. But there is little systematic attempt to put it in a frame and help better communication. It is obvious that communication can be between two people of equal age, between somebody who is older and somebody younger, people of the same gender, people of the opposite gender, people with prior antecedents of relationships, and people with no prior antecedents of relationships.

THE USUAL RESPONSE WHEN THERE IS A LACK OF CLARITY ON WHERE TO BEGIN, ONE SHOULD BEGIN JUST SOMEWHERE AND HOPE THAT IT RUNS ON SATISFACTORILY. IF IT IS NOT ENTIRELY SATISFACTORY, IT CAN BE CORRECTED AS ONE GOES ALONG



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

## Unraveling the delicate threads of human interaction

Communication is the lifeblood of human connection, yet it remains one of the most intricate and fragile aspects of our existence

The contexts are huge and almost impossible to exhaustively list. This is not to say that the problem is not solvable or cannot be handled. The usual response when there is a lack of clarity on where to begin, one should begin just somewhere and hope that it runs on satisfactorily. If it is not entirely satisfactory, it can be corrected as one goes along. Being inundated by problems and not beginning at all cannot be the answer. Sometimes a simple problem can be so elusive that it becomes difficult to structure it for a solution. Effective communication is one such problem.

Any discussion touching on communication will be incomplete without the realisation, as already noted, that communication is not always with words. There is an oft-repeated quote to the effect of 'if you cannot understand my silence, you will not understand my words'. Interestingly, silence also communicates, and there are different types of silence. Often, body language takes over, but that is another matter. Unfortunately, communication through silence also needs deep insights and research. Communication

can be between people where one of the limbs that is centrally used in communication, loses its function or becomes unusable. For example, if someone has a problem with listening through one ear, the best course of action would be to help the person concerned restore their hearing through the other ear.

However, this may not always work. So options and support systems have to be generated. Like in many things, psychological factors become very heavily involved, and unfortunately, those who are not capable of deep thought fumble more. There is a cause for serious research on all aspects of the communication enumerated above and more research on communication per se, in a scholastic mode, would help.

Till then, one can only hope that the general conversation on communication will alleviate the confusion that sometimes arises on communication points. One also hopes that research will help good communication all around. (The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## FAMILY FIRST POLITICS

Madam — Family first is not only for Biden. It is rather a human tendency to attend to the needs and aspirations of the family first before thinking and acting for the cause of the society. Biden's act of granting a pardon to his son is seen as a great sin because the US is projecting itself as the promoter and protector of democracy and democratic values all over. Though it is expected of any leader to rise above all petty thinking and prioritise the benefit of the general mass and the country, many a time we do observe some people at the helm of affairs succumbing to simple human instincts, keeping the disciplines and decorum related to the position held at bay. No doubt, such acts not only demolish the image of the person that has been built for decades but also bring shame to the nation and the society he is attached to. We have seen the way the entire country of Sri Lanka was brought under the grip of one family that led to unprecedented levels of corruption, amassing wealth by the family, unleashing some sort of dictatorship, and plunging the common people into sufferings of all sorts.

But people are watching, which all the leaders should keep in mind. Biden lost in the US, and the family is out in Sri Lanka. India is not an exception. The leaders of the ruling dispensation, pointing at the Opposition for promoting the culture of family, assuming the leadership of the party, are simultaneously focusing on bringing their siblings to the limelight of political careers. In most of the states, the regional parties are almost converted into family organs, and they firmly believe in the dictum of 'the king and his family can do no wrong', meaning that their family is above all the laws of the land and none of them can be questioned or punished. In India it is almost an accepted norm to bear with all the mistakes or misdeeds of the members of the family in power.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

## Gukesh youngest world chess champion



India's young Grandmaster D Gukesh defeated China's World Champion Ding Liren in the 14th and final round, claiming the title of the youngest world chess champion. At just 18 years old, Dommaraju Gukesh has demonstrated that conquering the world is possible at a young age. Thursday was a historic day for Indian chess, thanks to Gukesh's remarkable achievement. Gukesh broke the 14-year-old

record held by Russia's Garry Kasparov, who became the youngest world champion at the age of 22 years, 6 months, and 27 days. Gukesh's victory marks a new chapter in the history of chess. After Viswanathan Anand, Gukesh is the second Indian chess player to earn the title of world champion. In a 14th-round match that lasted nearly four hours, Gukesh defeated Ding Liren in 58 moves, becoming the 18th world champion in chess history.

In October 2022, Gukesh had already captured everyone's attention by defeating then-world champion Magnus Carlsen in a rapid chess tournament. In 2024, Gukesh first triumphed in the Candidates Tournament. Later, he played a pivotal role in helping the Indian men's team win the gold medal in the Chess Olympiad. Now, by claiming the world championship title, he has added another feather to India's cap.

Dattaprasad Shiroadkar | Mumbai

judges in district and high courts. Bal Govind | Noida

## RS CHAIRMAN FACES NO CONFIDENCE

Madam — It is unfortunate that the ruling BJP and the opposition parties in our country do not look at each other as ideological opponents but as real-time enemies. The present move by sixty members of the opposition expressing 'no confidence' against the RS chairman may not reach the extent of voting, and even if it does, it will get defeated as the opposition does not have the sufficient strength for the motion's success. However, such a move by the opposition expressing lack of confidence in the chair is a black mark in the world's largest democracy. This has led to the situation that they do not engage themselves with each other and ensure a fair and useful debate in both the Houses of Parliament, trying to score one over the other.

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

# Trump's tariffs will backfire



TAKATOSHI ITO

US President-elect Donald Trump appears committed to imposing high tariffs on imports to the United States — or, at least, using the threat of tariffs to bend US trading partners to his will. Mr Trump now says he will enact a 25 per cent tariff on all imports from Canada and Mexico on his first day

in office, and raise tariffs on goods from China by 10 per cent. And he has previously advocated 60-100 per cent tariffs on imports from China and 10-20 per cent tariffs on imports from all other countries, including allies.

Some countries will probably retaliate with tariffs of their own; others might try to negotiate exemptions, by offering to increase investment in the US or to import more US agricultural products. A third possible response — which is particularly relevant for China — is offshoring, with firms shifting production to countries that are subject to lower US tariffs. China is already laying the groundwork for such trade diversion: It has been pursuing a "charm offensive" with a wide range of countries, including US antagonists, such as Russia, to US allies, like Japan. For Russia, closer ties with China are an easy sell. In 2023, Russia's exports to China

rose by 63 per cent, while China's exports to Russia increased 65 per cent, according to my calculation using the International Monetary Fund's Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS).

Beyond bilateral ties, China and Russia are working to strengthen trade and finance cooperation among the BRICS grouping of emerging-market economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which extended invitations to six new members last year (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). Argentina ultimately rejected the invitation, and Saudi Arabia has put its plan to join on hold. But the BRICS+ has undoubtedly gained traction, and further expansion may well be in the cards.

Many countries have proved reluctant to "take sides" in the US-China rivalry, preferring to maintain trade ties with both

the West and the China-Russia axis. This is true even among democracies: In 2023, total Russian exports to India rose by 606 per cent according to IMF DOTS, owing largely to the Ukraine war — in particular, Russia's need to redirect energy exports to friendlier countries, often at cut-rate prices.

So far, however, India is more an exception than the rule among emerging and developing economies, whose exports to the West have grown faster than their exports to Russia and China. According to IMF DOTS, the Global South (emerging and developing countries other than China and Russia) increased exports to G7 countries by 13 per cent from 2021-23; exports to Russia and China increased by only 5 per cent in the same period. But this may well change if Trump imposes across-the-board import tariffs. China hopes to woo even close US allies. For example, it unilaterally reintroduced a short-term visa exemption for Japanese citizens.

In Europe, China has set its sights on

Hungary, where the Chinese electric-vehicle maker BYD is building a new factory in Szeged — a bid to reduce its future tariff bill, no doubt. But the European Union (and Japan) might be able to negotiate exemptions to Mr Trump's tariffs, though this would not come for free, and any deal with China could still drive a wedge between the US and its closest allies.

Beyond alienating friends and partners, Mr Trump's tariffs will probably fail to advance his apparent goal of reducing the US trade deficit. If other countries adopt retaliatory tariffs, total exports from the US — and global trade overall — may well decline. Moreover, high US tariffs would fuel domestic inflation, forcing the US Federal Reserve to raise interest rates, which would probably cause the US dollar to appreciate, causing exports to fall and imports to rise.

Of course, Mr Trump will point the finger elsewhere, accusing US trading partners of "dumping" goods or maintaining artificially low exchange rates. Some

observers, including myself, speculate that Mr Trump's pick for Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, might even call for a special G20 meeting to pressure other countries to revalue their currencies "risk-a-vis the dollar, a move that would recall the 1985 Plaza Accord."

While Mr Trump appears eager to impose tariffs on everyone, China has always been his favourite target. The apparent goal of taxes and other restrictions imposed by both Mr Trump and President Joe Biden — is to contain China's rise, thereby preventing it from becoming a credible challenger to the US. But unless Mr Trump takes a prudent approach to tariffs on imports from the rest of the world, it is the US that will be contained, in terms of both economic dynamism and global influence.

*The author, a former Japanese deputy vice minister of finance, is a professor at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. ©Project Syndicate, 2024*



## The chessboard whisperers

VIEWPOINT  
DEVANGSHU DATTA

One of the more interesting aspects of Gukesh Dommaraju's successful campaign for the world championship was the induction of Paddy Upton as part of his team. The South African is a former first-class cricketer and rugby international. He's also worked as a strength and conditioning coach.

But his real credentials are as a mental coach, a chess whisperer whose work across 20 different sports and esports. Indians may recall Upton as part of the outfit that supported the winning squad in the 2011 cricket World Cup, and as a consultant with the hockey team that won bronze at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Upton has also authored a bestseller, *The Barefoot Coach: Life-changing insights from working with the world's best cricketers*, which is now likely to become a cult classic on the chess circuit.

Upton is a self-confessed beginner at chess. When he was approached by Gukesh's sponsor in May, he was hesitant though intrigued. He had never worked at a sport where, as he says, the mind is the main performance tool. But he felt the principles for improving performance in any sport are probably similar.

Upton and Gukesh hit it off, spending a few hours each week discussing preparation for and playing high-level chess. The new world champion was gracious enough to mention Upton's contribution at his press conferences, acknowledging that Upton had helped him to sort out his workout and sleep schedules and prepared him mentally for all the situations he might encounter during the title match.

Upton, for his part, uses the analogy of preparing for an exam by reading the books in the syllabus cover to cover. He says Gukesh has studied the whole "book," working out how to manage his sleep, how to manage downtime, how to manage himself moment to moment during a game. Upton described Gukesh as an exceptionally well-prepared professional who is highly self-aware and more mature than the average 25-year-olds he has worked with.

Upton says one of the things talented newcomers in any sport need to learn is the importance of performing to their normal form, rather than jump to a new level and risk losing form when competing in a major event for the first time. This is a wonderful insight — you are in a big event because your normal form was good enough to get there. It may seem odd that chess, the most cerebral of sports, has taken so long to regard mental conditioning as integral to preparation. This is perhaps due to a sense of exceptionalism and, possibly, hubris.

Chess has always considered itself different from other sports. While this was possibly true for some years, it has become increasingly less so as the game is now played for substantial sums under

stringent tournament conditions and tight time controls. And, as in any sport, the same fears and anxieties prey on players' nerves and every professional sportsman has to learn how to deal with those while optimising their skills.

Chess players are good at recognising visual patterns and are usually of normal intelligence, or occasionally better. But they tend to assume they are equally smart in other respects, including psyching each other out. This is not necessarily true. It is unlikely a professional chess player, who has spent time focussed on learning the subtleties of sundry openings and tackling difficult endgames, is better at dealing with their own emotional frailties than a psychologist who has focussed on understanding the vagaries of the mind.

Mental coaching, motivational training, life training, and the like are soft skills, and it's difficult to determine their impact. Upton says a good mental coach may add 1-2 per cent to the performance levels of a top sportsman by helping them understand themselves. That is of course, enough to make a difference when two athletes are stretched to their limits, and it may well have done the trick in Gukesh's case.

But it is hard to measure such small differences objectively, and the internet is chock-a-bloc with "amateurs" and outright charlatans offering such services. It's very hard to judge which of them actually delivers value. Nevertheless, now that Upton's client has proved to be spectacularly successful, chess prodigies from around the world will be in the market for such services. This could be a new niche for "head whisperers".

## BJP goes after Foggy Bottom

BJP's attack was not merely on the American 'deep state'. The idea had been acquiring currency across ideological lines for some time and has been given greater legitimacy by Trump

A most important event in our politico-strategic history passed with somewhat less debate than it deserved. It was the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) attack not merely on the "deep state" — now seen as a formidable, undefinable, and mysterious pan-national demon, but also on the US State Department.

When the BJP's official Twitter (sorry, Elon, X) handle posted a 16-part thread attacking the US deep state for launching an all-out war on India and its Modi government, you might have normally been inclined to say, "It's OK. Trump is the new President. He's railing against the same monster. So, it's just as well that the BJP also joins in. Be on the winning side." Except, the 13th of these posts went beyond the deep state and accused the US State Department of leading this conspiratorial cabal.

The key line: "It has always been the US State Department behind this agenda...The deep state had a clear objective to destabilise India by targeting Prime Minister Modi...The French investigative media group Mediapart revealed that OCCR is funded by the US State Department's USAID...In fact, 50 per cent of OCCR's funding comes from the US State Department."

There are specific mentions of the Pegasus controversy, several exposés on the Adani Group, and also references to other "deep state" figures like George Soros. The substantively new thing here was the BJP launching a direct and unqualified attack on the US State Department. Please note that Mediapart is also the hard-left French platform that led the

investigations into the tawdry deal, providing the Congress Modi critics with much ammunition to attack him. So far, for the BJP, it might have been part of some French left-deep-state plot to undermine India and the Modi government. Now, it's a credible ally. That irony just died isn't a phrase that works in hard politics. Here, irony dies and resurrects, just like the serial storyteller of Vikram our Betal. In this latest avatar, Betal Mediapart's story was actually quite damaging to the US establishment. It isn't just too clever by half, but also cynical in the extreme to be funding (without disclosure) investigative journalism around the world while simultaneously jailing a veto over appointments of key personnel and issues, as revealed by Mediapart. Cynicism, however, must be a core requirement for becoming a superpower. Equally, a political party was within its rights to question it, if it felt its government was

hurt by this US government-funded initiative. Complications, however, arise at a more substantive level. It isn't the first time a ruling party in the West has attacked the "foreign hand" or specifically the US. The Congress did so routinely in the Indira era.

In the early 1970s, as Mrs Gandhi came under pressure from the Opposition, she and her party routinely accused their opponents of being CIA agents. It was then that Rajiv Sabha member Pilo Mody, who had been a founding member of the Janata Party, walked into the House one day wearing a badge saying, "I am a CIA agent." Later, Rajiv Gandhi and even P V Narasimha Rao routinely attacked America when under pressure. Rajiv with his "naaniyad karu denga" ("we will make them remember their grandmothers"), and Rao in a parliamentary intervention. Sidlight: Later, the Ministry of External Affairs tried explaining this to the US embassy by dismissing it as a slip of the tongue. In a conversation with some of us editors, a furious William Clarke, Jr, the US ambassador at the time, asked, "Was his tongue slipping for 15 minutes?"

So far, so good, but those times were different. This was India's Cold War anti-Americanism. Now, we live in a different era, where three successive Indian Prime Ministers and five US Presidents have hailed ours as the most consequential bilateral relationship of the 21st Century. India and America see each other as strategic partners if not allies. Some lines spoken during Mr Modi's official state visit to Washington in 2023 are relevant here.

Mr Modi said, "Important decisions have added a new chapter to our comprehensive and global strategic partnership." Joe Biden had described this as "a partnership that is among the most consequential in the world, that is stronger, closer and more dynamic than any time in history." And this, from the 6,500-word joint statement, was the cherry on the cake: "No corner of human enterprise connects us; the partnership between the two great countries, which spans the seas to the stars."

This gives context to the BJP's attack on the US State Department now. Of course, diplomatically, both sides maintain at the highest levels there's no problem with the relationship.

So, how do two great powers, who mutually regard and repeatedly hail each other as vital strategic partners, reconcile this contradiction? That the Congress party has now latched onto this by

NATIONAL INTEREST  
SHEKHAR GUPTA

accusing the Modi government of ruining a vital strategic relationship, "protecting a friend Adani" is just another irony in this season of contradictions, given its traditional anti-Americanism, which Manmohan Singh had to defy for that epochal nuclear deal.

It's the Opposition's job to prey on the government's contradictions. But how does the government balance this without sacrificing a relationship it says it values? The answer won't be as simple as saying the party has its view and the government will keep doing its thing. India and America may have become friends, but anti-Americanism has always survived in popular opinion. Lately, it's been turbo-charged with Mr Trump railing against his deep state, its "conspiracies," and woven into it the curious new appeal of the idea of de-dollarisation, something S. Jaishankar has tried to squash unambiguously more than once.

So strong is our anti-Americanism that so many smart and influential people are seduced by the idea of a BRICS currency, never mind if it will be just another name for the Chinese Yuan. It goes without saying that anti-Americanism is probably the safest ideology to flaunt.

Doubts and disputes will arise in the closest partnerships. As Mr Biden winds up, each side thinks it caught the other with their hands in the cookie jar. The US on the Panama issue and India now paying back on OCCR. How can you do such a thing to a friend? That's the question each is asking the other.

Could the Modi government/BJP have handled it differently? Would they have spoken differently if Kamala Harris had won? You can speculate. My point would instead be, has US handled this much better?

Some of the statements of Ambassador Eric Garcetti. Was it really necessary or diplomatic — for him to talk of the "red lines" on the Panama issue when India was already responding to it very differently than to Najjar-Cajal? Or his statement that the US made a distinction between talk and acts of terrorism. His country knows as well as ours how terror talk can turn into action, even when among the most insensitive were spoken in India by a US Ambassador in three decades.

We acknowledge that his Bollywood dancing moves are way better than the bhangra we saw from Justin Trudeau even if their costumes seemed daffodil by the same guy in Phalika Bazaar. Dancin' to Bollywood music or dholak is so very to the heart and minds of Indians in the 21st century, especially not when you are schooling them on the "difference" between terror talk and action.

No single individual, institution, or action is to blame for this, but the relationship has entered a stressful phase in the final months of the Biden administration. We'll try to dig deeper, responding in kind — definitely not with a check to its government. And they wait for Mr Trump.

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## Left-arm speed merchants

### EYE CULTURE

VISHAL MENON

Marrying skill, athleticism, and finesse, Mitchell Santner's bowling is a sight to behold. There is magic in the manner he powers to the crease and flicks the ball with his cocked wrist to generate late swing.

One cannot blame Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill for looking like deer caught in the headlights, trying to negotiate Santner's devilish deliveries in the just concluded Test match of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in Adelaide.

Watching left-arm quick bowling at full tilt is one of cricket's most ethereal sights. Wasim Akram remains the high priest of left-arm fast bowling, although fans from a different generation may pick Australia's Alan Davidson over the Punjabi ball from Lahore.

Akram was a wizard who would hustle in from 15 paces to deliver at frightening pace backed by unmatched control over swing and seam. Over the course of two decades, from 1984 to 2003, the "Sultan of Swing" had the impassivity to break a few skulls, even as he perfected the art of reverse swing under Imran Khan's tutelage.

Arguably Pakistan's greatest cricketer, Akram possessed cricketing intelligence to recalibrate his plans spell by spell, over by over, and ball by ball. Simply put, he was a captain's delight and a batter's nightmare.

Davidson, who piled his trade through the 1950s and early 60s, was a bowler with an economical action who could extract copious amounts of swing from the most benign surfaces. Before Kapil Dev burst on to the

national consciousness in 1978, India had a left-arm pacer from Rajkot named Karan Ghavi. A bowler with a square jawline, life frame, and an unbreakable spirit, Ghavi was the first Indian pacer to get 100 Test wickets.

At the turn of the century, Zaheer Khan made a splash with a 150 kmph thunderbolt that sent former Australia captain Steve Waugh's stumps for a walk. Khan would discover his verve during his four-year tour of England in 2000, when he became the team's bowling lynchpin. Like Akram, Khan possessed crickety nous and developed several variations, including the knuckleball, which helped him get crucial scalps in the limited-overs format.

India still gets misty-eyed over MS Dhoni's six in the 2011 World Cup final against Sri Lanka. But without Khan's 21 wickets in that showpiece tournament, India would not have made the stellar march to the summit clash in Mumbai.

Intermittently through the 2000s, Khan found an ally in Anil Kumble, another left-arm bowler, who created awkward angles for right-handers with the incoming delivery. Sadly, a fragile body succumbed every ounce of Nehru's bouncebackability. In 2003, Irfan Pathan, who grew up idolising Akram, plucked the nation's interest with his swing, spirit, and curly locks.

Three years later, Pathan would turn into a national hero after picking a hat-trick against Pakistan on Day 1 of a Test match in Karachi. By the end of 2007, Pathan's swing and pace had nosedived. Injuries added to his woes, and he was never quite the threat he once was.

In recent times, India have unearthed another left-arm fast bowler named Arshdeep Singh. Singh was part of India's 2019 winning Ashes World Cup squad. In 2022, he would make his international debut against England. Since then, the youngster has made a name for himself as a limited-overs specialist, unleashing yorkers at 140 kmph with ease. In 60 T20s, and through several international Premier League outings, Singh has displayed unforgivable temperament, prompting cricketing pundits to wonder why he is not playing Test cricket. The 25-year-old, who was a key member of India's World T20 triumph in the Caribbean earlier this year, has expressed his desire to feature in the game's traditional format.

Indian selectors have missed a trick by not including Singh in the ongoing Test series Down Under. In Australia, he would have been the perfect foil to Jasprit Bumrah. Singh could have required the impressive Travis Head's ability to bring the ball into the left-handers and then swing it away.

Head's belligerence notwithstanding, Singh could have exploited his weakness under the off-stump, which some of India's right-handed bowlers have failed to do so far. Having a left-arm quick of Singh's calibre gives the bowling attack the much-needed heft and variety. It's like having another bow in Team India's quiver, or an ace up their sleeve.

Pigeonholing Singh as a white-ball specialist is the greatest disservice to this sparkling young talent.

## The year we thought about institutions

TICKER  
MIHIR S SHARMA

The United States (US) may be about to receive a lesson in overconfidence.

It has been argued since 2016, when Donald Trump was first elected President, that there are limits to what he could permanently alter the trajectory of a country with strong and stable institutions. It has been stated at various points that his own party would hold him in check; that the President needs the approval of Congress to operate; that blatantly illegal actions would not stand up in court; that the federal government was too large and vast to do one man's bidding.

To be fair, the experience of his first term did not disprove all those claims. Yet the Republican Party did not put up much of a defence, and voted en bloc in his defence during both impeachments, for example. But some of his most controversial actions — for example, the restriction on

those from certain Muslim-majority countries entering the US — were in fact upheld by judicial scrutiny. Various members of his Cabinet just got away with the job, and many one resigned rather than help him out politically.

All of this did lead us to assume, when Mr Trump was voted out in 2020, that American institutions had survived their greatest test. But, clearly, we were wrong. The greatest test for institutions is not when an elected leader first attempts to undermine them. They come under real strain when that leader is re-elected. That is when the individuals who make up those institutions, and on whose energy and actions their independence depends, begin to give up.

We in India have had some experience of this. We often talk about the hollowing out of our institutions during Indira Gandhi's long, if interrupted, stint in power. But it was after she received a resounding mandate on re-election that this institutional decay really began to take hold. Even in more recent times, there was unquestionably a qualitative difference, in the atmosphere in the corridors of power, between the first term of the current dispensation in New Delhi and after they were resoundingly re-elected in 2019.

We were reminded this week that institutional political eco-

omy has enjoyed something of a renaissance this year. Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A Robinson formally renewed their economics prize during the year, and the Nobel laureate at Stockholm University on Sunday, Prof Acemoglu reminded us that poorly designed institutions can impose greater limits on growth than expected.

Institutions appear to be, if we take such seriously, both extremely fragile and unusually persistent. Their effect and influence can last for centuries — for example, colonial institutions survive in India and Indonesia. But, somehow, they are simultaneously not too strong; they can be distorted or broken by the pressure imposed by powerful leaders.

Are we speaking of different things here? Is an "institution" like the US Department of Justice or its Supreme Court different from an "institution" such as the legal and constitutional ethos of Enlightenment-era individualism that is supposed to motivate their actions? Perhaps the former can bend, buckle, or break, while the latter survives.

And perhaps not. Definitely, to an outsider, the broad independence that has usually been the remit of an attorney general in the US is remarkable, almost incomprehensible. A politician

or lawyer from the President's own party is appointed by the President to head the Department of Justice and is a member of his Cabinet, but is not a key decision-maker. It is supposed to make decisions without the interference of the President. Such an inversion of basic incentives can persist only when some sort of institutional strength has been built up. In such systems of departmental process, it is their underlying ethos, Attorneys general in the past have refused to fire special prosecutors investigating the President — for example, during the Watergate scandal — and been fired themselves for this defiance. Much more recently, the current attorney general very conspicuously took his time about prosecuting Mr Trump. His party might be paying the price of his punctiliousness.

It is hard to see how such a system would be taken to preserve institutional independence and objectivity in the next four years — and, if not, why it should ever return. If there is a lesson to take away from the institutional life in political economy, combined with the political currents of populism, it is this: Institutional strength is both vital and fragile. Defending it must be the primary task of politics. But this defence will not prevail if the voters are not persuaded of its importance.

## Distrust, disorder in the House

The no-confidence motion against Jagdeep Dhankhar, chairperson of the Rajya Sabha, is unprecedented in the country's parliamentary history. Signed by 60 Rajya Sabha members, it seeks his removal from office on grounds of bias and partisanship in favour of the ruling party. The move has no chance of being passed as the Opposition parties do not have the numbers to carry it but the message it conveys is worrying. It shows a breakdown of communication and a lack of trust between the head of the House and its members and between the ruling side and the Opposition. In a democratic system, parliament is the highest forum for conversation. Parties represent people and they should talk in parliament, agreeing and disagreeing on matters. But there is no conversation in parliament, which is now a highly polarised platform where accusations and innuendoes are traded and hostilities get further deepened. Even when it is in session, it is more in the adjournment mode. The move against Dhankhar mirrors this dysfunctional state of affairs.

The presiding officers of the two Houses have also contributed to this state of despair. It is their responsibility to run the Houses cordially and efficiently, giving no scope for complaints of partisanship. The moral authority and goodwill they gain by treating all members equally and enforcing norms and rules well will help them bring the members and parties together. But they have been found wanting in this aspect. The Opposition has based its move against Dhankhar on his rulings inside the House and statements outside which it has provided as evidence of his partisanship. The latest instance quoted by the Opposition is his decision to allow BJP MPs to speak on an adjournment motion he had himself rejected earlier. There are other instances as well. The Opposition notice has also said that he has made unacceptable remarks against the Leader of the Opposition and acted like a spokesperson of the government.

Dhankhar had the record of an extremely antagonistic relationship with the West Bengal government and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee when he was the Governor of the state. He has extolled the RSS in the House and has made controversial remarks about the powers of parliament and the judiciary. He is the Vice-President of the country, and a political overload hurts constitutional offices. Being the presiding officer of the Rajya Sabha, he should be more conciliatory than combative and needs to rise above the political fray to run the House. The Opposition move will hopefully drive that message home. An aggressive ruling side, a desperate Opposition, and a presiding officer distrusted by the Opposition are not a good combination for parliament.

## The crowning of a prodigy

The chess world has found a new king in the prodigious Gukesh Dommaraju. In a draining World Chess Championship battle, the 18-year-old dethroned Ding Liren by showcasing maturity and composure that belied his age. Gukesh was installed as the favourite ahead of the Championship clash, and with good reason. After acting the Candidates event in Canada, he played a stellar role in India's march to the team gold at the Chess Olympiad, topping it up by winning the gold medal on board one of the tournament with nine points out of a possible ten. Liren, by contrast, came into this 14-game marathon with no form. The Chinese superstar's struggles extended beyond the board too, compelling the pundits to assert that Gukesh was the king-in-waiting and it was only a matter of time before he ascended the throne.

Liren fired the first salvo, charging off the blocks against a nervous Gukesh to win the opening game and record his first victory in 304 days. Undaunted, Gukesh displayed tremendous character and bounced back almost immediately by securing game three and levelling the proceedings. Typical of such long-drawn-out games, a period of intense attritional battles ensued but not once did Gukesh blink, going toe-to-toe with his more experienced opponent and sending out the message that he wouldn't give away. Gukesh ended the seven-game sequence of stalemates by nudging ahead in Game 11, only for the Chinese to hit back immediately. Tied at 6-6 after 12 games, the clash seemed destined to head into a tie-breaker with the established order proclaiming that Gukesh would find it hard to digest the latest defeat. But the poker-faced teenager who worked with world-renowned mind coach Paddy Upton held his own, comfortably securing a draw in the penultimate game. With all to play for in Game 14, it was the seasoned Liren who cracked, making a schoolboy error to present the game and the title to Gukesh who pounced on the unexpected gift to send his country into raptures.

Gukesh's dream of becoming a world champion was fuelled as a seven-year-old when he watched Viswanathan Anand, a five-time champion who later became his mentor, lose to Magnus Carlsen in the World Championship battle in Chennai in 2013. A decade of deep-rooted ambition, perseverance, and immense sacrifice – not just from him, but also his parents who had to battle financial challenges – culminated in ecstasy for India. The enormity of his accomplishment hit Gukesh not long after Liren offered his right hand in surrender, as he broke down in a show of raw emotion, kept wonderfully under check until then. By going where Anand went before him, Gukesh has become the new poster boy of chess in India.

**As the RS presiding officer, Dhankhar should rise above politics and drop his combative style**

## When Hindutva meets inclusive outreach

DEEPANSHU MOHAN

At the core of the BJP's dual identity lies a profound contradiction: its ideological commitment to Hindutva and its simultaneous attempt to court non-Hindu and lower-caste voters. Hindutva, rooted in the ideal of seeing India only as a Hindu nation, has historically marginalised religious minorities, lower castes while observing women as mothers and child-bearers in Narendra Modi, the BJP has made significant inroads, in some cases with assistance from the RSS (and its grassroots-level outreach in Hindi-heartland states), and retained key bases among these groups in the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

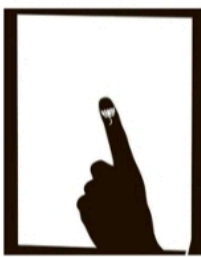
Similarly, its attempts to appeal to Muslim women by advocating for the abolition of triple talac coexist uneasily with anti-minority rhetoric and policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. These contradictions are not merely rhetorical – they also reflect deeper tensions in the BJP's governance model that threaten to undermine India's secular and social fabric. This adopted duality for electoral survival and power also challenges the BJP's transactional, populist narrative of 'empowerment' which merely repackages entitlement-based short-term welfare transfers as 'opportunities for higher mobility' without making substantive investments in human capital development, employment generation, and economic security for lower, middle, and lesser privileged classes.

This makes one also inquire: Does BJP's electoral support among Dalits and OBCs represent genuine inclusion, or is it merely transactional welfare politics? Welfare schemes, often designed to create direct links between beneficiaries and the central government, serve as powerful tools for voter mobilisation. BJP's appeal to marginalised groups, however, often stops short of structural reforms that would address entrenched inequalities.

The party's rise as a pan-Indian political force is marked by its ability to adapt and dominate across diverse regional landscapes, leveraging socio-economic narratives and targeted outreach to secure its position. From the Hindi heartland of the North to the politically resistant South of India, the BJP's strategies have systematically reshaped India's electoral map – these extend to its efforts in the eastern and western parts of the country. The methods employed to achieve this dominance, however,

also raise critical questions about the implications for federalism and India's pluralistic fabric.

In the North, the BJP cemented its dominance by dismantling caste-based regional alliances. A case in point is Phulpur, a constituency in Uttar Pradesh that was once a symbol of Congress-era politics. Its strategic engagement in the state has been redefining caste dynamics, securing a loyal voter base. In Bihar, alliances with the Janata Dal (United) and hyper-local caste recalibrations have delivered victories in constituencies such as Gopalganj, breaking the Rashtriya Janata Dal's long-standing grip.



In the East, the BJP's rise in West Bengal highlights its ability to disrupt entrenched regional parties. Similarly, in Odisha, victories in constituencies like Dhamagaur underscore how welfare schemes and infrastructure commitments resonate with economically vulnerable voters.

In the South, the BJP faces more resistance but has made calculated inroads. Karnataka remains its stronghold, with constituencies like Bengaluru South showcasing its urban appeal. In Telangana, the party won eight of the 17 Lok Sabha constituencies in 2024. In Tamil Nadu, where Dravidian politics dominates, the BJP's focus has been on Tamil pride and heritage, reflecting a slow but deliberate strategy to establish itself.

In the West, the BJP has leveraged its partnership with the RSS to deepen grassroots connections, as reflected in Maharashtra, where over 60,000 RSS-led meetings were held ahead of the recent Assembly election.

Despite these successes, critics argue that the BJP's strategies come at a significant cost. Its welfare outreach, while fostering development, is often selective, undermining the structural reforms needed for long-term change.

Furthermore, its use of divisive narratives – blending welfare promises with Hindutva and centralising power – threatens India's pluralistic ethos and

federal structure. The BJP's dominance may secure electoral victories, but the broader societal consequences of these techniques pose serious challenges to the democratic integrity and inclusivity of India's political landscape.

**Politics of welfare populism**

Central to the BJP's electoral strategy is its extensive use of welfare politics. Flagship schemes such as the Ayushman Bharat, which provides health insurance to over 500 million people, and PM-KISAN, offering income support to farmers, have been instrumental in consolidating temporal support amongst the larger percentage voting groups: from rural and economically disadvantaged voters.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, which provided free food grains to millions of families, further solidified the BJP's pro-poor image. These efforts have transformed voter perceptions, creating a direct connection between welfare benefits and Modi's leadership. This limited welfare-driven approach also exposes stark contradictions.

Modi's frequent criticism of *resuli* (freebie) culture rings hollowing considering the approximately Rs 34 lakh crore spent on welfare schemes. It could be argued that this persistent reliance on welfare politics highlights the party's electoral pragmatism rather than a commitment to sustainable governance.

By prioritising short-term gains over long-term development, the BJP risks perpetuating dependency rather than fostering empowerment. Moreover, the selective application of welfare programmes raises concerns about polarisation. Data suggests that welfare schemes are often concentrated in BJP-dominated regions, reinforcing electoral strongholds rather than addressing nationwide inequalities.

This approach undermines the principle of equitable governance, creating a perception that welfare is not a universal right but a political reward. Such strategies, while electorally effective, erode the integrity of democratic governance, reducing citizens to beneficiaries rather than empowered stakeholders.

The BJP's dominance has profound implications for Indian democracy. The complex blend of projected inclusivism in electoral campaigns while continuing communal charged polarisation to secure ideological objectives for the BJP raises critical questions about the evolving nature of India's democratic republic which, at this time, seems indifferently ignorant of the basic constitutional charter and its application.

*I am a professor, dean, and director, Centre for New Economic Studies, OP Jindal Global University, Ankur Singh contributed to this article*

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

## The iron horse and I

For the first time in its storied history, the iconic Brindavan Express was late

HEMA RAMESH

As I lazily flipped through the newspaper on a Sunday morning, two stories about trains in Bihar caught my eye. Suddenly, I found myself reminiscing about the significant role trains played in my younger years. Growing up in an industrial town in Bihar in the 1960s, I was no stranger to trains. Every two years, my family and I would embark on a two-night train journey to Bengaluru, then a relatively unknown town beyond Madras. Preparing for this journey was a labour of love for my parents, who looked forward to meeting their families. For me, it was the start of an exciting adventure.

Steam locomotives enthralled me. The ones that pulled our trains, and those that passed by, had the gold letters 'SEI' engraved on them – South Eastern Railway, of course. My father once told me

that any of them could be one that he had worked on to build 'Yes, the Locomotive was a very important one'.

Years later, my cousins and I would sneak out of our homes to watch the trains pass. We'd stand on the railway overbridge at Perambur Loco Works station, eagerly awaiting the iconic Brindavan Express. As the train's headlights came into view, the rhythmic thundering grew louder, followed by the arresting metallic roar of the diesel locomotive. We were spellbound! The Brindavan Express was the crown jewel of Southern Railway, renowned for its punctuality. Legend had it that people would set their watches by its passing time.

My father's family had a shining star – my uncle, a brilliant student and engineer who topped the Railway Services examination. He went on to make significant contributions to Indian Railways, working in crucial hubs across Southern Railway. His early postings were in Andhra Pradesh's busy Bitragunta Junction. As a small child passing by in a train, I remember the words HOME OF THE

IRON HORSES painted on a shed. What magnificent locomotives resided inside, I wondered in awe.

I remember visiting his office in the heritage building next to Madras Central station, where he worked as deputy chief mechanical engineer. He occupied the largest office I had ever seen, with four black telephones on his table. His humility and kindness had earned him the respect and admiration of his colleagues and workers. We lost him to a dreadful heart attack when he was just 53. A deluge of stunned mourners thronged his palatial railway bungalow in Perambur. An old friend who was driving back home from his factory in Padli, found the road blocked by a sea of people. Only later did he realise that the sea was an outpouring of grief by railwaymen for their beloved officer.

That afternoon, the train waited for extra time in Bangalore City station, to ferry his shocked family members to Madras. For possibly the first time in its history, the Brindavan Express arrived late. Even the great iron horse paid tribute to the caring master.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### New RBI Governor has a rough road ahead

Apromos RBI boss' big ask: Restoring balance' (Dec 13), Reserve Secretary Sanjay Malhotra's surprise appointment as the Reserve Bank of India Governor comes amid concerns over declining economic growth, a weaker currency, and rising inflation. Malhotra faces significant expectations, particularly regarding monetary policy.

### Kudos Gukesh

The new World Chess Champion, 18-year-old Gukesh, has made history in India. Despite his limited academic background, Gukesh's decade-long dedication and ambition to reach this well-intentioned, the reliance on insurance schemes and inadequate funding for essential social services hinder progress. It is crucial that policymakers consider increased

### Elusive health equity

Apromos 'India's rough road to health equity' (Dec 13), India has not made any significant progress toward health equity. While programmes like Ayushman Bharat are well-intentioned, the reliance on insurance schemes and inadequate funding for essential social services hinder progress. It is crucial that policymakers consider increased

government expenditure on health, ensuring informal employment includes insurance coverage, and enhancing primary care.

Trisha S Doodla, Bengaluru

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

## SPEAK OUT

...A woman died when he (Allu Arjun) visited a theatre. He has been arrested in that connection and there's no political involvement in this.



Mallu Ravi, Congress MP

Art imitates life. Life imitates high school.

Brad Holland

## TO BE PRECISE

ALL THEIR GAMES END THE MOMENT YOU REALISE YOU ARE PAWNS IN THE GAME!



## IN PERSPECTIVE

## AI-led education, a new normal

Educators must have clarity on processes that can be automated and fundamentals that are non-negotiable

ANUPAMA RAJ AND SHILPI BANERJEE

AI (Artificial Intelligence) is becoming the buzzword across domains including education. With Covid-19, teachers and students from even remote parts of the country made the switch to online teaching-learning. A simple smartphone with internet access opened up a range of possibilities in terms of technology-integrated teaching-learning. The potential and reach of AI in education have expanded continuously since reshaping the way students learn, and teachers instruct.

AI technology can self-train, adapt, and scale in ways that traditional educational technology cannot. It can learn and improve its intelligence over time by analysing large amounts of real-time data related to student learning patterns. By identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, AI can adjust in real-time to provide each student tailored learning experience. It can also manage a large number of students simultaneously and scale up activities like providing quizzes and offering personalised feedback. The utility of AI-enabled tech is evident. However, there is also widespread fear and scepticism regarding its impact on restricting children's creativity; replacing the teacher's role; increasing cases of plagiarism; and encouraging assessment malpractices. While all these concerns are valid, in the future as technology continues to evolve, it is important for educators to navigate certain principles and policies to effectively utilise AI to their benefit.

The use of AI in education is a grey zone, at present. There is an imminent need to understand what kind of knowledge and skills could be safely automated using AI and what should remain strictly within the purview of classroom teaching-learning. As a teacher, how would you treat a presentation on global warming by a student that is completely generated by an AI software? The skill of analysing, synthesising and organising information has been automated using AI; however, the skill of presenting and explaining is being exhibited by the student. If the same student was to write about the issue of global warming in a closed book exam such as the boards, how well-equipped is the student to analyse, synthesise, and organise information

in that limited time? So, the question here is as educators, do we have clarity on why certain knowledge, capacities, values, and dispositions are non-negotiable in terms of automation vs a few others that can be automated purely from an efficiency point of view e.g. gamifying the content for learning, generating relevant image for a project; creating a detailed reference list, or brainstorming on a topic.

The primary purpose of educational assessments is to understand and track how effectively students have mastered the necessary competencies. Now, with AI-enabled learning in the picture, how much of this mastery is a result of independent thinking by students and how much of it is based on assistive technology nudging students on what level of AI usage is permissible and what is considered out of bounds. Initially, this will involve having strict monitoring procedures in place e.g. maintaining drafts of their work and furnishing evidence of their original work as needed. Teachers should be encouraged to and capacitated in utilising AI on their pedagogical assistant. Routine tasks such as designing assessment tools, automating grading for objective-type tests, creating detailed grading rubrics, and maintaining performance records can be easily automated using AI. While many routine processes could be offloaded to AI, there should be a proportionate increase in classroom-based assessments undertaken by the teacher in the form of oral discussions, role plays, practical demonstrations, field visits etc. This can serve as an effective way of triangulating evidence of student learning between teacher-led and AI-led assessments.

The growth of AI cannot be accurately estimated due to its potential to self-train. Moving forward, we need to create more opportunities and spaces where we can mutually learn, understand, and navigate this new normal of AI-led education. (The writers are faculty members at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru)

Assam's BJP-led government recently moved to expand the ban on beef, bringing the nation's focus back on the issue

JAMMU AND KASHMIR

• Beef had been banned in J&K since 1862. Under the **Ranbir Penal Code (RPC)**, intentionally killing or slaughtering a cow or similar animal (like an ox or a buffalo) was a non-bailable offence.

• However, after the abrogation of the erstwhile state's special status under **Article 370 in 2019**, the 157-year-old beef ban was lifted.

GUJARAT

• Consumption, transportation, and slaughter of cows and progeny was banned in Gujarat in 2011.  
• In 2017, the government made the law against cow slaughter tougher, with provisions for punishment up to a life term imprisonment and a Rs 5 lakh fine for killing a cow or its progeny.

MAHARASHTRA

• The **Maharashtra Animal Preservation (Amendment) Act, 1995**, which got presidential assent in 2015, brought the slaughter of bulls and bullocks under the prohibition that was earlier limited to the slaughter of cows.  
• In May 2016, the **Bombay High Court** decriminalised the possession of beef from cattle slaughtered in other states.

KARNATAKA

• In 2021, the BJP government introduced a new, stringent law that imposed a blanket ban on the slaughter of cattle, with the only exception in cases of cattle certified to be terminally ill and buffaloes aged above 13.  
• Congress vowed to overturn the blanket ban but has not yet acted on it, fearing a backlash, as Hindu seers have publicly asked CM Siddaramaiah not to withdraw the ban.

• Consumption of beef per se is not prohibited by law in Karnataka.

UTTAR PRADESH

• The **Uttar Pradesh Prevention of Cow Slaughter Act, 1955**, prohibits cow slaughter, sale of beef, or transport of beef besides criminalizing causing physical injury to cows and their progeny

• The law was amended in 2020 making cow slaughter punishable with imprisonment for 10 years and a fine of up to Rs five lakh

ASSAM

• **Assam Cattle Preservation Act, 2021**, prohibited the sale and consumption of beef within five kilometres of temples, satras (Vaishnavite Monasteries), and other religious places  
• The state's BJP-led government now decided to amend the 2021 act to prohibit the sale and consumption of beef in all public places, including at religious events  
• Beef is not banned in other northeastern states, including in BJP-ruled Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur

WEST BENGAL

• The **West Bengal Animal Slaughter Control Act of 1950** permits the slaughter of cows, bulls, buffaloes, and calves in the state if they are certified to be aged over 14 years or unfit for work or breeding  
• BJP in West Bengal lauded the ban on beef in Assam and vowed to do the same if voted to power

KERALA

• Kerala strongly resists any moves to impose a ban on beef. Even the BJP has not raised any such demand.

THE MOO QUESTION



Stop policing people's plates

SANJAY HEGDE

The Englishman's liberty ends where the Frenchman's nose begins" is a legal maxim that Himanta Biswa Sarma, a former lawyer and current chief minister of Assam, may do well to remember. His cabinet has recently approved a proposal to make legislative changes in the Assam Cattle Preservation Act, to ban the consumption of beef in all public places including restaurants, hotels, public functions, and community spaces. Given the BJP's majority in the state assembly of Assam, it is quite likely that legislation will soon be passed, but it may be difficult to sustain challenges to its constitutionality through the courts.

The Indian cow may be holy, but there is no conceivable reason to protect her Japanese cousin. Thus, Assam cannot ban the consumption of beef, which is sourced from outside the state. If one were to eat a Wagyu beef steak from Japan, somewhere in Guwahati or Jorhat, it would be beyond the power of the Assam legislature to stop it.

A total ban on public consumption of beef would violate the principle of proportionality as well. A ban is not the least restrictive means of cow protection which the state might claim as a legitimate state interest. There is no legitimate state interest in interfering with a citizen's choice of diet. It may tax imports and make beef eating prohibitively expensive, but no government has authority over a person's body and what he puts on or into it.



In the guise of protecting the cow, the bull, the buffalo and various other bovines have remained unslaughtered and uncared for, leading to a stray cattle menace that plagues farmers and motorists alike. Assam has a large beef-eating population. In such circumstances, banning the consumption of beef would be manifestly arbitrary.

The only objective of the ban on public consumption is to allow overzealous policemen and vigilante groups to get into restaurant kitchens and wedding halls that serve a meat-eating public. The government's nose is protesting unconsciously and unconstitutionally into citizens' private choices. It is time to stop policing people's plates.

(The writer is a senior advocate designated by the Supreme Court of India. This article reflects his personal views.)

The beef ban brouhaha

SUMIT PANDE  
DH NEWS SERVICE

In the Constituent Assembly debates, held in the backdrop of a bloody partition, cow protection emerged as a bone of contention. A large section of the Congress leadership, including the chairman Dr Rajendra Prasad, supported a statutory provision to ban bovine slaughter.

The framers of the Constitution negotiated a resolution to this knotty problem by introducing an article in directive principles. It was left to the provinces to enact state-specific laws compatible with the demographics and dietary habits of the populace. The broader framework for cow protection was based on the economic importance of the animal in an agrarian society and on religious beliefs.

Muslim leadership supported the move. Syed Mohammad Saadullah,

the former Premier of Assam and a member of the Constitution drafting committee, voted in its favour. Z H Lari from Uttar Pradesh even suggested that the law be made part of the Fundamental Rights.

Since the adoption of the Constitution 75 years ago, various state governments have enacted laws to ban cow slaughter under Article 246 (which delineates the division of power to legislate between states and the centre).

Since the adoption of the Constitution, some states have imposed a blanket ban. Uttar Pradesh enacted the Cow Protection Act in 1955. Tamil Nadu appended rules and regulations to carry out the slaughter of bulls, bullocks, and buffaloes after obtaining permission from government authorities. Sikkim banned the slaughter of cattle in 2020, making cow slaughter punishable with imprisonment of 10 years and a fine of up to Rs five lakh.

The status, political and statutory, persisted for almost five decades since Independence. But in the last 25 years, some states, especially the ones ruled by the BJP have sought to amend the cow protection laws to either make the provisions stricter or to widen the ambit of their respective laws from just bovine protection to beef eating and its transportation.

While the 1964 Karnataka law allowed bulls, bullocks, and buffaloes aged over 12 years or if they were unfit for breeding or did not yield milk, the 2021 bill passed by the BJP government introduced stringent provisions imposing a blanket ban on the slaughter of cattle.

The 1955 Uttar Pradesh law prohibited cow slaughter, sale of beef, or transport of beef. The Yogi government amended the law in 2020, making cow slaughter punishable with imprisonment of 10 years and a fine of up to Rs five lakh.

Madhya Pradesh also amended its law against cow slaughter in 2012. per the statute, the burden of proof of not killing a cow and its progeny lies with the accused.

In 2015, a bill passed by the legislative assembly of Maharashtra in 1995 got the presidential assent. It banned the slaughter of bulls as well as bullocks, which, based on a fit-for-slaughter certificate, was previously allowed. Ahead of the recent state assembly polls, the Eknath Shinde-led Maya Yuti government declared 'desai' (indigenous cows) as 'Rajya Mata-Ganmata'.

In its first term, the Modi government in 2017 notified the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Markets) Rules to regulate livestock trade and cattle transport.

Madhya Pradesh also amended its law against cow slaughter in 2012. per the statute, the burden of proof of not killing a cow and its progeny lies with the accused. In 2015, a bill passed by the legislative assembly of Maharashtra in 1995 got the presidential assent. It banned the slaughter of bulls as well as bullocks, which, based on a fit-for-slaughter certificate, was previously allowed. Ahead of the recent state assembly polls, the Eknath Shinde-led Maya Yuti government declared 'desai' (indigenous cows) as 'Rajya Mata-Ganmata'.

In its first term, the Modi government in 2017 notified the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Markets) Rules to regulate livestock trade and cattle transport.

The rules banned trading in cattle, including buffaloes, for slaughter in animal markets. When challenged before the Supreme Court, they were

withdrawn.

In Assam, the Cattle Preservation Act of 1950, banned cow slaughter except on issuance of a fit-for-slaughter certificate. In 2021, the BJP government introduced the Assam Cattle Prevention Act to restrict the sale and consumption of beef within a five-kilometre radius of temples, and satras (Vaishnavite monasteries).

After the ruling BJP's recent victory in the bypolls in Samaguri, a minority-dominated seat held by Congress since 2001, the Himanta Biswa Sharma government has moved to expand the ambit of the 2021 Act to ban beef consumption in all public places including hotels, restaurants, and religious events, thereby setting the tone for the next state assembly polls slated for 2026.

(With inputs from Bharath Joshi, Mrityunjay Bose, Sanjay Pandey, Arjun Raghunath, Satish Jha, S N V Sudhir, Zulfiqar Majid, DHNS)

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

How hot is hot enough to spur climate action?

To keep heating below 2 degrees C, the world must start cutting emissions by 4% every year until 2035. There is not enough time, writes Mark Gongloff

This has been the hottest year in recorded human history. Its unprecedented temperatures stoked devastating wildfires, floods, cyclones, droughts and heat waves that cost thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars in economic damage. At the rate we're going, it will also be one of the coolest, calmest years any of us will ever experience again.

Just how much hotter and more destructive the atmosphere will become depends on the choices humanity makes, starting today. At the moment, we're still making too many bad ones.

On Monday, the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service said 2024 will almost certainly be the hottest year on record, with global average surface temperature about 1.6 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial averages. That will top the previous record, set all the way back in 2023.

Significantly, this will also be the first year on record with global temperatures 1.5C above preindustrial averages. That was the fingers-crossed, best-case global-heating goal the world set for itself in the Paris Agreement of 2015. Breaching 1.5C for one year doesn't mean that goal is a lost cause. The Paris Agreement referred to long-term averages, not one-year anomalies.

But let's be honest: 1.5C is basically a lost cause. The world has wasted most of the decade since that goal was set, during which it became ever more of a stretch. The greening promises that countries and companies have made aren't nearly enough to hit that target, much less Paris' slightly more realistic primary goal of less than 2C of heating. Given current policies and practices, the world isn't even on track to warming to 2.8C, a recent UN Nations report warned before just a few years, the window to hold heating to 1.5C will slam shut.

So what, you might be thinking. How much worse is 3C than 1.5C? If you're talking about its effect on an afternoon in the park, it's not significant. If you're talking about a



long-term global average temperature, each tick higher brings devastating consequences. One climate scientist has compared it to having a fever. Every slight rise in temperature puts more strain on your body, and it's not long before the heat becomes life-threatening. The mere 1.3C of long-term warming the planet has experienced so far has already raised the risks and destructive power of those wildfires, floods, cyclones, droughts and heat waves.

And warming won't happen uniformly around the world. A study published in the journal *Environmental Research Letters* found that some heavily populated areas, including sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean and Central Europe, will reach 3C far more quickly than others. Making matters worse, global heating

has apparently accelerated in recent years. The planet has warmed by an average of 0.18C per decade starting in 1970, but since 2015 that rate has jumped to 0.3C per decade. Berkeley climate scientist Zeev Hausfather has written (acknowledging the geologically teeny time scales make such measurement somewhat uncertain). After considering the many other factors possibly causing this, from volcanic eruptions to the end of sulfur-dioxide pollution from shipping, the biggest factor heating the planet is still humanity burning fossil fuels and spewing greenhouse gases. In fact, acceleration at this point is what a lot of climate models expect, Hausfather points out.

The better news is that stopping our greenhouse gas emissions would also stop

the warming in its tracks, Texas A&M University climate scientist Andrew Dessler pointed out recently. Unfortunately, in some important ways, humanity seems further from reaching that milestone than it was in 2015. The following year brought the first election of Donald Trump, who pulled the US out of that Paris agreement and otherwise did everything in his power to frustrate a clean-energy transition.

The transition survived Trump's first term, and President Joe Biden made some progress in accelerating it during his four years in office, including rejoining the Paris accords. But now Trump is coming back for another four years. This time, he's armed with the blueprint of Project 2025, which calls for ending government support for green energy, boosting fossil-fuel production and leaving the Paris Agreement yet again.

In Europe, meanwhile, right-wing parties gained power in the summer's parliamentary elections at the cost of green parties, driven partly by rhetoric hostile to climate action. The shifting political mood has been reflected in increased support for the UN climate confabs that fossil-fuel interests have derided. The world can barely agree on the necessity of phasing out fossil fuels, much less come up with credible plans. The hotter the planet gets, the more global politics will destabilise, making concerted climate action even more difficult.

We are losing our nerve for action at the worst possible moment, in other words. Global carbon-dioxide emissions from fossil fuels and land use reached a new high this year. To keep heating below 2C, the world will need to start chopping emissions by 4% every year until 2035. UN scientists have argued. The longer we delay that process, the bigger the task will be. The more the cost in economic losses and human lives will grow. There's still time to start making the right choices, but not much.

BLOOMBERG

DID YOU KNOW?

All dogs do not age uniformly: Study

A new study from the University of Liverpool has pinpointed the average age when vets consider dogs to be in "old age," providing insights that can help owners prepare for their pet's senior years.

The research also highlights older dogs' most common health issues, emphasising the importance of early detection and care. The study is published in the *Journal of Small Animal Practice*.

By analysing veterinary electronic health records (EHRs), researchers discovered that dogs are typically described as old age at 12.2 years, though this milestone varies by breed. Smaller breeds, like Jack Russell Terriers, tend to age more slowly, with old age beginning closer to 14 years. Larger breeds, such as Labrador Retrievers, are considered old much earlier, around 12 years.

The study also identified the top five health concerns affecting old-age dogs:

- **Weight-related issues (35%):** Including overweight, underweight, and weight loss.
- **Musculoskeletal problems (33%):** Such as stiffness and mobility challenges.
- **Dental conditions (31%):** Ranging from tartar buildup to periodontal disease and tooth loss.
- **Skin-related problems (28%):** Including lumps, infections, or hair loss.
- **Digestive issues (22%):** Covering symptoms like vomiting or diarrhoea.

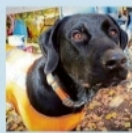
The research emphasises that the rate at which dogs age is not "one-size-fits-all."

Prof Carr Westgarth, who led the research, says, "This study allowed us for the first time to examine when vets start noting that dogs are now in a stage of their life where they consider them to be 'elderly' or 'senior.' By analysing what signs owners noticed and conditions the vets were diagnosing, we can improve our understanding of providing the best care for our dogs."

Regular check-ups and proactive care are essential, as health concerns associated with old age often overlap and worsen with time. The findings have been used to develop the Ageing Canine Toolkit, which includes a free checklist of signs to look out for as your dog ages that might require veterinary advice.

Based on the study's findings, the researchers offer the following tips for pet owners:

- **Understanding your dog's specific aging needs:** Understanding your dog's breed-specific aging can help you stay ahead of their health care needs.
- **Be proactive about common conditions:** From weight management to dental care, tackling issues early can make a big difference.
- **Visit the vet regularly:** Early detection is key to ensuring a longer, happier life for dogs.
- **Phys.org**





A bust of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, stands near a bust of Mahatma Gandhi near Sealdah railway station in Kolkata. The marble busts were installed in 2023. This is one of the few sculptures of Rahman that has not been removed. DEBASISH BHADURI

# Fractured bonds along the border

As attacks on minorities continue in Bangladesh, the movement of people and goods into West Bengal has been impacted. Strained bilateral ties and protests by religious organisations, monks, and Hindutva groups are affecting the tourism and medical tourism industries and cultural sector in the State. **Shrabana Chatterjee** and **Shiv Sahay Singh** report on how the ripples of the crisis are spreading to bordering West Bengal

**A** peek into Bangladesh through the integrated check post in West Bengal at the Petrapole-Benapole border shows that a mural of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which was visible from the Indian side before August 5, has been whitewashed. The flag of Bangladesh unfurls where the mural of Rahman, the founding leader of Bangladesh who has now fallen out of favour, used to be.

Change is visible not only in Bangladesh, but also in India. It is early December. Trucks pass by as usual and people can be heard bargaining with transporters, but the buzz is drowned by slogans of 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai' and 'Jai Shri Ram'.

Arjuna Begum, a Bangladeshi national, is trying to cross the border. Many of her relatives married Indians and stay in West Bengal, so she often visits India. "I heard rumours that the border may be sealed. But our lives cut across the border," Begum says, as she checks her belongings.

As hundreds of people cross over, thousands of saffron-clad men gather at the spot in Petrapole to protest against the attack on Hindus in Bangladesh and demand the release of Chinmoy Krishna Das, a monk from ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), who was arrested in Bangladesh in November.

By afternoon, the Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly, Suwendu Adhikari, arrives and releases saffron balloons in the air. In his speech, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader threatens to stop all trade between India and Bangladesh through Petrapole if the ISKCON monk is not released.

Just five weeks earlier, Adhikari had visited Petrapole with Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who inaugurated a new passenger terminal and Maitri Dwar (Friendship gate). Shah had said that trade between India and Bangladesh had increased by 64% between 2016-17 and 2023-24. He had also pointed out that 70% of India's total trade (₹30,000 crore) with Bangladesh through land is via Petrapole and stressed that the new infrastructure will increase the passenger capacity to 25,000 daily.

When Adhikari threatened an economic blockade of Bangladesh at Petrapole, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee urged the Union government to take up the matter of attacks on minorities in Bangladesh with the United Nations, so that peacekeeping missions may be deployed. Ever since the West Bengal unit of the BJP and Hindutva groups began protesting against the treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh, Banerjee has been claiming that this is a bilateral issue that should be dealt with by the Union government.

## Tourists go back home

Among the most popular spots for Bangladeshi tourists in Kolkata is located in the centre of the city, just a couple of kilometres from the State Assembly. Every morning, air-conditioned buses with 'Destination Dhaka' written on them line up at Sudder Street, Free School Street, Colin Street,

**About 90% of our hotels are generally occupied by people from Bangladesh; now it is down to 5%.**

**MONTOSH SARKAR**  
Owner of hotels and travel firms

and Marquis Street in central Kolkata, to take tourists back home across the border.

By the end of November and early December, as reports of violence against minorities in Bangladesh piled up, and protests erupted in West Bengal, frightened Bangladeshi nationals started leaving the area, popularly called 'mini-Bangladesh' by the locals. Many of them were receiving frantic calls from home, given the now-strained ties between India and Bangladesh.

On December 2, in response to a Lok Sabha question by BJP MP Jagannath Sarkar, the Ministry of Tourism informed Parliament that the number of foreign tourists from Bangladesh in 2023 was 21.19 lakh and 12.85 lakh until August 2024. The drop in the number of Bangladeshi tourists was 20.26% in July and 38.08% in August compared to the same month of the last year, the Ministry said.

Montosh Sarkar, who runs several hotels and travel firms on Marquis Street, is worried. "About 90% of our hotels are generally occupied by people from Bangladesh; now it is down to 5%. I have more than 35 employees and their families to feed," he says. Sarkar adds that there are about 150 registered hotels in the area which are dependent on Bangladeshi nationals. The situation is likely to worsen if political tensions do not ease and the Indian government does not grant visas to Bangladeshi nationals, he says.

Md Alauddin, 38, who runs the Marquis Calcutta Guest House on Marquis Street, is keen to show how he has transformed an old dilapidated building into a guest house. "There are 13 rooms and only three are occupied by Bangladeshi nationals now. In August, the business was affected, but now the impact is even worse. The move-

ment of people should not stop," he says.

Alauddin emphasises that hotel operators go the extra mile in ensuring the safety and security of people from neighbouring countries, such as by installing CCTV cameras. He then barges into the room of Sadiqullah Mirsalim, a resident of Dhaka, without knocking. "He is like my brother and will not mind," Alauddin says, smiling, as he introduces his guest from Dhaka.

Mirsalim is on a medical visa and plans to stay for a month at the guest house. "We don't consider India as a foreign country," he says. "We get everything here. If there is a marriage in the family, people come to shop here."

Asked about the political rhetoric, Mirsalim says, "How can we dislike India? This country helps us in so many ways."

Thousands of shops in the area and in the adjoining British-era New Market complex primarily cater to Bangladeshis. Travel agents, garment sellers, traders dealing in spices, and restaurant owners are all counting their losses and hoping that the situation will change.

## The ripple effect

The impact is not limited to trade in central Kolkata; it cuts across sectors, including health. For decades, patients from Bangladesh have come to hospitals in Kolkata for treatment. Tour operators say the number of visas granted to Bangladeshi citizens by the Indian High Commission has dropped, affecting medical tourism.

The fast-deteriorating ties between the two countries has clearly aggravated the situation. A little-known 130-bed hospital in Kolkata, the J.N. Ray Hospital, said that it would not treat patients from Bangladesh. Though it is well known that a prominent BJP leader in Kolkata owns a stake in the private hospital, the remarks created panic for Bangladeshi patients visiting Kolkata.

However, other private hospitals in Kolkata say they have not changed their policy. "Every patient deserves equal care, regardless of nationality or background," says Rupak Barua, Managing Director and CEO, Woodlands Multispecialty Hospital. He adds that the number of outpatient department patients from Bangladesh has fallen by 60% in the last four months at Woodlands.

Sudipta Mitra, CEO of Peerless Hospitals, says on a regular day, the hospital receives around 150 outpatients from Bangladesh and 25 admissions. "The number of Bangladeshi patients has now reduced due to visa issues, but when they come back, we will treat them just as we treat other patients," he says.

With Bangladeshi patients in Kolkata's private hospitals dropping by 60% to 80%, several hospi-



We don't consider India as a foreign country. We get everything here. If there is a marriage in the family, people come to shop here

**SADIQUILLAH MIRSALIM**  
Resident of Dhaka

tals in Kolkata are rescheduling the dates for surgery and other procedures for patients from the neighbouring country.

## An eye for eye

The political developments have also brought religious organisations, monks, and Hindutva organisations into the limelight.

Journalists would visit the ISKCON Centre, located in the posh neighbourhood of south Kolkata, only during the annual Rath Yatra festival. But since November 25, when a monk of the order was arrested in Bangladesh, Radharaman Das, the vice president of the Kolkata Centre, has been giving interviews regularly to the media.

Seated in his office on the second floor, Das explains before TV cameras why he has advised ISKCON monks in Bangladesh not to wear saffron or tilaks. "We have hundreds of centres and thousands of monks in Bangladesh. ISKCON has been a target ever since the Sheikh Hasina regime fell," he says. But Das admits that he is receiving second-hand information and that telephone networks don't work most of the time in Bangladesh.

Monks from other orders, and Hindutva organisations, have also been organising protests across West Bengal. Kartik Maharaj, of the Bharat Sevashram order from Beldanga, has been seen with Adhikari at several protests. The Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, led by Chandrachud Goswami, has been going to hotels and shops in Kolkata asking them to boycott products and people from Bangladesh. Three or four people of the group burned products from Bangladesh, especially potato chips, which are quite the rage in markets in Kolkata.

The Bangladesh Deputy High Commission has become a popular protest spot. A mural of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the outer wall of the Deputy High Commission has been covered by cloth. Security has been stepped up at the venue after protests by Hindutva groups on November 28 turned violent – protesters broke barricades and burnt an effigy of Mohammad Yunus, the Chief Advisor to the Government of Bangladesh.

By the second week of December, the Trinamool leadership started reacting to reports. Every remark made by politicians in Bangladesh found a reaction from politicians in West Bengal. Both Banerjee and Adhikari demanded that the Indian government intervene in Bangladesh even as India's Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, visited the country on December 9 for the first time after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina regime.

Days after Bangladesh National Party leader Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said in Dhaka that if India claims Chittagong, Bangladesh will occupy Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha, Banerjee said, "You will take all this and we will sit and eat lollipops?" When Rizvi burnt saarees from India in Bangladesh, Hindutva organisations set Dhakai saarees from Bangladesh on fire in Kolkata and Durgapur.

## Life comes to a halt

Along the border with Bangladesh, the Border Security Force has been pushed to the zero line in at least three battalions of Murshidabad. Of the 4,096 kilometre-long border with Bangladesh, West Bengal shares 2,216 km.

The heightened activity at the border, the war of words, threats of economic blockade, and the burning of imported goods makes Pabitra Sarkar, 87, sad. "Both Bengals (West Bengal and Bangladesh) were inheritors of the composite culture legacy of undivided Bengal. Everything about our culture – our language and all the songs of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam – are part of our shared history," says the former Vice Chancellor of Rabindra Bharati University.

The academic, who was born in Dhaka, says he was in that city when the Sheikh Hasina regime fell in August this year. "My friends there kept me protected in August 2024. I have been to Bangladesh 100-150 times. Bangladeshis are such welcoming people," he says. Sarkar is concerned that extremists are gaining ground in Bangladesh.

Academics, artists, publishers, and filmmakers are also upset. Bangladeshi publishers have not confirmed whether they will come to the Kolkata International Book Fair in January 2025. There are hardly any Bangladeshi filmmakers participating at the Kolkata International Film Festival. Clubs at Kolkata Maidan, such as the East Bengal club, have issued statements against the "systemic targeting of minorities" in Bangladesh. Many supporters of the East Bengal Club trace their ancestry to the country.

While the strain in relations peaked in the last week of November, disruptions in the movement of people and goods began in July, when the bus and railway services were suspended. The two trains running between West Bengal and Bangladesh were halted on July 19. The trains are run by the Sealdah Division of the Eastern Railway.

An official of the Railway Division says, "The names of the two trains – Bandhan Express and Maitree Express – are synonyms of our bonds and friendship ['bandhan' means bond and 'Maitree' means friendship], whereas the train between India and Pakistan was called the Samjhauta Express ['samjhauta' means compromise]."

Just outside the Sealdah Railway Station, one of the largest in the State, stands a 20-foot bust of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman alongside one of Mahatma Gandhi. This is probably the only sculpture of his which has not been covered, whitewashed, or removed. The marble busts were erected only a year ago by a local Trinamool MLA, to celebrate the ties between the two countries and particularly between Bangladesh and West Bengal.



Protesters including Radharaman Das, vice president of the ISKCON Kolkata Centre demand the release of Chinmoy Krishna Das in Bangladesh. DEBASISH BHADURI



# 14 The EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## DOMMARAJU GUKESH

India's second world champion may underplay his young age. But in it lies the promise of even greater things

THE WAIT WAS only 12 years since Viswanathan Anand last won the World Championship. But it was a dozen, long winters of painfully watching Krishnan Sasikiran and Pentala Harikrishna trying to match the five-time world winner's feats. What Dommaraju Gukesh achieved with his World Championship triumph at Singapore was to drag India out of its wait in the wings, and send out warning signals to the traditional chess powerhouses Russia, USA, Uzbekistan and China — Indians are here to play for the big wins. Gukesh started his journey early at 18. But he is far too mature to keep harping on being the youngest. What a world title at 18, and in a fighting match against a stubborn title holder Ding Liren means, is that he has years ahead in which to absorb inevitable setbacks, develop his bold game without worrying about results, and even look to surpass Visy Anand's five titles.

Indian chess has been throbbing with possibilities in the recent years. For some years it has been apparent to contestants from other countries that if Gukesh doesn't get you, R Praggnanandhaa will, and if Praggnanandhaa misses somehow, then Arjun Erigaisi will swoop in. India's depth shone at the Chess Olympiad, and like Garry Kasparov declared, Visy's kids are running riot. Gukesh stole the early march with his composed approach and fierce appetite for fight. He declined draws twice and pushed to extract winning advantages, even from seemingly stalemated situations. His accuracy with black (only 0.33 missed points compared to Ding's 0.56, as per chess expert Mehmet Ismail) meant he remained adventurous even when judged GMs called for a draw. His never-say-die attitude forced Ding to err when a draw seemed imminent. The acknowledgment from some quarters might have been grudging — Vladimir Kramnik has doubted the quality of chess at the contest — but none can deny Gukesh whisked up some novel lines that boggled trained eyes.

In stating that Magnus Carlsen remains the greatest player and he would love to play him, Gukesh has sent out the most disarming of challenges. Carlsen operates at a higher level, but isn't keen to put in the doggedness needed for a classical event that goes on for three weeks. But his aura pervades the chess ecosystem. The Norwegian has, for long, made this into a wait for a challenger he deems worthy of battling, hoping Iranian-French Alireza Firouzja steps up. Gukesh didn't start out wanting to be a worthwhile opponent to Carlsen — he was just doing his own thing at 18. But he did it so well, he brought back the crown Carlsen had taken off Anand. He also hinted he was ready, for whenever Carlsen is.

## SACRED, CONSTITUTIONAL

SC order stopping surveys is welcome and long overdue. On Places of Worship Act, its task is cut out

THE SUPREME COURT Thursday barred district courts across the country from registering fresh suits challenging the ownership and title of any place of worship or ordering surveys of disputed religious places until further orders. Chief Justice of India Sanjay Khanna's directive to trial courts to not pass any "effective orders" is a very welcome decision. This intervention, which comes just two weeks after four lives were lost in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal in the violence that followed the survey of the town's medieval mosque, was long overdue. On May 21, 2022, an oral observation by then CJ D Y Chandrachud that a survey would not violate the 1991 Places of Worship Act, effectively became the basis for several such suits and surveys, including the one in Sambhal.

As the court now frames the challenge to the 1991 Places of Worship Act, the fraught history that led to its enactment is inescapable. The law was brought in by the then Congress government of Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao at a time when the Ram temple movement was at its peak. The promise it held was that a diverse nation would not allow the ghosts of history hijack its future. When it was passed and, subsequently, the BJP has criticised this law as being a tool of appeasement. In four weeks, the Centre will have to now tell the SC whether it will defend or oppose the law, or what its interpretation is. The political faceoff between the BJP and the Congress was, of course, the prime mover behind the 1991 law but the SC was right in ensuring that it cannot be bypassed through majoritarian speak or hastily propped up — and often choreographed — battles in lower courts.

One of the judges on the bench Thursday, Justice KV Viswanathan, prudently pointed out that the 1991 law is only an "effective manifestation or a reiteration of the already embedded constitutional principles." In 2020, while deciding the Ayodhya dispute, the SC had said that the law embodied a constitutional commitment to "equality of all religions and secularism which is a part of the basic structure of the Constitution." The ruling had also recognised "non-retrogression" as a foundational feature of the constitution. In this, the 75th year of the Constitution, the guiding light for the republic, what happens to the Places of Worship Act could very well decide the role of history in shaping this diverse nation's future. The Supreme Court's stay is the recognition that core constitutional values — a commitment to equality and the right to freedom of religion — need a higher bar and protection. Clearly, the court's task, as the political debate over the law gathers pace, is cut out.

## FOOD OF GLOBAL VILLAGE

Culinary guides may seem a democratic arrangement. They also flatten the eating experience

EATABLES HAVE BEEN intrinsic to cultural exchanges between people since the days of hunter-gatherers. And long-distance trade in food items goes back to at least the times when ships carried Indian pepper to the Roman empire — perhaps even earlier when water buffaloes were an item of commerce between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamian civilisations. Commentators from Ptolemy to Marco Polo to Ibn Batuta and the first Mughal Emperor Babur to Western colonisers passed judgement on the culinary habits of people they encountered far from their homes. The compilation of food atlases or guides to "best" eateries, however, is a distinctly contemporary enterprise, premised on the understanding that geography need not limit the culinary experience. The smorgasbord has never been so diverse and the table today is laid out for a range of eaters — not just the gourmand. This may seem a democratic arrangement, but it also homogenises taste.

Take the latest edition of the Taste Atlas Awards. It's a rich platter comprising cuisines from 100 countries. But, instead of doing the introductions and letting the foodie's taste buds experience the fun, the Atlas does the snob's nomenclature. Italian, Greek, Indian, Ethiopian and more than 90 other cuisines are compared and ranked in an order of excellence that does not even pay lip service to the vastly different cultural and agronomic contexts in which they were produced. The Taste Atlas claims that the ranking draws on the "preferences" of people around the world. But isn't that a violation of the fundamental principle that makes culinary cultures profound — taste-defies formula? Even salt, fat, acid and heat come together in myriad, and protean ways.

Seeking out detectable versions of the Indian dishes that find a place in the Atlas — mugh mahani, Hyderabad biryani, chicken 65 and keema — won't require much doing. The Indian gourmet industry might also celebrate India's 12th position in the honour's list. The culinary explorer, in contrast, will put aside this compilation, and do what she does best — seek out the unpredictable.



S Y QURAISHI

ON DECEMBER 12, the Union Cabinet approved a controversial proposal to implement simultaneous elections across India, involving all three tiers of elections, namely, the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and local bodies. This is in pursuance of the recommendations of a high-level committee chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind, which submitted its report on the "One Nation, One Election" plan this September.

It is noteworthy that the committee was not given the freedom to study the pros and cons of simultaneous elections but to suggest legislative and administrative measures required to implement it.

The committee, established on September 2, 2023, worked for 191 days and submitted an 18,626-page report on March 14, 2024. According to the report, suggestions were invited from the public and 21,558 responses were received, with 80 per cent supporting simultaneous elections. However, critics have pointed out that suggestions were invited only in Hindi and English. Therefore, the response does not reflect the sentiments of all regions of India. Of the 47 political parties who responded, 32 (all members of NDA) favoured the proposal while 15 opposed it, labelling it anti-democratic and anti-federal. They expressed concern that the move could marginalise regional parties, promote national-party dominance, and lead to a presidential-style government.

Several concerns were raised of which foremost was that state and local issues may be overshadowed by national narratives. States may lose the flexibility to dissolve assemblies or hold elections based on their political needs. It may also affect the outcomes of state elections. Also, if an assembly is dissolved early due to a hung legislature or no-confidence motion, aligning the new election with the national schedule could be problematic.

The committee had proposed that Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections be held together, with municipal and panchayat elections following within 100 days of the general elections. It also outlined the constitutional amendments and legislative changes required to achieve this objective. It was recommended that to hold simultaneous elections nationwide, it is necessary to amend the Constitution

Lack of debate on One Nation One Election invites questions on sincerity of plan that cites national interest

and relevant laws, including a new Article, 82A, which states, "notwithstanding anything contained in Articles 83 and 172, all the legislative assemblies constituted in any general election held after the appointed date shall come to an end on the expiry of the full term of the house of the people."

The committee made it clear that "simultaneous elections" refers to only general elections to the Lok Sabha and all Vidhan Sabhas. Panchayat elections would be held "within hundred days." Two separate sets of elections do not amount to simultaneous elections. Holding local bodies' elections three months later is absolutely a new election, requiring logistical preparation all over again. This includes setting up polling stations, selecting and training polling staff, and redeploying security — all within three months.

Mobilising 15 million staff before they get over their fatigue would be an insurmountable challenge. Importantly, millions of voters would not be able to return to the polling stations as they come from outside. Those employed may not be able to take leave again and wage workers would lose their earnings. This would amount to stripping them of their important constitutional right.

The report also stated that "where any state legislative assembly is dissolved on account of a no-confidence motion, a hung house, or any other event, fresh elections will be held for such new house with tenure ending with that of the house of the people." This provision does not rule out the possibility of mid-term polls. This certainly does not constitute simultaneous elections. On top of that, the candidates would end up spending crores on an election for a truncated term which could be as short as one to two years.

One positive feature of the report, however, is that it recommended a single electoral roll by proposing an amendment to Article 325, recognising that the voters for all three tiers of elections are the same. This essentially shifts the responsibility for local bodies' electoral rolls to the Election Commission of India (ECI) in consultation with State Election Commissioners, a task full of practical coordination problems, especially in opposition-ruled states. The committee also acknowledged the

ECI's "detailed requirements for equipment such as EVMS, VVPATs, polling personnel, security forces, and election materials". Although specific costs were not mentioned, it is clear that we will require at least three times the current number of 55 million EVMS and VVPATs, which would entail humongous expenses. This is paradoxical since cost reduction was one of the main reasons for the proposal.

It is important to note that the committee did not examine alternative solutions to high costs and "policy paralysis" as its mandate precluded. Costs can be drastically brought down if a ceiling is put on the expenditure by political parties and if the elections' duration is cut down from 10 weeks to four weeks by going back to single-phase elections. All it would need is the deployment of 4000 companies of paramilitary forces, which should be easily possible since most of the troubled areas are now peaceful, as declared by the Home Minister.

With the dilution of the original proposal, the moral authority of the idea of simultaneous elections has been undermined. If the proposal was sincere, why have all elections been extended over the past decade? Why have the Himachal and Gujarat elections, which were traditionally held simultaneously, been consistently separated, and why was the norm of clubbing all elections due within six months not done in 2024 and earlier? What happened to the concern of prolonged disruption of normal life and policy paralysis?

This puts a question mark on the sincerity of a proposal put forward in the name of national interest. Modi had mooted the proposal as far back as 2013, before becoming Prime Minister, citing high costs and disruptions to development activities. He had rightly called for a national debate to arrive at a consensus. After intense debate, committees examined the proposal but no consensus was achieved. Taking a unilateral decision in the absence of a consensus amounts to a bulldozer technique, currently much in vogue. At least the Bill should be referred to a JPC to make a last-ditch attempt at consensus.

Quraishi is former Chief Election Commissioner of India and author of India's Experiment with Democracy: The Life of a Nation through its Elections



PAROMITA CHAKRABARTI

I CHANCE UPON Rosa Linn at 2 am on one of those rare nights when sleep has failed me. The lyrics of her new single "Snap" are unremarkable, or only as poignant as the next pop song. But there is something arresting about the Armenian musician's voice — a soaring range, an effervescence that makes you linger. I listen to the song on loop through the night, feeling giddy with exhaustion and suitably exhilarated at having "discovered" a new musician to explore.

You would imagine, dear reader, wouldn't you, that it would, having been a permanent fixture on my playlist, make it to my Spotify Wrapped, that annual marketing gimmick that makes listeners feel cherished even as it holds the music industry ransom to its insupportable revenue-sharing model? I did too.

We were both wrong. Instead, my Wrapped is a rap around the head, pointing at all that's wrong with my taste — and with the corporate behemoth's stealthy-crook algorithmic patterns, built on data harvested over the time one has spent on it to push more of the same to listeners. What Spotify wants is not to provide you with personalisation, or motivation even to seek out new music and newer musicians. It wants to keep you hooked by adding you with stuff that sounds reasonably familiar and easy enough on the ears not to press fast forward.

New, you could call my taste in music dubious, but never my range. From Tagore songs to Nina Simone, Mohiner Chhoraguli to Joan

## LOST IN THE NOISE

Why my Spotify Wrapped is an AI-powered disappointment

Scrolling through my soundtrack to 2024, I realise that Spotify has forgotten why people come to music in the first place — to feel. That song by The Smiths a colleague sent past midnight to make light of a hard day at work, the one by Noel Harrison that you still haven't managed to share with anyone because it's so precious to you, the plaintive Moushumi Bhowmik number that your favourite cousin who died far too young used to love — music, like literature, is tied up in memory and nostalgia, in the personal and the convivial.

Wrapped is a model that has clearly worked for Spotify — the rapturous reception of its annual summary of a person's listening habits features on more social media updates than one can attempt to remember. And yet, the personalisation on Wrapped, outsourced apparently this year to AI, is impersonal and gimmicky — "That's so serious dedication," it puns at one point. "Where do you find the time," it gibes at another. The reveal of my top five songs and favourite artists is a letdown; I have reservations about the stats ("Falling Colour" by Vanbr 52 minutes. Seriously?).

A lot of this apparently has to do with the company having laid off a sizeable chunk of its workforce in December 2023 in favour of an AI-powered upgrade. Spotify CEO Daniel Ek has said that the decision to lay off 1,500 employees caused greater disruptions than anticipated. The results are

telling. But not in a pleasant way.

Scrolling through my soundtrack to 2024, I realise that Spotify has forgotten why people come to music in the first place — to feel. That song by The Smiths a colleague sent past midnight to make light of a hard day at work, the one by Noel Harrison that you still haven't managed to share with anyone because it's so precious to you, the plaintive Moushumi Bhowmik number that your favourite cousin who died far too young used to love — music, like literature, is tied up in memory and nostalgia, in the personal and the convivial.

Brady Brinkner-Wood writes in the New Yorker, "when Spotify inevitably fails to deliver on the promise of being everything users need it to be — a record collection, an archive, a jukebox, a merch bar, a book of burned CDs, liner notes, FM radio, MTV, our favourite magazine, a conversation with a friend — listeners feel betrayed and existentially destabilised. If we can't trust the apps to tell us a meaningful story about our art consumption, how will anyone, including ourselves, ever discover the idiosyncratic composition of our inner lives?"

It might be too big an ask of a corporation intent on maximising profit to be a record keeper on our inner lives, but perhaps, it could be a more faithful custodian of the background score to our fleeting days so we have an inkling of who we were and who we have become.

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## DECEMBER 14, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### SCORES FLEE BHOPAL

AN ESTIMATED 2 lakh people, a quarter of the total population of Bhopal, have fled the city in a desperate bid to escape any danger arising out of the deadly MIC gas at the Union Carbide plant. Panic-stricken residents of almost all the localities of Old Bhopal, which have been declared "vulnerable zones", are on the run.

### P C VERMA KILLED

VETERAN JOURNALIST and former Congress member of Parliament Prem Chand Verma, was beaten to death by 10 intruders in his house in Safdarjung Enclave. While the rob-

bery theory has not been ruled out by officials, they feel that vendetta appears to be a more likely motive. It has been reported that Verma had sacked three waiters for irregularities from the Safdarjung Club of which he was president.

### SRI LANKA'S RESPONSE

THE SRI LANKA government expressed "regret and dismay" over Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's statement on the situation in the island. They said it "language, tone, and substance can only encourage the terrorists and their supporters both in India and in Sri Lanka to pursue further their nefarious activities." Foreign Minister ACS Hameed also expressed

that he chose not to make any reference to "the brutal killing of innocent civilians."

### CONGRESS MISSTEP

CONGRESS (I) WAS caught on the wrong foot when it presented copies of a paper "White Paper" in the Parliament debate on Punjab. This was to substantiate that the Opposition had supported the Akalis' Anandpur Sahib resolution. However, the paper made it clear that BJP had rejected the resolution. On page eight, the PM asked BJP's Atal Behari Vajpayee: "I would like to know which version of the Anandpur Sahib resolution you support?" Vajpayee said, "My party has rejected all the three versions."

# BIG PICTURE

**G**UKESH D HAS bittersweet memories of his first brush with the World Chess Championship. The story goes that 11 years ago — when Chennai hosted the showpiece battle between Viswanathan Anand and Magnus Carlsen — Gukesh and his father were at the Hyatt Regency to get a feel of the action. There were no seats left in the playing hall that day. Not that father and son cared. They were content standing at the back and watching the action from a distance.

Gukesh was only seven years old then. All these years later, he can still visualise the spectacle of Anand and Carlsen trading pieces as they sat on the other side of a soundproof glass wall.

"I was outside, looking inside the glass box. I thought to myself it will be so cool to be inside the glass box one day," a smiling Gukesh recollected after joining Anand and Carlsen in the ranks of world champions.

Eleven years after that innocent dream, as another battle for the world champion's crown played out in a glass box — christened the "fishtank" by the organisers — in Singapore, Gukesh had one of the two best seats in the house — this time, inside the glass box, duelling world champion Ding Liren.

"When Magnus won that world championship by defeating Visly sir (in Chennai), I thought I really want to be the one to bring back the title to India. This dream that I had over 10 years ago is the single-most important thing in my life so far," added Gukesh.

■ ■ ■

Gukesh's moment on the throne came rather unexpectedly. He and Ding Liren were battling in the 14th game of the world championship. With most of the pieces having left the board, the game was heading towards an undramatic draw. In the past 13 games, there had been ample drama. Ding had won Game 1, in complete mockery of all the pre-world championship naysayers. But Gukesh struck back in Game 3. Seven draws followed, in which twice Gukesh tried to force a victory simply by ignoring a draw offer and playing on, even when in a worse position on the board. While he could not win those two games, he won Game 11. The title suddenly seemed within grasp. But Ding suddenly rediscovered his appetite, winning Game 12. Anand, the last Indian to ever hold the crown before Gukesh (Moscow, 2012), was at home in Chennai when Gukesh's crowning moment came in Game 14. Game 14 was the final game before the matter would need to be decided in a faster time control tiebreaks. Like the rest of the world and the players themselves, Anand thought that the 14th game was going to head to a draw. And then, a page turned in the book of chess history.

Ding Liren, a man who had resisted the charge of his rival addicted to attacking chess, made a blunder with his rook. A single move of his wrist had changed the course of history.

"Sometimes history walks in when you are not expecting it. Like on Thursday, I was kind of just sitting around, not watching the 14th world championship game between Gukesh and Ding live in the end game. I was expecting it to end in a draw at some point and the match to continue in tiebreaks the next day," Anand tells *The Indian Express*.

"Then suddenly, I see that Ding has blundered his way into a lost game. Boom! That was quite dramatic. In a few seconds, everything changed."

Everything had changed for sure. Definitely for the boy who once dreamt it would be cool to be a world chess champion someday. And for a country of 1.4 billion that he represents which is now a bona fide chess powerhouse. And for the sport itself, which has been awaiting the era of the Indian chess prodigies to begin.

"18 is just an unbelievable age to become world champion," Anand says.

None of the previous occupants of the throne — be it Bobby Fischer, Garry Kasparov, Viswanathan Anand or Magnus Carlsen — were anywhere close to even fighting for the title at 18.

"There's probably nothing better than this. I'm just living my dream," grinned Gukesh. "This means a lot to me. It probably meant a lot more to that eight-year-old Gukesh than it does to me right now. Because at some point I stopped thinking about things like the youngest ever and such stuff. I had mentioned in an interview when I was eight that I wanted to be the youngest world champion in the world. Now that I have got here, that eight-year-old kid would be very happy."

■ ■ ■

After Gukesh lost the first game to Ding in



Illustration: Sangit Dey

## The boy who is king

As the eight-year-old stood outside a glass box, watching two giants of the game battling it out, he made an audacious wish: to reach where they were. Eleven years later, Gukesh D is now the youngest World Chess Champion. AMIT KAMATH decodes the Grandmaster and his game

### FIVE WORLD CHAMPIONS BEFORE GUKESH BECAME THE 18TH



**NO 17: DING LIREN**  
CHINA, 2013–2024

Only the 2nd Asian to hold the title (after Visly Anand). Ding got the chance to compete for the title with Ian Nepomniachtchi in 2021 after Magnus Carlsen decided to not defend his title because he lost motivation. Ding won the tiebreaks.



**NO 16: MAGNUS CARLSEN**  
NORWAY, 2013–2023

Visly's grip on the World Champion title was taken away at his home ground by Carlsen. Then 22, Carlsen went on to win the title 5 times before relinquishing the format. Holds a peak rating of 2882, which is the highest ever achieved in chess.



**NO 15: VISWANATHAN ANAND**  
INDIA, 2007–2013

India's original history-maker in chess, Anand is the first Indian to win the world title. In 2007, he became the undisputed world champion, also the first from India. In 2000, he had won the FIDE championship when there was a split in the chess world.



**NO 14: VLADIMIR KRAMNIK**  
RUSSIA, 2000–2007

A controversial figure in the chess world, mostly for his views on cheating in the sport, Vladimir Kramnik ended Garry Kasparov's 15-year reign. The 2000 title clash in London was the first time Kasparov lost a World Championship match.



**NO 13: GARRY KASPAROV**  
RUSSIA, 1985–2000

Considered one of the greatest chess players of all time, Kasparov became the youngest undisputed world champion when he triumphed in 1985 at the age 22 against Anatoly Karpov — Gukesh broke the record with his win. Kasparov broke away from FIDE in 1993, and held the classical world title till 2000.

This ability to keep distractions away has been a trademark since he was a child. Grandmaster Vishnu Prasanna, who shaped Gukesh in his formative years after starting to work with him at the age of 11, once pointed out why Gukesh's rise had been meteoric even in a sport like chess, where every fourth player has been a prodigy.

"The first thing I noticed about him was the emotional maturity he had even at the age of 11. There was a certain hunger to learn. He was completely different from others at that age. He was always much more serious about chess than others in his age group," Vishnu had told *The Indian Express* recently. "While others in the training group would joke around and want to play blitz games, Gukesh was always super serious — even at 11! He would never take any game, even a blitz game, lightly. I thought, okay, this guy really wants to be something. He was very driven right from the start," said Vishnu.

He was at his driven, insatiable best in Singapore, his visage largely a poker face, win, loss or draw. He was also ruthless on the board, chasing victory even if conventional wisdom would have told him to take a draw and live to play another day. "My whole strategy for this match has been to push as much as possible for wins with both colours in every single game. Even if it didn't work in most games, at least it was tiring him out," he said.

After winning the title, it all changed. The impassive boy on the board started to sob, on multiple occasions. Once at the board. Then when he met his father. Then again when he spoke to his mother on the phone. One of the turning jokes on Twitter when he was playing at the Candidates tournament earlier this year was about him never smiling. After becoming the world champion, he could not stop smiling.

In the midst of the overwhelming tsunami of emotions, he did not forget his upbringing that makes him respectful. So while he sobbed uncontrollably at the board

after sealing his victory, he remembered to stand up to greet FIDE president Arkady Dvorkovich as the Russian walked up to him to congratulate him. At the press conference, after his vanquished rival was done with his piece and walked away, Gukesh was again the first to rise on his feet and applaud Ding. He kept standing and applauding until Ding was out of the room from the exit at the other end.

With Ding out of earshot, he finally settled in his chair and then went on a long speech about how Ding was a "true champion". He wasn't done. The next day, at the closing ceremony, he walked on stage to collect his trophy, and again decided to pay a tribute to his rival without being prodded to.

"Ding Liren is in my eyes a true champion and we saw that despite all the pressure on him, he was able to put on a huge fight. This match has been the show it is because of his fighting spirit. I really admire you," Gukesh told Ding from the stage.

This is a pleasant change to the way business has historically been conducted on the world championship stage, where every under-hand tactic to destabilise your opponent has been employed: from wild allegations to employing para-psychologists or hypnotists to rattle the man across the board. Gukesh and Ding preferred to keep their fight on the board.

There is the Gukesh the world sees on its screen, the most serious 18-year-old in the world. And then, when tournaments end, a switch gets flicked and Gukesh acts every bit his age. This was the Gukesh the world had seen at the Chess Olympiad in Budapest as well, when he had led the Indian chess team to a history-making team gold and claimed an individual gold medal as well. At that event too, Gukesh had uncharacteristically broken into dance showing off his footwork at the trophy ceremony.

A single-minded pursuit of his target has always been Gukesh's greatest forte since he was barely tall enough to reach the other end of the chess board to make a move. He dropped out of school in Class 4 as he chased success on the board.

Asked about sacrifices he has had to make in his journey, Gukesh says, "I can't say I have personally made many sacrifices in life. This is what I have always wanted to do. So I wouldn't have it any other way." He then steers the conversation in the direction of his parents.

His father, Dr Rajini Kanth, made the tough decision to give up on his own practice as an ENT surgeon to travel with Gukesh as his career was taking off.

"The most sacrifices came from them (parents). Once I started growing, they had to face a lot of financial struggles. We were not really well off at that point. In 2017 and 2018, we were running so low on money that my parents' friends came forward and sponsored me to play tournaments. All of this my parents had to endure. Just for me to get a chance to play chess," he said.

Then, without missing a beat, he reminded the world of other sacrifices: those in his team of seconds — like Grzegorz Gajewski, Radosław Wojtaszek and Pentala Harikrishna — who are also fathers to young children and had been spending a lot of time helping him out.

■ ■ ■

Gukesh's win is the finale to a year that started with an unprecedented five Indians competing at the Candidates tournament in Toronto. It was here that Gukesh won the right to challenge Ding for the throne.

After the Candidates, the legendary Garry Kasparov had famously remarked, "The Indian earthquake in Toronto is the culmination of the shifting tectonic plates in the chess world. The 'children' of Visly Anand are on the loose!"

The Indians have been on the prowl alright! At the Chess Olympiad, an event where there is participation from over 180 nations, Indian chess teams swept both team gold medals. They were also four in individual golds. Besides Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi has also been taking the world by storm, after touching the 2800-rating mark.

There are audacious whispers in chess circles that the next world championship could see another Indian sitting in front of Gukesh. "I would love that... to play against another Indian in the world championship," said the world champion.

A moment like this has the potential to change the landscape of the sport, both in India and world over.

"He will inspire millions of kids around the globe, especially in India! He will be the best chess ambassador ever!" Gukesh's chess legend Suman Polgar on X. "Chess is in a great place!"

# THE IDEAS PAGE

## Places of politics

Using courts to politicise places of worship of a particular community flies in the face of constitutional values. Supreme Court staying all such petitions is a welcome step



KAPIL SIBAL

"DOUBLE, DOUBLE, TOIL and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble." It is a toxic brew when religion and accompanying emotive incantations breed divisiveness for political dividends.

When we the people, gave to ourselves this Constitution of India, we embraced certain fundamental tenets which are the foundation of our Republic. That is why the preamble to our Constitution secures for citizens, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship along with the commitment to promote among citizens fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation. What this means is that a citizen of this country has the liberty, which is an inalienable right, of his or her belief, in his or her faith. The right to worship, in accordance therewith, is embedded in our cultural traditions. This applies to all religions practised in India, forming the bedrock of our multicultural society.

When the act of demolition, based on faith, of an allegedly disputed structure is considered a triumph, even though perceived as a crime, the fabric of our country is torn asunder. The history of our country is replete with waves of barbaric invasions at a time when the concept of the rule of law did not prevail. If alleged historical wrongs of the past are grievances for which retribution is sought now, qua those who had no role in such acts, the present becomes an uneasy place for our Republic to flourish. How can the millions of our citizens living in the present be faulted for the allegedly barbaric acts of the past? Political agendas that seek to victimise the citizens of our Republic by targeting them for such alleged historical wrongs have no constitutional or legal basis.

December 6, 1992, was a day of triumph for many but perceived as a tragedy for those who espoused a particular faith. To calm the turbulent waters and to put an end to future acts of constitutional vandalism, Parliament in 1991 had decided to enact the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 ("Act of 1991"). In essence, it stipulated that the character of the places of worship as they existed on August 15, 1947, would not be altered. What this means is that when India became free and adopted on November 26, 1950, our Constitution, our Republic assured freedom of belief, faith and worship, enshrined in Article 25 of the Constitution. It states that "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate their religion, subject to public order, morality and health".

Recent attempts to reopen the wounds of the past for acts that happened hundreds of years ago, demonising the present, encourage public disorder. Every other day, we witness courts being made a battleground for dubious historical assertions against places of worship of a particular commu-



CR Sankar

nity. The claims are based on suspect assertions that the structures in place in fact are built on the debris of a site where another religion was being practiced. Such petitions themselves are acts which tend to fuel emotions inconsistent with the values of the Constitution that we have embraced. That the Supreme Court on December 12, through an interim order, has stayed all such petitions is a welcome step.

The court has no legal means to justify that such acts are indeed based on alleged historical facts. In fact, such an exercise by a court for making a judicial determination of the existence of a fact is per se hazardous and is bound to evoke controversy. Those who worship at such places feel targeted. Other triumph at their unease. This creates an environment of both fear and uncertainty. The alacrity with which the court that is moved passes orders on all such claims and the swiftness with which the agencies of the government act, suggest that this is much more than a simple litigation.

Some suits are filed on the basis that the place of worship in question is a protected monument and, therefore, its access cannot be denied under section 15 of The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904. However, that very Act under section 13 stipulates that the place of worship or shrine maintained by the government shall not be used for any purpose inconsistent with its character. In addition, The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958, in terms of section 16 stipulates what is set out in section 13 of The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904. This is in respect of places of worship, which are maintained by the government. In any event, Article 25 protects all places of worship from changing their character whether

The fact that the government of the day is silent on the issue is a matter of concern. Their silence is perceived to be an act of consent by those who fear that courts are being moved to fulfil an agenda that resulted in the demolition that took place on December 6, 1992. The intent of those moving the court to dig the graves of the past is to create an environment which supports a particular political agenda, wherein religion and politics become two sides of the same coin. Majoritarian triumphalism is the objective. The intent, to my mind, of those who move the court backed by a particular political party is to create a majoritarian vote bank that cuts across caste and creed and becomes a coalescing force which differentiates 'us' and 'them' based on religion.

or not they are maintained by the government. Any claims, therefore, made based on statutes are inconsistent with the fundamental right guaranteed under Article 25 of the Constitution.

The fact that the government of the day is silent on the issue is a matter of concern. Their silence is perceived to be an act of consent by those who fear that courts are being moved to fulfil an agenda that resulted in the demolition that took place on December 6, 1992. The intent of those moving the court to dig the graves of the past is to create an environment which supports a particular political agenda, wherein religion and politics become two sides of the same coin. Majoritarian triumphalism is the objective. The intent, to my mind, of those who move the court backed by a particular political party is to create a majoritarian vote bank that cuts across caste and creed and becomes a coalescing force which differentiates 'us' and 'them' based on religion. This coupled with the political rhetoric bordering on hate speech by some and unbridled outpourings of hate by others, becomes part of a movement that started with Advani's *rath yatra*.

If our polity had embraced the constitutional values of our Republic, such events would never have happened. There would have been no need for the Act of 1991. Twenty-four years after the enactment of such a law, we still seek to resurrect the wounds of the past, which the Constitution protected under Article 25. Religion as a political tool is anathema to the concept of a Republic. It is best to practice religion in the privacy of one's home and allow it to flourish for the good of the community.

The writer is a Rajya Sabha MP and senior advocate

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"One hopes that the PTI and PML-N have also realised that the path they have been on is very likely to end in disaster, not only for themselves but for the country and its people as well."

— DAWN, PAKISTAN

## It's not just the price tag

Who pays for climate change effects is relevant. But it detracts from other issues waiting to be addressed to prevent worse from happening



KRISHINA KUMAR

SOME YEARS AGO, I met a businessman on a train from Delhi. He was leaving Delhi for good, taking his business along. When I asked him why, he told me something I wish had figured in the annual lament over air pollution in Delhi. "My employees are constantly on a short fuse — ready to quarrel over every small thing," he said. Then he explained: "It's all due to the bad air; it has no oxygen." I was stunned by the clarity of his remark. In my Grade X chemistry, I learnt how essential oxygen is for the human brain to function. Why does nobody mention it in the endless TV debates on Delhi's air pollution? Respiratory ailments form the staple of these debates, and there is nothing wrong with that, but the brain's ability to function and cope with life is closely related to air quality. Not everyone will make the connection between choking and impaired thinking and emotional well-being. That's what this businessman had done before deciding to wind up.

Delhi is where all major decisions are made. The quality of these decisions is surely subject to the supply of oxygen. The thought makes one uneasy. You instantly know you are looking at a vicious cycle. Good decisions need to be made to resolve the pollution problem, but pollution affects decision-making capacity and the quality of decisions made. This loop is actually somewhat misleading because the poor supply of oxygen to the brain affects all decisions, not just the decisions about air quality. And if decisions about everything are now to be made in Delhi, certain areas of governance suffering from a backlog of good decisions will be worst affected. The area I am most familiar with is certainly one of them. So many decisions that universities and states used to make are now being taken in Delhi. They are supposed to comply and they do. Whether these decisions are suited to specific institutional conditions is not subject to debate either.

Returning to debates on the environment, the discourse of anxiety has mutated numerous times during the last three decades. If you look back at the 1990s, you can recall how forests, big dams, biodiversity, and the loss of village commons were all recognised as important contributors to the environmental crisis. The range of concerns shrank when "global warming" acquired popular currency. As a label, it was supposed to cover air and water pollution, and a lot more, but floods and droughts were still seen at that time as results of freak weather. In regions like Bihar and Assam, they were perceived as annual routines with established protocols, which proved inadequate year after year. The Kosi River's annual floods from the backdrop of Phaneeshwari Renu's classics like *Mulla Aanchal* and *Parti Parlika*.

Towards the turn of the century, further shrinking of multi-national debates occurred. The new label was "climate change". It was a good poster phrase, but a bit too compact. Of course, when experts use it,

they pay due attention to carbon emissions, waste burning, and so on. As an overarching term, however, climate change doesn't necessarily convey something worryingly complex. In TV debates and documentaries, we are told that the change in climate patterns is presenting new opportunities to certain regions. For example, we are told that some countries with long and bitter winters can now produce wine. In our country, we learn that inaccessible spots in the high mountains can now welcome tourists, and so on. The list of human resilience stories is quite long. They mitigate anxiety, permitting us to breathe deeply and move forward to embrace braver new worlds.

Another feature of the new ethos around terrifying news about the environment is technology. Nearly every discussion on the economic implications of climate change now invokes the promise of green technology. It is a great linguistic invention. As a colour, green inevitably arouses the image of undisturbed forests and grassy meadows. No doubt the term gives hope and takes away the pain of a long struggle that switching from grey to green technologies will demand. Maintenance of hope, we are told, and avoidance of depressive resignation are important for mobilising the consumer public to cooperate. The market has mastered basic pedagogic mantras that teachers thought only they knew.

The recent international conference held in Baku reveals the absence of spontaneous concern and consensus over the crisis. The Baku debate boiled down to the price tag of a participatory initiative. The fight over who would pay was, of course, highly relevant, but it obfuscated many real issues waiting to be addressed to prevent more acute climate change than what is already happening. It was just one of the many issues raised, and it didn't get much traction to be explicitly acknowledged.

It is not merely an aspect of fossil fuel emission; there are multiple reasons as Delhi's residents know all too well. It is apparently not an issue of much concern in Europe. It is typically perceived as a regional problem of South Asia, and even within India, it is seen as a problem of metropolitan cities and a few others in the Gangetic belt. Someone troubled by Delhi's air does not find empathisers in Pune, Pondicherry or Bhatnagar. In school classrooms in Madhya Pradesh, it is barely mentioned. And if there is empathy for Delhi in Lahore, it provides little solace, and even less hope, for obvious contemporary reasons.

So, it is just your doctor who worries about you. Persistent pollution has boosted the demand for medical help and air purifiers. According to received social scientific wisdom, what is good for business cannot be bad for the economy even if it impairs people's ability to breathe deeply and work according to their full capacity. How can solutions be found in such a close circuit-orbit? We obviously require both real and metaphorical oxygen to pursue the matter. At Baku, few wanted to discuss the dust particles that the daily assaults on Gaza and Ukraine have widely dispersed for more than a year now. War contributes to climate change in ways that neither the industrialised nor the so-called developing countries want to raise.

Kumar is a former NCERT director and author of *Thank You, Gandhi*

## Poised for a quantum leap

Power today is about technology, not just economy. India must join the race



RAM RAJYA  
BY RAM MADHAV

JAMES CARVILLE, THE campaign strategist of Bill Clinton in the 1992 presidential elections said, famously, "The economy, stupid", a phrase that turned the tables on George H W Bush's re-election and sent Clinton to the White House. Today, it should be "The technology, stupid". The world has entered the era of frontier technologies, of tech waves and have-nots. The real race is no longer about shadowy GDP figures, which can be interpreted differently based on varied indices. For example, if you take the GDP in real terms, the US is ahead of China by at least \$10 trillion. However, the GDP adjusted to purchasing power parity (PPP) will place China ahead of the US by about \$4 trillion.

But the two countries are competing not just about those numbers. It is no longer the case that the country with the highest GDP would automatically dominate the world. In this era, five or six major technological advances would determine the global pecking order. Technologies like artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, genetic and biotechnology, clean-tech and space fall under this category of weapons of world domination in the 21st century.

Earlier this week, Google introduced a new quantum chip called "Willow", which can "solve problems in under five minutes that would take ten trillion years for the world's fastest supercomputer". A septillion is a million billion, or 1 followed by 24 zeros — a trillion trillions. In 2019, Google developed a processor called "Sycamore", which

made history by performing in just 200 seconds a task that would take a good supercomputer 10,000 years. The Willow processor chip has double the quantum bits (Qubits), making it revolutionary. When Sundar Pichai announced the development, it wooed tech leaders like Elon Musk.

India should take this technological challenge seriously. It has to tighten its belt to race ahead in all the frontier technology areas. Let me contextualise this challenge with some relevant data. Digital age computing saw the development of supercomputers and massive storage and processing machines in the 1960s. The first supercomputer, Cray, was developed in the US in 1964. We took 20 years to enter the race. When the US denied access to the technology, India decided to build its own. Vijay Bhaskar, the architect of supercomputing in India, built Param 8000 in 1991.

According to the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the first indigenous supercomputer, Param Shivay, was installed only recently at the BIRU in Varanasi. AIRAWAT — AI Research, Analytics and Knowledge Assimilation program — is India's best supercomputer thus far. But it is ranked 75th in the world in terms of computing capability.

Meanwhile, the world is moving to quantum technologies that are millions of times faster and more efficient than supercomputers. The entire future of AI and activities driven by it like genome technologies, space

and clean-tech is dependent on quantum computing. India cannot wait for too long to plunge into this race, nor can it smugly assume that with advances in supercomputing, it is ahead of the curve.

Supercomputing has limited applicability in the new AI-driven world of quantum 2.0. That is why countries are investing heavily in quantum and other technologies. In 2022, China announced \$15.3 billion for quantum technology, almost double the investment that EU nations made, and around five times that of the US.

Thanks to the visionary initiatives of the Modi government, India has also entered this race. The National Mission on Quantum Technologies & Applications was established in 2020 with a five-year budget outlay of about \$1 billion. It is the seventh country to have a quantum mission. However, much needs to be done in terms of actual research and output. If we take the top 10 per cent of most cited papers on quantum technologies, India ranks 20th. On the patents front, too, India ranks ninth with around 340 patents in quantum technologies. China, with over 57 per cent of patents and the US with over 28 per cent lead the race.

Countries won't have long gestation periods for progress. World history shows that the take-off happens due to visionary leadership and relentless pursuit in just 10-15 years. Franklin D Roosevelt gave such a boost to the US economy between 1933 and 1945 through his revolutionary New Deal. World

War II helped the US build a strong military-industrial complex. Something similar unfolded in the Soviet Union under Stalin and Khrushchev. Deng Xiaoping's era (1985-1995) witnessed China rising as the world's manufacturing capital. Once they took off, the US and China continued their trajectory by investing in frontier areas — China through state funding and the US through private and public capital.

If India is to join this league, it needs a decade of leadership vision, and resource allocation jointly by public and private institutions. Can India achieve this? As I was finishing this article, the news that Gukesh Dommaraju — the 18-year-old chess prodigy from Tamil Nadu — defeated his Chinese challenger Ding Liren to become the world champion. India has the brain power needed to rise in the tech world. It has that 10-year window of visionary leadership too.

The last time that a digital revolution swept the world in the 1980s and 1990s, India's foremost IT entrepreneurs seized the opportunity. With a government leadership committed to taking the country forward in the frontier tech era, there is a huge opportunity for private and public institutions to leap forward. Sadly, though, we still don't seem to realise that the real infrastructure spending needed in the 21st century is not just physical but AI infrastructure.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### AN ALARMING TREND

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Rebuttal universities" (IE, December 13). While India has historically been a leader in higher education with universities like Nalanda, Takshashila, and Vikramshila, it is rather sad and alarming to see the increasing brain drain. IITs and IIMs have always charmed the masses in India but a look at the general university education here reveals the plight of PhD scholars, the lack of research infrastructure and the tough life they lead. It is no wonder these students end up choosing universities abroad. Nevertheless, universities like Ashoka and ISB are keeping hopes up but we do need to rework and rethink our Indian institutions.

Shubham Singh, New Delhi

### FOR A FAIR SYSTEM

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Lead by law, not ideology" (IE, December 13). The remarks made by Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav, during a speech he delivered at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad event this week, are very disturbing as they seek of deep prejudice and hatred against a minority community. Judges have to exercise restraint when they speak about any issue lest their personal views be

seen as influencing their judicial decisions. Judges are sworn to bear faith and allegiance to the Constitution and are bound by their oath to follow and uphold it. The Supreme Court should take strict action against him. A system of justice with such a judge cannot be considered fair and just. To ensure people's faith in the Indian judicial system does not erode, appropriate action must be taken.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Lead by law, not ideology" (IE, December 13). Every judge takes an oath, as provided under the Third Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which states affirmations to "faithfully and to the best of my ability, knowledge, and judgment perform the duties of my office without fear or favour, affection or ill will and uphold the Constitution and the laws". Recent remarks by Justice Yadav at the Vishwa Hindu Parishad event have blurred this legal and moral mandate. In a democracy, the judiciary is viewed as an independent arbiter of justice and integrity forms the bedrock of its credibility which gets compromised by such controversial remarks. It undermines both judicial neutrality and erodes public trust in judicial institutions.

Vallabh Goyal, Chandigarh

## Editorial



## Welcome spotlight

**Supreme Court's renewed emphasis on monitoring Manipur is welcome**

**H**earing a case by petitioners aggrieved with the unremitting hostilities in Manipur, the Supreme Court of India has directed the Manipur government to disclose details of destroyed and encroached properties following the ethnic violence a year and a half ago. The Court had also, a few months ago, extended the working tenure of the Justice Gita Mittal-led Committee supervising the investigations related to the violence and also humanitarian assistance and relief in the State. Ideally, these steps should not have been under the aegis of the Court and, instead, under the remit of the executive governments – in this case, the State and the Union Home Ministry. But the violent imagery of sexual violence, the wanton destruction of property, including places of worship, and the continuing hostility between the State's two ethnic groups had forced the Court's hand into foraying into a supervisory role through the Justice Mittal Committee. It has also become an imperative for the higher judiciary, first, because of the remarkable reticence of the Union government in answering questions from civil society and the political Opposition related to the situation in the State, and second, due to the lack of accountability by the misfiring State government that has been ineffective in bridging the ethnic gap. Even political representatives from the same parties have been split on ethnic lines and there seems little convergence in the political demands being made by the opposite camps.

There is also the rise of non-state actors, armed with sophisticated weapons – many of which are looted from the State armories – exercising their illegal writ on the political process. They have also been engaged in violent acts in places such as Jiribam, which did not see any ethnic conflagrations earlier. Manipur's tragic descent into ethnic hostilities receives national attention only when the scale of the violence is horrifying and reaches unconscionable levels. Despite the government avowing that it is taking steps to restore the rule of law and addressing the political differences, a return to the status quo ante before May 2023 seems far away. The Court's renewed attention is, therefore, welcome, but short of meaningful steps to reverse the spiral of hostilities, this exercise would remain incomplete. The government's attorneys have also sought to retain a veil of secrecy over the committee's functioning and findings using the tired rhetoric of "national security". The Court should not pay heed to this ploy which seems more a case of seeking to divert attention than helping to find meaningful solutions to the conflict. Across the world, conflict resolution has focused on mechanisms such as "truth and reconciliation" exercises which have privileged accountability and normative actions, something that remains absent in Manipur. The Committee's findings may provide the necessary push in the right direction.

## Beyond faith

**The interference of the Akal Takht in the affairs of the Akali Dal is unacceptable**

**T**he Akal Takht, the highest Sikh temporal seat, has enforced punishment for Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader and former Punjab Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal, and colleagues for the alleged mistreatment they committed when they were in power from 2007 to 2017. The punishment has been both religious and political in nature, which is a disturbing collapse of the essential wall between the two spheres. Mr. Badal survived an assassination attempt while performing penance at the Golden Temple, the central place of worship for Sikhs, on December 4. The Akal Takht's punishments for religious misconduct are the accepted norm for practising Sikhs and, as such, are within the realm of faith and custom. However, Mr. Badal's actions that drew the scrutiny of the Akal Takht were not strictly about his faith, and at the very least, overlapped with his political role as Deputy Chief Minister and beyond. The religious authority also pushed for his ouster as SAD president, and issued directions to the party to set up a committee to initiate a membership drive and hold elections for office-bearers within six months. The SAD is a registered political party regulated by the law of the country and the Election Commission of India. That it bends to religious writs is disconcerting for the polity.

India's legal framework and constitutional principles emphasise secularism, which is reflected in how political parties are regulated. The direct intervention of any religious body in political decisions and affairs of political parties could send the wrong signals on adherence to the Constitution's secular principles. The SAD has been going through a challenging phase following its poor electoral run in the 2022 Assembly and 2024 general elections. It has lost its traditional support base and needs to reimagine its politics to stay relevant in Punjab. The SAD's strategy to revive its fortunes is a return to its pre-1996 "pan-thic" (Sikh) agenda. But this is a tricky route. There are disturbing signs of a potential revival of extremism among Sikhs, which will do no good to the community or the country. There are global actors that want to reignite the embers of the long dead "Khalistan" movement. The assassination bid on Mr. Badal yet again revealed the existence of radical elements willing to resort to violence. The SAD has had a moderating effect on the Sikh community, offering its members a platform for their religious and secular concerns. An effective takeover of the party by the Akal Takht is harmful for both, and the larger polity.

**W**e, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic, republic, and to secure to all its citizens justice, liberty, and equality and promote fraternity among all, have been witness to a mockery being made of our constitutional compact, in full public view, at an event organised within the precincts of a constitutional court, the Allahabad High Court.

**Distancing ourselves would be a disservice**  
We have witnessed a sitting judge brazenly challenge the spirit and letter of the Constitution of India, in a speech that is nothing but a dog whistle that guarantees impunity to the mobs that will act on his words and views – and have been acting on words such as his emanating from the seats of power. The venom that Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav, judge of the Allahabad High Court, speeded on the precincts of the court, has been widely reported in the media. Members of Parliament in the Opposition have initiated an impeachment motion against the judge, the Supreme Court of India has called for a report, and concerned citizens have written to the Chief Justice of India.

None of this, however, captures the sense of collective shock, dismay and grief that it is even possible for this level of public humiliation, violent, incendiary, genocidal street-talk to emerge from a seat of justice under the Constitution. For that is what it is. And it is really time to seek remedies against an incitement to violence of this nature as a part of our solemn affirmation as citizens who gave to ourselves this Constitution. The 'sludge' that was passed as learned judicial speech is an assault on the citizens of India and not an attack on Muslims or minorities or urban naxals or protesters or just any particular group that has become the latest target of mob violence/public incitement. This is not Justice Yadav's views on Muslims, nor is this a case of just one rotten apple. In distancing ourselves from his comments, we do profound disservice to our autonomous and independent determination of the terms on which the collective 'we' is constituted in this country called India that is Bharat.

Justice Yadav's speech is an act of wounding. It is a speech that inflicts deep harms on all of us: in terms of how we experience the life of the mind, knowledge, convivial living and spiritual



**Kalpana Kannabiran**  
a sociologist based in Hyderabad

'We' the people of India must not read down Justice S.K. Yadav's speech and allow it to pass as something that is inconsequential

fulfilment in a shared space, the boundaries of which are not determined by narrow walls and fences of bigotry, and in terms of the injuries that religious bigotry inflicts on shifting targets – on people, our lived lives, our dwellings, our workspaces, our neighbourhoods and our places of worship. We have also seen the disastrous effects of soft bigotry as a trigger to mob/State violence, especially in the case of places of worship.

Let us not read down Justice Yadav's speech and allow it to pass as something that is inconsequential. It is not something that can be adequately answered by the High Court that offered the space and the possibility for this – a High Court that did not rise in one voice to condemn and censure a member of the Bench for speaking genocide and atrocity. This is a court that ought to have written to the Chief Justice of India condemning Justice Yadav's speech long before the Supreme Court demanded a report in response to the petitioning and the protests by citizens who took note of the speech and mobilised action given the exceedingly slow wheel of the law.

It calls for a different order of collective judicial accountability. Nor can this act be adequately redressed by subjecting it to the low, anodyne chiding that is whispered by the judicial fraternity alone within court halls that allow restricted entry. We have seen the consequences of dog whistles of this kind over the past decade and the irreparable harms they bring in their wake. We also know that mobilising around the Constitution and its core values together as ordinary citizens, elected citizens and judicial citizens, speaking a shared language across vernaculars and faiths, is the only way of effectively affirming our collective and individual human dignity and the unity and integrity of this country – India that is Bharat.

## A commons

This writer has long argued that the Constitution of India, and our rights and responsibilities as citizens, take shape through a deep connection between the intellectual history of constitutionalism and a grounding of that history in our evolving present-futures. Neither constitutional interpretation nor the delineation of our rights need be shackled by narrow reference to precedents and prior judicial wisdom alone, since the spirit of the Constitution (and indeed the Constitution itself) is not judicial

property, but is a commons. It is urgent that we think of the Constitution-as-commons – that a shared ownership and shared understanding govern its use to further the common good which is set out in the Preamble and in the philosophy of civil disobedience of various hues. Satyagraha is our collective inheritance – Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Maulana Azad, Jaipal Munda, Dakshayani Velayudhan, Anis Kidwai, A.K. Gopalan....

It is not just rulers but when people who sit on judicial seats speak the undisputed tongue of rulers and the mobs, disobedience is the constitutional route to recuperation. If norms of 'judicial propriety' have come undone, Justice S.K. Yadav of the Allahabad High Court has scripted its ruination. In the resulting crisis that 'judicial propriety' finds itself in, the only resurrection is through the grammar of civil disobedience. Inquiries, explanations, reports, and measured censure will amount to nothing. Impeachment is a good move, but is only symbolic; it is destined to fail when Justice Yadav's political masters have a brute majority in Parliament, unless of course we have an unprecedented and unlikely action by members of the ruling alliance standing with the Constitution.

## The outlines of a response

It is of course a sad comment that S.K. Yadav, as a judge, has political masters. This alone should trigger some deep reflection and public discussion by citizen judges, since the barrier between judicial and political speech (and space) has been breached. Taking this further, in reinstating the dignity compass and rejecting public humiliation in judicial conduct and speech, we need to think through public and judicial action that will draw on the wellsprings of our inheritance of civil disobedience and *satyagraha*. We must craft tactical resistance by refusing to allow a person who speaks this language to judge our cases or judge with us. The 'We' that opens the Preamble to the Indian Constitution is not a 'we' that is a motley group of people identified randomly (with or without their consent) as Hindu.

The 'We' is a constitutionally constituted people. A non-denominational, plural, dizzyingly heterogeneous, and diverse beyond measure people who believe in the spirit of the Constitution and its core values.

## Trump's return and the South Asia outlook

**I**n January 2025, Donald Trump will be sworn-in as the 47th President of the United States of America. Mr. Trump's re-election, and subsequent return to office, have triggered curiosity and "nervousness" in many countries. However, in South Asia, he is likely to offer a distinct continuity. His ideology and foreign policy goals will continue to push for increased cooperation, collaboration, and consultation with India in South Asia even as his leadership style, decision-making nature, and management of great power politics will provide new opportunities and challenges.



**Harsh V. Pant**  
Vice-President for Studies and Foreign Policy at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF)



**Aditya Gowda Shrivamurthy**  
an Associate Fellow, Neighbourhood Studies, Observer Research Foundation

## Factors in U.S.-India ties

India and the United States have enjoyed an upward trajectory in their relationship since the beginning of the millennium. Acknowledging its leadership in the region, the U.S. even labelled India as a net-security provider in 2009. The Biden administration (2021-24) has emulated a similar outlook. With China's increasing aggressiveness and assertiveness, India and the U.S. have strengthened their engagements and cooperation in South Asia. Through its Indo-Pacific strategy, the U.S. wants to supplement India's regional leadership to counter China and maintain the values-based order. Its cooperation with India on the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) projects in Nepal and helping Sri Lanka out of its economic crisis, indicate this growing cooperation. Besides, Mr. Biden's passive relations with Pakistan after withdrawing from Afghanistan helped India and the U.S. foster a mutual vision for the region.

The relationship has not been free of dissonance and divergences. New Delhi's primary objective of cooperating with the U.S. is to push back against China and offer alternative development partnerships. However, the Biden administration has selectively scrutinised some

How South Asian countries will cope with the Trump administration, even as they balance China and India, is yet to be seen

countries on democracy and human rights under the pretext of upholding a values-based order and pushing back China. While India supported the Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh and pragmatically engaged with Myanmar's junta, the U.S. pressured both regimes, including imposing targeted sanctions. This pressure nudged them closer to China. Similarly, sanctioning Indian firms for collaborating with Russia and accusations of corruption against the Adani Group has altered two Indian projects in Sri Lanka, leaving India to face the brunt and consequences of the decisions.

## There could be less irritants

However, Mr. Trump's return is likely to assuage these irritants. As in his first term, Mr. Trump has continued to hint at burden sharing, reciprocity, nationalism, and competing against China in his foreign policy. If Mr. Trump walks the talk, he will prioritise pushing back against China while giving less importance to human rights, democracy, and nation-building. He would also want India to take the lead in the region while the U.S. would supplement the same. This would leave less space for divergences and enhance collaborative policies between both countries. Another potential irritant between both countries was concerning their policies on Afghanistan and Pakistan. During his first term, Mr. Trump punished and cooperated with Pakistan and urged India to take an active role in finding a sustainable solution in Afghanistan. With the U.S.'s withdrawal from Afghanistan and Pakistan's little strategic importance, this issue is of little dissonance now.

During his first term, Mr. Trump promoted capacity building, development assistance, defence agreements, and cooperation with the South Asian countries. This nature of assistance would continue, given his ambitions to counter

China and supplement India. Mr. Trump's little focus on democracy, nation-building, and human rights (like in his first term) would also benefit Sri Lanka, where a new government is still looking for economic assistance and exploring a lasting solution to the Tamil issue.

This approach could benefit Myanmar and the Taliban too, although it is unclear to what extent Washington would like to engage them. However, Bangladesh, which is undergoing a political transition under the new regime, will face challenges and a potential reduction in assistance.

## China and the region

Mr. Trump's confrontational approach to China will also put South Asian countries under more pressure. Given his erratic decisions, Washington will likely be less tolerant of South Asian countries' agency and consistent playing of one great power against the other. Besides, the region's consistent politicisation and ambiguity over investments, defence cooperation, and agreements will likely invite more pressure from the U.S. to seek reciprocity. However, his promise of bringing peace between Russia and Ukraine and resolving the crisis in West Asia (if successful) will help weaken South Asian economies to overcome their food and fuel inflationary pressures.

As the world braces for Trump 2.0, South Asia will not be immune to the broader structural shifts. Yet, the region is likely to see more continuity. With India and the U.S. likely to increase their cooperation in South Asia and bridge their divergences, Mr. Trump's ideology, leadership style, and management of great power politics will have opportunities and challenges for the region. How South Asian countries will cope with the new administration, even as they balance China and India, is yet to be seen.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Court's 'freeze' order

The Supreme Court of India's freeze on suits on claims over places of worship is a source of relief. Most Indians are descendants of migrants from other parts of the world – an inconvenient truth for some political narratives. This is a point that was also highlighted by the former Supreme Court judge, Justice Markandey Katju, in 2011. India's history, marked by waves of migrations and invasions, has seen countless instances of places of worship being destroyed, repurposed, or rebuilt. Similarly, invaders have often displaced earlier settlers. Seeking justice for

every such historical grievance is impractical and endless. Worse, entertaining such cases risks perpetuating communal strife and minority demonisation, which may serve divisive agendas but is certainly not in the national interest. No right-thinking citizen could possibly dispute the wisdom behind The Places of Worship Act, 1991. **G.G. Menon**, Tripunithura, Ernakulam, Kerala

Meanwhile, the war between Ukraine and Russia persists. Perhaps war is a reflection of our never-ending desires, which we mistakenly perceive as essential for survival. Mutual cooperation is the key to our survival. Yet, we ignore this fundamental truth. **Kishor Mori**, Kutch, Gujarat

The nail-biting win reminds me of the phrase, "Success is when preparation meets opportunities". His hard work, determination and perseverance paid off. **R. Srivastava**, Chennai

When Bobby Fischer of the U.S. challenged the Soviet Union's Boris Spassky, the Americans rejoiced in it as a victory of their acumen over Soviet might. Today, as India finds ways to tackle China, Gukesh's victory over Ding Liren mirrors this – that Indians are formidable and a young India cannot be underestimated. **Pragya Jain**, New Delhi

The games between Gukesh and Ding were gripping. It was Viswanathan Anand who elevated Indian chess. It is now the turn of Gukesh and other youngsters to continue the good work. **Prabhakaran Vallath**, Vatakara, Kozhikode, Kerala

possible at a young age. Thursday was a historic day for Indian chess.

**Dattaprasad Shirodkar**, Mumbai

Gukesh is to chess what Sachin Tendulkar was to cricket.

**R. Shankaran**, Tiruch, Tamil Nadu

It is a historic moment for India. With many youngsters showing great talent in the game, there is a lot of hope in India.

**Abdulla Ameen P.M.**, Adimali, Idukki, Kerala

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

At just 18, Gukesh has demonstrated that conquering the world is

conquering the world is

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## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### World chess champ

Gukesh Dommaraju, take a bow

IT'S been Gukesh Dommaraju's year. In September, he led the Indian team to a historic gold medal at the biennial Chess Olympiad. Now, the 18-year-old prodigy from Chennai has fulfilled a childhood dream by becoming the youngest world champion in chess history. He is the first Indian to hold the title after Vishwanathan Anand. Twists and turns marked the 14 games in Singapore. Gukesh and China's Ding Liren, the reigning champ, were tied with two wins each before the final game. Just when a draw seemed imminent, setting the stage for high-speed games to break the tie, Ding committed a dramatic blunder. He was gracious in defeat, marking the end of the three-week match that kept fans riveted across the globe. Former world champions Magnus Carlsen and Vladimir Kramnik may have criticised the quality of play, but in the larger scheme of things, it's the game of chess that won.

Gukesh's victory signals a generational shift in the chess world. Yet, the new champion does not harbour any illusions. He remains outside the world's top three by rating, and is not even the highest-rated Indian. That spot goes to 21-year-old Arjun Erigaisi. In his post-match press conference, Gukesh acknowledged that 'becoming the world champion doesn't mean that I'm the best player in the world, there's obviously Magnus.' The 34-year-old Norwegian, who is regarded as possibly the greatest chess player of all time, said Gukesh has shown the potential to establish himself as the 'number two player in the world, who knows, maybe the number one'.

The surging popularity of chess as a spectator sport could ignite a new wave of enthusiasm. Gukesh's achievement also cements India's growing influence in the chess world. What's needed is more government and private support to nurture a robust ecosystem.

### Fix health insurance

Hidden costs, denied claims a bane

THE shocking murder of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in the US, reportedly motivated by grievances over denied claims, has ignited a global debate about health insurance systems. While the US struggles with its own healthcare challenges, India faces a similarly disheartening reality. As per a recent survey, 43 per cent of policyholders in India reported difficulties in claim processing, ranging from rejections due to 'pre-existing conditions' to opaque exclusions hidden in fine print. India's health insurance sector, touted as a safety net, often traps patients in a web of delays and financial burdens. Claims are sometimes processed so sluggishly that hospital discharges are delayed, forcing families to bear additional costs. Ambiguous contracts filled with technical jargon only worsen the plight of policyholders, many of whom are left financially and emotionally drained.

Adding to the problem, insurance premiums have seen staggering hikes — over 50 per cent for one in five policyholders last year — making coverage unaffordable for many middle-class families. This trend undermines public trust and risks turning health insurance into an unsustainable financial burden rather than a source of relief. The lessons from the US are clear: distrust between stakeholders — insurers, healthcare providers and patients — leads to systemic failures. India must urgently address this mistrust by strengthening transparency and accountability within the insurance sector. Models like managed care, which integrate healthcare delivery with insurance, can reduce costs and improve patient outcomes.

The Insurance Regulatory Development Authority of India must enforce stricter transparency norms, ensure grievance redress mechanisms and penalise unscrupulous practices. Strengthening public systems like Ayushman Bharat can complement these measures by reducing dependence on private insurers. The growing disenchantment with health insurance calls for meaningful reforms. India cannot afford a system that prioritises profit over patient welfare.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1924

### The Viceroys speech

IT is perhaps too much to expect the Viceroy, like the King, whose representative in India he is, to be entirely free from Partisan bias; his position as actual head of the Government would not permit him to be, even if his own inclination lay in that direction. But the fact that he is the Viceroy as well as Governor-General makes it not unnatural for the public to expect a certain standard of fairness and impartiality in handling public questions, which one does not ordinarily expect from a mere leader of party, and to be disappointed when it finds that the reality falls short of the expectation. Judged by this test no Viceroy ever made a more disappointing speech than what Lord Reading made at the European Association dinner in Calcutta on Wednesday last. It is a speech of exactly the kind that one would have expected from a leader of the European community itself, official and non-official. Whether we regard to the tribute he paid to the work of the Services and the hope he expressed for the indefinite continuance of work of the same kind rendered in the same spirit and temper; or to his defence of the Bengal Ordinance and the action taken under it or finally to his reference to the Reforms, the remarks made by His Excellency might as well have been made by the President of the Association, under whose auspices he delivered this post-prandial oration. The distressing impression that is left on one's mind by a perusal of the speech is that in the opinion of this august personage, everything in India is for the best, if not actually perfect — the Government, the Services as well as the European community — with the single exception of the infernal agitator and the still more infernal revolutionary.

# India learning to play it both ways

In Afghanistan and Bangladesh, India's hyper-realist foreign policy is the mantra for our times



THE GREAT GAME  
JYOTI MALHOTRA

FOREIGN Secretary Vikram Misri's measured remarks on his visit to Bangladesh with the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs in Delhi this week is a welcome return to the realistic middle ground for which India's foreign policy has been well known.

Most interestingly, Misri addressed the Sheikh Hasina question with full forthrightness. He was speaking to his MPs, but, no doubt, the message was being read and heard in Dhaka equally carefully. The result was a fine balance, an adroit defence of a friend of whom you have not fully approved in the past nor in the present circumstances, but cannot fully wash your hands of.

Misri said Hasina was using 'private communication devices' — sometimes called a phone or an iPad or a computer, via any number of service providers — to make the highly critical comments that she had recently done on the Bangladesh interim government and its chief adviser Muhammad Yunus as well as Dhaka's lack of protection of the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh. Misri never once said whether India approved of what Hasina was saying. He pointed out that India's ties with Dhaka were not dependent on a 'single political party' but focused on the 'people of Bangladesh'.

So, let's read between the not-so-finely-drawn lines. India, Misri was clearly saying, was ready to move on from its old tie with Hasina and try to restore a measure of normalcy with Naya



MIDDLE PATH: Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met his Bangladesh counterpart earlier this week. ANI

Bangladesh — after all, it's not as if Delhi has not dealt with not-so-friendly governments in its eastern neighbour before. Ask Ronen Sen, the old ambassador with a penchant for history, about the time when Mujibur Rahman, Hasina's father, was assassinated that late night or early morning, depending on your sleep cycle, back in 1975, and why such a brutal event, if not an assassination, was waiting to happen. Ask the other ageing diplomat with a razor-sharp mind, Deb Mukharji, about his interactions with Hasina and Khaleda Zia and why the two women who ran the country between them for decades detested each other with such full-blown certainty, and why the August 4 'uprising' or 'debacle', depending on how you saw it, was inevitable.

Let's move on. Misri was telling Dhaka, even as he spoke to the Indian parliamentarians in Delhi. It's been an ugly episode, ugly for us, too. Misri will never say this, nor will any serving Indian diplomat, but the fact remains that when India supported Hasina in her last victory this January as well as the last time she won, in January 2019, it had not so delicately held its diplomatic nose.

Involve the opposition parties,

India's new tie with Bangladesh is as interesting as the one it is building with the Afghan Taliban. India is taking a leaf out of the book the big powers have read and torn up whenever they felt like it.

Delhi had told Hasina repeatedly to talk to Khaleda Zia and to the rest of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, ask them to participate in the elections, this is not a one-party state. Delhi's advice to Mujib's daughter was as much for herself, for the people of Bangladesh, whose loyalties were divided down the middle between the Awami League and the BNP, as for the safety and security of its own north-eastern states, several of which share the more than 4,000-km-long bound-

ary between them. India's new tie with Bangladesh is as interesting as the one it is building with the Afghan Taliban. Only a few weeks ago, senior Indian diplomat JP Singh travelled again to Kabul to meet the Taliban Defence Minister, Mullah Yaqub — who also happens to be Mullah Omar's son. The meeting set off alarm bells in several parts of the neighbourhood, notably Pakistan.

Some Americans wondered if Delhi was making nice with the bad guys — although it is more than likely that the Deep States in India as well as in the US were fully on board with the move. Remember that the Taliban have not touched one brick of the US embassy in Kabul since the Americans fled two years ago; certainly, all sides are waiting for another round of the great game. Certainly, the Russians are obliging by removing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from their list of banned entities.

You might wonder about Delhi's hyper-realism, and what exactly is going on. You might ask yourself: is it actually true that India wants to be friends with a regime that has banned women from singing, or girls from studying in schools beyond Class VI

and kept most other human rights in abeyance? The fact is that India is taking a leaf out of the book the big powers have read and torn up, chapter by chapter, whenever they felt like it.

The simple answer is that India may be finally learning to play it both ways. To support the ghoulish Taliban regime because it helps protect India's northern border once removed — it is Pakistan that has a border, not India, of course — and because India hopes that a friendly Taliban could sometime in the future come to its aid in allowing Indian operatives to put pressure on Pakistan on its northern frontier.

As the year comes to an end, the interesting change in the Modi government's foreign policy in its third term is that it has no special friends or enemies. (The one exception, of course, is Pakistan.) The decision to end the frictions at the Line of Actual Control and strike a deal with the Chinese was taken with the full force of knowledge that a military standoff at high altitude was being undermined by a burgeoning imbalance in bilateral trade. Perhaps, the Russians helped — who knows.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to Moscow this week is as much a part of this hyper-realism as is the decision to cut a deal with the incoming Trump administration, whatever it takes. The last time around when Trump was in power, some arguments — some as small as high tariffs around American chicken's legs, medical equipment and super-expensive Harley Davidson motorcycles — had threatened to overtake the relationship. This time around, Delhi is not about to strike the iron with things so small and silly.

The moral of 2024 is also that power is not enough; it is the exercise of that power that is equally important. From Yunus' Bangladesh to the Raj Kapoor dynasts who recently met PM Modi, the message is simple. Only if you stand long enough can you be counted.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Foreign policy is like human relations, only people know less about each other. — Joe Biden

## When families were big & radios hissed

RANJIT SINGH

ONE of the benefits of the lockdown during Covid-19 was reconnecting with my childhood as the responsibility of teaching the maid's daughter, Mehak, who was then in Class II, fell on me. While reading her EVS book on the structure of a family, I was amused to read about the difference between a nuclear and joint family. I was born in 1946, when five or six children in a family were common. A joint family, as illustrated in the textbook, had parents with two children and their grandparents — smaller than a nuclear family of our time.

Because there were five or six children, maintaining discipline was important and this was normally the responsibility of the father. He was the judge, jury and prosecutor, all rolled in one. At times, one didn't even know the cause of the punishment. It was left to the mother to assuage the bruised feelings and hands! One learned that the best way to avoid such punishments was to keep out of sight of the authority.

During the holidays, it was common for us children to be bundled off for a week or two to some relative's house. We would either travel by train or bus. As the hosts, too, would have a number of children of their own, we kids would have a great time playing all sorts of games, such as seven tiles, hide and seek and 'satapi'. The adventurous sorts would be climbing trees. There would be frequent fights, with the aggrieved party vowing to never speak to the other. But within an hour, reconciliation would have taken place, the fight forgotten.

Those were the days of innocence. The only source of music was the good old valve radio. The present generation cannot imagine that the radio would take a minute or two to warm up before we could hear the hiss and the crackle of its waves. All India Radio did not broadcast film songs, and one had to tune in to Radio Ceylon to hear them. Wednesdays were reserved for 'Binaca Gauri Mala', broadcast with the mesmerising voice of host Amrita Sanyal.

There was no TV and, hence, we would see very few movies and, those too, which had been vetted by the parents. We would look forward to this rare event with anticipation. From the opening credits of the film till 'The End' appeared on the screen, we would be transported to a different world — of kings and queens, palaces, a corrupt 'wazir' or scheming 'senapati', the swashbuckling hero, sword fights, galloping horses and damsels in distress, all in glorious black and white. The songs and dances were also a big draw. What thrill we would get seeing action on the screen. In the end, the hero would be seen rescuing the princess from the clutches of the evil senapati.

Mehak, who is now in the Class V, looks at me as if I am from another age and planet. I am and I yearn for the simplicity of yesteryear. There was more tolerance and understanding between people then. I am waiting for the hero to rescue us from the bigotry and hatred that has permeated society today.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Avoid too many PF withdrawals

With reference to 'PF a swipe away', on the face of it, the provision to make withdrawals from Provident Fund (PF) through ATMs may seem to be subscriber-friendly, but easy withdrawals may prove counterproductive. The provident fund is meant to provide savings for post-retirement needs or other legitimate expenses. It is heartening to note that a provision capping withdrawals at 50% of balance in PF is proposed to be made, but an individual may keep withdrawing on film-soundground still he/she hits the 50 per cent cap. Perhaps, there is a need to relocate at this juncture.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

#### Reform EPFO pension scheme

Refer to 'PF a swipe away'; the Labour Ministry's move to enable easy withdrawal of PF up to 50% via online platforms is a commendable step. Previously, workers often relied on middlemen or cyber cafes, incurring high fees to access their hard-earned savings. This initiative enhances transparency and accessibility for the workforce, who frequently change jobs and need financial support. However, the government should also address the issue of low pensions. Many private school teachers receive pensions below Rs 5,000, while their government counterparts receive over 10 times more, highlighting the need for reforms in the EPFO pension scheme.

VIJAY KUMAR KATYAL, PANCHKULA

#### Social security for gig workers

Appropos of 'PF a swipe away', the Labour Ministry's initiative of enabling EPFO subscribers to withdraw their funds from ATM from the ensuing year is praiseworthy. But these initiatives centre on the employees of the organised sector. There is a big chunk of casual or contractual employees in the country that are not covered under the EPFO or any other social security schemes. The fact that a policy for providing benefits like pension and health services to gig and platform workers is also being contemplated is laudable.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

#### Judge's remarks biased

Appropos of 'Dishonourable', the remarks made by the Allahabad High Court Judge, Justice Sheldhar Kumar Yadav, at a VHP event are

disturbing as they reek of prejudice and hatred against the minority community. No Muslim can expect to get justice if his/her case is heard by him. The SC has rightly taken note of his remarks and sought a report on it. It should take strict action against him as he has lowered the credibility of the entire judiciary.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

#### Majoritarian view dangerous

Refer to 'Dishonourable', the assertion by an Allahabad High Court judge at a VHP event that a country's laws should align with the majority's wishes, coupled with his unwarranted comments on the Uniform Civil Code, reflect a dangerous majoritarian bias that contravenes the principles of justice and the secular ethos of our Constitution. Such statements, bordering on hate speech, are unbecoming of a judge. Any deviation from constitutional values by those entrusted with interpreting the law must be addressed decisively.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

#### Maintain secular character

With reference to 'SC stays surveys, final orders on suits over religious structures', the recent trend of lower courts seeking surveys of mosques has raised concerns as these can disrupt communal harmony and create unnecessary tensions. A former SC Judge, Justice RF Nariman, has emphasised the importance of enforcing the 1991 Places of Worship Act, which highlights the need to maintain the secular character of the country.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

#### An opportunity for India

Appropos of 'The weakening Chinese economy needs a stimulus', due to increased state intervention in its economy, China's productivity is declining. This is having a cascading effect. The depreciation of the Chinese currency creates volatility in the market, which has a limited effect on India. India can capitalise on this crisis in China by implementing policies that strengthen its service-based exports, especially in the ASEAN region, where China has narrow states. This would also address India's trade deficit and enhance its economic prospects.

VANBHAW GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

# Why a pandemic treaty is still hanging fire



RAJESH BHATIA  
FORMER WHO DIRECTOR



JAI PRAKASH NARAIN  
FORMER WHO DIRECTOR

THE havoc caused, the deaths and the social chaos witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic are gradually fading from public memory. This ought not be. That pandemic was neither the first such health emergency nor will it be the last one that has the potential to engulf the entire world.

Any extraordinary event which constitutes a public health risk through the international spread of disease and requires a coordinated international response, implies a situation that is serious, sudden, unusual or unexpected. Since 2007, WHO has officially declared seven such public health emergencies of international concern. These were the influenza pandemic (2009), Ebola (2013-2015, and 2018-2020), polio (2014 to present), Zika (2016), Covid-19 pandemic (2020) and mpox (2022 and 2024). Given their frequency and regularity of occurrence, it can be logically surmised that the next pandemic is knocking at our doors. The question is when it will appear with a potential to repeat or exceed the magnitude of previous pandemics.

What causes a pandemic? Most pandemics during the current millennium are

caused by viruses of animal origin which have originated from wildlife where millions of viruses continue to circulate. Most of these viruses are transported by bats from wildlife into nearby animal and human habitation thus kicking an epidemiological cascade from local outbreak to massive epidemics and a possible pandemic. The degradation of the environment, especially deforestation, enhances the proximity of wildlife to domestic animals and human habitation thus enhancing the risk of emergence and transmission of novel viruses.

Recognising that these emergencies cannot be prevented but, with appropriate preparedness, can result in low-risk events for communities, WHO coordinated the development and promulgation of an instrument-based framework. The International Health Regulation of 2005 is a legally binding treaty between 193 member countries, and calls upon countries to share information on public health events in a transparent manner and build their national core capacity for the prevention, detection, and response to health emergencies.

What progress has been made to strengthen national core capacities? According to self-assessment in 2022, India scored 85 per cent against the global average of 66 per cent. However, the Global Health Security Index puts India at No 66 amongst 195 countries with a score of 42.8 against a global average of 28.4. According to this Global Health Security Index all countries remain dangerously unpre-



ON GUARD: Most pandemics during the current millennium have been caused by viruses of animal origin.

pared for future epidemic and pandemic threats, including threats potentially more devastating than Covid-19, and no country is fully prepared for future pandemic or epidemic threats.

There is unquestionable need for an urgent and comprehensive enhancement of India's capacity in alignment with international health regulations. Learning from the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for a comprehensive national public health law has been acutely felt. A recent NITI Aayog document on future pandemics has recommended the enactment of the Public Health Emergency Management Act to facilitate the response to any public health crisis including a holistic approach to health management, prevention, control and response.

National capacity for an early detection and comprehensive swift responses to novel diseases are the keys to minimising the impact of future pandemics.

Progress has been made in surveillance through a web-based Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme that detects an average of 40-50 outbreaks every week. This is indicative of the national burden of infectious diseases. A strong and battle-ready epidemiological capacity especially trained workforce through the India epidemic intelligence service and field epidemiology training programme need to be expanded to cater to the urgent need for conducting effective outbreak investigation and taking action locally. We also need to build capacity for national surveillance and detection of novel pathogens from animals and wildlife.

The national surveillance programme should facilitate community and hospital data to flow seamlessly into a unified data portal for data access and sharing across all relevant sectors for mounting appropriate interventions. An efficient integrated surveillance at human-animal-wildlife interface is critical for early detection of such unusual events. There is a need to develop a country-specific forecasting and prediction modelling system by harnessing expertise available in non-health institutions of excellence.

Vaccines are the most cost-effective public health interventions. It was incredible how Indian scientists, industry and regulators rose to the occasion and developed and manufactured efficacious Covid-19 vaccines in a short period. Administering 2.2 billion doses to more than 1 billion people is indeed com-

mendable. For new vaccines, diagnostics and medicines to combat future health emergencies, a focused National Mission on therapeutics and novel drug development should be established with a 100-day target to develop, produce and make these fit for use in the communities through networking of pharmaceutical industry, research institutes and regulatory authorities.

No public health programme can succeed unless institutions are built for the purpose and the public is actively collaborating through a systematic risk communication and community engagement strategy that incorporates locally relevant factors. With 12 billion mobile phones, 600 million of which are smartphones, 825 million people having access to the internet, 425 million people using WhatsApp, 897 television channels of which 350 provide news in addition to almost 80,000 newspapers in various languages, India has extensive electronic and print media reach. These resources can be utilised to convey reliable and doable health messages to almost the entire population of this country.

National capacity for early detection and comprehensive swift response to novel diseases are the keys to minimise the impact of future pandemics. These require strong political will and appropriate sustained financing to successfully implement the International Health Regulations 2005 framework to obviate health, economic and social chaos that are the hallmarks of any pandemic.

# How AI skills will drive economic growth in 2025



JUSTINA NIXON-SANTILL  
VICE PRESIDENT, CHIEF IMPACT OFFICER, IBM

WITH artificial intelligence poised to reshape industries worldwide, a paradox is emerging. Despite a growing demand for people with the knowledge to leverage the technology's potential, AI-related skills remain in short supply.

The scarcity of AI-related skills—from proficiency in machine learning, prompt engineering and data science to an understanding of AI's ethical implications—is becoming a major obstacle in deploying the technology effectively. In one recent report, 47 per cent of executives say their employees lack the necessary skills. This will affect companies' ability to move AI projects from conception to implementation. A 2023 report from the World Economic Forum finds that "six in 10

workers will require training before 2027, but only half of workers are seen to have access to adequate training opportunities today."

This gap in skills bodes ill not only for individual career growth, but also for economic growth more broadly. Capitalising on the opportunities that AI presents will require updated approaches to education and training. In the coming year, educational and vocational institutions will likely place a much greater emphasis on teaching AI ethics skills, offer flexible lifelong learning and infuse AI into their offerings to be more competitive.

AI ethics skills will become a core concern—and for good reason. In the space of just a few years, generative AI has become available to anyone with a computer and an internet connection. For employers and their information technology (IT) departments, this raises the problem of "shadow AI," or unsanctioned use of generative AI by employees. It could expose companies to a wide range of security, compliance, and reputational risks. In addition, the workforce will need AI ethics skills to manage new AI agents: tools that can automate complex tasks that would otherwise



FUTURE: AI-powered solutions have reached a point from being a nice-to-have to a must-have, soon

require human resources.

Shadow and agentic AI both demand new guardrails to help users protect AI applications based on responsible AI practices. To this end, education providers will begin to emphasise training on the fundamentals of AI explainability, fairness, robustness, transparency and privacy. Without a basic understanding of how AI models generate their output, for example, those responsible for protecting data or controlling autonomous systems will be ill-equipped for the task.

With AI and other new tech-

By embracing AI, we can enhance learning and professional outcomes, improve operational efficiency, and reduce costs.

credentials in AI-related fields like natural language processing and machine learning will likely increase.

Moreover, the future use of quantum computing will continue to drive the need for new skills. And the steady rise in the number and variety of cyberattacks—such as "harvest now and decrypt later" (HNDL) hacks—underscores the importance of up-to-date cybersecurity skills.

That is why our own organisation is working with community colleges across four US states to offer a new cybersecurity certificate that will prepare students for in-demand roles across the workforce. Similarly, our collaborations with Singapore Polytechnic and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the US provide free training in AI to young learners. And while this process may begin in the classroom, we can also expect to see more opportunities for upskilling as the relevant technologies evolve. For anyone who wants to stay competitive in the job market, lifelong learning has become indispensable.

Finally, AI and automation technologies can make existing education platforms far more effective, as we are like-

ly to see in 2025. AI-powered solutions have reached a tipping point from being a nice-to-have to a must-have. Educators, whether in schools or other organisations, will find new ways to apply AI-powered tools to personalise and tailor learning experiences, understand students' needs and match them with relevant courses, or enhance coaching and feedback.

The same technologies can also enhance customer service aspects of education. For example, at IBM, we have already seen the benefits of using AI to analyse feedback from more than 60,000 learners in 47 languages, which led us to simplify online registration and other parts of the process.

In the coming years, education systems and platforms will also benefit from multimodal AI models that can process audio, video, charts and images to provide an even more effective, individualised learning experience.

By embracing AI, we can enhance learning and professional outcomes, improve operational efficiency, and reduce costs across the economy. But all of that will require developing the skilled workforce we need.

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QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Graphic description (8)

5 Principal (4)

9 Devoid of humane feelings (5)

10 Grossly incompetent person (7)

11 Full discretionary power (5,7)

13 Violent thief (6)

14 In short supply (6)

17 Take undue risks (4,4,4)

20 Implement for domestic use (7)

21 Obligated (5)

22 Victim of deception (4)

23 Eaten (8)

DOWN

1 Choice one (4)

2 Leaf-stalks cooked as food (7)

3 Be the boss (4,3,5)

4 Assimilate (6)

6 A survival from past age (5)

7 Obdurate (8)

8 Too numerous to be reckoned (12)

12 To offer for consideration (8)

15 Newly enlisted soldier (7)

16 Trader (6)

18 Precipitous (5)

19 Person greatly admired (4)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Full-scale, 8 Sworn, 9 Adoring, 10 Garish, 11 Cellular, 12 Especial, 15 Congress, 18 Hoarse, 20 Deadly, 21 Aviator, 22 Waive, 23 Fairy tale.

Down: 2 Undue, 3 Lordly, 4 Concrete, 5 Estate, 6 Codicil, 7 On the line, 11 Crack down, 13 Pushover, 14 Invalid, 16 Relief, 17 Vacant, 19 Spoil.

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

7 1 8 3 5 2 6 9 4

5 2 9 4 1 6 7 3 8

3 6 4 9 8 7 1 5 2

8 3 1 6 7 4 5 2 9

2 5 7 1 3 9 4 8 6

4 9 6 5 2 8 3 7 1

6 8 3 2 4 5 9 1 7

1 4 2 7 9 3 8 6 5

9 7 5 8 6 1 2 4 3

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 14, 2024, SATURDAY

Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Margshirsh Shaka 23

■ Margshirsh Purnimite 29

■ Hijri 1446

■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 14, up to 4.59 pm

■ Siddha Yoga up to 8.26 am

■ Sadhya Yoga up to 5.07 am

■ Rohini Nakshatra up to 3.55 am

■ Moon in Taurus sign

FORECAST

SUNSET: 17:24 HRS

SUNRISE: 06:11 HRS

SATURDAY

SUNDAY

CITY

Chandigarh

New Delhi

Amritsar

Bathinda

Jalandhar

Ludhiana

Bhiwani

Hisar

Sirsa

Dharamsala

Manali

Shimla

Srinagar

Jammu

Kargil

Leh

Dehradun

Mussoorie

MAX

21

23

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23

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22

19

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MIN

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-11

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