



Peace imperatives

President's Rule in Manipur provides an opportunity for peace

In Manipur, with the Bharatiya Janata Party unable to identify a successor to N. Biren Singh for the post of Chief Minister and the Assembly also not having been convened even six months since its last sitting, President's Rule was imposed in the State with the Assembly under suspended animation. Since mid-2023, in any case, a number of central forces have been deployed, with the Union Home Ministry in control over law and order even as the strife that began as an ethnic conflagration in May 2023 has begun to subside. With President's Rule being declared – even if it was for expedient reasons and showcased an inability of the BJP and its allies in government to overcome the ethnic differences within the legislature and in the polity – the Union government now has an opportunity to ease the tensions. It can also work on pressing issues such as the persisting displacement of over 60,000 people. Reports suggest that many among them still experience severe trauma and a loss of livelihoods, which must be tackled by the government with alacrity. President's Rule also allows for the possibility of talks between representatives of the two communities in the conflict, especially those who are committed to peace. The legislators can also play a role in this exercise of reconciliation.

The other major issue is the militarisation of civil society, with the burgeoning of armed groups among the two communities, who have termed themselves as "village volunteers", brandishing arms looted from constabularies. Earlier attempts to retrieve these weapons and bring the looters to face justice have not borne fruit. The militarisation in the new ethnic conflict has also been complicated by the expanded role of insurgents who were fighting the Indian state or were engaged in the Myanmar civil war. It would take a concerted effort by the government, armed forces and civil society actors to identify the "village volunteers", disarm them by using a firm hand and with incentives, and then work on ways to tackle the insurgents. The Biren Singh regime was incapable of doing this because of the perceived bias in leadership and Mr. Singh's tendency to stigmatise the Kuki-Zo community as a whole, leading to complete distrust. Efforts must be taken to distance the government from this coloured legacy and the Home Ministry should work on a war-footing to restore peace. Ideally, Assembly elections would have been necessitated immediately considering the deep ethnic divisions within the legislature and its failures. But, first, it is imperative to extinguish the climate of fear and repression from violent groups and restore the rule of law before elections.

Catching a break

January's inflation dip is respite for households but risks are building up

A healthy winter harvest of vegetables reined in food inflation to a five-month low of 6% in January, driving down India's consumer price inflation to 4.3%, tantalisingly close to the 4% median target pursued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). For urban consumers, in fact, inflation eased to 3.9%, while rural consumers faced a much moderated 4.6% up-tick in prices. This constitutes some relief for households, especially the urban middle class which has been awaiting relief from food inflation and has pulled back on other spending. If inflation holds around this level for some time, this may have broader connotations for consumption and growth impulses gathering fresh steam. The RBI, which slashed interest rates last week in anticipation of declining inflation, must be relieved too. As per its own reckoning, with this quarter expected to average 4.4% inflation, there may be a minor uptick from January's 4.3% price rise over this month and March. On Thursday, citing the inflation decline and the RBI's projection of an average inflation of 4.2% in 2025-26, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman exuded confidence in Parliament that food prices will be under control this year, with farm output estimates suggesting a healthy uptick.

Some dark clouds, however, loom over this benign inflation outlook that is expected to create more room for the central bank to cut rates further and support growth. With the rupee declining 4% against the U.S. dollar so far in the second half of 2024-25, imported inflation can play spoiler, particularly on fuels, and edible oils where imports constitute 60% of India's consumption needs. If commuting costs, which accounted for the highest chunk of households' non-food spending in 2023-24, and cooking fuel costs flare up along with the price of fats to fry one's meals, household budgets will be exacerbated afresh. Edible oil prices have been rising sharply for a few months already, with high global prices compounded by the Centre's decision to impose import duties. They were up 15.6% in January, the highest in almost three years. Wholesale prices for edible oils jumped 33.1%, indicating there is likely more pass-through of these costs in retail prices. Any weather shocks this coming summer and monsoon could also undo food price gains. The RBI, which is seeking to curb the volatility in the rupee, will be mindful of these risks, and having retained a neutral monetary policy stance, may hold off on its pursuit if warranted. To alleviate price pressures, the government, after unveiling income tax cuts to boost middle class consumption, should be open to slashing indirect taxes – fuel levies, import duties, and GST – as they affect all sections of society, including the most vulnerable.

The Teesta dam and the long shadow of climate change

In January 2025, an expert committee constituted by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change recommended a proposal to rebuild the Teesta-3 dam on the Teesta river in Sikkim. In October 2023, a powerful glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) from the South Lhonak lake had decimated the dam and its hydroelectric power generation facility. The waters also carried debris from the dam forward like a fluid battering ram, heightening the damage further downstream. In all, over 100 people were killed while more than 80,000 people in four districts were affected.

It became clear later that a moraine on the South Lhonak lake's flank suffered a slope failure, weakening the terminus. The failure also sent rocks tumbling into the lake, generating a strong ripple. The outlet subsequently gave way, with satellite data indicating that around 50 billion litres of water had spilled into the valley. The event also set off multiple landslides about 30 to 40 kilometres downstream. Experts who have since been monitoring the lake also said the moraine has remained unstable.

The link with global warming

As global warming and particulate matter – especially black carbon, also known as soot – accelerate the melting of Himalayan glaciers, more runoff is pooling into new lakes or adding to the existing ones. The rate of melting is inversely proportional to the volume, so, as glaciers shrink, they melt faster. A report by the Central Water Commission of last year found that the number of "glacial lakes and other water bodies" in the Himalayan region had become 10.8% more numerous between 2011 and 2024 and that their combined surface area had increased by 33.7% in the same period. The South Lhonak lake itself was formed in the early 1960s and grew to 167 hectares by 2023. Glacial retreat has also been known to destabilise extant geological formations and create new sources of risk. Against this background, the expert committee's decision to recommend the rebuilding of the Teesta-3 dam is worrisome.

As *The Hindu* has reported, the committee's decision was motivated by the fact that Teesta-3 was "successful" and "commercially viable" and that its power-generating equipment "was largely intact" following the GLOF. Environmental activists and hydrogeology experts alike have expressed misgivings about large hydroelectric power projects in the Himalayas and have questioned the new design's green clearance.



Vasudevan Mukunth

The key line that the dam was 'commercially viable' is a weak reason to reconstruct it

Teesta-3 has also been the subject of several public interest litigations asking for it be scrapped: because of its location (in an earthquake- and landslide-prone area); issues in its techno-economic clearance; its non-compliance with a 1996 notification to have Sikkim hold 51% equity; and alleged corruption.

According to the committee, Teesta-3 2.0 is to be built with concrete alone rather than concrete and rocks as before; to have a spillway nearly three-times more voluminous; and to have an early-warning system for flooding. The facility's new design is reportedly based on a "worst-case scenario" modelled by the India Meteorological Department, with the "maximum possible rain" in the next century in the region.

But one of the hallmarks of climate change is that it is a risk-multiplier. If the slope failure off the South Lhonak lake had occurred without there being a lake, there is unlikely to have been a flood. Likewise, if the moraine had not collapsed, the gradual accumulation of water may have caused the overtopping to flow into the valley less violently than during a GLOF.

The views of experts

The proliferation of glacial lakes, geological instability, dynamics of transient landscape features, and even the flux of atmospheric soot blowing in from industrial centres in the Gangetic plains all increase risks in a way that cannot reasonably be captured by a rainfall-centric model, however. Experts had already doubted whether the 2023 GLOF was triggered by heavy rain because local weather stations recorded only moderate rainfall or less in the area around the time. Professor Raghu Murtugudde has also written in *The Hindu* ("The value of attributing extreme events to climate change | Explained", May 24, 2024) that the relationships between climate change and local rainfall are hard to characterise because the data for modelling is seldom sufficient. In his words, climate models are "notoriously bad at properly capturing normal rainfall and worse at extreme ones".

On January 30, 2025, an international team including experts from the Indian Institute of Technology Bhubaneswar, the Indian Institute of Technology Bengaluru, the Indo Tibetan Border Police, and the Government of Sikkim published a comprehensive assessment of the GLOF ("The Sikkim flood of October 2023: Drivers, causes and impacts of a multihazard cascade"). Among other things, they wrote: "Prevailing GLOF modeling and assessment approaches insufficiently account for processes of erosion and sediment transport,

as well as hillslope-channel interactions such as riverbank collapses and landslides triggered by toe-undercutting as well as the impact of sediment transport on local bed elevations and hence water levels. The latter is of particular importance in large river basins because water waves move faster than sediment waves..."

The commercial viability of Teesta-3, pre-GLOF, speaks to India's soaring power demand and the pressing need to produce it somewhere. But since climate change multiplies risk everywhere, production in specific locales should be weighed against the consequences. Property and livelihoods downstream of Teesta-3 1.0 suffered greater damage due to the dam being in the swelling river's way. If the new design holds, Teesta-3 2.0 may be able to reduce the downstream damage due to a (hypothetically) identical flood. But if a stronger and/or significantly different flood occurs, the damage could be even greater. A new facility with more moving parts will also create both new success and failure modes.

The people form the larger picture

The social security of the region's residents will have to be improved accordingly so that, in the event of a disaster, they are able to piece their lives back together without slipping on any social, health, and/or economic indicators. Brian Stone, Jr., a professor in the School of City and Regional Planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology, U.S., wrote in a 2024 article ("The lunacy of rebuilding in disaster-prone areas"), "We cannot engineer our way out of climate change; retreat is inevitable." That is, if the climate-change-induced risk to X in an area is to be kept constant, in time either the area will shrink or the costs of maintaining X will increase. X could be property, livelihoods, even human lives.

That the facility was commercially viable is an insufficient excuse to restore it. Instead, the decision should be made within a framework of priorities led by the need to minimise risk to locals, their property, and their livelihoods and maximise their socio-economic resilience. The framework should also include a risk determination matrix with a response plan and a hard "unacceptable risk" level. The cost of these measures should be included in the dam's hydroelectric power tariff rather than externalising it in the determination of commercial viability. Anything else would be unsustainable by definition.

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Dealing with China's weaponisation of e-supply chains

In mid-January this year, news emerged of China preventing travel by its citizens working as engineers and technicians in Foxconn's facilities in India. It was also reported that those already in India were being recalled, and that the restrictions extended to curbs on exports of critical specialised manufacturing equipment, over which China has a monopoly. While Foxconn has reportedly scrambled to bring in Taiwanese workers to fill the gap in manpower, it is the stoppage of specialised equipment that is crippling. Apple-Foxconn remains critical to India's ambitions of becoming a global manufacturing power, and, therefore, such strangulation will affect that larger objective.

What is at play

These zero-sum measures by China expand geopolitical competition with India through regulations on flow of capital and other factors of production. Fully cognisant of its dominance in advanced machinery and a well-trained workforce in tightly integrated global electronics production, China intends to also curb the tacit transfer of knowledge from Chinese technicians to their Indian counterparts on the assembly line. Combined with the disruptions on account of non-availability of specialised equipment, China has sought to weaponise its strategic location in the network of supply chains to slow down production in India, and place itself in an advantageous negotiating position.

The growing trade tensions between China and the West, specifically the United States, along with the COVID-19-related disruptions have led many global corporations to adopt a China Plus One diversification strategy to future-proof themselves. India has been in the forefront to seek benefits from this move along with countries such as Vietnam and Mexico.

Given the scale and the development trajectory of India's manufacturing sector bearing potential similarities to that of the Chinese experience, Beijing realises the need to limit the rise of its geopolitical rival and also remind global corporations of its own indispensability to the production ecosystem.



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With large-scale electronics manufacturing important to India, New Delhi needs to speed up its future-proofing

Over the last few years, the Indian government, in coordination with its State governments, has pulled out all stops to entrench Apple-Foxconn's investments in the southern part of the country. The efforts bore fruit in 2023, with the assembling of iPhone 15 models at Foxconn's facility in Sunguvarchattam, Tamil Nadu along with another line in Tata Electronics' plant in Hosur, Karnataka.

In the fiscal year ending March 2024, Apple assembled \$4 billion worth of iPhones in India, through contract manufacturers Foxconn, Pegatron and Tata Electronics. In 2024, for the first time, iPhone 16 Pro models were assembled by Foxconn in India. State governments in south India have prioritised Apple-Foxconn in their pursuit of investments.

The conferment of the Padma Bhushan on Young Liu, Chairman of Foxconn, in 2024, further underscores the company's importance for India. It appears that the emphasis has been on replicating Apple's symbiotic relationship with China.

A pillar of 'Make in India'

Large-scale electronics manufacturing, especially of smartphones, is one of the important pillars of the 'Make in India' programme. The Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, which was launched first in the electronics industry in 2020, has witnessed increased allocation by the central government – a sum of ₹8,885 crore (\$1.02 billion) in the Union Budget this year, rising from ₹6,125 crore in the Union Budget 2024 (\$0.70 billion).

A recent news report revealed that over three financial years, from 2022-23 to 2024-25, Apple's contract manufacturers in India (Foxconn, Pegatron and Tata Electronics) had cumulatively received close to ₹6,600 crore (\$7.76 billion), out of the total disbursed amount of ₹8,700 crore (\$1 billion) under the PLI scheme. In addition, the Union Budget 2025 has completely removed basic custom duties/import taxes on mobile phone components such as printed circuit boards, camera modules, connectors, and sensors, as also different capital goods/machinery for use in

the manufacture of lithium-ion batteries for mobile phones. It is notable that China's zero-sum action happened just a few months after the thaw in India-China ties, post the patrolling agreement in October 2024 to end a four-year-long military standoff between the two armies in eastern Ladakh.

Economic necessity – visible in the Indian dependence on China for components and machinery – is believed to have hastened the negotiations process. This illustrates how India-China relations do not (necessarily) hinge on a stable boundary, as geopolitical competition between both sides is only bound to get more acute in the future.

India needs to think long term

There are no easy solutions for India in the short term, and so, it needs to involve both Apple and Foxconn to negotiate with China for easing Beijing's latest measures. Given that these two corporations have stakes in both countries, their involvement could possibly help India's case. However, this should also serve as another opportunity to hasten the process of future-proofing in terms of human resources, components and specialised machinery.

It needs to be kept in mind that India is still, largely, a centre of final assembly of smartphones. For a well-rounded and holistic manufacturing ecosystem that includes production of various components, ancillary industries need to be incentivised and scaled up.

The National Manufacturing Mission for small, medium and large industries, announced in the Union Budget is a good step, but it needs credible financial muscle that leads to development of clusters for technological knowledge-sharing. On-site training for workers, which includes tacit transfer of knowledge on the assembly line, needs to be complemented and augmented with industry-specific specialisation in skill development programmes.

More private capital needs to be encouraged in order to create a robust network of indigenous contract manufacturers for not just foreign corporations but also for domestic Indian brands.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

President's Rule

With some much-needed steps in conflict-ravaged Manipur having been initiated, the Government of India must leave no stone unturned in expediting the economic advancement of the region. Making sincere efforts to get to the root of the legitimate concerns of the locals and taking steps to integrate them into the mainstream are vital.

Rather than using coercive methods, a humanistic approach would help usher in peace and stability.

M. Rishidev,
Dindigul, Tamil Nadu

Procrastination is an evil that leads to nothing being done even in sensitive issues. It is the height of insensitivity that it took several months, severe displacement and much horror before some attempt

is being made to restore order. The challenge now is to swiftly bridge the deep trust deficit between communities.

Buddha Jagdish Rao,
Visakhapatnam

The central government not responding in real time is what has also contributed to the escalation in violence. Going by the manner in which the N. Biren Singh government

had handled the whole ethnic conflict, it goes to show how little it cared for its own people. It remains to be seen what difference the imposition of President's Rule makes to the troubled State.

Prabhu Raj R.,
Bengaluru

U.S. visit
The joint press conference between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S.

President Donald Trump was largely a substance-less charade. It was dominated by Mr. Trump's uninterrupted bragging and misrepresentation on a host of issues. Mr. Trump belongs to that school of politics where the philosophy is 'it's my way or the highway'.

The illegal immigration issue was glossed over. In this era of asymmetric warfare, where lighter and nimble drones have come

into prominence, having a controversial 'sophisticated' fighter jet is nothing but a white elephant. It is a political gift to the struggling manufacturer. The idea of pouring India's hard-earned money into a bottomless pit is also financially imprudent.

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FIRST COLUMN

SHAPING INDIA'S AI FUTURE

As AI redefines global power dynamics, India is emerging as a key player in its governance and innovation



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

Prime Minister Modi's Paris and Washington visit, meetings with the two most powerful leaders from the developed world, comes at a time of shifting geopolitical sands. The buzzword around both these high-level bilateral visits was high-end technology cooperation in a world, increasingly getting fragmented. India was the co-chair of the AI Action Summit in Paris, along with the host country France. This is the third global-level event on Artificial Intelligence, making it a Kumbh of technology leaders, policy makers, experts, corporates and world leaders in France. The theme was how to harness the power of this nearly mind-bending technology, whose evolution has been compared to the invention of the wheel and humans learning to use fire safely.

Almost simultaneously, China released a nimble version of the generative AI tool DeepSeek, which is currently a huge challenger to US billions of dollars infused into US technology companies' almost monopolistic dominance on AI tools and standards. US President Biden in his last week at the Oval Office had passed an executive order called the Interim Final Rule (IFR) on Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion, essentially imposing export controls on high-end software and hardware required for AI development across nations which may be considered inimical to US interests (i.e. China) but also, close allies like India.



While the global technology industry stakeholders have requested the new President to be consistent with the Trump Administration's previously stated, Regulatory Freeze Order, and suspend implementation of the AI Diffusion Rule until the Secretary of Commerce and other relevant officials can review the rule appropriately and pursue robust stakeholder engagement so that the rules reflect the government's objectives and ensure companies can engage with key US trading partners. President Trump is yet to revoke the executive order signed by his predecessor, even though he did sign a fresh one on January 23, which potentially hints at a pause.

Three days into the Oval Office President Trump signed the executive order on AI development and deployment stating the purpose as "The United States has long been at the forefront of artificial intelligence (AI) innovation, driven by the strength of our free markets, world-class research institutions, and entrepreneurial spirit. To maintain this leadership, we must develop AI systems that are free from ideological bias or engineered social agendas. With the right Government policies, we can solidify our position as the global leader in AI and secure a brighter future for all Americans. This order revokes certain existing AI policies and directives that act as barriers to American AI innovation, clearing a path for the United States to act decisively to retain global leadership in artificial intelligence. It is the policy of the United States to sustain and enhance America's global AI dominance in order to promote human flourishing, economic competitiveness, and national security."

India is aiming to have an equal say on global high tables of AI governance, innovation and development. It has an ambitious AI mission of its own, which is heavily dependent on high-end chips and Graphic Processing Units (GPUs) currently available from US technology companies. Any restrictions on access to these high-end processors would upset the ambitious goal envisaged under the India AI mission. The conversation in Paris, India's announcement to host the fourth global AI summit in Delhi, and conversations with President Trump and other leaders this week, are steps in the right direction.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Palestine in ruins: The unbearable cost of war

As political instability deepens and global powers debate the future of Gaza, millions of Palestinians face an uncertain and harrowing future



K.C. TYAGI

On October 7, 2023, Hamas fighters successfully launched a massive attack on Israel, but the price that Palestinians had to pay for it is heartbreaking. It will take three centuries to recover from the destruction caused by this war, which lasted for more than 15 months. According to a United Nations survey, it may take more than 350 years to rebuild Palestine, which has been reduced to rubble. The estimated loss in the first four months of the war was \$18.5 billion. At present, about 69 per cent of the structures in Gaza are either damaged or destroyed. More than 50 million tons of rubble have accumulated in the Gaza region, which may take more than 15 years to remove. Piles of rubble are visible throughout Palestine due to bombings and ground operations.

A United Nations report states that the accumulated rubble is approximately 12 times the size of the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt. According to estimates, even if more than 100 trucks work continuously, it may still take more than 15 years to clear the debris. Three generations born in tents will likely have to make them their permanent homes for a long time. Reconstruction will require billions of dollars, yet no international institution is willing to invest in an ungoverned region that has seen five wars in less than two decades.

Using satellite data, the United Nations estimated last month that 70 per cent of structures in Gaza have been destroyed, including more than 245,000 residential buildings. The World Bank estimated losses of \$18.5 billion in the first four months of the war—an amount nearly equal to the combined economic output of the West Bank and Gaza in 2022. Major roads have been turned into deep trenches, essential water and electricity infrastructure has been destroyed, and most hospitals are no longer functional due to being targeted during the bombings. According to the United Nations, more than 50,000 people have died in Gaza, 44 per cent of whom are children. The children who have survived are suffering from sickness, stress, insomnia, depression, and fear. They are terrified of every stranger. The children of Gaza have lost the will to live. Amidst the devastation, 96 per cent of children express a desire not to live, and 49 per cent say they would have preferred to die. Among those who feel this way, 72 per cent are boys and 46 per cent are girls.

A Netherlands-based organisation, War Child Alliance, has collected shocking and heartbreaking data. The alliance gathered this information from 500 parents or caretakers, including families whose children were crippled in the war or separated from their families. Their findings revealed that 92 per cent of the children surveyed are unable to accept the reality of war. The smell of gunpowder lingers in Gaza's atmosphere. The situation is so dire that 79 per cent of children experience nightmares, and 73 per cent have become so overwhelmed that their behaviour has turned aggressive. Many scream and moan in their sleep. These children have witnessed their homes and schools reduced to rubble. Their young minds are shattered, unable to comprehend why they are being punished and what crime they have committed.

Devastated by this horrific situation, the entire Palestinian government, including



DESPITE MULTIPLE RESOLUTIONS CALLING FOR A CEASEFIRE IN THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, ALL PREVIOUS EFFORTS HAD FAILED. ISRAEL WAS EVEN INCLUDED IN THE LIST OF SHAME, A DOCUMENT THAT RECORDS ALLEGED RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

Prime Minister Mohammad Shatat, has resigned. In his resignation letter, he acknowledged that Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are starving. Tensions escalated further when an American airman involved in military operations set himself on fire outside the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC, repeatedly shouting, "No more involvement in genocide." The United Nations has passed a ceasefire resolution, endorsed by 158 nations, including India.

Despite multiple resolutions calling for a ceasefire in the UN General Assembly, all previous efforts had failed. Israel was even included in the List of Shame, a document that records alleged rights violations against children in armed conflict. In this report, Israel is accused of committing severe violations of children's rights. This inclusion has angered Israel and damaged its international reputation. Several key European Union countries, which previously sympathised with Israel, have now condemned its actions. Despite continued American support, Israel's economy has begun to collapse. In recent months, GDP growth has been only 0.7 per cent. The Israeli army has requested \$16 billion, equivalent to 3 per cent of the country's GDP. Even after the ceasefire, the military requires \$8 billion annually to address new security challenges.

The fiscal deficit has now reached 8 per cent of GDP. Israel is also deeply concerned that fighting has spread to its major business hubs, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. In January, Israel's debt stood at 62 per cent of GDP, which is still lower than the average for most wealthy nations in the OECD. However, prominent credit rating agencies such as Fitch and Moody's have already downgraded Israel's credit rating once this

year, with the possibility of further downgrades shortly.

Following the Hamas attack last year, Israel revoked work permits for 80,000 Palestinian workers. No replacements have been hired, leading to a 40 per cent decline in the construction industry. The same trend is observed in the high-tech sector and other industries. Inflation reached an annual rate of 3.6 per cent last month. If the war had continued any longer, the value of the Israeli shekel might have dropped further, forcing banks to rely on their reserves. Although a ceasefire is in place, this does not mark the end of the war. A recent statement by US President Donald Trump has crushed any hopes of peace efforts. Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is currently visiting the US, where he has been given priority among the foreign guests invited by the President. However, Netanyahu faces growing protests in Israel, driven by both economic instability and widespread public dissent. The situation worsened when Israel's Defense Minister, Benny Gantz, resigned from his position along with other members of his party, putting additional pressure on the government. Both leaders have sparked global controversy following a press conference at the White House, where they announced plans for the US to occupy the Gaza Strip and transform it into a resort city.

The proposed project would turn Gaza into a hub for employment and tourism in West Asia. The entire area would be levelled to develop infrastructure, and the 2.3 million people currently living in Gaza would be relocated to countries such as Egypt and Jordan. However, both Egypt and Jordan have firmly rejected this proposal. Experts argue that international laws and treaties will pose a significant obstacle to any US attempt to occupy Gaza. Meanwhile, major Arab nations are mobilising against Trump's plan, with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, and Turkey openly opposing it. Hamas has strongly condemned the proposal, labelling it ethnic genocide. Several US lawmakers, both Democrats and Republicans, have also voiced their opposition. In the past, Trump had similarly expressed intentions to occupy Greenland Island, take control of the Panama Canal, and annex Canada as the 51st state of America. The Israeli parliament has enacted several controversial laws that have further inflamed tensions with Palestine and Arab nations. For example, the Jewish State Bill officially declares Israel as a Jewish state, effectively relegating non-Jewish communities to second-class citizenship. Additionally, the decision to shift the capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem is widely seen as an act of provocation against Palestinians. Israel also occupies the Syrian territory of the Golan Heights, which has been under Israeli control since the 1967 war.

A massive city, known as Trump City, is currently being developed in the region. The month of Ramadan is approaching, which is likely to bring additional hardships. Tensions surrounding the Al-Aqsa Mosque also intensify during this time, as restrictions are often imposed on Muslim worshippers. At present, the likelihood of renewed conflict appears higher than the prospect of lasting peace. The international community is also deeply concerned about the Trump administration's decision to withdraw US representatives from the United Nations.

(The writer is a former Member of Parliament; views are personal)

India stands on the brink of an AI-driven revolution

By prioritising comprehensive AI education, ethical governance and transparent regulations, India can lead the global AI revolution

India is emerging as a dominant force in Artificial Intelligence (AI), shaping its economy, security, and global influence. At the ongoing AI Summit in Paris, India's leadership in AI highlights its commitment to technological advancement and innovation. The Prime Minister's prominent role at the summit underscores the country's strategic focus on AI, positioning it as a counterforce to China's deep-fake threats. Whether in AI, digital transformation, or healthcare, India is rapidly evolving into a global technology powerhouse, striving for AI self-reliance and economic growth.

AI is no longer a futuristic concept—it is an immediate reality reshaping India's digital landscape. Projections sug-



VINAY PATHAK

firms like NVIDIA are helping develop AI solutions tailored to India's unique challenges. AI-driven tools in agriculture, such as CropIn and Intelio Labs, assist farmers in predicting weather patterns, optimising irrigation, and detecting crop diseases, thereby boosting productivity and sustainability.

India's corporate sector is also investing heavily in AI.

Companies like Infosys and TCS are deploying AI-driven solutions to streamline business processes, automate customer service, and optimise supply chains. Infosys' AI platform enhances efficiency and reduces operational costs, while Zoho's AI-powered CRM tools empower small and medium enterprises to compete globally. Generative AI tools like ChatGPT are increasingly being utilised by job seekers, with 87 per cent leveraging them to refine resumes and prepare for interviews.

Despite its rapid progress, India faces significant challenges in AI adoption. A critical skills shortage in AI-related professions remains a pressing issue. To address this, the National Programme on AI,



launched by NITI Aayog, aims to train over a million workers in AI skills. Additionally, states like Karnataka and Telangana are establishing AI hubs to nurture innovation and talent development. However, while India produces over 1.5 million engineers annually, only a small percentage have the specialised expertise required for AI development. AI's rise also brings security concerns. Cyber threats are

growing, with increasing vulnerability to sophisticated cyberattacks. In 2023, a major Indian bank suffered a ransomware attack, disrupting services for millions of customers. AI-powered cyber tools, while beneficial, can be exploited by malicious actors. The dangers of misinformation and AI-generated deepfakes are also becoming more apparent. The viral deepfake video of actor Rashmika Mandanna in 2023 highlighted the risks of AI-driven disinformation. Similarly, AI-powered voice cloning scams are on the rise, posing significant fraud risks.

AI is also playing a crucial role in preserving India's cultural and linguistic heritage. Institutions like IIT Madras are developing AI models to revive

endangered languages such as Toda and Gondi.

The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute is using AI to digitise ancient manuscripts, ensuring the preservation of India's historical knowledge. AI is further enhancing the entertainment sector through immersive experiences, such as virtual reality tours of curated sites and AI-curated regional literature and music recommendations. In healthcare, AI-driven tools like Niramai are revolutionising early cancer detection, while telemedicine platforms like Apollo Telehealth are providing medical access to rural communities. The education sector is benefiting from AI-powered platforms. In disaster management, AI is helping predict natural disasters and

coordinate relief efforts. The Indian Meteorological Department employs AI to analyze weather patterns and issue early warnings for cyclones and floods, thereby minimising casualties.

AI is not merely a technological tool; it is a transformative force shaping India's future. However, the country must strike a balance between innovation and regulation to ensure ethical AI deployment. As AI evolves, India must establish a robust framework to address ethical concerns, security risks, and workforce reskilling. Collaborative efforts between the government, industry, and academia will be key in ensuring AI benefits for the society.

(The writer is an assistant professor at IIT, Somepat; views are personal)



A thought for today

News is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress; all the rest is advertising

LORD NORTHCULFEE

Talk Big, Move On

There's a method in Trump's mad headline-making

In 25 days, Trump has made America great again. Gone are illegal immigrants, handcuffed and deported on military planes. High tariff walls guard US interests - China, Canada, Mexico won't dare dump a shirt button now. The fantasy tap has been turned off, climate change cancelled, Gaza solved, and peace in Ukraine is a finger snap away. Iran and North Korea will fall in line. Everything's fixed. Except, none of this has happened - *The Economist* just reported that Elon Musk's relentless federal government pruning has "scarcely made a dent in spending". Trump has spoken unexpected, outrageous things, compulsively made headlines with his flits, and created a perception. But headline management is not governance. For proof, read India's old five-year plans, or look at all the foundation plaques littering the country. A highway here, a township there, the promise of a power plant - they never got past the headline stage.

Headlines don't make a nation great, but they magnify the individual, the ruler, and even ideas. Brexit was not a great idea, but headlines made it the answer to UK's problems. Almost nine years after the fateful referendum, it's clear that UK's trade in goods has suffered. Travelling has become cumbersome.

Headlines perk up business too. AI is the latest craze, everything from ACs to water purifiers and cars must have it. What happened to IoT, the internet of things? But that was a headline peg 7-8 years ago. Five years ago we were all going to live and shop in the metaverse - a term coined in 1992 but made popular by headlines after 2017. Firms sprang up to sell designer stuff for our online avatars. We were also, according to headlines - going to buy a lot of non-fungible tokens or NFTs. And the office was dead, headlines said. But actually, WeWork collapsed. In Orwell's 1984, when the weekly chocolate ration is reduced to 20g, there are demonstrations to thank Big Brother for raising it. That's the power of headlines. Trump knows it.

Child's Play

Decoding Musk taking his kids to big meetings

Musk met many important people in Washington. So who made for the cutest photo-op? No prizes for guessing: it's the one with Musk's kids. It was an unusual sight for US Indians and has created a lot of buzz here. Because when our men of state (they are, usually and sadly, mostly men) discuss matters of weight and wealth, it is not with their toddlers in tow. Same for most countries.

But America's a bit different. First Children, for example, are always a big deal. JFK era images of Caroline and John Jr playing in the Oval Office were all the rage, long before Instagram and TikTok. Caroline once, famously, walked into cabinet meeting, asking JFK to her shoes. With Trump himself not having any pinafare or knickerbocker aged children, Musk's are filling in. The other day at the Oval Office he was sporting Lil X, who even ran his nose against the Resolute Desk. X was there at the meet with Modi too, but so were the twins Azure and Strider.

Interestingly, it's much more common in India for small children to share their parents' bedroom. In US, by contrast, children tend to sleep separately from an early age. And yet, children sharing adult spaces is also more common over there. In a globalising world, where cultural practices are converging at pace, this trend is catching on. Some years ago, New Zealand's then prime minister, Jacinda Ardern took her three-month-old daughter to UN and played with her before delivering a big speech. That must have put ideas into the heads of a lot of working women everywhere. And Musk cavorting with his kids at high meetings can be inspirational too, for dads this time around.

Right Under Our Noses, A Very Refined Sense

Smelling is easy, also wonderfully complex & important

Smelling is the easiest and most natural thing in the world. It creates experiences, emotions, memories and behaviours. And yet, in our age of sight and sound, scent is sidelined. *The Forgotten Sense: The New Science of Smell and the Extraordinary Power of the Nose* by Jonas Olsson shows just how fundamental this capability is.

For starters, humans are extraordinarily good at it, contrary to popular belief. We don't realise this because 19th century Western scientists created an opposition between higher intellectual abilities (and associated with white men) and the 'lower' sense of smell.

But in fact, humans are more sensitive to odour molecules than rats (31 to 10), bats or spider monkeys (58 to 23). The only animal that beats us hollow is the dog - but we can give even dogs a run for their money with training. Humans' sense of smell is enhanced by the enormous capacity of the rest of their brain.

Smell is an emotional time-machine. We know, calling up old memories. It can also summon up disgust like no other sense, whether to body odours or other associations with a negative charge. In fact, those who are more easily disgusted seem to have conservative or authoritarian political attitudes. It's not surprising that racism often manifests itself in descriptions of body odour.

And mustard taste similar if you hold your breath. Smell and taste are so very manipulable senses. Some cafes draw in customers by spreading the scent of cinnamon.

Research now shows that the sense of smell is an interface where the faculties of the brain meet and collaborate. Olfactory impairment has a link with dementia and other brain diseases.

For the millions who have lost their sense of smell after Covid, there is hope - the sense of smell can be trained, via steady exposure to things like rose, clove, eucalyptus and lemon. The book shows the current limits of the science on smell too; claims about pheromones and aromatherapy should be taken with caution.

Olfactory processes are shaped by emotions, life experiences and cultural conventions. Our expectations are crucial. This is why an odd combination of innocuous things like vanilla ice cream or herring or durian in patriarchy is in India households and underlines the need to address it by profoundly understanding Indian concepts of karma and dharma.

Patriarchy when examined through the lens of karma - principle of action and its inevitable consequences - and dharma, moral and cosmic order, unfolds a dynamic relationship between social structures and individual responsibilities. Karma, as a metaphysical principle, emphasises inevitability of consequences that arise from actions. Every action, whether it perpetuates dominance, subjugation, or liberation, generates outcomes that shape individual destinies

What to make of the Indian PM-US Prez bonhomie? Trump won't give Modi too hard a time but not a free pass either. But bilateral flashpoints can't undo the strategic logic of Indo-US relations. Trump knows this, and Modi & his team know Trump well

He Likes India But Likes Tariffs More

Pramit Pal Chaudhuri



Even before Trump took his second oath of office, a few things were clear. A New Delhi in its initial interactions. One, this was Trump unalloyed, no longer moderated by experience and a Beltway staff as he was in his first term. Two, India should not expect heavy because of strategic relations. Trump largely sees allies and partners as freeloaders, he would have to be won over on additional grounds. Three, India's two biggest negatives for the US president were its protectionism and its illegal migrants.

Like most world leaders, Modi agreed to Trump's invitation for an early summit with some wariness. Trump turns normal diplomacy on its head. He issues threats which he



where he extracts a few concessions, and then allows minions to work out further details later. A sunny press conference is often preceded by bullying behind closed doors. Every govt is trying to determine what the summit concessions needed to ensure Trump lets the rest of the agenda be handed to negotiators.

India got through the first summit largely unscathed. Trump accepted Modi's handful of tariff cuts as an "act of good faith" and agreed to begin bilateral trade negotiations. Such an agreement was bandied about with Trump's team in 2020 only to be buried by Covid. Such an agreement will be difficult but will be largely welcomed by New Delhi as it will also cover supply chain integration, the core of modern trade talks. US is India's largest source of foreign investment, capital, technology and its biggest migrant destination. Securing this with a treaty would massively reduce uncertainty regarding India's economic future.

Another concern was whether Trump would honour previous agreements on jointly making everything from pharmaceuticals to semiconductors. As this would mean supporting factory work in India, it would put America First against 'Make in India'. This seems to have been avoided with the commitment to "expand Indian manufacturing capacity" in both countries and work together to create "trusted and resilient supply chains" (meaning no Chinese inputs). The main prerequisite was that all of these would lose the labels given by the Biden administration.

It was known Trump would push hard for defence purchases. Again, the issue was whether he would swallow

India's rigorous offset and domestic production requirements. By bundling it all into a 10-year US-India Major Defence Partnership for the 21st century the issue can now be worked out over time. Modi got sensibly agreed "deals of billions and billions" required accessing technology like fifth-generation F-35 fighters - and Trump agreed.

It must be understood the new administration will be relentless in pursuing its economic agenda. Knowing how he operates, it's almost certain that behind closed doors Trump was aggressive. Washington, having experienced the Indian commerce ministry's tactics in the first Trump term, will not be above imposing tariffs if it feels New Delhi is giving it the run around in trade negotiations. Notice the tight annual deadline for the first round of deliverables.

Additionally, there is the agenda of the Silicon Valley constellation who surround White House and want a level-playing ground for US and domestic firms in India and less restrictive regulations. This will run afoul of the Modi govt's support for national champions and small and medium businesses. Expect this to be a continuing friction point. On the other hand, Silicon Valley support helped ensure Trump lets the rest of the agenda be handed to negotiators.

Trump is a curious throwback to the isolationism that existed pre-World War I. Trump has been remarkably consistent in arguing that US's global commitments, economic and military are impoverishing it. Being a US military ally is a negative in his worldview; a sign US has spent blood and treasure in your defence. Running a trade surplus with US is the flip side, evidence to underpin a vampire draining US economy.

It's strategically shortsighted and his views on tariffs make no sense to anyone but himself. But all this resonates with many Americans troubled by the ills on their home front. In Trump's global hierarchy what matters are countries which he judges to be powerful, ruled by strongmen and are "young" in some way or another. So India along with probably Russia and Saudi Arabia. These are countries Trump talks of doing "big deals" with, whose leaders he tends to praise and often where Trump Enterprises have prospered. They are ones Trump is prepared to spend time negotiating with rather than simply browbeat. Again, this means these govt may get a discount voucher but never a free pass on policy.

As Trump warned during the press conference, "We are a reciprocal nation."

The writer is the South Asia practice head, Eurasia Group



Calvin & Hobbes

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I SEE... AND WHAT WILL YOU DO IF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE DOESN'T ENTERTAIN YOU EVERY MINUTE?



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8-2



THE SPEAKING TREE

The philosophical foundations of dharma challenge alignment of patriarchal practices with its core metaphysical principles. The concept of Ardhanareshwar, depicting Shiva and Parvati as an inseparable whole,

Old Buddies Who're Necessary Partners

Michael Kugelmann



Modi's visit to Washington can be categorised as a success. He renewed his nearly decade-long friendship with Trump. The two sides underscored their commitment to furthering a fast-growing strategic partnership. All this, despite the Trump administration being in office less than a month and with many top India-focused posts still vacant.

The main take-away was that the state of the bilateral partnership is strong. But one might ask, how can that be so? Indeed, there's something so much that doesn't bode well for the relationship in Trump 2.0. That the partnership is nonetheless alive and well can be attributed to factors we'll call the 3Ps - precedent, personalities, and policy.

Consider the challenges. India has long been in Trump's tariff crosshairs, an especially unsettling reality given India's economy is slowing.

New Delhi is burdened with the delicate challenge of taking back undocumented immigrants - over 700,000 per some estimates. India faces pressure to buy more American oil, at a moment when Russia's is cheap and plentiful. The H-1B visa programme is facing scrutiny. India's high-priority plans to strengthen trade and connectivity links with Central Asia - which requires infra cooperation with Iran - could be scuttled by Trump's maximum pressure policy towards Tehran - no mercy to those doing business with Iran. Most important, Trump has signalled a desire to partner with China on global security, which risks loosening the glue - shared concern about Beijing - that binds US-India strategic partnership.

But these are manageable challenges. Then there's personalities. The Trump-Modi chemistry is real, evident



MODI-TRUMP MEETING



Even a seemingly fundamental difference - Buy American vs Make in India - is reconcilable. New Delhi has signalled its readiness to buy more American products. And US private investors will continue to deploy capital in India.

Ultimately, US and India have no choice but to make things work. India, an emerging power and China's competitor, is Washington's best strategic bet in the 'Indo' part of Indo-Pacific. US is a top destination for Indian exports and an increasingly important source of investment. The two may not be natural partners, but they're necessary partners. That'll enable them to navigate the inevitable challenges of the next four years.

The writer is director of South Asia Institute, Wilson Centre US

in the praise they lavished on each other in Washington. Their shared politics and governing styles, coupled with similar strategic outlooks, make their personal relationship stronger than Modi's ties with Trump's two predecessors. Further, Trump administration features some of Washington's most fervent champions of US-India partnership.

Modi and his team know Trump well. The current Modi cabinet is mostly the same as the previous one that overlapped with Trump's first administration. Few of America's allies have New Delhi's level of familiarity with what makes Trump tick. This helps hedge against Trump's unpredictability. It explains why New Delhi smartly sent preemptive signals to Trump that it's willing to make concessions on issues he has sought to use as pressure points - tariff negotiations, US energy purchases. It shielded India from getting slammed with new tariffs, beyond those associated with Trump's reciprocal tariff policy.

Policy convergences are the strongest insulation against shocks to the partnership. The Indo-Pacific policy - launched during Trump's first term, retained by Biden, and embraced by India - will remain core US strategy in Asia. Trump may want to ease tensions with Beijing to lessen the risk of a US-China conflict. Modi too has recently sought to reduce strain with Beijing. Not to mention that India may benefit from a less heated US-China rivalry, as it reduces the risk of Beijing retaliating against India for the latter's close partnership with Washington.

Nevertheless, Trump remains fixated on economic competition with Beijing - demonstrated in the tariffs he slapped on China. This ensures continued opportunities for US-India strategic cooperation, especially on tech.

Trump's approach to world order is unlikely to clash with New Delhi's India's desire for more multipolarity, which could dilute US global power, is unlikely to appeal to a leader who wants US to play less, not more, of a role in the world, and who wants US partners to do more burden sharing. On that latter front, India has negotiated - or is negotiating - deals to send missiles to Southeast Asian states to help them counter China in South China Sea - all outcomes that'll be welcomed in Trump's Washington.

Trump's likely appeal to India's neighborhood - counter China's economic influence, and pull back from Pakistan and Iran - will play well in New Delhi. Additionally, the freeze on US foreign aid should have much less of an impact on India than on its neighbours. It may in fact create more space for investment from India's Indo-Pacific policy tool that sponsors infrastructure projects in the region. India is already IDFC's largest market.

Even a seemingly fundamental difference - Buy American vs Make in India - is reconcilable. New Delhi has signalled its readiness to buy more American products. And US private investors will continue to deploy capital in India.

Ultimately, US and India have no choice but to make things work. India, an emerging power and China's competitor, is Washington's best strategic bet in the 'Indo' part of Indo-Pacific. US is a top destination for Indian exports and an increasingly important source of investment. The two may not be natural partners, but they're necessary partners. That'll enable them to navigate the inevitable challenges of the next four years.

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Sacred space

Feminine is a powerful dimension of life. Without the feminine energy, Shakti, there would be nothing in existence.

Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev



#CancelPatriarchy With Introspection And Reform

Vijay Hashia

Veteran actor K Chiranjeevi recently stated that he wants his son, Ram Charan, to have a boy to "continue the legacy". His statement highlights how deeply entrenched patriarchy is in Indian households and underlines the need to address it by profoundly understanding Indian concepts of karma and dharma.

Patriarchy when examined through the lens of karma - principle of action and its inevitable consequences - and dharma, moral and cosmic order, unfolds a dynamic relationship between social structures and individual responsibilities. Karma, as a metaphysical principle, emphasises inevitability of consequences that arise from actions. Every action, whether it perpetuates dominance, subjugation, or liberation, generates outcomes that shape individual destinies

and collective social realities. Patriarchal practices, such as institutionalised gender-based hierarchies, have created entrenched systems of inequality. These actions, viewed through the lens of karma, are contributors to societal disharmony. Injustices embedded in such practices reverberate across generations, impeding social progress and spiritual evolution.

Actions undertaken with awareness, compassion, and a commitment to equity can counteract negative consequences of past deeds. This principle highlights ethical responsibility of individuals and communities to address structural imbalances perpetuated by patriarchy. Through conscious, dharmic actions, societies can rewrite karmic patterns that have historically favoured one gender over another, fostering

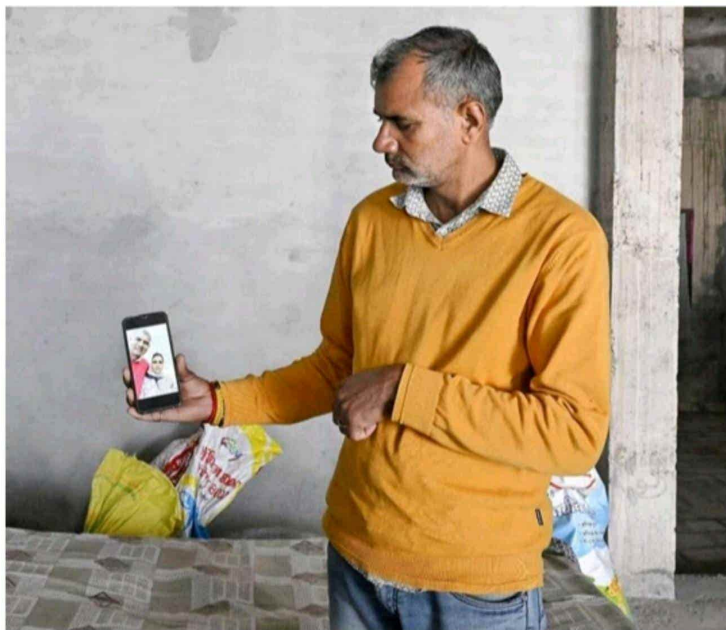
inclusivity and mutual respect. Dharma, as the guiding principle of moral and cosmic order, emphasises harmony, justice, and the uplift of all beings. Rooted in the Vedic concept, the foundational cosmic order, dharma demands that human actions align with universal principles of fairness and balance. Patriarchal systems, by disrupting this harmony, represent adharm, leading to social discord and spiritual disconnection. When women are excluded from positions of authority or denied equal opportunities, this imbalance violates dharma.

The philosophical foundations of dharma challenge alignment of patriarchal practices with its core metaphysical principles. The concept of Ardhanareshwar, depicting Shiva and Parvati as an inseparable whole,

exemplifies the ideal of gender equality. Patriarchal systems that marginalise one gender or prioritise hierarchical dominance contradict these spiritual ideals.

Contemporary practices are beginning to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. Female spiritual leaders advocate for inclusivity in Hindu rituals. The increasing number of women pujaris, priests, across India further exemplifies the shift towards challenging patriarchal monopolies in spiritual leadership. Festivals such as Karwa Chauth, traditionally requiring women to fast for their husbands' well-being, are now practised by many couples as mutual acts of devotion. These shifts reflect the broader principle of samatva, equity. Philosophically, addressing patriarchy involves not only critiquing its historical and cultural roots but also recognising its karmic implications.

GROUND ZERO



Omi Devi and Paramjeet Singh were recently deported to India. Devi's brother Rajesh Kumar, who lives in Kheri Sakra village in Kaithal district, says he still nurtures the dream of going to the U.S. (Right): Jaspal Singh entered California through the Tijuana border crossing on January 22. He is seen here at his home in Fatehgarh Churlan town in Gurdaspur district, Punjab. SHEV KUMAR/PUSHPAK



Shackled in the land of the free

On February 5, the U.S. deported 104 illegal immigrants to India. The immigrants had left India after borrowing hefty amounts to pay false agents, traversed inhospitable terrain, and finally found themselves at the U.S.-Mexico border where they were discovered and sent back in shackles. **Abhinav Lakshman** reports on their harrowing journeys and what compelled them to risk their lives

Nearly a week before their children's school broke for winter vacations, Omi Devi and Paramjeet Singh began packing. There was a lot for them to sort out before they made their big move to the United States. Their farm had to be taken care of — Omi's brother Rajesh Kumar had promised that he would see to it. Their house in Kurukshetra, Haryana, had to be emptied, since no one was going to be staying there for a while.

"The farm was enough for our two families. The children were in a private school. But Omi and Paramjeet felt that a little more money would help them," says Rajesh. "Their oldest daughter, 20, is already in California on a student visa. Obviously, it would be an added bonus for them if one more child found a future there."

On December 21, 2024, the family of four flew out of the Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi with two large suitcases and four backpacks. Their first stop was Paris and their final destination was California on the western coast of the U.S. For the move, Omi and Paramjeet had borrowed ₹1.25 crore from family members.

However, it was only on January 23, 2025, that Omi and Paramjeet and their children stepped into California, not past immigration, but through a hole cut into the border wall between Mexico and the U.S. near Tijuana. Within hours, they were in shackles and within days, they were on a military plane back to India.

The four of them were among the 104 Indians, including 19 women and 13 minors, who were deported by the U.S. after they were caught entering the country illegally. Their journey back to Amritsar, Punjab, took 40 hours. Multiple deportees who spoke to *The Hindu* since they landed on February 5 say their wrists and ankles were shackled throughout the journey. The children, too, were restrained.

In the early hours of February 6, more than 12 hours after they landed in Amritsar, the family returned to Kurukshetra, escorted by the police. They did not move into their house. Instead, Rajesh rented a place for them for the time being in Kurukshetra. Omi and the children were running a fever.

Before they had left, Omi's children had told their closest friends in middle school that the family was moving. Their friends had come to the airport to say goodbye. "I never thought that the children would be this heartbroken," says Rajesh. "They are nervous about going back to school."

But Rajesh is tenacious. "A dream has been shattered but this is not the end for us," he says.

A treacherous journey

Omi and Paramjeet's family are among the hundreds of thousands of Indians who undertake treacherous journeys, popularly called "donkey routes" in Haryana and Punjab, to make it to the U.S. To reach their destination, they often cross rivers in rickety boats, climb mountains, and trudge across deserts and forests. Many of them die on the way. Most of them have agents who connect the migrants with "donkers", or people smugglers. "Donkers" in the transit country help them enter their final destination illegally.

I know cops' children who have taken the illegal route. They also want to find out who these agents are.

RAJESH
Brother of Omi, who was deported to India

According to estimates from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the share of the "unauthorised Indian migrant population" has been increasing steadily from 1990 onwards. It peaked at 5.6 lakh in 2016 before sharply declining to 2.2 lakh in the 2022 estimates. However, in 2023, data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Nationwide Encounters shows that the number of Indians apprehended by border patrol forces had increased to 43,000 from around 18,000 the previous year. In 2024, this number came down slightly to 40,000.

While illegal immigration has been a point of political concern and a matter of public debate in the U.S. for many decades, it is more pronounced now. During the U.S. presidential election campaign last year, Donald Trump's tough-on-immigration policies resonated with voters. He was sworn in on January 20, 2025. It was around this time that most of the Indians in the first batch of deportees say they had crossed the south-western border of the U.S. on foot.

The moment Omi and her family landed in Paris, they found that one of their suitcases was missing. There was no time to recover it before moving on to Italy, their next leg. From Italy, their agent had promised to put them on a small aircraft with 15-20 others to the U.S. with a stopover in Costa Rica. "But the flight did not get clearance to land in Costa Rica and landed in El Salvador instead," Rajesh says, adding that they lost their second suitcase there. Omi and her family were told that from El Salvador, they were on their own to the Tijuana border.

Robin Handa, 18, is another of the deportees. Robin says his father, an electrician, took a loan of ₹30 lakh to send him to the U.S. after Robin completed a course in Computer Science from the Industrial Training Institute in Ambala, Haryana. "My father put together his savings of over ₹15 lakh after selling land and took a loan of ₹30 lakh to pay an agent who had promised to send me to the U.S. via the U.K.," he says.

Robin says he made the "expensive" journey to the U.S. only after he realised that there were neither any jobs for him in his home town, nor any prospects of making a decent living.

Robin's agent instructed him to board a flight



Chained Indian illegal immigrants on their way to India. Photo: X/@USBPChf



Daily labour charges are ₹500 a day here. You know how much I made there [the U.K.]? At least £70 (around ₹7,600).

JASPAL SINGH
Immigrant who was deported

to Guyana from Mumbai on July 24, 2024. "Then, unlike what he had promised, I was taken to Brazil. First, I travelled some distance by foot along with 30 others, including Indians, Nepalis, and Bangladeshis. Then we crossed seas on small boats and waded through rivers. Then we traversed the Amazon jungles to reach Peru, then Ecuador, and finally Colombia. From there, I went to the U.S.-Mexico border. I was arrested from there on January 22," he says.

While Robin had been promised by his agent that he would reach his destination in a month through the "donkey route", it took him nearly six months. He spent many of these months without proper food. "Anyone who fell sick would be left behind to fend for themselves," he recalls.

Jaspal Singh, 36, from Punjab's border district of Gurdaspur, entered California through the Tijuana border crossing on January 22, a day before Omi and her family crossed over with their children. But his journey began more than two years ago. "I had arranged for the ₹40 lakh that my agent had asked for, and left Delhi in February 2022. I flew to London on a tourist visa. The agent said I would have to wait there until he could get the paperwork done to get me into the U.S. I kept waiting. I found a dormitory and spent two years doing construction work," he says.

Jaspal says he was even able to send money home: "You know how much daily labour charges are here? ₹500 a day. Do you know how much I made there? At least £70 (around ₹7,600)."

Meanwhile, Jaspal would call his agent every day to check on the progress of his U.S. paperwork. "I have my heavy vehicle drivers' licence. I have studied only till Class 10. I just wanted to go to the U.S. and drive trucks. What's wrong in wanting to seek a better life," he asks.

After two years in London, Jaspal went to Barcelona, where he believed his agent was staying. "I kept speaking to him on the phone, but he would not meet me. A few days later, he finally put me on a flight to Brazil, saying the people there would sort out my paperwork."

After running from pillar to post in Brazil, Jaspal was told that he would have to make his way to the Mexico-U.S. border by road from Brazil. "There were about a dozen people with me. We travelled by bus, taxi, and walked for days on end. We walked a lot in Panama," he recalls.

Within hours of reaching California, Jaspal was arrested by uniformed officers, shoved into a bus, and sent to a camp in San Diego. "They took all our belongings except for the clothes on our backs. During the day, we ate biscuits, fruit, and chips. At night we would get bread," he says.

After 10 days in the camp, Omi's family, Jaspal, and other Indian deportees were shackled and put on a bus to the air strip. There, they boarded a military aircraft. "Throughout the journey, there were perhaps two instances when our handcuffs were removed," recalls Omi.

Jaspal says everyone near him on the flight was crying. No one knew where exactly they were going. "About 6-7 hours into the flight, I asked the security personnel where we were headed. He said, 'India'. I asked where in India. He said, 'I don't know,'" he says.

Robin is upset. "I did all this only to be chained like an animal and brought back," he says.

Of apps and phones

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a global policy forum that promotes policies to improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world, the number of asylum requests in the U.S. from Indian nationals rose from about 6,000 in 2020 to 51,000 in 2023. According to data cited in a 2025 Johns Hopkins University School of Ad-

vanced International Studies paper, 66% of asylum cases involving Indian nationals between 2001 and 2022 had been filed by Punjabi speakers. Of the 104 Indians deported by the U.S. last week, the highest number (33) was from Gujarat, 29 were from Punjab, and 33 from Haryana.

Within hours of being sworn in, Trump banned the Customs and Border Protection One mobile app that had been used to allow migrants to schedule appointments at eight southwest border ports of entry, requesting asylum.

For Indians taking the "donkey route", downloading an app was never their first priority. They say their priority was to reset their phones and, if possible, dispose of the phone. "The moment Omi's family crossed into the U.S. on January 23, I was cut off from them," says Rajesh.

Jaspal says the agents had made it clear to them that their phones should not help people figure out their identities.

'Dreams are dreams'

The moment the deportees landed in Amritsar, they were fed "properly," remembers Jaspal. The deportees were told at immigration to jot down whatever details they remembered of their respective agents. "It is impossible to remember their phone numbers. Also, it is not as if we have very good relationships with the agents," he says.

The police have launched extensive operations to try and identify these agents and prosecute them. The Haryana and Punjab police have registered cases against travel agents who allegedly "duped" the deportees who landed in Amritsar.

"When we were being escorted back, I remember the Punjab police telling us that they would help us to the extent possible," says Jaspal.

Rajesh says he is not surprised that the police have been willing to help identify these agents and recover money. "I know cops' children who have taken the illegal route. They also want to find out who these agents are," he says.

But as the police in Haryana and Punjab canvass villages to go after the agents, there is also nervousness. In Haryana's Bhaini Kalan village, at the home of Aditya Kumar, one of the deportees, young men speak in hushed tones as a man in a dark suit sits on a chair, taking notes. Aditya's brother says his son has not returned home yet. "The police are here now. Please leave. We do not want any trouble," he says.

Jaspal has had enough for the time being. "I have lost everything. I can't bring myself to think about retrying the trip," he says.

However, Rajesh refuses to give up. "We were raised in the village. We don't stop just because we failed once. The dream is alive," he says.

Rajesh says he speaks not just for his family, but for most of his village. "It is not like our granaries are running empty," he explains. "Even if we don't do any work here in the village, we will survive; we have enough food. But is this enough? There are no jobs for us here and dreams are dreams."

Rajesh says they see neighbours sending children abroad and showing off their money in the form of new cars. Pointing to a group of giggling children on their way home from school, he throws a challenge: "Do you want to check how many of them want to go to the U.S.?"

He has already sent his older son, 20, to Brampton in Canada, where he is studying management. His younger son, 16, is packed and ready to leave the minute his father will allow it. "Forget my son, I have been ready to go to the U.S. no matter what for years now," Rajesh says. At 45, he has exhausted all his attempts at securing jobs in the Army and paramilitary forces. In addition to farming, he drives trucks for a living.

Rajesh's priority now is to help get Omi and Paramjeet back on their feet and ensure that their children are again enrolled in school. One of the children needs to prepare to write the 10th Board exam this year. "But if we can arrange the money, I would go tomorrow to the U.S.," he says.

TRUSTworthy Enough To Give and Tech

India for access, US for supply chain strength

While tariff talk is still in the air, Narendra Modi and Donald Trump deepening engagement between their two countries by signing the TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology) initiative is the real bilateral headline news. This is welcome news and deft diplomacy within weeks of Trump assuming office. The areas covered — AI, semiconductors, defence, space and biotech — will propel India as a complementary force to US tech dominance. India needs access to tech and must build manufacturing capability in strategic industries. The US, on its part, needs supply chain resilience. Take AI. The tech is being advanced in Silicon Valley with contributions from Indian software engineers, who will also aid its dispersal. India must scale up hardware capacity to contribute more at both ends of the tech's development and deployment.

US defence production has incorporated Indian vendors, and the process can be sped up with access to more US tech. This benefits India's indigenous defence production effort. As a big buyer of US weapons platforms, growth of local vendors helps both the US and Indian lower costs. Commercial exploitation of space, too, will benefit from a bigger role for Indian firms as tech costs are being driven down. From the US perspective, India is an alternative to China in biotech. Emergence of an Indian ecosystem in each of these areas should lower innovation costs — vital for the US to maintain its tech lead over China.

Washington's signal to US companies about its comfort with New Delhi should accelerate tech-driven outsourcing. India has a long way to go before it catches up with the world's biggest defence spenders, and the US will want to be there for most of that journey. Strategically splitting production of armaments is economical. Greater access to core and allied tech is needed to nurture it. It speaks of Trump's priorities that the India-US tech-sharing agreement is being unveiled when the US threatens the rest of the world with reciprocal tariffs.

'Civic Disobedience', Third World Version

In India, the line 'Rules are meant to be broken' isn't just a counter-cultural philosophy. It's the default position. Nowhere is this more evident than on our roads. Take the sheer recklessness — passed off as ingenuity among jugged devotees — of motorists and two-wheel drivers who treat road dividers as suggestions, driving against the traffic as shortcuts. Car owners in the backseat also don't bat an eyelid if their chauffeurs brute-force their SUVs' access rules and regulations that are there to actually make life on the road less chaotic.

Pedestrians aren't only victims, but perpetrators too. Overbridges and subways? Too much effort. Why bother when you can scale a divider, instead. After all, shuffling off a few seconds is worth the risk of accident, or worse. From the roads, this lack of civic sense — common sense, really — also seeps into other public spaces. Whether outside a ticket counter, a temple or getting off an aircraft, forming an orderly queue is an alien idea. Taking selfies in crowded, even hazardous, spots? No thought will be put into it regardless of the inconvenience caused to everyone else. Playing music loudly from phones in a metro is seen as a haq, not a nuisance.

And these are just forms of 'civic disobedience' in an 'external' environs' form. Bad behaviour is abetted — from giving bribes to 'lubricate' a transaction to encouraging 'casual misogyny' — with the knowledge that it's wrong, but something only 'other people' mustn't do. As a result, a 'third world' mindset is perpetuated. While the government has much to blame for letting matters slide in implementing law, it won't pay to lay all blame at its door. Frankly, it's we, the people, who get the conditions we comply with. Or decide to consider pointless.



JUST IN JEST The Kids Are Alright, In a Big Boys' Room

Not everyone — in mai-baap India, that is — seems to have quite 'understood' what Musk Jr's were doing in the room where Elon met Modi. Some fusty souls even raised their pencilled eyebrows, saying the presence of the Musk-teen was 'odd' enough, but their nannies — 'Not even their mum's' — being there was 'a bit much, nah?' Uncleji, Auntieji, the thing is, in America, having kids at the workplace, no matter how 'serious' the work may be, is no ha-ha. No domestic staff will be horrified, 'Pappu ko le jao idhar se'. In fact, having a kid in the presence of serious business brings the temperature down, infuses a lightness much needed when conducting the 'grown up' stuff. The optics of a row of a suited, GQ-stamped Indian delegation including the foreign minister, Indian ambassador and NSA facing three kids and two au pairs may seem surreal asymmetrical. But in the apple IT and baseball hall throwabouts world of MuskTrump's Americana, this is SOP. In fact, MAGA symbolism would imbue the kids-in-the-grown-up's meeting setting as a gentle reiteration of 'American family values', where the young child is part of the portrait not just of home, but life and lifestyle itself. That the Musk Jr held a press con in the Oval Office with his son on his shoulders and POTUS looking on should tell us that Big Daddy in America means big daddy as well.

CHAPATI Delhi has handled first weeks of a disruptive Trump 2.0 better than many others More Strategy, Less Noise



Ashok Malik

A cheeky summary of Narendra Modi's visit to the US would be: COMPACT to reset ICET as TRUST. Quite aside from silly punning — necessitated by a numbing official love for acronyms — there is much the Indian delegation can bring home with satisfaction. To be sure, problems remain. The tariff sword has been stayed, not sheathed. Despite the political nudge, hopes for even a limited 'bilateral trade agreement' (BTA) by Sep 2025 will require a harmonisation of Indian and American trade negotiators. In the past, this has resembled Superman meeting Kryptonite.

To achieve an 'innovative, wide-ranging BTA... [that] will take an integrated approach to strengthen and deepen bilateral trade across the goods and services sector, and will work towards increasing market access, reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers, and deepening supply chain integration' by September 2025, when Trump is expected to visit India, is hard, though not impossible. Political and diplomatic urgency to crystallise a deliverable will perhaps prevail.

Frankly, failure or inordinate delay is not an option for a lot at stake. The text of the joint statement indicates Trump has conceded language with that India can be comfortable, with the broader idea that he will get enhanced market access and a minimal deficit. He has agreed to:

- Not just military sales but co-production with India to strengthen interoperability and defence industrial cooperation as well as 'reciprocal supply of defence goods and services'
- 'Large scale [nuclear] localisation and possible technology transfer', including for 'advanced small modular reactors'
- Continuing the Biden-era critical



Thumbs up, hackles down

and emerging technologies cooperation, almost with cut-and-paste phrases, a new nomenclature — and an ambitious paragraph on a 'certain positioning'. The evolution of the world into a global workplace and 'putting in place innovative, mutually advantageous and secure mobility frameworks'.

Even boilerplate language on 'ASEAN centrality' in the Indo-Pacific. In turn, India has promised to grow its strategic commitments. It has implicitly acknowledged that the building of Indian military capacities and capabilities will enjoy under a greater net security provision role in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. The conceptual landscape reinforces the IMPEC template with a sharper edge and a wider scope.

The leaders recognised the need to build new plurilateral anchor partnerships in the Western Indian Ocean. Middle East, and Indo-Pacific to grow relationships, commerce and cooperation across defence, technology, energy and critical minerals. The leaders expect to announce new partnership initiatives across these sub-regions by fall of 2025. Many of the points and phrases above are standard for a conventional, aspirational, communiqué. Yet, they are counterintuitive to the finger-wagging transactionalism and 'What've you done for me lately?' approach that most countries have come to associate with, and fear from, Trump. India's diplomats can pat themselves on the back. It is now over to their colleagues in the commerce ministry. A trade deal that is fair — at least one that Trump can be convinced of a fair and a victory he can claim — is crucial for any of the rest of the joint statement to be realised. In all this, there is a larger message for Indian foreign policy? New Delhi has fended the first few weeks of a disruptive Trump administra-

tion better than many others — at least so far. Nevertheless, the period has not been without its lessons. Notwithstanding the circus surrounding Trump's domestic and international moves, South Block and the political leadership have maintained a studied and mature silence. They have embraced a pragmatic civilisational virtue passed on to us by our ancestors: the main vrat (affirmation of reticence).

In a chaotic and noisy world, one can either seize opportunities that appear and build one's capacities — or simply add to the chaos and the noise. Modi and his team are acting as would be expected of custodians of India's interest.

Having said that, diplomatic infection points will emerge not just because of Trump but sometimes in spite of Trump. The quest for hearts and minds — and economic and political stakes — in the Global South is becoming that much harder. Trumpian America has abdicated a certain positioning. In shredding USAID, for instance, it has targeted both wasteful spending and useful spending. The unfortunate makes for success. To-gether, they present the formula for success. When the mind is under control of the intellect? Or has the mind reeled up desire into a force that wrecks havoc within you? Concentration is a vital link in success. A batsman may play brilliantly till he reaches the score of 90. At 90, his mind shifts from the present to worry over past failures and anxiety for the hundred. He gets out. Hence the term 'nervous nineties'.

The mind tricks you. The intellect keeps you focused. When the intellect is strong and alert, the mind is able to concentrate, and you emerge a winner.

The author is partner, The Asia Group, and chair of its India practice

But We Have Promises to Keep



Rajesh Shukla

75 years ago, Ram Singh heard a radio announcer declare the adoption of the Constitution in his village. A farmer with a small plot and big dreams, he didn't grasp terms like 'justice' or 'directive principles'. But he knew this document promised a fairer future — for him and generations to come. In the 1960s, Singh saw land reforms and irrigation projects take shape. But village life remained tough. State investments in industry felt distant from his fields. By the 1980s, his son Mohan joined him, dreaming of becoming a teacher. Droughts forced him to drop out and help the family survive. While wealthier farmers embraced modern tools, small farmers like Singh struggled. The Constitution's promise of equality felt far away. By the 1990s, economic reforms reshaped India. Mohan moved to a

small town for better opportunities. Though he earned more as a delivery man than his father ever did, wealth remained unevenly distributed. He could afford to educate his children, but knew that true economic security was still out of reach.

As the millennium began, schemes like MGNREGA created rural employment opportunities, while initiatives like RTE expanded access to education. Mohan's son, Ravi, became the family's first college graduate, a milestone that filled them with hope. Then came an unexpected crisis: Covid. The pandemic in 2020 reversed years of progress. Ravi, who had secured a stable job in the city, lost his income overnight. Back in the village, Mohan's relatives struggled even more. State relief programmes such as free food rations and DFTs helped but were not enough. While wealthy businesses rebounded quickly, the poor bore the brunt of the crisis, reinforcing how fragile economic progress was for many families. In the 75th year of the Constitution, Gov unveiled Budget 2025, a roadmap to a more inclusive and equitable future. Key provisions aim to bridge economic gaps that families like Ravi's have faced for



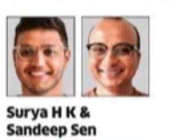
Confronting real forks on the road

generations. The budget allocates increased funds for small farmers, promising better irrigation, access to low-interest credit and subsidies for organic farming. Singh's dreams of a fairer agricultural system are finally seeing hope. A new employment guarantee scheme for urban youth, and an expansion of MGNREGA aim to create more jobs in both rural and urban areas, bringing greater stability to people like Mohan, who sought work beyond farming. Singh's dreams of a fairer agricultural system are finally seeing hope. A new employment guarantee scheme for urban youth, and an expansion of MGNREGA aim to create more jobs in both rural and urban areas, bringing greater stability to people like Mohan, who sought work beyond farming. Singh's dreams of a fairer agricultural system are finally seeing hope. A new employment guarantee scheme for urban youth, and an expansion of MGNREGA aim to create more jobs in both rural and urban areas, bringing greater stability to people like Mohan, who sought work beyond farming.

have imagined. Direct cash transfers and pensions will support vulnerable families, while incentives for small businesses and startups create more opportunities. Ravi and his family's story mirrors the journey of millions of Indians. While inequality remains a challenge, the new budget provides hope that policy will all more closely with the Constitution's vision of justice and equality. Ravi believes that real change is possible if economic growth benefits everyone, not just a select few. As India moves forward, he hopes that the ideals of the Constitution — justice, liberty, equality and fraternity — will be the guiding stars for the nation. They must be a lived reality for all. Of course, this isn't just Ravi's story. It's the story of India — of farmers, workers, small business owners and dreamers who have walked a long road of progress and struggle. It's time to reaffirm its foundational promises. The journey ahead may be one of shared prosperity, ensuring that no family is left behind. India has the opportunity to truly fulfil these promises in the years to come.

The writer is MD-CEO, PRICE

How to Stop Brain Drain 2.0 Pain



Surya H K & Sandeep Sen

they land well-paying jobs, repayment isn't an issue. But with opportunities shrinking in the US, Europe and Canada, many risk deflating their dreams, without stable employment. Three layers of brain drain have emerged:

- **Our loss, their gain** When Indian students study abroad, train in foreign institutions and join overseas workforces, benefitting other economies over India's.
- **Badly matched** When top-trained Indians take mismatched roles, especially in big tech, waste their skills and hurting the global economy. For instance, big tech companies and tech startups in California are top recruiters of the top STEM programmes in the region. But they often staff organisation with mismatched roles and candidates.
- **Low returns** When individuals return to India, but are forced to exit their fields of expertise and adopt generalist roles owing to lack of opportunities, abandoning their specialised training and passions. For example, graduates who followed countries are shutting doors to foreign workers. Many Indian students abroad are in limbo. Around 1 lakh Indians studying abroad often with loans starting at ₹1 cr. If



Ensure a safe landing

is the future of work. But the fact is that returns face hardships while looking for roles that align with their skills and expectations, as their work interests and ethics were solidified in vastly different economic environments. As a result, they often switch to unrelated fields and take time to adapt. India's comparative lack of research-based or innovation-driven opportunities exacerbates this issue. Unlike Western economies, India's GDP is 0.64% of GDP. Its startup ecosystem is largely restricted to tech-first ideas. These may be lucrative for software engineers and MBA graduates, but offers little diversity to job seekers who are trained in psychology, immunology, or say, environmental economics. Returns often need additional training to adapt to India's systems. Yet, the country lacks programmes to facilitate this transition. Moreover, economic barriers, such as mismatch between salary expectations and available opportunities, deter many from staying. India's higher education system is

ill-equipped to handle the scale of this crisis. With over 15 lakh students pursuing higher education abroad annually, even if a fraction of this cohort chose to study in India, the already overburdened system lacks the capacity to provide quality opportunities. Consider the CAT exam, which attracts an average of 1.5 lakh applicants annually for MBA programmes, a small fraction of the total number of graduates in India. India's higher ed system and employment landscape need urgent reform to prevent this multi-layered brain drain from escalating. Building robust institutions, fostering innovation and aligning education with market needs are long-term solutions. Immediate steps — such as creating reintegration programmes for returnees, enhancing career opportunities in STEM, liberal arts and management fields, and regulating student loan malpractices — are crucial. India's policymakers must recognise the scale of this crisis. Without systemic changes, the country risks not only losing its best talent but also faces an economic crisis fuelled by disguised unemployment, underemployment, bad loans and wasted potential. The time to act is now, before this multi-tiered brain drain becomes an irreversible drain on India's future.

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Taking an Exam?

JAYAROW

Sometimes, the most unlikely students do well, while others perform below expectation. Is there a component other than hard work and study that makes for success? Similarly, in sport, top players sometimes fail while novices win. What's the reason for this? Researchers have now understood the major role played by the mind, in success. In a world obsessed with measuring talent and ability we often overlook the importance of the mind, which is subtle and difficult to evaluate.

The renowned Gita gives valuable insights into the mind and its role in success. The Gita, verse 2-48, says, 'Samatvam yoga ucyate — equanimity of mind is called yoga'. Verse 2-50 says, 'Yoga karmasu kausale — proficiency of action makes for success'. Together, they present the formula for success. When the mind is under control of the intellect? Or has the mind reeled up desire into a force that wrecks havoc within you? Concentration is a vital link in success. A batsman may play brilliantly till he reaches the score of 90. At 90, his mind shifts from the present to worry over past failures and anxiety for the hundred. He gets out. Hence the term 'nervous nineties'.

The mind tricks you. The intellect keeps you focused. When the intellect is strong and alert, the mind is able to concentrate, and you emerge a winner.

LOLLING ON SATURDAY

A Burning Question

A physicist, an engineer and a mathematician are locked in separate burning buildings. The physicist runs to a chalkboard, calculates exactly how much water he will need to put out the fire, runs and finds that amount, puts out the fire, and survives. The engineer pulls out a calculator, calculates exactly how much water he will need to put out the fire, runs and finds it, and survives. The mathematician runs to a chalkboard, calculates exactly how much water he will need to put out the fire, declares, 'There is a solution' and then burns to death.

Sesh-andwich

A man walks into a library, approaches the librarian and says, 'I'll have a cheeseburger and fries, please'. The librarian says, 'Sir, you know you're in a library right?' 'Sorry,' he whispers. 'I'll have a cheeseburger and fries, please.'

Chat Room

Merits of Going Cabombastic

Apropos 'Leaving Their Gulf Of Cabom Footprint' In Just Inest, Feb 14), Cabom's audacious re-branding of the Gulf of Mexico is nothing short of revolutionary — a masterstroke in the art of rebranding things just because one can. While all who settle for boring old geography when you can sprinkle a little national pizzazz on it? If this trend catches on, we could soon be vacationing by the Lakel of Totally Not Canada or sailing across the Atlantic Pond. And why only water bodies? Imagine rebranding the sky 'Upper Cabom' or the moon 'Cabom's Nightlight'. The possibilities are endless when a country decides that maps are more of a suggestion than a fact. Now, Cabom is rapidly becoming a wave of creativity and rebrand all as 'breathable Cabom' or declare Tuesday as 'Pro-Wednesday'. If nothing else, they have provided a rebranding of a surefire way to make headlines — who needs policies when you have panache? *Amrinder Kumar Hazaribagh, Jharkhand*

ANDHRA PRADESH



Safekeeping cultural inheritance: (Clockwise) An elderly Konda Reddi woman hangs some freshly collected tender bamboo shoots to dry at Dumpavalasa village in ASR district of Andhra Pradesh; Konda Shambu takes out a few dry bamboo shoots he saved to cook his favourite traditional fish curry; Bamboo shoots hung to dry in the verandah of a Konda Reddi household in Dumpavalasa; Pallala Boddu Reddi shows a fishing basket he crafted with bamboo. T. APPALA NAIDU

Guardians of 'green gold'

Konda Reddi women set out on a quest for tender shoots of a species of bamboo endemic to the Godavari Valley forests during the monsoon. *Konda Veduru*, known for its rich nutritional value, gained popularity post-COVID-19 when many started exploring healthy food options. However, the recipes of a myriad of delicacies made with the 'green gold' the tribe prepares to celebrate the onset of summer remains its well-kept secret, writes

T. Appala Naidu

It's January 31, a Friday. As the clock struck eight, Konda Sambhu Reddi, 62, puts on his off-white dhoti and a wrinkled white shirt to go to the weekly shandy. He steps out of his wooden hut and checks the dried bamboo shoots hanging on a string in the verandah.

The weakened current of the stream flowing close by his hut brings a smile on his face as he knows that it is an indicator of the onset of summer. Sambhu brings home the best fish available at the shandy to cook and relish his tribe's ancient delicacy. "We welcome summer with the delicacy made of the fish caught in our stream and the dry bamboo shoots. This is our unique tradition, a cherished memory of our Konda Reddi tribe that has been passed on for generations," he says.

Nearly 50 Konda Reddi families live in Alluri Sitharama Raju (ASR) district's Aaku Maamidi Kota village, where the biggest weekly shandies on the tri-State border of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Chhattisgarh are held.

"Preparing dishes with bamboo shoots to welcome the summer is not a community affair. However, every family enjoys cooking and eating them as the catch of fish and prawn are abundant in our stream at the beginning of the summer," says Sambhu's son Naji Reddi, 35.

"Our tribe collects and consumes the tender shoots of the *Konda Veduru* bamboo variety (*Dendrocalamus strictus*), which grows only on the hill plains," he says.

After dropping out of college in his final year of B.Sc., he assists his father in commercial agriculture, primarily cultivating Annatto, a seed used in lipstick production. The Konda Reddi tribe is a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) located in the Godavari Valley of Andhra Pradesh. Women in this tribe have a high fertility rate, with most having more than five children. As of 2024, a Konda Reddi woman from Muntha Maamidi village in the Mareduilli Agency of Alluri Sitharama Raju district, holds the record for the highest number of children—11 in total.

Sambhu lives in Aaku Maamidi Kota village, nearly 27 kilometres deep inside the Mareduilli forest cover on the ancient Rampa-Malkangiri tribal trade route, which is still a stronghold of Left Wing Extremist (LWE) Groups in India's Red Corridor spreading along the Sabari-Sileru-Godavari rivers.

A prized catch

The *Konda Veduru* is considered a prized catch by the Konda Reddis.

Native to South Asia, *Konda Veduru* occupies more than 53% of India's total area under bamboo. It is also extensively used by the Konda Reddi and Koya tribes of the Godavari Valley to make musical instruments.

"*Konda Veduru* is the dominant species among the eight bamboo species spread over 2.25 lakh

hectares in the Valley. It spreads across more than half of the total area," says R. Srinivas, State Silviculturist of the Regional Forest Research Centre, Rajamahendravaram. Most of the area under *Konda Veduru* species grows naturally.

The Konda Reddis strictly adhere to one precaution: boiling bamboo shoots, fresh or dry, before adding them to any dish.

"Boiling the bamboo shoots is a must. We can eat them by adding some red chilli and salt. This is the easiest recipe of *Konda Veduru*," says Pallala Bojamma, an elderly woman and mother of five, from Perika Valasa, 15 km from Aaku Maamidi Kota.

"Every season, we serve food made of bamboo shoots for all—children, pregnant women, and even lactating mothers in our families. We believe that the bamboo has various health and nutritional benefits. It is one of the staple foods naturally available in our forest," adds Bojamma.

Classified as Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), the tribals are entitled to collect any bamboo species in the Valley. They are also entitled to collect it from the Reserve Forests for their dietary, economic, and household purposes.

It is hard to find a Konda Reddi household that doesn't preserve bamboo shoots for consumption during winter and summer.

"Our extensive search for bamboo shoots lasts eight weeks, between July and August. The shoots that come up during the first spell of rain are collected, and a large portion of the collection is consumed during the monsoon itself," adds Bojamma, boasting that it is only the women in the tribe that venture into the forest and collect the bamboo shoots in the early hours to collect the shoots.

Gourmet meal

Renowned Anthropologist Christoph-von-Furer-Haimendorf has observed in his book, *The Reddis of Bison Hills* (1945): "During the heavy rains of the south-west monsoon edible herbs spring up all over the jungle and are eaten boiled both in gruel and curry. The women cut larger quantities of the new shoots of bamboo and, peeling off the outer skin, grate the tender stem with a small knife before cooking". Haimendorf had stayed with the Konda Reddi tribes in the Godavari valley.

Eight decades after Haimendorf visited the Godavari Valley, despite the advent of many changes in their lifestyles and exposure to the mainstream, the Konda Reddis continue to consume bamboo shoots as they firmly believe in its health benefits.

Meanwhile, upon learning about its nutritional value and savouriness, other tribes and non-

tribes have also begun to consume *Konda Veduru*. The Konda Reddis prepare a range of dishes with bamboo shoots, commonly known as Kommu Kora, in which shoots are mixed with daal, cereals, chicken, and mutton.

Konda Reddi woman Pallala Santha, 40, of Perika Valasa village, says, "In summer, we treat our guests with dishes made with bamboo shoots as a mark of high regard for them, and they also enjoy the food and look forward to the next lunch invitation."

She adds that some portions of tender shoots are sent to non-tribal friends during the monsoon. The nutritional value of the *Konda Veduru* has been evaluated by P. Nongdam and Leimapham Tikenra of the Department of Biotechnology, researchers from Manipur University.

They published a paper: "The Nutritional Facts of Bamboo Shoots and Their Usage as Important Traditional Foods of Northeast India". According to the paper, 100 grams of freshly harvested shoots of *Dendrocalamus strictus* contains 3.07 grams of amino acids, 2.60 grams of protein, 6.17 grams of carbohydrates, 0.33 grams of fat, 2.26 grams of fibre, 2.43 mg of Vitamin C, 0.58 mg of Vitamin E, traces of calcium, phosphorus and 2.19 mg iron.

The Indian Food Composition Tables (IFCT-2017), released by the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN-Hyderabad) of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), has listed *Konda Veduru* as edible in the vegetable food category.

On the nutritional value and health benefits of *Konda veduru*, R. Ananthan, Scientist E, Food Chemistry and Nutrient Analysis Wing of the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, told The Hindu: "Bamboo shoots are widely consumed as edible food across North East India. It has a lot of nutritional benefits."

In the North East, the local communities cook bamboo shoots as vegetables and prepare pickles for preservation and consumption. "The bamboo species in South India may be different from those of the North East, and nutritional values of every species are different from the other," says Ananthan, one of the authors of

the IFCT-2017. Over the decades, the local tribes, Koyas in particular, and tribes who migrated from neighbouring Odisha and Chhattisgarh and settled in the Godavari Valley have also adopted bamboo shoots in the cuisine. The Konda Reddis, however, have better access to the *Konda Veduru* variety as they inhabit the hills slopes and Bison Hill Range of the Eastern Ghats.

Embraced novelty

The Kondhs, who migrated from Odisha in the 1970s and the Murias (Gutti Koyas), who migrated from Chhattisgarh in the early 2000s, slowly began to collect and consume bamboo shoots. This escalated the demand for bamboo shoots among the tribals of the Godavari region.

Venkatesh Jatvati, secretary of Jana Vikas Society NGO, says: "Post-COVID-19, however, the demand for bamboo shoots has increased manifold among non-tribals also as they learned about its nutritional and health benefits. During monsoon season, the Konda Reddis sell the bamboo shoots in the weekly shandies."

But the non-tribals have yet to find an authentic delicacy prepared with bamboo shoots. They are now adding tender bamboo shoots to their regular vegetarian dishes.

Bamboo spreads over 82,000 hectares in the Chintoor Forest Division, with *Konda Veduru* as the prime species as claimed by the Forest Department.

"Being a non-tribe, we, too, consume the bamboo shoots. However, the taste of the Konda Reddi's delicacies prepared with bamboo shoots is unique," says Venkatesh.

Today, a bundle of four bamboo shoots costs ₹20 in the tribal shandies of the Godavari region and Chhattisgarh's Kunta shandy, the biggest tribal shandy in Central India.

Commercial viability

In early February 2025, the Forest Department consented to collect and auction five-foot-long *Konda Veduru* sticks meant for curing, a post-harvesting stage in tobacco farming. Tobacco growers say the bamboo sticks will withstand heat above 100 degrees Celsius in this stage.

"In the first week of February, we have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Virginia Tobacco Farmers Association (VTF, Godavari Region) to supply an estimated two lakh bamboo sticks. It is an attempt to prevent the illegal felling of bamboo trees and check the unregulated trade of *Konda Veduru* bamboo sticks," says B.N.N. Murthy, Chief Conservator of Forest, Rajamahendravaram.

VTFA president Vivekananda Kakarla adds that the tobacco growers have struggled to procure the *Konda Veduru* variety sticks.

"We are collecting the bamboo sticks from our forest blocks with a condition that the VTF should participate in the open auction as per the timber sale guidelines. If they won't participate, they are liable to pay the compensation as per the February agreement," Murthy explains.

Pallala Linga Reddy, newly elected vice-president, Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, (PESA), Egvalasa Panchayat (Mareduilli Agency) has said that the *Konda Veduru* stems are also in great demand from the banana farmers in the Godavari Delta.

The sticks are erected to support the banana plants to withstand the gales during the monsoon.

"Even though it has a great market demand, our tribe is yet to explore the economic benefits of the *Konda Veduru*," says Linga Reddy.

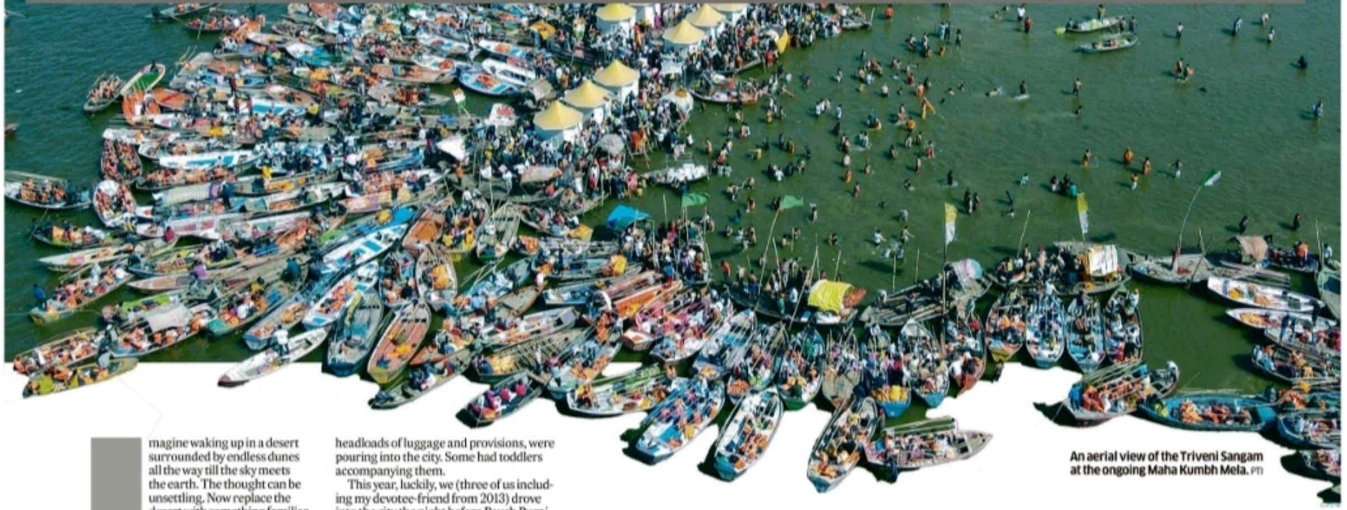
Meanwhile, Pallala Boddu Reddy of Aaku Maamidi Kota, seen repairing his abandoned bamboo basket-shaped tool for fishing in the stream, worries that the intricate bamboo craft passed on for generations in his tribe is becoming extinct.

"We admire the *Konda Veduru* for the many benefits it offers. But, few can craft a fishing basket like this with bamboo sticks. I wish even the bamboo craft gets its attention, now that people are talking about edible bamboo," says the 55-year-old as he gently places the bamboo basket he made in the sun to dry.



DH journalist Viju Cherian travels from Delhi to Prayagraj and jots down his impressions of the world's largest congregation

What I saw at the Maha Kumbh Mela



An aerial view of the Triveni Sangam at the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela. PH

Imagine waking up in a desert surrounded by endless dunes all the way till the sky meets the earth. The thought can be unsettling. Now replace the desert with something familiar, and it becomes a comforting thought. If you can replace the sand expanse with humans, more humans, and a few more humans, chances are that you will be at peace at the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela.

A drop in the ocean of humanity—that's how I felt while walking towards Sangam, the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers in the city of Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) in Uttar Pradesh. I was walking with a sense of professional detachment and sociological curiosity. The journalist in me wanted to capture the sights and sounds of this duodecennial event, while the hobbyist sociologist in me wanted to understand the emotions of the thronging devotees. The singular focus of walking towards a goal, and the hope of washing away one's sins—these bind total strangers in a way only religion can.

My experience at the Maha Kumbh Mela, which I visited in mid-January, was mixed. I was (and still am) in awe of the resilience of the ordinary devotee—it is a story waiting to be told. (This year's Mela is said to be especially significant because of a rare celestial alignment, occurring after 144 years; some dispute this claim). So while I was impressed by the scale on which the event was organised, I felt the administration could have been more humane. More on that later.

Recent news headlines and social media posts have highlighted the hardships of reaching the destination. Clearly, there is a lot that can be done on that front. However, for the devotee at Sangam, the religious experience takes precedence.

Past visit

For a child who grew up believing that the Maramon Convention—a week-long gathering every February of Marthoma Syrian Christians on the riverbank of Pamba in central Travancore—was the largest human gathering, and for a vicarinal spellbinder by the Tiruvannamalai Girivalam (circumnambulating Arunachala Hill in Tiruvannamalai), the Maha Kumbh Mela was a jaw-droppingly different experience. Despite media updates about the crowd size, nothing can quite prepare you for the moment when you first see the magnitude of the 45-day celebration.

I have been to the Kumbh Mela once before, 12 years ago. It was an impromptu decision. I accompanied a devotee-friend driving from Delhi. Vehicular traffic was stopped 8-10 km outside the city limits. We parked at a makeshift car park and joined the crowds walking towards Sangam. Men and women, young and old, carrying

headloads of luggage and provisions, were pouring into the city. Some had toddlers accompanying them.

This year, luckily, we (three of us including my devotee-friend from 2013) drove into the city the night before Poush Purnima (January 13) and managed to get hotel accommodation. That meant we didn't have to walk an extra 8-10 km this time. On January 13 and 14, vehicular movement within the city, on the roads leading to the Sangam, was restricted. Anyway, everyone, except those who had a vehicle pass, must walk the 3.5 km distance from the New Bairahara Chauraha to Sangam.

Since I visit in mid-January, much has changed. A stampede has taken place and news reports suggest long traffic jams en route to Prayagraj. A friend narrated how, last week, it took him 26 hours to get to Prayagraj from Delhi. We were lucky—we made it in less than 12.

Moment of impatience

Down Kali Road, which leads to Sangam, there is a point where the gradual incline of the road offers a clear view of the crowd ahead—that's where you get an idea of the massive gathering you are a part of. It is a frighteningly exhilarating experience. You must stand and take in the sight. It gives you a dopamine rush, one that startles the brain cells and quickly retreats, etching an image in memory.

It is not like the peak-hour jostling you experience on a bus or metro. The Mela crowd is massive, but not unruly or aggressive. However, it did get scary on January 14, on Makar Sankranti, when we joined the millions waiting to get a glimpse of the Naga sadhus. The crowd's trance-like mood which we witnessed the previous day had given way to a desperation to receive the blessings of the sadhus. The security personnel and volunteers managed the situation well, and I believe they certainly prevented a tragedy that morning.

Changing times

Both the administration and devotees have seamlessly integrated technology at the Maha Kumbh Mela, scheduled to end on February 26. At several points, I saw drones being operated by security personnel, piquing the interest of many devotees.

The cellular network coverage has vastly improved since my visit in 2013. As a result, selfies, reels, vlogs, and live-streaming are no longer a novelty at the Mela. That said, one male devotee caught my attention. On the riverbank near the Snaa Ghat and a pontoon (floating) bridge, he was offering prayers. He held burning incense sticks in his right hand and a mobile phone in his left hand to live-stream or record the ritual. He panned the phone from the riverbank to the incense sticks, all the while reciting a prayer.

Beyond its spiritual significance, the Maha Kumbh Mela also supports the local

economy, driven by the influx of devotees. Food stalls are abundant, ranging from rotis/walas (small cart vendors) selling samosas and bhel to major QSR chains operating from makeshift shops with billing counters and seating arrangements. Vendors sell everything from blankets and mats to jerrycans (for devotees carrying Gangajal home).

At the ghats, near an ashram (a sect or monastic order that follows specific spiritual practices), I even came across a tattoo artist inking a religious insignia on a devotee's arm. The enterprising artist had connected his tattoo pen to a portable battery, the size of a school lunch box.

Long march

Walking is a large part of the experience. It can be arduous, and perhaps, the hardship becomes a part of the atonement. One must be mentally and physically prepared to walk a lot. In two-and-a-half days, I clocked a total of over 40 km; and this after using e-rickshaws at certain points. For devotees who walk from the railway station to the Sangam, the

courteous. Devotee after devotee would come up, point to the barricades, and ask the same questions, oscillating from 'Can we go this way?' to 'Does this road lead to the exit?'. Not once did I see the police and other staff lose their cool. Patience and mild manners are not usually associated with the police, but this was something else. A Maha Kumbh Mela miracle!

Many takeaways

The successful hosting of the event will be an important milestone in India's efforts to promote religious tourism. However, the administration was under-prepared in some areas. Lessons need to be learnt from the January 29 stampede to prevent such tragedies. Deepak Pandey, expert on disaster management, wrote in *DH* recently that such tragedies are 'predictable, preventable, and avoidable'.

The infrastructure needs to get better if devotee convenience is a priority. The existing inventory of hotel rooms, homestays, and other lodging facilities is grossly inadequate. For instance, the hotel room we stayed in, listed at

were running 10-12 hours late (I assume partly because of the weather conditions in early January). My point here is that not many options exist for the ordinary devotee. Buses are stopped outside the city. A confirmed train ticket these days is as difficult to get as a toehold in an unreserved compartment. Even if you overcome these problems and somehow manage to make it to the city limits, you are left with little option but to walk.

Our hotel offered us a vantage point as it was located on a road connecting the railway station with the Sangam. This meant that for two-and-a-half days, we got to see a steady stream of people, day in and day out, walking from the railway station towards the Mela and back. On January 14, as the crowds swelled, the authorities used public announcement systems placed across the city to request devotees not to move toward the railway station, as it had no space for more passengers. Now imagine if you were a devotee there. You took the holy dip and were leaving the city, except now you couldn't. This led to many people spending the night on the footpaths.

Plunge of faith

The large and diverse cast of characters—believers, vendors, security personnel and others—has unique stories to tell. The account of someone stuck in a traffic gridlock differs vastly from that of someone who flew in on a helicopter to the Sangam. Yet, all these accounts matter because the Maha Kumbh is a sacred event for believers, an economic opportunity for vendors, and an administrative challenge for security personnel.

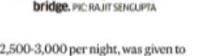
On January 14, Makar Sankranti, sadhus belonging to the various akharas were performing the Amrit Snan ritual. It was a cold winter morning and the grounds were chock-a-block with devotees in the wee hours. The floodlights were beaming, and the loudspeakers blaring. A huge group of devotees was taking the holy dip. Many of them would have walked for kilometres to get there, some would have even camped there the previous night. But while taking that holy dip their faces exuded a sense of fulfillment. They had achieved what they had come for. After offering their prayers they emerged from the Sangam and disappeared into the millions waiting for their turn. I imagine they stayed at the Mela grounds for some more time, and began their long walk back home at the crack of dawn.

Like this story? Email: dhonast@deccanherald.co.in

Naga sadhus on the auspicious day of Makar Sankranti. PH: VIJU CHERIAN



Devotees walking on a pontoon bridge. PH: RAJIT SENGUPTA



distance is much longer.

The pain is alleviated when you realise you are not alone on this journey. Just go with the flow. To that extent, the crowd is comforting, even encouraging. But just when a sense of oneness starts to develop, the honking of luxury SUVs carrying VIPs to the ghats reminds us that all are equal, but some are more equal than others.

Reality check

That the administration has deployed an army of volunteers to continuously clean the Mela premises is noteworthy. This had caught my attention in 2013 too. The success is sketchy, but let's not forget that cleanliness of public spaces also depends on the civic values displayed by the crowd.

Another remarkable aspect is how the security personnel were mild, patient, and

Rs 2,500-3,000 per night, was given to us for Rs 10,000. The day we checked out, the receptionist proudly informed us that the next guest was paying Rs 15,000! Such predatory pricing is also seen in local transport. An e-rickshaw ride of less than 2 km cost us Rs 20 on Sunday night; two days later it had spiked to Rs 100 ('No haggling'). Public transport buses were nowhere near meeting the demand. This is unfair to devotees without the means to pay such prices. Even for devotees who had the means, they had to pay exorbitant airfares until the civil aviation ministry intervened, following which airlines cut the prices by up to 50%.

The toll charges on the highways from Delhi to Prayagraj and back cost us about Rs 4,000. We had initially decided to go by train and booked our tickets—but trains

MUSICANA

Mudroad hopes to revive love for country music in B'luru

The eight-member group was started by four friends in 2016, writes Rashmi Rajagopal

Mudroad, one of India's handful of country music bands, was initially just a group of four friends. They would break into song at random to entertain others at whichever party they found themselves in. "We had a lot of fun doing this. We had been doing this for years, when we felt compelled to form a band," says Sheridan Brass, the lead vocalist.

Country music is a less explored genre in India, but Brass and his friends—Daniel Schwartz (vocals and drums) and Joshua Selvaraj (vocals and acoustic guitar)—had grown up listening to the likes of the Zac Brown Band, George Strait, and Darius Rucker. That was the kind of music they enjoyed performing as well. So when they formed the band in 2016, they gravitated towards country

music. The fourth member Mark Swaroop (bass guitar), now based in Scotland, joins in whenever he is available. While their repertoire is country heavy, they also cover gospel, blues and rock 'n' roll.

The way they harmonise, and their complementary voices that are soulful and comforting are some of the factors that set them apart, believes Daniel.

"It's easy for us because we are very connected to and comfortable with each other. Therefore, the whole process is smooth," says Joshua.

Typically their performances are broken up into two sets. The first set is dedicated to country music, while the second covers retro hits that the audience can dance to. "Country music was popular with our parents when they were younger. That popularity has since died down in India. We want to reintroduce the



In addition to country music, Mudroad also covers gospel, blues and rock 'n' roll.

genre here," Joshua shares.

Over the years, the Bengaluru-based band has grown from four to eight members. It currently comprises Jerusha Verghese (vocals), Blesswin Winco (lead guitar and music director), Karun Verghese (rhythm guitar), Devin Lawrence (keyboard) and Adish Paul (bass), apart from Daniel, Joshua, and Brass.

Brass has shifted base to Dubai but flies down to Bengaluru regularly for gigs. "It's not too challenging for us. I don't necessarily have to be in the jam room during rehearsals. I typically arrive a few days before the event to practice. It has been smooth sailing so far," Brass shares.

The Eagles is another major influence and Mudroad is currently planning a tribute concert for the American band in the second half of 2025. Also on the agenda this year are a few international gigs.

The US has of late deployed military aircraft to remove unlawful aliens.
Can India too expedite the process of deporting illegal migrants?

Deportation: The India way...

SUMIR KARMAKAR
DH NEWS SERVICE

Sixty-year-old Mariam Bawa (Khatun) was lodged in India's biggest detention camp for foreigners at Matia in Gwalpura district for three months and 11 days, before she was released on "conditional bail" five months ago. She had been arrested after a Foreigners Tribunal at Barpeta declared her a non-Indian. "But we are not from Bangladesh," said Mariam's son, Muktar Khan. "My mother was declared a foreigner because of a mismatch in surname," the resident of Barpeta in western Assam's Barpeta district claimed. "My mother's surname is Khatun, but it was wrongly published as Bawa in the electoral rolls. She was declared a 'D' (doubtful) voter," and her case was referred to the Foreigners Tribunal. The court asked us to call my maternal uncle, who lives in Dinapur in Nagaland, to prove her identity. But he did not show up," raved Muktar. "Where will my mother go now?"

However, the names of his father, Mangal Khan, and two brothers appeared in the draft NRC, which was updated in Assam between 2013 and 2018 to detect the post-1971 migrants from Bangladesh. The lives of people lodged in detention camps came under focus once again after the Supreme Court, in a February 4 ruling, ordered the Assam government to immediately start deporting 63 people lodged in a detention centre. This, coupled with the US administration sending back illegal Indian migrants, has reignited the deportation debate in India.

'Centre to decide'

Officials in Assam have told DH that the Centre has to handle this. "We have informed the Supreme Court that the process is taking time mainly due to Bangladesh's refusal to accept them without their addresses in their country," said a state home department official.

The 63 declared foreigners are among the 270 persons, both Bangladeshis and Rohingyas, lodged in the Assam detention centre, which has a capacity to lodge 3,000 people. Nearly 1,000 declared foreigners were lodged in six detention camps inside jails, but they were shifted to the new facility at Matia in 2023, after the apex court slammed the Centre and the Assam government for poor living conditions there. More than

ILLEGAL MIGRANTS in INDIA

• Foreign nationals, who enter into the country, without valid travel documents are treated as illegal migrants in India.

• The powers of the Central Government under Section 3 of the Foreigners Act, 1946 to deport illegal foreign nationals and powers under Section 5 of The Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 to remove an illegal foreigner by force have been entrusted under Article 258(1) of the Constitution of India to all the State Governments.

• Further, under Article 239(1) of the Constitution of India, Administrators of all Union Territories have also been directed to discharge the functions of the Central Government relating to the powers to deport illegal foreign nationals.

• Such illegal migrants enter India in a clandestine and surreptitious manner, without valid travel documents.

• Hence, accurate data regarding number of such persons sneaking into India is not available with the Government

Foreigners deported from India
2,331
(April 2023 to March 2024)

Nigerian 1,470
Bangladeshi 411
Ugandan 78

Illegal Immigration in Assam:

• Declared foreigners by Foreigners Tribunals (FTs): **1,59,353** (till December 2023)
• Deported (mainly Bangladeshis): **3,100** (between 2021-2023)
• Cases pending in FTs: **96,149**
• Number of 'D' (doubtful) Voters: **96,987**
• 'D' voters declared foreigners: **577**

• The D voters are barred from casting votes in Assam

• 'D' voters removed from electoral rolls between 1997 and 2023: **89,400**

• Cases related to foreigners or D voters are initiated in the Foreigners Tribunals under Section 14 of the Foreigners Act, 1946, Foreigners (Tribunal) Order 1964, Assam Accord, and Citizenship Act, 1955



"As per available inputs, there are around 20 million illegal Bangladeshi migrants staying in India"
Kiren Rijiju, then Minister of State for Home Affairs, in Rajya Sabha on Nov 16, 2016



SOURCE: INFORMATION TABLED BY GOVT OF ASSAM IN THE STATE ASSEMBLY IN 2024

COMPILED BY SUMIR KARMAKAR, DHNS

750 "declared foreigners" were released on "conditional bail" following an order of the Supreme Court during the Covid pandemic. But 270 continue to remain in the detention centre.

Anti-migrant clamour

The agitation against illegal migration from Bangladesh has amplified now. The concern is the "failure" of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to detect and deport the foreigners from Assam, despite assuming power in 2014 in the Centre, and 2016 in Assam. "During a campaign on April 28, 2014, Modi had said that all foreigners would have to leave India if the BJP formed the gov-

ernment. The BJP has won the elections for the third term in 2024; and in Assam twice, in 2016 and 2021. But their promises remain unfulfilled," said Jagadish Bhuyan, general secretary of Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP), a regional party. The Assam accord of 1985 had decided March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for migrants to stay in India. The Supreme Court upheld this date in October, last year.

"The work to update the NRC with this cut-off began when Manmohan Singh was Prime Minister. But the BJP has divided the foreigners based on religion by offering citizenship to non-Muslim illegal migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and

Afghanistan till 2014 by bringing the CAA. "Other nations bring in laws to deport the illegal migrants, while our country passed the CAA to give citizenship to the foreigners," Bhuyan said.

NRC in limbo

The draft of NRC, which was released in 2018, had left out 19.06 lakh applicants (out of 3.29 crores). But the NRC has remained in limbo since then, due to petitions in the Supreme Court seeking a reversion.

The unresolved problem of illegal migrants from Bangladesh continues to be a critical election issue in Assam. It will remain so as Assam goes to polls next year.

Fair policy needed to send illegal migrants back

SANJAY HEGDE

The recent deportation of 104 Indian migrants from the United States has reignited debates about India's own challenges in addressing unlawful immigration. India's approach to deportation is mired in legal, political, and humanitarian complexities, particularly in states like Assam, where the issue is deeply intertwined with historical and socio-political realities.

The Assam conundrum

Assam has often been described as the epicentre of the crisis of illegal immigration from Bangladesh to India. The trend of branding all Bengali-speaking Muslims as Bangladeshis in the Brahmaputra Valley, however, ignores the geography and history of pre-Partition Assam. A mass nationalist movement since 1978 led to the 1985 Assam Accord, which forms the basis of Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, 1955. It categorizes migrants based on their date of entry into India. Those who entered India after March 24, 1971, are deemed illegal immigrants and must navigate a complex web of legal safeguards designed to protect genuine citizens from wrongful targeting. The Foreigners Tribunals, tasked with identifying illegal immigrants, have been criticized for their lack of transparency and procedural inconsistencies. Many individuals have simply been unable to prove their citizenship due to inadequate documentation, a problem exacerbated by poverty and illiteracy. The Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized the need for a fair and humane process.

Legal safeguards

Critics of India's deportation process often point to the US model as a benchmark. However, this comparison overlooks critical differences in the legal and historical contexts of the two countries. In the US, individuals deported have typically exhausted all legal options over an extended period. In contrast, India's deportation process must navigate a complex web of legal safeguards designed to protect genuine citizens from wrongful targeting.

The Foreigners Tribunals, tasked with identifying illegal immigrants, have been criticized for their lack of transparency and procedural inconsistencies. Many individuals have simply been unable to prove their citizenship due to inadequate documentation, a problem exacerbated by poverty and illiteracy. The Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized the need for a fair and humane process.

Assam's National Register of Citizens (NRC), updated in 2019 under the supervision of the Supreme Court, excluded 1.9 million people, only some of whom were also declared foreigners by Foreigners Tribunals. Failure to prove descent from the original NRC of 1951, does not ipso facto deprive a person of Indian citizenship. Inclusion in the NRC, however, proves the person's citizenship beyond doubt.



The Supreme Court last week pulled up the Assam government for its failure to deport 63 declared foreigners, lodged in a detention centre, due to the unavailability of their addresses in Bangladesh. This highlights the logistical and legal hurdles in implementing deportation orders.

Challenges

The BJP, which has long championed a strong anti-illegal immigration stance, has been in power both at the Centre and in Assam for several years, but could not expedite deportations. The deportation of illegal migrants from Bangladesh requires cooperation from the government in the neighbouring country. The absence of such cooperation has left thousands in legal limbo, fuelling political tensions and keeping the issue alive. In 2023-24, India deported 411 Bangladeshi nationals - the number that pales in comparison to the estimated millions of illegal migrants in the country. The logistical challenges of identifying, detaining, and deporting such a large population are immense.

The path forward

The Supreme Court's intervention in Assam underscores the need for transparency and accountability in the functioning of Foreigners Tribunals. The government must also secure Bangladesh's cooperation in the deportation process.

The US model of deportation may appear efficient, but India must ensure that its policies are grounded in its unique historical and socio-political realities and rooted in the principles of justice, fairness, and respect for human rights. Only then can it hope to navigate through the complexities and address the problem of illegal migration, without compromising its constitutional values. (The writer is a senior advocate designated by the Supreme Court of India)

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

Race for rare earth elements

Even today, it is China that separates and processes a major chunk of REEs mined in other countries, writes **B K Singh**



The buzzword in the planet's history today is rare earth elements. These are required to manufacture batteries, renewable energy technology, defence infrastructures, mobiles and computers. China has funnelled \$87 billion to control critical mineral supplies.

To counter China's dominance in the supply chain of all critical emerging technologies, the new US administration is stepping up the extraction and processing of rare earth elements like dysprosium oxide and neodymium in Texas mines. Trump's interest in Greenland, reportedly rich in critical and rare earth minerals, is part of a broader strategy to reduce US dependence on China. The first significant use of REEs came with the adoption of colour TVs in the 1960s, initially mined in California. Mining these elements generates a massive overburden, leading to unprecedented environmental and health issues. The traditional mining of REEs was labour-intensive. However, with lower wages and laxity in environmental laws, China took it up in a big way, and the USA was left behind.

China built mines for the magnet industry, and high-tech countries like the USA and Japan depended on it. After the 2010 territorial conflict, China put an embargo on selling REEs to Japan. However, even today, a significant chunk of REE mined outside China continues to be sent to China for separation, refining and magnet production.

China thus dominates the REE supply chain. In support of building a robust and secure supply chain of REEs, US Congress has approved \$800 million for research in mining and recycling, innovative separation and recovery technologies, and increasing efficiency to lower demand. Currently, the USA, Australia and Malaysia occupy second, third and fourth positions. India is the fifth largest producer of REE. Brazil, Canada, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Thailand also contribute to global production. Due to the geopolitical situation, 35% of REEs were extracted outside China in 2022.

The chemistry

There are 17 rare earth elements (REEs) in Group 3 of the periodic table, comprising scandium, yttrium, and the lanthanide series of elements in the f block. All these are found in the same ore and deposits and possess similar physical properties. China, which accounted for 38% of global production of REEs in 1993, increased to 97% in 2013. Subsequently, other countries have stepped up REE production. Lanthanum (La), cerium (Ce), praseodymium (Pr), neodymium (Nd), promethium (Pm), samarium (Sm), europium (Eu), gadolinium (Gd), terbium (Tb), dysprosium (Dy), holmium (Ho), erbium (Er), thulium (Tm), ytterbium (Yb), lutetium (Lu), scandium (Sc), and yttrium (Y) are the 17 REEs. The atomic number of the first fifteen REEs goes from 57 to 71, whereas the last two, i.e. Sc and Y, have atomic numbers 21 and 39, respectively. In other words, La has an atomic number of 57, Ce has 58 and so on, and it ends with Lu, which has an atomic number of 71. All elements from La to Lu are called lanthanides, or transition or f block elements. One ad-

ditional electron is filled in each successive element's 4f orbital. The most important properties of this block are that the elements form coloured compounds and possess high magnetic strength.

Further, the elements of the block form coordinate compounds, which are generally unstable compared to ionic and covalent compounds. These elements are characterised by high density, melting point, conductivity, and thermal conductance. REEs usually occur in bastnaesite (a fluorocarbonate in igneous rocks), xenotime (yttrium phosphate found in mineral sand deposits, loparite occurring in alkaline igneous rocks, and monazite (a phosphate).

High-value usage

These elements have applications in over 200 high-tech consumer products, namely electric and hybrid vehicles, computer hard drives, flat screen monitors and TVs, cellular telephones, and defence applications like electronic displays, guidance systems, lasers, submarines, radars, sonar systems, etc. Though the quantity of REE used is insignificant, it is essential for the functioning of any technology. For instance, magnets made of REE may look insignificant compared to the product's total weight, but they are critical for the spindle motors and voice coils of desktops and laptops to function correctly. Neodymium (Nd) magnets made of Nd, iron and boron have the highest strength and can withstand 230 degrees Celsius temperature. Magnets are used in automobiles, computer hard disks and digital cameras. Lanthanum (La) is used for digital and cell phone cameras. La is also used in petroleum refining and steel making. Eu, Y and Tb are used in phosphors that emit luminescence. Er is used in optical fibre and laser repeaters. Ce-based alloys are used in catalytic

converters. Ce is also used in water purifiers.

Praseodymium (Pr), neodymium (Nd), dysprosium (Dy), and terbium (Tb) are a few REEs mainly extracted in India with high levels of purity. At the same time, several other heavy REEs are not available in extractable quantities. India's REEs are found in monazite minerals in coastal states, mainly with thorium in coastal sands. Sand mining in coastal areas is thus strictly regulated.

Indian Major Earth Ltd in Visakhapatnam is a major player in mining, processing and producing rare earth compounds. It collaborates with Japan's Toyota Tsusho corporation. India and the US also signed a collaboration last year focusing on processing and strengthening environmental, social and governance frameworks to reduce dependency on China's REEs.

The extraction of REEs causes considerable environmental and health hazards, with large amount of toxic waste contaminating air, water bodies, and soil. Every tonne of REE produced results in generating 2000 tonnes of toxic waste. Rare earth ores are laced with radioactive uranium and thorium, causing significant risk to human health, especially the mine workers on the extraction sites. Millions of tonnes of wastewater are generated in China annually during REEs' extraction, separation and refinement.

Managing this is a costly affair, and experts say that the entire cost of cleanup should not only be shouldered by the Chinese government but also by rare earth industries, global companies and the consumers benefiting from the technologies.

(The author is a retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Head of Forest Force) Karnataka)

Earthly abodes built by nature's architects

DID YOU KNOW?

Indigenous people worldwide have learnt to build dwellings from mud. The mud fabric of these houses modulates climatic parameters to create comfortable living conditions within, however harsh, the outdoor weather. But long before humans, many animals constructed their homes with mud. What makes mud such a good building material? And how do animals transform this building material into sturdy, protective structures?

Wasps are a group of insects with diverse biology. Those that belong to the subfamily Eumeninae are commonly called potter wasps, which refer to the nests they build for their young using mud. A female potter wasp builds her nest singlehandedly, beginning with choosing an appropriate nesting site and cleaning it with water droplets carried in her mouth. She goes on to mix water with dry soil to make tiny balls of soil called boluses, which she then carries to the construction site.

Using her mouth parts, antennae and forelegs, she lays out the design of her mud nest, in which she will later lay an egg into a single chamber and provision with paralyzed caterpillars - food for her egg, which will hatch and feed upon the rich source of protein in the form of the paralyzed caterpillar. These wasps select the right kind of soil, constructing nests with the ideal shape and size for the offspring to develop.

While potter wasps are solitary, termites work in groups to make their mound.

Termite colonies have a caste system where individuals are assigned specific roles - workers, soldiers or reproducers - each with a set job that helps the colony survive. The blind, wingless and most numerous workers participate in the nest-building process. Research has shown how termites make nests that are stable and energy-efficient structures. Swallows, a group of small, agile birds, build nests with various materials. But the Red-rumped swallow, common in Bengaluru and nearby places, builds an inverted retort-shaped nest



made of mud. These swallows gather beakfuls of mud from riverbanks and carry it to a sheltered surface. The breeding pair take turns to layer and shape the mud with their beaks. A study investigating the mineralogical and textural characteristics of the materials used in nest construction has revealed that these swallows prefer large-grain-sized particles and a high quartz content in their nesting material.

These remarkable examples show how animals instinctively harness the unique properties of mud to build strong and functional homes. Observing them gives us insights into natural construction strategies and inspiration for creating sustainable buildings.

-SHWETA MUKUNDAN



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

1984 riots: Long way from closure

The Supreme Court's remark on the laxity of Delhi Police in prosecuting cases relating to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in the national capital is a comment on the system of justice in the country. The court told the police that prosecution should be carried out "seriously and not just for the sake of fit" as it has happened in hundreds of 1984 cases. Poor investigation and prosecution have resulted in miscarriage of justice in most of the cases. It is estimated that at least 2,733 people were killed during the riots that broke out after the assassination of former prime minister Indira Gandhi. Only 587 FIRs were filed and of them, 240 cases were closed as "un-traced." About 250 cases resulted in convictions. Even these numbers vary. There were only 39 convictions. It is an indictment of the system when only 39 convictions are awarded for the killing of over 2,700 people.

The court asked the police why it had failed to effectively appeal against the acquittals. It noted that filing Special Leave Petitions (SLPs) served no purpose unless the prosecution was pursued seriously. The court also pointed out that no senior lawyer was engaged to argue the matter. An SIT formed by the Supreme Court in 2018 on the basis of a PIL found that several investigations had been derailed. It is clear that Delhi Police was responsible for the neglect and indifference that resulted in this failure of justice; the negligence was also deliberate. It was only in May 2023 that a charge sheet was filed against Congress leader and former MP Jagdish Tytler who had, till then, managed to get away with clean chits for his role in the killings. The trial is still on. Another former MP, Sajjan Kumar, was convicted for a second time this week for his involvement in the killings. There is no good reason or justification for a 40-year delay in convictions in a criminal case. It is a matter of shame that convictions have not happened in hundreds of cases.

The absence of evidence cited as a reason by the police cannot be accepted when there was a clear lack of intent on its part in pursuing the cases. No government in Delhi has been able to persuade the police to effectively investigate the cases. There is no doubt that the political nature of the cases has constrained the police. A system of justice is tested more by its response to mass killings than by how it addresses individual crimes. The failure in cases such as the 1984 riots and the 2002 Gujarat riots is collective; the system and society cannot evade responsibility.

Convictions in only 39 cases tell a story of abject indifference by investigators

Bracing for the AI boom

The Artificial Intelligence (AI) summit which concluded in Paris on Tuesday was an attempt to find common ground among nations on the use and aims of the world's newest technology. AI has the capability to revolutionise patterns of life and work in ways that the Industrial Revolution and similar events have done. It has positive and negative aspects and a consensual approach based on common good and mutual interests is required. The summit, co-hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saw wide-ranging deliberations on various aspects, including the future of AI governance, its applications, innovation and ethics. There were concerns over both regulatory overreach and unregulated use of AI. The policy on AI has ranged in the world from the US liberal approach to the EU's accent on regulation to China's focus on control. At the summit, as many as 61 countries including China, France, Germany and India signed a declaration that said AI should be "open, inclusive, transparent, ethical, safe, secure and trustworthy, taking into account international frameworks." A complete consensus could not be evolved, and the US and Britain did not sign it.

Prime Minister Modi spoke of the potential of AI and the need to be aware of its negative side. He said AI is "writing the code for humanity in this century" and he looked for a future where open-source systems enhance trust and transparency and where technology is democratised and "rooted in local ecosystems." Modi called for setting standards for AI which will benefit all countries, particularly in the Global South. The Prime Minister highlighted the advances made by India, particularly the development of Large Language Models. India is the fourth highest-rated AI power in the world and has strength and potential to advance it. The importance India attaches to it may be seen from the offer it received to host the next edition of the summit.

The most important concerns over AI are its potential misuse, the threat of it replacing human labour and intelligence, and the inequality among nations arising from the unequal advances they make in developing the technology. There is also the worry among many that the technology may become a threat to humanity. There are explanations and answers to counter the concerns, and they found expression at the summit. Modi was hopeful that the technology will not have a negative impact on jobs. He said only the nature of jobs change, necessitating "skilling and re-skilling" of people. The potential of AI and the concerns over AI call for common policies and actions, and the deliberations at summits and other conclaves should move the world towards them.

AI's potential, regulatory concerns and risks of misuse together call for global consensus

It should instead use the Trump playbook and push its own set of non-negotiables

JAGDISH RATTANANI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has met Donald Trump, the 47th US President who is busy executing his wild project to reorder the world. In this, Modi became one of the few leaders to meet Trump in the first flush of his disruptive presidency. The *New York Times* put it rather well in its early reporting on the meeting: "...it became clear that Modi was the latest leader to placate Trump."

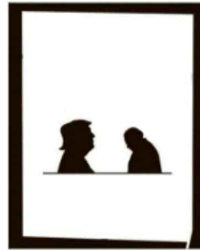
There is, in principle, nothing wrong in placating a powerful world leader who has been described variously as narcissistic, egotistic, even solipsistic. But placating is different from an over-zealous endorsement of positions and policies that have raised many questions and worries across the globe. India started with the former by praising Trump as an inspiring leader. But somewhere this slipped into different territory when the idea of a *Viksit Bharat* (developed India) got transcribed into the language of MAGA politics.

This is how Modi put it: "If I say in the language of America, developed India means Make India Great Again, i.e. 'MIGA'. When the United States and India work together, i.e. 'MAGA' plus 'MIGA', the 'mega' partnership for prosperity is formed. And this mega spirit gives new scale and scope to our goals." The effusive language came despite the fact that Trump unhesitatingly announced reciprocal tariffs that would clearly impact India and in fact, underlined the tariffs in his remarks with Modi, calling out India as "just about the highest tariffs nation in the world". He added for good measure that "whatever India charges, we will charge them."

It was always clear that Trump would play by his own rules, and put India under pressure, as indeed he has done with other nations. Some of his ways are based on simplistic ideas set out in his book *Art of the Deal* — a cocky real estate developer's manual stretched thin to apply to other fields, and to life itself. Chapter 2 of the vintage 1997 book, republished in a mass market

edition in 2005, is titled *Trump Cards: The Elements of the Deal* and it begins thus: "My style of deal making is quite simple and straightforward. I aim very high, and then I just keep pushing and pushing and pushing to get what I want. Sometimes, I settle for less than I sought, but in most cases I still end up with what I want."

American foreign policy has always been about American interests, marked by short-termism and an instrumentalism that has many of its claims to principles of openness, democracy or peace sound hollow. Now, the mask is off, the pretence of values is gone, and naked power-play is at work. India will need to carefully navigate this partnership,



expecting to be pushed, and so has to be ready with its own list of asks and red lines and non-negotiables. In short, the Trump playbook will have to be used against Trump.

Politics in play

Modi, and India, would be helped in this if the nation has a foreign policy approach that all political parties could sign up and profess as the agreed Indian consensus. In this, the BJP needs the Congress and other parties on its side to make strong, clear and specific demands on Trump instead of caving in on every ask made from the other side. But political bitterness has been brought even to foreign affairs, the bureaucrat-turned-foreign minister S Jaishankar personally feeding into some of it with barbs against Opposition leaders that apparently secure his position in the BJP and with the Prime Minister. Without this forced injection

of bitterness, it should not have been difficult to have an all-party consensus to publicly condemn the way the Trump administration has begun the deportation of unauthorised Indians.

The use of a military plane, with Indian citizens under deportation orders set in chains, and the act duly promoted in a video by the US agencies, is in poor taste and tries to showcase a negative image of India at the cost of dignity and rights of Indian citizens. It is shocking that Indians are being treated no different from migrants who have been called "high threat criminal illegal aliens".

India should condemn the US for treating Indians thus. The Prime Minister chose not to speak out on this openly. However, he correctly pointed out that gangs who help smuggle people illegally across borders must be curbed and that those who are poor are being misled and lured into a trap. This is the correct position. But the next logical step is to ask Americans not to treat Indians found to be undocumented as criminals, or put them in shackles as they are sent back. Instead, the Indian foreign minister has earlier been quoted as saying that this is normal procedure for the US. "The standard operating procedure for deportations by aircraft used by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement of the US) that is effective from 2012, provides for the use of restraints," he said. How does this help at all? Is Jaishankar, the foreign minister of a *Vishwaguru* nation not ashamed about this treatment of ordinary Indians?

The planned deportation of 20,000 Indians from the US will require an endless stream of flights, if all are to be sent back, not to speak of more who are being caught as raids by US immigration continue. None of them should be allowed to be detained without access to lawyers, medical aid and humane conditions at the facilities they are kept in. None of them should be allowed to be sent back in chains. This is not to speak of other issues on which Trump will continue to push as teams from the two nations iron out energy deals and defence supplies. India can play along but only up to a point. It is important to draw a clear line beyond which India will not give in.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR, Syndicate, The Birlon Press)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

My boss is always right. Or is he?

Both my boss and I defied the sacred management commandments

ODIYANDA K MUTHAPPA

When I joined TCE in Mumbai nearly six decades ago, a senior colleague jokingly told me, "The boss is always right, as per the Ninth Management Commandment. And if he's wrong, refer to the Tenth, which says to follow the Ninth!" This memory resurfaced recently during discussions about grueling 70-90 hour workweeks.

After seven years in Mumbai, I was transferred to TCE's Bangalore (now Bengaluru) division, where I worked under the exceptional leadership of my boss, whom I'll refer to as Bsl. A Tata Power expert in thermal power plant operations, Bsl possessed outstanding vision and managerial skills.

In the early 1970s, TCE was engaged by several electricity boards, including private sector companies, to engineer their

new projects. Bsl and I, as a core group head, attended numerous technical meetings with clients and vendors. Two incidents from that time still amuse me.

The first occurred after a meeting at BHEL, Hyderabad, for TNEB. Bsl and I were travelling to Delhi to catch a flight to Bengaluru when our taxi scratched to a halt to avoid hitting a herd of pigs. While the pigs escaped unscathed, a group of villagers, seemingly ready for a confrontation, rushed towards us. Without hesitation, Bsl instructed the driver to speed away. He quipped that stopping would have led to unnecessary arguments and a missed flight. I agreed. It was a classic example of the Ninth Commandment in action.

The second incident, however, left me puzzled. In 1981, we received a call from the Gujarat Electricity Board requiring a study on installing a desalination plant combined with a 120 MW thermal power plant in a coastal area to address water scarcity in nearby villages. We prepared a detailed presentation with about 40 transparencies for overhead projectors. PowerPoints were unheard of then — and travelled to the Wanak-

bori thermal project site for the board meeting. We landed in Ahmedabad on the previous evening and proceeded to Wanakbori after dinner by road in a taxi.

An hour into the journey at around 10 pm, a group of men with sticks tried to stop our car. Seeing danger, I urged the driver to speed up, ignoring Bsl's unusual suggestion to stop. Bsl teased me, saying, "You, being from the land of soldiers (Kodagu), are afraid of these people?" I insisted it was unsafe, and the driver confirmed that the area was known for unruly gangs. I concluded that Bsl was wrong, defying the Ninth, and in effect the Tenth, Management Commandment. But his stance remained a mystery. While the GEB project did not come through, even now, I wonder what prompted him to suggest stopping the car.

After retirement, Bsl donated his wealth to social welfare and moved to Salem, Tamil Nadu. Though he is no more, I hold him in high regard as one of my most revered mentors. The unresolved conundrum of that night lingers in my mind, a testament to the complexity of human thought.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ragging is cruelty. Perpetrators should be punished

This refers to 'Chilling video of ragging in Kerala nursing college goes viral' (Feb 14). It is utterly appalling and shocking that young nursing students would engage in such behaviour, and even more disturbing that the college authorities seem to have turned a blind eye. Ragging is a scourge that has no place in any civilised society. It is nothing short of cruelty, and those responsible must

be held accountable. The police must take immediate action and ensure that perpetrators are punished severely. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for legislation to ban ragging nationwide. Anyone found guilty of ragging should face severe punishment, including being barred from pursuing education in any institution.

AR Ravichandran, Bengaluru

image. However, it is time to overhaul the ranking and accreditation system to ensure transparency and accountability.

Albert Smith, Bengaluru

Autonomy is important

Apropos 'UGC regulations: A degree of overreach?' (Feb 13), India's higher education system is indeed diverse and vibrant. However, the UGC's regulatory expansion into university governance raises concerns.

While regulation is necessary to ensure quality and accountability, over-regulation can stifle innovation and autonomy. To strike a balance, the government and regulatory

bodies must create an enabling environment that promotes autonomy, innovation, and collaboration. This can be achieved by reducing bureaucratic hurdles, providing adequate funding, and encouraging industry-academia partnerships. By doing so, India's higher education system can address pressing challenges, such as ensuring accessibility, promoting research, and aligning programmes with industry needs.

MR Ranganatha, Bengaluru

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

SPEAK OUT

...We are all sure that the PM's visit will yield results for India and pave the way for the growth and development of the world.



CV Ananda Bose, West Bengal Governor

Politicians have a special reality... It's like they're in a play, and we're not even in the audience.

Jerry Seinfeld

TO BE PRECISE

'MAGA, MIGA unite for MAGA partnership': PM after meeting Trump



IN PERSPECTIVE

Bridging a hard border

India and Bangladesh must balance security concerns with welfare of people in border region

S K SAINI

Md Tushid Hossain, foreign adviser to the interim government of Bangladesh, has now acknowledged that there have been attacks on minority communities in Bangladesh but castigated the Indian mainstream and social media for propagating exaggerated or false narratives on the incidents. Hossain argued that the first step towards improving the bilateral ties would be putting an end to the killing of unarmed civilians at the border.

There has been heightened tension along the border since the new regime took over in Bangladesh last year. Increasing incidents of illegal construction, border crossing, and firing have been reported. Statistics widely quoted in Bangladesh claim that 25 Bangladeshi nationals were killed in 2024.

According to the BSF, it apprehended 2,294 Bangladeshi nationals on the border while they were attempting to infiltrate into Indian territory. In 2024, as many as 69 BSF personnel were injured in attacks by armed men, smugglers and other criminals along the border. While in 2023, the number of injured personnel was 74.

Problems over management of the Indo-Bangladesh land border arose within months of Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Today, the border represents both a symbol of the strained relationship between the two countries and a major obstacle to its improvement. Rapid deterioration in the bilateral relations in the years preceding 2005 can be largely attributed to the unstable security situation on the border. Periodic occurrence of unpleasant incidents on the border, including civilian deaths and injuries at the hands of the security forces, mostly by the BSF, is a reality and has a disproportionate psychological impact on the Bangladeshis.

The deaths of Bangladeshi nationals on the border are perceived in Bangladesh as indiscriminate killings of innocent, unarmed civilians by an unsympathetic entity, violation of domestic and international laws. Such incidents are also perceived as arrogant action by a stronger neighbour. India feels that instead of forming the border fatalities "killings", they should be classified as "deaths" since they are not intentional. Moreover, all Bangladeshi nationals who have died in BSF firing were found in Indian territory.

Influenced by the wars with China and Pakistan over unsettled borders, the Indian mindset has been shaped by the imperative to ensure territorial integrity by securing borders, irrespective of the costs involved. Border friction

between India and Bangladesh is essentially the result of paucity of resources and economic disparities. This is borne out by assertions of former Pakistani prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, laying claims to the Indian state of Assam with its abundant resources to overcome paucity of land in East Pakistan and to make it financially and economically strong.

Two nations, two approaches

Based on these existential considerations, Bangladesh views border management issues more from a humanistic and benign perspective, tacitly disregarding harsh measures to counter smuggling and illegal border crossings. The current conceptions being adopted in border management by both countries are at variance. While India follows a more security-oriented philosophy, disregarding public sentiment, Bangladesh espouses a milder approach based on ground realities.

Most of the outstanding border issues are not directly territorial but of access to resources and livelihood. As a result, disputes that do not involve territorial claims but are resource-based have a better chance of being managed. Both countries need to deconflict their border-guarding approaches and apply humanitarian principles where appropriate. For this, the focus should shift to the people, which include the security personnel, the locals, as well as the migrants who are stakeholders in effective border management.

While Bangladesh needs to impose tighter controls to address Indian concerns, India needs to tone down its excessive security-centric approach by striking a balance between its security concerns and welfare of the people residing in the border region. The notion of a hard border needs to be relatively de-emphasised, to make a workable compromise between functionality, security and territoriality.

Failures in border management, including the occurrence of violent clashes involving the forces, demand an integrated border management strategy at the national level and a harmonised, joint border management policy between the two countries. Both India and Bangladesh will have to develop mechanisms that ensure that security concerns do not result in strained relations. Devising these mechanisms is going to be an arduous task. Border management, if refined based on peoples' aspirations and current dynamics, is one fact that can change perceptions of the common masses found in Bangladesh towards India. This is where border management becomes an essential adjunct to policy formulation for achieving a sustainable Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship.

(The writer is a former Vice Chief of the Indian Army)

What is MAGAnomics?



ANTARA HALDER

While the end of World War II 80 years ago ushered in an age of reason, Donald Trump's return to the White House has ushered it out. His MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement promises to take a wrecking ball to the postwar global economic order, raising the question of what will replace it. "America First" seems to appeal to a wide spectrum of constituents, from blue-collar workers in the heartland to Big Tech "brologers". But what does it mean in prac-

tice? Is there any method to Mr Trump's madness, or does he believe, like Mao Zedong, that "Everything under heaven is in chaos; the situation is excellent"?

At his second inauguration, Mr Trump announced a new American "golden age", which presumably would be achieved by delivering on his campaign promises to end inflation, impose new tariffs, expel undocumented immigrants, cut taxes, and radically reduce the size of government. But mainstream economists were quick to point out that achieving these contradictory objectives simultaneously would be difficult, if not impossible. After all, tariffs, deportations, and tax cuts are all potentially inflationary.

What are we to make of MAGA economics—or what is variously referred to as "economic nationalism", "Trumponomics", or "populist economics"? Is it the progeny of economics, or something else entirely? Economics traditionally has comprised coherent schools

of thought: Neoclassical, Keynesian, monetarist, and Marxian economics, for example, follow a certain internal logic. But MAGAnomics is an intellectual grab bag.

Start with Mr Trump's emphasis on tariffs, which represents a repudiation of neoclassical economics' commitment to free trade and a return to mercantilism or the heterodox developmentism of the left. Meanwhile, "industrial policy"—active government interventions to support strategic industries, which are typically associated with government-led planned economies—somehow coexists with the echoes of anarcho-liberalism implied by the war on the "deep state". Likewise, whereas the rejection of austerity and tolerance for deficit spending smack of Keynesianism, the focus on deregulation and tax cuts harks back to Ronald Reagan and trickle-down economics.

Thus, MAGAnomics is simultaneously considered to be "pro-business" (corporate-tax cuts and deregulation)

and "pro-worker" (reindustrialisation, reshoring, and anti-immigration). By rejecting the logic of Ricardian comparative advantage, Mr Trump rejects the supreme criterion of neoclassical economics: Efficiency. While some commentators have attempted to position MAGAnomics as a descendant of Hamiltonian economic philosophy or the paleo-conservatism of Pat Buchanan, many others see it simply as the result of a long-standing dissatisfaction with globalisation.

MAGAnomics has undoubtedly absorbed arguments from Mr Trump's senior counsellor for trade, Peter Navarro (a protectionist China hawk), Robert Lighthizer (a free-trade skeptic), Oren Cass (a conservative champion of the American worker), and Stephen Moore (a talking head and consummate Trump flatterer). But unlike traditional schools of economic thought, MAGAnomics operates as a pastiche of contradictory doctrines and impulses crammed together under the banner of nationalism and grievance politics. Mr Trump's brand of economic

nationalism resonates not because of any theoretical coherence but through its emotional appeal. The currency of MAGAnomics is not analytical rigour; it is affect—wounded pride, humiliation, and, above all, anger.

That is why the best explanations may lie outside of economics. Consider sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's work on the "deep story" of Mr Trump's supporters: How they see themselves as waiting in line for the American Dream, only to be snubbed off by outsiders and elites, women, and minorities. Here we find the psychological basis for MAGAnomics' appeal, even when its policies are inconsistent or contradictory. Mr Trump reframes their pride as having been "stolen", and urges them to channel it into blame.

It is ironic, to be sure, that neoclassical economics, so rigorous and elegant, has met its match in an intellectual mashup. But this is consistent with a defining feature of MAGAnomics: Its animus toward experts and elites. In replacing the technocratic logic of postwar economics, it redefines the American worker not as an

economic agent in a model but as a symbolic figure in a larger struggle against "globalisation" and cultural displacement. Its power lies in its ability to channel collective frustrations into a political agenda whose purpose is not economic stewardship but cultural messaging.

MAGAnomics may not qualify as a school of economic thought, but economists need to recognise that it is no mere aberration, but rather a symptom of the deeper, longstanding shunning of the orthodoxy that prevailed in the aftermath of World War II. A reckoning is in order, not just with Trumpism but with the assumptions that made it possible in the first place. Many are blaming MAGA's rise on the Democratic Party's disarray; but the economics establishment may be even more at fault. Until and unless economists get their discipline's house in order, the MAGA madness will be here to stay.

The author is associate professor of empirical legal studies at the University of Cambridge ©Project Syndicate, 2025

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Varying constants of Delhi



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

"Mazda na gya" chanted a functionary of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Delhi after the Assembly election results, which installed the party in power in the city (the party lost power in 1998). "But the path of the new chief minister is not going to be easy." He was referring to new power equations that the verdict will throw up for the administration of Delhi.

Over the past few years, the lieutenant governor (LG) of Delhi has been empowered in a variety of ways. In 2023, an ordinance that was later passed by Parliament—the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act—established the National Capital Civil Services Authority, which consists of the chief minister, chief secretary of Delhi, and principal home secretary of Delhi. The Authority can recommend to the LG transfers and postings of officials and disciplinary matters. This means the elected government cannot appoint, transfer, or post bureaucrats.

On August 5 last year the Supreme Court upheld the authority of the LG to nominate 10 persons with special knowledge of municipal administration to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) was a statutory duty attached to his office and he was not bound by the aid and advice

of the council of ministers. The specific issue was the appointment of 10 aldermen to the MCD, to which the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government objected on grounds that only public order, police, and land were within the Centre's remit. On everything else the LG (and the Centre) was bound by the aid and advice of the council of ministers. Not so, said the Supreme Court, relying on the letter of the law governing Centre-Delhi government relations, as well as earlier judgments that sought to strike a balance between the elected regime and the appointed administrator.

Then a few weeks later, President Droupadi Murmu delegated powers to the LG to constitute any authority, board, commission or statutory body under any law enacted by Parliament applicable to the Delhi government. The AAP didn't even try to contest this. Because the Centre is empowered under Article 239 of the Constitution, read with Section 45D of the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991, to take the decision.

Under the AAP, the BJP needed to control the Capital and rule with a heavy hand. But under a BJP government and chief minister, these powers still be necessary? It is a moot question. Even more pertinent, will the LG be ready to rule with a light hand, having been vested with powers that amount to using a hammer to kill a fly?

In Delhi-Centre relations, there is another political aspect that needs to be watched. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is the authority that oversees most aspects of Delhi's administration. The BJP is likely to get a new national president in the next few weeks. A lot will depend on the equation between the president of the BJP and Union Home Minister Amit Shah. We must never forget

that statehood, such as it is, for Delhi was a struggle that the BJP helmed, led by Madan Lal Khurana. Most in the BJP were happy when the AAP government's powers were enunciated, on the grounds that the party just could not be trusted with Delhi. But in many ways, Delhi has regressed from the BJP's original struggle for statehood. A party president will understand and sympathise with this, but will be a person with the political stature and authority to tell the home ministry and the LG that an elected Delhi government is now perfectly capable of taking decisions in the city's interests?

The MCD is held by the AAP. The Centre has two options: It can dissolve the MCD and hold fresh polls, or it can run the body through commissioners. This further centralises powers and makes you wonder why elections to the MCD are even held.

The BJP is mindful that on the ground the AAP still exists. And so does the Congress. In 14 seats of the Delhi Assembly, the Congress got more votes than the margin of defeat of the AAP. On at least one seat, the Majlis e Ittehadul Muslimin (MIM) contributed to a three-way opposition split that led to the victory of the BJP (Mohan Singh Bhatnagar from Mustafabad). Granted these are arithmetical rather than political equations. But it will take no time at all for the AAP, which is more comfortable in a role as an Opposition than a ruling party anyway, to ask the BJP uncomfortable questions about its powerlessness vis-à-vis the Centre. While it is unlikely the BJP will make any real administrative changes in the city of Delhi is now governed, it might have to tweak the optics of how it runs the city. Otherwise, all Madan Lal Khurana's sacrifices will have been for nothing.

Deep state, shallow state, non-state

The deep state has now become the engine of conspiracy theories across democracies. America was the first and India is catching up fast. Many European democracies are on the bandwagon too

It's early days in 2025 yet, but the "deep state" looks like the frontrunner for winning the "word of the year" honours. Anything goes wrong and we blame this sinister entity—the deep state.

Except that it isn't so mythical. It is as much a part of our lives and system of governance as shallow state and non-state. We shall explore these definitions and how these intermesh as we go along. However, the deep state, often just called DS, has now become the engine of conspiracy theories across democracies.

The first thing we need to look at is the dictionary/Wikipedia definition of it: Potentially secret and unauthorised network of power operating independently of a state's political leadership in pursuit of its own agenda and goals. Of course, it all has a negative and conspiratorial connotation. Then, let's follow our usual three-example formula and list these specific issues/events.

• The regime change in Bangladesh. It was sudden, violent at street level, leaderless and dramatic. It's been widely blamed on the US deep state (we will use DS hereon). It's also been called a US (United States) DS success, with the insinuation that similar operations were planned in India as well. Because, of course, the Biden administration and the DS do not like Narendra Modi.

• Next, the series of exposures on the Adani group across two years. Many came from a shadowy short-seller Hindenburg, which vapourised as mysteriously as it had appeared on the scene. There were also many other stories that came in through organisations supported or funded by OCCRP (Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project). There is also the ICJI, or the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. Both these organisations supported investigations leading to stories on the Adani group. The conspiracy theory is that this was an indirect attack on the Modi government. In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted at the outset of the current Budget session of Parliament that this was the first in many years that a session was beginning without any "mischievous from abroad".

• And the third, two difficult and embarrass-

ing situations India was caught in—in Canada and the US—were linked to Sikh radical operations there. In each of these cases, the American media highlighted the stories in great detail and persisted with the coverage as did the *Financial Times* in the case of Adani. All of this, the argument is, couldn't be a coincidence. It must have been the work of DS. And you know what, now even Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and their lieutenants are all complaining about it as they set out to drain the swamp.

So far so good, and we then examine each in some detail. On Bangladesh we are sure this was merely the handiwork of some "potentially secret and unauthorised" group that worked under the US government radar? If you saw the pictures of George Soros' son flying in to meet Chief Adviser Mohammed Yunus in Dhaka last month, your suspicions will be strengthened.

Then also see that *Los Angeles Times* was allowed to use just once the description I usually ban in my own newsworld for anything but a sculpture) picture of a dotting Joe Biden with his arm around Yunus' shoulders.

If Hasina's downfall was really engineered by the Americans, was it by some DS working on its own? Or in conjunction with the Modi government? The Biden Administration? This won't pass the conspiracy theorists' definition of DS.

There are shadowy, amorphous, vaguely defined organisations that work as instruments of a regular outfit. A trick question follows: How will you describe the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jash-e-Mohammed? As non-state actors which the Pakistanis would? Or DS? Both will give the Pakistan state plausible deniability. They are the state, and they mean enormous harm to India.

The Adani issue might be a bit more complex because in most of the stories from Hindenburg and OCCRP, there is no clear US government role. So, was DS at play? But then, the US Department of Justice and Securities and Exchange Commission came up with indictments potentially and a lot more threatening than Hindenburg's. Now, were Hindenburg and OCCRP working independent of the state, or in cahoots with it? Or vice versa?

And finally, the issues India faced in Canada and the US over Nijjar and Pannun. The notion of this being DS activity was brought in mostly because some in the US and Canadian media were particularly active on this. All of their stories, however, were based on briefings by their own intelligence officials.

One way of looking at DS is the bureaucracy, civil services, police, armed forces, judiciary, reg-

ulators, election commission and other institutions that span the terms of multiple governments. They follow the rule book, provide continuity, and protect the family silver. Between 1996 and 1999, India had six Prime Ministers. It was a brilliant set of civil servants, military leaders, and nuclear scientists who kept continuity with our strategic programme, protected it, and didn't let a word leak.

The same system can act differently. If they kept the nuclear assets all so secret and defined as "peaceful" all of these decades, they made them open and military in 1998. Why?

That's because the Vajpayee government asked them to do so. This DS, which provides continuity and also assurance on broad policies and sovereign commitments remaining intact, also changes when political leaders command so. Those we describe as the shallow state.

"Shallow" is not to denote weakness but because they're transient. Actually, they are the ones with real power. It is used only because the political leadership will have the deeper state apparatus at their command. It is only when the shallow state is weak that DS takes over the affairs. We saw this play out just after Manmohan Singh signed the nuclear deal.

Much of the opposition to it was based on leaks from his office and his Ministry of External Affairs by career civil servants, partly motivated by ingrained anti-Americanism and partly by those who found the change too drastic.

That is why the nuclear liability law was so poisoned as to make the entire deal fruitless. This is precisely what the Modi government's Budget just promised to change and which the Modi-Trump joint statement has taken note of.

And finally, where does non-state feature? From ancient times, sovereigns have used the cover of non-state actors to take their cause forward.

From Ashoka of Ashokan 3rd century BC and medieval Sufis to Oxfam, Omidyar and Soros now, non-state actors have any real power only when they work in conjunction with a real state. What is the US Agency for International Development, for example? It can't be DS because it is very much an instrument of the American state. So much so that Marco Rubio has now taken direct charge of it and moved it in the state government. The Trumpian objection is that it had been hijacked by Leftist ideologues who were using it to indulge their own fancy and not to further American interests.

Jump millennia to present-day India and ask what the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will say it is a non-state entity, and, in fact, the world's largest non-government organisation. Ask the Congress, and they will call it the BJP's DS. The exact equation will apply if you asked the BJP and the Congress what Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council was. One shallow state antagonist's DS is the other's non-state entity.

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Release for grief

EYE CULTURE

RANJITA GANESAN

"Are you okay?" A seemingly inadequate question to produce during someone's time of grief. Yet, when Balaya, a protagonist in *Sabar Bonda*, poses it to his bereaved friend Anand, away from the earshot of the relatives, who are too consumed by ritual organisation to worry about emotional comfort—it serves to put oxygen back in the airless room. A reminder that in painful situations it is not the language of a question that matters so much as the sincerity in its asking.

The response he receives is just as momentous for its naturalness: "I don't know." Anand has lost his father, a parent who accepted his quirkiness and whose support had nourished him—an answerless sort of hurt. Rohan Kanawade's feature-length debut, about the connection Anand and Balaya form over the course of the traditional 10 days of mourning recently won the grand jury prize for world cinema at the Sundance Film Festival.

The question "Are you okay?" appeared repeatedly in this Sundance in several films that chose to hold sorrow to the light. A consequence perhaps of the past few years, which have involved incalculable suffering but have allowed little room for coming to terms. The Marathi-language *Sabar Bonda* had company in a Portland-set buddy

comedy about losing a twin (*Twinsies*), a documentary where a terminally ill poet reflects on living (*Come See Me In The Good Light*), and a zom-com drawing from the horrors of the pandemic (*Didnt Die*).

Grief is a tragic fact with no resolution without. So the inevitable long senseless endings of that period: "No one ever told me that grief feels so much like fear" (CS Lewis) and "You can go on losing after loss" (Hélène Cixous). The film is stitched together with Viníty's irreverent narrations that bring out the peculiarity of trying to stay alive even as one watches their dearest go.

A vastly more hopeful approach to sorrow comes from Andrea Gibson, the subject of the documentary *Come See Me In The Good Light*, who proceeds heart-first as the other side of life calls. As one crushing diagnosis after another arrives, the poet laureate of Colorado surrounds themselves with the vitalising warmth of friends. For instance, Gibson's partner Megan Falley finds an ingenious tech solution to the reality of not being able to grow old together: Using a face-aging app for her proposal video.

Loss is humanity's lot, but as Gibson reaches usently for her best gifts—love, humour, creation—we see it ought to be a connecting idea rather than an isolating one. In the poet's own words, "Happiness becomes easier to find once we realise we do not have forever to find it."

there are well-imagined echoes of Covid here. The protagonist Vinity does what so many did in lockdown: Start a podcast. "I wonder if any of the people I know 'made it'. That used to mean being famous, but now it just means being here," she ponders.

Director Meera Menon and co-writer Paul Gleason turn to the words of wise men and women to make sense of the slow yet sudden, wonder if any of the people I know "made it". That used to mean being famous, but now it just means being here," she ponders.

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Delebrities neverfade away



SANDEEP GOYAL

YES, BUT...

The recent India Art Fair in Delhi was a living ode to "delebrities". Delebrities are dead celebrities who continue to be remembered, celebrated, and valued. The art fair was ruled by the works of S H Raza, F N Souza, M F Husain, Vasudeo S Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta, and Gogi Saroj Pal among many others whose posthumous fame continued to attract rich-art collectors. These delebrities artists all command stratospheric prices, and their works sell like hot cakes to well-heeled, knowledgeable, discerning buyers.

Dead celebrities remain valuable because their creative works—art, music, movies, or books—continue to generate exponential value through actual sales, through royalties, licensing deals, and merchandise even after their death, allowing their inheritors (or their estate) to earn significant revenue from their

legacy. These celebrities were obviously highly influential figures during their lifetime; and their art or creative output continues to be consumed and appreciated by fans long after they are gone.

Michael Jackson, the Prince of Pop, died in 2009 but still makes hundreds of millions of dollars each year, more than many top celebs of today. Jackson was one of the biggest names in world music during his peak in the 1980s and 1990s. And even though controversies took away some of the sheen from his stardom, even death failed to dim his fame or fortune. After his sudden demise, Jackson's estate has continued to monetise his celebrity status through royalties earned from his countless chartbusters.

According to *Forbes*, "The Highest Paid Dead Celebrities of 2024", Jackson has earned more than \$3.3 billion since his death. His earnings of \$115 million in 2023 (\$600 million in 2024), for example, beat Elvis Presley (\$100 million) and the Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek (\$45 million). In 2024, Freddie Mercury's earnings in 2024 were \$250 million while Prince cashed in at \$35 million and Bob Marley at \$34 million. John Lennon at \$17 million too was not far behind.

Painter Raza was already a legend by the time he passed

away. But death has magnified the value of his works manifold, as no new Razas will any longer hit the market. "Gestation", a 1989 S H Raza painting, sold at a Pundole's auction in Mumbai for ₹51.75 crore (\$6.27 million). "Gestation" is possibly the most expensive Indian artwork ever to be sold at an auction. His work was already repeatedly tipping the one crore mark by the time he died in 2011. But his prices have risen by 2000 per cent since then—an artwork by the late Husain titled *Voices* sold for ₹18.47 crore at an online AstaZur auction in 2020. Similar statistics are true for other Indian masters.

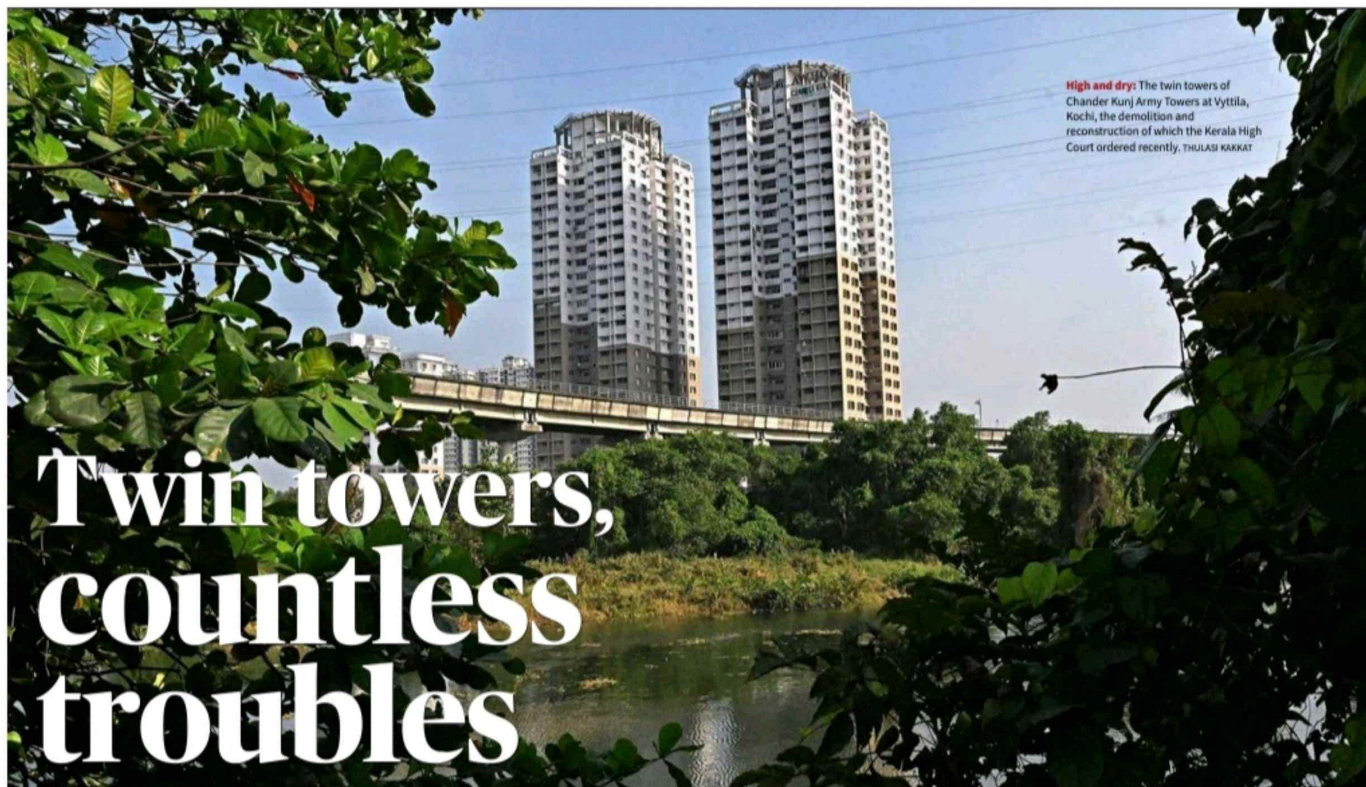
An interesting debate, especially in today's age of artificial intelligence, is whether the dead celebrities should be brought back to life beyond fan memories. The late John Lennon's 1980 cemented his reputation as a musical visionary and cultural icon. Since then, Yoko Ono and Sean Ono Lennon, the couple's son, have maintained his legacy, cultural ubiquity, and fame. Until that, he is allowed Celine Dion to use him to sell cars. In 2010 advert, Lennon was seen in a studio setting, discussing the notion of nostalgia in grey colour. His image was then cut to reveal the new Citroën. Squaring "imagine no possessions" with such a flagrantly commercial act is a tough ask, there being no cul-

tural association between the value of his works and the product. In his defence, Sean Lennon argued that it was designed to keep his father in the public consciousness and introduce his image and personality to a new, younger audience. In reality, it was an attempt to ensure the value of Lennon's image, persona, and music. But a reputation can be easily tarnished. Lennon's eloquence and idealism endowed him with unique intellectual weight and gravitas. To squander this by using him to sell a car was a mistake.

India's biggest celebrity, at least in recent living memory, has been Mahatma Gandhi. Since his death The Father of the Nation has adorned our currency notes and postage stamps, and has had his name emblazoned on hundreds of roads, garlands, public buildings and institutions. But (Gandhi's) celebrity brand is getting somewhat diluted and diminished as lesser and lesser currency notes are used today as everyone is going digital. And letters have long been replaced by e-mail. You see that even the Mahatma is fading away. In earlier decades, *Munnaabhai* nevertheless rejuvenated his somewhat strong delebrities have a way of bouncing back—they rarely fade away.

The author is chairman of Rediffusion

KERALA



High and dry: The twin towers of Chander Kunj Army Towers at Vyttila, Kochi, the demolition and reconstruction of which the Kerala High Court ordered recently. THULASI KAKKAT

Twin towers, countless troubles

A group of retired military personnel, who chose to settle down in Kochi after their decades-long toil across various military installations, have found themselves homeless as the apartments they purchased have become unliveable. A recent judicial intervention has warranted the demolition of the multi-storey apartment complexes. **M. P. Praveen** chronicles the emotional and financial crises of the military veterans

If ever an installation was to epitomise the fury of a man cheated of his life's savings, then the one in the parking lot 72 in Tower B of Chander Kunj Army Towers on Silver-sand Island, Vyttila, Kochi, would come close.

On the floor, spread out like a floral carpet are concrete flakes of different sizes and shapes. Alongside it, arranged on a bowl kept on a footstool are thin, rusted rebars (reinforcing bars) and brown-coloured dust into which many similar rusted rebars have been reduced into. Paul Eriinjery, 73, who retired as a captain after 28 years in the Indian Army did not painstakingly collect them from far and wide to fulfil some exotic post-retirement artistic flair.

Rather, they tumbled down off the roofs or the countless renovations forced upon many of the 208 apartment owners in Towers B and C of the apartment complex, located about a km away from the busy Vyttila Junction.

"One of my two apartments, which together cost me around ₹1.40 crore, is now a storehouse of the debris and documents revealing how we are in danger of losing our apartments just seven years after they were delivered to us," Paul says.

Court orders demolition, reconstruction

On February 3, 2025, the Kerala High Court ordered the demolition and reconstruction of the two towers "to prevent casualties and protect lives and properties."

The High Court order came on a batch of writ petitions filed by the association of the owners and some individual owners. They had challenged an order from the District Collector directing retrofitting and sought reconstruction as well as compensation. The court observed that multiple inspections confirmed severe corrosion in the reinforced concrete due to high chloride content. Several assessments pointed out a lack of quality control procedures during construction. "The presence of chlorides indicates an inherent flaw in construction practices or materials, which require comprehensive structural treatment rather than surface-level fixes which had proven inadequate," the court observed.

Chander Kunj Army Towers, a gated community near Thykoodam metro station, was developed by the Army Welfare Housing Organisation (AWHO), a registered society controlled by the Indian Army, solely for serving and retired defence personnel and their dependents. The construction was carried out by Silpa Projects and Infrastructure Pvt. Ltd. and the architect and the project management consultant was Ajith Architects. The project was supervised locally by an officer of the rank of Colonel who was in charge as the Project Director, AWHO.

264 apartments in three towers

It has 264 apartments in three towers, two (B and C) towers of which are 29 floors each and the third (A tower) with 16 floors, across 4.25 acres. The project commenced in 2013 and the delivery of apartments began in 2018 though the apartment owners allege that the completion certificate was procured fraudulently when the work was still incomplete.

V.V. Krishnan, 43, a Lieutenant Commander enlisted with the Indian Navy under the Short Service Commission, had completed his 12-year service by the time he received delivery of his apartment, which he bought for ₹75 lakh.

He recalls how the two towers comprising 208 flats started to show signs of structural dis-



We will shortly inspect the site to take a call on evacuation, demolition, and removal of debris

N.S.K. UMESH
District Collector

stress in the first year itself with large chunks of concrete falling and tiles starting tenting.

Cracks on walls and staircases, spalling of concrete, and the collapse of concrete flakes off the roof and granite claddings off the wall are now commonplace. The basement with many foundational pillars stripped off concrete, exposing the highly corroded rebars, can spook even the courageous ones. Then there is the highly corroded retaining wall, which has assumed a yellowish tinge with the rebars on the verge of protruding through the wall.

Safeguarded by a flimsy net

On the ground floor, a net has been stretched along the circumference of the towers to protect people from the free-falling concrete flakes. A few concrete flakes, the size of a brick, could be seen deposited on the net. However, recently a large chunk of concrete from the 14th floor of the B Tower fell through the safety net and pierced through the steel roof of the first-floor terrace in the middle of the night. It was big enough to take a life had it fallen on someone. Cars too got damaged from falling concrete pieces. Thankfully, none of the residents have been hurt.

Krishnan shifted to a rented house last year when the District Collector issued an order under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, asking the residents to evacuate by June 30, 2024.

"I did not want to compromise on my daughter's safety or disrupt her education abruptly by evacuation midway through an academic year," says Krishnan who pays a monthly rent of ₹30,000 in addition to the EMI of the bank loan of his soon-to-be-demolished apartment. Eventually, the evacuation plan was dropped last year.

The trauma of impending displacement and safety hazards has taken its toll on children as evidenced by the absence of their hubbub, a defining feature of any residential community. Eleven-year-old Nanda's (name changed) band of friends in the apartment has shrunk as families continue to move out. She stood silent with sadness written all over her face when asked about her friends.

Stephen Mathews, 76, a decorated Navy com-

mander who participated in the Bangladesh Liberation War and was honoured with the Vishisht Seva Medal, injured his spine after stumbling on debonded tiles of his apartment floor four years ago. With his mobility restricted, he now moves around with a walking stick.

₹40 lakh spent on interiors

When Annie Jones, 52, moved into the 3BHK apartment along with her husband Jones Alex, 60, a retired Navy captain, in 2018, she was fairly sure that it was going to be their final abode where, in her words, "they would live and die."

That's why they lavished ₹40 lakh on decking up the interiors in their ₹90-lakh apartment. Yet, when their newly wed daughter and husband arrived from Australia for the wedding reception last year, they had to rent a home fearing they may have to evacuate around that time.

"What should have been one of the happiest moments in our lives instead proved traumatic. After 34 years in service, when I was transferred every five years, I was hoping to have some stability finally. Yet, here we are staring at an uncertain future and another displacement," rues Jones.

The apartment owners attribute the degradation of towers to sheer negligence on the part of the authorities. The court observed that the distress to the towers is undeniably human-induced, caused by cumulative violations of regulatory, structural, and environmental standards.

Smitha Rani, 48, opted for voluntary retirement from the Indian Army as a Lieutenant Colonel to finally have some family time with her husband and sons after being posted across the country during a 24-year career. "What hurts most as a defence person is that feeling of being betrayed by our people," she says.

Sajje Shankar, 49, a Non-Resident Indian who



Constant threat: (clockwise from top) A building material caught on a safety net tied around the twin towers of Chander Kunj Army Towers to prevent debris from falling on people underneath; chunks of concrete have fallen off the roof at many places in the towers; a foundation pillar stripped off concrete exposing the rusted reinforcing bars. THULASI KAKKAT

returned for good, was allotted an apartment since his father was in the Army. Though he didn't know at that time, enrolling for law came in handy as he is now engaged in a legal fight for rights along with a bunch of other owners.

In his final year at the Government Law College, Thrissur, he is now the president of the 'rebel' Chander Kunj Welfare and Maintenance Society which is at the forefront of that legal fight.

Two horrible experiences

Lizy Cherian, 72, served as a nursing officer with the Indian Army for 10 years before leaving the service to spend the next 30 years with the Delhi administration. She had at least two nightmarish experiences before she decided she had enough and shifted to another apartment in Maradu for a monthly rent of ₹39,000.

"Once, I got locked out in the balcony alongside the kitchen of my sixth floor apartment for nearly two hours. The door that got slapped shut in the wind wouldn't open. When I pulled hard at the door handle in desperation, it came off. None heard me crying out for help and I did not have the mobile phone with me either. Fortunately, there was a machete in the balcony with which I broke open the door," she recounts.

On another occasion, during a rainy evening, she found to her shock, water gushing into her apartment, including from the plug points raising the spectre of electrocution, through a fissure in the wall. A police team had to rush to her rescue on receiving her panic-stricken phone call.

In keeping with the High Court order, District Collector N.S.K. Umesh has constituted a committee to supervise the demolition and the reconstruction of the towers. It comprises an experienced structural engineer, two owners from the residents' association, an experienced engineer from the municipality, and an experienced officer from the Town Planning department.

"We will shortly inspect the site to take a call on evacuation, demolition, removal of debris etc. Also, the committee will decide whether more experts need to be inducted," says Umesh.

The court has also empowered the committee to make complaints against those responsible for creating a situation that led to the demolition of the towers. However, the AWHO contended in the High Court that there was no need for further investigation to fix responsibility as it had already initiated arbitration against the project director, architect, and contractor to recover losses. The AWHO is yet to respond to an email seeking its views on the crisis that has befallen the apartment owners.

'Rent offered not high enough'

Apartment owners, however, find the monthly rent – ₹21,000 and ₹23,000 for owners of towers B and C respectively which the court has directed AWHO to pay until reconstruction – inadequate. "For this rent, how are we going to get decent accommodation in the city matching the facilities we enjoyed in our apartment," wonders Lalitha Mathews, an elderly resident.

Neither are they happy about the provision that the AWHO could construct additional floors/ additional areas on the same site, subject to the relevant building rules, to enable them to offset the expenses incurred in the demolition and reconstruction. "We are planning to go on appeal against the court order," said Sajje.

The apartment owners accuse AWHO of carrying out patch work all around the building using local untrained manpower without any technical expertise, to cover up the structural defects, including in piling foundations.

Amidst all this, Paul continues to go around collecting debris to add to the installation that keeps getting bigger in his parking lot, like the mounting worries of his neighbours.

THE ASIAN AGE

15 FEBRUARY 2025

Tariffs loom as India-US ties soar after Modi visit

The optics were great. They always are when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump meet. Their hug spelt the regular warmth, and the firm handshake reflected the strength of India-US ties that are certain to grow manifold with a transactional Republican President in the White House than a preshy Democrat.

The Indian foreign office may have worked overtime to produce a punchline with alliteration in MAGA plus MIGA equals Mega prosperity. But the feeling remains that the Washington meeting may do more for MAGA than MIGA as India commits in a big way towards the USA for defence purchases, including stealth F35 aircraft being offered as an alternative to the Russian Sukhoi Su-57 and energy deals that will be aimed at making America India's biggest supplier.

The benefits are clear as the security aspect gathers strength with Mr Trump calling for damping down of border tensions with China even as he makes more than a symbolic gesture in urgently allowing the extradition of 26/11 plotter Tahawwur Rana over which US governments dragged their feet for years. For a nation struck by 26/11 terror akin to the US's 9/11, a plotter to face justice on its soil holds a high emotional quotient.

Dark clouds may, however, have gathered already with the US announcement of reciprocal tariffs that nearly coincided with the Modi visit. This is Mr Trump's 'fair trade' move through which India, along with Japan and other countries considered equally friendly with the US, are likely to be hit. If the US also targets GST rates on American goods as it has on VAT that the UK levies, India will take an even deeper hit.

Having spared no one, friend or foe in the matter of tariffs, Mr Trump was unlikely to allow India any leeway despite its preparation for Mr Modi's visit by dropping retaliatory tariffs on American almonds, apples, chickpeas, lentils and walnuts and the Harley Davidsons, of course. Discussions on a comprehensive free trade deal would, however, help in addressing the many tariff issues.

Agreeing to ramp up trade and defence purchases is fine, but it appears these will do more for America as a supplier of military hardware and high-tech chips for AI development than India, which presently enjoys a \$45 billion trade surplus with the US. To avoid reciprocal tariffs, Indian exporters may also have to look at assembling manufactured goods in the US as Mr Trump's favourite motorcycles may take that route in these complicated tariffs and trade exchanges.

All the positives flowed around ties on the security front as the US and India plan to sign a new 10-year defence partnership even as Mr Trump called out Pakistan for terrorism.

The geopolitically important messages regarding Pakistan and Bangladesh must have come as music to Prime Minister's Modi's nationalist thrust and his newly coined 'Make India Great Again' slogan that resonates with Mr Trump's own brand of US nationalism. Going forward, US-India cooperation in civil nuclear power generation, based on the historic civil nuclear deal, might be a significant development towards India building on its clean power reserves.

Like world traders, Indians may also be anxious ahead of having to navigate Mr Trump's reciprocal tariff regime, but India can prepare for it with a greater sense of security regarding its military preparedness as it lives in a zone thick with prickly neighbours. The stealth jets will be a great addition when they fly in IAF insignia.

Use Prez Rule to heal Manipur

Two years after ethnic strife split Manipur into two different enclaves, the Central government has imposed President's rule. This is the 11th time that Article 356 — whose provisions relate to the breakdown of constitutional machinery in the state — was invoked to impose the President's rule in Manipur — the maximum for any state in India, followed by Uttar Pradesh which went under President's Rule 10 times.

There was a demand for the President's Rule in Manipur since violent clashes flared up between the dominant Meiteis, the dwellers of the lowlands, and tribal Kukis, who reside in hill districts and make up 25 per cent of the state's population. However, the Centre chose to ignore the demand in the belief that its chief minister N. Biren Singh, who now resigned, would manage the situation.

The Narendra Modi government's trust in Biren Singh proved wrong when he resigned on February 9, incapable of facing a potential no-confidence motion in the Assembly. The BJP's attempts to find a consensus candidate as his replacement did not bear fruit immediately. Article 174(1) that mandates Assembly members meet twice within six months closed the shorter window available to the BJP, forcing the Centre to impose the President's Rule.

As President's Rule was imposed as a result of the ruling party's political exigency, and not as part of its strategy to restore normalcy in the state, the hope for a reconciliation between the warring populations in the state is extremely low.

The internal conflict in Manipur has all the ingredients that kept different parts of unpartitioned India on the boil on different occasions for over 150 years — the majority community's penchant to develop too quickly, the minority community's extreme levels of suspicion. Starting from Hindu-Muslim riots in the 1870s over the script of Hindavi, which sowed the seeds for the creation of Pakistan, all conflicts in India have centred around trust deficit between different communities. Unless attitudes are made to foster trust between communities in Manipur, the President's Rule will achieve absolutely nothing in that state.

THE ASIAN AGE

KASHMIR METER

Editor

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Subhani



A good Modi-Trump start: India buys time on tariffs?



K.C. Singh

The much-anticipated meeting of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with US President Donald Trump took place on Thursday, February 13. He was the fourth global leader to engage the new US President, who in his first three weeks has issued a flurry of executive orders. He was delivering on election promises and implementing the far-right Agenda 2025. The visit was crucial for renewing contact with Mr Trump and his new team, and to ensure that his undermining of existing norms, systems and institutions, at home and abroad, did not hamper relations with India.

On the very eve of his meeting with Mr Modi, President Trump signed an executive order imposing "reciprocal tariffs" that would be applicable across the world. Later at a post-meeting press conference, he called it the "easy way" to deal with the US trade imbalance with major nations. India, with a trade imbalance of \$45 billion, is at number one among nations with a trade surplus. But "reciprocal" may not be practicable as, for instance, India exports \$1 billion worth of aluminium to the US and now faces spiked tariffs. But India does not need to import it from the US.

Despite the inauspicious beginning, India shrewdly adopted a Trump appeasement policy. India's foreign secretary Vikram Misra, who briefed the media about the meeting, signalled that India came prepared to address President Trump's oft-voiced concerns regarding imbalanced trade and illegal immigration. But India is also wanted to renew Mr Modi's personal relationship with President Trump, ignored during Joe Biden's presidency.

Mr Misra shared the path way forward. First, to grant Mr Trump a "win", India agreed that the first phase of a trade agreement shall be finalised by "fall", or in ab-

When Indian journalists enquired if the China threat motivated India-US engagement, President Trump emphasised the importance of China for resolving many issues, including Ukraine.

aliens includes legal entrants with their path to permanent residency in Mumbai, stands cleared indicated close counter-terrorism cooperation, even over Pakistani objections. But repeated queries by many Indian journalists about the activities of elements threatening Indian sovereignty and territorial integrity, had Mr Trump respond with generalities, ignoring the phrase "Khalistan". Similarly, the Gustom Adani prosecution and the case involving the attempted murder of Gurpreet Singh Panu, were side-stopped by both leaders.

Two international issues elicited interesting responses. When Indian journalists enquired if the China threat motivated India-US engagement, President Trump side-stepped and emphasised the importance of China for resolving many issues, including Ukraine. On Ukraine, Mr Modi said India was not neutral, just peace. He added that repeated dialogue and diplomacy to resolve the issue without hostilities. Mr Modi also deftly backed Mr Trump's self-appointed role as peacemaker, although Europeans worried that the US President assigned part of Russia.

On illegal immigration, once again Mr Modi chose cooperation rather than confrontation. While emphasising the ecosystem facilitating the illegal human trafficking networks in the US and abroad.

However, the avoidance of deportation without shackling and handcuffing was not publicly discussed. Because of the huge Indian backlash, following the deportation via a US military aircraft that landed at Amritsar, the Indian delegation must have raised the Colombian solution. Colombia uses its own civilian aircraft to fly back citizens facing deportation.

All told, Indian diplomats as Prime Minister Modi handled the first engagement with Trump 2.0 well. Gaffe flattery and non-confrontational address of key issues currently dominating Mr Trump's agenda, besides isolating core areas of engagement from those irritants, was temporarily successful. It was also sensible to show the convergence between Mr Trump's approach to Israel, Gaza and West Asia and the India Middle East Europe Corridor (IMEC) and EU2, finalised during the Biden presidency. These ideas require normalcy in West Asia and a solution to the Gaza quagmire. Mr Trump's proposed mass relocation of two million Palestinians from Gaza has been generally rejected. Similarly, his ambitious dispute resolution in Ukraine may or may not succeed. Europeans are waiting and watching as Mr Trump's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy fights American issues of threatened withdrawal of military and economic assistance. Mr Trump has an exaggerated belief in his negotiating skills. His trip to North Korea, which flopped badly during his first term.

However, India has shrewdly bought time to readjust its overprotective tariffs on imports. Meanwhile, India-US engagement across a wide range of areas will resume uninterrupted. Yet, tremors in one region and weakened role of new globaly making an interconnected world more dangerous and prone to sudden jolts. Donald Trump can be a saviour for change or chaos. The BJP would be sensible to seek tolerant governance at home and a friendly outreach in the neighbourhood. As the famous saying goes: "Trust, but verify".

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkcsingh.

LETTERS

AUTOCRATIC BJP

Having deputy CMs is a bad idea. They are usually there because of political pressures or as a lollipop to those who were unable to occupy the highest chair. It would also be understandable in a big state. In Delhi where the BJP has a clear majority and a small area, the proposal for two deputy CMs is preposterous. The overdependence of the BJP on Mr Narendra Modi to take all decisions is going to hurt the party badly in the long run. The BJP could learn from history what the result was of a similar overdependence of the Congress on the Nehru-Gandhi family.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

FAMILY HEAD

DONALD TRUMP has committed to Russia that Ukraine will not have all its land back and will not join Nato, without even consulting Ukraine or the EU, much to both's dismay. He has acted like the head of a family, considering Ukraine as one of his children, and other EU members as the elder children, by speaking on behalf of Ukraine with Russia, considering them to be too immature to handle themselves. On the other hand, Russia also considers Trump to be the man behind the gun, and did not waste time talking to anyone else even if they are the people of direct concern. President Trump reiterates time and again that he wants to win the world not by fighting but by ending wars. Well, wish him all success.

R.S. Narula
Patiala

INDIA'S PROBLEM

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump on Thursday shared his vision for the United States' future ties with Beijing, calling China "a very important player in the world". He also asked to mediate on India-China border issues. "If I could be of help, I'd love to help, because that should be stopped," he said, referring to the dispute between India and China. He indirectly declined President Trump's offer, reaffirming its commitment to a bilateral approach in handling the matter. Whatever issues we have with any of our neighbours, we have always adopted a bilateral approach to dealing with these issues," foreign secretary Vikram Misra said. Well said, Mr Misra. Well done, India. Well done, Mr Narendra Modi!

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

Farrukh
Dhondy
Cabbages
& Kings



"Wait the spring and clear skies
And maybe spot the butterflies
But Bachcho, stop this false pretence
Admit that to you these make no sense
These seasons, skies or winged creatures
Your obsession is with human features
Reading changing expressions on faces
The truths, the lies — ambivalent traces..."

— From Qaid-e-Shamsh by Bachcho

Will attacker of Rushdie get to politicise trial in martyrdom bid?

The trial of Hadi Matar for the attempted murder of Salman Rushdie began this week in New York. The reports of the opening day showed Matar entering the court in a blue shirt. He had several defence lawyers with him, as did Donald Trump in an earlier trial, and he entered a plea of "Not Guilty". (err... "Fact") That's a trifle puzzling. What do he or his lawyers expect by entering such a plea, which binds witnesses, apart from the courageous Salman Rushdie, calm and will contradict.

Perhaps Matar has convinced his lawyers that he wants a prolonged trial so he can expound his murderous ideas during it? He was apprehended on the spot while he was in the act of stabbing Salman for ten times, blinding him in one eye and causing him near-fatal injuries. This is something the jury should note so that the defence lawyers can't spring

on the court the fantasy that the defendant appearing in court is not the Hadi Matar who entered the Chautauqua Institution and proceeded to attack the speaker on the platform.

My reason, gentle reader, for suggesting that this fellow Matar wants an extended trial in order to expound his religious "philosophy" or convictions, is that, as he entered the court, he shouted the Palestine supporters' slogan: "From the river to the sea".

This indicates that he sees himself not as a blundering and criminal idiot, but as an advocate of what he sees as Islamic causes. He is 27 years old. Salman is 77. Matar wasn't born when The Satanic Verses was published. The circumstances of his ideological brainwashing, impelling him to murder Salman, may emerge in court. He probably wants to expose some reason for his actions and justify them as fulfilling God's verdict to kill all apostates.

Whether he's read the book will also emerge in court during the trial. If I were on the prosecution team, I would certainly ask him if he had.

I wouldn't be surprised if he says he hasn't but Salman is 77. Matar wasn't born when The Satanic Verses was published and so gave his martyrdom when.

What I was eagerly looking for at the start of the

trial were challenges from the defence and the prosecution about the constitutionality of the jury. There was such a contest from both sides at the trial for fraud which Donald Trump faced for falsifying his payments to the porn star Stormy Daniels. The defence didn't want starchy Democrats on the jury and the prosecution naturally wanted all "Make America Great Again" advocates excluded.

Perhaps such a process took place in Matar's trial as well, but I could find no reports.

Surely, suspecting that Matar might show his pro-Palestinian slogan as he entered the court, his defence lawyers wouldn't want any staunch Zionists or perhaps Arab Muslims on the jury. Similarly, the prosecution would want any firm Islamists to be excluded as the presence of two or three of them could lead to a hung verdict. That the trial of this man is taking place at all is, of course, what should happen in any democratic country — Salman obviously supports the process as he appeared as a witness and described in detail the horror of the attack. I suppose one has to agree with such due process, even in this extreme case.

The person who wouldn't have supported or countenanced the idea and process of a fair trial was my late father, an Army man. He was an ardent advocate of short shrift. He would point to some headline in a newspaper about some criminal

or unfair activity such as a raid on grain borders or were attempting to raise prices during a famine. His judgment was always: "Lime them up against the wall and shoot them".

Whatever the verdict in Matar's case, the maximum he will get is a life sentence as New York has abolished the death penalty as unconstitutional.

My father would have been disappointed? And perhaps Matar himself, since he committed the deadly assault on Salman knowing he'd be caught, will also be disappointed as he may have, through this action in his possibly unwavering existence, been seeking martyrdom and the seven-year promised hours of paradise.

My vague curiosity inclines me to look forward to hearing what Matar or any other witnesses have to say about his murderous motive. Perhaps there's more to it than a passion to follow the fatwa of Khomeini or the fervent wish for martyrdom.

A plea of insanity from the defence is still possible — and even if they take the trial in that direction, it may be interesting to hear why the insanity took the direction of a determination to kill the author of The Satanic Verses.

If Matar's lawyers do resort to such a tactic, his defence will be making a tenuous connection between an extreme Islamist intention and insanity. Would that be welcomed by, say, the Ayatollahs of Iran or the maniacs of the Islamic State, or ISIS?

Mega partnership

Modi-Trump bonhomie amidst tariffs threat

The meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump has reinforced the evolving Indo-US partnership, with both leaders announcing key agreements in trade, energy, and defence. While both are known to be tough negotiators, their shared goal of strengthening bilateral ties has paved the way for deals that could have long-term benefits for both nations. However, the issue of trade tariffs remains a potential flashpoint.



Trump has consistently pushed for "reciprocal tariffs" on trade partners, and India's high tariffs on certain products have long been a sore point. The White House fact sheet outlining this policy makes comparisons with India sectorally (agriculture) and on specific products (motorcycles). However, the ambiguity in Trump's approach suggests that he is keeping his options open, possibly using tariffs as leverage in broader trade negotiations. India's trade surplus with the US was around \$35 billion in FY24 and it has signalled its willingness to increase energy imports from the US from \$15 billion to \$25 billion. The two countries also announced their intent to double bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030. Additionally, ongoing defence deals could also contribute to balancing trade. If trade talks stall, India might have to consider alternative export markets or even impose counter-tariffs, as it did during Trump's previous term. However, this may not be a desirable route as it could escalate the trade war, destabilising the macroeconomic environment and potentially hurting India more than the US, especially if the latter expands its action on export-oriented sectors such as IT services and textiles. The US accounts for 18 per cent of India's total exports, and it is India's largest export destination.

A significant outcome of the meeting is the continued expansion of defence ties. The US has emerged as one of India's top defence suppliers, and fresh agreements could bolster India's military capabilities while benefiting American arms manufacturers. India will have to balance this growing defence partnership with its ambitions to develop a strong domestic defence manufacturing base under the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" initiative. India's commitment to increasing US energy imports is a win-win for both economies. The US benefits from a reliable export market, while India diversifies its energy sources. The pricing will be crucial though.

Despite progress in multiple areas, India must be prepared for tough negotiations on trade. Trump's transactional approach means he will likely continue pushing for greater market access while using tariffs as a bargaining chip. If talks do not proceed as planned, India must have a contingency strategy, whether through countermeasures or alternative trade partnerships. The Indo-US relationship is poised for growth, but its trajectory will depend on how both nations navigate challenges in trade and economic policy.

POCKET

RAVANKANTH



ABHIJIT DAS

If there were any lingering doubts about the US under President Donald Trump posing a significant threat to the rules-based international order, these were removed with the White House memorandum of February 13 titled "Reciprocal Trade and Tariffs". The memo introduces the Fair and Reciprocal Plan (the Plan) to counter "non-reciprocal trading arrangements with trading partners by determining the equivalent of a reciprocal tariff with respect to each foreign trading partner". Implementation of the Plan will brazenly violate many provisions of the WTO and is likely to result in asymmetric outcomes tilted against the interests of many developing countries.

What are the main elements of the Plan, why would it run counter to the WTO disciplines and what are its likely implications?

With the objective of addressing large and persistent annual trade deficit in goods and countering other "unfair and unbalanced aspects" of the US trade with foreign trading partners, under the Plan, the US intends to adopt a comprehensive approach to determine the equivalent of a reciprocal tariff with respect to each foreign trading partner. This would be based not only on the tariffs imposed on US products imported by the partner, but would also include examining the following four aspects of non-reciprocal trade relationships: first, value-added tax and extra-territorial discriminatory taxes; second, non-tariff and regulatory barriers that increase the cost of US businesses operating in other countries, including government procurement, lack of intellectual property protection and digital trade barriers; third, exchange rate policies and practices that make US businesses less competitive; and fourth, any other practice that imposes "unfair limitation on market access or any structural impediment to fair competition" to US businesses.

US GAMEPLAN

The end game of the Plan is very clear—compel countries to make changes in their tariffs and regimes related to government procurement, digital economy, subsidies, IPR protection etc., to promote the interests of economic operators of the US—with the WTO rules counting for nothing. How would the reciprocal tariffs break WTO rules? First, since on the same product the US is likely to impose different tariffs on different countries, this would go against the most favoured nation requirement of WTO rules.

Second, it is also likely that in many cases the reciprocal tariffs would exceed the commitment made by the US not to exceed the negotiated tariff ceiling in respect of various products, popularly called bound rates.

New Income Tax Bill: What's in it for taxpayers?

The Bill cleans up the language and structure of the 1961 Act but does not attempt any major changes in tax rates

bl.explainer

Aarati Krishnan

After the substantial relaxations announced under the new tax regime in the recent Budget, it was a bit unreasonable for people to expect further miracles from the new Income Tax Bill. But hope springs eternal, and big expectations seem to have been built up that the review of Income Tax Act announced by the Finance Minister in her July Budget, will usher in further reforms. The Bill cleans up the language and structure of the 1961 Act but does not attempt any major changes in tax rates.

What are the main differences between the old and new income tax bills?

The main intent of the new Bill is to make the Income Tax Act more lucid, concise and easy to understand. To achieve this, the new Bill makes three kinds of changes to clean up the old Income Tax Act of 1961.

One, by shortening sentences, removing legalese and moving text to tables where possible, the new Bill has trimmed the number of words in the

entire Act from 5.1 lakh to 2.6 lakh. Two, sections and clauses which have become obsolete because of the changing business environment or tax laws, such as laws pertaining to SEZs, fringe benefits tax, wealth tax etc have been deleted.

Three, Court judgments and plugging of loopholes over the years had led to the old Act accumulating many provisos and exceptions, appended to every clause, which hindered reading. The new Bill has deleted 1,200 provisos and 900 explanations, by incorporating them wherever necessary into the tax provisions.

This exercise has reduced the number of chapters in the new Bill to 23 from 47 and sections to 536 from 619. A lot of information on tax rates, exemptions etc that lay people look for have been presented in tables in the schedules which are easier to read.

Besides, the new Bill introduces the concept of "tax year" instead of "previous year" and "assessment" year. Sections and clauses have been renumbered, making sections such as 80C or 80CCD no longer relevant.

How were these changes decided upon?

Audit accountability

The Delhi High Court's ruling presents an opportunity for the NFRA to strengthen its regulatory framework by ensuring a clear separation between its investigative and adjudicative functions. This division is crucial to mitigating potential bias, enhancing credibility, and improving decision quality. To implement this separation effectively, the NFRA should introduce structured adjudication guidelines, a peer-review mechanism, and capacity-building initiatives to train personnel in due

process and evidence evaluation. Strengthening transparency by publishing clear procedures and decisions will further reinforce accountability. These reforms will not only align NFRA's functioning with global best practices but also fortify its role in ensuring high auditing standards, investor protection, and financial integrity in India.

Amarjeet Kumar
Hearst (Hearst)

Rupee volatility

This refers to "What moves the



IT BILL. Simplifying the text. ANKUR WADIA

The Tax Department invited online suggestions and received over 20,900 inputs. It also met with industry, tax filers, tax professionals and field level officers. A committee of 150 officers from the Tax Department worked on redrafting the old Act chapter by chapter. This was vetted by the Law Ministry before the final Bill was tabled in Lok Sabha.

Have any tax rates or rules changed with the new income tax Bill?
No, tax rates have not changed in the new Bill. However, some of the rules

relating to residential status, clubbing of income, return filings in special cases such as foreign travel, re-assessment etc have been tweaked and this could impact individual taxpayers.

Does the Bill ease compliance for taxpayers in any way?

Not materially. On the contrary, the new Bill raises reporting requirements on digital earnings, virtual digital assets etc (this is due to the inclusion of the 2025 Finance Bill) for the purposes of calculation of tax.

It also grants greater powers to the tax officials on seeking information, search and seizure operations and levying penalties, which could raise the compliance bar.

Are there any changes in return filing etc?

Given the major overhaul of the old Income Tax Act, and the reordering and renumbering of its sections and clauses, it is likely that the entire set of return filing forms will need to be replaced once the new Bill is enacted into law.

But thankfully, the new Act is expected to take effect only from April 1, 2026, resulting in no immediate change for tax filers.

of high exchange rate fluctuations. In this context, its strategy of accumulating forex reserves appears prudent. Unless India becomes an export powerhouse, currency volatility is bound to persist. Moreover, excessive intervention could lead to India being labelled a forex manipulator, as seen during President Trump's previous term. At this juncture, easing regulations to promote forex inflows remains the only viable option for policymakers.

Shrinivas Velamuri
Chennai



Reciprocity and power play in a Trumpian world

TRADE TANGLE. The US memorandum breaks all WTO rules.

Larger developing countries must take the lead and push back

Third, WTO rules permit countries to impose non-discriminatory value-added tax on imports as well as domestically produced goods.

Fourth, under WTO rules most developing countries are allowed to bend in favour of their domestic producers and service suppliers and discriminate against imported products procured by their government for non-commercial purposes.

Finally, WTO rules prohibit the US from taking any unilateral action for any perceived violation of its rights.

Overall, the proposed reciprocal tariffs would not only be illegal, but would also represent a slap on the face of the WTO as an institution.

How should WTO members, particularly developing countries, respond to the threat of reciprocal tariffs?

Given the overwhelming dependence of most developing countries on the US market for their exports, they are likely

The US plan is to compel countries to make changes in their tariffs and regimes related to government procurement, digital economy, subsidies, IPR protection etc., to promote American economic interests

to be compelled to come to the negotiating table and accommodate the US interests.

PUSHBACK OPTIONS

However, larger developing countries may hold some cards to pushback the US. First, they could point out that the US itself maintains high import barriers through imposing non-ad valorem (NAV) tariffs—an important aspect that is rarely acknowledged by the US and its cheerleaders.

To illustrate, ad valorem equivalents of NAV tariffs in the dairy sector is likely to be prohibitively high and in the range of 65-140 per cent. Second, they could also point out that high subsidies targeted to specific farm products in the US have tilted the playing field against imports into the US market.

Some of the products in which subsidies in the US in some years exceeded 50 per cent of the value of production include the following: rice (82 per cent); canola (61 per cent); sugar (66 per cent); cotton (74 per cent); mohair (41 per cent); and wool (215 per cent).

Third, if these countries lower their tariffs for the US, they must demand that this be accompanied by firm and enforceable commitment by the US to transfer technology in some of the emerging sectors.

If some of the larger developing countries are unable to strike a fair and balanced bargain for preventing the US from imposing reciprocal tariffs against

them, they should not hold back on the most potent counter-action against the US. These countries should consider not respecting the intellectual property rights of US holders of intellectual property, a step that might induce a rethink by President Trump.

Further, in the pharmaceutical sector this could action could actually facilitate production of generic products, thereby enhancing access to affordable medicines.

In conclusion, global trade and trade rules are at a turning point.

Implementation of reciprocal tariffs would tear into pieces the WTO rulebook. The US intends to use it as a leverage to compel other countries to advance its economic interests by reducing their tariffs and making comprehensive changes to their regulatory regimes.

In addition, most countries are unlikely to enhance their exports in the US market after granting concessions to the US: the agenda of Make America Great Again is likely to diminish the rest of the world.

It remains to be seen whether larger developing countries muster the political will to pushback the US, or they keep under the US pressure.

What the US and other developed countries could not achieve through WTO negotiations, is now sought to be achieved through reciprocal tariffs.

The writer is an expert on international trade. Views expressed are personal.

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A good step forward

This refers to "Income Tax Bill from complexity to clarity" (February 14). From the taxpayers' perspective, the new Income Tax Bill is clear, concise, and easy to understand. Hopefully this will also help in calculating income tax liability and filing the return without consulting an accountant. The new Bill should have a mechanism for mutual resolution of disputes to avoid litigation.

YG Choudhary
Pune

Opinion

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2025

Pragmatic deal-making

PM's meet with Trump raises hopes of a much-needed bilateral trade agreement

P RIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi is the fourth leader to visit the US following President Donald Trump's inauguration, which is reflective of the importance of the India-US partnership and strong bipartisan support for this relationship. While Modi has developed a strong personal chemistry with Trump — as he also had with former President Joseph Biden — having visited the US in 2017 and 2019 in the latter's first term, he would have discovered that he is dealing with a different leader who is moving the US into a highly disruptive and unpredictable territory. Barely hours before their one-on-one meeting in the White House, Trump ordered his administration to prepare reciprocal tariffs on numerous trading partners headed by India to rebalance trade relations in the direction of greater fairness. He considers India as "tariff king" and an "abuser of imports" that levies average applied most favoured nation tariffs on agricultural goods of 39% as against the US' 5%, and 70% tariffs on US motorcycles while America charges 2.4%. This lack of reciprocity is considered unfair and responsible for India's trade surplus with the US.

Trump's tariff bluster no doubt cast a shadow over Modi's visit. The transactional US President emphasised the importance of India increasing its procurement of American-made security equipment and energy supplies of oil and gas to reduce its persistent trade surplus with the US. The pragmatic deal-making on India's part in this regard is reflected in the joint statement. Both leaders launched a new initiative, US-India COMPACT (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology), to drive transformative change across key pillars of cooperation. The US is already one of the leading suppliers of defence equipment like helicopters, transport and maritime patrol aircraft, and other military hardware. Both leaders announced plans to sign a new 10-year framework for the US-India defence partnership. Both leaders also announced the start of US-India TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology) to catalyse collaboration in various critical and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, telecom, and space.

To reflect the aspiration of COMPACT, both India and the US resolved to deepen the bilateral trade relationship in the direction of greater fairness. The US is now India's largest trading partner but more needs to be done to remove impediments for a new phase of trade cooperation to double bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030. A mutually beneficial, multi-sector bilateral trade agreement is to be negotiated by autumn this year. It bears mention that such a deal was also attempted in Trump 1.0 but did not make progress. Trump 2.0, however, is different as the US President is hastening moves in this direction with reciprocal tariffs for greater fairness. This entails the US raising its tariffs to match India's or India lowering its levies to that of the US. Although the Union Budget for 2025-26 pre-emptively announced the reduction in import duties for electronics, textiles, and high-end motorcycles, India's higher relative tariff rates face the risk of reciprocal tariffs. The risks are made much lower by inking a bilateral trade agreement.

Although navigating the unpredictable Trump 2.0 has its own challenges — like dealing with the deportation of illegal Indian immigrants — US-India ties will continue to broaden and deepen. This process is also coterminous with the growing profile of the 5.4 million-strong Indian diaspora in the US that strengthens the bond immeasurably.

Transformative milestone for taxation in India

THE GOVERNMENT HAS been focusing relentlessly on its ambitious Viksit Bharat vision, aiming to transform India into a fully developed and self-reliant nation by 2047. Budget 2025 has rightly placed significant taxation reforms at the forefront of this vision, effectively balancing the crucial objectives of consumption, investment, innovation, and employment. The proposed Income Tax Bill, 2025, represents yet another stellar step towards simplifying and modernising India's tax laws.

The new Bill judiciously avoids sweeping policy changes and maintains tax rate structures, ensuring much-needed consistency and coherence. It attempts to clarify and simplify the language, which would improve compliance rates and reduce the time and resources spent by both taxpayers and the government. This echoes simplification efforts seen in countries like the US, Australia, and Canada, where streamlined tax processes have led to greater efficiency and compliance. Several experts have highlighted the Bill's positive aspects; we'd like to emphasise five key improvements.

Firstly, the consolidation of provisions related to non-residents and foreign companies offers a much-needed ease of reference. Instead of navigating a scattered landscape of legislation, foreign entities now have a single, accessible point of reference. This should significantly improve clarity and efficiency for those doing business across borders. This aid, the proposed changes to transfer pricing provisions, allowing block assessment, represent another milestone in easing compliance for foreign firms.

Secondly, the definition of "resident" has been made more precise and unambiguous, particularly for individuals leaving India for employment. Additionally, the scattered provisions related to salary income have been consolidated, simplifying matters for the vast majority of taxpayers who are solely salary earners. This will greatly improve transparency and understanding.

Thirdly, the rules governing depreciation, particularly the calculation of "actual cost", have also been streamlined and made more pointed. This is another area where much of the litigation has arisen in the past. Fourthly, clear delineation of the assessment process has demystified complex limitation provisions in the current Act. Lastly, consolidation of tax deducted at source (TDS) provisions and rate rationalisation, thresholds which began in the last Budget, are all welcome.

Another commendable step is the practice of releasing FAQs. Whether it's the Finance Bill, 2025, or the new Income Tax Bill, the detailed FAQs provided by the income tax department represent a welcome departure from past practice. This proactive approach to clarifying potential ambiguities is praiseworthy.

This Bill represents a significant and positive step towards a more effective and equitable income tax system, creating a solid base for improvements. It offers a strong foundation upon which we can build greater efficiency and fairness. While the Bill is commendable in its current form, a few key enhancements could further streamline its provisions and amplify its positive impact. Incorporating the Budget announcement of expansion of the safe harbour regime and expediting dispute resolution would be highly beneficial. Further simplifying TDS provisions, particularly by reducing the number of payment types, would greatly ease compliance burdens. Finally, to fully realise the PM's vision of "yaspur" (justice), rationalising penalties and prosecution provisions is essential. The promising progress made in this direction with TDS/tax collected at source provisions can serve as a model for expanding the approach to other areas of the Bill, ultimately creating a truly fair, efficient, and just tax system.

The FM's announcement that the Bill will be reviewed by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance is a positive step. The consultative approach will ensure a thorough feedback process, incorporating input from industry experts, tax professionals, and the public before the Bill's proposed implementation on April 1, 2026. This is a hallmark of good governance and is practised in various forms in many countries when significant tax reforms are undertaken. We are confident the government will favourably consider legitimate stakeholder suggestions from the public consultation, laying a strong foundation for a tax system that fosters compliance and promotes economic growth and investment.

RAVI KUMAR S
JATIN DALAL
Respectively CEO & CFO, Cognizant

● RELIEF VS BURDEN
HIGH EXEMPTION LIMITS PUSHING GOVT TO RELY ON INDIRECT TAXES WHICH BURDEN LOWER-INCOME GROUPS

An inequitable tax structure

A KEY HIGHLIGHT of the FY26 Budget is a major tax relief: salaried individuals earning up to ₹12.75 lakh annually will be exempt from income tax. This bold move aims to boost domestic demand and consumption by increasing disposable income — potentially accelerating private investment in a timely manner, as the Economic Survey noted private investment is on the cusp of a rising cycle.

However, this tax relief raises concerns about government revenue. Direct taxes are vital for fiscal health, and such leniency may strain revenue mobilisation. With FY26 capital expenditure growing only 1% and fiscal deficit targets tightening (4.4% in FY26, down from 4.8%), coupled with truncating the debt-to-GDP ratio to 50% by March 2031, the government may adopt a conservative approach to public spending, potentially moderating infrastructure and development goals critical for India's Viksit Bharat vision by 2047.

How many Indians pay direct taxes?

India's direct tax landscape reveals a narrow base. While indirect taxes such as the goods and services tax (GST) impact everyone — even the poorest pay 18% GST on essentials like a ₹5 biscuit

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ABHISHEK JHA

Respectively chairman and fellow at the Palé India Foundation

or refined sugar packet (₹25 for half kg) — personal income taxes tell a different story. Taking central and state government tax receipts together, direct taxes account for only about 40% of the total. This is surely a regressive tax regime, which has only marginally improved over the last five years.

As regards personal income tax (PIT), 8.1 crore income tax returns (ITRs) were filed in FY24, a mere 6% of our total population. Assuming there is only one tax-paying member in each family, which of course is not universally true, only 30% of the households are covered in the PIT net.

Out of the ITRs filed in FY24, 4.9 crore had zero tax liability. Thus 55% in FY24 and up to 65% of current tax filers do not pay any PIT. This implies that only 3.1 crore individuals filed non-zero tax ITR. Thus, approximately 2% of India's 143-crore population pays any income tax. This contrasts sharply with countries like the US (44% of households pay income tax), the UK (over 50%), and even

peers like Brazil (7%) and Vietnam (20%). This shows that a broader tax base is achievable even in economies with similar income levels. The disparity will become starker with the new exemption limit, as only 1.5 crore people are expected to pay PIT in FY26.

Income tax threshold and its implications

India's direct tax structure presents a paradox: it offers a tax exemption limit that is 500% of its per capita income, far exceeding peer countries like Brazil, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia, where this ratio is below 100%. This means a large portion of India's population falls below the taxable threshold, showcasing fiscal leniency that is rare on a global scale.

The disparity deepens when the exemption limit is compared to the per capita final private consumption expenditure, which is about 60% of the per capita income. A newspaper report notes that a salaried income of ₹12.75 lakh

per annum is 10.6 times the per capita private consumption expenditure — an exceptionally high exemption threshold by any standard.

Additionally, India's tax system lacks the progressivity seen elsewhere. While the highest tax slab isn't detailed, the high exemption weakens its progressive nature. Countries like China, South Africa, the UK, and France apply marginal tax rates of 45%, ensuring higher earners contribute more to national revenue and promoting social equity (with the education and one other cess that are levied, the highest tax slab in India also goes up to around 34%).

The key takeaway is that India's tax structure is inequitable, with generous exemptions leading to a narrow tax base. High exemption limits reduce direct tax collection, pushing the government to rely on indirect taxes which disproportionately burden lower-income groups. While India's combined central and state tax-to-GDP ratio is around 19%, which is comparable to peer countries, the ratio of tax exemption to per capita income is not.

Wealthy farmers and large agricultural landlords continue to remain exempt from income tax, an issue that remains unresolved for over four decades. Bringing them into the tax net, along with higher tax rates for the wealthy, as seen in countries like China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and South Africa — could ease the undue burden on the salaried middle class. This group contributes the bulk of direct taxes but seldom benefits from public services like schools and hospitals. Improving the quality of these services would encourage middle-class usage, reducing their reliance on expensive private alternatives and providing much-needed financial relief. India's exceptionally high tax exemption limit, combined with a low percentage of taxpayers and a modest top tax rate, creates a regressive tax structure that places a disproportionate burden on indirect taxes.

WHERE INDIA STANDS

Country	Minimum tax slab (\$)	Tax rate applied at minimum tax slab	Per capita income, at nominal terms (\$)	Per capita final consumption expenditure at current prices (2022, in \$)	Per capita income to average tax exemption limit	% of population paying direct income tax	Direct tax rate for highest slab
Brazil	0-3,934	0%	10295	6870	2.6:1	7-9%	27.5%
China	0-5,000	3%	12600	5700	2.52:1	8.00%	45%
South Africa	0-12,791	18%	13640	5500	1.07:1	11.00%	45%
Indonesia	0-3,678	5%	4877	2700	1.3:1	Approx 10%	35%
Vietnam	0-2,580	5%	4300	2500	1.5:1	At least 20%	35%
India	0-13,837	0%	2770	1830	0.2:1	2%	34%*

Source: World Bank, Statista, Worldwide Tax Summaries of PwC

* including education and health cess

At last, accessibility for all



SHASHANK PANDEY

Lawyer and founder of Politics and Disability Forum

IN NOVEMBER 2024, a Supreme Court (SC) bench led by former Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud and Justices J.B. Pardiwala and Manoj Mishra delivered an order in *Rajive Raturi vs Union of India*. The case had begun in 2005 as a petition advocating accessibility for visually impaired individuals, but it has since evolved into a pivotal matter addressing various aspects of accessibility. In its ruling, the SC emphasised three critical elements that will have substantial implications for inclusivity across sectors like technology, transport, health, and social services, moving beyond the persons with disabilities (PwDs) classification and encompassing all vulnerable communities.

Enhanced understanding of accessibility as a right

The SC articulated the concept of accessibility as a factor that perpetuates inequalities, as it constrains the capacity of PwDs to participate in community life. This often leads to a reliance on others, limiting their autonomy and opportunities for self-determination. Thus, the SC has interpreted the accessibility mandate as a part of a broader human rights framework. Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities also obligates State parties to promote accessibility as a universal right.

Accessibility ensures the enjoyment of other forms of fundamental rights. For instance, digital accessibility is a prerequisite

for enjoying the right to form opinions and express oneself. Therefore, it's imperative to remove the inaccessibility that can be in the form of built-in environment, transport systems, and communication channels to ensure equality, freedom, and human dignity.

The SC reiterated that the accessibility component is not restricted to PwDs but has been envisioned as a universal design to create products, services, and environments that all people use, regardless of ability, age, and gender. A two-pronged approach of accessibility will be required for this: accessibility in existing establishments (public and private) and transforming new structures, i.e. new infrastructure and services. This categorisation was imperative in allowing better governance of accessibility mandate in existing and future products, services, or infrastructure.

Differentiating groups

PwDs are not homogeneous. Intra- and inter-disability differentiation require different degrees of accommodation. This means every disabled person has unique requirements and accommodations that can't be termed universal. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, conceptualises reasonable accom-

modation as necessary, and appropriate modification and adjustments in a "specific case" to allow a disabled person to enjoy equal rights. The SC has given the jurisprudential authority to this differentiation by explaining that accessibility is related to groups, meaning that the duty to provide accessibility is an ex-ante State duty. Reasonable accommodation is related to individuals, and providing reasonable accommodation is an ex-nunc duty — enforceable from the moment an individual with an impairment needs it in a given situation (workplace, school, etc.). This differentiation will help determine what actions would be qualified as accessibility and reasonable accommodation and the corresponding liabilities for failure to provide either of them.

All establishments now have to comply with the basic accessibility guidelines that will be delineated by the Centre

Mandatory guidelines

Section 40 of the RPwD Act provides that the Centre will lay down the rules for the standard of accessibility for the physical environment, transportation, information, and communications. The accessibility guidelines have been notified under Rule 15 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017, by 17 ministries and departments like urban affairs, home, sports, culture, ports, etc. A point of contention was whether the guidelines

are mandatory or directory. The SC clarified that Section 40 is a mandatory provision, and hence all the guidelines that are notified giving effect to the accessibility right under the Section can't be directory as it will violate the fundamental rights.

This is significant as all establishments, including private bodies, now have to comply with the basic accessibility guidelines that will be delineated by the central government based on an existing set of guidelines or additions to them, within three months of the judgment. The order also clarified that other progressive accessibility goal realisations, as enumerated in existing guidelines, are long-term and cannot be a substitute for the basic mandate, which is the legislative intent of the RPwD Act.

The judgment is anticipated to instigate a substantial revision of the accessibility mandate for PwDs as well as other demographic groups, including the elderly, children, and other vulnerable sections. The current framework on accessibility has functioned as a directory, with compliance predominantly enforced through adversarial litigation. However, the SC's characterisation of accessibility as a fundamental right, distinct from reasonable accommodation, elucidates the scope of obligations imposed on governing and private bodies. The Centre is now mandated to ensure the establishment of a baseline of non-negotiable accessibility standards for all establishments.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Room for more

The new Income Tax Bill is in tune with the latest technology encompassing our commerce and industry and removes the redundant provisions of the existing Act. The old structure, principles, taxation basis, implementation, and administration have been largely retained. However, the new law has obviously missed an opportunity to introduce incentives and promotion for several important

sectors such as manufacturing and exports. It also lacked courage in terms of promoting wealth creation by the industry and setting up of manufacturing bases in remote areas. In the most challenging and competitive times globally, the new income tax law has not responded as expected. Our commerce and industry expects more dynamism and bold initiatives in the income tax laws, and more remains to be done. —Vinod Johri, Delhi

Nuclear power aims

Apropos of "Nuclear boom" (FE, February 14), the Budget is optimistic about bringing up a nuclear energy mission with a target of generating 100 gigawatt of nuclear energy. With global alliances and private participation, nuclear energy can be boosted by bringing more private companies with the support to develop infrastructure. However, nuclear accidents, hazardous

radioactive waste, and negative environmental impacts can deter the mission. Private players are upbeat about developing solar and wind energy projects with government support, but not nuclear ones. While big players who could withstand the gestation cost can carry it forward, the road ahead must include government initiatives too. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Love the giver more than the gift
Brigham Young

Suleman's phone call has exposed protocols again

Have the police bungled once again in the handling of notorious criminal and alleged land grabber Suleman Siddique? Barely two months after the gaffe that saw Suleman escape from the Ribandar lockup with a constable in tow, he now gets the freedom to make phone calls to journalists from the Colvale jail, a prison equally notorious for smuggling narcotics, phones, etc inside. In the recent case, Suleman dials from the prison and narrates that the second video he released earlier was fake.

He speaks about torture and an attempt to eliminate him.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this case is the amount of liberty that Suleman enjoys while in custody, even after his re-arrest following the great escape that left the police humiliated. Despite being a suspect in several serious crimes, including land grabbing and escape from prison, Suleman was allowed to speak to journalists from within the jail.

Now here is the tricky part. Suleman claims that he did not use a cellphone, but used a phone inside the prison. The police claim that they recovered Suleman's mobile phone after one of his calls. And voila -- the phone number Suleman used to call journalists, is still actively ringing. This is mind-boggling.

This Suleman Siddique episode is a stark reminder of the need for effective policing and the importance of accountability in law enforcement

We understand that Suleman cannot be trusted, but can the police's claim be relied upon? The facts don't add up. Suleman claims that his second video was recorded at gunpoint and that the police had orchestrated his escape to divert attention from a job scam, both of which have been widely disputed by the police. Against this background, how does one swallow the fact that Suleman gets liberties to speak his mind while in custody and police fail to take adequate measures to prevent him from making contact with the outside world?

The fact that Suleman was able to speak to journalists and make calls to the media while in custody raises questions about the police's protocols for dealing with criminals. This is particularly disturbing given the nature of Suleman's crimes, which include land grabbing, murder and the recent escape from prison. One expected police to tighten vigil around him, especially after the escape.

Furthermore, the response to the developments has been inadequate. The police, including the jail superintendent, have not convincingly explained how Suleman had access to a phone, or how he was allowed a conversation while at court. Dismissing allegations made by Suleman because he is a criminal is fine, but that should not stop the police from at least covertly looking at some of the serious allegations involving politicians. This attitude is unbecoming of a law enforcement agency and could damage public trust.

This Suleman Siddique episode is a stark reminder of the need for effective policing and the importance of accountability in law enforcement. The police must not only protect the public and prevent crimes, they must also set high standards of professionalism and integrity. The developments in this case demonstrate that the Goa police still have much to learn when it comes to handling high-profile cases and dealing with suspects like Suleman.

OPEN SPACE >>

Goa govt can't impose development projects

CM Pramod Sawant criticised Mayem locals for opposing the proposed law college, calling it a human tendency to resist change. He stressed that politics should not hinder village development and that progress comes through development.

However, the Goa government's approach of imposing projects without consulting locals raises concerns. Why don't ministers start from the ground up, engaging with residents and addressing their concerns if the project is genuinely beneficial? Governance should be "of the people, by the people, and for the people." The final say should rest with the locals, not just the ministers. Moreover, should any development be allowed, or should it be sustainable and suitable for the area?

A major issue is the trust deficit between people and Goa's ministers. Rampant environmental damage—hill cutting, deforestation, water body destruction, and pollution—often benefits big real estate firms. Projects like the huge housing complexes highlight this destructive trend. Time and again, "development" projects, including airports and educational institutions, seem like fronts for real estate expansion. What guarantees that Mayem won't face the same fate? Villagers' concerns deserve to be heard before another project is forced upon them.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva



How media & law overreact

In the cacophony surrounding the controversy, the mainstream media's selective outrage has once again become evident



ADITI SURYAVANSHI

The writer is a journalist with working experience in print and digital media

A new wave of controversy dominated the Indian media's attention after Podcaster Ranveer Allahbadia made a distasteful comment on comedian Samay Raina's YouTube show India's Got Latent. The now-deleted episode, sent shockwaves across the internet, resulting in multiple legal notices and FIRs lodged against Allahbadia, Raina and 30-40 other individuals associated with the show.

Amid all the noise, US-based think tank India Hate Lab (IHL) on Monday, February 10, released a pressing report on the surge in hate speeches targeting religious minorities in India, specifically Muslims. The report named several key political and far-right figures ranked by the highest number of in-person hate speeches they delivered in 2024.

The IHL report linked the sharp rise in hate speech to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ideological goals and the broader Hindu nationalist movement, suggesting they increased by 74.4% from 668 in 2023 to 1,165 in 2024.

"On average, three hate speech events were held per day. This marks a 74.4% increase from 2023, when 668 such incidents were recorded. 1,147 (98.5%) speeches targeted Muslims—either explicitly (1,050) or alongside Christians (97)—while 115 (9.9%) targeted Christians, either explicitly (18) or alongside Muslims (97)," it stated.

However, despite its alarming findings, the report barely made a ripple in the mainstream media—no outrage, no headlines, and no national debate. This stark silence raises serious questions about the priorities of both the press and the legal system.

The controversy erupted when Allahbadia asked a contestant, "Would you rather watch your parents have sex every day for the rest of your life or join in once to stop it forever?" The crude remark, seemingly a centuries-old Reddit 'joke', was considered so outrageous that a Parliamentary panel on Information and Technology (IT) is set to issue a formal notice to the YouTube, as per reports.

Despite issuing a public apology, calling his comment "inappropriate, unfunny, and a lapse in judgment," the outrage against Allahbadia only intensified.

The incident became a nationwide debate about what constitutes acceptable humor, and whether comedians,



particularly those on social media platforms, should be held accountable for their words.

So far, multiple FIRs and legal complaints have been lodged in Maharashtra, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh.

Adding fuel to the fire, state leaders have also weighed in on the issue. Ironically, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma—who, as per the IHL report, delivered 36 hate speeches in 2024, ordered the Guwahati Police to register a case against Allahbadia and the involved YouTube.

The FIR invokes Sections 79, 95, 294, and 296 of the BNS 2023, along with Section 67 of the IT Act, 2000, and provisions from the Cinematograph Act, 1952, and the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986.

In response to the backlash, Raina has removed all videos of India's Got Latent from his YouTube channel. The show, which reportedly garnered the highest viewership of 40 million and a minimum of 20 million, is no longer available on the platform.

In the cacophony surrounding the controversy, the mainstream media's selective outrage has once again become evident.

The crude remark, seemingly a centuries-old Reddit 'joke', was considered so outrageous that a Parliamentary panel on Information and Technology (IT) is set to issue a formal notice to the YouTube, as per reports

While there is certainly a place for accountability, one must ask: why is this outrage so selective? Why is the same level of scrutiny not applied to political leaders who have made divisive and hate-filled statements that endanger the social fabric of India?

In September 2023, BJP MLA Mahesh Kisanrao Landge, threatened to repeat the Babri mosque demolition and labeled Muslim localities in Pune as "terrorist hubs," inciting communal tensions. A month later in October 2023, BJP MP Ramesh Bidhuri made crass remarks against Congress MP Danish Ali, calling him a pimp, "Mullah Atankwadi" and "Katwa" (circumcised) in the Parliament.

Despite the divisive nature of such rhetoric, media coverage remained conspicuously muted on both the matters. This inconsistency not only highlights a double standard but also underscores the need for a more balanced and fair media approach.

The media's disproportionate response to the India's Got Latent con-

trovercy appears misplaced considering how common dark humor and risqué jokes are common in India's meme culture and are part of the social media fabric. In fact, millions of Indians engage with dark humor daily, often consuming content that may not always align with traditional sensibilities.

Even stand-up comedians, both on YouTube and in live performances, frequently use dark humor as part of their act. So, should one isolated comment by a popular YouTube reality warrant such a massive media response, when millions of Indians consume far more offensive content online every day?

What makes the situation even more bizarre is the fact that Ranveer Allahbadia is not just any content creator. Ironically, he was recognized by the government for his influence in the digital space. In 2024, he was awarded the 'Disruptor of the Year' title by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Bharat Mandapam.

Some of the ministers featured on his YouTube channel 'BeerBiceps' include BJP ministers such as Rajeev Chandrasekhar, S Jaishankar, Smriti Irani and Piyush Goyal.

According to a report by NewsLaudry, Apar Gupta, the founding director of Internet Freedom Foundation, revealed that most of Allahbadia's interviews were "co-presented by MyGov", a government agency.

As per the 2023 report, Allahbadia and his partner Viraj Sheth, CEO of Monk Entertainment, revealed that MyGov contacted them in May with the idea of featuring key cabinet ministers, which led to the "co-presented by MyGov" label. They also clarified that they did not bid for the March 7, 2024 tender and received no payment from the government. Sheth also mentioned that they plan to invite non-BJP politicians on their platform.

Given Allahbadia's close ties with prominent political figures, his sudden vilification over a comedic remark seems inconsistent with the recognition he has received. It's curious that a content creator celebrated by the government is now being painted as a pariah for a single joke.

-- FPI

THE INBOX >>

Valentine Day controversy

Valentine's Day—a day which is celebrated every year on February 14—has unfortunately become a hot potato in the country due to some misguided elements who perceive it as a day of sexual immorality. The truth, however, is that it is a day to honour and celebrate the martyrdom of a Roman Catholic priest, Valentine, in the third century for defying the orders of the Roman Emperor Claudius II, who prohibited men from marrying to enable them to perform better in the army.

Valentine, on the contrary, secretly married men for several years to keep them away from sinful lifestyles until he was arrested, imprisoned, and later executed for failing to recant. It is for such noble deeds and martyrdom that Valentine is honoured as St Valentine, and the day, February 14, is celebrated all over the world as Valentine's Day.

AF NAZARETH, Alto Porvorim

Following Google Maps blindly can cause accidents

A truck carrying medicines from Goa to Chennai reportedly got stuck in a ditch near a railway gate in the forest near London on Thursday, after the driver claimed he was misled by Google Maps on his mobile phone.

They are generally accurate but its accuracy can be affected by several factors such as obstructions like buildings and other structures, weather, interference, and the number of satellites. Location accuracy can be low due to weak Global Positioning System (GPS) or Wi-Fi signals. In some cases they may provide inaccurate or outdated directions due to changes in road layouts or traffic conditions.

Following GPS blindly while driving is not advisable. They may not show unmarked railway crossings or roads closed

Sarzora locals say big 'no' to railway station

The people of Neura and Sarzora strongly oppose the proposed Konkani Railway station by the Goa government and railway authorities. With Kamali station nearby, why is another needed in Neura? For years, Sarzora residents have demanded a flyover at the railway crossing, but authorities have ignored them. The village is surrounded by greenery. A new railway station will destroy water bodies and fields, bringing harm to the village. Villagers fear that under the guise of development, the government is planning land acquisition and a coal hub. Outsiders will disrupt the peace, and real estate developers will take over Goa land. Goa's environment is already suffering due to unchecked development, causing water shortages, deforestation, and destruction of hills and fields. Chandor residents are already struggling with increased crime, land acquisition, and pollution due to the railway. Stop building unnecessary railway stations in Goa and focus on maintaining the existing ones. Development should not come at the cost of our land and environment.

RONNIE D'SOUZA, Chandor

for various reasons which can lead to accidents. On the flip side GPS can be blamed for breaking traffic rules. There was an instance in Goa when a tourist was caught driving the car on the beach.

The driver said that he was led to the beach by Google Maps. It is prudent for the motorists to verify the route manually, especially while travelling on unfamiliar roads, as blind reliance on GPS can sometimes lead to major inconvenience and even accidents.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vosco

Difficulties from Devanagari typing training

The Directorate of Official Language has reportedly started Devanagari typing training for government employees in Goa to implement the Official Language Act, 1987. However, the Pramod Sawant-led BJP government is well aware that

the Christian community in Goa predominantly uses the Roman script in daily life—from church services and newspapers to digital communication. Despite this, the government is pushing Devanagari training in all departments.

The real intention appears to be twofold. First, it indirectly promotes Marathi under the guise of enforcing the Official Language Act. Second, it places an unnecessary burden on the Christian community, forcing them to use Devanagari in government offices instead of their preferred Roman script. This could discourage them from applying for government jobs. The Christian community must recognise this move as an attempt to make their professional lives difficult and limit their presence in government jobs. Such exercises only serve to further a divisive agenda in Goa.

JERRY FERNANDES, Salgao

New business model?

Despite being a developed nation, the U.S. has high crime rates and overcrowded prisons, leaving its administration struggling for solutions. El Salvador has offered an unusual alternative—one that America has praised but its own citizens question.

Recently, El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele met US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and proposed a deal: the U.S. could send prisoners to El Salvador in exchange for financial compensation. Bukele assured that his country would "properly" handle them. The US promptly accepted, making this the first instance of outsourcing prisoners.

El Salvador has a massive prison with 40,000 capacity but is notorious for harsh conditions. Human rights groups have condemned the move. Could this be the beginning of a new business model? DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR, Mumbai



Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

Nothing justifies delay to bring peace in Manipur

BLAME it on Centre's dithering or intransigent stand taken by the warring factions of Meiteis in plains and Kuki-Zos in hilly areas, the north-eastern hill state of Manipur, which has been strife-torn, has come under the President's Rule to avert a constitutional crisis after Chief Minister N Biren Singh stepped down. The last time the State was under the President's Rule was for a period of 277 days beginning June 2, 2001.

That this is the 11th time the State has been put under the Central rule points historical irritants that have time and again erupted in conflagrations necessitating Centre's direct rule.

The BJP national leadership could not zero in on the CM candidate immediately after Biren Singh's exit so as to convene the assembly within the constitutionally allowed maximum period of six months. Article 174(1) of the Constitution says that State Assemblies have to be convened no later than six months after their last sitting, which in the case of Manipur, was on August 12, 2024. As a result, even the all-important Budget session now stands postponed.

Due to inept handling of the crisis that broke out since May 2023, more than 200 people lost their lives and over 60,000 people had to

leave lock, stock and barrel for safety. Even deployment of paramilitary forces, and even the Army, could not quell the situation, with battle lines clearly drawn in the bitterly polarised society of Manipur. There have been unprovoked calls by opposition and human rights and civil societies for Centre's (read PM) intervention, but to no avail. As a result, an exasperated Conrad Sangma's National People's Party, which has 7 MLAs, withdrew support from the government. Though the BJP government faced no threat, enjoying a simple majority of 32 in a house of 60 MLAs, dissonance and discontent was

simmering among the party MLAs over Biren Singh's style of functioning. Adding to it, the Congress party threatened a no-confidence motion. Amidst the surfacing of audio tapes purporting to be of Biren Singh instigating Meiteis not to lie low but to retaliate compounded the crisis.

Now, the question uppermost on the minds of people in Manipur is what could be done during the time the Assembly is in suspended animation, as there are no signs yet of any thaw in the Meitei-Kuki ties. There is a deepening of chasm between the two, as the central and the state mediators fail to precipitate a

dialogue. Simultaneously, law or order has to be restored by disarming, and disbanding, militias on both sides.

With the Centre seen to be buying time or not much concerned, the BJP faced a sense of alienation among the masses in both the warring camps, with the result that it lost both the two MP seats in last general election to the Congress party. It should be not surprising if observers or people elsewhere in the country suspect abdication of responsibility by the Central government as well as the BJP top brass.

Now, it is clear that it requires no less than the strength and resolve of Prime

Minister Narendra Modi himself to help stabilise the internal situation in so sensitive a border state. He must lead the initiative. It is also incumbent on the BJP to choose a leader with right vibes and political acumen — one who can reach out to the aggrieved for reconciliation and stay genuinely interested in bringing the situation to normalcy. Confidence-building measures have to kick off in right earnest, right after the PM returns from abroad. Looting of thousands of weapons from police in the past and a fresh bout of insurgency in the state bordering a crisis-ridden Myanmar warrants this.

LETTERS

Double down on Manipur peace efforts

PROCRASTINATION is an evil trait in a person or in a group that leads to "do nothing" mindset even on sensitive issues. It is hilt of the government insensitivity (not on PM's priority) that took 21 months, post 300 killings, displacement of thousands and the dishonouring of women to impose President's Rule a law-and-order measure. Manipur is a sensitive N-E sensitive state and remains in conscious ignorance state. Strife-ridden Manipur needs respectful compromise between the two warring Kuki Zos and Meitei communities. The challenge for the Governor is to swiftly create unshakable trust from deep trust deficit among them for sustainable peace and harmony.

Buddha Jagdish Rao, Visakhapatnam

IT is a matter of great relief, belated though, that President's Rule has been imposed in the state of Manipur. The then CM Biren Singh, the two Governors before Ajay Kumar Bhalla, and the Centre are all to blame for their mishandling of the Manipur situation. At the best of times, any state in the north-east presents a challenge for the government in power, owing to the crisscross currents of religion, ethnicity and historical legacy that are always at play. Manipur's geographical proximity with an unstable Myanmar could give any government a run for its money. Biren Singh's belated departure will definitely create a "neutral" atmosphere in the state, as hailing from the Kuki and Meitei community, he was seen to be pro-Meitei and anti-Kuki Zos.

Arinash Godbole, Dewas (MP)

THOUGH Biren Singh's tenure as the CM of Manipur is characterised by both political successes and ethnic turmoil, the violence that erupted in May 2023 resulting in many loss of lives and displacement of thousands is deeply disturbing. The continuance of ethnic hostilities between Meiteis and Kukis having deep historical roots has put the brakes on the smooth functioning of administration. The President's Rule decision also serves as a broader message that BJP prioritises stability over individual leadership, reinforcing its commitment to governance.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad

THE Centre deliberately delayed the imposition of the President's rule due to political compulsions. However, the state government's inability to deal with the situation was evident from day one when the Kukis and Meiteis clashed and killed one another. The internal and external support to either of these two groups, notwithstanding, the failure of local intelligence outfits in gauging the situation was visible. As such, the President rule was long overdue. The politician is always the culprit in such situations and Manipur is no exception. More importantly, the Centre did not evince keen interest in resolving the issue and delayed decisions.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

Oppn's appeasement mentality persists

SUB: Editorial - Issues to the fore as debates turn intense (Feb. 14). Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge was unnecessarily vociferous and labelled the report as a "Farji report" despite six months of deliberations with members of the opposition in the IPC, and the dissent notes being allowed in the report. The attitude and body language of Kharge was akin to one who is in support of exclusive Muslim cause standing for the Waqf Bill that became an unbridled power unto itself to claim any land as its own with nobody either to question or challenge. The walkout by the Opposition totally exposed their vindictive, opportunistic and appeasement mentality that is becoming needlessly antagonistic to any rational moves in course correction by the Centre.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

Radio is very much alive and kicking

NO doubt, a radio set in a home had become almost an extinct piece but fortunately enough, not tuning to a radio station and enjoying the various programmes. With the widespread launch of FM (Frequency Modulation), radio stations in every State capital and a few other big cities, the habit of listening to radio received great thrust. Now that radio programmes are also made available on mobile phones, its popularity is once again at its peak. That a FM radio station from New Delhi broadcasts Hindi film songs throughout the night speaks of popularity of radio tuning and Hindi film music.

Seshagiri Row Karri, Hyderabad

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Molli urges CM to establish airport in coastal region

BENGALURU: Former Karnataka Chief Minister Dr. M. Veerappa Molli has urged the state government to establish a new international airport in the coastal or Malnad region, citing its vast economic potential and the growing constraints at Mangalore International Airport.

In a letter addressed to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, Molli highlighted that Karnataka's aviation infrastructure is under pressure, with Kempegowda International Airport (KIAL) in Bengaluru surpassing its capacity. While supporting the expansion of Bengaluru's airport network, he stressed the need for a full-fledged international airport in Dakshina Kannada or Udupi district to cater to the region's economic and logistical needs.

"When I was Chief Minister in the 1990s, we had planned two international airports—one at Devanahalli (Bengaluru) and another at Nadsal village in Udupi district. While KIAL has become a major success story, plans for the coastal airport did not materialise," Molli stated in his letter. He recalled that late industrialist Aditya Birla had shown interest in collaborating with the Karnataka government for the project, but an alternate deal, signed with another entrepreneur, failed to materialise.

Currently, Karnataka has two international airports—Bengaluru and Mangalore. Molli pointed out that while Mangalore International Airport has witnessed steady growth, handling around 1.9 million passengers in 2023, its tab-top location limits future expansion.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

USAid funding freeze puts HIV prevention at risk, warns UNAIDS

The HIV global response is heavily dependent on funds from the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR); it finances 70 per cent of the overall AIDS response. Since its creation in 2003, PEPFAR has saved more than 26 million lives by investing in critical HIV prevention, treatment, care and support programmes in 55 countries

What if leaders do not act boldly on HIV, now?

New HIV infections will be higher in 2030, more than they are today, far from the target of 200 000.

THE US pause in foreign assistance funding has created "confusion" in the vital work of community HIV prevention, despite a waiver issued for HIV/AIDS programmes, the UN agency to combat the still deadly disease said on Friday.

The waiver allows the continuation or resumption of "life-saving humanitarian assistance" including HIV treatment. That means 20 million people living with HIV and whose medication is funded by the US can continue to receive treatment. "That's 20 million out of the 30 million people living with HIV in the world," said Christine Stegling, Deputy Executive Director of UNAIDS, at scheduled press briefing in Geneva.

Although it is expected that governments around the world will respond to the US announcement by supporting existing medication plans, "what we're really concerned about is that...governments will focus right now on keeping people on treatment rather than preventing new infections" she explained. The HIV global response is heavily dependent on funds from the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR); it finances 70 per cent of the overall AIDS response.

Since its creation in 2003, PEPFAR has saved more than 26 million lives by investing in critical HIV prevention, treatment, care and support programmes in 55 countries, according to UNAIDS. Nevertheless, "there is a lot of confusion on the ground especially at the community level on how the waiver will be implemented", Ms. Stegling reported, pointing to disruption of treatment services. Transport services and community health workers are also impacted by the US funding pause, according to UNAIDS.

Drop in health centres at risk

The agency — which works with 70 countries — highlighted that the pause in US assistance to community programmes would lead to the closure of many drop-in health centres and the termination of outreach workers' contracts, effectively depriving vulnerable groups of support.

The biggest interruption will be to community health services which have been crucial in the success of the fight against HIV, according to UNAIDS. In Ethiopia, 5,000 public health worker contracts depend on US assistance. "All of these, in all regions of Ethiopia, have been terminated, as well as 10,000 data clerks, very important in Ethiopia," added Ms. Stegling.

Key services cut

Thousands of individuals — women, young girls, and priority populations at higher risk of sexually transmitted infections — will no longer be able to access critical services, such as condom distribution, HIV testing, antiretroviral treatment, pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV prevention, screenings for tuberculosis or support to address gender-based violence.

UNAIDS is most concerned about the long-term impact of the US funding freeze on prevention of new HIV infections as most services community-based, while national governments tend to focus on keeping people on treatment, rather than preventing new infections.

Fear over spike in AIDS deaths

If PEPFAR is not re-authorized between 2025 and 2029 and other resources are not found for the HIV response, "there would be a 400 per cent increase in AIDS deaths," UNAIDS said. "That's 6.3 million people, 6.3 million AIDS related deaths that will occur in the future," Stegling told journalists.

UNAIDS says it will continue efforts to ensure that during the 90-day pause, all people affected by HIV continue to access life-saving services. (UN News)



When some astrologers predicted that 2025 would witness significant political turmoil and that, in the next four to five years, countries including the US would experience economic downturns, many dismissed these as general forecasts. They suggested that following the path of dharma could mitigate such crises.

However, looking at current global developments and the volatility in the Indian stock market — largely influenced by the Trump administration's policies and the behavior of opposition parties in India — these predictions seem to carry some weight.

Indian politics is increasingly dominated by negativity, with national parties showing growing intolerance. Regional parties, too, often refuse to honour the people's mandate. Despite knowing the importance of values in politics, young leaders like Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy feel constrained by a system where idealism struggles to survive in the face of cutthroat competition.

It then seemed like a candid confession. Revanth Reddy recently admitted that past leaders such as former Prime Minister P V Narsimha Rao, Dr Chema Reddy, Jaipal Reddy, and N T Rama Rao upheld different standards of commitment. He reminisced about past Assembly debates, rich in content and satire, contrasting them with today's discussions, which focus more on personal attacks and abusive language rather than substantive content.

He acknowledged feeling disheartened by this shift, comparing old politics to a test match and modern politics to a T20 game. Despite his personal reservations, he admitted to following the same path to remain competitive. He rightly emphasised the need for individuals with strong values to enter politics and reform the system.

Value-Based Politics On A Steady Descent

While all parties need introspection, the Congress party, which prides itself on a legacy of sacrifices, should lead the way in value-based politics. Unfortunately, instead of setting an example, the party seems to be deteriorating, sticking to worn-out narratives that are hastening its decline.

It has become fashionable for Congress leaders to attack Sanatana Dharma, mock the Maha Kumbh Mela, oppose reforms in the Waqf Bill, and focus more on personal attacks against the Prime Minister rather than critiquing policies



It appears key leaders of opposition parties are trapped in coming out with misplaced and misleading political narratives which only betray their deep disdain for preserving the fragile cultural fabric of the country. While launching a broadside against the Modi government on public issues, they are showing a penchant for striking where it deeply hurts, by making snide remarks on Sanatana Dharma. By latching on to outdated and baseless narratives, the opposition leaders are only belittling themselves in the eyes of the people. Ironically, these leaders continue to claim they are the protectors of the Constitution. Congress leaders right from their president Mallikarjun Kharge are, particularly, seen vying with one another to attack Hindu beliefs, which could be an easy means to please Rahul Gandhi who himself is leading the charge. If it's the latter, one can only say — may God save this country. Until now, Revanth Reddy maintained an intelligent stance by criticising the central government's policies while ensuring cordial relations with it for administrative cooperation. However, in his latest outburst, he attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi on caste grounds. When will they honour the people's mandate and abstain from needless remarks on religion?

constructively. The party appears fixated on glorifying the sacrifices of its leaders, ignoring the contributions of others in India's history. For them, everything starts with Nehru and ends with Rahul Gandhi.

Congress-ruled states like Karnataka and Telangana are also trapped in this misplaced narrative. Until now, Revanth Reddy maintained an intelligent stance by criticising the central government's policies while ensuring cordial relations with it for administrative cooperation. However, in a recent outburst, he attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi on caste grounds, alleging that Modi was not an "original" Backward Class (BC) leader but was legally reclassified as one after becoming Gujarat's Chief Minister. He claimed that Rahul Gandhi would compel Modi to implement a caste census.

Can Rahul Deliver On His Promises?

The question remains: Can Rahul Gandhi truly achieve this? Congress has been losing elections due to its misguided narratives, and Rahul's silence when allies like the DMK make demeaning remarks against Sanatana Dharma is eroding the party's voter base. Ironically, these leaders continue to claim they are the protectors of the Constitution.

During a recent budget discussion, Rahul Gandhi criticised the government's handling of a gang rape case

in Uttar Pradesh, lamenting that while the accused were free, the victims were under virtual house arrest. His concern was valid to an extent. However, his argument lost credibility when he stated, "Where is it written in the Constitution that accused can walk free? It is not in the Constitution; it is in your Manusmriti." Such remarks only deepen societal divisions and alienate Hindu voters.

Just days ago, DMK MP Dayanidhi Maran objected to Sanskrit translations in the Lok Sabha, calling it a waste of public funds. Ironically, his name, Dayanidhi, means "treasure house of mercy" and is one of Lord Krishna's 108 names. Instead of questioning the minimal costs of Sanskrit translations, he should have raised concerns over the taxpayer money wasted in parliamentary disruptions and personal attacks.

Similarly, Tamil Nadu Deputy CM Udhayanidhi Stalin, known for controversial remarks against Sanatana Dharma, sarcastically suggested that if the UGC appoints Vice-Chancellors, students might soon be asked to start their day by drinking gongura (cow urine). Such statements fuel unnecessary hatred and distract from pressing governance issues.

Hypocrisy Seen In Political Narratives

There are occasional exceptions. Karnataka Deputy CM D K Shivakumar recently

praised the UP government's arrangements for the Maha Kumbh after taking a dip in the Ganga with his family. However, just days later, he attempted to divide people by advocating for a North Kumbh and a South Kumbh, urging Kannadigas to attend the Mysuru Kumbh instead of Prayagraj. Promoting regional religious events is acceptable, but drawing unnecessary comparisons with the historic Maha Kumbh, which has seen a foothold of 44 crore devotees so far, is misleading.

The Mysuru Kumbh, held every three years at the confluence of Kaveri, Kapila, and the mythical Spatika Sarovara, is undoubtedly significant. However, comparing its turnout of a few lakhs to the 44 crore at Prayagraj is unjustified. Congress leaders, while criticising the tragic stampede at Prayagraj, should have also acknowledged the massive logistical effort behind such a grand event and its economic benefits. Instead, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge mocked the event, questioning whether taking a dip in the Ganga could eliminate poverty. He further stated that Modi and BJP leaders could never reach heaven, no matter how many times they took a dip in the river. Such comments either reflect deep-seated disdain for Hindu beliefs or a desperate attempt to please Rahul Gandhi. If it's the latter, one can only say — may God save this country.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Donald Trump is abandoning Ukraine. Others would be both wrong and reckless to follow suit." — THE GUARDIAN

Masters of the sea

Eighth Indian Ocean Conference is an opportunity for India and region to secure maritime supremacy



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

INDIA, WITH ITS Indian Ocean partners like Singapore and Oman, is hosting the Eighth Indian Ocean Conference (IOC) in Muscat this weekend. Foreign ministers from around 30 countries in the region will be converging at the conference to discuss the future of this most happening region. Oman, the host, like India, has been a major seafaring nation and has maintained linkages with India for over five millennia. Both countries are strategic partners and work closely in many areas of development in the region.

The 16th-century Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, after observing the calm waters of the Pacific, called it "mar pacifico", meaning "peaceful sea". The Atlantic and Arctic Oceans got their names from Greek mythology. However, the Indian Ocean derived its name from the historical and civilisational influence that India wielded on the countries of the region. "Hind Mahasagar" and "Indian Ocean" have been familiar names for voyagers and explorers of the great oceans for millennia.

Discourse on the "Indo-Pacific" dominates the world today. But the "Indo-Pacific" is a geo-strategic construct, where big power competition is omnipresent. The "Indian Ocean" is a largely peaceful natural region connected by civilisation and culture. Vast expanses of the waters of the third-largest ocean in the world touch the shores of 26 countries. For many other landlocked countries like Nepal and Bhutan, the Indian Ocean remains a lifeline.

From the first millennium, merchants like the Marigamam Chettis and Nanadesis and kings like the Andhras, Pallavas and Cholas used it to establish trade with the Arab lands in the west and ventured into the Philippines and other South China Sea territories in the east. Kautilya's Arthashastra talked about the functions of officers like port commissioners and harbour masters, highlighting the importance attached to maritime activity in ancient India. Fa-Hien, a Chinese traveller, wrote in 415 CE that the ship that took him from Ceylon to Sri Vijaya (present-day Indonesia) had 200 merchants who professed the "Brahmanical religion".

The Indian Ocean made India the leading economic power in the first millennium. Its economic decline coincided with its decline in maritime power. In the second millennium, European powers like the Portuguese, Dutch, French and British developed stronger navies and converted the Indian Ocean region into a colony. The British were well-known seafarers. But they never bothered to build a strong blue-water capability for their colony during their two-century rule. This lack of attention to the sea, sadly, continued after Independence, too, with the governments giving greater priority to land-based warfare, completely neglecting the oceans and their potential for

the country. Consequently, in areas like ship-building and naval vessels, India remained a laggard power in the world for almost seven decades. It ranks 20th in the global shipbuilding industry, holding a meagre 0.06 per cent market share.

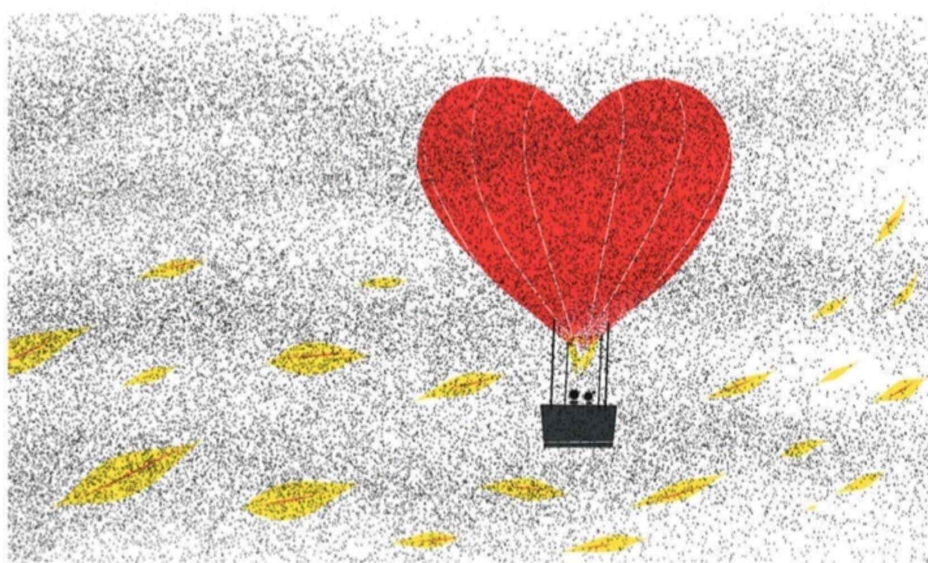
Interestingly, the first to alert India about the importance of the Indian Ocean for its future was a renowned diplomat, K M Panikkar, who served as India's ambassador to China and France. "So far as India is concerned, it should be remembered that the peninsular character of the country and the essential dependence of its trade on maritime traffic give the sea a preponderant influence on its destiny," he argued in his book *India and the Indian Ocean* (1945). Sadly though, his warnings fell on deaf ears. Indian leadership, engrossed in the "continental mindset", failed to fully appreciate the importance and potential of the Indian Ocean Region.

From the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean is the main trading artery for many countries in the world. Critical supply-chain routes managing almost 70 per cent of the world's container traffic pass through this region. More importantly, around 80 per cent of India's external trade and 90 per cent of energy trade passes through these ocean lines. It took several decades for the governments in India to realise the natural goodwill that the country enjoys in this region, once described as a "British lake", and start taking proactive steps to strengthen those bonds through events like the IOC. The global power axis has relocated to the Indian Ocean region in this century. The US and UK, with their Diego Garcia base, and France with Reunion Island, are already active in the region. China, too, joined them, investing heavily in spreading its influence. India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, nurtured the ambition of rising as an influential blue-water power and the voice of the Global South. To that end, the Modi government proclaimed an ambitious SAGAR initiative — Security And Growth for All in the Region in 2015.

The Indian Ocean is a crowded space today with vessels of all major countries crisscrossing its waters over the surface as well as under the sea. Important next-generation communication networks proliferate in the Indian Ocean through undersea cables managed by India and other countries. Companies but also of late erected by the Chinese, communications between Huawei. This region faces challenges like piracy, sea-borne terrorism, climate changes, human and contraband trafficking, illegal and unregulated fishing, arms running, poaching and humanitarian challenges like rising sea-levels, evacuations and disaster relief.

Alfred T Mahan, an influential geopolitical theorist and confidant of President Theodore Roosevelt, wrote more than a century ago that "whoever attains maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean would be a prominent player on the international scene". Mahan's comment is an important reminder to all the assembled leaders of the region at the IOC that the "supremacy" of the region must remain in their hands, and they should be the masters of managing the affairs of this "region of peace".

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



C R Sasikumar

Love in time of climate change

Let us go then, you and I, where the evening is spread against the sky, to a place of low AQI



SUMANA ROY

EVEN UNTIL THE early years of this century, it was impossible to imagine oneself in love and not think of the word "mausam" at least once. Growing up with a soundscape that included Hindi film music, one met the word more frequently than words that were rarely used then, words such as "boyfriend", "lover", "partner". Like these words, the word "mausam" too had travelled from outside the Indian Subcontinent — in this case, literally, across Asia, as wind, carrying rain, to rest against the mountains of our V-legged landmass. This moisture and its behaviour, on the body, on the mind, inside the voice and other musical instruments, would give to our music its vapour and personality, like the angle of our bent bodies does to the resonance of our voices inside water wells.

That romantic love is an integer of the serve-and-volley between the elements and emotions seems as obvious as the curtain responding to the wind teasing it. "Yeh mausam ka jadoo hai mitwa, na dil pe kaboo hai mitwa..." Whether it is the directness of the confession about the loss of control over one's heart due to the magic of the mausam or the playfulness of coming to this seemingly inexplicable connection indirectly, as in "Bagon mein bahar hai... Tumko mujhse pyar hai" — because spring has come to the gardens, you must love me! — it's a train of

logical consequentiality that goes back to the oldest relationship we know, between the earth and the heart, the reason they are perhaps anagrams of each other.

The nervous lover, expecting constancy of the kind that they have been given by the force of gravity, that keeps them from falling off the earth, is bound to liken emotions with the seasons, with flux, with change, with fluidity. It's a lineage of thought that goes back to the rasa theorists, their recognition of changing emotions as the axis that makes — and keeps — us human. That is why Kishore Kumar can sing about writing with air on air: "Hawaon pe likh do hawaon ka naam".

Listening to Lata Mangeskar sing "Rahin na rahin hain mehla karengi, ban ke kail, ban ke toba", with its emphatic "mausam koi ho", no matter what the season, we are led into a world of love promised with Shakespearean conviction (the English poet, who has no faith in "brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea", but believes "that in black ink my love may still shine bright"), one immune to "mausam", which, in songs such as these, is a metaphor for fickleness, for change ("Mausam ki tarah tum bhi badal tai na jaoge"). I hope that you won't change like the seasons, the fragility of a lover's hopeful plea, in another song).

The mausam is not a trigger for romantic love; it is part of the love itself, giving it dimension and sky. "Thandi hawa yeh chandni suhani..." Like the opening lines of the 'Rig Veda' make evident our composition, that our bodies and its neighbourhood are constituted of the elements, so does the recurrence of 'mausam' in these songs from Hindi cinema up to a certain period — the same reason children were named 'Ritu', with its various suffixes.

The 'mausam' is not a trigger for romantic love; it is part of the love itself, giving it dimension and sky. "Thandi hawa yeh chandni suhani..." Like the opening lines of the 'Rig Veda' make evident our composition, that our bodies and its neighbourhood are constituted of the elements, so does the recurrence of 'mausam' in these songs from Hindi cinema up to a certain period — the same reason children were named 'Ritu', with its various suffixes.

ment of this lineage of thought and feeling can be found summarised in Mahendra Kapoor singing "Neeley gagan ke taley, dharti ka pyar paley..." — the "phool", "pedon", "subah", "shaam", "dharti" and "sagar", flowers, trees, the morning and evening, the earth and the sea, are analogous to the invocations to agni, yau, fire and air, in the opening verses of the first Veda, "Ratnadhatamam", in the first verse of the Rig Veda, a Sanskrit word that holds in it delight and ecstasy, is achievable only through a dialogue — and even drowning in — with the elemental. It was this awareness, one we take as a given, that Robert Frost must have been trying to summarise in "Earth's right place for love: I don't know where it's likely to go better".

Where are the songs about mausam in our time of "climate change"? Our complaint now, made with as much bafflement as an impersonal sadness, about how love, its sweetness and transcendence, has disappeared from our cinema, where we implicitly blame a "third person" that is not really a person but a machine, the smartphone, is perhaps related to the disappearance of mausam from our senses (notice how the Urdu word "fiza", which can hold in it a universe, from "air" to "the environment", has disappeared from our songs), its transfer from skin to screen, where we are made aware of it only through a language of numbers, the temperature and the AQI. How is one to sing of love then, except as parody? Let us go then, you and I, where the evening is spread against the sky, to a place of low AQI? Or "Yeh raatnien yeh mausam nadi ka kinara, yeh dhoor aur dhruva..."?

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

The masks our children need

We need to equip them with the ability to walk around the trash



NANDITESH NILAY

SEX. VIOLENCE. DISTURBING scenes. Language. Graphic sequences. Parental advisory. Today, every episode on a streaming platform comes with labels like these on the top left corner of the screen. This, after an elaborate disclaimer that effectively, and farcically, washes its hands of everything you are about to watch. If you find anything offensive or demeaning, nothing is intended, it's all in your head. All this is under the rubric of freedom of speech. Then come Ranveer Allahbadia and his band of brothers. The same person has interviewed leading politicians across all parties as well as celebrities — clearly, everyone wants to be on his show for the size of his audience. So be, in an attempt to be funny, makes a comment on children, parents and sex, perhaps thinking that will sustain the millions who follow him — or add a couple million more.

In a discourse where everything is divisive, the reaction is on predictable lines: Those who support him say he is pushing the boundaries; if you don't like it, switch off, go to the next YouTube channel. There are many who say, "What else did you expect?" Then, there are many who say these men have wrecked the foundations of a family's morality.

Lost in all this is one key fact. Our ability to navigate our way through mounds of garbage. In our cities, we know how to do it. Despite

significant gains made by Swachh Bharat, in every city, every small town, there is unclaimed garbage on the side of the road; there are plastic bags and polypacks at every tourist destination. We hold our noses, walk past it, drive around it, look the other way, get out as fast as possible. Can we do the same with the garbage on the information highway? On the trash that pops up in by Instagram feeds?

It is politically incorrect to call content trash but the fact is, Allahbadia's alleged joke was neither funny — at least not to this writer — nor provocative. Several comedians with much stronger and sharper humour have paid a cost with either FIRs or bans or cancellations. What is clear is that the team at India's Got Talent believes that you need to be more crass since that's what "works". The contempt for their audience is clear.

They also know that a joke told a second time isn't funny, so the only way to get those views coming in by falling on the oldest tropes in the business. Perhaps they see a model in many of the new American stand-up comedians with their own shows on Netflix or Amazon who talk about orgasms, sexuality, their own sexual experiences and even their anatomies with a remarkable ease — and bring the house down. When almost nothing shocks anymore, what do you need to make people squirm in their seats, laugh

nervously? That's what people pay for.

The Oscar season is upon us but remember how three years ago, Will Smith, the distinguished actor, walked onto the stage and slapped comedian Chris Rock because, apparently, he didn't like how he talked about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith. There were the usual noises made about behaviour in public and celebrity tantrums but it faded away into the next shocking reel.

Mahatma Gandhi's three monkeys need to be recalled today. During Covid and when pollution levels are high, we use masks to keep the virus and particulate matter out. Our smartphones are protected end to end by antivirus software. What are the masks that we need for our children as they navigate the trash-littered information highway? One of the greatest theorists of communication, Elihu Katz, underlined the key paradox of mass media: Should it lead or follow, mirror or mould society? Communication, he argued, has been employed both as an instrument of social change and a reinforcing force to maintain the status quo.

Undoubtedly, the information highway has limitless opportunities and possibilities that will help our children realise their full potential, grapple with contradictions and truths. How to equip them with masks and the ability to hold their noses, walk around

the trash, is what we need to work on. We have to tell them that, as Jawed Akhtar says, the use of abuse — he likens this to a chilli in food — to shock shows that you have run out of imaginative powers to use language.

One answer lies in getting them young. Right from kindergarten, at school, and at home, we need to help our children switch off the phones. We need to equip them with tools to navigate the information highway knowing very well that while it runs past meadows and lakes and rivers and beautiful city squares, it also forks into crudity and hate. Children must witness their parents' conduct and choices as well. Our children carry testimonies of ethical memories from us, from the way we live and the way we talk, the level of importance we give to trust, care, responsibility and respect. In a society where brand is everything, can we brand respect, ethics as a key element of our profile? These issues need hard conversations between parents and children, between parents and teachers, children and teachers. We need to ensure that the next generation of the audience knows how to dismiss the next crudity.

Nilay is the author of Being Good, Aaiye, Insaan Banen and Ethikos. He teaches and trains courses on ethics, values and behaviour

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA'S CHANCE

THIS REFERS to the article, "US reach-out can reshape global order, open a window for India" (IE, February 14). US President Donald Trump's posturing about rooting out illegal immigrants and hiking tariffs is making worldwide ripples. His ostensible commitment to negotiating with Russia and Ukraine to end the ongoing war promises a reshaping of the world order. His amiable equation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi bodes well for India. We need a meeting with President Emmanuel Macron ending on a cordial note, there is a propitious global environment for India to cultivate its relations with these two powers.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

PRESIDENT'S RULE

THIS REFERS to the report "President's Rule in Manipur, Assembly under suspended animation: Centre". The Opposition clamoured for the dismissal of the Manipur government under N Biren Singh, but the Centre remained adamant. PM Narendra Modi's visit to the US was preceded by Singh's resignation, and the promulgation of President's Rule coincided with his stay in the US. How things unfold in the days to come will reveal whether the government is sincere. The decision to impose President's Rule should have been taken in 2023.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee, Faridabad

CLIMATE DANGER

THIS REFERS to the article, "The heat of the moment" (IE, February 14). Climate change and global warming can cause unimaginable damage to our country; it must be first priority for policymakers. India is fast turning into a consumer economy; SUVs and ACs are selling like never before. While developed countries are fast shutting manufacturing, developing countries are ready to grab bigger pieces of the pie. That's where the real problem is. There is an urgent need for judicious thinking in this regard.

Manish Mishra, Bhopal

REFORM NEEDED

THIS REFERS to the editorial, "In the light" (IE, February 14). Corruption and misgovernance by Waq institutions is evident today, and this was also flagged earlier by a joint Parliamentary Committee headed by a Rahman Khan. Politics aside, reform is due. The Waq Amendment Bill should include measures focused on checking corruption, inefficient management of educational institutions and orphanages according to modern requirements, and lack of oversight of aung. The government should keep in mind the rights of Muslims to manage their properties as enshrined in the Constitution while dealing with such amendments.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

13 BIG PICTURE

IN A nondescript building in the heart of Hyderabad sat three men who, not so long ago, were guerrillas of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist). One of them was a former central committee member who had joined the party in the 1980s, when it still went by the name of People's War Group. The central committee and the politburo make up the top decision-making bodies of the Maoist party.

Clad in a neatly ironed handloom shirt and cotton trousers, the former central committee member, who identified himself by his alias Kiran, told *The Indian Express*, "I worked in Andhra Pradesh, then Chhattisgarh. Finally, I ended up in Jharkhand only to lose faith in the party."

Kiran is not the only one to have lost "faith" in the recent past. A string of reverses in the form of arrests, surrenders and encounters has left the Maoist party and the movement — which former prime minister Manmohan Singh called the "single biggest internal security challenge" — at what is, arguably, its weakest point yet as the State makes inroads into hitherto Naxal citadels, from Abujhmad to Gadchiroli.

Five months ago, on September 20, 2024, Union Home Minister Amit Shah put an end date to a conflict that has confounded multiple governments at the Centre and states. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi has decided that Naxal violence and ideology will be wiped out from the country. March 31, 2025, is fixed as the last date for Naxalism in this country. I assure you that we will wipe out Naxalism before that," he said.

Shah reiterated that after the most recent setback for the Maoists — on February 9, 2021 Maoists were killed in an encounter at Indravati National Park in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district. Two security personnel were also killed in the gunfight. So far this year, 81 Maoists have been killed in Chhattisgarh.

Iron-fist, a shrinking Red space

According to data from the Union Home Ministry, there have been 24,237 "incidents" and 8,694 "deaths" in the nearly two decades between 2004 and June 2023. Over 2,000 of these deaths are of security forces. Over the last decade, apart from cadres, the Maoist party has lost some of its biggest leaders in counter-insurgency operations in states.

On January 21 this year, Pratap Reddy Ramachandra Reddy alias Chalapati, 62, who had a bounty of Rs 1 crore on his head, was gunned down by personnel of the Gariaband district police in Chhattisgarh, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA), and Odisha's Special Operation Group (SOG). In November 2021, Milind Telumbde, a central committee member of the CPI (Maoist), was killed in an encounter in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district.

In October 2016, four central committee members — Daya alias Garla Ravi, Ganesh, Mallesh and Chalapati alias Appa Rao — were killed in an encounter in Odisha. Earlier, in 2010, the Andhra Pradesh police killed Cherukuri Rajkumar alias Azad, a politburo member, and in 2011, Mallajala Koteswara Rao alias Kishorji, a politburo member, was killed.

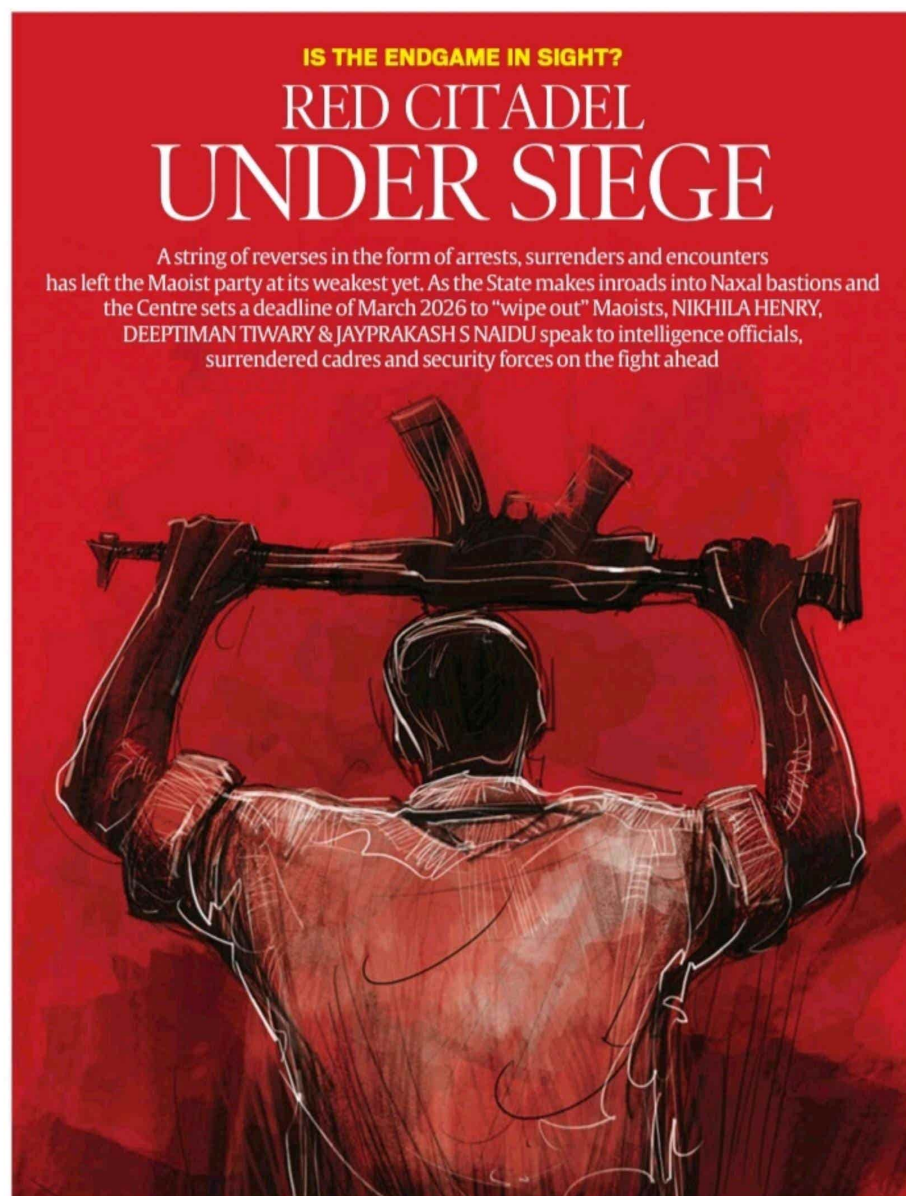
As against this, the number of Maoists arrested during the last 25 years is estimated to be 16,733, with the majority of these arrests made between 2015 and 2025. In 2024, 475 Maoists surrendered across the country. The number of surrenders in the last decade — from 2015 to 2025 — is estimated to be 10,884. This is double the number of surrenders in the previous decade — 4,380.

Karnataka recently declared that its "last Naxal", Torbattu Lakshmi, had surrendered and, according to intelligence officials, the state is now "Maoist free".

Telangana intelligence officials said that in 2024, "there was zero recruitment" to the banned outfit from the state. The leadership of the Maoist party too has been shrinking. While in 2004 there were 16 politburo members, now there are only four — Namballa Keshava Rao alias Basavraj, Mupalla Laxman Rao alias Ganapathi, Mallajala Venugopal Rao alias Sonu, and Misir Bessa, Telangana intelligence officials said. The central committee has 19 members.

It was under the Vajpayee-led NDA government that a coordination committee headed by the Union Home Secretary was set up to draw up an effective strategy to tackle the Maoist violence.

Later, under the UPA government, a comprehensive plan was drawn up by the Union Home Ministry under P Chidambaram, which involved a massive infusion of Central Armed Police Forces in Maoist districts of various states and allocation of funds for training and modernising of Maoist. A plan under the "clear, hold and develop" policy was drawn up. As part of the policy, forces would enter Maoist bastions, engage them in gunfights, build camps to hold the area and eventually get the state administration to build roads, schools and hospitals. It's the same policy that the Modi government has continued after com-



IS THE ENDGAME IN SIGHT?

RED CITADEL UNDER SIEGE

A string of reverses in the form of arrests, surrenders and encounters has left the Maoist party at its weakest yet. As the State makes inroads into Naxal bastions and the Centre sets a deadline of March 2026 to "wipe out" Maoists, NIKHILA HENRY, DEEPTIMAN TIWARY & JAYPRAKASH S NAIDU speak to intelligence officials, surrendered cadres and security forces on the fight ahead

ing to power in 2014, only with greater vigour.

During its tenure, the Modi government has assisted states in building 544 fortified police stations in LWE (Left Wing Extremism) areas, up from 66 built during the UPA's term. The road network in these LWE areas went up from 2,900 km between 2004 and 2014 to 14,400 km in the decade after. The present government has also set up 6,000 mobile towers in LWE areas.

Since 2019, the government has also established 280 new security camps in Maoist areas and 15 new Joint Task Forces, and deployed six CRPF battalions to assist the police in various states. According to the Union Home Ministry, only 38 districts in nine states are affected by LWE violence. Shah recently said Maoist insurgency is now confined to "just four districts of Chhattisgarh".

Yet, if there have been successes in the fight against Maoists, it's largely due to the concerted efforts of state governments and the local police. States such as Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and West Bengal have completely eliminated Maoists from their regions, while Odisha, Maharashtra and Bihar have restricted their activity to small pockets.

These states have achieved this through a multi-pronged approach, which involved strengthening and training of state police forces, raising crack commando units to fight Naxals, rolling out robust surrender and re-

habilitation policies and taking governance and development to the remote tribal areas.

Last year, in Chhattisgarh, the current theatre of anti-Maoist operations, 219 Maoists were killed in encounters, making it the year with the highest Maoist casualties since the formation of the state.

The strategy here has been one of aggression with security forces setting up forward base camps — run mostly by the CRPF or state police — deep inside the forests of Chhattisgarh. These camps act as launchpads for action in the event of an operation, besides helping the forces in area domination and to gain ground.

The idea, senior officials earlier told *The Indian Express*, was to "box the Maoists in a grid of camps, making their movement difficult". The camps, however, have been met with resistance from tribals in Narayanpur, Bijapur, Kanker and elsewhere in Bastar.

According to state government data, in the six years between 2019 and 2024, 100 police camps have come up in Bastar region.

Chhattisgarh's former Additional Director General of Police (Naxal Operations) R K Vij recently told *The Indian Express*, "Forward

camps are filling up the security vacuum in places like Abujhmad and south Bastar, which were considered to be safe havens for Maoists. These camps are not only restricting the movement of Maoists, but are also helping forces conduct major operations."

Sundarraaj P, Inspector General of Police for Bastar Range, said that better coordination between

different anti-Maoist forces had made a big difference. "We are looking to carry forward the prevailing synergy between the DRG, STF, Bastar Fighters, CoBRA, CRPF, BSF, ITBP, SSB, CAF and other security forces in the operational region. We have the best-ever coordination with troops of our bordering states," he said.

While Chhattisgarh has largely relied on an iron-fist approach, what has worked in Telangana is "a humanitarian surrender policy", an intelligence officer in the state said. Of the 475 Maoists who surrendered in 2024, 87 were from Telangana, according to the state intelligence department.

According to the ex-Maoists *The Indian Express* spoke to, the state offers land for cultivation, a place to stay and "a decent amount of money for rehabilitation". The

bounty on their head is usually offered to the Maoist who surrenders, an intelligence officer said.

But there are tales of the Maoists hunting down those who surrender. "Yes, the party turns against those who turn informers and those who 'harm' the party," Kiran, the former central committee member, says.

Subba Rao insists, "You can leave the party anytime you want. But there is a procedure for it."

The "procedure", however, is not simple. "First, we need to inform the party that we want to leave. It is discussed and debated for three to four months. Then we are released," says Ashok. The "release" is not simple either. The person who hopes to surrender needs to establish contact with the state's intelligence agencies, by which time one is already branded an informer. So, several Maoists prefer arrest over surrender. Some, they say, still prefer death to a surrender.

A Telangana intelligence officer said, "We have just one message to those who helm the party — surrender before people lose respect for you. Don't lead a losing battle."

According to former Maoists, the trick, however, is to educate people — those usually caught between the police and the rebels — about the redundancy of the party. "The best way to do this is to assert that democracy alone will prevail," says Kiran,

adding that the impression among people that the Maoist party is like any other political outfit needs to be dismantled. "The message that this is an armed outfit with a political aim should be communicated well."

Intelligence outfits say state governments do their bit with outreach schemes. In Chhattisgarh, they say, there is an effort to educate people to "stop sheltering the insurgents". In Telangana, efforts are on to keep the youth "who are vulnerable" away from Maoist literature. In Kerala, "sweeps have become common".

It may not be over yet

Despite the aggressive approach and the government's March 2026 deadline for a "wipeout" of Maoists, intelligence agencies admit that an endgame isn't on the cards yet.

"They are not entering Telangana because our counter-ops are pushing them further into the jungles. We cannot let off steam because there is a chance of resurgence," a Telangana intelligence official told *The Indian Express*.

Officials in the state point out that of the 19 existing central committee members of the party, 12 are from the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. And that three of the four politburo members are Telugu-speaking.

A senior Home ministry official, however, said the fact that most of the top Maoist leaders are from united Andhra Pradesh points to the crisis in the movement. "It is a reflection of the paucity of fresh blood in the Maoist leadership that while Maoism stands almost wiped out from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, all the top leaders are from there. The only state where they have been effective this past decade is Chhattisgarh, but there is hardly anyone from the state in leadership roles," the official said.

Intelligence officials and the former Maoists *The Indian Express* spoke to say there is still considerable sympathy for the movement and its cadres among the local population. "Even the crackdown on those known as 'urban naxals' has not wiped out this sympathy," said an officer.

According to a Chhattisgarh police source, Bijapur still has thousands of militia cadre, making it the most Maoist-affected district among the seven such districts in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region.

Those who are sceptical of the government's deadline say Shah is not the only political leader to have predicted the end of the Maoists. In 2010, then Union home minister Chidambaram had said that he would eliminate Maoism in three years.

Kiran and the others who laid down their arms, too, caution against over-optimism.

"It is true that the Maoist leadership is shrinking and aging. But we cannot outrightly say that they have lost traction or that they have lost their relevance," he says, adding, "I left the party not because the ideology was dead but because I found that at the implementation level the party has failed."

The three ex-Maoists say they have been able to live normal lives after leaving the banned outfit, running small businesses and managing agricultural fields. "There is no stigma whatsoever. People are welcoming to those who surrender," Kiran says.

None of the three surrendered Maoists denounced the party completely.

Sitting next to Kiran is an ex-district committee member who identified himself as Ashok, another alias, who joined the party as recently as 2008. "The party has a clear political aim and can still attract people," he says with a smile. "When upper-caste people attacked Dalits in my village, the party intervened and protected the Dalits. I decided to join the party that very month," Ashok says, recalling a time when overground and underground leaders of the Maoist party used to roam free in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. He left the party because he did not want to follow its violent ways, he says.

A former state committee member of the party, who identified himself by his alias Subba Rao, says he surrendered because he was "disillusioned... But there are many others who are not".

The three vouched for the egalitarian nature of the party, calling it its biggest strength. "There are women who join the party to counter patriarchy. There are Dalits who join to counter caste oppression..." says Ashok. When pointed out that some surrendered Maoists have criticised the party for being casteist and patriarchal, Ashok insists, "I *lene* *ledu* (not at all)".

Will the party move towards laying down arms? "Only the leadership can say," he says.

Explaining the Maoist party's "pull", an intelligence officer says, "As long as there are problems in the society, they (the Maoists) can pose as the solution to these problems. There is an ebb now (in the party's operations), but it could be a flow later. Anti-Naxal operations alone cannot wipe out the Maoists. There is enough evidence to suggest that both anti-ops and a good surrender-and-rehab policy is the key."

INTERVIEW: SUNDARRAJ P, INSPECTOR GENERAL OF POLICE FOR BASTAR RANGE

'We will see an end to Naxalism in a few months'

JAYPRAKASH S NAIDU

Union Home Minister Amit Shah says Naxalism will be wiped out in a year. But the Maoists are still holding out in Chhattisgarh.

The Government of India and the Chhattisgarh government have a clear intention of bringing this seven-decade-long Naxal violence to an end much sooner. The local population of Bastar is frustrated by the mindless violence of Naxals, who are

responsible for the death of more than 2,000 civilians in the region.

But there is a lot of resistance from villagers against police camps. Security forces on the ground say there is still a lot of sympathy for Maoists in villages.

All these years, the Maoists have used the security and administrative vacuum to their advantage and misused the local population. A comprehensive strategy was conceived to reach out to the people and make them aware of the designs of

Maoists. As a result of these initiatives, the bond between the population and government agencies is strong. In fact, our operational bases act as an integrated development centres, bringing basic amenities to villagers.

In January 2024, a six-month-old girl was killed in the crossfire and in December, four children were injured.



How are you working on minimising civilian casualties? Also, Maoists have killed 11 security personnel this year. Is that a concern?

Protecting the lives and properties of the local population is one of our primary priorities. Unfortunately, there were a few civilian casualties. The government has ensured all possible assistance to the victims of those incidents of Naxal violence. There

were many instances of our security personnel saving the lives of civilians injured in IED blasts or Naxal crossfires.

Compared to previous years, the operational casualties suffered by security forces have come down drastically. The morale of the security forces is high and strong.

Is an endgame in sight? If so, what kind of an end will this be?

All these years, the senior Naxal leadership used the local cadres as human shields and would flee from the spot by taking ad-

vantage of the dense forest cover. But now, due to better cord-on and search-operational tactics by the security forces, the senior Naxal cadre are not able to flee from their hideouts.

Moreover, the local cadres are no longer in a mood to risk their lives to protect their seniors, who are mostly from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, etc. All these factors are working in our favour. In the recent months, we have been able to ensure decisive operational outcomes. We are confident of seeing an end to Naxalism in a few months.

14 E. EXPLAINED THE MODI-TRUMP MEETING

EXPLAINED TARIFFS



President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi shake hands as they meet in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington DC on Thursday. *The NYT*

How reciprocal tariffs work

President Donald Trump has decided to impose the same level of tariffs on goods coming into the US as others charge on US exports. How will this impact the framework of global trade and, specifically, India?

UDIT MISRA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 14

UNITED STATES PRESIDENT Donald Trump on Thursday unveiled a plan to hit the whole world with "reciprocal tariffs", potentially signalling the end of existing trade rules and sending things back almost a century in terms of how countries do business with one another.

The reciprocal tariffs will likely be imposed after April 1 — the US Trade Department is supposed to work out the details for each country by then.

First, what are reciprocal tariffs?

Tariffs are taxes imposed by an importing country on foreign goods coming into that country. For a consumer, they raise the price of an imported good, and in effect, throw mud in the wheels of global trade.

Over the past century, more so since the end of World War II, the world has moved towards freer trade in goods — that is, lower tariffs or no tariffs. There has been a consensus, especially among developed countries, that freer trade is mutually beneficial for all parties involved.

But there is an important caveat. As the rules of world trade were being framed — think the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) — it was agreed that developing countries would get "special and differential treatment" since they often did not have a robust industrial sector or an efficient farm economy to compete on an even keel with the developed countries.

As such, developed countries having lower tariffs than developing ones was considered to be a "fair" deal — one that ensured that a country like India could prevent cheap food grains produced by rich farmers in Europe and the US from flooding its market.

Trump's reciprocal tariffs do away with this caveat, at least on paper. Simply put, Trump has announced that the US will charge the same level of tariffs on goods coming into the US as others are charging on US exports. This, Trump argues, is only "fair".

And how will these reciprocal tariffs be calculated?

The Trade Department is in the process of making this calculation. How the US intends to make this calculation is crucial.

To be sure, the US doesn't want to simply mirror the tariff levels with each country. President Trump has suggested that officials will look at the whole gamut of subsidies and other help that countries provide their traders when they compete with the US.

This could mean that developing countries such as India, which provide all kinds of subsidies to exporters, will face the biggest tariff burdens going forward.

Based on information obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, *The Indian Express* reported on Thursday that the Indian government had disbursed \$1 billion (Rs 8,700 crore) between 2022 and 2024 to companies in India under the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme to boost exports of mobile phone handsets. The PLI scheme is essentially a subsidy to companies.

Why does Trump want reciprocal tariffs?

Trump is not driven by a single reason, nor is he singling out any particular country for this action. While China is the United States' biggest competitor, Trump's first tariff threats were made to allies Canada and Mexico, two of the country's closest trading partners. On Thursday, he also came down severely on the European Union, claiming that EU rules and courts have treated US companies unfairly. Trump's tariffs, it is his dislike of "trade

deficit" — which refers to a situation where the value of goods imported by any country exceeds the value of the goods it exports.

The US trade deficit with the rest of the world — that is the difference between the value of its imports and exports — is closing in on \$1 trillion even as China enjoys a trade surplus of more than \$1 trillion.

Trump sees deficits as unfair, a marker of the fact that the rest of the world is cheating the US. As such, the President is out to remove all trade deficits.

There are two ways to do this. One, by forcing other countries to import American goods, and two, by getting other countries to set up shop in the US instead of exporting to the country.

But are trade deficits always bad?

At one level, the US trade deficit with India does indicate that more money is flowing out of the US than coming in. It can also appear to be a marker of American dependence on India.

However, in a global setting where countries trade with each other freely and fairly, a trade deficit is just an accounting exercise. For instance, India may have a trade surplus with the US, but it also has trade deficits with its other trading partners such as China.

A trade deficit or surplus does show the relative strength of one country's exports vis-à-vis the other's. At the same time, it also indicates that consumers are able to enjoy goods at a cheaper price.

While the sustainable way to remove deficits is to boost domestic productive efficiency, economic wisdom lies in understanding not just that no country enjoys an absolute advantage in all goods over all other countries when it comes to trade, but also that free trade helps even when a country somehow does enjoy such an absolute advantage.

What will be the impact of US reciprocal

tariffs on India?

Trump singled out India as being a country "right on top" of the list of those that "charge tremendous tariffs" — giving the example of the iconic American motorcycle company Harley Davidson "failing to sell their bikes in India as the tax was so high".

As various reports suggest, India is likely to buy more and more US goods — such as defence equipment and oil and gas — to balance the trade. It is also possible that other US goods will become cheaper and thus more affordable for Indians in the coming days. As such, the trade deficit that the US has with India can be expected to narrow.

But this would mean that the Indian rupee will weaken further against the US dollar — this is because more dollars will be demanded as more American products are imported.

What should also be noted is that this development comes just after the Finance Minister provided a Rs 1 lakh crore tax break to Indian income tax payers in the Union Budget presented this month. This was seen as a way to boost domestic consumption and fuel GDP growth.

There is, however, a good chance that the richest Indians, whom the tax break targeted, may spend this tax relief on American products — more so if they suddenly become cheaper. This, in turn, may mean that the anticipated consumption boost to India's GDP may not happen to the extent imagined by the government.

Over the medium to longer term, India and Indian consumers can benefit if American goods are available at a cheaper price, not to mention the broader benefits that an association with the world's largest economy can provide as India attempts to become a developed country by 2047.

That said, India's bid to become an "autonomous self-reliant" may take a hit as the US forces India to buy more of its goods.

Note of caution: what bilateral trade deal with US could mean for India

US TRADE WITH INDIA, OTHER KEY COUNTRIES

TABLE 1

TOP IMPORTS FROM THE US
Top 5 items that comprise 60% of India's imports from US (2023-24)

Items	Value
Mineral fuels & oils	12.96
Precious, semi precious stones	5.16
Nuclear reactors, boilers	3.75
Electrical machinery	2.3
Aircraft and parts	2.25

TOP EXPORTS TO THE US

Top 5 items that comprise 67% of India's exports to US (2023-24)

Items	Value
Engineering goods	17.62
Electronic goods	10.49
Gems and jewellery	9.9
Drugs and pharmaceuticals	8.72
Petroleum products	5.83

Value in \$ billion

TABLE 2

TARIFF DIFFERENTIAL WITH US (%PP, WEIGHTED AVG, 2022)

Products	India	China	Canada	Mexico	Vietnam
Animal	30.2	9.3	29.3	28.9	9.4
Chemical	10.2	2.4	0	3.3	1.2
Footwear	17.2	-5.8	0	11.9	-8.9
Fuels	6.8	2.6	0	0	0
Hides and skins	3.0	-4.6	0.3	4.7	-6.4
Machinery	6.0	1.1	0	0	2.0
Metals	7.8	1.7	0	5.0	0.6
Minerals	8.6	0.7	0	0	0.6
Vegetables	20.5	13.2	0.2	10.5	4.3
Transportation	14.4	9.8	0	6.9	4.0

Typ = percentage points. Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, WITS, Emkay Research

RAVI DUTTA MISHRA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 14

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi and United States President Donald Trump have announced plans to negotiate the first tranche of a mutually beneficial, multi-sector Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) this year, and to double bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030.

A BTA is narrower in scope than a free trade agreement (FTA), and is focused on specific goods rather than overall trade liberalisation.

The two countries have committed to designating "senior representatives" to advance trade negotiations, according to the joint statement released after the meeting between the leaders on Thursday (early on Friday night).

India and the US will work towards "increasing market access" and reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers, the joint statement said.

However, Trump has also been making repeated threats of imposing trade tariffs on countries around the world. Hours before meeting the Prime Minister, he announced plans for reciprocal tariffs on all countries, including India, "to restore fairness in US trade relationships", and correct "long-standing imbalances".

Trump has already imposed 25% tariffs on US aluminium and steel imports, impacting Indian exports. During the joint press briefing with Modi, he complained about India's high tariff structure that prevented American products such as cars from accessing the Indian market.

He described this as a "big problem", and indicated that the US aims to bridge the trade gap by selling more oil and gas to India.

The trade background

Given the loss of American jobs, especially industrial jobs, following China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO), sentiment among US lawmakers turned against granting easy market access to foreign goods.

The think tank National Bureau of Economic Research noted in a 2017 paper the correlation between growing import competition from China and a rightward shift in the political beliefs of adult Americans. Trump's "fair and reciprocal plan on trade" announced on Thursday said the US trade deficit in goods exceeded \$1 trillion in 2024.

India and the US have agreed to explore the possibility of a trade agreement earlier too. The US-led 14-member Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), of which India is a part, did not offer tariff reductions or increased market access to the US market.

EXPLAINED BTA

India's goods trade surplus with the US doubled from \$17.30 billion in 2019-20 to \$35.33 billion in 2023-24.

While exports of electronic and engineering goods have surged, traditional exports such as gems and jewellery and garments have remained largely unchanged.

Over the past five years, India's imports from the US have grown at a slower pace than its exports. US exports to India rose to \$42.19 billion in 2023-24 from \$35.81 billion in 2019-20.

India's goods trade surplus with the US doubled from \$17.30 billion in 2019-20 to \$35.33 billion in 2023-24.

There is a good chance that this figure will rise to as much as \$25 billion in the near future. It is entirely possible that these increased purchases will contribute to addressing the trade deficit between the two countries as well, "Mishra said.

On the trade deficit with the US, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misra said India is a significant purchaser of American energy, having bought about \$15 billion worth of energy output last year.

It is entirely possible that these increased purchases will contribute to addressing the trade deficit between the two countries as well, "Mishra said.

EXPLAINED ENERGY SECURITY

US-designed reactors, SMRs, and why the 123 Agreement could finally realise its full potential

ANIL SASI
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 14

AS INDIA and the United States affirmed their commitment to furthering a bilateral Energy Security Partnership, an agreement that aims to make Washington "a leading supplier of oil and gas to India" is in focus.

However, this pact is being seen by both sides primarily as a means to bridge their trade deficit.

Far more strategic is an announcement that signals their commitment to "fully realise" the US-India 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement, alongside a pledge to move forward on plans to work together to build American-designed nuclear reactors in India.

The two sides took note of the announcement by the Indian Government in the Union Budget to take up amendments to the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010 (CLNDA) for nuclear reactors.

It was also decided "to establish bilateral arrangements in accordance with CLNDA", which would address the issue of civil liability and facilitate the collaboration of Indian and US industry in the production and deployment of nuclear reactors.

It is learnt that Washington wanted to secure India's commitment on bringing a law in Parliament to ease the nuclear liability provision, but New Delhi was initially willing to offer only an assurance.

The NDA government's reduced numbers in Parliament could make it difficult to get the amendments to the liability law passed.

The statement issued by the Ministry of External Affairs on Thursday reiterated the commitment to take up amendments to both laws. The "path forward will unlock plans to build large US-designed reactors and enable collaboration to develop, deploy and scale up nuclear power generation with advanced small modular reactors", it said.

The '810' hurdle in the US

While New Delhi has onerous legislative commitments to set this partnership rolling as envisaged in the 123 Agreement of July 2007, it has sought a major commitment from Washington as well.

It is seeking an exemption to one of the most restrictive of American legislative provisions — the '810' authorisation that explicitly restricts US companies from manufacturing any nuclear equipment or performing any nuclear design work outside of the US.

The 123 Agreement provided for "full civil nuclear energy cooperation covering nuclear reactors and aspects of the associated nuclear fuel cycle including enrichment and reprocessing".

This authorisation is essentially a non-

starter for New Delhi's Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) ambitions, since it wants to participate in manufacturing these reactors being built in India, and to co-produce the nuclear components for its domestic needs.

An exception on the 810 provision is, therefore, vital for New Delhi.

Amendments to India's laws

1962 ACT: The proposed changes to the Atomic Energy Act are aimed at opening the door wider to let the private sector into nuclear power plant operations, and to enable them to enter the SMR sector as operators.

This is currently allowed only to state-owned Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL), and some joint ventures between NPCIL and other state-owned companies such as NTPC Ltd and National Aluminium Company Ltd (NALCO).

2010 ACT: The Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, which sought to create a mechanism to compensate victims for a possible nuclear accident, and allocate liability and specify procedures for compensation.

These provisions have been cited as an impediment by foreign players such as GE-Hitachi and Westinghouse to investing in India, primarily on the grounds that the legislation channelised operators' liability to equipment suppliers.

Foreign vendors have flagged this as a disincentive to invest in India's nuclear sector amid apprehensions of incurring fuel liability.

Hope for partnership for SMRs
On the SMR deal, India's Department of

Atomic Energy (DAE) is learnt to be in exploratory talks for collaborations with the Camden, New Jersey-based Holtec International, a private company that is now billed to be one of the world's largest exporters of capital nuclear components.

The 810 authorisation is vital for this to go forward. The Biden administration is learnt to have initiated work on an authorisation to Holtec towards the end of its tenure, but progress was limited by the lack of time.

There are indications that this will be taken forward by the new administration, potentially opening the doors for leveraging the commercial potential of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal almost two decades after it was concluded.

Why SMRs matter to India

SMRs — reactors with a capacity of 300Mw (megawatt electric) to 300MWw per unit — are increasingly seen as important for nuclear energy to remain a commercially competitive option in the future.

India is pushing for a leadership position in this small reactor space, both as a way of fulfilling its commitment to clean energy transition, and of bundling SMRs as a technology-led foreign policy pitch.

Currently, two SMR projects have reached the operational stage globally. The Akademik Lomonosov floating power unit in Russia, which has two modules of 35 MWw, started commercial operation in May 2020. The other, a demonstration SMR project called HTR-PM in China that was grid-connected in December 2021, is reported to have started commercial operations in December 2023.

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WEST BENGAL



Restricted zone: The West Bengal government has put up barricades so that people don't approach the confluence of the Ganga and the sea from the front of the Kapil Muni temple. DEBASISH BHADURI

Pilgrims meet climate change on an island

The impact of rising sea levels is visible at the annual Gangasagar Mela on Sagar Island in West Bengal's Sundarbans. Here, soil erosion is threatening the Kapil Muni temple as the sea creeps inland, finds **Shiv Sahay Singh**. Meanwhile, the State government accuses the Centre of non-cooperation on funding

On January 12, several Ministers of the West Bengal government gathered at a conference room on Sagar Island, situated at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal – the southernmost tip of the State – to brief mediapersons on the arrangements for the Gangasagar Mela 2025. Lakhs of pilgrims visit the island every year to participate in the religious fair and take a dip at the confluence of the Ganga and the sea on the occasion of Makar Sankranti on January 14. The site is considered sacred and is home to the Kapil Muni temple.

Aroop Biswas, the seniormost among the Ministers, who holds the Power, Housing, and Sports and Youth Affairs portfolios, quipped that an old Bengali saying has changed with the times. "Sab tirtha baar baar, Gangasagar ek baar (Visit all places of pilgrimage again and again, but go to Gangasagar only once)" has changed to "Gangasagar baar baar (Visit Gangasagar again and again)", he said.

Sagar Island, situated about 120 km from the State capital Kolkata, is the largest island in the Sundarbans archipelago, with a population of around two lakh, as per the 2011 Census. Reaching the once-remote island involves navigating the mighty Muriganga river. Now, there are frequent ferry services mainly due to the initiative of the Mamata Banerjee-led government, which has made the religious event a key part of the Trinamool Congress's outreach efforts.

During the press conference, the Minister drew parallels between the Gangasagar Mela and the ongoing Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. He questioned the lack of support from the Union government towards the event in West Bengal and highlighted the fallout at the Gangasagar Mela, with about 42 lakh pilgrims visiting the island between January 1 and 12.

There were no answers to queries on how much was spent from the State's coffers this year for the event. Last year's expenses came up to around ₹250 crore. Hosting the mela involves setting up thousands of tents and barricades, installing public announcement systems, and making adequate security arrangements to accommodate the large number of pilgrims.

After the press conference, a group of journalists approached Bankim Chandra Hazra, the 75-year-old Minister for Sundarban Affairs, over the issue of erosion. The school teacher-turned-politician, who has represented the Sagar Assembly seat for the past two decades, said softly, "The sea is just 470 metres from the Kapil Muni temple. About 10 years ago, it was 1,500 metres away. The average tidal surge, which is 4.6 metres during high tide, increases to 7.6 metres at the beach in front of the temple."

He added that the only hope of arresting erosion is a proposed ₹4,000-crore project between the World Bank and the West Bengal government. The project aims to strengthen the embankments across 52 inhabited islands in the Sundarbans, with the World Bank bearing 70% of the cost and the State government covering the remaining 30%.

National vs local

As dusk falls on Sagar Island, the crowd at the Gangasagar Mela swells, the pitch of announcements for lost individuals gets shriller, and the site bustles with energy. The Kapil Muni temple

The sea is just 470 metres from the temple. About 10 years ago, it was 1,500 metres away. The average tidal surge, which is 4.6 metres during high tide, increases to 7.6 metres at the beach in front of the temple

BANKIM CHANDRA HAZRA
Minister for Sundarban Affairs, West Bengal

is illuminated with rows of bright lights. Lights from three triangular structures of the temple fall on the waters where the river meets the sea. However, pilgrims are barred from accessing the beach, which has been severely eroded. Two roads running through the beach, connecting the temple and the confluence, have been closed. The beach in front of the temple, which had gentle slopes and white sands gradually meeting the waves, has become a sea of mud.

Pilgrims now assemble for the holy dip on beaches about a kilometre from the temple, where rows of boats bring in fish to be dried and sold. This year, the auspicious time for the dip was declared by priests as between 6.58 a.m. on Makar Sankranti and 6.58 a.m. on January 15. By January 13 afternoon, sadhus begin arriving for the annual pilgrimage; Naga sadhus opted to attend the Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj this year.

Swami Nischalananda Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Puri, is among the seniormost monks to arrive at the Gangasagar Mela well before the auspicious hour. Emphasising the pilgrimage's religious significance, he asserts that it is no less than that of the Kumbh Mela. "What can be more significant than a place where the Ganga meets the sea? I have been coming here for the past 30 years. In no way is the significance of the mela less than any national mela," he tells devotees and a group of journalists.

Sitting in a decorated tent next to the eroded beach, the Shankaracharya engages in discussions on religion and politics with his followers. He also endorses the proposal of the West Bengal government that the annual pilgrimage be accorded national mela status.

"[Prime Minister Narendra] Modi does not have *mamata* (compassion) towards Chief Minister Mamata [Banerjee]," he says. However, the next moment, the Shankaracharya appears upset with the State government over its plans to build a Lord Jagannath temple near Digha beach modelled after the one in Puri, Odisha.

The Shankaracharya also voices concerns about erosion threatening the Kapil Muni temple and says trees were cut down to create in-

frastructure for the mela. "Who is thinking about climate change? Everyone wants development, but at what cost?" he says.

Climate change experts believe that large-scale construction on Sagar Island's ecologically fragile beaches has worsened erosion.

Tuhin Ghosh, a professor at Jadavpur University's School of Oceanographic Studies, says, "There were sand dunes and vegetation followed by a flat beach about 30 years ago. Gradually, the vegetation and undulations were cleared and made flat for extension of the mela ground. Since these barriers were done away with, the attacks of waves have increased."

Experts, including Ghosh, point out that most constructions for the mela violate Coastal Regulation Zone provisions, which prohibit building within 500 metres of the high tide line.

Fishing trouble
About 20 km from the din of the mela is Bankimnagar village, where people have borne

DIPAK MAITY
A fisherman on Sagar Island

the brunt of rising sea levels and frequent cyclones. The afternoons are quiet as women cook lunch and the fishermen repair nets.

Mehrun Bibi's house is located almost on the edge of the sea. The sound of waves lashing against the land can be heard in the afternoon. Despite several attempts with a small net, the 39-year-old does not find any fish in her pond. "I still have to cook some rice and there is no fish. Maybe it is because of the increase in salinity."

Living on the edge of the island with the sea is scary, Mehrun says. She recalls the last major cyclones: Yaas (May 2011), Remal (May 2024), and Dana (October 2024). "They pushed us out of

our houses. We had to stay in cyclone relief shelters for days and weeks," she says. Whenever a cyclone approaches, the family has to leave pets behind and most of them die when the village gets submerged. "I have regular arguments with my mother-in-law. I tell her I do not want to rear chicken anymore," Mehrun says, pointing at the coop next to the pond and a couple of chickens that walk around her house.

A few houses away lives Bilasini Bar, 37, who is chopping pumpkin for lunch. Her home has no concrete roof. Her 19-year-old son dropped out of school a few years ago. Like Mehrun, Bar is worried that when the next cyclone strikes, she will have to move with her goats. "We have to work daily to feed ourselves. The mela means nothing much to us," she says.

Saddam Gazi, 26, stays with his mother Sakila Bibi in a house that is hardly 50 metres from the sea. A graduate in English from Sagar Mahavidyalaya, Gazi works as a pathology technician and collects blood samples from the island to make a living.

A cricket enthusiast, Gazi says rising sea levels are reducing employment opportunities for the youth on the island, and many of them have to migrate to other States for work. No one wants to set up a business on land that may be submerged. A few years ago, a concrete embankment was erected, clearing the mangroves, but this was washed away by cyclones, leaving the people more exposed to the sea.

Now, between the sea and the modest houses of Mehrun, Bar, and Gazi is an earthen embankment. It is covered with geotextiles, which are synthetic materials used in construction. The local fishermen have spread their fishing nets on it to dry. The smell of dried fish fills the air.

Dipak Maity, 42, a fisherman, says the administration has prohibited them from taking motorised fishing boats into the water from January 5 to 20 on account of the heavy movement of pilgrims across the water.

Along one corner of the earthen embankment, a few mangrove trees stand and fishermen leave their boats in their shade.

"When the embankments were made a few years ago, all the mangroves were cut to make way for big vehicles. The areas behind the mangroves have remained unaffected by the tidal surge," Maity says, highlighting the importance of natural barriers.

Centre vs State

As Makar Sankranti draws to a close, the State government starts patting itself on the back. Biswas claims that the number of pilgrims has crossed 85 lakh. By January 15, the government pegs the number of pilgrims who visited the island over the past two weeks at 1.10 crore. The Minister describes the event as the "best mela in the country". A similar number of pilgrims had visited the island last year too, the State government says.

But the ecological stress of so many people visiting the site weighs heavily on Hazra, who once again talks to a group of journalists on why erosion prevention measures do not work in front of the Kapil Muni temple. "Geotextiles, which are useful in other places on Sagar Island, are not working here as waves directly hit the coastline," he explains.

RTI activist Biswanath Goswami, who is at the mela, casts doubts on the claim that one crore people visited the island in 2024. He cites data provided in response to an RTI query, which reveal that only around 4.57 lakh vessel tickets were sold from January 10 to 16 last year. The only way to reach the island is by boat.

Many political observers see the Trinamool Congress government pushing for organising the Gangasagar Mela and building temples as a "soft Hindutva push" to counter the Bharatiya Janata Party, its main political opponent in the State, which relies on "polarisation of voters on religious lines as an electoral strategy".

"It is part of the identity politics of Trinamool Congress. It promotes religious events and gatherings such as Gangasagar Mela on Sagar Island and Kumbh Mela at Tribeni in Hooghly. This has worked for the party over the past 13 years," says Biswanath Chakraborty, professor of Political Science at Rabindra Bharati University.

The Chief Minister, while overseeing arrangements for the Gangasagar Mela, had addressed a government event on Sagar Island on January 6. She appealed to the Kapil Muni temple trust to allocate funds for constructing concrete embankments to prevent rising seawater from reaching the temple.

"The Centre gives thousands of crores of rupees for the Kumbh Mela. The Centre does not give any money for the Gangasagar Mela. They do not even look at Gangasagar. All arrangements at Gangasagar are made by us," she said.

The priests of the temple, however, are concerned that if the erosion continues, the temple will cease to exist.



Perilously close: The Kapil Muni temple is just 470 metres from the sea; (right) pilgrims trudge through marshy land to reach the confluence during the Gangasagar Mela on Sagar Island. DEBASISH BHADURI



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A NEW COMPACT

With emphasis on self-interest, flair for deal-making, Modi and Trump set India and US on a promising path

DURING PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's visit to Washington, India and the United States established an ambitious agenda to deepen their bilateral strategic partnership. Trump's emphasis on reducing the trade deficit — now favouring India — and the swift repatriation of illegal immigrants from India had cast a shadow over the relationship. But Thursday's summit signalled the determination to reduce differences and deepen the agenda of cooperation. The unveiling of a new COMPACT (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology) is likely to become the foundation for a high-quality relationship between the two nations. For India, the challenge lies in translating the "result-driven agenda" articulated by Modi and Trump into tangible outcomes. With Trump expected to visit India later this year, Modi's diplomatic agility in responding to significant shifts in US domestic and foreign policy must now be matched by proactive measures from various ministries.

Modi and Trump exhibited finesse in addressing the issue of illegal immigration. India agreed to repatriate verified illegal immigrants from the US, while Washington is now prepared to collaborate with Delhi to combat human trafficking by targeting criminal networks and facilitators. On the topic of legal immigration — an area of intense debate among Trump's supporters — the leaders acknowledged the globalised nature of today's workforce and the importance of facilitating the legal and sustainable mobility of skilled Indian professionals, students and businesspeople into the US. Trade relations also took centre stage, with Trump demanding urgent action to improve market access for US goods in India. His criticism of India's "abuse of tariffs" reflects a broader critique of the global trading system, where other nations benefit from America's open market while restricting access to US products and services. As Trump prepares to impose reciprocal tariffs by spring, he has provided India with the opportunity to negotiate a "fair trade" arrangement in the coming months. The two nations have set an ambitious target of achieving \$500 billion in annual bilateral trade by 2030, necessitating a comprehensive reevaluation of India's trade strategy — a need that has become increasingly urgent amid a slowdown in India's external trade and rising complaints from trade partners regarding its protectionist policies.

In contrast to the challenges surrounding immigration and trade, Modi and Trump found opportunities to enhance bilateral ties. For instance, in the energy sector, India, a major importer of hydrocarbons, is poised to benefit from the US as a significant exporter. Both countries have agreed to strengthen cooperation in the nuclear energy sector, which is experiencing a revival. On defence, India is prepared to increase imports of US arms, and Trump is ready to review existing restrictions on defence technology transfers to India. The leaders also committed to expanding their technological cooperation to emerging areas such as Artificial Intelligence. In terms of regional security, they agreed to enhance their engagement in the Indo-Pacific and broaden their focus in the Middle East. The potential for a new strategic compact between the two nations is underpinned by the convergence of Modi's "India First" policies and Trump's "America First" approach. With a heightened emphasis on self-interest and a flair for deal-making, Modi and Trump may have set India and the US on a promising path.

FACING THE WEATHER

Latest edition of Global Climate Risk Index makes a strong case for building climate resilience across national borders

LAST MONTH, The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report ranked extreme weather events as the second-most difficult security threat after armed conflicts and war. Now, one of the world's longest-running climate impact indexes has quantified the toll taken by the crisis in the past three decades. More than 9,400 extreme weather events were recorded between 1993 and 2022, notes the latest edition of the Global Climate Risk Index (CRI). It reckons that floods, heatwaves, and cyclones claimed more than 765,000 lives in this period. The survey, conducted regularly since 2006 by the international think tank German Watch, estimates that the economic losses due to these extreme weather events amounted to more than \$4 trillion (inflation-adjusted). The report's findings are sobering for India — one in 10 climate casualties between 1993 and 2022 was from the country. It was the sixth worst-affected country in this period.

"There are clear indications that the world is entering an unpredictable phase of climate change," says the report. The delayed onset of La Niña and its inability to cool global temperatures is the latest example of this phenomenon. Last month was the warmest January globally with the world recording an average surface temperature of 13.23 degrees Celsius, 1.75 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels. While all parts of the world are vulnerable to weather vagaries, the report sounds a note of warning to policymakers in the hotter regions of the world, "where heatwave impacts are felt most acutely." Climate change makes "early heat in India and Pakistan 30 times more likely," the CRI points out. It lists the Subcontinental neighbours amongst the top nine heatwave-prone countries.

The picture painted in the CRI is, however, not uniformly grim. It makes a special mention of climate adaptation projects such as Ahmedabad's Heat Action Plan. However, the report underlines the inadequacy of global efforts in building climate resilience. In addition to the well-known deficits in finance, it speaks of inadequate technology transfers from the North to the South. For long, the issue of climate adaptation has been left to UNFCCC-anchored negotiations. Building safeguards against floods, droughts, cyclones and heatwaves also requires engagement at other fora — at the G-20, or between neighbouring countries, for instance. The intensification of the climate crisis makes such cooperation imperative.

FUTURE OF FRAUD

Deepfakes in the UK university system might just be a warning of what is to come in digital interaction

THE SPECTRE OF deepfakes is looming over the UK university system. Enrolly, a software product used by several universities in Great Britain to automate part of the application process, is being haunted by what it has called the "future of fraud". In the interviews, applicants are posed a series of random questions. Enrolly's platform is reportedly used to screen international applicants as a part of issuing their confirmation of acceptance for studies (CAS) certificate — a prerequisite for issuing student visas. Among other things, the system looks at "suitability" and the ability to communicate in English. That's where the deepfakes come in.

A small number of those aspiring to study in the UK have attempted to use deepfake versions of themselves to record their answers. But perhaps the "fraud" speaks of larger issues. A large-scale study by the University of Northumbria in 2022 found that "accentism" is widely prevalent in the UK. How an aspirant pronounces their consonants and rounds out their vowels, then, can be a real advantage or disadvantage at workplaces and in university acceptances. Given this, an argument could be made that using a digital avatar that resembles oneself is a social mobility prosthetic. Since so much communication is now online, what is labelled the "future of fraud" might just be the future of digital interaction.

The anxiety over AI-driven avatars is understandable. Beyond the issue of university admissions and visas, it raises questions about the nature of truth and authenticity. What do "AI-enhanced" versions of people do to relationships, hierarchies, diversity? Dealing with these questions calls for a plethora of minds. If universities in the UK and beyond didn't care about accents and suitability, they might get the right people on board to answer them.



KANTI BAJPAI

THE MEETING BETWEEN Narendra Modi and Donald Trump went about as well as it could. While the shadow of friction points was evident, it did not mar the visit. This is not terribly surprising because high-level meetings are carefully choreographed in terms of final outcomes, and discordant notes are suppressed or finessed. With Trump, there is, of course, always the risk of the unexpected, but the Indian side can come away with a sense that it was largely mission accomplished.

What are the key takeaways for India? Joint statements are indicative of the priorities and the biggest takeaways (unless there are secret agreements). It is always useful to look at what is upfront in a joint statement for clues. The statement features six areas: Defence, trade and investment, energy, technology and innovation, multilateral cooperation, and people-to-people (P2P), in that order. It is safe to say that the first three areas are key.

The Foreign Secretary's "special briefing" to the media more or less followed the same order in terms of the areas of agreement, though it was perhaps significant that in his remarks, multilateral cooperation came last — significant because Trump's America is focused on transactional bilateral relationships and suspicious of or indifferent to regional and international partnerships. As a result, almost everything in the multilateral cooperation section was blameless and blameless.

The big friction points going into the meeting were trade and immigration: India's large trade surplus on the back of high tariffs, and the status of illegal Indian migration to the US. Delhi can be reasonably satisfied with how both these were treated in the joint statement. In essence, the US avoided slamming India on tariffs publicly.

PM Modi and his team should be smiling on their way back from the US

The Prime Minister got a warm embrace from the US President and met key figures friendly to India such as Elon Musk, Tulsi Gabbard, and Vivek Ramaswamy. Trump refrained from embarrassing India over tariffs, though higher tariffs on Indian products will likely soon kick in. The areas of cooperation ahead are solid ones to deepen — defence, trade and investment, energy, and technology.

The road ahead seems to be to find a way to reduce the surplus through a multilateral trade agreement to be concluded by the fall of 2025.

As for illegal migration, the two sides agreed that they would "aggressively" combat illegal migration and the networks that facilitate it — the world "aggressively" undoubtedly reflecting US insistence and the focus on networks being an Indian preference. At the same time, Delhi has come away with an assurance that the US wants to continue with student visas, visas for professionals, and legal migration. If India pressed the point about the mistreatment of recently repatriated illegal migrants, it was in private and it got no recognition in statements during the visit.

A third potential friction point was the Gupatwan Singh Panam assassination case. Just hours before the Modi-Trump meeting, a senior White House official stated that Trump "prioritises nothing more than the safety of every American". This was in response to a question on whether Trump would raise the Panam issue with Modi. In his media briefing, the Foreign Secretary referred to the joint statement's indication that both sides would deal with "elements who threaten public and diplomatic safety and security, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both nations". This takes into account the US concerns over the Panam case and India's concerns over anti-India protests and separatist activities in America.

Beyond the management of friction points, the visit was notable for three agreements.

The first was a new 10-year defence partnership agreement to be signed later this year. As part of this, India will get the Javelin anti-tank missile, Stryker combat vehicles, and more P-81 maritime patrol aircraft. Plus,

the US will co-produce AI-enabled unmanned systems for underwater domain awareness. Not mentioned in the official statements, but featured in Trump's remarks, is also the promise to consider selling India the F-35 combat aircraft.

Secondly, partly to deal with the Indian trade surplus, the two sides have committed to increasing Indian oil and gas imports from the US. The Foreign Secretary suggested the increase would be from about \$15 to \$25 billion "in the near future". Beyond this, India will continue to improve the civil liability framework to enable US help in building both large and small modular reactors.

Finally, nestled in the section on technology and innovation, beyond all the usual words on developing semiconductors, AI, biotech, and space cooperation, is an agreement to launch a Strategic Mineral Recovery initiative to recover key minerals from heavy industries such as aluminium, coal mining, oil and gas. Critical minerals are vital economic and military resources, and China is very well endowed.

Modi's visit was both symbolically and substantively productive. The Prime Minister got a warm embrace from the US President and met key figures friendly to India such as Elon Musk, Tulsi Gabbard, and Vivek Ramaswamy. There were no tensions over tariffs, though higher tariffs on Indian products will likely soon kick in. The areas of cooperation ahead are solid ones to deepen — defence, trade and investment, energy, and technology.

The Prime Minister and his team should be smiling on their way home.

The writer is Wilmar Professor of Asian Studies and vice dean, Research and Development, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore



ROHAN MANOJ

LITTLE ENGLAND, GREAT BRITAIN

Those protesting Bengali signboards in London must know they can't have both

KURTAS, SALWAR, IMITATION jewellery, gol gappe, jackfruit hanging from hooks. Is this Sarojini Nagar market? The thought may fleetingly strike you before beating just as sudden a retreat when you see the prices. It's Whitechapel in London, nowadays known more for jaljale than Jack the Ripper.

You'll see one of the biggest mosques in Western Europe, and a bit further down the road, an underground — literally — a Somali restaurant with Old Delhi vibes where you can eat something biryani-esque off a shared plate. There's the proverbial Brick Lane and, perhaps inevitably, a fish-and-chip shop called Jack the Chipper.

In this cultural khichdi, there's nothing particularly out of place about a sign displaying the local tube station's name in both English and Bengali. Nor is there anything surprising about an MP from Nigel Farage's Reform Party complaining about it. Elon Musk sticking his oar in is practically a given.

On the surface, there's the old debate of integration versus multiculturalism — should minority groups assimilate fully into the dominant culture, or can these cultures thrive alongside each other?

But what's interesting here is the deeper cultural politics underlying it — that of the British, or rather, English right's war on London. Think Londonistan, add a couple more decades of anti-immigrant, anti-multicultural politics culminating in Brexit, and the knotty question of English-versus-British identity.

Set against the nativist imagination is

Among those who call themselves English rather than British, only a third say the country's diversity is an important part of their identity. Among those who describe themselves as more British than English, the figure is two-thirds, the survey added. If you grow up in England as the child of immigrants, can you really be English? It depends on who you ask.

London's historical reality: That of a bustling port city that has always hosted travellers from across the oceans, some of whom settled down — from the legionaries and traders coming from the Mediterranean region, who rubbed shoulders with the Britons in Roman Londinium, to the Jewish and Lombard merchants of the Middle Ages to the East India Company's lascars. There were those who played important roles in British society and politics. From William Cuffey, the son of a formerly enslaved Black man from the West Indies and an Englishwoman, who settled in London and became a leader of the Chartist movement in the mid-19th century, to myriad Irishmen and women of all social strata.

Whitechapel and East London more broadly have their own history of working-class Irish immigrants who came in the wake of the Potato Famine, as well as Eastern Europeans and Russian Jews — all of whom contributed to the melting pot before the Bangladeshis.

The 19th-century saw London transform itself from the mercantile capital of Napoleon's "shopkeepers" to a self-conscious imperial city, full of mushrooming monuments fit to bear the White Man's Burden, the detritus of empire is strewn all about today.

And attendant on being an imperial centre was a certain cosmopolitanism — as it was in Rome, Constantinople, or Delhi for that matter, so it was in London. After this came the great waves of post-imperial migration that shaped the demography and debates of today.

London has hardly ever been 100 per

cent White and English — so English nationalism seeks a whitewashed, homogeneous London that never really existed. The imperial nostalgia that sometimes accompanies such nationalism conveniently elides imperial cosmopolitanism.

It's a contradiction: you can't have both Little England and Great Britain at the same time.

This tension has a parallel in people's self-identification — whether they see themselves as more "English" or "British". A 2018 BBC survey found that 61 per cent of people who described themselves as "White" were proud to declare their English identity, whereas the figure for those from ethnic minority groups was only 32 per cent. On the other hand, three-quarters of the BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) population strongly identified as British. The English identity emerges as more exclusive while the British identity is seen as more inclusive. Among those who call themselves English rather than British, only a third say the country's diversity is an important part of their identity. Among those who describe themselves as more British than English, the figure is two-thirds, the survey added. If you grow up in England as the child of immigrants, can you really be English? It depends on who you ask.

Such an exclusive vision of the nation would struggle to swallow a multicultural British London. Therefore, the latter's history must be erased, its diversity smoothed out and its many tongues cut out if it is to be the capital of England (not Britain).

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FEBRUARY 15, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

DEFECTION LAW

THE ANTI-DEFECTION BILL, passed by the two Houses of Parliament a fortnight ago, need not be sent to state legislatures for ratification. Law Ministry sources clarified. However, it will take time for the bill to become law because after it receives the President's assent, the presiding officers of the two Houses of Parliament and state legislatures will have to make rules.

MENINGITIS DEATHS

MENINGITIS HAS CLAIMED 52 lives, mostly of children between 5 and 14 years of age, in Delhi since January, according to statistics

compiled by the National Institute of Communicable Diseases from the major hospitals in the city. The death rate is so high, explain doctors, because the patients are usually brought to them at an advanced stage of the disease by which time it is too late to save them. The alarming increase in meningitis this year has baffled most doctors.

RELOCATION PLAN

RESTRICTION OF DELHI's rapid population growth, conservation and revitalisation of traditional areas like the Walled City, immediate provision of water, sewer, and electricity for resettlement dwellers, a rapid transport sys-

tem, and a dry port are some of the major suggestions contained in the revised Master Plan for Delhi. With a perspective of planning up to 2001, the plan was laid on the table of the Delhi Metropolitan Council.

NEW CBI DIRECTOR

MOHAN KATRE, SPECIAL DGP, Maharashtra, has been appointed director of the CBI, New Delhi. He is the third senior officer from Maharashtra to be appointed in the Home Department after S B Chavan assumed charge as Home Minister. Ram Pradhan, who was chief secretary to the state government, has taken over as a Union home secretary.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

US U-turn on Ukraine war

Trump and Putin have agreed to negotiate an end to the Ukraine war, a move that could have far-reaching implications for global peace and trade

The US President Trump has had a good relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and that is now showing in the policy shift of the US. The US stance on the Ukraine war now seems to be taking a U-turn as in all likelihood the US would now go soft on Russia and leave Ukraine in the cold. In a significant geopolitical development, US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin have agreed to initiate negotiations aimed at ending the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. This move marks a notable shift in US foreign policy and has elicited varied reactions globally. President Trump held a 90-minute phone conversation with President Putin, discussing a range of topics, with a primary focus on the situation in Ukraine. Following the call, Trump announced that both Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had expressed a willingness to pursue peace, leading to the initiation of negotiations to end the war. Trump indicated that these talks would commence immediately, with a potential meeting with Putin in Saudi Arabia in the near future.



Ukrainian and European leaders have expressed concerns about being sidelined in the negotiations and the potential for unfavourable concessions.

The decision by the US to engage directly with Russia has raised questions about a potential shift in its support for Ukraine. By recognising Ukraine's NATO membership as 'impractical' and the return of Russian-occupied territories as 'illusory', the US appears to be moving away from its previous stance of isolating Russia. This shift has led to concerns that Ukraine may be left in a precarious position, especially if European allies are unable to fill the void left

by a potential US withdrawal. The announcement of potential peace talks has had immediate effects on global markets. European stock markets have shown optimism, with indices such as Spain's Ibex 35 reaching new highs. Oil prices have also declined, with Brent crude falling below \$75 per barrel, as traders anticipate a relaxation of sanctions on Russian producers. However, uncertainties remain. Analysts caution that while a de-escalation could stabilise energy and food markets, the specifics of any agreement will determine the long-term impacts. The agricultural sector, in particular, is closely monitoring the situation, given that Russia and Ukraine together account for a significant portion of global wheat exports. A resolution to the conflict could ease supply constraints, but logistical challenges and infrastructure damage in Ukraine may continue to pose obstacles. India, as a major importer of commodities like sunflower oil, stands to be affected by these developments. A potential end to the conflict could lead to more predictable trade flows and possibly lower prices for key imports. While Trump-Putin negotiations offer a glimmer of hope for peace, the potential shifts in alliances and the impacts on global markets warrant careful consideration by all stakeholders involved.

PICTALK



A foreign devotee during the Mahakumbh Mela 2025, in Prayagraj

Kumbh Mela: The catalyst for Gandhi's freedom struggle

It was at this grand confluence of faith and politics that Gandhi fully grasped his growing influence, reinforcing his resolve for satyagraha



RAJDEEP PATHAK

One of the most notable episodes in the history of the Kumbh Mela occurred in 1915 when Mahatma Gandhi visited the Haridwar gathering shortly after returning from South Africa after twenty-one years. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Gandhi's political mentor, had advised him to undertake a nationwide tour to understand India's socio-political landscape before formulating his strategies - and plunging himself into the dynamics of the freedom movement. It was during this tour that Gandhi decided to attend the Kumbh, primarily to visit Mahatma Munshiram at his Gurukul in Rishikesh and to oversee the activities of the Servants of India Society.

While Gandhi's views on various issues such as cleanliness and sanitation, including that of communal harmony were critical - which Gandhi distinctly mentions in this autobiography too - his brief political debut at Haridwar Kumbh Mela pointed towards the necessity of bridging the communal divide to achieve a more conscientious goal for freedom. Gandhi was also awestruck, not only by the overwhelming crowds but also by the chaos, superstition, and lack of hygiene. He noted the rampant disregard for cleanliness, which tarnished the sanctity of the event.

'The banks of the Ganga, a symbol of purity, were defiled by human waste and negligence', he lamented in his speeches decades later. In 1947, remembering his Kumbh experience, Gandhi remarked, 'We must ensure that our religious gatherings become sanctuaries of cleanliness and serenity, not breeding grounds for disease and disorder.'

It was also here in Haridwar that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi first grasped the profound impact his humble efforts in South Africa had on Bharat's people. Reflecting on this experience, he wrote in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*: 'My business was mostly to keep sitting in the tent, giving darshan and holding religious and other discussions with numerous pilgrims who called on me. This left me not a minute



which I could call my own. I was followed even to the bathing ghats by these darshan-seekers, nor did they leave me alone whilst I was having my meals. Thus, it was in Haridwar that I realised what a deep impression my humble services in South Africa had made throughout the whole of India.'

The Kumbh Mela at Haridwar proved to be a pivotal moment in shaping Mahatma Gandhi's sense of purpose and his eventual entry into the political arena of India's freedom movement. This deepened his realisation that the people of India looked up to him, not just as a spiritual figure, but as a leader capable of addressing the nation's struggles.

This realisation planted the seeds of confidence and responsibility within Gandhi, inspiring him to expand his mission of service and truth to the broader cause of India's liberation - which resulted in his first non-violent satyagraha in 1917 in Champaran, Bihar. The overwhelming response he received at the Kumbh Mela reinforced his belief in the power of collective action and solidified his resolve to dedicate his life to the fight for India's freedom.

It is also fascinating to note that Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Haridwar and his entry into the political arena coincided with a landmark moment in history - the All India Hindu Mahasabha formation during



THE KUMBH MELA AT HARIDWAR PROVED TO BE A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN SHAPING MAHATMA GANDHI'S SENSE OF PURPOSE AND HIS EVENTUAL ENTRY INTO THE POLITICAL ARENA OF INDIA'S FREEDOM MOVEMENT

the Kumbh Mela. In April 1915, amidst the spiritual fervour of the Haridwar Kumbh, Gandhi joined luminaries such as Swami Shradhdhanand, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, and other visionaries at the inaugural conference of the Sarvadeshak (All India) Hindu Sabha, marking a pivotal chapter in India's socio-political awakening. Gandhi's participation at the Kumbh was also available to British intelligence, who had made records - now available in the Regional State Archives.

The colonial period introduced a fresh perspective to the Kumbh Mela, with European observers chronicling its significance and adding valuable historical context. Fascinated by the immense scale and diversity of the pilgrimage, the British left behind detailed records that provide significant insights into the evolution of the Maha Kumbh Mela which also can be found in the well-documented writings of James Prinsep, a British colonial administrator.

It is worth referring to The Sunday Guardian's article, *Beyond Faith: How Kumbh Mela Reshapes the Course of History*, which highlights the Kumbh Mela's role in India's independence movement. A 1920 British intelligence document, displayed at the Allahabad Museum, reveals a pivotal 1918 meeting during the Mela. This meeting adopt-

ed a memorial supporting political reforms, demanded Panchayats, permanent settlements, and tenant protections, and founded the UP Peasants Association. Led by Pt Madan Mohan Malaviya, the association grew to 450 branches, fostering unity among peasants and opposing zamindar dominance.

The Sunday Guardian further highlights the pivotal role of the Kumbh Mela in shaping India's post-independence democracy, particularly during the Emergency. The JP Movement gained significant momentum at this Kumbh, with the Sadhu Samaj lending strong support. Events such as the 'Dharma Sansad' and 'Sadhu Sammelans (congregations)' cemented widespread support for the Janata Party across the Hindi heartland. The Maha Kumbh Mela transcends its role as a spiritual gathering, reflecting the profound confluence of the sacred and the secular.

While it offers a space for deep introspection and devotion, it also acts as a mirror to the socio-political currents that shape Indian society. This timeless festival continues to evolve, bridging spiritual and worldly realms. The Kumbh Mela remains a powerful testament to India's enduring cultural legacy.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WazirX hack exposes crypto risks: A call for stringent regulations

Such cyberattacks expose regulatory gaps across jurisdictions and underscore the need for investor protection and the need for stricter crypto regulations

At the 2023 G20 Summit under Indian presidency, world economies pledged to create a global regulatory framework for crypto-assets. While each country must establish its regulations, international collaboration is equally important.

This need for both domestic and global regulatory frameworks is exemplified by the recent WazirX case, which underscores the urgency of addressing vulnerabilities in the crypto ecosystem. WazirX, one of India's leading cryptocurrency exchanges, suffered a cyberattack in July 2024 by the North Korean hacker group Lazarus. This has been confirmed by a joint statement issued by the governments of the United States, Japan and South Korea and the three countries have pledged to collaborate to counter this.

In India, the attack has raised concerns about cybersecurity risks and the reliability of custodial exchanges. Custodial exchanges, where assets are held centrally pose significant risks, as evidenced by this cyber-attack. This episode has exposed broader systemic risks and has revived the con-



versation about a regulatory intervention into the entire crypto ecosystem in the country. Approximately 4.4 million users were affected.

The Anatomy of a Crypto Crisis WazirX's holding company, Zettai Pte Ltd, is based in Singapore, meaning any legal recourse must go through Singapore's regulatory channels, even though over 95 per cent of WazirX's users were Indian investors. In response to the crisis, WazirX introduced a Restructuring Scheme aimed at user recovery and long-term operational stability. The proposed scheme promises quicker asset recovery, profit-sharing mechanisms and operational changes. Last month, WazirX received approval from the Singapore High Court to propose its Scheme of Arrangement to creditors. Additionally, WazirX recently completed its

asset rebalancing exercise, which ensures each victim will receive 85 per cent of their portfolio value as of July 18, 2024. Following the breach, WazirX faced a significant shortfall in ERC-20 tokens, leaving it unable to fully cover user balances. Since matching individual token losses would be complex and impractical, the proposed Scheme aims to distribute available assets equitably among all creditors, based on their claim values at the time of the attack.

This standardised valuation approach ensures fairness and transparency and has been approved by the Singapore court.

The Scheme of Arrangement The Scheme of Arrangement promises to offer a legally binding path to recovery, ensuring equitable treatment of all creditors, regardless of the size of their claims or the type of cryptocurrency they hold. This approach takes an egalitarian stance, providing all users with a fair opportunity to recover their assets. The restructuring and resolution process will only proceed with the approval of a majority of creditors. To enhance recovery prospects, the

Scheme includes the issuance of Recovery Tokens (RTs), which would give creditors a stake in future platform profits and assets. If the Scheme is rejected, WazirX may face liquidation, which would likely erode value, force the sale of assets at distressed prices and drag out the recovery process for years with uncertain outcomes.

The Way Forward WazirX's restructuring plan represents a bold approach to crisis management, prioritising immediate user recovery and laying the groundwork for a more resilient crypto ecosystem. However, the broader lesson from this case is the urgent need for a robust regulatory framework for digital assets in India.

As the G20 emphasised, global cooperation and regulatory consistency are key to addressing the risks in the crypto ecosystem. India must develop a comprehensive regulatory framework to better protect investors and mitigate future risks, ensuring the country's preparedness for a rapidly evolving digital economy. (The writer is CEO & Co-founder, The Policy Consensus Centre; views are personal)

SAJJAN KUMAR CONVICTED IN SIKH RIOTS

Madam - Congress leader Sajjan Kumar stands convicted in yet another case related to anti-Sikh violence in Delhi after the death of the then PM Indira Gandhi, gunned down by two Sikh security guards more than 40 years ago. There were no FIRs and the Congress goons roamed across Delhi to burn alive the Sikhs along with damaging their property continuously for 3 days when the Army was called to contain the violence. The moot question is, "Who was responsible?"

Obviously, the violence had the blessings of Rajiv Gandhi, who took over as PM immediately after the death of her mother and justified the killings on camera, yet no case was made against him or the family, and even the courts remained aloof to the bare fact about the responsibility of Rajiv Gandhi while hearing the petitions pertaining to the violence. Sajjan Kumar or Jagdish Tytler were only carrying out the orders to finish the Sikhs as much as possible within 3 days. The same courts as well as the media tried and tried Gujarat CM Narendra Modi for the violence that erupted after the gruesome burning alive of 59 Hindus. Doesn't it establish that the special family is much bigger than scores of poor Hindus in the eyes of the media and judiciary?

Jai Prakash Gupta | Ambala Cantt

US BANS ASSOCIATED PRESS

Madam - The decision by U.S. President Donald Trump to ban the renowned news agency Associated Press (AP) from entering the White House is a severe blow to democracy. This is not merely a restriction on a media institution but an attempt to crush independent journalism. The Trump administration accused AP of misusing the term 'America', but can this truly justify curtailing press freedom? The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees the press the right to operate fearlessly, impartially, and independently. However, when those in power seek to evade

New Income Tax Bill simplifies taxation



The newly tabled Income Tax Bill brings much-needed reforms to India's tax system and deserves commendation. By replacing the outdated Income Tax Act of 1961, the bill aims to simplify tax laws, reduce litigation and remove obsolete provisions, making the tax process more transparent and efficient for both taxpayers and the government. One of the most notable changes is the

increased tax rebate under Section 87A, which will now provide up to Rs 60,000 for individuals with a net taxable income of Rs 12 lakh or below. This is a significant step towards reducing the tax burden on the middle class, offering greater financial relief.

Furthermore, the introduction of two clear deductions under the new tax regime, a Rs 75,000 standard deduction and NPS contributions, enhances tax planning options for individuals, making it simpler to manage finances. Although the income tax slabs remain unchanged for FY 2025-26, the streamlined approach will likely benefit taxpayers in the long run, fostering greater compliance and reducing unnecessary complications. Overall, this bill paves the way for a more modern and efficient tax system that is better suited to today's economic landscape.

Vishal Mayor | Tumakuru

criminal offence. These raging incidents continued for three months, telling how much ordeal freshers had to face during that period.

Till about the 90s, ragging in the educational institutions used to be a platform to create affinity, closeness, and rapport between first-year students and seniors. Sadly, it has now taken an unfortunate turn and become a tool to torture. Merely getting parents and students to sign the undertaking was never going to help and prevent ragging from taking place. Punishing culpable students is an absolute must, but college administration must be held accountable in such cases too. One out-of-the-box idea could be to set a rule that any student who is found guilty of ragging and torturing juniors would not be allowed to participate in final placement or not be given passing out certificates. We have to hit it where it hurts them most.

Bal Govind | Noida

RAGGING MUST STOP

Madam - The Kottayam Nursing College ragging incident is a crude reminder that ragging is very much prevailing in our colleges without any deterrent and despite ragging being a

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