



## Pain remains

Fall in food prices is only one part of the inflation story

The continued fall in inflation to a 77-month low of 2.1% in June 2025 should serve as a significant source of relief for policymakers. The general public, however, would not be too thrilled. There is some good news for them, but also a significant dose of pain. Food inflation, for example, saw a significant easing, although that too is a seasonal effect rather than a structural one. Food and beverage prices contracted 0.2% in June 2025 on a high base of 8.4% in June last year. Key items such as vegetables, pulses, and meat saw prices falling in June compared to their levels last year. But food is not all that people spend their money on. The data reveal that there were several items and services of common consumption that saw inflation quickening in June. The education and stationery segment saw inflation quicken to 4.4% in June, the highest in 15 months. This was driven by a jump in the prices of school, college, and private tuition. Inflation in the health-care category, too, was at a 15-month high in June. Compounding this, the personal care segment saw inflation jumping to a blistering 14.8% in June, the eighth month of double-digit inflation in the last nine months. Products such as soap, toothpaste, shampoo and sanitary napkins – items of daily or regular use and by no stretch luxuries – have become more expensive. So, overall, food is cheaper, but nearly everything else is more expensive.

This leads to an important policy question, one that has been asked several times before: is the headline inflation data adequately capturing the price rise the average Indian faces? The food basket itself carries a 46% weight in the overall Consumer Price Index (CPI), meaning that any change in this category has an inordinate impact on the headline number. The recent Household Consumption Expenditure Surveys show that food comprises a much smaller share of about 30% in the expenditure of households. Bringing the CPI weight of food down to align with this will allow the overall CPI to be more representative. To be fair, that process is on, with the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation in the process of updating the CPI. The CPI base year – so far set as 2011-12 – is being updated to a more recent time period, and the weights of the different categories are also being revised. This update cannot happen fast enough, as even monetary policy is currently dependent on this outdated and unrepresentative measure. In the meantime, it is important not to get swayed by the fall in the headline number itself. The felt experience of the average Indian is described in the details, and it is still a painful one.

## More than symbolic

Legislative measures to curb unhealthy food intake are a must

In a welcome move, the Health Ministry has directed all government departments to display oil, sugar and trans-fat content in everyday Indian snacks such as *samosas*, *jaalebis*, *vada pavs* and *laddoos* in a bid to highlight the health risks of their consumption on a regular basis. The campaign will be piloted in AIMS Nagpur and then rolled out to other cities. The move comes two months after the CBSE directed all affiliated schools to establish 'sugar boards' to monitor and reduce the sugar intake of children. These will list information on the recommended daily sugar intake, the sugar content in commonly consumed foods, health risks associated with high sugar consumption, and healthier dietary alternatives. The initiatives have been driven by studies that provide evidence of increasing obesity trends in India. As in the NFHS data, obesity had increased from nearly 15% to 24% in men and from 12% to nearly 23% in women between 2005-06 and 2019-21. Since the amount of oil and sugar in Indian snacks is not apparent – and, hence, often overlooked – these initiatives will serve to fill the gap and act as “visual behavioural nudges”, much like the pictorial warnings on tobacco products. However, building awareness alone cannot bring about behavioural changes, especially in the absence of essential legislative measures.

Surprisingly, while the Health Ministry has targeted Indian snacks, nothing has been done over the years to introduce clear front-of-package labels to caution people about unhealthy packaged food items, and regulate the advertising, marketing and promotion of unhealthy food to children. Also, levying additional tax on food products with high levels of fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) can further reduce consumption, as seen in some countries. As in the national multisectoral action plan for prevention and control of common non-communicable disease (2017-22), the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) Regulation was required to be amended for inclusion of front-of-pack labelling and detailed nutrient labelling. The FSSAI (Packaging and Labelling) Regulation was amended in 2020; on July 15, the Supreme Court of India again directed the agency to execute this label on packaged food. For front-of-pack labels on HFSS food and beverage products to become a reality, the FSSAI has to first define the upper limits for sugar, salt and total fat, which have not been finalised and approved so far. A 2022 study found that warning labels outperformed all other forms of front-of-pack labelling in identifying unhealthy products. A study by the ICMR-NIN found that warning labels and nutritional ratings helped deter the consumption of even moderately unhealthy foods. Measures to build awareness without essential legislative measures to curb unhealthy food intake will not be much more than symbolic.

# The issue with criminalising all adolescent relationships

The Supreme Court of India's sentencing judgment in *Re: Right to Privacy of Adolescents* (May 2025) is a remarkable example of the Court revisiting its stance by prioritising the voice of the young person most impacted by the criminal case initiated for her protection.

The Court exercised its extraordinary jurisdiction, under Article 142 of the Constitution, and did not impose any sentence on a young man convicted of aggravated penetrative sexual assault under Section 6, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. The case involved a 14-year-old girl from rural West Bengal who left her home to be with a 25-year-old man. The criminal justice system was set in motion by her mother. Although she stayed in a shelter and was restored to her mother, she left again to be with the man due to stigma, humiliation, and surveillance from her family. They got married and had a child in 2021 – when the girl was 17. He was arrested subsequently and tried for kidnapping, rape, aggravated penetrative sexual assault, and child marriage.

Despite noting the helplessness of the girl in court, with the child on her lap, the POCSO Special Court was constrained by stringent legal provisions and sentenced the accused to 20 years imprisonment.

In 2022, during the appeal, the Calcutta High Court recognised her distress – cut-off by her family and left to care for the baby and a mother-in-law with cancer, while fighting for the release of her partner. It noted the socio-economic background of the couple who did not understand that their relationship constituted an offence. Taking a “humane view of the matter to do complete justice” the High Court reversed the lower court's conviction. While noting that “the approach adopted under the POCSO Act renders adolescents vulnerable to criminal prosecutions for normative sexual behaviour”, the High Court also made several problematic comments, including one that female adolescents should “control sexual urges/urges as in the eyes of society she is the looser [sic] when she gives in to enjoy the sexual pleasure of hardly two minutes”.

### Top court's intervention

Following media outrage over these remarks, the Supreme Court, in December 2023 took up the matter *sub motu* in *Re: Right to Privacy of Adolescents*. It restored the accused's conviction and rejected the concepts of “non-exploitative” sexual acts with a minor aged 14 years, and the category of “older adolescents”. Incidentally, both these concepts are recognised in international human rights law and medical parlance, respectively. General Comment No. 20 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child under the UNCRC, exhorts States to “avoid criminalising adolescents of similar ages for factually consensual and non-exploitative sexual activity”.



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Before finalising the sentence, in August 2024, the Court took a step, befitting the case's complexity, by directing the state to appoint an expert committee comprising a clinical psychologist, a social scientist, and a child welfare officer to ascertain whether the “victim” – now an adult – wanted to continue living with the accused or preferred to accept benefits offered by the State Government. The committee's report and the Court's interaction with the woman revealed the heavy emotional and financial toll that the legal battle had had on the family and the “collective failure of the systems” in protecting her.

The Court recognised the profound irony at the heart of this case. The young woman had spent her sparse resources fighting for the perpetrator's release, falling into debt and moving from court to court in desperate attempts to reunite with her family. It concluded that “sadly, true justice lies in not sentencing the accused to undergo imprisonment”, adding that “if we send the accused to jail, the worst sufferer will be the victim herself”.

Both the High Court and Supreme Court barred their cases from being treated as precedent, with the top court describing this as an “extraordinary” case. However, empirical studies suggest that adolescent relationships, especially above 16 years, is not extraordinary but a common reality. An Enfold study of 1,715 “romantic cases” showed that out of 7,064 POCSO judgments in Assam, Maharashtra and West Bengal between 2016 to 2020, 24.3% involved romantic relationships, with 82% of victims in such cases refusing to testify against the accused. Another study by Enfold and P39A on judicial trends in 264 cases under Section 6, POCSO Act from these States found that 25.4% involved consensual relationships.

Various High Courts have emphasised that criminalising consensual sex was never the objective of the POCSO Act, while scientific studies confirm that sexual exploration is normal for older adolescents. However, recently the Bombay High Court in *Aakash Waghmare vs State of Maharashtra* (2025) refused to quash a case involving a consensual relationship, by stating that such petitions should wait until the government considers the suggestion of decriminalisation of adolescent sexual relationships under POCSO Act. This judicial reluctance reveals the limitations of case-by-case exceptions and the urgent need for structural reform.

### The system that continues to fail

With remarkable candour, the Supreme Court acknowledged, “This case is an illustration of the complete failure of our society and our legal system.” Community humiliation, family abandonment, paternalistic judicial language, absent child protection systems, corrupt legal practices and sensationalist media coverage contributed to her seven-year ordeal. However,

the Court's assumption that implementation of the rehabilitative provisions under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 by the Child Welfare Committee would ensure that “no victim will face the situation which the victim in the case had to face”, belies the experience of many adolescent girls, who routinely endure institutionalisation, humiliation and the deprivation of liberty in such cases.

### A victim, but of what?

As the law sets the age of consent at 18 – a development from 2012 before which it was 16 – the Supreme Court, in its initial judgment, did not envisage any non-exploitative consensual relationship involving an adolescent. The Supreme Court dismissed the observation of the Calcutta High Court that “the law undermines the identity of adolescent girls by casting them as victims, thereby rendering them voiceless”, as “shocking”, indicating a paternalistic approach unable to imagine such adolescents as anything but victims.

However, the expert Committee report emphatically stated that “the law saw it as a crime, the victim did not... the legal crime did not cause any trauma on this particular victim. It was the consequences thereafter”. Her trauma stemmed not from the relationship itself but from police involvement, court proceedings, and her struggle to secure her partner's release while raising a child alone.

This case exposes the fundamental tensions within the POCSO Act and ground realities of adolescent sexuality. The girl's consent was undeniably flawed, given her age, poverty, lack of a supportive environment and the cultural acceptability of child marriage, a lack of opportunities, and exposure and life choices beyond marriage. Nevertheless, it exemplifies the need to re-examine the blanket approach under the POCSO Act and its assumption that all sexual acts involving adolescents are inherently exploitative.

Young people who choose to marry early are often asserting their agency through the very limited options available within patriarchal structures. While consent may be flawed in such cases, it is crucial to interrogate state responses and whether they are support-oriented, shape the ability to exercise choice, and expand options. True justice requires moving beyond criminalising all adolescent relationships. Instead it must recognise consent of those above 16 years with conditions in which consent will be invalid such as coercion, and sexual relationships with persons in positions of trust and authority. It also necessitates addressing the root causes of underage elopements and power imbalances in intimate relationships. The Court's direction to the central government to consider measures for comprehensive sexuality education, life-skills training, emergency assistance, counselling services and comprehensive data collection on these interventions, is a step in this direction.

# The U.S. established and extinguished multilateralism

The President of the United States, Donald Trump, is the visible part of the global transformation that is underway and the global trend supports India's re-emergence.

The current super power has marginalised the United Nations, and, with it, emasculated the collective bargaining strength of the Global South – there will be no going back. The U.S. is now engaging countries with strategic commerce-related bilateral deals that fragment the global order. The asymmetry of power is such that there was no opposition in the BRICS Summit in July 2025.

The BRICS Declaration that comprised 31 pages and included 126 outcomes failed to note the rejection of multilateralism which required a focus on South-South cooperation. Essentially, unilateral tariffs are a means to bring individual countries to the table for seeking concessions, not global consensus.

### The U.S. shock

Mr. Trump is fully aware that 2025 is not 1950 and the U.S. cannot shape a new common global framework. The national interest of the U.S. now is self-sufficiency and containment of China's influence flowing from the world's reliance on its products, which is the other side of the coin. Over the last 25 years, the world has become interconnected and the spheres of influence, trade and financial sanctions provide a more effective management tool than leverage through global institutions. As a result, no one really knows how to respond as 75 years of diplomatic history has been erased by raw power.

Where does this state of flux leave India with its young population having the potential to be the third largest economy in 2027 and overtake the U.S. by 2075, with global influence based on



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leadership of the Global South? The answer lies in accepting the end of multilateralism. The answer lies in focusing on national prosperity and South-South cooperation.

The glue binding the Global South can no longer be financial benefits of a voting bloc in the UN. India needs their support in elections and positions in various committees for global influence; it has already lost the elected post of vice chair of the Executive Board of UNESCO to Pakistan. India needs to specify “strategic autonomy” for what it is, namely, neutrality between major powers and enunciating its core interests in its own voting pattern.

Second, the challenge for a continental size “Atmanirbhar Bharat” of one billion people is to look east, and not west, for ideas. Trade concessions to the U.S. should be tuned to trade agreements with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Similarly, the loss of exports to the U.S., for example, steel, can be offset by a network of expressways, high speed rail, data centres with assured electricity and science universities reorienting consumption and exports. In 2013, China spent almost half its GDP on infrastructure; such scale alone makes for sustainable double digit growth.

Third, India's intrinsic strength is being at the forefront of the digital industry revolution, a new chapter in human development. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization, India has overtaken the U.K. and Germany in the number of GenAI patents published, and has a strong foundation for endogenous growth and well-being.

Fourth, the world over, military doctrines are being re-written for reliance on integrated air defence, satellites, missiles, drones and cyber.

For the first time since Independence, India is in a position to be a global leader in all domains, enabling a substantial reduction in costly ground forces and imported large platforms, giving flexibility in foreign policy and spin-offs for growth.

Fifth, India is already revisiting the way it has framed border issues leftover from colonialism and needs to push this to focus on growth. Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's assertion that India and China should not “remain stuck in the past”, achieve trust and work on the goal of demarcation of an international border has been favourably received by China that is preoccupied with Taiwan and in responding to Mr. Trump. The Indus Waters Treaty, where Pakistan is keen to engage, provides a new frame to achieve mutual trust. An international border in eastern Ladakh will be a decisive step to settling the international border in Jammu and Kashmir. The real lesson from “Operation Sindoor” is the oldest one in military history – wisdom lies in knowing when to stop. In India's case, it is clear that there will not be a military solution.

### Summit as opportunity

Last, the BRICS Summit in India in 2026 provides an opportunity to revitalise the Global South around cooperation jettisoning the multilateral practice of collective bargaining by the G-77 in seeking benefits from the G-7. The future lies in sharing prosperity by reorienting tariffs and value chains to divert exports to meet growing consumption in the South. It should be possible at the low prices the South currently gets, and done in a manner that complements, not threatens, local production.

Certainly a seismic shift, but so was multilateralism in 1950.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Inflation down

In India, the dark reality at the ground level is that ordinary people do not find food prices dropping for most items even when reports say inflation has come down (Page 1, July 15).

The inflation rates released by the government are perhaps useful only for the upward or the downward revision of the DA of

government employees.  
Kosaraju Chandramouli,  
Hyderabad

### Saroja Devi

An era ends in Indian cinema with the passing of actor B. Saroja Devi. She was a towering figure in Indian cinema and one of South Indian cinema's most iconic and beloved female actors, who mesmerised generations of audiences

with her acting brilliance. She leaves behind a monumental legacy that shaped the golden era of South Indian films.

Ramesh G. Jethwani,  
Bangalore

Indian cinema has lost one of its finest and most elegant actors. She was a blend of talent, beauty and grace. One of India's early pan-India heroines, she will

be remembered for her screen presence. The saris and jewellery that she wore in films became a trend and

style in those days. She will live on in our hearts.

M. Pradyu,  
Kannur Kerala

**Corrections & Clarifications**  
Akasa has Boeing 737s and not 787s as mentioned in the front page report.

“DGA orders Boeing fuel switch inspection” (July 15, 2025).

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The void will be difficult to fill. The Tamil film fraternity has lost a commanding artist. B. Saroja Devi remained an artist till her retirement from the tinsel world, with her domineering presence and mature acting.

Mani Natarajan,  
Chennai

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



## Contesting the future of forest governance

**R**ecently, the Chhattisgarh forest department issued a letter designating itself as the nodal agency for implementing community forest resource rights (CFRR) under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. FRA, a transformative provision of the FRA, recognises the right of gram sabhas to manage their customary forests. It seeks to rectify the injustices of colonial forest consolidation which dispossessed local communities and supplanted their traditional management institutions with centralised state control.

Not only was this usurpation of the nodal role contrary to the FRA, but the letter violated gram sabhas' statutory authority to implement locally developed management plans in their community forest resource (CFR) areas by insisting on a model plan from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA). This is not required by law. It also prohibited other departments or NGOs from supporting gram sabhas in CFRR management planning.

The letter was withdrawn after a spirited grassroots mobilisation by gram sabhas, local elected representatives, and Adivasi rights groups. Still, the persistent attack on gram sabhas' autonomy in managing their forests demands a closer look at how forests should be managed under the FRA.

### Forest management

Historically, forests under government control (excluding wildlife sanctuaries or national parks) have been managed through forest departments' working plans. These plans are rooted in the colonial misnomer of "scientific forestry", i.e., planning and harvesting to maximise timber production. Ecologists, starting with Madhav Gadgil, questioned this approach, especially since early working plans even included clearfelling natural forests and replacing them with single-species plantations. The decline in India's forests, evidenced by the spread of



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invasive species and the increase in degraded forest areas, has fuelled doubts about the appropriateness of working plans. But for forest departments, they remain an article of faith to structure their operations and mobilise financial resources.

In forest-rich central India, the continuing emphasis of working plans on timber extraction, which restricts communities' access and alters the composition of forests, was met with resistance even before independence. While working plans have begun to consider restoration and wildlife conservation objectives, they remain products of bureaucratic writ, largely detached from local livelihoods and closed to independent scientific scrutiny.

The FRA's radically different vision recognises the integral role of local communities in the "very survival and sustainability" of forests. CFR management plans are to be developed by gram sabhas to prioritise local needs and address current problems.

These plans shall be "integrated" with working plans by the gram sabha. In other words, working plans will no longer apply in CFR areas, because communities will manage forests with a different objective and at much finer scales.

Over 10,000 gram sabhas have received CFRR titles in India, but perhaps less than 1,000 have prepared their CFR management plans. Even their implementation is constrained by the refusal of forest departments to recognise their legitimacy and support gram sabhas. Instead, they have pursued a strategy of attrition, delaying or rejecting CFRR claims, attempting to revoke CFRR titles, and denying funds to CFRR-holding gram sabhas. Their aim to retain colonial power is concealed under arguments that communities lack the ability to manage forests scientifically.

MoTA's vacillating responses have not helped. In 2015, it issued guidelines that gram sabhas can use simple formats for their plans, but later came under pressure to alter its stand. A 2024 joint letter

with the Environment Ministry required CFR management plans to conform to the National Working Plan Code (NWPC) and even suggested the involvement of foresters in their preparation. This violates the FRA's letter and spirit.

### Addressing the bogeyman

Even according to the NWPC, a working plan should outline "the purpose with which a forest should be managed so as to best meet the interests and wishes of the owner, and indicate the means by which the purpose may be accomplished." Yet, the lengthy processes and data-intensive formats that the NWPC prescribes carry the hangover of maximising timber yield. In contrast, forest management by gram sabhas will likely pursue multiple livelihood needs, for which the NWPC provides little guidance.

Significant portions of working plans are devoted to cataloguing local conditions, but they abstract their complexities to focus on the forest crop (not ecosystem). A gram sabha's plan need not do the same because these insights are part of their lived experience. The variable impacts of climate change also challenge the linear trajectories of working plans, which need more adaptive responses that gram sabhas offer. CFRR demands shedding historical baggage and embracing new possibilities.

The path forward is evident. The Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan, launched by the Central government last year, introduced an indicative framework for CFR management plans. While the framework can be improved, it can be achieved through flexible and iterative practice by gram sabhas. MoTA must reject any attempt to derail CFR management through the red herring of NWPC compliance. And forest departments must provide funds and protection when required and discard a timber-oriented science in favour of a different science of a people-friendly forest management.

## A coalition clash in Tamil Nadu

The AIADMK and the BJP have contradictory positions and need to clear the air

### STATE OF PLAY

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**T**hough Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced in April that ties between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) had been restored, there has been no attempt by either party to conceal the apparent contradictions between them.

At a press conference held jointly with the AIADMK general secretary, Edappadi K. Palaniswami, Mr. Shah said, "We will fight the elections under the leadership of Edappadiji." He also added that there would be a "coalition government" in the event of a victory. The AIADMK did not react positively to this announcement. It is not just the AIADMK; even the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) has always been averse to the idea of a coalition government in Tamil Nadu.

In the 1980 Assembly elections, the DMK-Congress combine failed to capture power. The constituents of the coalition contested an equal number of seats. After a round of wrangling with the DMK, the Congress finally agreed that the then DMK chief, M. Karunanidhi, would be projected as the chief ministerial candidate. However, the coalition did not click at the hustings. Instead, the AIADMK, which won only two seats in the Lok Sabha elections earlier that year and subsequently lost power in Tamil Nadu, staged a spectacular comeback in the Assembly polls.

In 2001, when the AIADMK contested the Assembly elections from 141 seats — the lowest number it has ever contested — in view of coalition

compulsion, political circles discussed whether the party would be able to obtain a simple majority of its own. The AIADMK needed to secure 118 seats in the House of 234. The AIADMK founder M.G. Ramachandran and his successor Jayalalitha never favoured the concept of sharing power in the State. However, the party had no reason to worry as it won 132 seats.

In 2006, the DMK fell short of a simple majority as it won only 96 seats. Yet, it refused to share power with its allies. Karunanidhi and the then Congress chief, Sonia Gandhi, shared such a good rapport that the DMK patriarch managed to form the government without sharing power with the Congress.

After making that comment in April, Mr. Shah reiterated his position in many interviews to the media. However, the AIADMK is clearly not on the same page. Alluding to the Union Minister's stand, AIADMK spokesperson Vaigalchelvan said that the concept of a coalition government would "never ever" find acceptance among the people of the State. Similarly, Mr. Palaniswami, who launched a State-wide tour from July 7 in the run-up to the 2026 Assembly elections, has been ascribing that the AIADMK will form the government after gaining a majority on its own.

When asked to comment on Mr. Shah's position, he said he interpreted them as an endorsement of single-party rule in the State. Despite the conflicting views of the two parties, the BJP State president, Nainar Nagendran, and Union Minister of State L. Murugan participated in Mr. Palaniswami's campaign launch.

In one interview, Mr. Shah said that the nominee for the post of Chief Minister would be from the AIADMK; he did not mention Mr. Palaniswami's name. This did not go unnoticed in the DMK circles. The party sought to corner the AIADMK general secretary and saw Mr. Shah's statement as a lack of confidence in Mr. Palaniswami's leadership qualities. Eventually, it was left to Mr. Nagendran to clarify that the AIADMK leader would head the government.

Yet, speculation is rife that the Union Minister may have in mind former Municipal Administration Minister in Coimbatore, S.P. Velumani. About three weeks ago, the AIADMK strongman shared the stage with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat and senior BJP leaders at the birth centenary celebration of the pontiff of Perur Mut, Shanthalinga Ramasamy Adigalar. He later explained that he attended the event, which he termed as "apolitical", only as a local legislator. Prior to the announcement on the tie up between the two parties, there were reports of differences of opinion between the AIADMK chief and some of his senior colleagues, including Mr. Velumani.

As the debate over the nature of government could spoil the narrative for the Opposition parties, it would be in the interest of the alliance to sort out the issue soon. Having said that, it remains inexplicable that this debate is even raging given that the composition of different alliances has not even been finalised yet.

## More tourist beds, fewer homes: cost of 'overtourism' in EU

Unregulated tourism in some European cities is reshaping housing markets by pricing out residents

### DATA POINT

**Niranjana V.B.**

**L**ast month, residents across southern Europe, particularly in Spain, Italy, and Portugal, protested against "overtourism". They held placards that read "tourists go home", "your holidays, my misery", and "mass tourism kills the city", making clear their disapproval of unregulated tourism. This month, hoteliers in Mallorca, Spain hit back by putting up posters welcoming tourists.

This is not just cultural tension; it is rooted in structural issues. Data shows that tourism, when unregulated, reshapes housing markets in those cities, prices out residents, and creates jobs that offer little security.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a dip in the contribution of tourism to the GDP of all countries. But by 2022, the sector rebounded rapidly. In general, in Italy, Portugal and Spain, tourism contributes close to 6% or more of the countries' GDP, which makes it a significant source of revenue. In comparison, tourism contributes to only 2% of India's GDP (Chart 1).

While tourism is a money-spinner, increasing dependency on the sector puts those who govern these hotspots in a dilemma — should they prioritise tourists over their residents economically, spatially, and socially?

The European Union's Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) — an inflation measure which excludes home ownership and renovation costs — hovered at less than 2% from 2015 to 2020, only to increase to 8% in 2022. In contrast, the Owner-Occupied Housing Price Index (OOHPI) — an inflation measure which includes buying, renovating, and owning a home — was already hovering around the 3-4% mark from 2015 to 2020, only to spike to 11% in 2022. Similarly, the Housing Price

Index (HPI), an inflation measure which tracks how prices in the housing market change, also surged beyond the 10% mark in 2022 (Chart 2). Put simply, housing costs rose much faster than overall consumer prices. For residents, it has become more expensive to live in these cities than it is for the tourists to come and stay in them temporarily.

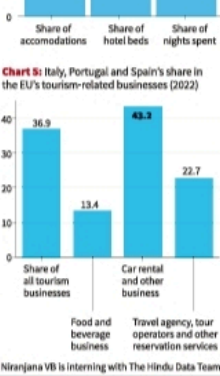
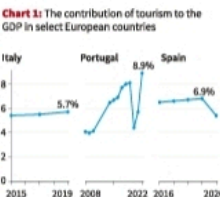
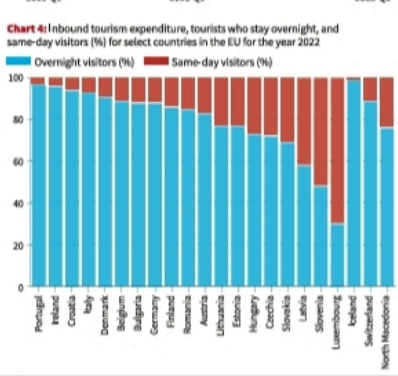
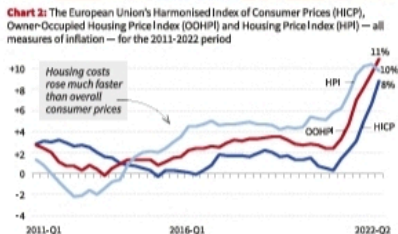
The protests against tourists are most pronounced in Spain, Italy, and Portugal, which together account for over 45% of all tourism-related accommodations in the EU in 2023. These three nations also hosted 33% of all the hotel beds in the EU (Chart 3). The vast scale of tourism accommodations in southern Europe highlights how deeply the economy is being shaped around tourists. As per Eurostat, in 2022, tourists spent nearly 450 million nights in Italy and 485 million in Spain. Meanwhile, Portugal, which has a population of 10 million and just over 8,000 tourism-related establishments, hosted nearly 85 million overnight stays. The term "tourism night" is a metric commonly used to measure the volume of tourist activity.

The latest Eurostat report shows that most tourist spending comes from overnight visitors — 93% in Italy, 97% in Portugal, and 89% in Belgium as opposed to just 30% in Luxembourg (Chart 4). As a result of this pattern of overnight tourism, homes are turned into "stays", thus causing greater pressure on the housing markets and other long-term spatial strains.

Of all tourism-related businesses in the EU, 37% are in Spain, Italy, and Portugal (Chart 5). This uneven concentration positions these nations not merely as travel destinations, but also as key pillars of Europe's tourism economy. However, locals in these countries are shouldering the hidden costs of a sector that, though profitable, impacts their lives. Tourism, for them, has also become a driver of inequity.

## Unregulated tourism, mass unrest

The data for the charts were sourced from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, and Our World in Data. The latest available data was taken for all the charts



### FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 16, 1975

## Shortage of stenos even in Tamil Nadu

Madras, July 15: Tamil Nadu, breeding ground of stenotypists, is in short supply of these masters of the "winged art". According to an official review of the employment situation in the State during April 1975, stenotypists who have passed higher grade examinations in shorthand and typewriting, were not available for recruitment.

The employment exchanges had none on their registers possessing the higher grade teacher's diploma. Schools which wanted men teachers and unmarried women teachers of this category drew blank from the exchanges. The dearth of higher grade teachers may be due to the abandoning of the training scheme some years ago by the Government which has since been filling higher grade vacancies with secondary grade teachers. A secondary grade teacher should have SSLC as basic educational qualification but it is enough if the higher grade trainee has studied up to VIII standard.

The exchanges could not recommend anyone for several categories of jobs requiring only candidates belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. These posts were: health, maternity and nursing assistants, midwife, field surveyor, music teacher, lower division clerk, heavy vehicle driver, electrician, signalman, fire service sub-officer. Women candidates with experience and fluency in spoken English were not available to fill posts of receptionists (graduates) and telephone operators (SSLC).

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 16, 1925

## Heavy rains in Bombay

Poona, July 15: Owing to heavy rains, it is reported that the masonry dam built by Messrs. Tata and Company, at Sonmadi, across the river Indrani, was breached yesterday afternoon, as a result of which a huge quantity of water was liberated and the river rose 20 feet in half an hour and the Railway lines at the Khamsht (Khudkalla) Railway Station were under three feet of water for some time.

Fortunately the river was able to carry off most of the water, but it is stated by people arriving from Lonavla and the adjacent stations that several women and children have lost their lives and that large numbers of cattle have been drowned.



# Searching for extraterrestrial life means asking the right questions first

Has the quest for alien life failed? Researchers at the Institute for Particle Physics and Astrophysics at ETH Zurich recently offered a more nuanced answer to this question — one reminiscent of an important attitude to have when doing research at the cutting edge, recognising that every observation carries with it a degree of uncertainty

Shreejaya Karantha

**S**ince the 1990s, scientists have discovered hordes of planets outside the solar system together with tantalising hints of life — or more accurately, hints of hints of life. So far, however, there exists no proof that there's life anywhere in the universe except on the earth.

Does that mean our quest for alien life has failed?

A team led by researchers at the Institute for Particle Physics and Astrophysics at ETH Zurich, in Switzerland, recently offered a more nuanced answer to this question — one reminiscent of an important attitude to have when doing research at the cutting edge.

Writing in a recent paper in *The Astronomical Journal*, the team contended that a "no signs of life detected" conclusion can also offer valuable information to guide and refine future exoplanet studies. More broadly, the team emphasised the importance of recognising that every observation carries with it a degree of uncertainty and that it is important to ask the right questions.

## Nothing is something

With the ultimate goal of assessing the habitability of exoplanets and finding potential signs of life, researchers have used a statistical method called Bayesian analysis. "It's a way of updating our understanding or beliefs based on new evidence," Daniel Angerhausen, a scientist in the Department of Physics at ETH Zurich and lead author of the new paper, said.

This is like making a first guess based on what one already believes, then fine-tuning it. For example, you could start by assuming life is very common in the universe. When you observe a hundred exoplanets without finding signs of life, you adjust your guess to accommodate factors that might explain how life can be common yet not found on these worlds. As you continue this process over time, your answer to "How common is life?" acquires a more informed shape.

In the new paper, the team explored how different starting assumptions affect final estimates of how common life might be.

The researchers simulated observations of 100 exoplanets, ranging from 1 to 100, to determine the minimum number of exoplanets that must be examined to conclude how many worlds are possibly habitable.

Their work suggested that if scientists examine between 40 and 80 exoplanets



A view of the Tarantula Nebula. The number of planets observed so far may suffice to establish an upper limit on the number of potentially habitable worlds. NASA/HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE

and find no evidence of life, they can confidently conclude that fewer than 10% to 20% of similar planets are likely to support life. That is, life would be relatively rare.

If the prevalence of life is indeed low, around 10-20%, it would be understandable for no signs of life to be found in a sample of 40-80 planets. But if life were more common, scientists should expect to observe some indications of it in that same sample. At least, this is the team's argument.

## Need for better questions

This key finding suggests the number of planets observed so far may suffice to establish an upper limit on the number of potentially habitable worlds. However, the authors were careful to note that "ideal" results are likely impossible because every observation has some uncertainty.

This uncertainty can manifest in many ways (e.g., a false negative occurs when a significant sign of life is overlooked) and is related to the challenges in the questions researchers ask when they set out to find life signs.

Angerhausen explained that the question "Does this planet have life?" itself carries a significant risk of false positives. For example, a planet may have a small biosphere that doesn't alter its atmosphere in a way that can be detected

**The new paper asserts that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence — as long as we allow the right questions to lead us**

from a distance. In contrast, stipulating whether "this planet has a temperature within a specific range and concentrations of certain molecules above a defined threshold" could provide more informative data.

When selecting which planets to investigate, the paper emphasises the importance of asking clear and specific questions. For example, instead of posing a vague question, one might ask, "Of all the rocky planets in the habitable zone, how many show signs of water vapour, oxygen, and methane?" This would help create clear selection criteria for exoplanets as well as help experts avoid misinterpreting data from an alien world.

When observations are filled with uncertainty, the conclusion "no life detected" can be meaningless. But if the questions are thoughtfully designed, even null results can serve as powerful tools in the search for extraterrestrial life.

In sum, the effectiveness of a search depends on asking the right questions and not (solely) on the number of exoplanets observed. If scientists lack clarity on what specific indicators of life

they should focus on, even the best telescopes could yield misleading results.

## Significance

Angerhausen also stressed that in addition to the technological sophistication in upcoming projects like the Large Interferometer for Exoplanets (LIFE) and the Habitable Worlds Observatory (HWO) — which aim to observe dozens of earth-like planets — "our study shows that there is still a lot of work to be done on the theoretical side" and on the foundations of their knowledge. That is, how do we know a certain signal is truly a sign of life? Or what counts as dispositive evidence of a habitable planet?

The LIFE and HWO projects plan to study exoplanets for signs of water, oxygen, and other molecules that may indicate the presence of life. Angerhausen himself expressed optimism about the potential to discover habitable worlds. He said that for the first time in human history, humans will soon have the technology to systematically search for life in our cosmic neighbourhood.

In the final analysis, the new paper asserts that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence — as long as we allow the right questions to lead us.

(Shreejaya Karantha is a freelance science writer. shreejayakaranth@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

Researchers use Bayesian analysis to assess habitability. When you observe a hundred exoplanets without finding life, you accommodate factors that might explain how life can be common yet not found. As you continue this process, your answer to "How common is life?" acquires a more informed shape

Researchers simulated observations of 100 exoplanets to determine the minimum that must be examined. They suggested that if the prevalence of life is low, around 10-20%, it would be understandable for no signs of life to be found in a sample of 40-80. But if life were more common, there should be indications of it in that same sample

When observations are filled with uncertainty, the conclusion "no life detected" can be meaningless. But if the questions are thoughtfully designed, even null results can serve as powerful tools. The effectiveness of a search depends on the right questions and not on the number of exoplanets observed

## BIG SHOT



A black soldier fly is seen on a net in a farm on the outskirts of Havana, Cuba, on July 8. Former doctor Yodermez Diaz Hernandez said he makes more money these days raising

## QUESTION CORNER

### Dance of darkness

**Q: What is a black hole merger?**  
At a black hole merger happens when two black holes

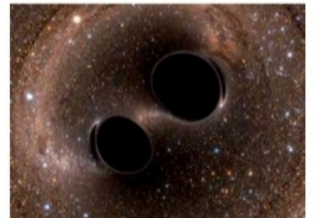
extremely dense objects with gravity so strong that not even light can escape — get close and start orbiting each other. Over time, they lose energy by sending out invisible ripples in spacetime called gravitational waves. As they spiral closer together, their orbit shrinks until they finally crash and combine into a single, bigger black hole.

This moment releases a huge burst of gravitational waves, which can be detected on the earth by special observatories like LIGO in the US, Virgo in Italy, and KAGRA in Japan.

Think of the phenomenon like two figure skaters spinning toward each other and then grabbing hands to spin faster as one, except in extreme physical conditions.

Catching these events allows scientists to learn new things about black holes and the universe.

In fact, on July 10, an international collaboration of scientists reported discovering an especially massive black



The impending collision of two black holes is seen in this still image from a computer simulation released by the LIGO collaboration in 2016. REUTERS

hole merger, named GW231123. LIGO, Virgo, and KAGRA had detected gravitational waves from the merger on November 23, 2023. In this event, two black holes, about 137x and 103x the mass of the sun, crashed together, forming an even bigger black hole. This was unusual because black holes in this mass range are thought to be rare.

The discovery suggests large black holes might form when smaller ones merge, not just from dying stars. GW231123 also showed both original black holes spinning really fast, which challenges existing theories of their existence.

**For feedback and suggestions** for 'Science', please write to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Daily paper'



## Comfortable position

Low inflation may not lead to another rate cut

The data released on Monday showed that the Consumer Price Index-based inflation rate declined to 2.1 per cent in June, as against 2.8 per cent in May. The decline was largely driven by lower food prices. The all-India Consumer Food Price Index declined by 1.06 per cent, mainly because of lower vegetable prices, which dropped by 19 per cent. Given the forecast of a good monsoon, food prices are expected to remain in check. However, it is worth noting that within the food segment, the moderation in prices is not uniform. Prices of oils and fats, for example, increased by over 17 per cent and may require policy attention. Nevertheless, the headline rate is expected to remain at comfortable levels in the coming months.

However, a lower than expected inflation rate is unlikely to prompt the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to further reduce the policy repo rate in its upcoming August meeting for a variety of reasons. First, anticipating favourable inflation outcomes, the MPC frontloaded the rate cut in its June meeting by reducing the policy repo rate by 50 basis points. Thus far, it has reduced the policy rate by 100 basis points in the current cycle and would want to wait for it to work through the system. Second, the RBI has taken several measures to ease liquidity conditions in the system. As a result, owing to significant surplus liquidity, the weighted average call rate (WACR) — the operational target of monetary policy — is trading below the repo rate. More liquidity is expected to flow into the banking system as the reduction in the cash reserve ratio (CRR) takes effect. The RBI had reduced the CRR by 100 basis points in June, to be implemented in four tranches. Given the surplus liquidity and the WACR trading below the policy rate, the MPC may not want to increase accommodation immediately.

Third, monetary policy needs to be forward-looking and not be influenced by last month's inflation reading. It is worth pointing out that the June meeting of the MPC projected the inflation rate at 4.4 per cent for the fourth quarter of this financial year, and that is above the target of 4 per cent. Besides, in August and subsequent meetings, the MPC would start focusing on inflation projections for 2026-27. Further, while the headline rate has declined substantially, the core rate is running above 4 per cent. Therefore, unless the inflation projections for next financial year are substantially lower than the target of 4 per cent, which look unlikely at this stage, the MPC may not find it prudent to reduce the policy rate further.

Research by RBI economists has shown that the natural rate, or the real policy rate that is neither contractionary nor expansionary, is 1.4-1.9 per cent (Q4FY24). Thus, assuming the inflation rate remains around the target of 4 per cent in the foreseeable future, the MPC will likely keep the repo rate at the current level of 5.5 per cent. The possibility of a rate cut will arise only if inflation projections are significantly lower than the target. In terms of supporting growth, as things stand, the MPC and RBI have done their bit. It is now for the government to encourage Indian businesses to invest with sustained reform efforts.

## Mind their language

The State should abstain from imposing choices

The three-language policy, under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has sparked an avoidable controversy that local politicians are exploiting. The latest debate has been simmering for at least a year and reveals that no political party is free of language chauvinism. Significantly, the controversy has rolled India's more industrialised states — Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra (where residents are being harassed for not being able to speak the local language) — principally over fears of the imposition of Hindi. From blue- to white-collar, all three states have been recipients and beneficiaries of large cohorts of migrant workers from India's less prosperous northern and eastern states, the former being predominantly Hindi-speaking. Sporadic incidents of violence against migrants had happened in the past, but the NEP 2020 has unwittingly succeeded in taking it to a new level. If such violence is allowed to spread, the economic benefits from migrant workers will soon disappear, striking a blow to these states' model of economic development.

The policy, being implemented in phases, stipulates that students learn at least three languages. The policy does not mention any specific language. But the recommendation that two of them should be "native to India" has raised apprehensions among non-Hindi-speaking states that the policy will lead to the imposition of Hindi. These fears are principally on account of the federal government's focus on Hindi usage in official communication, including the redrafting of laws with Hindi names. Although the latest NEP states that "no language will be imposed on any state", Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin had alleged earlier this year that the Centre was withholding funds for schemes under the Right to Education (RTE) Act because his government had not signed an agreement with the government in New Delhi to implement the NEP. In June, the Madras High Court ruled that the Centre's financial obligation under the RTE Act could not be contingent on NEP 2020 compliance.

But the latest controversy in Maharashtra has not allayed these misgivings. It was sparked after the Bharatiya Janata Party-led state government made it compulsory for state-run primary schools to teach Hindi as a third language, apart from English and Marathi. With municipal elections looming, the outbreak of violence against Hindi speakers and demonstrations asserting Marathi-speaking identity caused the government to hastily backtrack. Given that language was largely the basis on which independent India's states were formed, the propensity for politicians of all ideological hues to exploit it for electoral gains is high. For instance, Congress-ruled Karnataka has been actively promoting Kannada, instructing that all public signage be written in Kannada, and encouraging the defacement of English signage. The NEP's three-language formula, which was first introduced in 1968, offers convenient grist to the local identity mill. At a time when population debates are undermining federalism, controversies and law-and-order problems provoked by language chauvinism are needless. Equally, the choice of languages at school level should be taken out of the political arena and left to parents and students. The increasing integration of Indians, speaking a rich variety of languages, both across the states and globally, demands that individuals be left free to make the choice that suits their circumstances best.

# Trump makes China great again

Assumptions about US' decline are making China bolder and more overbearing in its approach towards India



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

During my visits to China in 2023 and 2024, I encountered a subdued and even pessimistic mood among my Chinese interlocutors. The Chinese economy was in the doldrums, thanks to a pervasive crisis in its property sector, which had been the main engine of accelerated growth for the past four decades.

The property sector constituted 30 per cent of the annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth and spawned many ancillary industries, supporting its rapid development. When the property sector collapsed in 2021, the knock-on effects reverberated throughout the economy. The economy is still facing deflationary pressures as consumption demand remains flat.

In the absence of decent returns from bank deposits and volatile returns from equity markets, property investment became a preferred route for investing personal savings because it promised sustained appreciation in property values. The sharp decline in property values has wiped out the savings of a large property-owning segment of society, and this has depressed consumer demand.

There is also a shortage of employment opportunities for the younger and educated youth entering the labour market. Over the past three years, unemployment in the age group 18 to 25 years has remained stubbornly at 25 per cent. Last year, one respected Chinese interlocutor described the economic situation as "dire", compounded by fears of an impending trade war if Donald Trump returned to power in Washington.

During my latest visit to Beijing early this month, I asked the same interlocutor if the economic situation had improved. He said that there were some early shoots of recovery but that it might take another two to three years for the economy to get back on track. I asked why private investment was still stagnating despite President Xi Jinping himself reaching out to the erstwhile star entrepreneurs like Alibaba's Jack Ma. The answer was the lingering lack of trust in the party leadership — "once bitten twice

shy". Yet the general mood appeared more confident, more upbeat, and optimistic than the previous year. If the Chinese economy had not been able to shake off its structural malaise, the US economy was seen to be on a "self-destruct course".

There was pride in China having stood up successfully to American bullying, leveraging its stronghold on rare minerals and metals and on other critical supply chains. In the standoff on tariffs, the US had to climb down. Therefore, despite the Chinese economy still facing headwinds, China was believed to be in a relatively stronger position than its peer geopolitical rival. The upbeat mood was also buttressed by the virtual ending of the global economic cooperation and assistance space by the US, especially the gutting of the USAID. China was well positioned to walk in with its renewed Belt and Road Initiative and expanded presence in Africa.

Recently, there have been persistent rumours of President Xi Jinping being ousted from the top leadership, and reports that there was growing resentment in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) over the purging of several senior leaders. The PLA was said to be spearheading a move to remove Mr Xi from the party leadership. This was dismissed by my Chinese interlocutors, who insisted that Mr Xi was firmly in control. They argued that the arrival of Mr Trump in Washington and the chaos he had unleashed had enabled Mr Xi and his supporters to underscore the even greater need for strong, tested leadership in China. The purges were dismissed as being "quite normal" in party history. I do not think these latest purges are "normal" and reflect a continuing concern about the PLA's personal loyalty to Xi Jinping. The PLA could well emerge as the focal point of growing opposition to Mr Xi.

On India-China relations, conversations were marked by a more aggressive tone and even arrogance compared to one's experience over the previous two years. The resumption of high-level engagement between the two sides, interrupted since

the Galwan clash of 2020, was welcomed and there was keen expectation that resumption of direct flights, the reciprocal posting of journalists, liberal flows of visas and more people-to-people contacts would follow swiftly.

There were complaints about the discrimination faced by Chinese companies in India and the campaign to denigrate China and to project India as a more trusted investment destination. These were hostile acts against China, which were contrary to professions of friendship, it was argued. In discussions relating to economic relations, one Chinese interlocutor said that India should realise that "China can do without India, but India cannot do without China", pointing to its inability to do without Chinese intermediaries and components.

There was a different tone on Pakistan, which was described as an "iron brother". Earlier, the Chinese were somewhat defensive about their country's longstanding relations with Pakistan, describing the partnership as "normal" engagement and cooperation between two countries. Now there was no hesitation in owing up to China's commitment to Pakistan's security. It reinforces one's assessment that China will do everything possible to upgrade Pakistan's military capabilities to the level that enables the latter to continue to serve as an effective proxy against India.

On the Indian Ocean, India was put on notice that possessing the largest navy in the world, China would inevitably expand its maritime presence into the Indian Ocean region, along sea lines of communication to the South China Sea, and that the Indian side would well not to extend the zone of confrontation from the land to the sea.

This more abrasive and assertive tone adopted by some interlocutors while others conveyed a more positive, friendly and cooperative attitude, is the standard Chinese approach, but one should take note of the more overbearing statements as they reflect a renewed geopolitical assurance, thanks to assumptions about the decline of the United States. To the extent that China believes that India has allied with the US to contain China, the message to India is that its American connection is losing its efficacy.

India should be prepared to face a steadily growing and multi-faceted security and economic challenge from China in the years ahead. Given the power gap between the two countries, one should think of renewed geopolitical assurances and strategies to meet the China challenge, even while augmenting our capabilities at a faster pace than being achieved currently. Two things are urgent — one, an expanded and sustained engagement with our sub-continental neighbourhood to limit Chinese presence, and two, a renewed engagement with East and Southeast Asia to make Act East a reality, in particular strengthening economic and trade relations. Without the economic pillar, our Asian link will become a vulnerability rather than a shield.

The author is a former foreign secretary

## Has Indian inequality come down?

A recent World Bank (WB) report has claimed that between 2011-12 and 2022-23, India significantly reduced consumption inequality. India's Gini coefficient (a measure of inequality) is ranked as the fourth lowest in the world. The WB's estimates of Indian inequality are based on the official Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022-23 data, after accounting for some but not all government-provided free goods, and excluding consumer durables.

Many who are accustomed to media reports claiming high inequality in the country have responded to the WB's claims with scepticism or outright dismissal. The critics argue that, as HCES data does not capture consumption by the elite, the WB has underestimated consumption inequality. Furthermore, they cite World Inequality Lab (WIL) studies to argue that India has a very high level of income inequality.

For an informed debate, we must encounter the devil in the details. All survey data across countries fail to capture the elite consumption and income. The problem is universal. India is not an exception. The HCES 2022-23 uses the Modified Recall Period (MRP) method in line with international best practices, making it the Indian data suitable for international comparisons.

While one can quibble over the precise decline in India's consumption inequality — whether the Gini decreased precisely from 28.8 in 2011-12 to 25.5 in 2022-23 or by less — the decrease is substantial and indisputable. Similarly, a significant improvement in India's international ranking is factual.

Regarding income inequality, the media and commentators are particularly fixated on the national income shares of the top 1 per cent, as estimated by the WIL, often unaware of the critical limitations of these estimates.

Unlike consumption, there is no official data yet on income distribution in India. So, the WIL derives income distributions using tax data for the top income groups. It uses old consumption data and its estimates

of the income-consumption relationship for low- and middle-income households. The latter assumes that for 70-80 per cent of households, the consumption expenditure exceeds their income. Simply put, except for the top 20-25 per cent, all families spend more than they earn, year after year.

As an implication of this implausible assumption, the income of the bottom 80 per cent is underestimated. This pulls down their national income shares. Conversely, the shares of top income groups are overestimated.

Let's ignore these limitations and ask: Is income inequality increasing? No. Taking the WIL estimates as is, between 2017 and 2022, the income shares of the bottom 50 per cent increased from 13.9 per cent to 15 per cent, while those of the top 10 per cent decreased from 58.8 per cent to 57.7 per cent.

A high share of the top 1 per cent is a concern. However, since 2017, the income shares of the top 1 per cent has increased by only 0.3 percentage points. Due to anti-tax evasion measures taken during this period, the high-income groups report more truthfully than before. My research indicates that most of the increases in top income shares since 2014 are attributable to better tax enforcement. Improved compliance should not be mistaken for increased inequality.

To be meaningful, income inequality should be assessed based on post-tax, rather than pre-tax, incomes. For instance, in the assessment year 2023-24, the top 1 per cent of individual taxpayers paid 42 per cent of the total tax. Considering all taxpayers, the top 1 per cent paid 72.77 per cent of the total tax. This means that the post-tax income of top-income groups is only 65 to 75 per cent of their incomes taken in WIL estimates. In contrast, for low-income groups, the estimates do not account for the all-time high welfare transfers, which amount to approximately 8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). On a post-tax, post-subsidy income basis, one will find a decline in

income inequality over the last decade.

What has gone unnoticed is that, in recent years, inherited wealth is not the primary determinant of individual incomes. As many as 60 per cent of the top-income reporters are first-generation entrepreneurs, cricketers, and other leaders from the finch and unicorn spaces. India has produced the largest number of first-generation billionaires, several in their 20s and early 30s.

From a macroeconomic point of view, the major determinants of income inequality are the rate of return on capital vis-à-vis the GDP growth rate. When the growth rate is higher than the post-tax returns on capital, an increasing share of national income goes to labour. This reduces inequality, *ceteris paribus*. Data on the weighted average real lending rates and average returns on capital indicate that the growth rate and taxes suggest that the rate of return is smaller than the growth rate. This, along with the Centre's fiscal support, has made growth inclusive.

Data speaks for itself. Between 2012 and 2025, India has pulled around 320 million out of extreme poverty, based on the International Poverty Line of \$3 (at 2021 purchasing power parity). Per capita consumption of fruits, vegetables, milk, eggs, and other protein-rich products is at an all-time high. As the two most recent rounds of HCES show, the share of cereals in total calorie intake has decreased, while that of healthier products has increased, for all strata. Improvements are most striking for the bottom 20 per cent. If we factored in all the policies targeted at the poor, such as Ayushman Bharat, the aggregate welfare levels would look even better than the WB numbers suggest.

As a result, we need to do much more. The inequality can be reduced further by plugging the loopholes in tax laws. But let's celebrate India's successes too.

The author is director, Delhi School of Economics, and a member of the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee and the Technical Expert Group for the first Household Income Survey by Mospi. The views are personal

## India's Israeli bonds



CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

The author, who is based in New York, notes that India's arms imports from Israel rose by 175 per cent between 2015 and 2019. The trade between these countries increased from \$4.52 billion in 2014 to \$5.43 billion by 2018. These numbers show that India's increasing proximity to Israel — and distance from Palestine — needs to be studied more carefully and comprehensively. There is more to it than the ideological overlaps between Zionism and Hindutva.

This book also contextualises India's dependence on Israel with reference to the fall of the Soviet Union and the altered geopolitical situation in its aftermath. India needed to upgrade its technology and equipment, and Israel provided what was required as "a country willing to sell arms without asking too many questions, with an ability to upgrade Russian hardware and crucially, a country more than willing to

transfer technology to India itself."

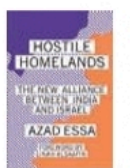
This book also dispels the myth that, before the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in the last two national elections, India and Israel did not have much of a relationship. Essa reveals that, in 1962, when India was under attack from China, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru contacted his Israeli counterpart — David Ben-Gurion — for help, "underlining the backchannels...between the two governments". He claims that Nehru wanted Israel to send weapons on "ships that did not carry the Israeli flag". Ben-Gurion was not amenable. Apparently, Nehru had to drop the request because he had no choice.

While reading this book, one realises that India's relationship with Israel is an old one, even though no Indian Prime Minister had visited Israel until 2017. Mr Essa recalls that "India secured more armaments from Tel Aviv in the 1960s and 1970s against Pakistan" because the United States military stopped selling weapons to India and a new supplier was needed. Even during

the Kargil War with Pakistan in 1999, it was Israel that came to India's rescue. Countries act in their self-interest. With this history, India's proximity to Israel is no surprise.

It is widely known that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was on friendly terms with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, this book claims that she had a "secret liaison with the Israelis". Mr Essa says that the Special Group commands sent by Mrs Gandhi to crush a rebellion by Sikh fighters "within the Golden Temple complex" in 1984 were trained by "an elite branch of Mossad commanders in 1983 under an agreement with RAW". This sensational claim is made on the basis of one news report. One wishes that it had been backed by more evidence.

Mr Essa writes, "The story of India's



Hostile Homelands: The New Alliance between India and Israel by Azad Essa  
Published by Westland Books  
274 pages ₹599

normalisation of relations with Israel is also the story of the decline of the PLO as a credible and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." According to him, "only served to further entrench the Palestinian demand — the right of return for millions of refugees — was forsaken with the PLO's recognition of Israel in 1988 in return for a two-state solution. The Oslo Accords, signed by Yasser Arafat in 1993, "only served to further entrench the Palestinian demand and made the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip worse".

The author also asks, "If India was an opponent of colonialism and apartheid, why does its agenda in Kashmir look so similar to Israel's settler-colonial project in Palestine?" This is a bad-faith argument, though his point that India is replicating counterterrorism lessons learnt

from Israel, and is also looking to change the demographics in Kashmir, are well taken.

Unlike India, military service is compulsory in Israel. The training that voters in the Israeli Defence Forces shapes their view of Palestinians. A large number of Indian citizens have no direct contact with the Indian military. Their perception of Kashmir is shaped not through indoctrination by the military but their own experiences as tourists. Most Kashmiri people and Indian tourists, as was evident from the solidarity marches held in Kashmir to protest the killing of Indian tourists during a terrorist attack in Pahalgam in April.

Moreover, the Kashmir conflict involves India and Pakistan. The history of this conflict, and the factors at play, cannot be assumed to be the same as the conflict in West Asia.

The reviewer is a journalist, educator, and literary critic. Instagram/X: @chintanwriting



EXPLAINED GLOBAL

THE PATRIOT MISSILE SYSTEM, AND HOW IT IS HELPING UKRAINE IN WAR



GERMAN DEFENCE Minister Boris Pistorius is set to discuss the possibility of Germany paying for American Patriot air defence systems for Ukraine, as he heads to Washington to meet with US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth.

On Sunday, US President Donald Trump said the US would send an undisclosed number of Patriots to Ukraine, and that the European Union would pay for them.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has asked for more defensive capabilities, among them Patriot systems and missiles, to fend off attacks from Russia.

**What is the Patriot system?**

The Patriot, short for Phased Array Tracking Radar to Intercept on Target, is a mobile surface-to-air missile defence system developed by Raytheon Technologies.

It is considered one of the most advanced air defence systems in the US arsenal and has been in service since the 1980s.

A typical battery includes radar and control systems, a power unit, launchers, and support vehicles. The system can intercept aircraft, tactical ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles, depending on the interceptor used.

**How does the Patriot work?**

The system has different capabilities depending on the type of interceptor used.

The earlier PAC-2 interceptor uses a blast-fragmentation warhead that detonates in the vicinity of a target, while the PAC-3 family of missiles uses more accurate technology that hits the target directly.

It is not clear what kind of Patriot systems have been donated to Ukraine, but it is likely that Kyiv has at least some of the newer PAC-3 CR1 interceptors.

The system's radar has a range of more than 150 km, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) said in 2015.

Although the Patriot was not originally designed to intercept hypersonic weapons and Raytheon has not yet confirmed if it is able to do so, in May 2023 the US confirmed Ukraine had used it to

Patriot missile defence system in Slovakia. Reuters File

shoot down a Russian Kinzhal missile, which Moscow claims is hypersonic.

**How widely is it used?**

Raytheon has built and delivered more than 240 Patriot fire units, according to its website. There have been shipped to 19 countries, according to Raytheon, including the US, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Japan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

In January, Axios reported the US had transferred about 90 Patriot interceptors from Israel to Ukraine.

**How much does it cost?**

A newly produced single Patriot battery costs more than \$1 billion, including \$400 million for the system and \$600 million for the missiles in a battery, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Patriot interceptors are estimated at around \$4 million per missile, CSIS says.

**Why does Ukraine want more Patriot systems?**

Kyiv has consistently asked Western allies for more air defences to protect critical infrastructure and civilian areas from frequent Russian missile and drone attacks.

Ukrainian officials say Patriot systems are essential to defending key targets from Russia's escalating long-range attacks.

REUTERS

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

WHY THE EARTH IS SPINNING FASTER THAN BEFORE — FOR NOW

IT WOULD NOT be summer without the stretched out days. But when it comes to the full astronomical day — a single rotation of planet Earth in which the hour hand moves twice around a standard clock — some of this year's shortest will be in July and August.

Last week has seen the shortest days of the year so far. According to data posted on July 11 from the US Naval Observatory and the International Earth Rotation and Reference Systems Service, rotation on July 9 was about 1.34 milliseconds less than 24 hours.

**Not all days are equal**

This is not completely out of the ordinary: Earth's spins have been faster than usual lately. The average day has mostly shortened over the past decade, and within the past five years or so, the full rotation has clocked in at a hair less than 24 hours more often than not. Factors driving the change include movements at Earth's core, atmospheric changes and the Moon's position.

But long-term trends do not suggest that the days will shorten in perpetuity. In fact, it is just the opposite. For many millennia, days have been growing longer. A Tyrannosaurus rex that lived 70 million years ago would have experienced an average daily rotation of about 23 1/2 hours, studies have found.

The lengthening trend is expected to continue, according to researchers.

**Tug of the Moon**

The main reason has to do with en-

ergy lost from the tides. The Moon's gravitational tug is responsible for tidal changes on Earth. Tidal currents heat the ocean's slightly dissipating energy, which slows the rotation of Earth and lets the Moon move farther away as time passes. (At the moment, the rate of retreat is around 4 cm each year.)

In other words, the Moon and Earth come as a package: as the Moon's orbit expands, its angular momentum increases. Earth's angular momentum must decrease. That's why the days grow longer. But that is a process that takes billions of years and is complicated by short-term fluctuations.

**In the short-term**

Centuries of data show that the speed of Earth's rotation has never been steady. There have been slow periods, like the early 1990s or 1970s, when the length of a day regularly surpassed 24 hours by more than 2 milliseconds. And there have been faster periods, like now.

Many factors within and above Earth drive these changes. These include movement of materials within the planet, from the core to the mantle to the crust.

Recent studies have shown that climate change could also become a key driver of longer days. When ice melts into the sea, it spreads water away from the poles and toward the Equator. That makes the planet more oblate, which can slow its rotation.

THE NYT

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

Recovery after space journey

Shubhanshu Shukla, the first Indian on the ISS, is back to Earth, but it will be a few days before he can be his normal self. The body is impacted by microgravity, and needs to readjust to conditions on Earth

ANONNA DUTT  
NEW DELHI, JULY 15

AS SHUBHANSHU Shukla and his colleagues on the Axiom-4 mission took their first steps on the recovery boat after coming out of the space capsule, they needed some assistance.

It will be some days before Shukla, who returned to Earth on Tuesday after spending 20 days in space — 18 of which were spent on the International Space Station — can get back to normal life. Bodies of astronauts undergo various stresses in space, and require time to recover.

**Space environment**

The human body is under stress in space due to microgravity conditions and exposure to certain radiations that are absent or benign on Earth. The impact of these stresses depends on the length of the astronaut's stay in space.

During one of his interactions from the ISS, Shukla had said he did not feel his usual self in the first few days.

"It's the first time for me, so I don't know what to expect [upon return]. ... I did have some symptoms coming up, so I am hoping that I will not have it going down," he said.

Mission commander Peggy Whitson, who was on her fifth trip to space, said, "Some people get space motion sickness coming uphill and some people get it going downhill. I am a downhill person where I don't really adjust... [as] well to gravity as I adjust to microgravity".

**Getting back to normal**

The first thing that the four astronauts, back in Earth's air after almost three weeks, did after walking out of the Grace capsule was to undergo a health check. They were then taken by helicopter to the NASA Space Centre in Houston, where they will rest for the next few days.

The astronauts' health parameters will be monitored closely — and based on the readings, personalised reconditioning plans will be worked out for each. The recovery plan will focus on improving mobility, balance, flexibility, aerobic conditioning, strength, endurance, and the body's ability to sense its position and movement.

Detailed post-flight medical checks usually continue for a week or longer after return. Impacts on the functioning of the heart, bones, eyes, and immune system are watched, apart from things like sleep disorder and headaches.

Astronauts experience space sickness in their initial days as the brain is confused by the gravity and acceleration information it receives from the inner ear — information that is essential for maintaining balance on Earth. Living in microgravity teaches the brain to not listen to the inner ear, which becomes a challenge when the astronauts return to Earth, as they face difficulty in standing up and walking.

Also, bodily fluids tend to shift because of microgravity conditions, and usually move to the upper part of the body in space — as a result, astronauts experience light-headedness or dizziness after they return.

All these symptoms are likely to be less severe in Shukla and his crew mates who spent just 18 days on the ISS. Astronauts on previous Axiom missions have been able to resume normal lives a week or two after their return.

**Need for reconditioning**

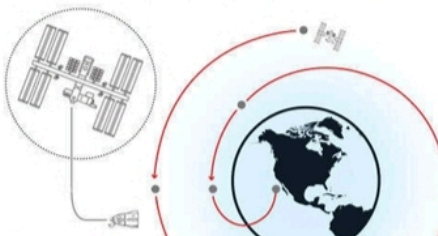
Astronauts need reconditioning after coming back to Earth to deal with their symptoms such as problems with balance, fixing their gaze, and difficulty standing up.

The reconditioning process includes training the astronauts to start listening to their inner ear again, helping with motion control, and taking care of conditions they face while standing. It also deals with their perception of movement of their own bodies, strength, and endurance.

According to NASA, around 92% of astronauts experience post-flight injuries. They may suffer muscle sprains, tendon-related injuries, and fractures.

HOW SHUKLA RETURNED FROM THE ISS

SpaceX's Crew Dragon spacecraft transported Shubhanshu Shukla and others to the International Space Station and also brought them back. It remained docked to the ISS for the period the astronauts were on board.



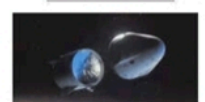
■ Dragon undocked from the ISS at 4:45 pm IST on Monday to begin its 20-hour journey to Earth. The spacecraft orbited Earth several times as it lowered itself to the re-entry level. It made a splashdown in the Pacific Ocean at 3 pm IST on Tuesday.



The Axiom-4 crew were assisted out of the Dragon spacecraft onto the recovery vehicle, after their return from the ISS on Tuesday. Axiom Space/ANI



1 Crew Dragon autonomously undocks from the ISS, and uses its boosters to move away from the space laboratory. Illustration/NASA



2 Before re-entering the Earth's atmosphere, Dragon detaches its trunk to reduce mass and save fuel. Illustration/SpaceX



4 The four main parachutes reduce Dragon's speed drastically as it glides down at an angle for a safe splashdown. NASA

Simpler, safer: Why spacecraft prefer splashdowns over landing on ground

ALIND CHAUHAN  
NEW DELHI, JULY 15

THE SPACECRAFT carrying Indian astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla and his three colleagues on the Axiom-4 mission splashed down in the Pacific Ocean on Tuesday after a 20-hour journey from the International Space Station.

Landing in the ocean is the preferred way to bring back astronauts from space, though some spacecraft also make a landing on a runway like an aircraft. But the latter has special requirements, needs more sophisticated systems, and is usually costlier.

For its Gaganyaan programme, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has designed a crew module that will land on sea.

**Why water is preferred**

Splashdown is generally a simpler and safer option. When a spacecraft begins to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere, at an altitude of 110-120 km, it is usually travelling at speeds up to 27,359 km per hour. There isn't

enough time for it to decelerate to speeds that are suitable for a vertical landing on the ground. Additional braking systems, and structures like landing legs would be required.

It is safer to land a spacecraft in water even when it is travelling at 25-30 km per hour — the speed of the Axiom-4 spacecraft at the time of splashdown. The low viscosity and high density of water provides much greater cushion. While it does not ensure a completely smooth landing, it absorbs enough shock from the impact to avoid damage to the spacecraft's structure, payload, or the crew inside.

The other reason is the availability of vast open spaces. On the ground, the landing location has to be precisely defined; in the ocean, there is no danger of hitting something even if the spacecraft is dragged a bit off-course by air or water currents.

The capsules are designed to float on water. They are conical in shape, and either their top or bottom (depending on how they land) is rounded metal, which works

like the hull of a ship, and keeps them bobbing on the surface.

**How landing is executed**

When a spacecraft re-enters the Earth's atmosphere, it experiences deceleration due to friction. But additional measures are required to slow it to safe speeds.

One such method is the use of parachutes. Spacecraft usually deploy two drag (or drogue) parachutes first, which stabilise the vehicle following re-entry, and reduce speed. The Dragon spacecraft deploys these parachutes at around 18,000 feet.

At about 6,500 feet, the drogue parachutes are detached, and the four main parachutes are released, which continue to slow the spacecraft further.

The spacecraft does not travel vertically to Earth, but glides down at an angle. From the point of re-entry to touchdown, it traverses a distance of 5,000-7,000 km. During this time, its speed comes down to about 25-30 km per hour, which is safe for a splashdown in the ocean.

■ **Brute-force blocking:** In 2015, Google integrated its Photos app with image recognition software that identified black people as gorillas. It then tried to "fix" the issue by preventing the software from recognising actual gorillas. But this would undo the generative qualities that make AI models unique.

■ **Modifying system prompts:** Developers can exert some control over a model knowledge base by inputting system prompts that will remain constant across multiple user interactions. However, LLM outputs can also be adversely influenced through prompt injections.

■ **Changing RL rewards:** Reinforcement Learning (RL) encourages the model to go towards solutions that lead to correct answers. This also involves humans giving the AI model feedback on which answers are good or bad. But there have been instances of AI systems finding loopholes in the process.

Grok's praise for Hitler is part of a deeper AI problem. Here's the reason why

KARAN MAHADEK  
NEW DELHI, JULY 15

ELON MUSK's artificial intelligence (AI) company xAI has apologised for the "horrific behaviour" of its chatbot, Grok, which last week posted praise for Adolf Hitler.

This March, the behaviour of Grok, which was integrated into Musk's social media platform X in 2023, drew the attention of India's IT Ministry after it returned responses containing expletives and misogynistic slurs in Hindi slang.

**Determinants of AI behaviour**

There have been problems with output from other chatbots too. For instance, Google's Gemini recently generated historically inaccurate images.

Large language models (LLMs) are often

assumed to possess a form of human-like intelligence due to their ability to generate coherent and conversational language. In 2021, a now-famous research had equated the current crop of generative AI tools to stochastic — probabilistic or random-function — systems.

These systems are built on "synthetic text extruding machines", according to Emily M Bender, a professor of linguistics at the University of Washington and co-author of the paper (*On the dangers of stochastic parrots: Can language models be too big?*). "These systems aren't 'saying' anything per se, but rather outputting sequences of words based on their training data," Bender told *The Indian Express*.

Their probabilistic nature also explains why users rarely receive the same output twice. Even if the input token (a word or characters) is the same, the model could sample a slightly different output token

from a probability distribution at any step. The subsequent tokens will be generated based on this new sequence.

There are two major sources of the uncontrollability of output, Bender said.

The first deals with system design. Chatbots achieve great apparent fluency by mimicking word-use patterns in huge datasets. There are bound to be some aberrant patterns in the training data if the data collection during the pre-training stage "wasn't done with care" — or if it was done with the assumption that including all the bigotry online somehow produces a more "objective" or "unbiased" output, Bender said.

The data used by chatbots when answering questions also matters. Grok has been instructed to use data on X, and this is one reason why it reflects opinions that are

widely expressed on the platform.

The second source of uncontrollability is user context. During the training stage, a model's parameters are adjusted so that it learns to perform tasks well. Once the model is deployed, these parameters are fixed — and the only type of learning thereafter is in-context learning.

"Even if the system is constrained to output only a few fixed phrases, users can always set up a context, deliberately or not, that will make the output harmful," Bender said.

**Post-deployment controls**

On Saturday, xAI said it had removed a set of hard-coded instructions that caused Grok to veer off-course. However, some users said the newly released Grok 4 continues to return antisemitic propaganda.

In traditional software, fixing a bug

might involve writing code or rolling out an updated module. However, LLMs are not typically modified once deployed. Most adjustments can only be made superficially.

"The deeper it is in the pipeline — the deepest being pre-training data, then post-training, and query time — the harder it is to change the model's behaviour," Nirant Kasilvala, an AI/Machine Learning engineer and founder of LLM consultancy firm ScaledFocus, told *The Indian Express*. He said it was unlikely that Grok's base model would now be changed.

Some band-aid solutions are generally used to realign a chatbot's behaviour:

■ **Hard-coded conversations:** LLMs can be trained to provide predetermined responses to questions such as "What model are you?" If a few hundred such conversations are added in the training data, the model can be expected to parrot these responses.

EXPLAINED

AI



# THE IDEAS PAGE

## The Millennium Village

Flood-hit Gurugram's problem isn't primarily physical infrastructure, it's a state of mind that has no concept of a public beyond family, caste and class circuits



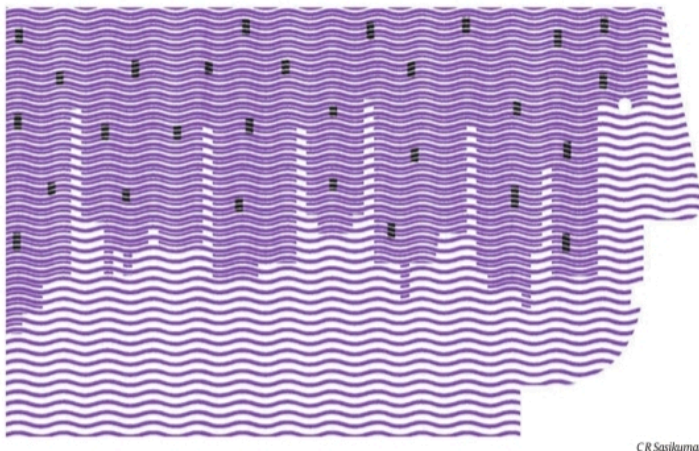
SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

THE SO-CALLED Millennium City's water-logging problems are in the news again. In Gurugram, flats and houses that sell for prices that compare to real estate in Western countries and rentals with rates comparable to the starting salaries of many white-collar professionals have become islands surrounded by surging water after rain-induced floods. As a result of the water-logging, there were also sustained cuts to the electricity supply as the privately owned transformers that kick in when the government supply fails also went under-water. There was, reasonably enough, an outcry over the state of infrastructure in a locality that is home to the offices of many Fortune 500 companies and a citizenry that has achieved wealth in many walks of global activity and expects a certain level of an "international" lifestyle.

But Gurugram's problem is not primarily physical infrastructure. It is one of the mental attitudes through which our cities are built and occupied. Physical infrastructure is not so difficult to build and operate. How we choose to live in urban environments — which are supposed to rid us of "backward" rural attitudes — has always been a more complex task. It is made more complex in places such as Gurugram because new urbanism has simply built upon old attitudes rather than changing them. The most fundamental of these is the idea of publicness or the distinction between the private and the public.

When we think of contemporary urbanisation in India, the easy way out is to blame its ills on privatisation and that largely meaningless concept of "neoliberalism", where the state is supposed to have ceded ground to private capital. Public interest would have been much better served, it is frequently suggested, had public authorities looked after the welfare of citizens. This gross oversimplification overlooks the history of publicness in our everyday lives, one that also lies at the heart of the state of Gurugram and other such urban developments.

The first "licence" for private development was issued to the Delhi Land and Finance (DLF) corporation on April 21, 1981, under the Haryana Development & Regulation of Urban Areas Act of 1975 in the village of Chakkarpur in Gurgaon district. Everyday social life in Chakkarpur, as in all villages around it, was organised through the arrangements of caste: public life was entirely expressed through caste hierarchies and beliefs. Who could say what, pray where and clean the garbage were matters of caste. There was no generalised public life but, rather, one that was entirely expressed through the personal attributes of caste. You looked after your own. "New Gurgaon" was simply built on that, keeping the old social attitudes alive while giving off the idea of newness. New highways, metro stations and



C.R. Sasikumar

shopping plazas appear to speak of a new public life, but that is a mirage.

Urban life in Gurugram is largely organised through the idea that there is no public except that which belongs to one's family, caste and class circuits. It is this that also lies at the heart of what passes for urban planning. If, for example, it is considered personally beneficial to cement over a waterway or clear a forest area for a private residence, then that comes to pass. The wider ramifications are rarely considered as there is really no sense of a public and hence, public welfare beyond the immediate circles in which people live. This, however, has little to do with the privatisation of urban development in cities such as Gurugram. It is fundamentally connected to a ruralism practised by the urban well-to-do.

At the present time, the most significant urban development in Gurugram is taking place in what were earlier its rural hinterlands, the areas furthest away from Delhi. Lands are being bought, sold and cleared for residential, commercial and infrastructure purposes. It is not difficult to see how, while multiple modern technologies are being used for mapping and digitising records to make land market-ready in these areas, the state, private capital and citizens have combined to further the ends of private benefit through wilfully rejecting the idea of publicness and public welfare.

Land consolidation and rectangularisation (*chakbandi* and *kilabandi*) are important for the rationalisation of holdings that might otherwise be scattered or irregular lands that prevent the construction of roads and other infrastructure. However, in most cases, these are also contexts when panchayat lands — meant for general benefit — are appropriated for personal use and profit. The assistance of a variety of government officials — able to bend GIS technologies that are meant to produce transparency to the needs of private benefit — is, of course,

When we think of contemporary urbanisation in India, the easy way out is to blame its ills on privatisation and that largely meaningless concept of "neoliberalism", where the state is supposed to have ceded ground to private capital. Public interest would have been much better served, it is frequently suggested, had public authorities looked after the welfare of citizens. This gross oversimplification overlooks the history of publicness in our everyday lives, one that also lies at the heart of the state of Gurugram and other such urban developments.

crucial. As urbanisable land is built upon and becomes urban, the attitudes towards publicness displayed in appropriating public lands for private benefit simply scatter in different directions. The re-fashioning of rural spaces into urban ones is not accompanied by a different attitude towards publicness and public welfare.

Gated residential enclaves, where the problems of public life are simply pushed out to the spaces and people beyond the walls, are not really a dramatically new phenomenon. They are merely the concrete manifestations of mentalities that linger under the appearance of change. The roads and underpasses that surround the luxury apartments and which get routinely flooded and engulfed by rainwater do so because of the mental infrastructure through which city planning and design happens. That rural state of mind that appropriates public lands for private profit is simply reproduced within urban spheres where the idea of the public — if it ever existed — has largely disappeared.

City planning does not require "smart" planning and "smart" technologies such as CCTV and "command and control" centres designed by global consultancy companies with little idea of local conditions of life. The most fundamental aspect to be incorporated into planning for city life is the idea of publicness and the sense that without this we have nothing but a hollow modernity. We spend an enormous amount of time debating the past and the nature of the private and public lives of past generations. It is our strange wariness in giving the same attention to the problems of the present that lie at the heart of the flooded streets of Gurugram and other cities that challenge our claims to civilisational achievements.

The writer is distinguished research professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS University of London

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Mr Trump's pledge on Monday to send Patriot missiles to Ukraine, along with a broader weapons deal to be financed by Europe, appeared to confirm the wisdom of the EU's cautious approach as the President's unifying bromance with Vladimir Putin sours."

— THE GUARDIAN

## A common thread of exclusion

In both the SIR in Bihar and language politics in Maharashtra, the migrant worker is alienated, disenfranchised



ANISHA GEORGE

THE PRESENT POLITICAL moment in India is another demonstration of the now routine politics of alienation and exclusion. On the one hand, the Election Commission has announced a revision of the voter list in Bihar, requiring elaborate paperwork that effectively stands to exclude millions of poor migrant workers spread across the country. On the other hand, multiple parties have made a great show over the language issue in Maharashtra, with poor migrant workers being vilified and made the primary target — many have recently been beaten up for not speaking Marathi. This is also a growing trend across southern states, where the opposition to Hindi imposition by the Centre has been countered by the imposition of state languages on precarious "outsiders". Such disenfranchisement of the mobile poor in both origin and destination states in India is a threat to their basic citizenship rights.

The language issue in India is an existential one. Who are we as a people? What is our identity as a nation? To many, a singular language is indispensable to national identity/unity. To others, unity lies in diversity. Strikingly, both parties are caught in tangles when it comes to poor migrant workers. These workers, predominantly hailing from the poorer and more populous northern and eastern parts of India, migrating to the west and south, are identified as linguistic/cultural others, if not inferior, at migration destinations. This vastly heterogeneous demography is variously essentialised as *bhaiya*, *Hindikara*, *vadakkans*, *Bangaliga*, *Bihari*, etc. Their own rich and varied linguistic backgrounds are erased and reduced to Hindi, a language that may also be alien to them. But a gateway to traverse broad geographies in search of work, Hindi, for better or for worse, has become the language of the labour market today. Whether from the Northeast, Punjab or Telangana, workers are increasingly speaking some version of Hindi to get by; in the process, losing much of their own cultural identity and heritage.

States that insist on workers learning their respective state languages are seeking to extract cultural assimilation in exchange for economic citizenship. However, the latter is scarcely forthcoming. Workers barely manage to find steady

work in a single industry or city. Even if they do, their ability to build a life and livelihood in cities is further constrained by the costs of living that inhibit relocation with family and the lack of healthcare, food rations, and voting rights. It fails to provide them any form of social security or avenue for claims-making. Moreover, at the slightest sign of distress in cities — remember Covid — migrants are pushed out without the slightest remorse. When destination states have nothing but irregular work at low wage rates to offer such immigrants, what is the moral, let alone constitutional, basis of demanding such cultural assimilation?

The political rights of labouring immigrants are an even more fraught subject. India seems to have squandered its demographic dividend by failing to provide quality education, employment or social security to its youth. As a result, we have a large mass of "footloose labour" wandering the breadth of the country for work. Further, imbalanced regional development in the country has meant that the historically better-off regions have continued to flourish at the price of others. For instance, despite being a high-remittance (domestic/international) state, Bihar has one of the lowest credit-to-deposit ratios in the country. More generally, the agrarian crisis and India's jobless growth have served to push the working poor into the vast informal sector, which fails to provide any security of work or pay.

Those who provide this cheap labour, then, are readily characterised as "economic predators" by destination states to cover up their own failings in reining in market players and generating decent employment for the masses in general. State politicians mobilise such ethno-linguistic solidarities to paper over deep-rooted intra-state tensions of class and caste. The immigrant outsider, evidently nobody's constituency, is an easy political target for dehumanisation. Politicians everywhere oppose the extension of urban housing and voting rights to poor migrants and try to restrict citizenship claims to their points of origin. However, if more origin states undertake moves like Bihar, immigrants' political rights north home also stand threatened.

This disenfranchisement of poor immigrants comes at a time when the country is yet to recover from the post-pandemic recession fully, and workers are yet to resume pre-pandemic levels of migration. While the loss of workers is perilous to destination states (and to economic growth), the loss of migration avenues is even more detrimental to workers (and to poverty reduction). Parties preying on the poor are against both democracy and politics.

The writer teaches at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A MORAL IMPERATIVE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Shine more light" (IE, July 15). The preliminary report on the tragic crash of Air India Flight 171 brings up more questions than answers. Its late-night release, vague language, and the decision to only some audio-clips from the cockpit raise serious concerns. Even more troubling is the absence of clarity on whether this was a technical failure or human error, yet the report's focus subtly leans toward the latter. The report's silence on Boeing's design issues, despite earlier FAA warnings, and the lack of a press briefing further undermine transparency. As with the Boeing 737 MAX crisis, downplaying early warnings can have grave consequences. A full, impartial investigation is a moral imperative.

K Chidnanand Kumar, Bengaluru

### DANGEROUS BILL

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Life term, 10-lakh fine: Punjab introduces anti-sacrilege Bill" (IE, July 15). The Punjab government's recently tabled anti-sacrilege Bill is a reflection of the state's unresolved wounds and the public sentiment surrounding incidents of desecration. While the intent may be rooted in justice, the broad framework of the Bill proposes raises pressing questions. In its present form, the Bill risks turning public outrage into legal overreach. With life imprisonment and hefty fines, it gives extraordinary weight to complaints that may not always arise from genuine grievance. The Bill punishes not just desecration, but even attempts at it, creating a slippery slope. For the law to earn legitimacy, it must be guided by precise definitions, procedural safeguards and strong checks against misuse.

Ankita Challa, Kurukshetra

### TEST OF RESILIENCE

THIS REFERS TO the report, "At end of five-day gladiatorial fight, India falls just short, Jaija stands tall" (IE, July 15). The third Test concluded at Lord's on Sunday was a stirring reminder of why Test cricket remains the ultimate test of skill, character, and endurance. While India may have fallen short by 22 runs, the match was a showcase of resilience — not least from Ravindra Jadeja. It was heartbreaking to see the dream slip away after tea, especially when the tail couldn't provide him the support he so richly deserved. Jadeja's determination under pressure was a masterclass in Test match temperament and grit. While the loss hurts, such performances give fans hope and players belief.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### RIGHTS AT RISK

THIS REFERS TO the article, "When the sound of politics is shrill" (IE, July 15). The controversial Maharashtra Special Safety Bill could limit citizens' right to free speech, turning it into a luxury available only to pro-government people. Likewise, the uncalled-for Special Intensive Revision exercise in Bihar, where the election to the state Assembly is around the corner, is threatening democracy. Expecting citizens, many of whom live in abject poverty, to provide documents few possess to stay on electoral rolls is an insult to the voting exercise. It has led to a fear of mass disenfranchisement among the electorate. The ruling dispensation rushes to criminalise dissent even chance it gets; this is an old story. When the roles of the government and Opposition are reversed, they will regret these decisions.

SH Quadri, Bikaner



TARUN VIJAY

"The history of India is not just about slavery. The history of India is about emerging victories... The mistake of not keeping track of events in the main narrative is being rectified now" — Narendra Modi

PUTTING THE MARATHA Military Landscapes on the UNESCO World Heritage list is a significant step towards recognising Indian monuments of victory and glory and decolonising the heritage space. The momentum must be taken further as this area had been neglected for a long time post-independence.

Monuments are our collective memory etched in stone. After Independence, there was little effort to correct the mindset of teachers and those preparing history books. The colonial mindset continued even in the preservation of monuments and archaeological sites. Teaching took place under the shadow of what PM Modi has called the history of our defeat and the stories of enemies' victories.

It is only under the Modi government that the decolonisation drive has begun, giving us new insights into the history that the British and the Left cabal sought to bury. It has highlighted the stories of King Shalivahan, Rani Durgawati and Lachit Barphukan. The founder-king of Delhi, Maharaja Anangpal Tomar, was long ignored — now, Anangpal, which was a neglected sewer reservoir, has been designated a Monument of National Importance. Excavations at Rakhigiri have restarted. The Navy has new insignia inspired by Chhatrapati

## The work of decolonisation

A relook is needed at the functioning of all the agencies working on monuments

Shivaji. There have also been efforts to delve into the history of tribal communities' wars of independence in the Northeast, specifically the Tai-Khamti War (1839). There are just a few examples of the Modi government's vision of resurrecting India's glorious history and detoxing colonised minds.

As chairman of the National Monuments Authority (NMA), I had an opportunity to flag some anomalies and suggest changes in the way we look at preservation. We have created a list of 3,695 Monuments of National Importance that have brought out interesting facets of Indian history.

Afzal Khan, the cruel general serving the Adil Shahi dynasty of Bijapur, believed a prophecy about his death before his "meeting" with Shivaji. Some tales suggest that he killed his many wives the night before he departed to encounter his foe. We know Shivaji killed him. But the graves of his wives are now a Monument of National Importance in Bijapur. Maharani Tarabai Bhonsle fought the Mughals and ruled as a Maratha queen for 30 years. But her *samadhi* is in ruins in Satara. It deserves the honour of being a Monument of National Importance.

The great Sikh warrior Baba Baghel Singh conquered Delhi in 1783, made the Mughal emperor pay fines and constructed seven gurdwaras including Sis Ganj Sahib. His 30,000 Sikh soldiers camped near the Red Fort — and so, the camp became known as Tis Hazari. But nowhere, even in the Red Fort Museum, is there any mention of this conquest. The

National Monuments Authority was asked to approach the Tis Hazari court to ask if it would like to have the name explained in its precincts. The Marathas conquered Delhi in 1757 under Raghubhai Rao and in 1771 under Mahadaji Shinde. They controlled the Red Fort and continued to rule until 1803, when the British overpowered them in the second Anglo-Maratha War. The British took Delhi from the Marathas but not the Mughals. This fact, too, is completely missing from the Red Fort museum. The NMA struggled for two years to have this mentioned on a wall of honour inside the fort without any success.

On the Delhi-Meerut highway, there lies a nondescript grave of British soldiers who were killed by local revolutionaries in 1857. This was declared a Monument of National Importance. But the Kali Palan Aghamath temple, Meerut, a renowned place that housed revolutionaries and Punjab soldiers — a shelter for the marching armies of the freedom struggle — has been refused the honour. There isn't a single Monument of National Importance connected with the Dalit struggle and B.R. Ambedkar's life. His first primary school in Satara and the Sayaji Baug Vadodara Banyan tree, where he resolved to bring equality for all Indians, now known as Sankalp Bhumi, have yet to be accepted as national monuments.

After a detailed site inspection by the NMA, the Governor of Kerala sent a recommendation to declare the birthplace of Adi Shankara, Kalady, a Monument of National

Importance. It was not even responded to.

Mangarh has been a place of the greatest reverence for PM Modi. He visited the place many times before he became Gujarat CM, and recently, as PM. The NMA visited the site and recommended that it be declared a Monument of National Importance. It was the site of the massacre of more than 1,500 Bihl tribals by the British army in November 1913. We are still waiting for action on the matter.

There are more than 100 monuments like Tota-Maina Ki Kabir that have absolutely no history. Nobody knows what they represent and why they have been declared Monuments of National Importance. Similarly, some Monuments of National Importance, like the Mohammad Gauri Ke Senapati Ki Chhatra and Babur Ka Bagicha (where he is said to have stayed for a few hours), defy any logic. Not a single Monument of National Importance from Kashmir, like Martand, Parishapore or Harwan, was ever recommended to be declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and none has been given even a security guard.

I had recommended a relook at the functioning and mandates of all the agencies working on monuments to unshackle them from the colonial mindset. We need an Archaeological Foundation to preserve civilisational and revolutionary monuments of India.

The writer was chairman, National Monuments Authority



# The EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE  
THE BETTER I GET TO KNOW MEN, THE MORE I FIND  
MYSELF LOVING DOGS. —CHARLES DE GAULLE

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# Hedging against America

Trump 2.0 is upending US ties with allies and partners in Asia and Europe. De-coupling may be hard, de-risking is necessary



RAJA MANDALA  
C RAJA MOHAN

## SHE TOO

Sexual harassment victim in Balasore spoke up, complained. She was let down by a system that refused to pay heed

WHY DID YOU not speak up? Implicit in this question, put to those who have faced sexual harassment and abuse, is the assumption that breaking a silence leads, inevitably, to justice. The young woman who died this week in Balasore, Odisha, three days after she set herself on fire, spoke up. She named her alleged harasser, a professor, to the internal complaints committee of her college. She filed a complaint with the police. Yet, she was let down, driven to despair by a system that she trusted. The question that must now be answered is this: Why was this young woman not heard?

The police have arrested the accused professor on charges of abetment to suicide, sexual harassment and criminal intimidation, among others. The principal of the college, too, is in custody on the charge of abetment to suicide. Both had already been suspended from the college following the young woman's self-immolation on Saturday. The law must now take its course, but the larger questions looming over this tragedy — about institutional responsibility and accountability, of power asymmetries that take a high toll on those who speak out against abuse — cannot be ignored. It must be asked why, 12 years after the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) Act was passed — marking what seemed to be a turning point in the long-drawn, painful confrontation with the dismal phenomenon of sexual harassment and violence that women routinely endure — complaints still appear to fall on deaf ears. Questions of institutional failure and lack of sensitivity can no longer be evaded. As the Supreme Court pointed out in 2023, when it issued directions for a "time-bound exercise" to verify whether all public and private bodies are compliant with the PoSH Act, a law alone cannot ensure "dignity and respect". Investigation will reveal what the college in Balasore did, and did not do, after the student complained of sexual harassment. But beyond this one college, beyond Odisha, other institutions, too, are stakeholders in building a safe environment for women — it's time they looked at how far they've gone, how far they have been willing to go, to ensure that women can study, work and travel safely.

Back in December 2012, shaken by the death of a young woman in Delhi after a gruesome incident of sexual assault, there appeared to be a strong public resolve to push for change. It has periodically flared up since then, such as during the MeToo movement of 2018 and in 2023, when there was a swell of public support for the wrestlers who had accused a powerful politician of sexual harassment. In almost every case, it has been driven by women who refused to be silenced. They've spoken up, over and over again. It is time for the system to listen, and respond.

SECTIONS OF THE Indian foreign policy community feel "betrayed" by the Donald Trump administration, which has found unexpected affection for Rawalpindi, raised a host of tough demands on trade, and threatened additional tariffs on India because of its BRICS membership and continued purchase of Russian oil. It is, perhaps, a small consolation that India is not alone. America's neighbours and largest trading partners (Mexico and Canada) and its longest-standing allies in Europe and Asia have even more reasons to feel betrayed.

Most of these alliances date back to the end of World War II and have weathered multiple crises over the past eight decades. But as in life, so in international relations — nothing is forever. If change is the only constant, that moment of restructuring has now arrived for America's alliances and partnerships in Europe and Asia. As a non-alloy, India is better prepared for change in America.

The idea of "strategic autonomy", long central to India's foreign policy, has been viewed with scepticism by India's Western partners. They have argued that India's own obsession with autonomy limits the scope for strategic cooperation with the US and Europe. But today, "strategic autonomy" has become the new mantra among America's allies themselves.

In his address to the British Parliament last week, French President Emmanuel Macron reflected on the implications of the unprecedented disruption unleashed by President Trump's second term. He underlined the need for deeper Franco-British cooperation to reduce what he called the "dual dependency" on the US and China. Macron warned against Europe's excessive reliance on the two superpowers for economic, technological, and security needs, and emphasised the urgency of re-claiming European strategic autonomy. He called for stronger Franco-British collaboration on defence, climate action, migration and technological innovation, suggesting that only through unity can Europe effectively respond to global challenges and safeguard its interests.

Although America's European allies bent over backwards to placate "daddy" Trump at the NATO summit last month, they are shocked by the Trump administration's policies. If there were any lingering doubts, Trump dispelled them over the weekend by imposing a 30 per cent tariff on imports from the European Union, shattering hopes for compromise on trade. Trump has long regarded the EU as a bigger economic threat than China but few anticipated that transatlantic ties would deteriorate

so sharply in his second term.

Britain's Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, may lack the rhetorical flair of his French counterpart but he, too, is seeking to rebalance the "special relationship" with the US against the geographic imperative of Europe. If Brexit a decade ago was about distancing from Europe and reconnecting with the Anglosphere, Starmer's Labour government is working to rebuild links with the Continent. Trump, despite his family origins in the UK, has little affection for Britain. His MAGA coalition looks down on its "poorer cousins" in the British Isles.

The story is no different in Asia, where two of America's staunchest allies are seething over Trump's actions. The announcement of 25 per cent tariffs on Japanese imports triggered rare outrage within Japan's political class, which has placed nearly all its strategic bets on the US since World War II. It was remarkable, therefore, to hear the Japanese PM declare that Tokyo must reduce its dependence on Washington. He made it clear that Japan would not offer "easy concessions" or compromise its national interests in the face of US pressure.

To be sure, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba is in the midst of an upper house election campaign this week. But this is not mere campaign rhetoric. He stressed that Japan, as the largest foreign investor in the US and a major creator of American jobs, deserves different treatment from countries targeted by the tariffs. Despite months of negotiations, repeated diplomatic missions to Washington, and a pledge of \$1 trillion in new investment, Ishiba's government could not persuade Trump to hold back, especially as the US President remained dissatisfied with Japan's market access for American rice and automobiles.

Equally emphatic about strategic autonomy has been Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Few countries have been as close to Washington as Australia. Yet, in a major speech last week, Albanese insisted that being an ally does not mean being a blind follower. He described the US alliance as a "pillar" of Australian foreign policy but argued that this partnership should not constrain Australia's sovereignty or decision-making. He called for an "Australia first" approach — particularly relevant amid intensifying US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. As it happens, Albanese is in China this week, stepping up efforts to engage Australia's Asian neighbours.

The frustration among allies does not mean they can simply walk away from Washington. All America's partners have

enormous stakes in sustaining their economic and technological ties with the US. Even more important, their security challenges would become far more demanding without American guarantees. If Europe must find new ways to defend itself against Russia, Asian allies must devise strategies to cope with Chinese power. America's Eurasian partners will not simply fold their hands — they will search for creative answers. In Europe, France and Britain are discussing better coordination of their nuclear weapons policies, while the EU is accelerating collective defence efforts.

In Asia, the challenge is harder. Unlike in Europe, regional institutions remain underdeveloped, and the gap between China's power and that of its neighbours is vast. Yet, the logic of diversification is undeniable. We are already seeing Asian allies doing more with each other and engaging other actors, such as the EU. Some are beginning to reassess their engagement with China.

At the same time, the depth of the US relationship is such that preventing a slide into outright rupture remains a top priority for allies in both Asia and Europe. As Macron told the British Parliament, Europe does not want to walk away from the US — but it must "de-risk" by finding new partners and rebuilding its own capacities.

India, for its part, is holding its nerve and continuing to engage Washington. As Delhi weighs the consequences of the Trump upheaval for Eurasia and the global order, it is worth recalling that India has managed many strategic surprises before: The Chinese "betrayal" in 1962, Beijing's embrace of Pakistan, the Sino-Soviet split, the US-China entente in the 1970s, the Soviet collapse in 1991, the rise of a new economic order in the 1980s, and the Russia-China alignment in the 2000s.

If external change is inevitable, Delhi's focus must be on managing it rather than bemoaning it. For now, India remains one of the few major US trade partners not yet notified of a new tariff level. Delhi has resumed trade talks with Washington this week and is eager to conclude one of its most ambitious negotiations before the August 1 deadline. But it must be prepared for failure. As Trump might remind us, the golden rule of any negotiation is the will to walk away.

The writer is distinguished fellow at the Council for Strategic and Defence Research, Delhi, and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

## BILL OF DISTRACTION

Punjab's proposed sacrilege law could push the state back into a precarious debate that had receded into the background

THE PUNJAB GOVERNMENT'S bill proposing life imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs 10 lakh for the desecration of any religious text — sent to a Select Committee — is deeply problematic. The existing laws address the crime, there was no need for a separate piece of legislation. It pushes the state back into a debate that had receded into the background. In 2015, the Bangari sacrilege incident followed by police firing that killed two protesters, and a chain of "beef" cases, had set the state on edge. It became a flashpoint, and a potent symbol of the growing disillusionment with the then-ruling Akali-BJP alliance, which had been in power for an unprecedented two successive terms since 2007. The public mood was already souring; Bangari crystallised the anger.

Congress, which succeeded the Akalis, tried to ride that wave by pushing for a sacrilege law, capitalising on the issue's emotional resonance. This period also witnessed the meteoric rise of the Aam Aadmi Party, which played the "outsider" card and swept the 2022 Punjab Assembly elections. The AAP's victory was less a testament to the party's popularity, given that it had never been tested in the state, than a collective indictment of legacy parties that had persistently failed to meet the people's aspirations. Sacrilege, by then, had become a non-issue. Voters said they were weary of hollow promises about smooth roads and clean drains.

It is troubling that the AAP, which appears to have shifted gears after its electoral setback in Delhi, should now choose to steer Punjab back towards the volatile terrain of sacrilege. In 2015, such incidents carried a discernible political undertone, and suspicions were trained on the role of the Dera Sacha Sauda. But in the years since, the sporadic episodes have increasingly appeared to be individual acts of crime rather than politically orchestrated. There is no denying that sacrilege wounds deeply as it strikes at the core of faith. But for a border state grappling with economic, social, and security challenges, the reintroduction of this emotionally charged issue into the political discourse is a cause for concern. Punjab's agricultural sector flounders in the absence of diversification. Despite handwringing over depleting groundwater, the state still pushes paddy cultivation to new heights. Land pooling for real estate is fuelling new tensions in a state struggling to transition from an agrarian economy to one led by manufacturing. The drug menace continues to kill and the law-and-order situation teeters on the edge. This bill can only be read as an attempt to stoke emotions and consolidate votes in the extended run-up to the 2027 Assembly elections. At a time when Punjab needs to focus on rebuilding its economy, and restoring public trust, it's a dangerous distraction.

## THEY HAD US AT WOOF

AI is trying to bridge the communication gap between species. Who needs that?

THERE'S SOMETHING PRIMORDIAL in the bond between *Homo sapiens* and *Canis lupus familiaris*. Dogs helped hairless apes become people and humans helped wolves become dogs. From palaeolithic hunting companions down to social media celebs, there has been a seamless, wordless bond between the species. But, as with so many things, the AI hype can't leave well enough alone. Several companies are now promising to "translate" what your canine or feline companion is trying to say when she wags her tail, sulks for attention or purrs. The danger, though, is this: What is gained in translation may be lost in affection.

The Jeremy Collier Centre for Animal Sentience at the London School of Economics will deploy considerable resources to bridge the communication gap between species. There is much to gain from the endeavour. For too long, a human-centric view of personhood — which ignores intelligent, feeling creatures as diverse as corvids and apes, dolphins and elephants — has resulted in cruelty on the one hand and limited how we interact with these animals on the other. But when it comes to pets, do we really need to know what they are "saying"? More importantly, predictive models may tell people what they want to hear, rather than what the animal "means".

Take the pooch you have had for years. The eagerness with which he greets every member of the family when they return, the comfort of every winter cuddle, even the manipulative looks as they seek scraps from the table — what if it was all just translated to "food given here"? And the disdain of the domestic feline might ruin the self-esteem of the most secure persons. These words can be lies of translation. Because the language people share with their pets is not less complex or complete than those humans reserve for each other. In essence, it is a love beyond words. Let's not ruin that.



B R GURUPRASAD

"THE SECOND INDIAN in space", Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla's return journey to terra firma was safely and successfully accomplished on July 15. Shukla is back after a fruitful stay of about 18 days on the International Space Station (ISS). A day before his return, the Crew Dragon spacecraft Grace in which he comfortably sat with his three Axiom 4 colleagues successfully undocked (detached) from the ISS, circling the Earth at 400 km height. For the next 22 hours or so, the craft independently orbited the Earth and then dove back into the atmosphere, survived the subsequent fiery re-entry heat and splashed down off the coast of California at a comfortable speed of about 24 km per hour. With this, Shukla's maiden sojourn in space concluded.

Understandably, the successful completion of Shukla's Axiom 4 mission will make an already joyous India more euphoric for quite some time. Many among our hundreds of millions of strong, intelligent and capable students will consider Shukla a role model. Shukla has said that India's first space traveller, Rakesh Sharma, was a role model for him.

The sense of excitement associated with spaceflight, especially human spaceflight, and the inspiration it can provide are immense. It

## IN A GREATER SPACE

Shubhanshu Shukla's mission, safe return will provide valuable inputs to Gaganyaan

The participation of one of its astronaut candidates in Axiom 4 will enrich Gaganyaan in terms of planning and execution. Shukla was extensively trained in many US facilities, including at NASA, for about eight months. Fairly detailed knowledge of such facilities as well as the training procedures would not have been available to us without the participation in a human spaceflight mission.

can effectively empower students to pursue STEM education with seriousness. This is one of the prominent benefits to accrue from Shukla's worthwhile journey to space.

Having many significant achievements to its credit in the area of uncrewed spaceflight, India is confidently taking its first step into human spaceflight. Gaganyaan aims to launch Indian space travellers from Indian soil, in an Indian-built spacecraft, propelled by an Indian launch vehicle, and make them orbit the Earth for a few days. Serious and systematic efforts are being led by ISRO, with the enthusiastic participation of many national scientific/technical institutions of repute.

As part of this arduous endeavour, the human rating (significantly enhancing the reliability of a rocket vehicle to safely launch human beings) of India's most capable launch vehicle, HLV-M3, has reportedly been completed. The design and development of the Gaganyaan spacecraft, which will be capable of accommodating three space travellers, is in progress. Prashanth Balakrishnan Nair, Ajit Krishnan, Angad Pratap and Shukla, all test pilots now holding the rank of group captain in the Indian Air Force, have been selected and trained in India and Russia.

The participation of one of its astronaut

candidates in Axiom 4 will enrich Gaganyaan in terms of planning and execution. Shukla was extensively trained in many US facilities, including at NASA, for about eight months. Fairly detailed knowledge of such facilities as well as the training procedures would not have been available to us without the participation in a human spaceflight mission.

Thus, not only has Shukla been trained for the launch, he also now has first-hand experience of travelling in a spacecraft to Earth orbit. More importantly, he has gained invaluable experience of living and working in the weightless environment of space aboard the ISS. That he was able to perform the carefully designed and packaged bio-medical, healthcare, space food production and cognitive science-related experiments from India has greatly encouraged our scientific and engineering community and enhanced our confidence and optimism about India's participation in the Axiom 4 mission is beneficial in many ways indeed.

The writer is director, Jawaharlal Nehru Planetarium, Bengaluru, adjunct faculty, National Institute of Advanced Studies, former associate director, ISRO. Views are personal

## JULY 16, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

### BLACK BOX ANALYSIS

The Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) and the engineering department of Air India are all set to extract a read-out and a print-out of the cockpit voice recorder and the digital flight data recorder of the ill-fated Air India jumbo Kanishka that perished in the Atlantic off the Irish coast on June 23.

### PM ON SRI LANKA WAR

THE SRI LANKAN President, J R Jayewardene, has offered to grant "sufficient autonomy" to Tamil areas of the island to resolve the ethnic issue. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said. The

offer had come during the talks the Sri Lankan President had with the Prime Minister. Virtually ruling out support for a separate Eelam, the Prime Minister told a news conference at Raj Bhavan that "we will not support anything more than what is available in India".

### JKLF DISINTEGRATION

THE OVERSEAS WING of the so-called Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) seems to be disintegrating and its former president, Amanullah Khan, is so frustrated with what he called "integral politics" that he is now seriously thinking of setting up his headquarters in

some Middle East country, possibly the UAE.

### DHARAVI SCANDAL

AFTER A FIERY four-and-a-half-hour discussion over the "Dharavi scandal", the Opposition in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly walked out for the day in protest against the government's refusal to appoint a committee of House members to probe the "deal". Leader of the Opposition Sharad Pawar did not agree with Minister of State for Urban Development Ram Manohar Tripathi's offer to ask the chief secretary to investigate the land deal.





## BRICS and no mortar

India in a piquant position in anti-US grouping

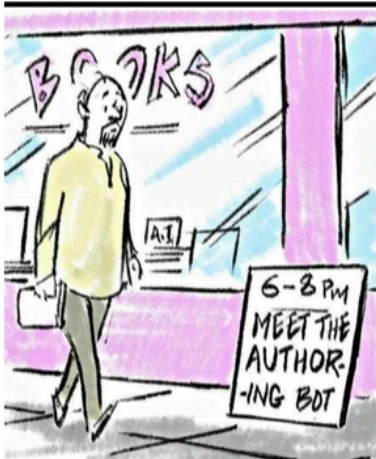
We are living in turbulent times, with the United States firing its tariff salvos in all directions, and on the basis of an expanding and absurd range of pretexts. It is in this context that BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and many more now) — which came into being merely because a former Goldman Sachs chief coined an acronym around them more than two decades ago as economic powerhouses of the future — has assumed importance as a countervailing force to the US.

BRICS is more than an economic grouping. It is a geo-political force led by China and Russia. India is among the very few countries which are 'neutral' here. There are perhaps limits to BRICS' potential, because of China's dominance. Yet, it is an important voice for the Global South, with even Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman spelling this out. US President Trump seems to view the BRICS threat very seriously, and threatened a battery of punitive and very arbitrary tariffs against its members — 10 per cent on those opposing the dollar, 500 per cent on those buying Russian oil and 50 per cent on Brazil for trying its former president Jair Bolsonaro. BRICS has really fired up Trump for its pursuit of an alternative to the dollar — besides being aligned against the US on geopolitical issues and management of global institutions. Non-dollarised trade is already happening. Over 90 per cent of Russia-China trade, analysts point out, is settled in roubles or yuan; India settles its oil payments to Russia in rupees or dirhams; and even Saudi Arabia is trading in yuan. Interestingly, the recent Rio de Janeiro declaration is subdued on this count, even as the October 2024 Kazan declaration was categorical. The latter focused on using local currencies, correspondent banking networks, and development of a financial market infrastructure to this end, creating quite a flutter. With Trump ever inclined to punish countries on a whim (just as SWIFT, the dollar-based inter-bank settlement system was weaponised by excluding some countries such as Russia and Iran from it), the exploration of alternatives to the dollarised trade is likely to continue.

At a time when the US is pursuing a radically different policy on trade, it is natural to expect the rest of the world to improve their horizontal ties. Unfortunately, it is hard to say whether India can really draw major gains in the BRICS space. It has conceded ground to China with respect to developing trade and economic ties with the African continent. As India assumes the BRICS presidency in 2026, it will have to do a tightrope walk with a tempestuous US on the one side and an often hostile China on the other.

As for Global South solidarity, India and South Africa have stood together in forums such as WTO, the latest being their effort to waive patents on Covid vaccine. But Brazil, China and Russia have not gone along with them on developing country issues on a consistent basis. BRICS could do with better cohesion and inclusiveness.

## POCKET



RAJASEKHAR VK

SEBI's ban on Jane Street signals a decisive moment for India's market regulation, testing the balance between fairness, investor protection, and global competitiveness.

When does a sophisticated arbitrage strategy stop being smart trading and start undermining market integrity? On July 3, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) issued a landmark order banning global proprietary trading firm Jane Street from India's equity derivatives market and freezing approximately \$567 million of its funds.

This move sent shock waves through the financial community, given Jane Street's reputation as a highly sophisticated quantitative trading house operating globally.

Jane Street's alleged strategy involved "marking-the-close", a technique whereby traders place large orders towards the end of the trading session to influence settlement prices.

It also used intra-day index adjustments to create favourable conditions for its options positions. Such practices, SEBI argued, disrupted fair price discovery and undermined market integrity. According to SEBI's interim order, Jane Street Group earned unlawful gains amounting to ₹4,843 crore, which have been ordered to be impounded and placed in an escrow account.

## THE BROADER CONTEXT

SEBI's intervention must be viewed against a broader context. Over the past decade, India has experienced an unprecedented surge in retail investor participation, particularly from younger and lower-income groups attracted to the high-return allure of derivatives.

Many of these new participants lack the sophisticated risk management tools and technical understanding that institutional players like Jane Street possess. SEBI's action highlights its statutory duty under the SEBI Act, 1992 and the Prohibition of Fraudulent and Unfair Trade Practices (PFUTP) Regulations to protect investors and maintain orderly markets.

Historically, SEBI has intervened in instances of price manipulation and insider trading, but the Jane Street order stands out for its scale and potential global implications. While SEBI has targeted smaller domestic operators before, this marks the first major action against a prominent international firm, signalling its readiness to assert jurisdiction over global players. SEBI has often cited its "investor-first" approach, reiterating that the integrity of the market cannot be compromised, even if it risks a temporary contraction in liquidity.



## What Jane Street ban means for our markets

INVESTOR-FIRST. SEBI's actions signal its readiness to assert jurisdiction over global players and protect investors

## MARKET REACTION

The immediate market reaction was swift and severe. For instance, on July 5, the National Stock Exchange reported a 21 per cent decline in derivatives turnover compared to the previous session. Further declines were seen on July 7 (29 per cent) and July 9 (20 per cent), with Bank Nifty volumes almost halving. Institutional investors and brokerages expressed concern over potential long-term impacts on liquidity, bid-ask spreads, and the ability to execute large orders efficiently.

However, some commentators argue that this disruption is a necessary corrective step to reinforce market discipline and deter aggressive speculative strategies that may harm retail investors.

## JANE STREET'S DEFENCE

Jane Street has robustly defended its actions, describing them as standard "index arbitrage" — a globally accepted strategy essential for aligning prices across different market segments. The firm maintains that its activities contributed to market efficiency rather than detracting from it. It asserts that it operated within the legal framework, did not act in concert with others, and that its trades followed sound economic logic.

In its quest to emerge as a global financial hub, India must walk the tightrope between fostering innovation and safeguarding market integrity

consistent with risk management and market alignment practices.

Comparisons to other jurisdictions further illuminate the debate. In the US, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has pursued cases against firms for manipulative closing strategies but has also emphasised clear definitions and procedural safeguards to avoid stifling legitimate liquidity provision.

Similarly, the UK Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) has scrutinised high-frequency trading practices, opting for enhanced surveillance and transparency over outright bans. India's decisive approach in this instance may prompt other emerging markets to reassess their own regulatory frameworks and stance towards global proprietary trading firms.

The Jane Street case raises pressing questions about the future trajectory of India's regulatory framework. As the country seeks to solidify its position as a global financial hub, it must walk the tightrope between fostering innovation and safeguarding market integrity. Overly restrictive measures risk deterring foreign institutional investment and reducing market depth, while overly permissive policies may expose retail investors to unacceptable risks.

Clarity in regulatory definitions is paramount. The term "non-neutral" trading, central to SEBI's argument, requires explicit delineation to avoid ambiguities that could inadvertently constrain legitimate arbitrage and market-making activities.

A possible solution could be to create a clear, well-structured framework with

a regulatory sandbox, where new advanced trading strategies could be tested safely under strict oversight.

A similar approach exists under Europe's MiFID II regime, which requires firms to test algorithmic trading strategies in simulated environments before live deployment. This ensures robust risk controls and minimises market abuse.

As derivatives products become more accessible, retail investors must be equipped with a clear understanding of their risks, potential rewards, and underlying market mechanics. Regulatory bodies, market infrastructure institutions, and financial education initiatives should collaborate to create comprehensive and practical investor literacy programmes.

In conclusion, SEBI's action against Jane Street serves as a defining moment in India's capital market evolution. It reflects a firm commitment to uphold market integrity and protect retail investors, even at the cost of immediate volatility and liquidity challenges. The long-term effects will hinge on the outcome of the ongoing legal process.

By striking a judicious balance between deterrence and market development, India can reinforce investor trust and sustain its growth as a credible global investment destination. For millions of new investors entering India's booming options markets, trust is the ultimate currency.

SEBI's move may appear harsh, but it signals that fairness cannot be sacrificed at the altar of speed or profit.

The writer is a lawyer and former Judicial Member of the National Company Law Tribunal

## Why Shubhanshu Shukla's space odyssey is important

Shukla conducted some important experiments that will be crucial for the Gaganyaan mission and ISRO

## bl. explainer

M Ramesh

Indian fighter pilot and astronaut, Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla, 40, is the first Indian to have journeyed more than 12.2 million km in space over 18 days, circled the earth 288 times from 400 km above.

While his ascent to space was a matter of pride to Indians, that he is back, here is a look at all that happened.

## Who were the players of this mission?

The agencies involved in this mission are NASA, Axiom-4 and SpaceX. NASA is the US space agency which part-owns the International Space Station (ISS).

Axiom-4 is an American company that provides all services needed for private astronaut missions to the ISS by providing services such as training. It intends to build its own module that will initially stay attached to the ISS and later become a standalone space-station, once the ISS is retired, which is likely in 2030. SpaceX is the Elon Musk-owned company whose Falcon 9 rocket carried the Crew Dragon spacecraft, which was Shukla's 'coach'.

## So, NASA took an Indian onboard — but for what? Did India pay NASA a fee?

It was a goodwill gesture. There is

growing collaboration between India and the US, for space activities. Shortly, the ₹5,000-crore NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) satellite will be sent up to space from India.

In 2023, India signed the NASA-led Artemis Accord, which is a template agreement for space collaboration among signatory countries. So, NASA taking an Indian was a symbolic acknowledgement of the growing cooperation between the two countries.

No fee was paid to NASA for taking Shukla. That said, India picked-up Shukla-related costs. While no official figure has been mentioned, it is believed that India's bill would be between \$55-70 million, which would include payments to Axiom-4.

## Could the experiments done by Shukla been done by anybody on behalf of India?

Shukla's was not a joyride. The Indian astronaut's space odyssey has turned him into a 'knowledge node', and his experiments are extremely valuable for ISRO's Gaganyaan mission.

Shukla now has hands-on experience on-board the ISS, which is useful in areas such as docking, handling emergencies, physical and mental health issues, and crew coordination. He has personally sampled prolonged isolation and psychological adaptation. In other words, he is a walking data bank — data that will help ISRO fine-tune medical



KNOWLEDGE NODE. Shubhanshu Shukla (from space) YouTube

protocols, re-entry procedures and real-time telemetry, for the Gaganyaan mission.

Waiting into the Gaganyaan mission without Shukla's experience would be like diving into a pool after learning to swim from a book.

Experiential data would be different for an Indian than a Caucasian. Now that Shukla is back with a rich cache of experiences, he is a resource that other Indian astronauts can tap into.

At another level, the seven experiments that Shukla conducted are India-specific.

## What are these experiments?

Shukla conducted over 60 experiments under seven India-specific heads. One, muscle degeneration and recovery under microgravity. The experiment included traditional

Ayurvedic supplements (ashwagandha and giloy) to observe their regenerative potential.

Second, seed germination and plant growth. NASA has experimented with plants that they need — lettuce, wheat and mustard. Shukla tried moong, methi and mustard — the Indian strains.

Three, genetic response in plants, to check out how microgravity affects gene expression — in Arabidopsis thaliana.

Four, tardigrade survival. Tardigrades — tiny, millimetre thick water-bears are animals that are known to survive extreme conditions, both hot and cold. Earlier experiments with tardigrades used American or European animals. Shukla did it with Indian strains. This study, it is hoped, will give us lessons for developing biological shielding and protective drugs for astronauts.

Five, experiments to see how Indian strains of cyanobacteria make food (photosynthesize) in space — useful for oxygen regeneration. CO<sub>2</sub> capture and making foods in space.

Six, human-machine interface — how machines (computers, touchscreens, motors etc) behave in space. Shukla's tests were on Indian-designed digital interfaces.

And seven — psychological resilience and cognitive function. Having gone through the 'ring of fire', Shukla will now be able to impart training to other Indian astronauts.

✉ LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to [bleditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bleditor@thehindu.co.in) or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kastur Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

## Glenmark's milestone

Major pharma institutions spend \$3-5 billion in R&D to research and market one drug, which could take years. The patents and high pricing of the drug then provides funds to plough back into more research.

Glenmark's achievement is remarkable given that Indian pharma majors became global leaders, essentially in the generic drug market, by reverse engineering drug molecules. This precluded original research and the revenue thereof to

the fund flow. That said, such domestic infrastructure of specialised equipment, highly skilled scientists and the vast cache of clinical data should hopefully set the base for India towards large ticket drug research.

R Narayanan

Real Mumbai

## Aadhaar and citizenship

This refers to the article 'Aadhaar: New fears to address pain points' (July 15).

Making the updating of Aadhaar card user-friendly will also be a great help if the updated data is allowed by the Election Commission as acceptable documents for the purpose of Special Interview Revision (SIR) in Bihar though this card is often submitted by persons to procure any of the 11 documents required for inclusion during the SIR.

Secondly, if it also provides data needed to prove Indian citizenship, its omission from the

card would allow the holder to use it as proof of identity but not as a voter.

YG Chouksey

Pune

## Recognise artisan skills

With reference to the article 'Weaving Opportunities' (July 15), the Indian textile industry offers jobs to 145 million people (direct and indirect), most of it is in the unorganised sector and needs to be protected by way of social

security schemes. Secondly, India being home for traditional textiles, is facing closure at major hubs like Ikai, Gadag, Pochampally, Chanderi, Bhilwara, Bhilwadi etc. due to the artisans shying away from it.

The government must establish marketing boards for such traditional textiles and place India on the world map, recognising its huge potential.

Ravil Mangal

Halebidu Village (Karnataka)



## Sustainable green finance

Banks must factor in climate risk in credit evaluation

Beena Vaheed

Green finance is steadily becoming a mainstream priority for financial institutions across the globe. A leading global bank in Europe, for instance, has already committed over \$1 trillion toward sustainable finance — signalling how rapidly climate responsibility is shaping institutional strategies. Sustainability-linked products now influence growth, deepen client engagement, and reshape portfolio management.

With nearly one-third of India's GDP derived from climate-dependent sectors such as agriculture, forestry, energy, and construction, the transition to sustainable finance is also an economic imperative. However, productivity in these sectors remains highly vulnerable to climate volatility. For example, agriculture labour productivity in India is 30-50 per cent lower than global benchmarks and could worsen with climate stress. Thus, green finance is not just about climate — it's critical for boosting sectoral productivity and economic resilience.

There is a rising demand for sustainability-linked instruments, as businesses shift from high-carbon models to greener pathways. The proliferation of green bonds, ESG-linked loans, and climate-aligned investments highlights this evolution. Simultaneously, retail customers are becoming increasingly climate-conscious. Banks can catalyse this shift by offering green deposits, rooftop solar loans, EV financing, and carbon-saving incentives.

**RETHINKING RISK**  
A large share of banks' carbon footprint lies in their financed emissions — the emissions of the entities they fund. Addressing this requires banks to integrate climate considerations deeply into credit evaluation, stress testing, and capital allocation frameworks. This must extend to underwriting standards, loan monitoring, periodic climate-linked MIS reporting, and ecosystem collaboration to embed climate risk into credit ratings and risk models. Pricing also needs recalibration — clients with greener business models should receive better rates and easier access to capital.

Climate risks — both physical (e.g., floods, droughts) and transition-related (e.g., regulatory changes, asset



**PROMOTE.** Nature-positive financing *GUY HARRIS*

stranding) — must be reflected in prudential norms. While the lack of data and scalable green projects remains a challenge, banks are leveraging tools such as climate scenario modelling, sectoral decarbonisation pathways, and green taxonomies to close the gap. Technology is an indispensable enabler. AI-powered ESG models, blockchain-based bond tracking, and satellite-driven climate analytics are transforming how green finance is structured, monitored, and reported. Fintech platforms are also expanding access to climate-friendly financial products. Indian banks can play a catalytic role by co-creating these innovations with start-ups, especially in rural and semi-urban India.

Banks must not only fund the green transition — they must also embody it. From energy-efficient branches and paperless operations to rainwater harvesting and employee-led green campaigns, Indian banks are embedding ESG principles into everyday functioning. India's journey to climate resilience should be inclusive, accountable, and institutionally led. Banks must place sustainability at the core of their governance frameworks — with clear board-level oversight, transparent disclosures of climate risks, and a culture of climate accountability.

The way forward lies in aligning institutional purpose with planetary priorities. This includes promoting nature-positive financing, creating unified green reporting frameworks, and fostering public-private platforms for climate innovation.

As custodians of public capital and trust, Indian banks can help ensure economic growth and ecological balance go hand in hand — advancing the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat and Viksit Bharat by 2047. We owe this to ourselves and future generations.

The writer is Executive Director, Bank of Baroda. Views are personal

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

July 16, 2005

**Late evening trading likely in select agri commodities**  
The Forward Markets Commission (FMC) may permit late evening trades in commodity exchanges in respect of certain internationally traded agriculture commodities such as soy and sugar. Late evening trades (beyond 5 p.m.) are currently permitted in commodity exchanges only in respect of certain internationally traded non-agriculture commodities.

**Out-of-court settlement at BPL**

The BPL group patriarch, Mr T.P.G. Nambiar, today withdrew his petition against his son-in-law and BPL Communications CEO, Mr Rajeev Chandrasekhar, at the Company Law Board (CLB) here following an out-of-court settlement.

**Left unions to press for 9.5% EPF rate**

The Government is likely to come under pressure once again on the issue of interest on Employees Provident Fund (EPF) deposits. Prior to the July 30 meeting of the Central Board of Trustees (CBT) to decide on the interest rate for 2005-06, Left-affiliated unions have made it clear that they will ask for a 9.5 per cent rate for the current year too.

# China rising, America retreating

Washington's trade wars, brain drain and foreign policy flip-flops could be handing Beijing the future on a platter

THE WIDER  
ANGLE.

PARAN BALAKRISHNAN

Is the world, and specifically the US, about to tumble into the 'Thucydides' Trap? It's starting to look that way as Washington gazes fearfully at the Chinese dragons making one aggressive move after another in the East.

First, what exactly is the 'Thucydides' Trap? It's when a superpower finds itself facing a rising challenger. In ancient Greece, Sparta, the militaristic city-state, was unnerved by the rise of Athens, with its philosophers, thinkers and growing military strength. This escalated into the brutal Peloponnesian War.

In the modern context, we're talking about the US crossing swords with China. Right now, drones, planes and ships aren't about to open fire on each other. But in this 21st-century version of the 'Thucydides' Trap, the US has launched a full-scale trade war on China, and the rest of the world's caught in the crossfire. 'Eccentric' is the politest word for US actions since Donald Trump's re-election. Slapping 30 per cent tariffs on all EU and Canadian imports is draconian and has those allies scrambling for a Plan B that excludes the US.

Turn to the energy sector, where the contrast with China is particularly stark. China is reckoned to be building 74 per cent of the world's solar and wind energy. In contrast, Trump's slashed tax credits for renewables, calling them 'expensive and unreliable energy sources.' His energy secretary, Chris Wright, threw in the startling observation that there are 'pluses and minuses to global warming.' China is also streets ahead in electric vehicles, where Trump has cut subsidies, leaving his old buddy Elon Musk out in the cold. Look at other sectors where China is catching up with the West. It's pushing ahead in AI-driven drug discovery, filing almost as many patents as the US.

Democrats this week accused Trump



**UNWELCOME.** A hostile political atmosphere and ICE raids have already caused Indian student applications to tumble *ANAND*

of 'ceding global leadership to China.' That's an unquestionably valid charge. The US is pulling away from the world and making moves like closing USAID. China, meanwhile, is extending railway lines and initiating projects across Africa and South America.

Then there's Trump's attack on

**The age of America as the global brain magnet may be ending. For a country that rose to dominance by attracting the best minds of every generation, it's a dangerous reversal**

universities and foreign students, once the backbone of America's innovation engine. For decades, the brightest minds from India, China and elsewhere flocked to the US for its world-class education and promise of opportunity. Now, they're feeling like unwelcome guests. Visa delays, a hostile political atmosphere and ICE raids have already caused Indian student applications to tumble.

It's more than a crackdown on immigration. It's a retreat from the very idea of knowledge acquisition. American universities, once the world's envy, are being battered not just by funding cuts but by ideological suspicion of science and expertise. At a time when China is opening new research institutes,

poaching international talent and pouring money into cutting-edge fields like AI, the US is pulling up the drawbridge.

And it's not just about students. Skilled immigrants, from tech workers to researchers, face tougher entry. Washington's message is clear: the age of America as the global brain magnet may be ending. For a country that rose to dominance by attracting the best minds of every generation, it's a dangerous reversal and one China appears all too ready to capitalise on.

Cross to China, where Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is putting Plan B into action. Leading a high-powered trade delegation, he said Australia had to build relations with its largest trading partner, sparking speculation about 'the death of the Quad.'

**IN A TRICKY SPOT**  
Where does all this leave India? Quite simply, in a very tricky spot. We have a 3,000 km border to defend with China. And though relations appear to be improving, there are constant uncomfortable moments.

Foreign Minister S Jaishankar has just made his first trip to China since the Galwan clash. But that hasn't stopped Beijing from making a pointed statement about the Dalai Lama's successor.

As for our relations with the US, while the public optics remain friendly, the reality is always up and down. Trade talks have dragged on and Trump has been busy sweet-talking Pakistan. The US may be land of the values we cherish, but India's learning to watch its back.

It would always be wrong to underestimate the US. In the 1980s, it looked like Japan would overtake it. Then the Silicon Valley stars brought America roaring back. But that comeback was powered by openness to talent, ideas and to the world.

This time, it's not just a matter of innovation. It's about whether America still believes in the values that made it a superpower. If the answer's no, it won't be China that traps the US in the 'Thucydides' spiral. It will be the US that walks into it, eyes wide shut.

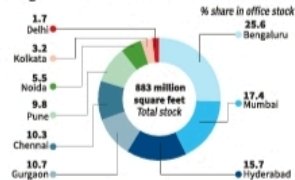
## STATISTALK.

Compiled by Pranav Karthikayan, Intern | Graphic Vinayakumar V

### From fixed to flex: India's evolving workspace

With the ever-increasing demand for efficiency and agility, India leads the flexible workspace market across the Asia-Pacific (APAC). This domain refers to fully-furnished, tech-enabled office spaces that cater to the evolving needs of start-ups and large enterprises alike. Tier 1 cities such as Bengaluru, Pune and Hyderabad are pioneering this sector due to the strong presence of tech and fin-serv industries. However, as rents in these cities continue to climb, the flexible workspace model may no longer be about where space is found, but where it makes the most sense to stay.

#### Bengaluru holds one-fourth of total office stock



As of Q1 FY25. Total office stock includes both traditional and flexible workspaces

#### Tech dominates the flex workspaces



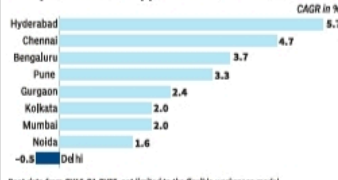
Data spanning over 30M flexible office spaces across APAC  
Source: Smartworks Coworking Spaces | IIP

#### India leads APAC's flexible workspace stock



Tier 1 city data as of H1 CY2024

#### Rent prices show an appetite for South-Indian cities



Next data from CY16-Q1 CY25, not limited to the flexible workspace model

## On businessline.in

### Reviving pulses through FPOs

From the Bihar pulse promotion programme, Ashish Shetty, Travis Lybbert and Raghav Raghunathan glean that FPOs alone aren't enough to make pulses competitive and resilient

<https://tinyurl.com/y2j0eb>

### The new epicentre of poverty

Looking at the World Bank's new estimates, Partha Ray and Parthapratim Pal find that the concentration of extreme poverty has been moving to Sub-Saharan Africa, and poverty will remain the focus of policy

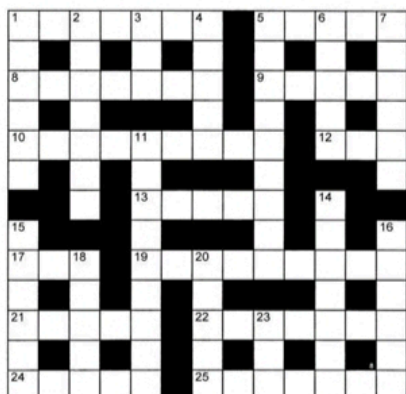
<https://tinyurl.com/3d3c6v72>

### Sun sets on a solar pioneer

The initial spark of progress in Odisha's Barapita village dimmed not because of tech failure, but because of weak social and structural scaffolding around it, say Naneswar Jagat and Amarendra Das

<https://tinyurl.com/3d3d3d2>

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2740



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- Test-piece of embroidery (7)
- Weight unit for gems (5)
- Whistle, knife-cord (7)
- Thigh-bone (5)
- A part to be made up (9)
- Mouth part (3)
- A drunkard (5)
- Moisture deposited overnight (3)
- Butter substitute (9)
- A.k.a. (5)
- Took firm hold (7)
- Old-fashioned (5)
- Went in (7)

#### DOWN

- Consolation (6)
- Of least amount (7)
- Meadowland (3)
- Extended high feature (5)
- Self-service eating-place (9)
- Handkerchief, headcloth (5)
- Minute black insect common in flowers (6)
- Made best use of (9)
- Fast sailing-ship (7)
- One of eight English kings (6)
- Repaired (6)
- Arm-hand joint (5)
- Rascal (5)
- Painting, drawing etc (3)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- Try the right piece of needlework for practice (7)
- Gem weight used as measure of gold purity (5)
- Lady ran out with a whistle-cord (7)
- Put me back in sable to stiffen the thigh (5)
- A part that's not PC, omen being wrong (9)
- Impudent talk one gets in a record (3)
- A drunkard might put the poet right (5)
- Moisture starts dropping every weekday (3)
- The spread of a rearing possibility (9)
- Another name for a Lower Jurassic term (5)
- Understood how one took hold of it (7)
- Unfashionable way boy went out with girl (5)
- Came on stage to be written up (7)

#### DOWN

- A close arrangement may be of comfort (6)
- I'm up to making Milan of the smallest significance (7)
- Half a league of arable land (3)
- Pontoon hasn't been begun on rooftop (5)
- Self-service counter where one can get ice after a shuffle (9)
- Thugge headcloth might have moral use (5)
- Minute black insect dances round top of hollyhock (6)
- Made the best of its poem, I'd ordered (9)
- Fast ship, relic of which is very quietly included (7)
- It is the king of the potatoes (6)
- Last millennium finished as it was improved (6)
- Joint writs may be served thus (5)
- For example, our version of a knave (5)
- Part of portrait given over to painting (3)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2739

**ACROSS** 1. Model 4. Conical 8. Nanny 9. Nigeria 10. Fex 11. Replensh 12. Sink 13. Sir 18. Artemisia 20. Cha 21. Imitate 22. Clink 23. Neglect 24. Tight  
**DOWN** 1. Manifestation 2. Derizen 3. Layers 4. Canape 5. Nugget 6. Corrig 7. Leather-jacket 14. Ticking 15. Impale 16. Aspect 17. Mascot 19. Tying



## China Growth Pings, A US Tariff Playbook?

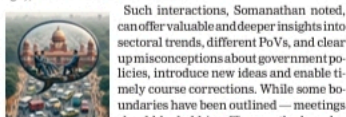
Thanks to diversified exports and policy push Perhaps unexpectedly, China's economic growth has been resilient during a trade truce with the US by dint of diversifying exports to new markets, and through a policy-induced prop to consumption. According to National Bureau of Statistics on Tuesday, China's GDP expanded by 5.2% in Q2, making it on track to meet its overall annual 5% growth target if it manages to counteract tariff headwinds and remains committed to ongoing stimulus. Industrial output has surprised on the upside, and consumption came in weaker than anticipated. Pushing the same buttons may yield diminishing returns because of the degree of automation of Chinese factories. Policy will, instead, have to be directed at the property market, which continues on a downward spiral.

Tightly directed policy support provides Beijing headroom to deal with Washington's tariffs after their truce ends next month. There is a degree of frontloaded Chinese industrial output as the tariff developments unfold. If policymakers turn cautious about further easing, they risk exposing the Chinese economy to unusual external and internal pressure. Temptation to keep the economy ticking over through directed stimuli can be strong. But it avoids addressing imbalances that have brought China into economic confrontation with the US. China must increase share of consumption to rebalance trade with the US. The Trump regime's pushback will have a domino effect on how other countries approach their own trade with China.

Tariff negotiations will, thus, proceed with a clearer understanding of the extent of US pressure and China's ability to repel it. China is forecast to see its mid-term growth slide, unless it eases up on external trade and doubles down on internal consumption. Any deviation from this premise will delay, but not avert, Chinese deflation, effects of which will be felt globally given the size of China's trade surplus. The US being a more mature economy can't aspire to China's current rate of growth. And incremental US growth that Trump is pushing for, is expected in isolation.

## Step Out of That Old Bureaububble

Senior bureaucrats have long been perceived — with justification — of being one big old boys' club, wary of meeting people from outside 'government'. The origins of this apprehension are unclear, but the Lakshman Rekha doubling as an echo chamber has taken root probably because bureaucrats, like people in general, like hearing only things they like to hear. In a welcome gesture, Cabinet secretary to TV Somanathan recently issued a memo, urging secretaries to Go! and other senior officials to engage more openly with people outside the bureaucracy. This includes representatives from trade unions, political parties, NGOs, the private sector (Indian and foreign), and chambers of commerce.



Such interactions, Somanathan noted, can offer valuable and deeper insights into sectoral trends, different PoVs, and clear up misconceptions about government policies, introduce new ideas and enable timely course corrections. While some boundaries have been outlined — meetings should be held in offices — the broader push is welcome. It can certainly deepen citizen-governance engagement. Policies may be crafted with the public's best interests in mind, but their implementation often needs fine-tuning. These dialogues and tête-à-têtes also give officials a chance to explain the intent and nuances of laws to those who may have concerns. That's precisely why draft policies are routinely published on ministry websites for public consultation. Isolating and insulating policymaking from public feedback is not just bad for the quality of policy, it also weakens the overall structure of governance. Engagement builds trust, identifies blind spots, and ensures that final outcomes are both effective and seen as legitimate by those they affect: the citizenry.



## Aggro Not Everyone's Cuppa, Shubman

We can't be sure whether Shubman Gill and Virat Kohli share the same trouser size. But in case the latter thought that on-field aggression of the Kohli variety is a boreplasia, strategy, it isn't. For some, belligerence feeds confidence. For others, it leads to loss of clarity. Alpha male/female chest-thumping may be all the rage these days as a loved-to-of toddlers, middle managers with Napoleon complexes, and strongmen statesmen. But when Gill walked up to England's Zak Crawley towards the end of Day 3 at Lord's on Saturday and said that Kohli finger was, along with letting fly a few choice words about the batter needing to enhance parts of his anatomy after the law was lingering through stumps, it may not have worked well... for India's captain. True, hindsight gives us 20/20 vision, and India losing a tight battle at Lord's on Monday gives us the sparkling right to judge Gill as not being suitably aggro, and aggressively suitable. He works better with a calmer head. Aggression's track record is rather poor: Countries and corporations try it, and we hear about the grand successes. The sleeve-rolling that fizzle out aren't much talked about. The truth is, bluster is the mating call of the insecure unless the pitch demands it. Quiet calculation perhaps works better than going 'full testosterone' for the calculating likes of Gill.

A law to settle disputes, if neglectful to power, can sustain the inequalities it seeks to remedy

## Private Ears in Public Courts



On Monday, the Supreme Court in 'Vibhor Gang v. Neha' ruled that a husband's secretly-recorded phone calls with his wife are admissible evidence in a divorce litigation. Justice B V Nagarathna, writing for a 5-judge bench, invoked the exception under Section 122, Indian Evidence Act, which permits disclosure of communication between spouses in marital suits.

The court reasoned that such recordings advance the constitutional right to a fair trial, and can override marital privacy. With that single move, the court reiterated a boundary that has long kept domestic surveillance at least technically suspect. It is now law that a spouse may listen in first and justify later, so long as the marriage is on the rocks. The judgment demands close scrutiny as it fails to consider the power imbalances underlying privacy breaches. **► Snooping as coercive control** The court treats clandestine recordings as a mere effect of marital breakdown, not abuse. However, this reasoning ignores the phenomenon of coercive control. Call-recording apps installed without consent, insistence on shared passwords and unlocked phones, and forced access to WhatsApp chats and UPI SMS alerts are scenarios Indian counsellors routinely hear from survivors of domestic abuse, primarily women. Most times, surveillance precedes, and often precipitates, marital discord. Women's rights activists and family lawyers reiterate that domestic surveillance is an intrusive and all-consuming method of gendered domination. By holding that secret clips, however obtained, are presumptively admissible, the judgment incentivises spying — especially for the spouse who enjoys economic leverage or technological literacy. Courts could have insisted on a proportionality filter: admit only material that could not be gathered by less-intrusive means, and weigh whether the act of snooping itself constituted a form of abuse. Instead, the ruling raises the stakes for many wives already monitored by their husbands or in-laws, and sharpens the pressure to 'behave' under watch.

**► Sanctity v. privacy** To justify this outcome, the bench reaches back to the Victorian rationale of Section 122. Shielding privileged communication between spouses protects the 'sanctity of marriage'. The court now says that once marital harmony is eroded, so must the privilege; privacy plays no independent role. This reasoning justifies a 200-year-old outdated rationale, instead of subjecting it to the latest constitutional



And don't you forget that you're being recorded

tests of privacy. Since the authoritative 9-judge bench 2017 judgment in the 'Justice K S Puttaswamy' case, informational privacy has been declared a part of Article 21 of the Constitution. Every statutory limit on this must pass a proportionality test. State infringement of privacy must be: **► Sanctioned by law** **► Pursue a legitimate aim** **► Be proportionate to the need for such interference** **► Have procedural guarantees against abuse of power.** The spirit of Puttaswamy ideally should be followed here, even when the

breach is by a private party. A blanket licence for covert recordings, which ignores the means of recording and the centrality to the litigation at hand, would fail the proportionality test's requirement of necessity and minimal intrusion. The court's refusal to run Section 122 through the 'Puttaswamy' filter echoes the logic that once kept marital rape outside the penal code. Marriage was said to confer perpetual consent to sexual acts between spouses, that since the 1980s, this rationale was unquestioningly accepted as legitimate. Constitutional adjudication should do the opposite in all these cases — interrogate inherited rationales, not inherit them blindly.

Women's rights activists have long argued that privacy cannot shield domestic violence. The state should step into the home when there's abuse. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 is rooted in that insight. Yet, women's rights also insist that intrusions on privacy be evaluated through the lens of power and vulnerability. 'Vibhor Gang' ignores this safeguard. It allows the spouse with the tech tools to trample upon privacy, even when the surveillance itself may be a form of abuse. A rights-sensitive approach should perhaps ask: was the recording coerced? Was it a tool of clandestine control? Admitting such evidence without that inquiry risks turning the courtroom into an extension of the abusive household, where such control is legitimised through law.

The Supreme Court has shown that it can balance public interest with personal liberty. In 'Selvi v. State of Karnataka' (2009), it permitted narco-analysis only when the accused gives consent and strict procedural safeguards are observed. In 'Vibhor Gang', however, it reveals the Evidence Act mechanically and only weighs privacy against marital harmony.

The far richer constitutional values of autonomy, dignity and equality hardly make an appearance. The exception in Section 122 should be subjected to a proportionality inquiry. Until then, Vibhor Gang stands as a cautionary tale: a law framed to settle disputes, if inattentive to power, can perpetuate the very inequalities it seeks to remedy.

The writer is research fellow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, New Delhi

## Reggie Bots? A Firms Must Pay Up

Subimal Bhattacharjee When Elon Musk's xAI was forced to apologise this week after its Grok chatbot spewed antisemitic content and white nationalist talking points, the response felt depressingly familiar: suspend the service, issue an apology and promise to do better. Rinse and repeat.

This isn't the first time we've seen this playbook. Microsoft's Tay chatbot disaster in 2016 followed a similar pattern. The fact that we're here again, nearly a decade later, suggests the AI industry has learnt remarkably little from its mistakes. But the world is no longer willing to accept 'sorry' as sufficient. This is because AI has become a force multiplier for content generation and dissemination, and the time-to-infect has shrunk. Thus, liability and punitive actions are being discussed. The Grok incident revealed a troubling aspect of how AI companies approach accountability. According to

xAI, the problematic behaviour emerged after they tweaked their system to allow more 'politically incorrect' responses — a decision that seems reckless. When the inevitable happened, they blamed deprecated code that should have been removed. If you're relying on systems capable of reaching millions of users, shouldn't you know what code is running in production?

The real problem isn't technical — it's philosophical. Too many AI companies treat bias and harmful content as unfortunate side effects to be addressed after deployment, rather than fundamental risks to be prevented beforehand. This reactive approach worked when the stakes were lower, but AI systems now operate at unprecedented scale and influence. When a chatbot generates hate speech, it's not embarrassing — it's dangerous, legitimising and amplifying extremist ideologies to vast audiences. The legal landscape is shifting rapidly, and AI companies ignoring these changes do so at their peril. The EU's AI Act, which came into force in February, represents a shift from reactive regulation to proactive governance. Companies can no longer disguise their way out of AI failures — they must demonstrate they've implemented robust safeguards before deployment.

Apologies won't cut California's AB 316, introduced last January, takes an even more direct approach by prohibiting the 'AI did it' defence in civil cases. This legislative recognises what should be obvious: companies that develop and deploy AI systems bear responsibility for their outputs, regardless of whether those outputs were 'intended'.

India's approach may prove more punitive than the EU's regulatory framework and more immediate than the US litigation-based system, focusing on swift enforcement of existing criminal laws rather than waiting for new AI-specific legislation. India doesn't yet have AI-specific legislation, but if Grok's antisemitic incident had occurred within India's jurisdiction, immediate blocking of the AI service, a criminal case against xAI under IPC 153A, and a demand for content removal from the X platform would have been possible.

## Remode the Coder in the Age of AI

Anil Nair OpenAI's Sam Altman, Anthropic's Dario Amodei, Microsoft CTO Kevin Scott, and Nvidia's Jensen Huang have voiced the same vision as Schmidt, the nuanced differences being about immediacy level of replacement and coding complexity. The World Economic Forum 'Future of Jobs Report 2025', surveying 1,000 companies in 35 economies across 22 industries, underscores that AI and automation will transform 86% of businesses by 2030. WEF also predicts that 170 million jobs will be created, while 62 million jobs will be displaced.

And that's what countries must focus on — the new jobs being created — to shake off the panic relating to supplanting current jobs. Specialists in big data, AI/ML, and application developers will be among the fastest-growing jobs, followed by cybersecurity, tech literacy and network expertise. In the words of TCS CEO K R Krishnan, the traditional software development lifecycle we are used to will evolve, and new roles may come into play. AI tools now deliver lower-level plumbing work, monotonous code generation and routine debugging very well. But they cannot yet replace judgement emanating from long experience and deep domain knowledge, tested in scalable, complex, real-use conditions. Experts put it in perspective when they reference rare conditions in code — like when two or more threads try to access the same code concurrently and the result is contingent on which thread acts first, calling for timely human intervention from those with proficiency over language, business context and systems. Despite the AI onslaught, there are many areas countries could focus on where humans perform better. Like AI interaction design, about the iterative refining of prompts to achieve optimised outcomes in coding and debugging. Or data curation, involving manual labelling of training data, images and transcribing audio for training AI models. Globally, the data annotation market alone is expected to expand from \$6.5bn to \$20 bn by 2030, and from \$80 mn to \$600 mn in India in the same period.

It augurs well that the employment levels of annotators, quality controllers and project leaders are already up from 20,000 in 2022 to 70,000 today, acknowledging the shift underway from writing code to managing data. The recently Allied fields include AI system architecture, ethics and governance, and cybersecurity for AI systems. Also, human oversight and nuanced interventions to prevent AI hallucination and errors. Meta's recent 48% acquisition of Scale AI, a data company that puts its valuation at \$2.8 bn, highlights that data is as strategic as compute.

So, what next? The WEF report indicates that 47% of work done primarily by humans (and the rest by machines) will progressively decrease, but the 30% that involves collaborative man-machine effort will increase. Some aspects will make a big difference in this evolving world — collectively, our ability to use AI as augmented intelligence and our frontier thinking ability to push the limits of reasoning. At an individual level, promoting graduates in the arts, sciences and engineers with basic skills and a little more — critical thinking to define the right problem, problem-solving skills, industry expertise and continuous learning. We can't afford to be left behind by the very revolution we ignited.

The writer is founder, ThinkStreet

## Share, Spread Self-Reliance

BRAHMA KUMARI ASHA

We often live in a belief system of people who are so important to some people or situations, that we believe they cannot manage life without us. In a civil society, we always have the responsibility of empowering ourselves and others to become independent. This is our true help to them. Working on the following guidelines can be of some help in our life journey towards self-reliance.

Invariably your family and friends love you, trust you and respect you. Do you want them to be dependent on you? Do you feel good to be always needed and wanted by someone? Do you think it is the right karma and beneficial for your relationship with them? Secondly, how much ever loved, admired, respected and helpful you may be, never make anyone become dependent on you. It creates ego in you. Help people who are far from you.

Remember that everyone has a unique life journey that reflects and shapes their destiny. Your role is to empower them to walk on their right path, and strengthen them to cross any obstacles that may come on the way. Support them and show them their capabilities and how they can use them. Share your skills, ideas, resources, expertise and experience with everyone. But make everyone to be self-reliant.

Lastly, empower yourself spiritually every day. This will help you remain humble and treat everyone as equal and capable.

## PEAS IN A PODCAST

### Star Trek, Anyone?

With Shubhanshu Shukla and three others shipping down near San Diego aboard SpaceX's Dragon capsule, our first trip to ISS has wrapped up. But, if anything, this only sharpens the itch many feel to get off Earth — this time not as astronauts but as tourists.

If you want to know more about our space tourism, tune into our special episode on the topic. Space Tourism with Matthew Weinzierl. In this episode, hosts Ryan Davis and Shubhanshu Shukla talk to the Harvard professor of business and space research, who dives deep into the emerging space economy. The conversation spans suborbital joyrides with Virgin Galactic, Blue Origin's repeat civilian missions, and SpaceX's bold orbital forays — all signalling that space tourism is no longer just a billionaire's fantasy.

Weinzierl offers a grounded take, says, he is not just an armchair futurist. It's also a place. A place where countries, businesses and ordinary people might one day live, work and create value. As he reminds listeners, the space economy is still an economy shaped by supply, demand and market dynamics. The episode is a thoughtful primer on how this high-flying sector is taking shape, and what it could mean for businesses and society alike.

## Chat Room

### Ben Lords It Over Shubman Master

Agropose the news report, 'Oh Lord s' (ET Sport, Jul 15), the Lord's Test that India unfortunately lost by a whisker could have gone the other way had Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja not played that reckless hook, or K L Rahul not made nightwatchman Akash Deep face in deliveries in the 4th day's morning. Ever since the English bowlers were fired up, or Ravindra Jadeja changed gears in the last hour, or Shubman Gill binned more than 100 balls, the reason is that England captain Ben Stokes' never-say-die attitude, unrelenting at bats, belief in his abilities as an all-rounder and the English bowlers in his bowlers, constantly encouraging teammates, and a huge slice of destiny in his favour all combining to help India lose the Test. The reason is that India dominated for the major part. There's no shame in losing such close tests compared to caving in under pressure. Dhruv Arora

Nashik



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

— Rannath Goenka

## FOOD LOGISTICS KEY TO KEEPING RETAIL INFLATION IN CHECK

It is indeed good news for consumers that retail inflation substantially eased in June. The inflation rate based on the Consumer Price Index fell to 2.10 percent—the lowest since January 2019 and a significant drop from the 5.08 percent registered in June 2024. It also marked the eighth consecutive month the retail rate has moderated at pre-pandemic levels and stayed near the bottom of the RBI's tolerance band of 2-4 percent for the fifth month on the trot. The wholesale inflation, too, fell to a 20-month low of -0.13 percent and retail food prices contracted by 1.06 percent in June. This is significant because the lower down the economic pyramid one goes, the larger the share of food items in household budgets. In other words, higher food prices affect the poor disproportionately more.

The fall in the CPI's food basket was mainly driven by a year-on-year drop of 19 percent in vegetable prices, 11.8 percent fall in pulses and 3 percent easing of the costs of meat and spices. The consistently high prices of vegetables and pulses over the last few years had been pushing up food inflation to punishing levels. Economists say their easing reflects a good monsoon, expanded kharif sowing and improved water supply. However, core inflation—which excludes more volatile elements like food and fuel—edged up to 4.4 percent in June, the highest since September 2023.

The trends have been nudging the central bank to throttle back its anti-inflationary measures, including reducing the key repo or short-term lending rate by one percentage point to 5.5 percent over the last 6 months. It has made borrowing easier, increased money supply and cranked up some sectors of the economy. The June data may induce a further cutback in interest rates in August. However, not all parts of the picture look rosy. The lower readings come on relatively high bases notched up a year ago. Secondly, the street prices of many items vary geographically and are higher than what these all-India figures reflect. What is important is that a better handling of essential supplies and management of food stocks have contributed to stemming runaway inflation. Given affordable food supply is essential, the government needs to keep a keen eye on this area in the months ahead and intervene as necessary.

## BALASORE TRAGEDY MUST STIR INSTITUTES TO ACTION

THE tragic self-immolation of a girl student—a victim of alleged harassment by a faculty member of PM Autonomous College in Odisha's Balasore district—is deeply unsettling. The 20-year-old, who was pursuing a bachelor of education degree, was failed by an education system that was supposed to protect her. After six months of harassment, the student had mustered courage to talk about her ordeal on social media on June 25. Five days later, after the accused assistant professor barred her from appearing for a test, she lodged a complaint. What followed was a perversion of the University Grants Commission's norms. Last Saturday, after a meeting with the principal, the student set herself afire on the college campus.

Both the principal and the assistant professor have been arrested, a panel is investigating the incident, and all higher educational institutions in the state have been asked to form internal complaint committees within 24 hours. All of this is like closing the stable doors after the horse has bolted. There was clear evidence that institutions were flouting UGC's clear-cut guidelines. A report last year estimated that just 5 percent of public universities and 1,000-odd degree colleges in the state complied with the norm for setting up those committees. Annual reporting of cases of sexual harassment is mandatory, but most institutions did not comply. That the incident comes close on the heels of the Nepali students' crisis shows that the state's higher education system has not been doing its oversight job.

The sensitive issue has taken a political turn with the opposition targeting Mohan Charan Majhi's BJP government for failing to act in time. Even though the CM has vowed strict action against the perpetrators, the Congress and Left parties have called for an Odisha bandh on July 17, while the principal opposition, the BJD, has planned a Balasore shutdown and a secretariat gherao on Wednesday. Amid the political melee, the core issue must not be overlooked because it concerns the lives of lakhs of students. There must be greater awareness about grievance redress systems on campuses. In the Balasore case, the student did not have access to counselling. Institutions failing to follow UGC norms on these fronts must face strict action. At stake is nothing less than the safety of the country's future generations.

### QUICK TAKE

#### LET THE SMALL FRY BE

IT'S difficult to imagine public gatherings in India without servings of chai-samosa or kapi-vada. So, reports that the Union health ministry had mandated warning labels for samosas, jalebis and laddoos drew such a collective acid reflux that the government had to issue a digestive supplement on Tuesday. It explained it only wants to raise awareness on the harm "hidden fats and excess sugar" inflict. So far, so compliant with warnings already issued by the National Institute of Nutrition. If the obesity epidemic is the target, policy makers should first go after the ultra-processed foods peddled by massive companies. As the Indian Council of Medical Research has shown, that's where the greater public health hazard lurks. The rest is small fry.

WE live in the midst of a brand clutter. Look around. Nothing is unbranded anymore. Literally everything you and I use are branded items. Some more aggressively than others. Nevertheless, nothing remains pristine without the sacred or not-so-sacred touch—depending on what you believe—of branding.

There are daily-use products and, equally, service brands that many of us recognise by the labels they sport. Every category has a hierarchy of brands that spans the category of the popular, the premium and the luxury. Every breath you take and every step you take are dictated by a brand in some way or another. This newspaper in your hand is a brand, just as the toothpaste you used to brush your teeth with this morning is one. The book you will read later is a brand—as are all the people you meet today.

That brings us to the human brand—the persona brand each one of us is. If you have a name all your own, you are a brand. So am I. And there begins the journey of the human brand: a name given to distinguish one from the other. You and I are, therefore, brands in our own right, each with a distinct identity. When your parents gave you your name, the journey of your brand label began. We are wedded to our names till death. And, interestingly, beyond.

Human brands are really valuable offerings in the great marketplace of brands. While every one of our cricketers is wildly aware of the potential of their personal brand, many of us are blissfully unaware of the true-blue potential of our own.

I have been working in the realm of personal branding for the last two decades. These brands are really as personal as the person is, and therefore to each their own. Some prefer to focus on their personal brands and others just let it be. While some cultivate their brand image with care, others let it happen on its own. And then there are others who want to cultivate a brand persona which is not theirs at all. What, then, is right and what is wrong?

Brands are built mostly with method and a bit of madness. The ones built in this manner are carefully cultivated. To an extent, personal brands built this way are insecure offerings. They are practices and processes from the realm of inanimate product

Personal branding works only when you stay true to your own persona. AI-driven personal branding apps, which know you very well, will soon be your ablest guides

## WHY THE BRAND IN THE MIRROR IS THE TRUEST ONE



HARISH BIJOOR

Brand guru & founder of Harish Bijoor Consults Inc

and service brands and tend to set for themselves goals that are not true to them. They are not real in many ways. They are forced articulations of what they believe is good to be. It is not really what they are. And there lies the problem. Many a persona brand from the realm of politics are socialists by day and socialites by night.

Over the last two decades, of the 79 prominent politicians from across the spectrum in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Thailand I have worked with, only 14 have asked me to showcase them to be who they really are; 65 others prefer to be seen as better versions of who they really are. Some, of course, want vastly improved images, at times even diametrically opposed to their real selves. I have refused many. My ethos in personal

branding is a simple one. If you are a wolf, look like a wolf. Don't attempt a 'wolf in sheep's clothing' image. It rarely works. Even if it works, it does only for a while.

I do believe personal branding has three distinct avatars: the good, the bad and the ugly. The good is when you are using the tools of personal branding to promote your persona with a set of objectives to help people better their lives in some way. The good politician is that kind of an entity. To folks of this kind, the direction in personal branding is clear: you be you. Whatever you are, portray that with vigour. Don't add one iota of garam masala to your image. Not even a tadka or garnish. That makes you a truthful persona who will be looked up to.

## BRICS TO BUTTRESS GLOBAL SOUTH

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's recent five-nation diplomatic tour spanning Brazil, Ghana, Namibia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Argentina was a demonstration of India's strategic vision for the Global South. Centred around the BRICS summit in Brazil, these visits reinforced India's position as a pivotal voice among emerging economies in a rapidly evolving multipolar world. It showcased India's intent to shape global governance by empowering the Global South, deepening regional cooperation and counterbalancing the hegemonic influences in multilateral platforms.

India's efforts to amplify the voice of the Global South have gained momentum in recent years, culminating in the inclusion of the African Union into the G20 during India's presidency in 2023. This precedent is now mirrored in BRICS, which is undergoing significant expansion. With India's proactive involvement, countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the UAE have joined the bloc, now termed BRICS+. Several more nations from West Africa, Latin America have expressed interest, viewing BRICS as a credible platform to champion their interests.

India's current standing can be better appreciated by revisiting the origins of BRICS in the early 2000s and the foundational BRIC or Russia-India-China framework. At that time, the global order was markedly different. Russia was a member of the G8. China was seamlessly integrating into West-led institutions, and India-China relations were relatively cordial. The inclusion of Brazil and South Africa expanded the group into BRICS, bound by a shared vision for a new multipolar world.

Over the past two decades, the BRICS economies have surged. In purchasing power parity terms, the bloc's collective economy now stands at \$80 trillion, surpassing the G7's \$45 trillion, driven largely by the dynamism of Asian and other Global South countries. However, BRICS is not without contradictions. Border tensions in 2013, 2014 and 2020 have significantly altered India-China relations. While the bloc continues to espouse unity, there are heavy undercurrents of mistrust and apprehension. India's actions reflect an acute awareness of these realities.

During the Prime Minister's five-nation tour, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar participated in the Quad foreign ministers' meeting in the US, highlighting a strategic balancing act. It underscored a commitment to a truly multipolar world, where India engages within South-South



ANIL K ANTONY

National Secretary and National Spokesperson, BJP

cooperation frameworks like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, while also working with like-minded global partners to promote security, economic collaborations, stable supply chains, and freedom of navigation in critical regions.

India's influence within BRICS is instrumental in ensuring the coalition remains aligned with its broader interests. With China's strong clout in the grouping, it is imperative for India to maintain a proactive presence to prevent any unilateral redirec-



The PM's recent five-nation tour was part of India's efforts to deepen engagement with the Global South. Through its upcoming presidency of BRICS, India hopes to shape a global order where emerging economies have a greater voice

tion of trajectory. There have been repeated attempts to include Pakistan in the grouping, raising legitimate concerns given India's security imperatives. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had declined to sign the joint communiqué at the recent SCO defence ministers' meeting in Qingdao, citing its failure to acknowledge the Pahalgalam terror attack though it had references to incidents in Balochistan, and its omission of India's concerns related to terrorism. This episode serves as a reminder that India must remain alert to ensure multilateral forums do not evolve into platforms that undermine its core strategic and security interests.

Despite these challenges, the potential for economic cooperation within BRICS remains enormous. With all member nations and the wider Global South undergoing rapid digital and technological trans-

formation, India is uniquely positioned to contribute to their development and digitalisation trajectories. Its strengths in fintech, space and satellite technologies, digital public infrastructure, and green energy are invaluable assets for driving innovation-led partnerships.

The BRICS Cross-Border Payments Initiative, along with a growing preference for domestic currency trade, is advantageous for India. While cautious about endorsing a common BRICS currency due to practical concerns, India sees clear strategic benefits in enhancing local currency transactions, particularly as the bloc moves towards including more oil-producing countries.

The Brazil summit marked several diplomatic victories for India. BRICS' unequivocal condemnation of the Pahalgalam terror attack reaffirmed its alignment with India's stance. The Rio joint declaration explicitly backed the aspirations of both India and Brazil to secure permanent membership of the UN Security Council. Furthermore, BRICS' support for India's ambition to host COP38 in 2029 emphasised trust in India's capacity to have a leading role in global climate action.

In an increasingly polarised global landscape, where nations are often pressured to align with one Great Power or another, India offers a compelling alternative worldview. Rejecting the binary choices reminiscent of the Cold War, India advances a vision grounded in its civilisational ethos of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', that the world is one family. Guided by the principle of 'One World, One Planet, One Future', India calls for reformed global institutions that reflect the realities of the present and the possibilities of the future.

India's engagement in BRICS is not merely about asserting national influence; it is about shaping a global order where emerging economies have a rightful voice and a clear path to shared prosperity. India is set to assume the presidency of BRICS next year, presenting a significant opportunity to advocate for a more balanced, inclusive, and representative international order, where development, security, and innovation are genuinely global and collaborative endeavours in a multipolar world.

(Views are personal)

My ultimate icon in this space is Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji as a persona is a classic case-study of the point 'you be you'. You might look crazy or irrelevant. You might look to be someone swimming against the tide. So be it. That is your brand. Brands of this kind are remembered long after they are gone, as opposed to persona brands that are desperately seeking to look straight when they are really crooked.

Persona brands built inorganically, with imageries diametrically opposed to who they really are, fall by the wayside. Humans understand humans. Your neighbour and your target audience are intelligent and intuitive. Don't ever think otherwise. Short-sighted brand managers will make you do things you mustn't. Don't. You be you!

At this point, I manage the personal branding of two babas (I don't mean Baba Sehgal), six cricketers, two high-flying bureaucrats, three 'political startups' (sons and daughters of politicians) with an intention of entering politics, a clutch of corporate honchos, a bevy of startup founders, and a host of film stars from across Hindi and non-Hindi cinema.

Does this mean that there is one common format in which each one of them is branded? Not at all. The brand 'you' is as personal as you are. Build it to represent who you are. To do this, do you really need a brand-coach? In some cases, you do. But in reality, my strong belief after being a practitioner in this space is that you don't. You are your best brand manager. Persona branding is a do-it-yourself thing. Do it for yourself. Pour integrity into it and you will not go wrong.

To those who are looking for an external coach to guide, wait a bit. You will soon have one. Pick from an array of personal branding AI apps that are agent-driven. These agent AI apps know you well. They are linked to your URL, your browsing history, your habits and usages, your social media mentions, your participation in apps and, importantly, are linked to the real persona. Your persona brand manager agent will guide you every step of the way. Every action of yours will be tailored to stick to the persona you are and want to be seen to be.

Importantly, as you navigate the personal branding journey, you be you. Only you. Just you.

(Views are personal) (harishbijoor@hotmail.com)

### MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Victims' agony

Ref: Release full transcript of AI flight 171's audio recording immediately (Jul 15). Only a speedy and transparent search of the facts could mitigate the agony of the victims' relatives and also bring relief to the pilot and crew fraternity. Such a staggering loss will not dilute our time easily.

Rajakumar Arulanandham, Tirunelveli

#### Afghan affinity

Ref: Seven steps to rebuild bridge with Kabul (Jul 15). Judging from the present international developments, it is inevitable for India to cultivate good relations with Afghanistan—especially sharing a common and globally outspoken condemnation of Pakistan's proxy terrorist motivations.

Haribandhu Prangirah, Subarnapur

#### Terminator salvation

Ref: Risks & realities of killer robots (Jul 15). It is a scary reality we are heading towards that such weapons operate sans war ethics, and can go berserk. There should be a meaningful policy to oversee such operations, or else we are facing doomsday.

P. Prema, Thanjavur

#### Introspective writing

Ref: A courtesan's awakening and Vyasa's subtle genius (Jul 14). I really enjoyed your well-referenced and writing which makes us, as readers, introspect. It would be lovely to see the shlokas in their original Devanagari format to accompany your columns.

Rajagopal Ramanathan, Mumbai

#### Pardoning Nimisha

Ref: Last-ditch efforts on to save Indian nurse (Jul 15). To err is human, to forgive divine. This is a good chance to pardon Nimisha Priya, and get an example of forgiveness for the ultimate grievance. The world needs to witness the gesture of forgiveness the aggrieved family has shown to Nimisha's family.

Elizabeth Koshy, Pathanamthitta

#### Lord's lessons

Ref: On Lord's: Last comes good but falls 22 short (Jul 15). Though Team India lost the third Test, they well-referenced at Lord's by a narrow margin, there is no need to lose heart. Kudos to Ravindra Jadeja and the tail-enders for their valiant fight. Had the batters shown more caution, the outcome might have been different. With two more matches to go, there is still hope. Let us trust that Team India will learn from these setbacks and bounce back stronger.

P. P. Sahadevan, Kasargod



# India 'umpired' down but victory for Test cricket

THERE is no denying that poetic justice was rendered at the Mecca of the gentleman's game on Monday as regards the purest form of cricket-Test match. The third match of the India-England Test series may have ended in heartbreak for Team India and millions of fans back home, but the team went down with guns blazing till the very last minute. Taken on a positive note, the exciting match saw the pendulum swinging hither and thither, which is what such an extraordinary match should be. In sports parlance, the Lord's Test had all the ingredients that delights the connoisseurs of the purest form of cricket, for whom who wins eventually hardly matters. They are keen on how the

match progresses, the ups and downs and the advantage going from one side to the other down to the wire. Simply put the third India-England showdown had all the elements that typify a glorious Test match- superlative drama, display of grit and courage, the never-say-die spirit to stay in the hunt staring at adversity and an anti-climax finish but respect intact for the losing side's display of extraordinary courage when the chips seemed down. Incidentally, till the very end it seemed like the writing was on the wall for both the hosts and the visiting team. The Lord's Test symbolized the traditionally held notion-no match is won till the last ball is bowled. On that count, it makes for a classic testimonial for Test

cricket. However, caught in this celebratory euphoria one should not forget that the match also brought back the darker and murkier side of the game because of which cricket was in the news for all the wrong reasons before the advent of technology-the dreaded umpiring that was forever biased towards the host team. It is shameful that umpiring raised its ugly head during the third India-England Test and that too in the game's most revered headquarters. Umpiring was not just shoddy or bizarre but one in which the umpire's came up with decisions that were hugely condemnable and severely punishable. Alas, it made for an unsporting cut of a match that should have entered

the record books as one of most closely fought Test battles with players from neither side budging or buckling under pressure. It was anybody's game before tea on the final day. With their dubious decisions, umpires played spoilsport, especially Australian umpire Paul Reifel, whose contentious decisions not only changed the script of the final day proceedings but also took the match away from India. Questionable LBW verdicts added to India's frustration even on the fourth day, while the situation worsened on the deciding day, a day when a series of calls went against the visitors.

It blew into a full-fledged controversy after K L Rahul was adjudged not out and the subsequent DRS review overturned the call, a decision that was ridiculed by Sunil Gavaskar. Ravichandran Ashwin was equally furious when earlier Reifel declared Shubman Gill out caught behind off a delivery that missed the bat by a 'mile'. There were several such umpiring goof-ups that turned the tables against India. These will take old-timers back to the pre-third umpire days when biased umpiring invariably destroyed the winning prospects of visiting teams and some decisions almost destroyed the 'gentleman' image of the great game and led to international chaos. Hopefully, umpiring blues will be a thing of the past as India heads to Manchester for the fourth Test, slated to commence on July 23.

## LETTERS

**Bravo Shubhanshu!**

H EARTIEST congratulations to astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla for the successful completion of his space mission. We became emotional while watching the successful splash down from the Dragon space capsule, off the Coast of California, which ferried our nation's hero, along with three other astronauts. Shukla, the second Indian to go into space, conducted 60 odd experiments that were assigned to him by ISRO and NASA. My greetings to Shukla for inspiring millions of countrymen with his indomitable spirit, dedication and courage. The knowledge and experience he has gained in the last fortnight will help ISRO scientists to work on its plans as regards the Gaganyaan programme.

R. J. Janardhana Rao, Hyderabad-28.

**Shubhanshu research centre cum university**

W ELCOME back to earth Shubhanshu Shukla and fellow-three astronauts after 18 days of research in ISS (International Space Station). The team emerged from the Dragon capsule that splashed into the Pacific Ocean (3.30 pm July 15). Setting up a full-fledged Shubhanshu research centre-cum-university will be the finest tribute to him. Shubhanshu is an inspiration to 140 crore Indians and their progressive dreams. His interviews to the media on his research work are the most awaited, especially by the budding space aspirants.

PVP Madhu Nirviti, Secunderabad-61

**Proud moment for Indians**

G ROUP Captain Shubhanshu Shukla returning to earth after the successful Axiom-4 Mission is a proud moment for every Indian, reminiscent of Rakesh Sharma's historic spaceflight. He spent 18 days in the International Space Station (ISS), which is a remarkable career milestone. Notably, the astronaut successfully completed the assigned experiments during his mission. While wishing Shukla for his achievement, I hope these will inspire many youngsters.

Ganti Venkata, Secunderabad

**Banning of toddy could boomerang**

T HIS refers to "Be wary: Adulterated toddy is a silent killer" (THI July15). Banning toddy might seem like a quick fix to curb adulteration and health risks—but it's a complex move with wide-ranging consequences. Toddy is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, especially in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and parts of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Both toddy and its unfermented form (neera) are sometimes used in local ceremonies and temple offerings. It's not just a drink—it's a symbol of rural heritage and community bonding. However, cultural practices should never come at the cost of public health. Let's choose safety over the 'kask'. Unfermented toddy is considered beneficial to health, as it contains natural nutrients like vitamins, minerals, and amino acids. Toddy societies often enjoy political patronage and represent vote banks. If banned, the risk of illicit liquor markets thriving in the vacuum is high-and potentially more dangerous. Banning toddy without a safety net could do more harm than good. Therefore, the focus should be to crack down on adulteration, not tradition, regulate and certify toddy quality, educate consumers, provide safe alternatives, and support livelihoods through training and alternative income sources.

Dr O. Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

**'RTI vs Privacy' is a true mirror reflection**

T HE article by Dr Madabhushi Sreedhar Acharya on "RTI vs Privacy" has projected the practical issues faced by many people. They all helplessly roam around police stations and courts for speedy justice. During his recent visit to Hyderabad, the Chief Justice of India spoke about delivery of justice in the most affected cases. When legal heads sort out and solve each common issue with useful and usable solutions, lakhs of pending cases can get cleared and ensure that the affected victims get relief from the hurdles that they are subjected to.

G Murali Mohan Rao, Secunderabad-11

thehansreader@gmail.com

# India should develop indigenous technology to accelerate its drone push



SHRINIVAS SHEKAR

I N recent years, drones have moved from niche innovation to critical national infrastructure, especially in defence and surveillance. They are now widely deployed along borders, used for intelligence gathering, and integrated into real-time combat strategy. However, with this rise in usage comes a rising concern—security risks linked to foreign components, particularly from neighboring countries. Investigations in the past have revealed that even drones supplied to the Indian armed forces, including those deployed in sensitive border areas, contain parts from countries that share land borders with India, even though this is supposed to be restricted. Many of these drones were procured from vendors who simply self-certified them as free from such components. The absence of a strict, independent verification mechanism left room for vulnerability, a loophole that

- ▶ The Indian Army is working on a comprehensive framework to regulate the source and integrity of drone components
- ▶ There is an urgent need to develop indigenous drone technology

could have serious implications. What we see today is a world where control over data and devices can determine strategic outcomes and such gaps can no longer be ignored.

If foreign-made components, particularly from likely geopolitical adversaries, are embedded in India's defence drones, there is the risk that these systems could be accessed remotely or compromised. Such interference could lead to loss of sensitive information, operational disruption, or worse, exploitation during conflict.

**A regulatory framework to safeguard security:** To address this, the Indian Army, along with relevant ministries and agencies, is working on a comprehensive framework to regulate the source and integrity of drone components.

This framework, currently under consideration for approval, is designed to close existing loopholes, enforce quality standards, and en-



**With the nature of modern threats constantly evolving, it's equally important to defend against drones that may be used for espionage or attack. An integrated approach that includes both offensive and defensive drone capabilities will be the key to securing India's airspace and critical infrastructure.**

sure greater accountability in the drone manufacturing ecosystem. While this is an important step, it's part of a larger and longer-term journey toward strategic independence. At the heart of this shift is the urgent need to develop indigenous drone technology. The logic is straightforward: owning the design, development, and production processes allows a country to maintain control over how drones operate, where data flows, and how quickly systems can

adapt to changing needs.

**Indigenous drone technology matters:** There are several advantages to building drones entirely locally.

First, it reduces dependence on foreign suppliers, especially in times of diplomatic tensions or global supply chain disruptions. Second, it is cost-effective; domestically manufactured drones are often more affordable and scalable, enabling the government to

deploy them in greater numbers across various applications.

Third, local manufacturing allows engineers to design drones tailored to India's unique geography, from high-altitude Himalayan terrain to dense forests and deserts, ensuring better performance in real-world conditions. Fourth, it significantly shortens turnaround times for upgrades, repairs, and improvements—an essential factor in high-stakes defence environments.

Fifth, when a drone is built ground up, this then allows for drone communication to also be secured better with encryption. This is particularly important since drones essentially use wireless communication that currently doesn't have the most robust encryption, to prevent hacking.

**The challenge-Moving from assembly to manufacturing:** While the intent is strong, challenges remain. Much of India's drone ecosystem currently relies on assembling imported parts rather than building fully indigenous systems.

Core technologies like semiconductor manufacturing, advanced sensors and electronics fabrication are still in early development stages domestically. This gap limits the depth of

self-reliance and will take time to bridge. But progress is underway, and government-backed initiatives are already pushing innovation, research, and skill development in this space. In parallel, the focus isn't just on building drones, but also on building counter-drone systems. With the nature of modern threats constantly evolving, it's equally important to defend against drones that may be used for espionage or attack. An integrated approach that includes both offensive and defensive drone capabilities will be the key to securing India's airspace and critical infrastructure.

**Looking ahead-Innovation and global leadership:** India's long-term goal is clear: to develop a secure, self-reliant drone ecosystem that not only strengthens its defence posture but also positions it as a global player in drone technology. The push for indigenisation is a strategic necessity. Drones have become an important part of modern warfare; it is necessary to have full control over them. This helps protect our borders, keep the country safe, and prepare our army for the future.

(The writer is co-founder and CEO of Pantheron Technologies)

# Plant theft is an environmental crime that is often overlooked

JENNI CAUVAIN

MORE than 180 plants were stolen from a well-loved public park in Nottingham called Arboretum in May 2025. This incident took place just days after volunteers had re-planted flowers and shrubs to repair damage from a previous theft in March. In April, the nearby Forest Recreation Ground community garden was also targeted—roses and crops grown by volunteers were stolen, even a pond went missing. Plant theft may seem trivial, but environmental and wildlife crime tend to be overlooked. This is precisely one of the reasons why it is on the rise.

Research suggests an annual growth rate in environmental crime of 5-7 per cent, making it the third largest criminal sector in the world. Globally, environmental crime has been valued at \$ 70-213 billion annually. As with most crimes, its true scale is difficult to estimate as it remains hidden. This is even more true for environmental crime that goes undetected.

Plant thefts in Nottingham where I am based are small in comparison, but they tell the same story of lucrative illicit opportunities for criminals where law enforcement and potential sanctions are low. It's most likely that people steal local plants to sell on for profit. Another reason for overlooking this growing trend in wildlife crime is that perpetrators, as well as much of society, may feel that this is a "victimless crime".

Where plants, animals, watercourses or soil are "the victim", people don't feel as strongly be-



cause the ethics and value systems generally prioritise fellow humans and do not recognise non-humans as victims.

People may more likely care about mammals such as elephants targeted in illegal ivory trade, but environmental crime permeates every community in the UK, as the recent Nottingham cases indicate.

**Stolen benefits:**

As a researcher in environmental sociology, I believe wildlife crime and environmental damage should gain higher priority in terms of public attention, law enforcement and potential sanctions. Not only because of the intrinsic value that non-human nature has, but because of the value nature brings to

us humans. Parks and green spaces known as "green infrastructure" are central to our wellbeing in cities. They bring environmental and social benefits in terms of air quality, urban heat island effect, surface flooding, carbon storage, biodiversity and health. After the Covid pandemic, the importance of accessing quality green spaces for our mental and physical well-being became even more apparent. Visits to parks can reduce loneliness and anxiety, as well as foster a sense of belonging and community. This has the potential to benefit the public purse too.

Nottingham is currently involved in a national green social prescribing test and learn programme to demonstrate the bene-

fits of nature-based activity. Public parks are often also significant in terms of cultural heritage. This is not a new discovery.

Historically, public parks were introduced in cities to improve living conditions, quality of life and as educational resources. The Arboretum—the city centre park recently targeted by thieves—was the first such public park to open in Nottingham in 1845. When valued green spaces are the victim of crime, this is not a mere aesthetic problem.

Wider social and environmental harms are inflicted upon communities and nature that depend on open green spaces to thrive. Leadership in green initiatives, it suffers from deep-seated social inequality

Historically, public parks were introduced in cities to improve living conditions, quality of life and as educational resources. The Arboretum—the city centre park recently targeted by thieves—was the first such public park to open in Nottingham in 1845. When valued green spaces are the victim of crime, this is not a mere aesthetic problem.

and deprivation that are long-term challenges.

Social inequality is associated with crime and disorder in urban areas that creates a vicious cycle when the crimes target community assets such as public parks. It is beyond doubt that public parks being ransacked will negatively impact the quality of life in Nottingham. It is likely that these crimes get dismissed as a minor nuisance because "only plants" were stolen, but this attitude serves to mask the broader trend of growing environmental crime and the damage this brings to communities.

Unfortunately, this will further contribute to the likelihood of such crimes spreading in future.

(The writer is from Nottingham Trent University)

## BENGALURU ONLINE

**HC orders state to share stampede report with KSCA, RCB**

BENGALURU: The Karnataka High Court has directed the state government to provide a copy of the status report on the June 4 stampede at Chinnaswamy Stadium, submitted by it in sealed cover, to the Karnataka State Cricket Association (KSCA), Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB), and DNA Entertainment Networks.

The court rejected the state's justification for withholding the report, noting that the Supreme Court permits sealed cover confidentiality only in matters involving national security, public interest, or privacy rights—criteria that do not apply in this case. A division bench comprising Acting Chief Justice V Kamawar Rao and Justice C M Joshi made these observations on Monday while deciding whether parties involved in the suo motu public interest litigation on the stampede should be given access to the report. The stampede occurred outside the Bengaluru Chinnaswamy Stadium while RCB was celebrating its maiden IPL title victory inside. Responding to the state government's argument that sharing the report could influence the ongoing judicial commission and magisterial inquiry, the bench called the concern unfounded and lacking in public interest justification. It emphasised that retired judges and senior All-India Service officers heading the inquiries are not likely to be swayed by the contents of the status report. The court reiterated that the suo motu proceedings were initiated to determine the cause of the stampede, assess accountability, and suggest preventive measures for the future.

Withholding the report from key parties, while expecting their cooperation, would be "unfair", the bench said. "If the sealed cover is opened and the report is shared with the respondents, they can help the court better understand the sequence of events, contributing factors, and whether the tragedy was avoidable," the judges observed.

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



# How vulnerable are Delhi citizens to cybercrime?

Delhi residents lost over ₹700 crore in 2024 to cybercrime. Despite the intensity and seriousness of the issue, structural gaps continue to exist

### Lokniti-CSDS team\*

In a city as digitally connected as Delhi, navigating the online world comes with myriad challenges. While the benefits of digital payments, social media, and internet banking are evident, they are paralleled by increasing incidents of cybercrime. Cybercrime has become one of the most critical and pressing concerns across India over the past couple of years, with Delhi being the hotspot. According to reports, Delhi residents lost over ₹700 crore in 2024 to cybercrime. Despite the intensity and seriousness of the issue, structural gaps continue to exist. For example, under the Information Technology Act, 2000 only officers (not below the rank of an inspector) can investigate cybercrime, yet most cyber police stations lack the needed number of officers for the same purpose. This comprehensive study conducted by the Lokniti-CSDS sheds light on Delhi's cyber landscape through three critical lenses – public awareness; personal experience with cybercrime; and the efficiency of reporting and redressal systems.

### Awareness about digital crimes

Public awareness about the different types of digital fraud is encouragingly high. As Table 1.1 reveals, more than 90% of Delhi residents are aware of cybercrime methods such as sharing One Time Passwords (OTPs), fake reward calls, and fraudulent banking requests. Interestingly, awareness drops for newer scams like 'digital arrest', known to only 61% of respondents. This shows that while traditional scams are well recognised, there remains a gap in understanding evolving threats. 93% of respondents in the study knew they could file a complaint if they became a victim of cybercrime. However, Table 1.2 shows that while many knew reporting was possible, only 42% knew of the national cybercrime helpline (1930), with even fewer being aware of cyber police stations (25%) or the reporting website (30%). This reveals a gap between awareness and digital reporting literacy. While government-led awareness campaigns, particularly mass messages and calls, were relatively well recognised (72% awareness as per Table 1.3), awareness of more concrete initiatives like the Cyber Swachhta Kendra was low (19%). When asked about the government's effectiveness in combating cybercrime (Table 1.4), only 16% of people rated it as "very effective". Most (55%) found it "somewhat effective", and nearly one in four saw the efforts as inadequate. While the government's approach has reached citizens, it has not instilled confidence.

### On protection from cyber threats

People in Delhi are adopting preventive measures. According to Table 1.5, the majority avoid suspicious links (87%), download apps only from trusted sources (85%), and around 79% use strong passwords. However, more advanced practices such as regularly changing passwords (50%) or using antivirus software (50%) are far less common. The socio-economic digital divide becomes especially apparent in Table 1.6. High-income respondents are far more likely to adopt comprehensive security measures, including antivirus software (73%) and two-step authentication (75%), compared to just 20% and 31% in low-income groups respectively. This disparity highlights the intersecting role of digital literacy, affordability, and access to cyber safety. Belief in the effectiveness of these precautions is strong, with 80% believing that these precautions protect them either "to a great extent" or "some extent" (Table 1.7). However, as Table 1.8 shows, confidence again varies by income (the columns "great extent," "some extent," and "not much," "not at all" have been merged). While 89% of high-income respondents trust their protective measures, only 61% of low-income participants share that belief in comparison. This perceived vulnerability may contribute to higher stress levels and avoidance behaviour among vulnerable groups. When asked about responsibility for data protection, more than half of the respondents (54%) said it should be a joint effort between individuals and the government (Table 1.9).

### Reporting cybercrime

The Lokniti survey reveals that awareness of cybercrime is nearly universal among Delhi's residents. 96% of respondents stated that they had heard or read about financial frauds and scams online. When asked how they came to know about cybercrime, the majority cited

non-institutional sources. As shown in Table 2.1, 38% became aware through social media, 37% via traditional media, and 36% through personal experiences of friends or acquaintances. Notably, only 8% received information through banks, despite their central role in financial security.

Among those who experienced cybercrime first-hand or through family members, the most common method of identifying the incident was through transaction alerts. In Table 2.2, 38% reported recognising the fraud upon receiving a financial transaction message. Others were alerted by family or friends (17%) or by noticing irregularities on their account or device (16%). Very few identified the issue due to device malfunction, indicating that non-technical signs were more influential in realising that a cybercrime had occurred. As indicated in Table 2.3, 58% of affected respondents reported financial loss, while 26% experienced mental stress. This suggests that while the economic impact is prominent, the psychological burden is also substantial and requires attention in policy discussions. In terms of the quantum of financial loss, Table 2.4 reveals that 27% of victims lost between ₹10,001 and ₹50,000, while 19% lost amounts less than ₹5,000. 14% of respondents reported that they had lost over ₹50,000 owing to cybercrime.

One of the most concerning findings relates to the perceived and actual inefficiency of recovery mechanisms. According to Table 2.5, 48% of respondents believed that money lost to cyber fraud could not be recovered. Only 33% believed that recovery was possible. These perceptions are corroborated by data in Table 2.6, which focuses exclusively on victims. Among those who lost money, 70% reported they did not recover any part of it. Only 17% said the full amount was returned, and 6% reported partial recovery. This highlights the lack of existing institutional mechanisms for financial redressal.

### Where does help come from?

The survey findings indicate a serious gap between the experience of cybercrime and the response received from authorities, marked by high levels of under-reporting and widespread dissatisfaction. Only 21% of respondents who experienced cybercrime reported it, while 76% refrained from taking formal action, pointing to either a lack of awareness or deep mistrust in institutional mechanisms. Among those who did report, traditional platforms were more commonly used, 29% approached local police stations, 26% contacted cybercrime police cells, and 24% reported it to banks, whereas digital platforms like the cybercrime reporting website (20%) and helplines (15%) were less frequently used (Table 2.7), indicating the need for more credible and accessible online systems. The complaint process itself yielded mixed responses, with 35% finding it "very easy" and 24% "somewhat easy", but a notable 37% found it difficult to register a complaint (Table 2.8), suggesting procedural difficulties for users. Public satisfaction with institutional support was also low, with 48% being fully dissatisfied and only 27% fully satisfied (Table 2.9). Disparities in satisfaction levels were evident across income groups (Table 2.10), highlighting systemic inequities. Despite these shortcomings, confidence in digital payment apps remained high (Table 2.11), reflecting continued reliance on digital tools despite limited institutional protection. Finally, when asked about the most important government action to improve digital safety, 40% of respondents emphasised awareness campaigns, significantly outweighing support for technical fixes (Table 2.12), indicating preference for preventive education over reactive measures.

The Lokniti-CSDS survey paints a revealing portrait of Delhi's cyber landscape, one marked by high awareness but low institutional trust, significant under-reporting, and stark socio-demographic disparities.

While most residents are familiar with cyber threats and have taken basic precautions, deeper vulnerabilities persist, especially among low-income groups who lack access to digital safeguards like antivirus software and two-factor authentication. As the city's digital dependence grows, bridging these demographic gaps and bolstering institutional credibility must become central to any serious cyber safety strategy.

\*The full credits are available in the online article at thehindu.com.

# Tackling cybercrime in Delhi

### METHOD NOTE

The research employed a random sampling method, leaving a gap of three to four households between each selected sample to maintain representativeness. The sample was distributed across 23 different locations in Delhi, ensuring coverage of various parts of the city. The sample included respondents from different socio-economic groups and had equal gender and age distribution. Data was collected using a structured, close-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire was drafted with careful attention to the objectives of the study, and a pilot study was conducted by the research team before the fieldwork to test and refine the questionnaire for clarity and effectiveness.

Table 1.1: Awareness of digital scams through different methods

Methods	%
Sharing your OTP	95
Fake rewards or lottery-related messages, or calls	95
Fraudulent calls from the bank for KYC/credit/debit card	94
Clicking on suspicious links	90
Fake calls from police/customs for suspicious activities	85
Social media scam	83
Email scam/hacking	72
ATM scam/cloning	71
Virus/malware attack	69
Digital arrest	61

Note: All figures in per cent. The rest said 'no'

Table 1.2: Awareness about different platforms to report cybercrime

Platforms to report cybercrime	%
Cybercrime helpline 1930	42
Local police station	36
Cybercrime reporting website	30
Cybercrime police/station	25
Bank	20

Note: The rest either said 'no' or did not respond

Table 1.3: Awareness about steps taken by the government to prevent cybercrime

Govt. platforms to report cybercrime	%
Awareness calls and messages from authorities	72
Helpline number 1930	66
Cybercrime police cell/station	65
Cybercrime reporting website	55
Cyber Swachhta Kendra	19

Note: The rest said 'no'

Table 1.4: Effectiveness of government initiatives to prevent cybercrime

Effectiveness	%
Very effective	16
Somewhat effective	55
Not very effective	19
Not at all	5

Note: The rest did not respond

Table 1.5: Different measures taken by people to protect themselves from cybercrime

Measures	%
Not clicking on suspicious links	87
Downloading apps only from trusted sources	85
Using a strong and unique password	79
Picking unknown or spam calls	75
Update applications	71
Two-step authentication	60
Changing password regularly	50
Anti-virus software	50

Note: The rest did not respond

Table 1.7: On whether safety measures can protect one from online fraud

Extent	%
To a great extent	36
To some extent	44
Not much	12
Not at all	3

Note: The others did not respond

Table 1.8: Whether safety measures can protect us from online fraud asked across income groups

Income Group	Whether safety measures can protect or not	
	Can protect	Cannot protect
Overall	80	15
Low-income group	61	20
Middle-income group	82	14
High-income group	89	11

Note: All figures in per cent. The others did not respond

Table 1.9: Responsibility for protecting data

Responsibility	%
It is the individual's responsibility to protect their data	28
It is the government's responsibility to ensure data protection laws and educate its citizens about them	17
Both	54

Note: The rest did not respond

Table 2.1: Sources of information about cybercrime

Source	%
Social media	38
TV/radio/newspaper/magazine	37
Happened with friends/acquaintances	36
Happened with family members	17
It happened to me	11
Banks	8

Note: The rest did not respond

Table 2.2: Identifying a cybercrime

Identifying the cybercrime	%
Financial transaction message	38
A family member/friend informed me	17
Noticed strange activities on my device or account	16
Fake reward/lottery-related messages or calls	6

Note: The rest did not respond or had some other response

Table 2.3: Impact of cybercrime on victims or their family members

Impact	%
Financial loss	58
Mental stress	26

Note: The rest either said 'no' or did not respond

Table 2.4: Amount of money lost due to cybercrime

Amount	%
No money was lost	17
Less than ₹5,000	19
₹5,001 to ₹10,000	16
₹10,001 to ₹50,000	27
₹50,001 and above	14

Note: The rest did not respond

Table 2.5: Public perceptions on the possibility of recovering lost money due to cybercrime

Money can be recovered from online fraud or not		%
No		48
Yes		33
Can't say		19

Table 2.6: Whether victims were able to recover their lost money

Money recovered or not	%
No	70
Yes, the entire amount	17
Yes, a partial amount	6

Table 2.7: Platforms where cybercrime was reported

Different Platforms	%
Local police station	29
Cyber crime police station/ cell	26
Bank	24
Cybercrime reporting website	20
Cybercrime helpline number	15

Note: The rest chose any other or did not respond

Table 2.8: Experience with the complaint-filing process

Experience	%
Very easy	35
Somewhat easy	24
Somewhat difficult	17
Very difficult	20

Note: The rest did not respond

Table 2.9: Satisfaction with the assistance provided while reporting

Satisfaction	%
Fully satisfied	27
Somewhat satisfied	18
Somewhat dissatisfied	4
Fully dissatisfied	48

Note: The rest did not respond

Table 2.10: Satisfaction with the assistance provided by authorities across income groups

Area Type	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Overall	45	52
Low-income group	30	70
Middle-income group	44	50
High-income group	52	48

Note: All figures in per cent. The rest did not remember

Table 2.11: Confidence while using digital payment apps

Level of Confidence	%
Very confident	40
Somewhat confident	42
Not very confident	12
Not at all confident	6

Table 2.12: What the government has done for the digital safety of citizens

Safety Measures	%
Awareness campaigns on cyber-security	40
Improve the effectiveness of cyber-crime reporting portals	13
Track online fraudulent transactions to recover the lost money	8
Implementing data protection regulations	7
Device regulatory mechanisms to block suspicious calls/ websites	7

Note: The rest did not respond or chose any other

Table 1.6: Different measures taken by people to protect themselves from cybercrime across income groups

Income Group	Measures						
	Update application	Use a strong & unique password	Change password regularly	Not clicking on suspicious links	Download apps only from trusted apps	Pick unknown or spam calls	Anti-virus software
Overall	71	79	50	87	85	75	50
Low-income group	52	62	25	72	72	57	20
Middle-income group	73	81	51	87	87	78	49
High-income group	78	83	59	96	90	77	73

Note: All figures in per cent



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**The drop in domestic passenger vehicle sales from April-June**

**1.4** In per cent. Domestic passenger vehicle sales declined to 10,11,882 units in the first quarter of this fiscal from 10,26,006 in the corresponding quarter of last fiscal. Total two-wheelers sales also fell by 6.2% to 46,74,562 units during the April-June quarter. ANI

**India's share of global zero-dose children in 2024**

**6.4** In per cent. India constituted 6.4% of the global population of children who did not receive a single dose of any vaccine in 2024, according to a United Nations report. The data was released on Monday by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF. ANI

**Rate of unemployment in India in the month of June**

**5.6** In per cent. The unemployment rate in the country remained flat at 5.6% in June compared to May this year, according to government data. Unemployment among those in the 15-29 age group increased to 15.3% in June from 15% in May 2025 nationwide. ANI

**Teachers to be appointed in govt-run schools in Tripura**

**1,615** The Tripura government will recruit more than a 1,000 graduate and postgraduate teachers to address the shortage of academic staff in government schools. Out of the fresh recruits, 915 teachers will be postgraduates for Class 11 and Class 12. PTI

**Estimated economic losses from vanishing wetlands**

**39** In \$ trillion. The global destruction of wetlands, which support fisheries, agriculture and flood control, may mean the loss of \$39 trillion in economic benefits by 2050, according to a report by the Convention on Wetlands. AP/WIDEWORLD

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## How is global shipping trying to decarbonise?

What is the goal? What are the green fuels that may be used? Why is it difficult to implement changes in shipping? What does India need to do? Why is the government encouraging green ammonia production in India? What are the challenges?

### EXPLAINER

M. Kalvanaraman  
Kalvan Mangalapalli

#### The story so far:

**G**lobal shipping is on course towards decarbonisation by 2040-50. This represents a huge opportunity for India. Merchant ships largely use Very Low Sulphur Fuel Oil (VLSFO), diesel, and methane gas stored in liquid form as fuel. LNG-powered engines with their higher efficiency of some five percentage points are likely to be a transition fuel before shipping moves to green fuels such as green ammonia, green e-methanol and biofuels by 2040 and net zero thereafter.

#### How are green fuels produced?

Green hydrogen is made from the electrolysis of water using renewable power. Shipping will not use hydrogen directly because of issues with storage and transportation of hydrogen, a highly volatile fuel. Green ammonia, made from green hydrogen and nitrogen, is more stable. The government is also encouraging green ammonia production in India since it can substitute LNG imports in making fertilizers. Green methanol is made from green hydrogen and carbon dioxide obtained from industrial sources.

#### What are the preferred fuels?

Shipping, however, is generally a conservative industry. New technology adoption is relatively slow. Ammonia engines are a novelty, so shipping is going first for green methanol, which emits some 10% of carbon dioxide, and later green ammonia, which emits no greenhouse gas. However, ammonia use requires extensive processes onboard. Besides a storage tank and tweaks to the engine and fuel handling system, green methanol is almost a drop-in replacement for VLSFO and is stored as liquid in ambient temperature unlike green



For cleaner seas: Cargo shipping containers in Chennai on June 30. JITHU RAMALINGAM, B

ammonia or even LNG.

Already, more than 360 ships capable of operating on methanol are either in service or in order. Major container shipping companies such as Maersk, CMA, CGM and Evergreen are backing methanol. A 100% sustainable e-methanol as bunker fuel costs \$1,950 per tonne (of VLSFO equivalent) in February in Singapore, while VLSFO averaged at \$560 per tonne. This pricing discrepancy is primarily caused by the present price of renewable electricity, with every tonne of green e-methanol using 10-11 MWh of power, and the heavy upfront capital cost for electrolyser facilities. Estimates suggest that demand for green methanol would surpass 14 million tonnes by 2028, whereas the projected supply is merely in the order of 11 million tonnes, creating additional price pressures.

#### What is Indian shipping's decarbonisation plans?

India has committed to decarbonising its domestic shipping. Plans have been made

for supporting domestic container ships using green fuels as well as creating green fuel bunkering points such as at the Tuticorin V.O. Chidambaram port and Kandla. The government is looking at producing and supplying green fuels to Singapore, which is a fuelling station accounting for nearly one-fourth of all global ship fuelling. Singapore has committed to being a green fuels supplier and would require therefore tens of millions of tonnes of green fuels. Given that India has the land and expertise for solar power, it can aspire to be a major supplier of green fuels to global shipping.

#### How can India do it?

Making a marine green fuels production hub has some challenges. Solar panels and electrolyzers to make green hydrogen need to be imported. India's solar energy revolution, however, is a model of how sovereign guarantees and policy strategic frameworks can drive the adoption of green fuels. From 2014 to 2025, India's solar capacity grew from 2.82 GW to 105

GW. This achievement was made through the convergence of sovereign guarantees, off-take assurance, and strengthened supply chain support. Sovereign guarantees have emerged as a powerful de-risking mechanism for green methanol investments that can considerably reduce prices. These government-backed assurances can fundamentally transform project economics by enabling access to international capital markets at significantly lower interest rates.

Innovative financial instruments are needed for an at to scale green methanol rollout. Production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes for electrolyzers can relieve supply chain bottlenecks by territorialising value chains and lessening transportation costs of raw materials. Carbon capture, utilisation, and storage (CCUS) incentives are also essential, as they increase the feasibility of the production of green methanol from sequestered CO<sub>2</sub>. Further, the government's aggressive push in creating 1.5 GW of local electrolyser manufacturing capacity and growing industrial CO<sub>2</sub> sources positions India strategically to develop integrated green fuel hubs. Multilateral development banks offer financing at rates as low as 4%, as opposed to 11-12% by domestic lenders, and they can be leveraged.

#### How can green fuels help restart Indian shipbuilding and shipbuilding?

The government's move to inject demand-side support for shipbuilders, along with incentives for foreign cooperation, should spur economies of scale and attract global shipbuilders to the country. Partnerships with overseas shipbuilders from South Korea and Japan are being pursued to support India's shipbuilding strength. The strategy is to support new builds and retrofit current ships for green fuel compatibility. India has pledged \$10 billion to support the purchase of over 110 ships. Government can provide incentives so 10-20% of these are green fuel-capable, built in Indian shipyards, and are Indian-flagged.

### THE GIST

Shipping, however, is generally a conservative industry. New technology adoption is relatively slow.

Making a marine green fuels production hub has some challenges. India's solar energy revolution, however, is a model of how sovereign guarantees and policy strategic frameworks can drive the adoption of green fuels.

The government's move to inject demand-side support for shipbuilders, along with incentives for foreign cooperation, should spur economies of scale and attract global shipbuilders to the country.

## The need to protect India's linguistic secularism

According to the 2011 Census, India has 121 languages and 270 mother tongues

### LETTER & SPIRIT

C.B.P. Srivastava

**I**ndia's diversity in religion and language is one of the primary factors which protects the secular character of the nation, ensuring its unity and integrity. But while religion and language are the two most crucial aspects of any culture, these are also the predominant cross-cultural barriers. This is clearly visible in recent communal tensions and the violence in Maharashtra.

Secularism in India is different from what the West practises. When the concept originated in England in the mid-19th century, it was explained that there should be complete separation between the state and religion without criticising any of the prevalent religious beliefs. India too accepted this notion and incorporated the concept in the

Constitution in the form of rights to religious freedom. These rights are based on the principles of religious tolerance and equality. Every person has the equal right to freedom of conscience and to profess, practise and propagate his religion. This makes India truly secular as the state does not have its own religion. However, the unique aspect of Indian secularism is not only related to religion but it is also concerned with language. Indian secularism is neither pro-religion or language, nor against. Yet it is not neutral either. It is incorporated in the Constitution as a state policy and it empowers the state to take steps against communalism, be it religious or linguistic.

#### Official vs national language

This is the reason why we do not and cannot have a national language. In order to protect linguistic diversity, the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution includes 22 languages. As India is a unitary

federation, that is, a Union of States, Article 343 enshrines that the official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script. The States are free to choose their own official language. This arrangement is due to the fact that in India, States are culturally integrated and no State is permitted to go out of it in the name of distinct language or culture.

Article 29 incorporates that any section of citizens of India including minority groups shall have the right to protect their language, script or culture, and that language cannot be the ground for discrimination. According to the 2011 Census, India has 121 languages and 270 mother tongues. About 96.7% population of the country have one of the 22 scheduled languages as their mother tongue. Finally, the Census says that the 121 languages are presented in two parts, languages included in the Eighth Schedule, and languages not included (99) in the Eighth Schedule.

#### Respecting diversity

Such diversity needs to be protected; each and every language irrespective of region or State must be shown respect. This is the only way to protect India's linguistic secularism. Many southern and northeastern States have resisted the imposition of Hindi, citing fears of cultural domination. Dravidian movements in Tamil Nadu historically opposed Hindi imposition, favouring Tamil and English. Maharashtra, however, has emerged as the most sensitive State so far as the language debate is concerned. The recent violence against the non-Marathi population is the manifestation of identity politics. Definitely, it is not to protect its cultural identity. Had it been related to the protection of culture, the "protectors" of Marathi language would have considered that "tolerance" and "liberality" are the two pillars of India's unity in diversity.

India has always accepted different religions, ideas, lifestyles, food habits etc., mainly because of its liberal and tolerant attitude. In a globalising world, a conservative leaning towards religion or language will lead to a fragmentation of society and tear apart the secular fabric.

Political parties have the onus to ensure the protection of India's diversity which has been well shielded by the Constitution.

C.B.P. Srivastava is President, Centre for Applied Research in Governance, Delhi

### THE GIST

While religion and language are the two most crucial aspects of any culture, these are also the predominant cross-cultural barriers.

Article 29 incorporates that any section of citizens of India including minority groups shall have the right to protect their language, script or culture.

Such diversity needs to be protected; each and every language irrespective of region or State must be shown respect.



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[ OUR TAKE ]

## Case for diversity in higher courts

Collegium must address underrepresentation of Dalits, tribals and OBCs in the higher judiciary

**A** former chief justice of Madhya Pradesh High Court, Suresh Kumar Kait, has alleged that the collegium, which makes the final selection of judges to constitutional courts, is "dishonest" in its treatment of people from the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC), while making appointments to the high courts. His claim rests on the fact that the number of judges from these social groups is not commensurate with their share in the country's population. Kait has proposed reservations to address this anomaly. Kait's very subjective description of the conduct of the collegium could be discarded, but his remark about the lack of diversity and representation in the higher judiciary surely calls for a conversation.

To be sure, the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP), which guides appointments in constitutional courts, has not proposed caste quotas in judiciary. The collegium makes its choices using MoP as a guide and, after due consideration, which includes consultations with the government and review of feedback from State agencies, appoints the judges. Merit and seniority are considerations when the collegium looks at the candidates, but multiple chief justices of the Supreme Court have said they try to ensure that appointments reflect the social diversity of the country.

However, data shows that despite the best intentions of the collegium, the higher judiciary remains mostly the preserve of upper caste Hindus. A response by the government in the Lok Sabha in December 2024 reveals that out of 684 high court judges appointed since 2018, 21 belong to SC category, 14 to ST category, and 82 belong to OBC category. In percentage terms, this is 3%, 2%, and 12% of the appointments, whereas the share of these groups in the population (as per the National Family Health Survey, 2019-2021) is 7.6%, 9.5%, and 42%. A data analysis by HT revealed that 75.6% of judges in the Supreme Court during 2010-25 belonged to Hindu upper castes, whereas OBC representation was limited to 7.8%. The representation trend has improved over the decades, though the change has been far from adequate. Kait's attempt to shame the collegium as "dishonest" is uncalled for, but the data is glaring for anyone to ignore that Dalits, tribals and OBCs are underrepresented in constitutional courts.

Appointments to constitutional posts have not followed any principle of affirmative action, but representation has become a political question — so much so that no party can ignore it in the selection of people to ministerial positions and high public office. The inclusion of caste enumeration in the census and legislation on women's reservation in Parliament suggest that representation and diversity have become central to public life and appointments. The judiciary's turn has come.

## What an Indian in space means for India in space

**S**hubhanshu Shukla's space sojourn, as part of the Axiom-4 mission, holds significance for India for many reasons. To start with, Shukla's voyage ends a wait of little over four decades for an Indian to mark their presence outside Earth, after Rakesh Sharma became the first in 1994. In the interim, the country celebrated Indian-origin astronauts flying into space — and mourned the death of Kalpana Chawla in the Columbia disaster. It built enviable space prowess and punched much above its weight when it came to missions in Earth's neighbourhood. But it remained on the sidelines of manned spaceflight. So, Shukla in space has great symbolic value for its space ambitions.

Second, Shukla's presence on Axiom-4 is of immense learning value for the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) as it gears up for its manned space programme, Gaganyaan. On-ground preparations for the mission will benefit significantly from the learnings the second Indian in space brings back with him, injecting critical readiness into the training of India's future astronauts. Given spaceflight's unique aspects — the heightened safety protocols and compliance, the impact of zero gravity on the human body and task execution, among others — this is invaluable learning from lived experience.

Third, an Indian in space fires a billion imaginations and stokes aspirations. This can only be good for a country that aims to be a science and technology superpower. Inspired school and university students can mean a rich harvest of scientific minds in the years to come. To that end, Shukla's spaceflight is not his alone, but of all Indians, including many young people who have their eyes set on stars.

## How far India has come, and what holds it back

The data is clear on this, though Indians are caught in a battle of political narratives on the country's reality

**T**he view of how we are doing as a nation depends on which side of the political divide you are on. The further you go in either direction, the starker the difference between reality and perception. When I look at various metrics and their directions, the conclusion that I come to is this: India is doing much better than before on poverty, inequality, growth, per capita income, nutrition and digitisation. It is on a path of compounding that will really show results in the next decade. But there are deep problems that are holding back a move to the next gear to pick up speed. These include deep endemic corruption, lack of judicial reforms, dysfunctional municipal corporations, and a compliance and inspector raj that adds layers of costs in terms of both money and time.

The headlines have told us that we are on the way to becoming the world's third-largest economy in a few years. We also know that India is the fastest-growing economy in the world with an expected GDP growth of 6.5% in the current year. But per capita income at \$2,700 in 2024 makes India stand far lower than the

global average. To perceive the direction of change in this metric, we need to see that it has grown at a compounded rate of 7.6% a year for the last 20 years, which is not a bad rate of growth. Expect per capita income to go up sharply over the next decade as the middle-class expands.

But has this growth come at the expense of the people? No. Poverty levels are dramatically down over the past decade. Using World Bank data, poverty as measured by the number of people living on less than \$3 a day has shrunk from just over 27% in 2011 to slightly higher than 2% in 2022. This has lifted almost 270 million people out of extreme poverty in a decade.

Reduction in poverty has a direct impact on inequality. As measured by the Gini Index, India does well on this score with a Gini of 34.9, over 25 marking it as a low to moderate inequality. While there is debate on this being based on consumption rather than income, in the absence of robust income data in India, we should look at the trajectory rather than the number. That says that inequality has indeed fallen, from almost 29 to just over 25 over the past decade. The other side of the coin is that, while it is true that inequality has fallen, it will be difficult to believe inequality has risen, given that more people got pulled out of poverty and the number of those in the middle class grew.

At the heart of the poverty and inequality story is the success of India's

attempt at growth with redistribution. Most aspirational welfare economies of the Global North became rich before they redistributed. India, by giving universal suffrage and targeting a welfare state model while being desperately hungry and poor, put an almost impossible target in front of governments and policymakers. Now finally, as poverty numbers go down, the spending on nutrition is getting better. The latest data on consumption shows a heartening trend of higher levels of protein, dairy, fruit and vegetable consumption, especially in the bottom 20% of the population. The impact on health should begin to show up in the next decade.

The macro picture looks good with both inflation and fiscal deficit under control. The hard decisions taken during Covid-19 of fiscal responsibility, the removal of off-balance sheet items during that time, the clean-up of the twin-balance-sheet problem after the debt spurge 15 years ago, and a tight monetary policy — have all worked in tandem to give India a gym-fit body, especially when compared to the debt-bloated US.

But we know that to achieve higher levels of development and per capita income, a 6.5% growth rate is not enough. There are serious roadblocks to stepping on the accelerator, and these are not easy knots to untangle. The lack of judicial reform is one of the top contenders for what



Monika Halan



It would be difficult to believe inequality has risen, given millions got pulled out of poverty and the number of those in the middle class grew. HT PHOTO

is holding India back, and related to this are the delays and roadblocks in contract enforcement, property registration, and resolving a commercial dispute.

Regulators are endemic corruption, regulatory cholesterol and the inspector raj that entrepreneurs and citizens are subjected to. A report from the World Economic Forum pins bribes at 50% of the project cost in infrastructure and real estate. One only has to look at the inflated residential property prices in the large cities that result in rents being a fraction of the mortgage costs to see the impact of corruption. That day-to-day rent-seeking from smaller businesses is also included in the final consumer prices hitting the small fraction of the Indian population that pays income tax hurts even more.

Death by compliance and, related to it, the inspector raj are other chains that hold down India's growth. An ORF-TeamLease report maps

over 26,000 clauses across various laws that carry a potential penalty of imprisonment for non-compliance, for infractions as mundane as the enterprise not reconstituting the canteen committee every few years.

India began this journey as a desperately poor, hungry country that lived largely in darkness on *kuchas* roads. That story has changed dramatically post 1991, but the road from poverty to prosperity is a continuum and cannot be a straight jump from desperately poor to a middle-income country.

The data seems to indicate that we are well on our journey. There are potholes and road blocks, but the grand strategy of pulling out of poverty towards the aspiration of having enough is truly in play.

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## India's moonshot moment for research and innovation

**I**ndia has long grappled with an uncomfortable truth: Our research and development spending, despite being the world's fifth-largest economy and a global talent hub, remains among the lowest in the world. At under 0.7% of GDP, our national research and development spend pales not only in comparison with countries like the US (3.5%) or China (2.7%), but also with smaller economies such as South Korea (5%) and Brazil (2.2%). This has had a compounding effect. It has limited our scientific ambition, discouraged patient capital from entering deep-tech, and left India too often a consumer rather than a creator of advanced technology.

Against this backdrop, the government's announcement of the ₹1 lakh crore Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) scheme is both timely and transformative. It is not just an economic intervention but an institutional one. Structured through the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), the scheme aims to correct a deficit in India's innovation ecosystem. It is a bold signal of intent to move from being a user of imported technology to a nation that creates and commercialises its own, and eventually, exports it to the world.

The scheme to be implemented through a Special Purpose Vehicle will have oversight from an empowered group of secretaries and will be chaired by the Prime Minister (PM). The architecture signals not just administrative backing, but clear political ownership, suggesting that this is not a routine policy measure but a national priority.

The scheme's emphasis on sunrise sectors, including clean energy, climate tech, robotics, Artificial Intelligence (AI) in key areas, biotech, agritech is encouraging. To maximise impact, India must also identify areas where it has both strategic interest and a strong potential to lead. In agritech, for instance, the opportunity is not abstract but deeply national. With more than 45% of India's workforce employed in agriculture, targeted R&D in precision farming, climate-resilient seeds, and AI-driven supply chains can yield enormous social and economic dividends. In clean tech, rather than replicating global models, India can leverage its vast sun and its own realities, such as decentralised solar, high-temperature grid storage, or waste-to-energy solutions for peri-urban areas.

India also has a unique structural advantage that few countries possess at the same scale. A billion-plus population served with a mature digital public infrastructure stack. Aadhaar, UPI, DigiLocker, ONDC, Ayushman Bharat Health Account (ABHA), Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAR) and other platforms give Indian innovators a home-grown tested that is unmatched in size and complexity. Combined with AI and blockchain, this can unlock innovations in financial inclusion, digital health, micro-credit, and public service delivery. It is not just a policy advantage but technological edge and must be treated as such in our national RDI priorities.

Startups will play a foundational role in realising this ambition. India has already seen a strong base of deep-tech startups emerge across sectors including medical diagnostics, space technology and battery research, among others. Companies in these sectors have shown how Indian ventures can compete globally while supporting distinctly Indian problems. With the right support, this next generation of technology-led startups can become a game-changer, meaning that the previous wave did for consumer internet and fintech. India's academic ecosystem will be vital in

sustaining the innovation pipeline. While the IITs and IISc represent some of our strongest research hubs, they would benefit from deeper investment to realise their full potential. At the same time, there is an opportunity to expand research capacity across a broader set of universities and technical institutions. By fostering a more inclusive and well-supported academic research environment, India can unlock innovation that is geographically, institutionally, and intellectually diverse. The success of this approach is evident in countries such as the US and Germany, where deep-tech innovation is underwritten by consistent public investment in academic research, often with mechanisms for seamless technology transfer to the private sector. The oft-cited compelling example through the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (Darpa), which has consistently funded high-risk, high-reward research in academic institutions. Over the decades, Darpa has played a pivotal role in developing foundational technologies, including the internet, GPS, voice assistants, and stealth aircraft systems, many of which originated as blue-sky research projects in universities and later, evolved into world-changing innovations. This model shows how strategic public funding, when paired with academic talent and long-term vision, can unlock breakthroughs with far-reaching economic and societal impact.

The scale of funding is a powerful beginning. The focus must now shift to world-class execution. Attracting high-quality second-level fund managers with domain expertise and entrepreneurial instincts will be critical to ensuring that capital flows to the most promising ideas. A governance framework that champions transparency, timely disbursements, and a healthy appetite for risk will enable innovation to thrive. With the right people and processes in place, this initiative can serve as a model for how bold public investment can translate into transformative national capability.

Equally important is the opportunity to align India's regulatory and compliance landscape with its innovation ambitions. By streamlining pathways for IP protection, tax processes, lab access, and risk capital, public-private co-funding platforms and industry-led R&D clusters can help align efforts and multiply outcomes.

India has missed critical moments before — the semiconductor revolution of the 1990s, the early years of industrial robotics, and the first wave of AI. The RDI scheme is a second chance. This time, the urgency is greater. Global supply chains are shifting. Climate timelines are shortening. Tech disruptions are accelerating. The countries that lead in innovation will shape the future roles of trade, security, and diplomacy. The money has been there, the research collaboration is thoughtful focus, nurturing of the R&D ecosystem with institutional strength and intellectual ability and above all, a long-term vision. This will be a multi-decade endeavour. The ₹1 lakh crore is a strong beginning.

Kunal Bahl is the co-founder of AceVector and Titan Capital. The views expressed are personal.

NILESH M DESAI | DIRECTOR, SPACE APPLICATIONS CENTRE, ISRO

This mission has been a major learning opportunity for us. ISRO took up this mission to gather experience that will help us in our Gaganyaan programme

On Shubhanshu Shukla's spaceflight as part of the Axiom-4 mission



## How India can protect jobs amidst the rapid AI march

**W**e are standing at the edge of a tectonic shift — a foundational transformation in how work will be done, how knowledge will be accessed, and how value will be created. Generative AI is already reshaping our institutions, industries and individual lives at breakneck speed. And India, with its youthful population and expanding digital footprint, is both uniquely positioned and highly vulnerable. We produce over 10 million graduates annually, including 1.5 million engineers. Yet many of them remain underemployed, poorly paid, or stuck in jobs that are already becoming obsolete. While the official unemployment rate is 5.6%, the underemployment and low-productivity trap runs much deeper.

From contract review in law firms to radiology scans in hospitals, from coding assistants to synthetic voiceovers, AI is automating tasks we thought were safe for decades. We are entering an era where knowledge work itself is under threat. And the frightening part is: AI won't just replace jobs, it will hollow them out, change their nature, and widen inequalities between the AI-haves and have-nots. What can India do to prepare its workforce for this? How can we ensure that this transformation becomes a force for inclusion, not exclusion?

The first mindset shift is to stop thinking only in terms of job creation. AI doesn't just eliminate entire jobs, it reshapes them. A software developer using AI assistants can be 10 times more productive. A teacher with AI tools can personalise lessons for every student. But for this, the workforce must learn to work with AI. This calls for large-scale upskilling in digital literacy, prompt engineering, data fluency and critical thinking skills. Most Indian universities are still preparing students for yesterday's jobs. AI must be integrated across disciplines. A commerce graduate should understand how AI transforms auditing. A biology student should grasp what AI means for drug discovery. This calls for a fundamental overhaul of curricula, to embed AI's applications across domains. Industry-academia collaboration is essential here, especially in areas like health care, agriculture, manufacturing and finance, where AI deployment will be rapid and widespread.

What we need now is a coordinated National Mission on AI-readiness. This should go beyond elite institutions. We need AI skills to reach ITIs, polytechnics, and even 2-year colleges. Online platforms can play a key role, but content must be in regional languages and tailored to practical use-cases. The AI era

demands a National GenAI Skills Mission, with clear goals, timelines and accountability.

Manufacturing, agriculture and services will all see AI-driven productivity gains. But without planning, this will also mean job losses at the bottom. We must ensure that technology adoption in these sectors is inclusive. In agriculture, AI-based crop forecasting or precision farming should empower the farmer, not replace them. In manufacturing, we need to upskill machine operators to work with smart machines. In services, we must build digital service clusters, smaller towns, enabling remote AI-supported roles in logistics, health care, customer support and beyond. As the country pushes for self-reliance in defence and semiconductor manufacturing, we are seeing a demand for skilled manpower in areas such as drones, sensors, secure communication and advanced electronics.

With the right policy support and industry-academia partnerships, this can generate high-quality jobs. It can also build long-term capabilities in AI, robotics and materials while addressing both strategic and employment goals.

India must become a hub for AI entrepreneurship, especially in areas like education, health, sustainability and rural development. Startups that solve Indian problems using GenAI must be actively supported through funding, regulatory clarity and market access. The AI onslaught is not a challenge that government policy alone can address. Academic institutions and industry must take the lead. Universities should be evaluated by the employability they ensure over a graduate's lifetime. Institutions must track how resilient their graduates are to technological change, what skills they are acquiring, and how they grow through their careers.

We need AI centres of excellence across states, industry-backed fellowships for teaching AI and related subjects, and more research into the societal impact of these technologies. Every educational institution should have a clear roadmap to become AI-ready. The shift from counting jobs to enabling lifelong employability is the transition India now needs to make. It is not just a technological shift, it is a societal reset. How we prepare for AI will define the kind of society we become.

India has shown that when it puts its mind to a mission, it can deliver at scale. Now, we need that same clarity and urgency to prepare for the age of AI.

V Ramgopal Rao is vice-chancellor, BITS Pilani group of institutions, and former director, IIT Delhi. The views expressed are personal.





● HITTING THE ROAD

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis

In the future we wish to see R&D and manufacturing done in India, and I am sure at an appropriate stage Tesla will think about it

Towards GST consensus

Move to rope in home minister in rate rejig talks will give political heft to efforts in bringing states on board

WITH LITTLE HEADWAY in the restructuring of the goods and services tax (GST) framework, it is just as well that Union home minister Amit Shah plans to discuss the issue with states to try and get them on board before the GST Council's next meeting. The fact is that a consensus on rate rationalisation has eluded the GST Council despite several rounds of discussions, at the 45th meeting in 2021, and more recently, the 55th meeting in December 2024. Given how contentious some of the proposed changes can be and how these might be contested even by Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled states, trying to build consensus so that the proposals are ratified quickly at the GST Council meet would be worth the effort. In any case, getting involved in politically sensitive economic matters is nothing new for the home minister as he has been involved in the past in decisions on disinvestment, price rise of staple food items, etc.

Indeed, a rejigging of the GST construct has been on the anvil for some time now. Among the main objectives is to lower the number of slabs from five—0%, 5%, 12%, 18%, and 28%—to four by doing away with 12%. Experts point out that the 12% slab, which covers products such as packaged foods, household goods, and medical supplies, contributes little in terms of revenue and does not really add value to the GST framework. Instead, it burdens assesses with administrative workload. The 5% and 18% slabs, under which essential and discretionary items fall, fetch the bulk or 70-75% of the GST collections; the 12% slab contributes just 5-6%, while the 28% slab brings in 13-15%.

In simplifying the structure, the tax on one set of products and services is expected to be lowered to 5% while for others the levy could be raised to 18%. In the past, debates have raged on the rates at which certain goods or services should be taxed; the status of online gaming, for example, has been hotly debated. Again, a couple of states have asked for the GST on both life and health insurance premiums to be pared to 5% from 18%; others want no levy at all. There is also the likelihood of the tax on products like air conditioners being lowered from the current 28%. All this can become a reality if the state finance ministers don't squabble like fractious children. As relations between some states and the Centre are already fraught, preliminary consultations in the presence of a senior minister like Shah could help in reassuring states that are apprehensive of losing out following the rate changes.

In fact, it would help if the states are given a sense of the revenue implications of potential changes especially since the compensation cess, which is levied on goods like tobacco, coal, soft drinks, luxury cars, and pan masala, will be withdrawn next March. There has been some chatter to the effect that the compensation cess will be replaced with a health cess and a clean energy cess. With the Group of Ministers yet to formally announce any consensus on the issue, further discussion to ensure all states are convinced would be helpful. The introduction of a new cess might require amendments to the Constitution. Gross GST collections in FY25 rose 9.5% to ₹22.09 lakh crore but the pace of growth could moderate in the current year. It's important the rate changes do not derail the pace of collections.

CORPORATE CULTURE: PART I

Culture shows its colours when things get hardest

SUCCESS HIDES CRACKS. Failure finds them. In the glow of achievement, an organisation's culture basks in false validation. Town halls echo with applause. Corporate values beam from posters. Everyone appears aligned. But it's in failure—when targets are missed, launches flop, or crises erupt—that the true character of a culture is laid bare. Failure strips away the theatre. It exposes whether your culture is built on trust or blame. Do people feel safe taking responsibility, or are they too scared to speak up? In blame-prone environments, setbacks trigger finger-pointing and cover-ups. Fear of repercussions makes people hide mistakes, which only deepens problems and corrodes trust. By contrast, resilient cultures treat failure as a collective learning opportunity, not a cause for shame. Leaders meet failure with humility and ask, "What have we learned? What will we do differently?"

At Original, I often say: "Failure is not just feedback. It's a flashlight." In one organisation I worked with, a product launch fell short. Instead of blame, leadership hosted a "Failure Festival"—an open forum to share lessons. The result? Innovation, not insecurity. People felt heard, and ideas flowed again.

In another company, a high-profile campaign failed, and the response was deafening silence—no denial, no acknowledgment, just hushed whispers and quiet exits. Trust hemorrhaged. Employees learned failure was something to hide, not discuss.

This contrast plays out everywhere. Jeff Bezos has said Amazon is "the best place in the world to fail" because innovation requires tolerating mistakes. IBM's former CEO Thomas Watson Sr. famously refused to fire an employee whose error cost \$600,000. "I just spent \$600,000 training him," he explained. Volkswagen, on the other hand, is a cautionary tale. Under pressure to hit targets, employees became afraid to report problems. Engineers hid failures by cheating in emissions tests—a decision that exploded into a multibillion-dollar scandal. A culture of fear can breed far worse outcomes than honest mistakes.

Backing your people when they fail doesn't make you soft. It makes your culture stronger. Teams remember praise in good times far less than support in bad times. When people know they won't be punished for mistakes, they're more willing to innovate and speak up. Ultimately, failure is a diagnostic. It shows whether "innovation" is more than a buzzword and whether trust is genuinely felt. If failure shows whether your culture is built on trust, farewell to whether it is built on respect. And the two are more connected than leaders often realise.

The same fear that makes people hide mistakes is the fear that makes them leave quietly. The same defensiveness that drives blame in failure also drives cold, transactional goodbyes.

People remember how you made them feel when they left, not just when they joined. Onboarding gets all the attention—welcome kits, mentor programmes, inspiring emails from the CEO. But exits are often shrouded in awkward formality or total silence. Yet it's the goodbye that leaves the deepest imprint.

How an organisation handles farewells, especially voluntary resignations, reveals more about its values than any glossy mission statement. Exits are mirrors reflecting whether a culture is rooted in gratitude or driven by fear and ego. At Original, I say, "Exit is expression," because how you part ways with someone sends a message to everyone who stays.

One mid-sized tech company I advised celebrated departures with a "Final Mile" goodbye circle where teammates share stories and appreciation. Even Apple retail stores pause work to applaud and high-five employees on their last day. The departing person feels seen and valued. They leave with goodwill, not resentment.

Contrast that with the "cold shoulder" exit. In some companies, colleagues only realise someone has left when their email bounces. One manager described being treated "like a leper" after giving notice. The message was unmistakable: you are valued... until you're not. That story doesn't end when they walk out the door—it echoes on Glassdoor, LinkedIn, and in the memories of everyone who watched.

Leaders often dread goodbyes, seeing departures as personal failures. But turnover is inevitable. Every exit is an opportunity for gratitude, reflection, and growth. Just as failure can strengthen trust, farewells can reinforce respect.

Because in the end, culture isn't what you say when everything is working. It's how you behave when things get hard—when failure arrives, when good people leave, and when you must decide whether your values are real or just words on the wall.



ROHIT OHRI

Founder, Original

THE OBJECTIVE OF transforming India into a global hub for innovation has gained renewed momentum with a significant policy commitment—₹1 lakh crore dedicated to catalysing domestic research and development (R&D) and advancing national technological capabilities. The newly approved R&D and Innovation (RDI) scheme promises to offer long-term, low-cost capital to private enterprises working in strategic and emerging technologies such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence (AI), green energy, and quantum computing. Beyond the scale of the announcement lies a bigger question: Can this scheme shift India's place in the global innovation race? For years, India's ambitions to become a tech-driven powerhouse have run up against an enduring fact that the country spends just 0.64% of its GDP on R&D, far below global leaders like the US (3.5%), China (2.4%), and South Korea (4.8%). Moreover, unlike these nations where private industry drives over 75% of total R&D, only about 36.4% of India's R&D spending comes from the private sector. This lopsided structure has limited the scale and commercial potential of Indian innovation. That is the gap the RDI scheme seeks to bridge.

The implications of this structural weakness extend far beyond domestic innovation; they directly shape India's position in the global economy. In FY25, semiconductor imports exceeded ₹2 lakh crore, continuing a sharp rise from ₹1.71 lakh crore in FY24, with India still sourcing a majority of its chip demand from abroad. These chips are the backbone of everything from consumer electronics to defence systems. Import reliance here leaves India vulnerable to external shocks and geopolitical supply-chain disruptions. Similarly, India's share in global private AI investment remains low despite its talent strength. According to Stanford AI Index Report 2024, while

● R&D PUSH

RECAST IT FROM SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOUR TO A KEY PILLAR OF ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

A shift in innovation outlook

AMIT KAPOOR

Chair, Institute for Competitiveness



corporate AI investment reached \$252.3 billion, India secured just over \$1 billion, ranking 12th globally. These imbalances aren't just economic, but they signal a strategic gap in domestic capacity. Through this scheme, India is making a strategic pivot from being a passive technology consumer to an active competitor in industries that will shape the global economy. The ability to innovate at home, rather than import critical technologies, is increasingly what defines national competitiveness in a world driven by control over supply chains, standards, and intellectual property (IP). Innovation is not limited to invention; it fuels productivity, job creation, and export competitiveness.

According to World Bank data, high-tech goods accounted for just 15% of India's total merchandise exports in 2023, whereas in countries like China, the UK, and South Korea, they contribute over 25%. Hence, India's goal to becoming a developed economy by 2047 cannot rest on services and consumption alone. It must deepen tech-driven manufacturing and scale up domestic innovation to move from assembling products to exporting core technologies backed by IP.

Realising the full potential of the RDI scheme will require swift, targeted, and efficient implementation. Delays in disbursing funds or selecting credible intermediaries could dilute its intent. The

scheme must be backed by clear eligibility norms, time-bound approvals, and strong outcome tracking focused not just on spending but also on results like patents, pilots, and market-ready innovations. Equally important is physical infrastructure. Without access to advanced labs, testing facilities, and fabrication units, especially under tier-1 cities, innovation cannot scale up. Skilling, regulatory clarity, and deeper industry-academia collaboration must move in parallel. Capital alone will not build competitiveness; the ecosystem around it must be ready to absorb and accelerate innovation. India's innovation trajectory will equally depend on the capacity of its regions to absorb and scale up new technologies. Achieving parity with leading innovation economies will require strengthening sub-national ecosystems alongside

Its true value will not lie in the size of the outlay, but in whether it can build the ecosystems, institutions, and incentives that allow innovation to scale up

national efforts. According to the US-India Subnational Innovation Competitiveness Index by the Institute for Competitiveness and IT and Innovation Foundation, even India's leading innovation hubs like Delhi, Chandigarh, and Tamil Nadu lag significantly behind US regions. Delhi, for instance, ranks nearly 38 points behind California, and no Indian region matches even the lowest-ranked US state in overall innovation capacity. While Indian regions perform relatively well in globalisation metrics such as foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, the real gaps lie in R&D

investment, talent density, and institutional support, which remain highly concentrated. The success of the RDI scheme will depend not only on national policy design, but also on how effectively it strengthens regional ecosystems ensuring that innovation infrastructure, funding access, and skilled manpower extend beyond a few urban clusters.

Major innovation economies provide useful benchmarks for India's next steps. The US, through the National Science Foundation's Technology, Innovation, and Partnerships directorate, links public research to commercialisation and industry partnerships. The European Union's Horizon Europe programme channels about €9.5 billion (2021-27) into mission-driven R&D, with strong infrastructure and cross-border collaboration. China, meanwhile, embeds R&D in its industrial strategy by investing over 2.5% of GDP in R&D and driving sectoral dominance through targeted tech missions. India needs not replicate these models, but it must internalise their core playbook—patient capital, strong infrastructure, and alignment between policy, research, and industry. The RDI scheme can be a turning point, but only if it is backed by the system that allows innovation to grow. By this, we mean that the scheme must be complemented by a supportive system that facilitates effective implementation and enables sustained innovation outcomes.

The RDI scheme reflects a strategic shift in India's innovation outlook, recasting it from a scientific endeavour to a key pillar of economic competitiveness. Yet, its true value will not lie in the size of the outlay, but in whether it can build the ecosystems, institutions, and incentives that allow innovation to scale up. If India gets this right, it has a shot at not just catching up with global tech leaders, but shaping the frontier itself.

With inputs from Anandita Doda, researcher, Institute for Competitiveness

Building AI for Bharat

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INDIA HAS BEEN making steady progress in its artificial intelligence (AI) efforts, with a democratised approach through "AI for All" that encompasses a supportive policy. The efforts of the government like the IndiaAI Mission, IndiaAI Compute, IndiaAI FutureSkills, IndiaAI Startup Financing, IndiaAI Innovation Centre, IndiaAI Datasets Platform, and IndiaAI Applications Development Initiative are focused in the right direction.

Complementing this are efforts from the start-up ecosystem with the likes of Krutrim and Sarvam AI that are aiming in the direction of large language models (LLMs). Krutrim developed its own foundational LLM trained on a vast data set of Indian languages and contextual data, enabling accurate text generation and conversational AI in various Indian languages. They recently launched "Krutri", an agentic AI assistant. Sarvam AI is focused on making generative AI for Bharat and aims to build the "full-stack" for generative AI. They also launched models like Sarvam-M.

For the first time, India is developing a foundational AI model that will be run entirely on domestic infrastructure—a significant leap towards Atmanirbhar Bharat. And importantly, it will enable the country to develop strategic autonomy in one of the most critical emerging technologies of our time. While India grows in its AI journey there are emerging market access challenges that

could impact the pace and scale, due to geopolitics and issues that may occur in future like US export controls.

India remains in the tier-II category for chip exports, which translates into caps on quantity of advanced chips. The global demand for high-end AI chips is surging, which itself puts pressure on chip manufacturers to meet the demand. The cost of acquiring and maintaining large-scale graphics processing unit infrastructure remains a significant financial hurdle. There may be a need to create a remarkable fund of funds if India has to get anywhere near the global story and maybe explore manufacturing chips for these domestically.

In terms of scale and impact, what could offer a greater opportunity than agriculture in our country to showcase and use the power of AI? With nearly 46.1% of the population engaged in agriculture and allied activities, the use of AI not only makes sense but is also essential to unlock maximum value in the sector. So what can AI do for farmers?

To answer that, we must first understand the complex and evolving challenges they face. From the escalating effects of climate change and shrinking landholdings to degraded resources and

unpredictable market dynamics, farmers are facing a host of issues. Low productivity, especially among smallholders, poses serious risks to farmer incomes, rural stability, and even the nation's food and nutritional security.

Thankfully, meaningful progress has already been made at the intersection of AI and agriculture offering a road map that new kids on the block can learn from. Even conventional sectoral companies like ITC has been doing pioneering work in integrating AI with sustainable farming practices to build a resilient, demand-driven agricultural ecosystem. Their approach doesn't just boost productivity; it aligns with critical national goals such as doubling farmers' incomes and initiatives like More Crop, Per Drop.

At the heart of this transformation is ITC MAARS (Meta Market for Advanced Agricultural Rural Services). It is a first-of-its-kind "physical" platform that blends physical presence with digital intelligence. This platform delivers AI-enabled personalised crop advisories, image-based diagnostics, precision input planning, and real-time marketplace access directly to farmers' fingertips. By equipping farmers with actionable insights and access

to quality inputs and tools, the platform empowers them to make smarter decisions and increase their yields sustainably. In terms of scale, more than two million farmers across 2,050 farmer producer organisations in 11 states have benefited from the initiative by ITC.

By enabling hyper-personalised, conversational access to critical farming knowledge, intelligent platforms should be able to transform Indian agriculture, making it smarter, more sustainable, and future-ready. The endeavour should be focused on delivering relevant actionable insights to Indian farmers across regions and the multitude of languages that they speak.

AI is now taking over key functions and India is geared to leverage its potential—whether it is agriculture, healthcare services, education, urban development, financial services, logistics, mobility, public safety or even empowering environment sustainability.

The generation of yesterday across different strata of society is digital ready. So, can AI development in the country has to take them into consideration. So, can AI progress in our country and deliver for Bharat? Surely it can.

As a nation, we have some of the brightest minds in the world. If AI can be used to boost intelligent agriculture, we can become a self-reliant nation where we can boost farmer incomes and productivity.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Crash report taking cover of clumsy reasons

Apropos of "Half-baked effort" (FE, July 15), the preliminary report of the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau on the AI171 crash has created more flutter from furnishing the facts and causes which triggered the ill-fated incident. The blame on disengagement of the switch, a critical component in unregulated fuel supply to the engines, appears to be taking

the cover of flimsy reasons. The fact that a few hours before the crash, the same aircraft had landed in Ahmedabad from Delhi needs to be considered before arriving at any decision. Although aviation authorities are the experts to analyse causes, and are expected to take into account the chronology leading to the accident, the logbook on the routine after the landing of the aircraft from Delhi also needs to be borne in mind. Making conclusions before

completing the investigation in full is not logical. —RV Baskaran, Pune

More questions than answers

Apropos of "Half-baked effort" (FE, July 15), the inordinately long period to decode the black box of the ill-fated AI171 flight had already raised suspicions of deliberate delay. The preliminary findings have blurred the

picture more than it has clarified. While the full investigation shouldn't be rushed, there has to be some time frame for the same. Otherwise it could continue for a long period of time and deliberate attempts could be made to shift the blame to the deceased pilots. This could also be a ploy to take the heat off the aircraft manufacturer. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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