

The silent crisis of rat-hole mining

In January 29, the Gauhati High Court took suo motu cognisance of the mining tragedy in Umrang, Assam. The January 6 mine flooding in Umrang, which trapped nine labourers and killed at least four, was yet another preventable tragedy in a series of accidents in the north-east. For instance, in Meghalaya, at least 30 miners have lost their lives in the past five years due to similar accidents. Weak enforcement has allowed these disasters to persist, with influential individuals operating illegal mines unchecked. Rather than taking preventive action, authorities respond only after lives are lost.

Why illegal mining persists

Coal mining in Meghalaya and Assam, once a small-scale practice, expanded dangerously in the 1980s due to industrial demand from West Bengal and Bangladesh. The region's terrain made mechanised extraction difficult, leading to a proliferation of rat-hole mines. This hazardous method involves digging narrow tunnels that are barely large enough for a person to crawl through, posing significant risks to miners. Rat-hole mining occurs in two forms: side-cutting, which follows coal seams along hill slopes, and box-cutting, where miners dig pits up to 400 feet deep and extract coal horizontally, forming a tunnel network. This technique, prevalent in the north-east, particularly Meghalaya and the borders of Assam, poses significant safety and environmental hazards. The mining period stretches between November and March. Migrant labourers, often trapped in cycles of debt, are lured by 'Sardars' (labour agents) under exploitative conditions that amount to bonded labour. Reports highlight that children are trafficked into these mines due to their ability to navigate the narrow tunnels, making them easy targets for abuse. There are approximately



Utkarsh Yadav
Law student at Dr. Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University, Lucknow



Alokita
Law student at Campus Law Centre, University of Delhi

26,000 unclosed mine openings, each employing up to 200 workers in shifts, putting thousands of labourers at daily risk in hazardous conditions.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) banned rat-hole mining on April 17, 2014, due to environmental degradation and unsafe working conditions. This decision was later upheld by the Supreme Court in *State of Meghalaya v. All Dimas Students Union* (2019). However, enforcement remains weak, as many illegal mines operate under the influence of powerful bureaucrats and coal mafias. Whistle blowers, including local officials and activists, face threats while authorities fail to hold perpetrators accountable.

Several States indirectly enable rat-hole mining by exploiting regulatory loopholes. They are often under pressure from coal mafias and local politicians who profit from these illegal operations. For instance, the Meghalaya government has attempted to secure an exemption under Schedule 6, Paragraph 12A(b) of the Constitution to regulate coal mining on its own terms, bypassing national laws such as the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 (MMDR Act). The State Assembly even passed a resolution seeking this exemption, but the resolution remains unapproved. Economic and political interests drive this effort – coal mining generates revenue and employment – while powerful individuals with stakes in the industry resist enforcement of the ban. However, under Section 23C of the MMDR Act, Meghalaya is obligated to prevent illegal mining. Yet, it has failed to create State-level laws to enforce the 2014 NGT ban. As a result, illegal mining continues.

Assam too has failed to prevent illegal rat-hole mining, leading to recurring tragedies. Despite the NGT ban and Supreme Court directives, the lack of stringent State regulations allows such

operations to persist. If the State government is unable or unwilling to act, the Union government must step in, as it did in Karnataka's Bellary region in 2011, when large-scale illegal mining forced the Supreme Court and the Centre to impose a ban, with the latter using its powers under Section 30 of the MMDR Act.

A multi-faceted approach

Now, with the Gauhati High Court taking suo motu cognisance of the Assam tragedy, there is renewed hope for accountability and action. However, unless governments take proactive measures rather than simply reacting after lives are lost, judicial directives will remain ineffective. The failure of Assam and Meghalaya to enforce the law is not just administrative negligence but a violation of Article 21 of the Constitution (right to life).

To tackle the menace of rat-hole mining, a multi-faceted approach is essential. First, policy reforms must criminalise rat-hole mining under the MMDR Act, with stricter penalties under Section 21 and enhanced monitoring mechanisms. Ensuring compliance requires incorporating the ban into State-specific regulations under Section 23C of the Act. This would allow States to craft localised frameworks tailored to their unique challenges, establish accountability measures, and close enforcement gaps. Second, alternative livelihoods for mining-dependent communities, such as eco-tourism, must be prioritised to reduce reliance on illegal activities. Third, technology can play a transformative role. Satellite-based monitoring can track mining operations, improve transparency, and curb illegal practices. The Ministry of Mines' Mining Surveillance System could enhance enforcement, as it did in Karnataka. Empowering local communities through stronger enforcement of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and requiring their consent for mining can promote inclusivity.

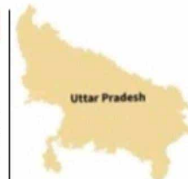
Stronger State laws, technological surveillance, and alternative livelihoods must replace reactionary governance

A studied silence over vandalism

Ambedkar statues have been vandalised in UP, but Mayawati remains mum

STATE OF PLAY

Mayank Kumar
mayank.kumar@thehindu.co.in



In Republic Day, a man attempted to vandalise a life-sized statue of B.R. Ambedkar, adjacent to the Golden Temple, in Amritsar, Punjab. When images were circulated showing him climbing atop the statue with a hammer, there was widespread condemnation. The Punjab police invoked sedition charges against the accused under Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

Meanwhile, in Uttar Pradesh, where roughly 21% of the population is Dalit, at least 13 Ambedkar statues have been vandalised in the last four and a half months. These incidents have not drawn any public attention.

The first case was reported on October 3, 2024, in Sultanpur district's Belsada village under the Kotwali Dehat police station. Locals, mostly Dalits, organised a protest demanding action against the culprits. The administration repaired the statue and the police launched a probe to identify the miscreants. However, a second incident occurred just the next day in Ballia district under the Phephana police station limits, and the third took place on October 5 in Lucknow, under the Kakori police station limits. More than a month later, on November 16, the fourth reported incident took place in Gonda district's Samarapur village. A few days later, on November 22, there was another reported case of vandalism in Jasapur village, under the Rasulabad police station limits in Kanpur. Instances where also reported in November and December

from Ballia, an upper caste-dominated district. The next few incidents took place in January and February this year in the Varanasi, Mirzapur, Aligarh, Barabanki, and Baghpat districts. In the latest case dated February 15 in Baghpat, when responding to protests, the administration promised to reinstall the statue.

All these incidents came to light in the morning, which means they took place during the night. The police have registered complaints under sections of the law dealing with damage to public property against unknown persons, who remain at large. In some cases, the damaged statues have been repaired by the public, who raised funds. To pacify the complainants, the administration has also promised to install cameras in parks and other public spaces to deter vandalism.

While these episodes point to the failure of law-enforcement agencies in preventing the vandalism of a statue of a Dalit icon, they equally point to a weakness in the political and social mobilisation of Dalits. This was not the case in U.P. during the 1990s and 2000s when the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was a prominent player in the State's electoral landscape. The BSP would raise Dalit issues, create awareness about their rights, and organise demonstrations over the community's concerns. The party installed

hundreds of Ambedkar statues in public spaces as a marker of the community's identity. The Bahujan movement flourished, with the BSP forming the government four times in U.P. However, in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the BSP secured only 9.39% of the vote share – its lowest in almost three decades. Its electoral fortunes have changed for the worse over the last 10 years. The party lacks both ambition and organisational heft to make a difference.

Dalit activists have blamed feudal elements for the vandalism. They believe that "anti-social elements" are trying to demoralise the community by attacking their most important icon. Even as Dalit social mobilisation on the ground remains weak, there have been voices on social media condemning these incidents. Many people have pointed out that Ambedkar is not just a Dalit icon, but also the architect of India's Constitution and so an attack against him is an attack against the Constitution and the values it upholds.

Following the incident in Amritsar, Ms. Mayawati called the incident "shameful" and demanded immediate and stringent legal action against such "anti-social elements". She also accused the State's Aam Aadmi Party government of negligence. However, in U.P., where there have been at least 13 similar incidents, the BSP chief has not said a word.

When asked about the vandalism, the Opposition parties, particularly the Congress, claimed that these acts were a fallout of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) "politics of hate", which has emboldened feudal elements. But why U.P.'s most vocal Dalit voice for decades chooses to maintain a studied silence over these acts is both disappointing and curious.

The perception shift against the AAP in the Delhi election

After enjoying 58.1% support in early January, the Aam Aadmi Party experienced a drastic fall

DATA POINT

Subhash Tandan

The 2025 Delhi Assembly election was nothing short of a political turning point, reshaping the electoral landscape of India's capital in ways few had anticipated. Data from Codemo and PeoplesPulse's survey reveal major shifts in voter behaviour, gender-based voting patterns, and the underlying factors that influenced the outcome at the polls.

The survey was conducted over more than two months with a sample size of 30,000. Samples were collected from a telephone survey. Post-stratification, a statistical modelling technique was employed where a large poll sample was combined with Census data and analysed using multi-level regression to estimate voter preferences.

Peaks and troughs

In the early days of campaigning, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) remained ahead of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in perception vote share (voters' perception of which party would win), indicating that a larger section of voters believed it could return to power.

The AAP's perception vote share surged in the initial days following the announcement of schemes such as the Mahila Samman Yojana and Sanjeevani Yojana, rising to 58.1% till January 1 (Chart D). However, its fortunes started declining after the BJP's campaign machinery was set in motion ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first rally on January 5. From January 1, AAP's perception vote share margin over the BJP dropped from +19.8% points to -1.8% points.

The AAP's vote share peaked at 49.2% on January 1 and steadily declined thereafter, dropping to 40.5% by February 4. Meanwhile, the BJP and Congress improved their vote share by 4.7% points and 2.3% points respectively to reach

48.5% and 7% over the same period (Chart 2).

The AAP had huge electoral success in 2015 and 2020 banking on its promise of providing corruption-free governance and populist schemes. In 2025, the BJP and Congress capitalised on the alleged corruption in the Delhi excise policy, significantly damaging the AAP's corruption-free party image. Additionally, the BJP was successful in convincing voters that it wouldn't stop the welfare schemes and financial incentives provided by the AAP government if voted to power.

Female and male voters

The AAP announced the Mahila Samman Yojana scheme and opened registrations for it, which provided the party with an initial boost with female voters. Till January 10, the party received more than 67% of the female vote share, whereas the BJP managed 28%.

However, all the gains were undone in the final phase, with the AAP's vote share among women dropping to 50.2%, while the BJP and Congress gained at its expense, rising to 41.8% and 6.1%, respectively. This decline could be attributed to the lack of financial assistance for female voters before the election, unlike in the Maharashtra and Jharkhand elections. Additionally, the BJP and Congress countered the AAP by promising similar schemes and financial incentives. In the survey, the AAP's vote share among female voters was 50.2% in 2025 compared to 62.4% in the 2020 Delhi election.

The BJP had an edge among male voters from the beginning and increased its margin over the AAP with time. In the survey, the BJP increased its vote share margin over the AAP from +4.3% points on January 1 to +17.5% points on February 4. The AAP had a 59% vote share among male voters in the 2020 election, which declined to 35.5% in 2025.

The AAP managed to secure more than 55% of the general cate-

gory vote share in the 2020 Delhi election. However, in 2025, the BJP got 57.3% of the general category vote share and the AAP's vote share dwindled to 31.9%.

Other Backward Classes (OBC) votes were traditionally split between different parties. However, during this election, the BJP gained ground among OBCs with a vote share of 48.6%, while the AAP got 41.1%. The AAP had an initial lead of +5.4% points over the BJP on January 1, but its margin with the BJP reduced significantly to -7.5% points by February 4.

In the final phase of the election, AAP witnessed a significant decline in the Scheduled Caste (SC) vote share while the BJP and Congress made gains, largely due to a targeted outreach towards SC voters. On February 4, the AAP's lead over the BJP narrowed to +8.5% points, a sharp drop from its margin of +25.9% points on January 1.

Voters with origins in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, also known as Purvanchali voters, were a decisive factor in many constituencies. The AAP had a lead of +3.5% points over the BJP a month before the election. A month later, the AAP capitalised to Purvanchali voters as its margin with the BJP reduced to -16.7% points (Chart 3).

Impact of Congress

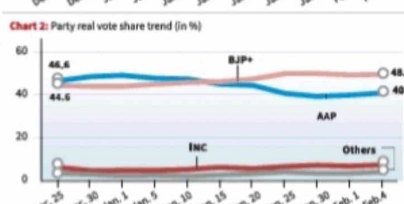
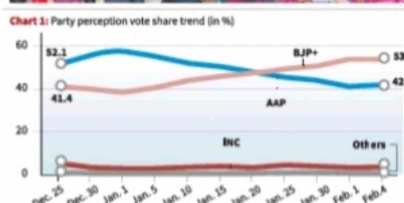
While the Congress was not seen as a major player in this election, its impact was felt in key constituencies where it managed to cut into the AAP's voter base. Among SC voters, its vote share was 7.8%, an improvement from 6.1% in the 2020 Delhi election survey.

Among Muslim voters, the Congress' vote share was 19%, a significant improvement from 12% in the 2020 Delhi election survey. Though the AAP managed to win six out of the seven Muslim-dominated seats, its win margin dropped significantly.

Subhash Tandan is Director and co-founder at Codemo Technology Solutions

Winds of change

The charts are sourced from a survey conducted by Codemo and PeoplesPulse



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 17, 1975

PLO must accept Israel: Kissinger

Bonn, Feb. 16: The U.S. Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger, and the West German Foreign Minister, Mr. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, stressed their identity of views on the situation in the Mediterranean, Cyprus, Israel and the conference on security and co-operation in Europe following their meeting to-day at Gymnich Castle near Bonn.

Dr. Kissinger, who spoke to journalists briefly after the 90-minute meeting with Mr. Genscher, said there was no question of engaging in a dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as long as it did not recognise Israel's right to existence.

Mr. Genscher said that Bonn's point of view was identical.

Dr. Kissinger said last night that Saudi Arabia had assured him that it supported his approach towards peace in West Asia.

He told reporters when he arrived here after his West Asia tour that he had been given the assurance by the Saudi Oil Minister, Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, before he left Riyadh yesterday.

Dr. Kissinger also took up with King Faisal of Saudi Arabia yesterday an American plan for long-term oil deals between producers and consumers before flying in here to discuss energy problems with West German leaders.

U.S. officials were guarded in describing King Faisal's reaction to Dr. Kissinger's "floor price" proposal during their 90-minute meeting.

However, newsmen were told that the King did not register any complaints about it. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil exporter and produces almost nine million barrels a day.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 17, 1925

New sailing club for the city

Madras, Feb. 17: The New Sailing Club, which has been shifted from the Boat Basin to the South Quay of the Madras Harbour, was opened by his Excellency Viscount Goschen yesterday evening. After cruising in the harbour from the anchor steps for a little while, His Excellency opened the Sailing Club. There was a large and distinguished gathering present on the occasion including the Vicountess Goschen, His Excellency the Rear Admiral Richmond, Naval Commander in Chief, Mr. Anderson Stuart of R.M.S. "Southampton" Col. Ralfour and a number of members of the Sailing Club.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of registered drones in India till January 2025

29,501 The national capital has the maximum number of registered drones at 4,882, as per data from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation. After New Delhi, the highest numbers of registered drones are in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. PTI

People from Punjab in the first two batches of deportees from U.S.

95 Over 40% of the deportees in the first two batches were from Punjab. On February 5, 104 illegal Indian immigrants landed at the Amritsar airport of which 30 were from Punjab, along with 33 each from Haryana and Gujarat. The second batch of deportees arrived on Saturday night. PTI

Drones launched by Russia during overnight air attacks

143 The Ukrainian military said on Sunday that it shot down 95 drones and that 46 others didn't reach their targets due to electronic countermeasures. At least one person was injured and the attack also started a fire in a critical infrastructure building in the city of Mykolaiv. REUTERS

The discontinued U.S. grants allocated for voter turnout in India

21 in \$ million. This has been discontinued by the Elon Musk led U.S. Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). DOGE has in total announced cuts of upto \$486 million. It also cancelled \$29 million allocated to "strengthening political landscape in Bangladesh". PTI

Number of militants arrested in Manipur in the past two days

11 On Sunday, the police said that seven of them were suspected cadres of the Kuki National Army (KNA). The KNA is a signatory of the tripartite pact signed in 2008 with the United Peoples' Front (UPF) and the Kuki National Organisation (KNO). PTI

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How does a President's rule function?

Why did the President of India issue a proclamation in Manipur after Chief Minister Biren Singh resigned? What are the different kinds of emergencies? Is a national emergency and President's rule the same? Has this power been misused by the Union?

EXPLAINER

Kartikey Singh

The story so far:

On February 13, four days after Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh's resignation, the Union government announced that President's rule has been implemented in the violence-hit State. A notification from the Ministry of Home Affairs stated that President Droupadi Murmu was satisfied that "a situation has arisen in which the government of that State cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution."

Why has it been imposed?

The violence between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, ongoing since May 2023, has claimed above 250 lives and displaced over 60,000 people. The conflict originated from the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which the Kukis opposed, fearing loss of job opportunities and other affirmative actions meant for STs. A political crisis erupted in the State after Mr. Singh resigned on February 9, and the State BJP leadership struggled to reach a consensus on his successor.

What does the Constitution say?

Emergency provisions, inspired by the German Constitution and outlined in Part XVIII of the Indian Constitution, protect India's sovereignty, unity and security. They empower the Central government to address extraordinary crises by temporarily assuming control to ensure stability and safeguard the democratic framework. The Constitution provides for three types of emergencies – national (Article 352), State (Article 356) and financial (Article 360).

In Manipur, the President has proclaimed a "state emergency" – popularly known as "President's Rule" or "Constitutional Emergency" – by exercising powers under Article 356. This fulfils the Union's obligation under Article 355 to protect States against 'external aggression' and 'internal disturbance' (such as separatist or sectarian violence or calamities beyond a State's control) and to ensure that State governments operate as per the Constitution. When a State's "constitutional machinery" fails due to non-performance or malperformance, Article 356(i) empowers the President to issue a proclamation – upon receiving a report from the Governor or otherwise – if she is satisfied that the State government cannot function constitutionally. This effectively transfers all executive functions of the State to the Centre and legislative functions to Parliament while leaving the High Court's (HC) powers unaffected. Additionally, Article 365 provides that if a State fails to comply with any Union directions under constitutional provisions, the President may declare a "Constitutional Emergency."

As per Clause 3 of Article 356, the proclamation must be laid before each House of Parliament, and unless approved by a 'simple majority' in both Houses, it ceases after two months. Once approved, it remains effective for six months from the proclamation date, with further six-month extensions requiring additional Parliamentary approval. Renewal beyond one year is allowed only if two conditions are met – an emergency has been declared in the country or any part of the State, and if the Election Commission certifies that President's rule is necessary due to difficulties in



At a standstill: Personnel keep vigil after security measures were increased after the imposition of President's rule in Manipur, in Imphal, on February 14. PTI

conducting State elections. However, in no case can the proclamation remain effective for more than three years, and the President may revoke or vary it at any time by a subsequent proclamation.

How is a 'constitutional emergency' different from a 'national emergency'?

Article 352 governs the proclamation of a "national emergency," which has been invoked thrice – during the 1962 India-China war, the 1971 armed conflict with Pakistan, and in 1975 on grounds of "internal disturbance." In 1975, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared the emergency after the Allahabad High Court, in *The State of Uttar Pradesh versus Raj Narain* (1975), found her guilty of "electoral malpractices" and debarred her from holding any elected post.

Unlike a "State emergency," proclaiming a "national emergency" requires that the President be satisfied that India's security – or any part of its territory – is threatened by war, external aggression, or armed rebellion. The 44th Constitutional amendment (1978) introduced multiple safeguards to prevent misuse. It replaced "internal disturbance" with "armed rebellion", mandated a written recommendation from the Cabinet (rather than just the Prime Minister), and shortened the parliamentary approval window from two months to one month. It also clarified that Articles 20 and 21 cannot be suspended, and that the President must revoke the proclamation if the Lok Sabha passes a resolution disapproving it. Crucially, the amendment restored judicial review of the President's satisfaction in proclaiming an emergency, a safeguard removed by the 38th Constitutional amendment (1975).

Unlike a "constitutional emergency" (which can last up to three years), a "national emergency" has no time limit. Additionally, while the President's rule (Article 356) requires a 'simple majority'

for parliamentary approval, a national emergency needs a 'special majority'. In a national emergency, the State executive and legislature continue to function, whereas under President's Rule, the State executive is dismissed, and the legislature is suspended or dissolved. However, the Manipur Assembly, which has a tenure till 2027, has not been dissolved but is placed under "suspended animation". This means that the Assembly is temporarily "paused", allowing its revival if 'political stability' is restored.

Does it affect fundamental rights?

President's rule does not affect citizens' fundamental rights, unlike a national emergency, where under Article 358, freedoms under Article 19 become inoperative, and the President may suspend other fundamental rights, except Articles 20 and 21. Under President's Rule, the President acquires extraordinary powers, with the Governor, on her behalf, administering the State with assistance from the Chief Secretary or advisers appointed by the President. Additionally, Article 357 allows Parliament to confer legislative power on the President and authorise delegation to another authority while also giving the President power to sanction expenditure from the State's Consolidated Fund.

How often has it been imposed?

Though Dr. B.R. Ambedkar hoped it would remain a "dead letter," President's rule has been imposed nearly 134 times across 29 States and UTs since the Constitution took effect in 1950, reflecting its dual role as both a crisis-management tool and a politically contentious measure. The very first application of Article 356 occurred in June 1951 in Punjab. Manipur is tied with Uttar Pradesh for the most frequent imposition of President's Rule, at 10 each – driven by chronic political instability – with Manipur's latest imposition bringing its total to 11. The longest President's Rule in

Manipur lasted two years and 157 days (1969-1972). Jammu & Kashmir holds the record for the longest cumulative duration, over 12 years (4,668 days), due to militancy and separatist movements, followed by Punjab (over 10 years, 3,878 days) and Puducherry (over seven years, 2,739 days).

What has the SC said about the use and misuse of President's rule?

For a long time, courts upheld the Centre's frequent unusual imposition of President's rule. However, the landmark *S.R. Bommai versus Union of India* (1994) judgment redefined these powers. Referencing the Sarkaria Commission's recommendation that Article 356 be used only as a last resort, the SC observed, "The Constitution of India has created a federation but with a bias in favour of the Centre. ... But that does not mean that States are mere appendages of the Centre". It also highlighted the Commission's points that "constitutional machinery" could fail due to political crises, internal subversion or fiscal breakdown, among other factors.

Further, the SC held that the President's power under Article 356 is conditional, not absolute, and that any proclamation is subject to judicial review. Both the SC and HCs can strike it down if found *mala fide* or based on irrelevant or extraneous grounds. The top court further clarified that the President cannot dissolve the assembly without Parliament's approval and that the Centre must first issue a warning notice to the erring State, seeking an explanation. Once proclaimed, the State government has to go, as two governments in one sphere is impermissible. Moreover, the SC clarified that President's rule must be invoked only for breakdowns of "constitutional machinery" (distinct from ordinary law-and-order failures) and never for political gains.

Kartikey Singh is a final year student at RGNUL, Patiala, Punjab.

THE GIST

Emergency provisions, inspired by the German Constitution and outlined in Part XVIII of the Indian Constitution, protect India's sovereignty, unity and security.

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MAHARASHTRA



People take part in a protest against the Pune Riverfront Development Project; (right) people hug trees to show they don't want them to be cut down. EMMAHUAL YOGINI

On the waterfront, people protest a PROMENADE

A ₹4,727-crore riverfront development project in Pune, Maharashtra's IT hub, has been seeing opposition from citizens for about seven years. The project, planned by Bimal Patel, the architect of India's Parliament, envisages a continuous promenade on the 44-km stretch of the city's three interlinked rivers. **Vinaya Deshpande Pandit** delves into the ongoing protests, the litigations, and Pune Municipal Corporation's plans



Mom, what is a Devrai?" "Devrai means sacred grove, beta (child). These are untouched forests. Yes, we are in a Devrai."

"Who would ever cut down a Devrai, Mom?"

This is a conversation between a schoolgirl and her mother at the February 9 Chipko protest in Pune, against the Riverfront Development Project. The plan is to 'beautify' the 44-kilometre riverfront of three of Pune's contiguous rivers: the Mula, Mutha, and Mula-Mutha, all at a cost of ₹4,727 crore.

At the Sunday protest, about 800 Pune-kars – senior citizens, school children, families, civil services aspirants, IT professionals, consultants, activists, social club members – walked to Ram Nadi's sacred grove in Baner, about 13 km from the city centre. Sacred groves are patches of vegetation protected by local communities, who worship deities or ancestors there. They provide ecological protection to parts of these forests.

People hugged the trees marked with red numbers. Some were overwhelmed, some angry. A woman in her 20s couldn't control her tears. "They can't speak for themselves. But we can," she says, as she holds a tree.

Pune's 2025 Chipko protest was a throwback to the 1970s ecological movement in what is now Uttarakhand, when women clung to trees so that loggers could not get to them.

Pune-kars are protesting the way in which the Riverfront Development Project has been envisaged. The project, designed on the lines of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project by architect Bimal Patel's consultancy, HCP Design, has faced both opposition and litigation by groups of Pune-kars. Some have submitted memorandums to the administration, some have gone to court.

While the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) has claimed that the marked trees will not be felled, people say trees are being felled on the opposite bank of the Ram river, a feeder to the three main rivers. Here, the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation has begun work on the project. The corporation says the opposition to the project has no merit, and the development will, in fact, give back the river to Pune-kars. Currently, the river resembles a nullah.

Tree hugging
Environmental groups have roped in experts and college students to geotag the trees individually, so the authorities do not later deny their presence. Citizens' groups have also suggested alternative plans for the comprehensive development of the riverfront.

"We are not against riverfront development. All we are asking for is an environmentally conscious, sensible approach, which moves beyond cosmetic measures. We want a living river, not concrete slabs around a dead waterbody," says Shailaja Deshpande, founder-director of Jeevina Living River Foundation that works on reviving rivers.

She asks that authorities work on removing encroachments and rejuvenating the river ecosystem, rather than building promenades and chopping down trees, adding to the concretisation of Pune.

The PMC says the rejuvenation of the river ecosystem will be done through sewage treatment. "Why should there be opposition to river-



We are not against riverfront development. We think river rejuvenation should be done. All we are asking for is an environmentally conscious, sensible approach, which moves beyond cosmetic measures

SHAILAJA DESHPANDE
Founder-director,
Jeevina Living
River Foundation

front development?" says a senior PMC official.

Marathi film-maker Kiran Yagnopapit asks that riparian zones be protected along the river. "We need a national policy for the protection of rivers, a policy which will be implemented, a policy which doesn't just exist on paper," he adds.

Standing in the sacred grove on the banks of the Ram river, the site of the protest, lawyer Asim Sarode says, "The PMC and the PMRD (Pune Metropolitan Region Development Authority) had told the National Green Tribunal (NGT) that this river does not exist."

The National Green Tribunal takes on court cases relating to environmental protection. "That is when petitioner Sarang Yadwadkar had to submit maps to prove to the court that the river did exist," Sarode says.

In 2019, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change gave the riverfront project the go-ahead. Yadwadkar, an activist, filed an environment interest litigation (EIL) before the NGT in 2021 challenging this. However, the ministry gave a fresh approval in 2024. He has again filed an EIL against this. Yadwadkar has also moved the Bombay High Court citing the illegal demarcation of flood lines in Pune's city development plan maps.

The blue flood line demarcates the area likely to be inundated by the highest flood that can be expected during a 25-year period. The red flood line demarcates the area likely to be inundated during the worst flood in 100 years. The corporation says the project will reduce flooding risk and that the blue and red lines need to be redrawn.

A shortfall in trust and transparency

One of the protesting voices is that of education reformist Sonam Wangchuk, who is here from Ladakh. He was the inspiration behind a character from 3 Idiots, a Hindi movie that received both box office and critical acclaim. As Wangchuk walks among the protestors, there is a wave of excitement.

"People's wishes and their choices need to be conveyed to the policy makers. I understand that they (the government) are trying to do this for people. But if the people are not interested in more concrete, if they are more interested in water and air, then the authorities should consider this. In a democratic country, the people's voice is supreme," he says, at the protest site.



A patch of the Riverfront Development project which is completed near the Bund Garden area in Pune. EMMAHUAL YOGINI

Madhavi Kolte, who runs the non-profit Jeeva Bhavana, which works in plant-based agriculture, claims that 22,000 trees are going to be chopped for the project. "A concrete promenade will be constructed. The authorities are not taking our say into consideration."

The PMC however, says that as per the approved plan, 10,800 trees will be chopped, and 11,000 relocated. "We have already planted over 5,000 trees. The trees' survival rate is 100%," Yuvraj Deshmukh, chief engineer of the PMC, says.

Meanwhile Patel's firm says, "Most of the large native existing trees along the riverbank have been retained and integrated with the proposed embankment," though it is unclear how many these are.

On its website, the PMC says that the river "is losing its importance", hence it had initiated the Riverfront Development Project. HCP Design, Planning and Management Pvt. Ltd. has prepared the project report and is implementing it as well. The three connected rivers have widths varying from 80 metres to 250 metres.

"The draft report of the project was prepared in 2016. It was finalised in 2018 and the work started in 2022," says Bipin Shinde, executive engineer of the Riverfront Development Project. The riverfront has been divided into 11 stretches. Work has begun on three, with over 80% completed across two stretches.

Some of the objectives of the project are: reducing the risk of flooding, retaining and replenishing water, cleaning the river and making it pollution free, creating a continuous public space along the river, connecting and enhancing surrounding heritage places and buildings, integrating slums, and ensuring more responsive and context-specific development.

One part of the project requires the river to be 'pinched', narrowing it down, thereby increasing its flow, similar to what architect Patel is doing on the Sabarmati.

"We want to ape what Europe does to its rivers. But the biggest difference is that European rivers are perennial. There isn't a great difference between their peak flow and lean flow. That is not the case with us," says Yadwadkar. These parts of the river can then be used for water sports and boating activities. Environmentalists fear that the narrowed embankment will cause

floods and that the four barrages to be built will slow down river cleaning.

Parallel to the riverfront project is another run by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This involves the construction of 11 new sewage treatment plants (STPs) for the city. Experts point out that even if all function at full capacity, they will not be enough to process Pune city's sewage. They say that a fraction of the funds from riverfront beautification will help clean up the black, stench-ridden river.

Yadwadkar says that the PMC has not taken the people into confidence. "In 2018, the general body of the PMC was given a CD with 2,500 pages of the project report at about 10.30 one night. Despite repeated requests by many members to give them eight to 10 days to study the project before clearing it, the project was approved the next day," he says. The general body members are elected by the people.

"In 2022, the NGT asked the PMC to get an amended environmental clearance, and not to start work until they did. But the PMC started work on three stretches," said Yadwadkar. He says the newly formed Social Impact Assessment Committee constituted in August 2024, completely neglected the earlier conditions for environmental clearance.

The PMC says all clearance is in place and that a local tree expert has now been roped in to consult the PMC about the native trees to be planted on the promenade.

On the riverfront

At Bund Garden, where work on Stretches 10 and 11 is over 80% complete, visitors smell the river before they see it. The water is black, and a handful of migratory birds from the neglected Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary nearby float by in the sewage-heavy water that is infested by water hyacinths.

"We have been trying to deal with the water hyacinth problem for years now. But even when we clean it here, it flows down from the upper side, from outside the limits of Pune," says junior engineer Vitthal Mule. He indicates a concrete ramp that to give a dumper truck access to carry away the cleared water hyacinth.

Mule walks proudly down the eight-metre-wide promenade. He says there is now a three-metre-wide soil-based running track. "Only the curb, the guide wall, the toe wall, the ghats, and the viewing decks are made of concrete. The rest is all soil and rocks," he says.

On the embankment, there are rocks put into a metal mesh, to form a gabion wall, protecting the coast. "During the recent flood, not a single rock in the gabion wall moved. We were really worried during the monsoon, as this was the first test for the project," Mule says.

He says despite the state of the river, people have begun to use the riverfront. "Before, these areas were not accessible to people, because of illegal encroachments and anti-social elements. Now, when people feel the stench of the river, they will ask for better quality of water," he says, confidently. A flowerbed of local scented flowers has been planted to take the attention away from the stench.

In response to questions, HCP Design promises a "green embankment" that is "a natural river riparian zone which will revive and enhance the natural biodiversity and ecosystem of the river".

vinaya.deshpande@thehindu.co.in



To be felled: Forest Department officials have identified and numbered the trees to be cut for the proposed Sharavati Pumped Storage Project in parts of Sagar taluk of Shivamogga district and Honnavar taluk of Uttara Kannada district. SATHISH G.T.

Sharavati valley project: Meeting growing power demand vs. keeping forests pristine

While officials argue that the proposed Sharavati Pumped Storage Project does only 'minimal' damage to the forests, environmentalists contend that cutting 'even one tree' in the Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot, will be disastrous. **Sathish G.T.** tunes into both sides of the debate

The Sharavati river that takes birth at Ambutirtha in Tirthahalli taluk of Shivamogga district flows for about 130 km through some of the most scenic and ecologically diverse regions of Karnataka in the Western Ghats before reaching the Arabian Sea. It has also been a major source of electricity production in Karnataka. The river water keeps the power-generating stations – Sharavathi Generating Station (1,035 MW), Mahatma Gandhi Hydroelectric Station (139.2 MW), Linganamakki Dam Power House (55 MW), and Gerusoppa Dam Power House (240 MW) – active. For decades, these stations have been contributing millions of units of power to Karnataka at a relatively lower cost than thermal power units. Over the decades, projects along this river have often been a bone of contention between environmentalists and the governments in power.

Now, Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd. (KPCL) has proposed exploiting the pumped storage power potential of the Sharavati valley. The project has been planned utilising the two existing reservoirs in the valley to generate another 2,000 MW.

However, with the project site falling within the pristine forests of the Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot, the KPCL has attracted the wrath of environmentalists. Many people in both Shivamogga and the neighbouring Uttara Kannada district have raised serious concerns about the damage the project could cause to the rich flora and fauna and warned the KPCL intensifying their protests if it went ahead with the project.

On the other hand, KPCL officials say the project's impact on the forest is minimal and the agency will take care not to disturb animals, including lion-tailed macaque, a primate whose single largest population is found in the region. The project implementing agency says that as a major part of the construction will take place underground, the damage caused to the forest cover will be minimal.

Recently, the Karnataka State Board for Wildlife gave conditional approval for the project. It asked the KPCL to reduce the number of trees to be cut by 50%. The agency has to devise strategies to minimise the damage and get approval. However, the agency is yet to get clearance from the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF & CC) and the National Board for Wildlife.

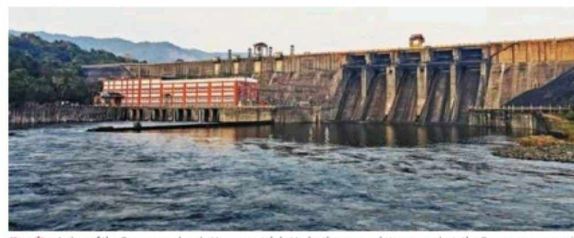
Why this project

The demand for power has been growing. With the decision to supply power to irrigation pump sets during the daytime, the demand peaks around 11 a.m. At present, the peak demand is around 17,500 MW and it is expected to increase gradually. According to the resource adequacy plan for Karnataka, the compound annual growth rate between 2023 and 2031 will be 3.93%. As per the demand projection of Karnataka Power Transmission Corporation Ltd. (KPTCL), by 2031-32, the State will require 1,20,778 million units, and the peak demand will touch 23,058 MW.

Considering the constant increase in demand, the Karnataka government has to strengthen its grid. Meanwhile, the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), which works under the Union Ministry of Energy, assessed the on-river pumped storage hydroelectric potential in India in 2023. Chairperson of the CEA, Ghanashyam Prasad, in his forward to the study, says, "India is on the path toward clean energy transition, with an aim to

Without going through the DPR, how can we challenge the project when they convene a public hearing?

SHANKAR SHARMA, an expert who has worked in the power sector in India and abroad



Key site: A view of the Gerusoppa dam in Honnavar taluk. Under the pumped storage project, the Gerusoppa reservoir will be connected to the Talakalale balancing reservoir with a water conductor system to generate power. SATHISH G.T.

Trees to be cut

Forest division and number of trees			
Sagar	Shivamogga Wildlife	Honnavar	Total
745	1,518	13,756	16,041

Land required for project			
Forest area	Non-forest area	Total	
54,155 hectares (including 19.98 ha underground)	88,608 hectares	142,763 hectares	

produce 50% capacity from non-fossil sources by 2030." The CEA has planned to generate 500 GW of power from renewable sources by 2030. As per the potential study, two projects – Sharavati Pumped Storage Project (PSP) and Varahi PSP (1,500 MW) – were listed from Karnataka.

What the proposal says

The State government in its 2024-25 Budget proposed to increase its installed power generation capacity from 32,000 MW to 60,000 MW in the next seven years. Of the existing installed capacity, around 15,630 MW is from renewable energy. However, power generation through solar panels and windmills depends on weather conditions. Hence the KPCL has proposed to take up the PSP in the Sharavati valley to manage the peak-hour demand.

The Sharavati valley has Linganamakki, Gerusoppa, and Talakalale dams. Linganamakki is the major reservoir with the capacity to store 151 tmcft of water. Talakalale reservoir acts as a balancing reservoir, where the water level is maintained to ensure the power generation in the Sharavathi Generating Station is not disrupted. Under the PSP, the plan is to connect Gerusoppa and Talakalale reservoirs with a water conductor system, with a 7-km-long tunnel. When there is excess power, water will be lifted from the lower reservoir – Gerusoppa – to the upper reservoir (Talakalale). When there is a high demand for power, water will be used to generate power and contribute to the grid. The KPCL has proposed to

construct a power station with eight units, each of 250 MW capacity, with reversible Francis pump turbines.

The project will be spread over Shivamogga and Uttara Kannada districts. The forest area required for the project falls under Sagar division, Shivamogga Wildlife Division, and Honnavar division. The total land required is 142,764 hectares, including 54,155 hectares of forest area.

Besides that, 88,608 hectares of non-forest land is required for the project. The KPCL approached the MoEF & CC for forest clearance, as per the Forest Conservation Act, in November 2023. It sought the approval of the wildlife board in November 2023. The CEA cleared it in September 2024 and the State wildlife board gave conditional approval in January 2025.

KPCL officials have estimated the project cost at ₹8,644 crore. The cost per MW will be ₹5.12 crore. KPCL officials say a majority of the estimated funds will be spent on tunnel work, power station machinery, and turbines. They say the cost of producing hydroelectric energy is lower than other methods – thermal, solar or wind.

Opposition

However, many environmentalists have opposed the project on the grounds that it affects the pristine forests. The project area is a core part of the Sharavathi Lion-Tailed Macaque (LTM) Wildlife Sanctuary. As per the LTM census of 2022-23, the sanctuary is a habitat for the single largest population of 730 individuals, spread over 41 groups. Tree-cutting for the project will fragment the habitat and damage the tree canopy, essential for the movement of LTM, they say. Apart from LTM, other animals found in the area are leopards, wild dogs, wild boars, sloth bears, Indian mongooses, and pangolins.

Among the trees identified for cutting, the highest is in the Honnavar division. Officials have recorded each species and girth of each tree to be cut.

Interestingly, the officials, in their proposal to the MoEF & CC seeking clearance, noted that the proposal may adversely affect the forest, flora, and fauna, particularly the endemic, rare, threatened, and endangered species. The formation of new roads and other above-ground structures will affect the canopy, leading to fragmentation of the LTM habitat. However, the divisional forest officers forwarded the proposal to higher officials with a recommendation to take decisions at a higher level.

The State wildlife board took objections to the number of trees being cut. The board, headed by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, gave conditional approval, asking the KPCL to reduce the number of trees to be cut from 16,041 to between 7,000 and 8,000.

Even so, environmentalists have raised significant questions about the project. They are backed by experts, including Shankar Sharma

who has worked in the power sector in India and abroad for decades. Sharma has written to the KPCL, the Ministers for Forest and Energy, and the Chief Minister many times, raising questions about the project's necessity. One of his main objections is that the project will not add power to the State grid. Instead, it will increase the load on the grid. "The power required to pump water is more than what will be generated. There will be a loss of 24% of energy. The KPCL should think of alternative systems, including battery energy storage systems (BESS)," he says.

People like Sharma and Akhilesh Chippali from Sagar are opposed to cutting "even one tree" in the highly sensitive forests of the Western Ghats. Chippali says, "We are mobilising people in Shivamogga and Uttara Kannada districts by spreading awareness on the impacts of the project. If necessary, we will move the court as well."

Another complaint from environmentalists is that the KPCL is not maintaining transparency. Even after repeated appeals and applications through the Right to Information Act, the agency has not shared the detailed project report (DPR), they say. "Without going through the DPR, how can we challenge the project when they convene a public hearing?" asks Sharma.

Numbers not clear

The Divisional Forest Officers of Honnavar, Sagar, and Shivamogga Wildlife have counted the trees to be cut as per the project layout. KPCL officials entrusted with the responsibility of reducing the number of trees say they can "somehow manage" to reduce the count to 10,000 but not below that. "We have worked out the layout plan considering the place required to move machinery and vehicles for project execution. On the ground, we assessed that we could avoid cutting many trees on the edge of our route. Thus, we can bring down the number substantially," says a senior official. Besides that, the officials are contemplating changing the plan for a fresh road required to connect to the project site from the Gerusoppa dam.

The environmentalists argue that the officials are silent about the number of trees to be cut to draw or upgrade the existing transmission lines. The transmission lines have to be upgraded to draw power from the project. The KPCL has not assessed the number of trees to be cut for this purpose.

"As the upgradation will be on the existing transmission lines, there will be minimum damage to the forest. However, the KPCL, entrusted with the responsibility of transmission of power, will handle it," an official says.

KPCL officials maintain that they will not refute the remarks that the project will damage the forest cover. However, they argue the damage caused will be "minimal". By and large, the project layout has been designed keeping the existing roads in mind, they say. The existing 3.5-m-wide roads will be widened by another 2 m to allow the movement of men and machinery.

They too say there are alternative methods, including the BESS, to generate power. The battery storage, however, lasts only for a couple of hours and cannot be compared with the pumped storage project. Besides that, affordability is a major issue, they say. The KPCL has been open to new technologies and is ready to adapt them considering financial viability. "However, pumped storage plants have been considered a time-tested and reliable method, which the Central Electricity Authority has been pushing for," says the official.

Currently, work on the design of the electro-mechanical system is on but work on the ground will begin only after all the mandatory clearances are received from the Centre.



A pictorial presentation of the pumped storage project in the Sharavati valley. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



The transmission lines in the Sharavati valley need to be upgraded for the pumped storage project which is proposed to generate 2,000 MW. SATHISH G.T.

CACHE



GETTY IMAGES

How have Big Tech companies backtracked on their DEI goals?

Why were Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programmes initiated in the first place? Why have many tech giants suddenly decided to put an end to their respective DEI initiatives? Do such programmes facilitate remote working for persons with disabilities?

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far:

When U.S. President Donald Trump returned to the White House, million-dollar donations poured in from Big Tech companies and their CEOs. During Mr. Trump's inauguration, some prominent figures included his adviser and major donor Elon Musk, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Apple CEO Tim Cook, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew. As Trump settled into his role for the second time, notable U.S. companies including Google, Meta, and Amazon announced (or quietly made) changes to their existing DEI initiatives. They either rolled back ongoing programmes and goals, or decided to stop pursuing new DEI plans.

What is DEI?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) refers to a wide range of principles and practices aimed at enriching a space by making sure all groups of people are represented (diversity), provided with measures to ensure equality by repairing past harms (equity), and given the support they need to thrive alongside their peers (inclusion). DEI reminds employers and employees alike that workplaces of the past often lacked equal rights for all or excluded talented individuals due to factors such as sexism, racism, religious hate, casteism, ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities), queerphobia, or other forms of bigotry.

In the U.S., the 2020 murder of George Floyd by a white police officer triggered nationwide outrage and a need to reflect on the inequality affecting Black people across all levels of society. However, some tech companies championed global diversity efforts long before 2020.

DEI schemes such as hiring diverse individuals, funding their training, or reserving specific opportunities for them are meant to improve the representation of different communities in the workplace, so that a company's products and services can better reflect their general buyers or users.

Why do people oppose DEI?

Critics of DEI initiatives come from a range of political backgrounds. While some believe that corporate DEI measures are band-aids on a bullet wound that fail to address systemic injustice, others are convinced that DEI hiring processes unfairly reject talented individuals from majority groups.

Mr. Musk, for example, is a vocal critic of DEI. He has frequently used the phrase as a slur as he claims that DEI kills art, promotes racism across industries, and even puts unqualified people in critical/life-saving positions. "DEI means people DIE," he has posted on X in January, despite recently expressing his strong support for the H1B visa category.

Which tech companies are getting rid of DEI measures?

Support for DEI initiatives is frequently perceived as a left-wing or even communist stance, which has alienated many leaders or institutions trying to closely align themselves with U.S. President Donald Trump's right-wing government. Mr. Trump in fact issued an executive order titled, "Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing," where DEI initiatives were referred to as "illegal and immoral discrimination programs."

Amazon is stopping diversity and inclusion programmes, while a senior executive said that the company still wanted to "foster a more truly inclusive culture," reported Bloomberg. The e-commerce giant noted on its website that it was still supporting its employee-led groups, such as 'Amazon People with Disabilities,' 'Black Employee Network,' and 'Glamazon' for all those interested in LGBTQ+ issues.

Meanwhile, Meta has scrapped its fact-checking programme, and loosened limits around sensitive topics such as gender/immigration while Mr. Zuckerberg has publicly complained about a lack of 'masculine energy' in the workplace. Meta is also getting rid of DEI programmes for employees and diversity efforts for suppliers, apart from ending representation goals for women and ethnic minorities, reported Axios, citing an internal memo. "Instead of equity and

inclusion training programs, we will build programs that focus on how to apply fair and consistent practices that mitigate bias for all, no matter your background," said Meta's memo, per Axios.

For its part, Google is no longer working to meet its diversity hiring goals, even though Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai previously committed to hiring more leaders from underrepresented communities, reported WSJ. The news outlet also noted that Alphabet's annual report left out a line about its DEI commitments. Furthermore, Google's Calendar removed references to Pride Month and Black History Month, noting that users could add these in if they specifically wanted to.

Other tech companies that have edited their DEI policies, or their wording, include Disney, Comcast, GE, Intel, PayPal, and Regeneron, according to NPR.

Which companies still support DEI?

Despite Apple CEO Tim Cook's attendance at Mr. Trump's inauguration, Apple in its 2025 annual meeting notice strongly criticised a think tank's potential proposal to "consider abolishing its Inclusion & Diversity program, policies, department and goals." Apple called the proposal unnecessary and said it was an equal opportunity employer. "The proposal also inappropriately attempts to restrict Apple's ability to manage its own ordinary business operations, people and teams, and business strategies," said the iPhone-maker.

Meanwhile, McKinsey's Global Managing Partner Bob Sternfels stated in an employee memo in February that the consulting firm would continue to pursue diversity as well as a system that rewards merit. "The answer is yes. We will continue to boldly pursue both, because these two things together — our diverse meritocracy — is what makes us distinctive and has defined who we are over our nearly 100 years," he was quoted as writing, per Bloomberg.

Other companies that have committed to DEI in spite of popular pressure against it, include Costco, Microsoft, and Pinterest.

"We continue to believe it's the business of Microsoft to be diverse and

inclusive so we can build products, services, and a workforce that empowers the world. The business case for DEI is not only constant but stronger than ever," wrote Microsoft's Chief Diversity Officer and Corporate Vice President of Talent and Learning, Lindsay-Rae McIntyre, on December 20, 2024, in a LinkedIn post.

What does DEI in tech look like?

Countless tech workers — and their families, by extension — receive numerous benefits from DEI measures already in place at their work. These benefits include visa sponsorship for foreign job applicants (which Mr. Musk himself supports), company cafeteria menus that cater to a range of diet restrictions, wheelchair-friendly elevators and toilets, hybrid work mode for caretakers/parents, remote work options for people with disabilities or medical conditions, and even corporate protection from inappropriate questions about one's body, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital status.

DEI measures are meant to protect Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai from racism, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg from antisemitism, and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman from queerphobia and antisemitism, not to mention their employees.

On the flip side, DEI does not guarantee a workplace where everyone feels equally respected or protected. For example, many companies which commit to DEI hiring principles on paper, may automatically turn down immigrants or refugees who need visas.

Furthermore, sweeping DEI measures in one location may fail to take into consideration lesser-known forms of discrimination present in other cultures, such as colourism or casteism. The presence of DEI programmes can also lead to meritless women, ethnic minority workers, or LGBTQIA+ employees facing more discrimination as others assume they were hired due to their identities, rather than their skills.

While numerous debates rage around DEI in the U.S., what is certain is that a tenuous tech market is set to become even more unstable in the future for those who do not fall neatly into the majority.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

She drove a wedge between us

Her latest party at the new apartment was a total snoozefest. Even her children slept off!

S. Upendran

"You look rather tired. Have you been up all night reading the book you bought a couple of days ago?"

"There's a major problem at the office. So, we've all been working rather late. As far as the novel is concerned, I've given up on it. Found it to be one big yawn."

"A big yawn? What do you mean?" "You should be able to figure out the meaning. Tell me, when does a person normally yawn?"

"When the person is very sleepy." "Yes, we all yawn when we're sleepy. Can you think of any other occasion..."

"A person also yawns when he's bored!"

"That's right! You also yawn when the person you're talking to or the book you're reading is boring. So, when you say that the book was a total yawn, what you mean is that it was very boring."

"How about this example? The match between India and Sri Lanka was a yawn." "Yes, it was rather one sided, wasn't it? The expression is mostly used in informal contexts."

"My father says that most academic conferences are a total waste of time."

"My uncle, who is a professor, calls them a snoozefest."

"Snoozefest? What does it mean?"

"Do you know what 'snooze' means?" "Of course, I do! When you 'snooze', you sleep for a very short time. You nap."

"Very good! Snoozing is usually done during the day time. When you say that the conference was a 'snoozefest', what you're suggesting is that..."

"It put you to sleep. The papers presented were so boring that you found it difficult to stay awake."

"Very good! Here's another example. The speech given by the Minister was such a snoozefest that many people in the audience kept looking at their watch."

"I usually enjoy watching your favourite hero's movies. But the latest one proved to be a snoozefest. I just couldn't sit through it."

"Let's not talk about my favourite hero's movies. You'll only succeed in driving a wedge between the two of us."

"A what?"

"A wedge! W...e...d...g...e. Rhymes with the words, 'edge', 'sledge' and 'ledge'."

"I see. But what does 'wedge' mean?" "Originally, it was an instrument or a tool that was made of a hard substance. Nowadays, a wedge mostly refers to the piece of wood or metal used to keep two things apart. It can also..."

"I see! So, when you say criticising your favourite actor will drive a wedge between us, what you mean is that it'll ruin our existing relationship. We'll no longer be friends."

"Very good. It'll sour our relationship." upendrankye@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was founded on this day in 1863. A quiz on the organisation that ensures assistance for people affected by armed conflict

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1

The ICRC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1944 in 1945. Why was there a one-year delay?

QUESTION 2

This book proved decisive in the formation of the ICRC. It describes the Battle of Solferino. Name it.

QUESTION 3

The Assembly is the supreme governing body of the ICRC. Its members must all be _____. nationals. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 4

The ICRC has called this event its greatest failure. Name this event, which continues to dominate political discourse.

QUESTION 5

The ICRC has come under criticism several times in the recent past from a President. In a letter to the organisation, influential civil society members of this President's country also criticised the humanitarian body for not doing enough to help their country, which is at war. Name the country.



Visual question:

The Ottoman Empire used this symbol instead of the Red Cross in 1877-78. Why?

Questions and Answers to the February 14 edition of the daily quiz:

1. Name the three individuals who founded YouTube. Ans: Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim

2. This tech giant acquired YouTube in November 2006. Ans: Google for \$1.65 billion in stock

3. This music video was the first to reach one billion views on YouTube. Ans: PSY's 'Gangnam Style'

4. The feat Indian record label T-Series holds. Ans: On April 29, 2019, it became the first YouTube channel to reach 100 million subscribers

5. This children's song video holds the current record of most views with more than 15.5 billion views and counting. Ans: 'Baby Shark Dance'

6. The online alias of Jimmy Donaldson. Ans: 'MrBeast'

7. The title of the longest video ever uploaded on YouTube (596.5 hours). Ans: 'The Longest Video on YouTube: 596.5 Hours'

8. The connection between the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Janet Jackson's Super Bowl incident to YouTube. Ans: Difficulty in finding videos of the two events led to the trio starting the video-sharing concept

Visual: The title of the first-ever uploaded YouTube video. Ans: 'Me At The Zoo' by Jawed Karim, one of the founders of YouTube

Early Birds: Nobody got all the correct answers

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

Word of the day

Peripatetic:

a person who walks from place to place; traveling especially on foot

Synonym: wayfaring

Usage: They are a group of peripatetic country preachers.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/peripateticpro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /pəˈrɪ.pəˈtæt.ɪk/, /pəˈrɪ.pəˈtɛt.ɪk/

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

Editorial



Transactional turn

India must push back against the U.S. and safeguard its interests

Pride Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington last week was brief but packed with headline-generating developments. The visit came less than a month after U.S. President Donald Trump was sworn in, making Mr. Modi the fourth world leader to hold bilateral meetings with him, following the leaders of Israel, Japan, and Jordan, all close U.S. allies. The joint statement issued afterwards outlined a range of substantive discussions. While many announcements focused on India's purchases of American goods and investments in the U.S., they managed to avoid some of the tough measures many had anticipated. Both sides launched 'Mission 500' (\$500 billion in bilateral trade by 2030) and initiated discussions on a free trade agreement, with phase one of the draft expected this year. Mr. Trump announced an increase in Indian purchases of U.S. energy, oil, and defence equipment, moves expected to help balance the \$45.7 billion U.S. trade deficit within the total \$130 billion goods trade. Additionally, there was agreement on a new umbrella framework, COM-PACT, or Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology for the 21st Century, to streamline cooperation across key sectors. They also rebranded the Biden-era Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (GITE) as Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology (TRUST), focusing on semiconductors, quantum computing, and AI, with a commitment to developing an AI infrastructure road map this year. A significant moment came when Mr. Trump announced his approval of the extradition of Tahawwur Rana, involved in 26/11 attacks, to India for trial.

Once the dust settles on Mr. Trump's unconventional remarks and Mr. Modi's rare engagement with the media in this format, India must assess the broader takeaways from this visit. The positive optics and their camaraderie signal a strong foundation for India-U.S. relations over the next four years. There is also clear continuity in key areas of strategic partnership, including Indo-Pacific engagement and the Quad, with Mr. Trump's planned visit to Delhi for the Quad Summit later this year expected to reinforce these commitments. However, economic discussions, trade, energy, nuclear cooperation and defence are likely to dominate the India-U.S. agenda, giving the relationship a transactional turn reminiscent of Mr. Trump's first tenure. There is not much evidence that Mr. Modi's visit significantly softened Mr. Trump's stance on imposing counter-tariffs and reciprocal taxes or influenced a more humane approach to the deportation of undocumented immigrants aboard military flights. These could present challenges for the Indian government going forward. As India engages with the new U.S. administration, it must carefully assess its own interests, assert its position where necessary, and push back when required to safeguard its strategic and economic priorities.

Sex and violence

Marriage should not provide immunity for sexual violence

A recent ruling by the Chhattisgarh High Court, which held that "unnatural sex" by a husband in marriage is not an offence, heavily relies on the presumption of consent within a marital relationship. The case involved a 40-year-old man from Bastar district who had been convicted by a sessions court in connection with the death of his wife in 2017. The sessions court found that the wife, in her 30s, fell ill and subsequently died following a forced physical relationship. However, on appeal, the High Court acquitted the husband. At the core of any discussion on marriage, or any relationship, must be the principle of consent. When physical harm occurs, especially leading to a tragic death, it cannot be excused under the presumption of marital consent. The issue at hand is not about the nature of the sexual act but the absence of consent and the use of force. The High Court relied on Exception II of Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, which does not recognise marital rape as an offence unless the wife is under 15 years old – the Supreme Court of India raised this age to 18 in the Independent Thought vs Union of India & Anr. case (2017) – to justify acquitting the husband. This overturned the sessions court's verdict, which had sentenced him to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment.

The ruling once again brings attention to the ambiguous legal terrain surrounding sexual violence in marriage. In October 2024, the Supreme Court deferred hearings on pleas to criminalise marital rape. In previous judgments, it had indicated that the responsibility lies with the legislature to introduce laws on this issue. The Union government has also stated that criminalising marital rape could "undermine the institution of marriage". India remains one of the few countries where marital rape is not a criminal offence. Yet, data from the National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-2020) reveal that 32% of ever-married women aged 18 to 49 years in India have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence, with only a small percentage seeking help. This stark reality should serve as a wake-up call for lawmakers, law enforcement, and society at large to take urgent action in ensuring women can live free from violence and fear. While constitutional safeguards on life, liberty, equality, and dignity exist, and laws are in place to protect women, true change requires a shift in societal attitudes and mindsets. No relationship, marriage included, should provide immunity for violence.

The special discussion in Parliament on the 75th anniversary of the Indian Constitution has long passed. While several salient aspects of the Constitution and policy directions adopted by previous governments were highlighted, one heard very little on a vital aspect of governance in India.

The 73rd amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1992, is one of the landmarks of India's journey as a constitutional republic, establishing the panchayati raj system. However, the momentum towards deepening local governance in India has stalled. Big shifts in both technology and society are threatening to make panchayats irrelevant, unless we are prepared to rethink their role. The 73rd amendment initiated the process of institutionalising decentralisation in rural India. The three-tier system, at the village, block, and district levels, with a regular cycle of local elections and 50% reservation for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, kicked off a movement that took democracy to the grassroots, thus emphasising the importance of local representation and inclusion in political leadership.

There is one bright spot

Panchayati raj elections are now keenly contested in many parts of the country. There have been many success stories – possibly the most notable of them being the scale of women's participation in leadership (nearly 14 lakh elected women representatives). The Constitution also mandated State Finance Commissions to recommend the quantum of funds that should flow to local governments as well as the administrative mechanisms by which it should take place. Various social sector programmes are now implemented through local governments, particularly gram panchayats (village-level local government).

Why then is the panchayati raj movement in distress? There are several reasons such as a decline in public participation, overdependence on centrally sponsored schemes, and politicisation through the engagement of political parties, which are equally important factors behind the steady decline of panchayats even in pioneer States such as Kerala.

But one must look at the longer-term systemic factors that have affected the evolution of the



Suvijit Chattopadhyay

is an international development professional with experience across Africa and South Asia, and has a specific interest in decentralised governance

Panchayats now operate in a very different development paradigm

panchayati raj movement in India. Panchayats now operate in a very different development paradigm from when they were originally introduced, and there is now a real risk that the spirit of the panchayati raj movement will die.

A decline, the big shifts

Let us look at four such big shifts.

First, administrative decentralisation has plateaued. In order to function effectively, State governments need to devolve staff to local governments and cede administrative control. Similarly, the flow of untied grants that flow to local governments needs to increase to enhance autonomy in local decision-making. Having made an initial set of reforms, the sense one gets is that there is no momentum. A report in 2022 by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj showed that less than 20% of States have devolved all 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution.

Second, in practical terms, panchayats have been forced to cede fiscal autonomy over recent years. Direct transfers to panchayats increased from ₹1.45 lakh crore under the Thirteenth Finance Commission (2010-15) to ₹2.36 lakh crore under the Fifteenth Finance Commission (2021-26). At the same time, there has been a significant reduction in untied grants, from 85% in the Thirteenth Finance Commission to 60% in the Fifteenth Finance Commission. Further, these direct transfers are being used by the central government to marginalise State governments in the name of efficiency, while the tied grants give them more control through central government functionaries and central scheme guidelines.

Third, the larger reason is a reimagining of the welfare state in India that has taken root over the last few years, an overt reliance by political parties on cash transfers of various hues to woo the electorate. And since these were delivered primarily using the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) platform, the role of gram panchayats as intermediaries for beneficiary selection or grievance redress has reduced significantly. For example, the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme, which disburses ₹6,000 annually to farmers, operates through direct transfers without the active involvement of panchayati raj institutions. While efficient, this model reduces the local accountability that panchayats traditionally provided.

Fourth, is the rapid urbanisation that India has

seen in recent decades. In 1990, nearly three-quarters of India lived in rural areas. This has now decreased to around 60%, and is going down steadily. The consistent trend of urbanisation has meant that the policy focus of development has shifted to India's cities and towns. Municipal reforms, both of governance and financing, is the main priority of today.

Ways to revive the system

As highlighted, it is evident that over the last decade, the view from the top is increasingly one that treats panchayats merely as last-mile delivery instruments for social sector schemes in rural India. This view of local governance is not conducive to a revival of panchayats in the country.

Of course, electoral politics at the panchayat level and the representation and the power that comes from winning will not allow panchayats to wither away very soon. But local governance in rural India needs to be revived in substantive terms as 94 crore Indians still live in villages. Over 45% of the population is still engaged in agriculture. Rural India – call it Bharat if you will – cannot be overlooked.

With advancements in technology, citizen engagement in local planning, decision-making and accountability processes will deepen. A networked panchayati raj system could play a vital role in bridging the rural-urban divide, for instance, by supporting safe and dignified internal migration, and also supporting both migrants and their families that stay behind.

Another area towards which the role of panchayats could be focused is to play a role in enabling water conservation and renewable energy generation at scale. Panchayats can reclaim their role in the management of common property resources, bringing to bear a mix of scientific practices, traditional knowledge and public finances. Panchayats can also play a key role in implementing community-based disaster risk management programmes, integrating early warning systems, disaster-resilient infrastructure, and capacity-building for residents.

We need to look further out and talk more to people. In order to reestablish the momentum behind local governance reforms and to support what is still a significant proportion of India's population that lives in its villages, we need to adopt a new vision for panchayati raj in India.

Interpreting the recent Bangladesh-Pakistan thaw

The bitter legacy of the 1971 liberation war, where Bangladesh split from Pakistan, has long steered the nature of ties between Dhaka and Islamabad. However, recent bilateral engagement between the two sides demonstrates Dhaka's intent to diversify its foreign policy trajectory in the subcontinent. Since August 2024, after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government following a student-led revolt, there have been several meetings between Muhammad Yunus, the Chief Adviser to the interim Bangladesh government, and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. In contrast, the absence of any engagement between Mr. Yunus and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi sheds light on this shifting equation.

The ousting of Ms. Hasina set the stage for a potential recalibration in the region – one that is likely to unsettle New Delhi. During Ms. Hasina's 15-year tenure, bilateral relations remained strained, partly due to her family's historic grievances against Pakistan's ruling class. Her close alliance with India likely emerged as a key factor for the continued frosty ties with Islamabad in the following years. Tensions between Bangladesh and Pakistan peaked in 2016, with both countries expelling diplomats.

Recent developments

However, under the leadership of Mr. Yunus, there has been a strengthening of ties. Some key and recent developments underscore this. For instance, Bangladesh hosted a high-level Pakistani military delegation in Rangpur, located close to the strategically crucial Siliguri Corridor. This was followed by a rare visit by Lieutenant general S.M. Kamr-ul-Hassan, the Bangladesh Army's second-in-command, to Rawalpindi to meet with Pakistan's Army, Navy, and Air Force chiefs. Dhaka has also announced the resumption of direct flights to Islamabad and also participated in Pakistan's Arman 2025 naval exercises in the Arabian Sea (February 7-11), which included the deployment of a major



Aishwarya Sonawane

is Research Analyst, Pakistan Desk at the Takshashila Institution

With the count of hostile neighbours growing, India needs to be both vigilant and constructive in its ties with Bangladesh

Bangladesh's warship to Pakistan for the first time in over a decade.

Despite the apparent warming of relations, can these interactions translate into meaningful outcomes? Or will they remain symbolic with little tangible impact?

The ground realities

While Mr. Yunus has watered down Dhaka's demand that Pakistan to apologise for the "1971 genocide" to one merely seeking a "resolution of the issues", Dhaka will face challenges in managing public opinion. A significant number of Bangladeshis still view the separation from Pakistan as a bedrock of their national identity. Without addressing this deeply ingrained historic grievance in the psyche of Bangladesh society, substantial diplomatic progress appears unlikely in the long term. This remains especially true should Islamabad continue to frame the 1971 war as an Indian conspiracy rather than acknowledging it as a separatist movement that was a product of an expression of Bengali identity and in response to the excesses of the government in West Pakistan. In addition, from a strategic and economic perspective, a partnership with Islamabad will offer limited gains for Dhaka, particularly given the misalignment between the economic realities of both countries. The geographical separation of Bangladesh and Pakistan by Indian territory is further likely to create connectivity and political hurdles for smooth trade.

As India closely monitors the situation, the diplomatic manoeuvres will be perceived as Pakistan's efforts to counter New Delhi's faltering influence in Dhaka after Ms. Hasina's ouster. Interestingly, these dynamics also coincide with India's unprecedented pivot of warming relations with the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan, a traditional ally of Pakistan. Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, the acting foreign minister of the Taliban government, in Dubai, in January, which is the

highest level of interaction between both sides ever since the group took control of Afghanistan in 2021.

The outline of New Delhi's approach

With the count of hostile neighbours now growing, which includes the Maldives and Nepal's increasing alignment with China, does New Delhi have a new cause for concern?

India's approach to Bangladesh should be grounded in an understanding of the economic and geographical realities. Despite the evolving nature of Dhaka-Islamabad ties, Bangladesh will find it challenging to adopt an overtly anti-India stance, given its geographic proximity and economic dependence on India. India remains Bangladesh's leading trading partner in the region. In 2023, Indian exports to Bangladesh were \$11.25 billion, while Bangladesh's exports to India stood at approximately \$2 billion in 2023. Many of these imports, particularly raw materials, are crucial for Bangladesh's industries.

That said, India must remain vigilant: first, there is scope for an axis involving Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan, and second, on the issue of security in its northeast States. India must clarify its red lines with Bangladesh in critical areas such as terrorism, weapons trade, joint military drills, and maritime security. While remaining firm on these issues, New Delhi should also constructively engage with Bangladesh, laying an emphasis on people-to-people contacts, cultural exchanges, and developmental projects. Both countries must also continue their cooperation on the critical issues of border trade and smuggling, water sharing and refugee concerns. Maintaining this momentum will require New Delhi to proactively address prevailing anti-India and anti-Hindu sentiments in Bangladesh as well as capitalise on its economic engagement to reinforce its ties with Dhaka. Maintaining a constituency that is favourable to India within Bangladesh remains crucial for long-term strategic stability.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stamped at Delhi station

Sadly, most railway stations in the country do not have enough entry and exit points. The priority should be the safety of human lives. With the heavy rush at railway stations, the Indian Railways cannot absolve itself of its responsibility to ensure safety. Are not the authorities aware of the huge rush due to the Kumbh? It is in times such as these that safety measures need to be the best ("Amid Kumbh rush, 15 feared dead in stampede at New Delhi railway station", February 16).

Balasubramanian Pavan, Secunderabad

Even with men and machinery such as police and announcements, it is unfortunate to have a tragedy. It shows the utter failure of crowd management.

Dr. D.V.G. Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh

It is inconceivable that the railway administration was unaware of the mammoth crowds. With crowds expected to grow in the days ahead, the government must ensure that there is foolproof safety and security as people head to the Kumbh.

V. Johan Dhanakumar, Chennai

People do not enter any platform without tickets (unless the railway officials have begun issuing tickets on trains). Did not the officials know how many tickets were issued, since it is all computerised with no manual writing and issuing, and realise that the special train could not accommodate all the passengers on their way to Prayagraj? This sort of overcrowding happens regularly, more so when youngsters travel by train for examinations and recruitment drives, or when people go home for religious festivals. An audit of the number of

passengers and the number of tickets issued for a specific destination should be done to verify the extent of the callous attitude of the Indian Railways.

Hemachandra Basappa, Bengaluru

As always, committees and commissions will emerge and are likely to pin the blame on low-ranking officials. This cycle of scapegoating must end.

V. Nagarajan, Chennai

The ceasefire

The ceasefire between Hamas and Israel brings only temporary relief. Until

the deeper Palestinian issue is addressed and meaningful steps are taken toward a sustainable two-state solution, future hostilities remain a looming threat. Tranquillity in the region is not just a regional necessity but also a global imperative.

Rayapur Pradham, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh

Sent back from America

The chain of deportations from the United States highlights the ongoing immigration crisis. While the U.S. has the right to deport illegal migrants, the Indian government must take responsibility in addressing

the root causes ("Ground Zero" page, February 15 and U.S. flight brings second batch of 116 deportees", February 16). Stronger policies and awareness campaigns are essential to discourage unlawful migration and to promote safer, legal pathways for job seekers abroad. This issue transcends legal and political boundaries, emphasising the need to safeguard human lives and ensure ethical migration practices.

Gaurav Badwar, Haryana, Rohtak

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

THE IDEAS PAGE

A success story like Amul

Can India replicate the milk template in the fruits and vegetables sector?
We need scale, policy backing, a champion to drive growth



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI AND
RAYA DAS

INDIA'S FRUITS AND vegetables sector (F&V) is growing faster than cereals, contributing roughly 30 per cent to the value of crop agriculture. It is also more nutritious. Yet, it receives far less policy focus and institutional support compared to cereals. Without organised value chains, proper storage, or adequate processing facilities, the F&V sector remains highly vulnerable to seasonal gluts, price crashes, and post-harvest losses. Around 8.1 per cent for fruits and 7.3 per cent for vegetables are lost in the post-harvest value-chain, amounting to 37 per cent of total post-harvest losses of Rs 1.53 trillion annually (NABCONS, 2022). Moreover, with highly fragmented value chains, farmers typically receive about 30 per cent of what the consumers pay for F&V. But what if these small holders join hands and float farmer producer companies, the way it was done in case of milk?

The milk story is well known. The milk cooperatives under the leadership of Verghese Kurien changed India's milk landscape from a highly deficit country to the world's largest producer of milk with 239 million tonnes, followed by the US at 103 million tonnes in 2023-24. More interesting is the fact that brands like AMUL claim that their milk farmers receive between 75 to 80 per cent of the consumer price.

The big question for policy makers is why India cannot replicate this success story of milk in the F&V sector? It is surely challenging. Unlike dairy, where a single commodity (milk) was efficiently organised, F&V involves multiple commodity value chains, each requiring specialised infrastructure. F&V are highly seasonal and often concentrated in specific regions, making them susceptible to extreme price fluctuations. The only way to stabilise their prices is by integrating farmers into well-structured value chains that include aggregation, assaying, grading, sorting, packaging, processing, and then having direct market linkages in both domestic and export markets.

This is where the role of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) becomes critical. Sahyadri Farmer Producer Company Ltd (SFPL) is one such company operating in Nashik district of Maharashtra, which provides a blueprint for success. Founded in 2004 under the leadership of Vilas Shinde, SFPL started with just 10 farmers. It has grown into a network spanning 252 villages, 31,000 acres, and over 26,500 registered farmers in 2023-24. SFPL's annual turnover skyrocketed from Rs 13 crore in 2011-12 to Rs 1,549 crore in 2023-24 (Figure 1).

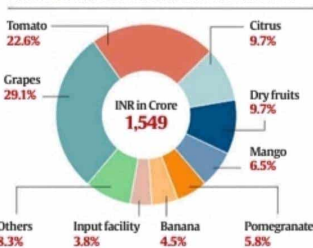
Of SFPL's total revenue, 64.6 per cent comes from the domestic market, while exports contribute 35.4 per cent, reaching 41 countries worldwide. Grapes and tomatoes lead the total revenue mix, together accounting for 51.7 per cent of the revenue, followed by citrus, dry fruits, and mangoes (Figure 2). However, in the total export revenue, grapes have the dominant share (63.9 per cent), followed by mango and other fruit slices (18.2 per cent) and banana (12.8 per cent). At the core of Sahyadri's success is its ability to

GROWTH OF REVENUE OF SAHYADRI FARMER PRODUCER COMPANY LTD (RS CR)



Source: Collated by authors from SFPL

SHARE OF F&V IN REVENUE OF SAHYADRI FARMER PRODUCER COMPANY LTD IN FY24



C R Sasikumar

bridge the gap between small farmers and global markets by integrating aggregation, value addition, processing, and direct market linkages. SFPL has built strong relationships with international buyers, ensuring that Indian farmers get access to premium markets by adhering to stringent quality and traceability standards following Good Agriculture Practices (GAP). SFPL is the largest grape exporter of the country. It exports 90 per cent of the procured grapes to the EU and UAE, and farmers receive, on an average, about 55 per cent of the FOB price.

Another crucial aspect of SFPL's success is also its investment in processing infrastructure. Tomatoes dominate SFPL's domestic revenue at 35 per cent, with the entire produce going for processing into ketchup, tomato paste, and sauce production. This has ensured price stability for farmers even during glut periods. Because of the expansion of the processing units, SFPL could also generate 6,000 plus jobs out of which 32 per cent is women employment in 2023-24.

The success of Sahyadri Farms gives us a blueprint for scaling it up to the entire F&V sector. As of August 2024, the government of India has a target 10,000 FPOs, of which 8,875 FPOs have been successfully registered across the country. If India can scale up 10,000 high-impact FPOs like SFPL, it could redefine the F&V sector, as was done in the milk sector. Sahyadri Farms could be the 'divadandi' (lighthouse), as AMUL was in the milk sector.

The success of Sahyadri Farms gives us a blueprint for scaling it up to the entire F&V sector. As of August 2024, the government of India has a target 10,000 FPOs, of which 8,875 FPOs have been successfully registered across the country. If India can scale up 10,000 high-impact FPOs like SFPL, it could redefine the F&V sector, as was done in the milk sector. Sahyadri Farms could be the 'divadandi' (lighthouse), as AMUL was in the milk sector.

working capital, infrastructure development, and digital integration. Linking FPOs with platforms like the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) that can enhance market access, while blockchain technology can improve transparency and traceability in transactions. Second, reviving and expanding Operation Greens and the National Horticulture Mission. The GoI launched Operation Greens in 2018 to stabilise perishable prices. But with a modest Rs 500 crore allocation under the Ministry of Food Processing, it lacked both a visionary leader like Kurien in Operation Flood and clear accountability. Third, a commodity-specific value-chain approach must be prioritised, ensuring at least 10 to 20 per cent of F&V produce is processed, preventing distress sales and stabilising prices.

What India truly needs is a National Fruit and Vegetable Board, akin to the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), to streamline market linkages, promote efficient value chains, and integrate retailers like SAFAI, ensuring better price realisation for farmers. The question remains: Can Vilas Shinde be the Verghese Kurien of India's F&V sector? The Sahyadri experiment has already cracked the code. What we need now is scale, policy backing, and a champion to drive this growth. The aim should be to ensure that farmers get at least 55 to 60 per cent of the price being paid by consumers. If India can do it, it will transform its F&V sector.

Gulati is Distinguished Professor and Das, research fellow at ICRJER. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"It is vital that past crimes by the Awami regime, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions, are tried and those responsible held to account. The UN has made a number of recommendations which must be seriously considered and acted on."

— THE DAILY STAR

The AI middle path

India has a chance to not choose sides and straddle the approaches of the US and Europe to Artificial Intelligence



JASPREET BINDRA

AT THE RECENTLY concluded Paris AI Action Summit, it is quite likely that two things were talked about. One, the audacious bid by Elon Musk and backers for the non-profit that controls OpenAI, and two, French President Emmanuel Macron's startling deepfake videos of himself, which he put up on LinkedIn.

While both provide the shock and entertainment value that AI has been generous with over the last couple of years, there is a deeper meaning and impact at play here. The US is the undisputed leader in AI, and Donald Trump made his intentions clear with the \$500 billion Sargate announcement with Sam Altman and Masa Son on the second day of his second term. The EU, of which France is striving to be the AI spearhead, has already taken on unchallenged leadership in the regulation and development of safe AI through its EU AI Act and a raft of AI Safety Initiatives.

The Paris Summit, in which more than 90 countries participated, was jointly chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Macron, and attended by US Vice President J D Vance, Vice Premier of China Zhang Guoqing, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, as well as Google CEO Sundar Pichai and OpenAI's Sam Altman. The summit focused on key priorities: Promoting accessibility and reducing the digital divide; maintaining ethical, secure and trustworthy AI; enabling its development while eschewing centralisation; positively shaping the future of work and jobs; sustainable AI; and reinforcing international cooperation.

A lot of these priorities play into India's and France's interests and capabilities. India has bridged its digital divide with its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) rollout and has the potential to do the same with AI. It is also concerned about AI affecting jobs and labour markets and would like to see how its vast STEM workforce could provide a competitive edge. For France, the summit was a chance to showcase Europe's focus on AI ethics and sustainability. Its formidable nuclear power infrastructure makes it a frontrunner in clean electricity for AI data centres. As Macron joked, "There is no need to drill baby, drill. It is just 'plug baby, plug'." He also announced that France will invest 100 billion euros in AI infrastructure and R&D.

As the US retreats into its "America First" fortress, both India and France would like to foster international cooperation and democratisation. As co-chair of the Summit, India positioned itself as a major AI player. It must now lead in balancing technological ambition with regulatory pragmatism.

Here are my three post-Paris recommendations on the path that India should take. India has a strong and growing economy, a population of 1.4 billion, and it has displayed its leadership in bridging the digital divide through DPI. It could now build on this by taking the lead on AI safety and ethics for the Global South. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has already announced the setting up of the AI Safety Institute (ASI), which will set standards, frameworks, and guidelines for AI development without acting as a regulatory body. This will join the global network of AISIs being set up in the UK, Europe, China, Kenya, etc. India should strive to not only be a part of this network but also become a key player by leading the Global South in this initiative.

While the EU is veering sharply towards strict AI regulation and the US is adopting a much more free-for-all, laissez-faire approach, India can take the middle path. India's approach has been industry-friendly yet cautious — focusing on innovation while mitigating risks through soft regulations. The summit's outcomes suggest that harmonisation with global AI norms will become inevitable. However, India must ensure that its regulatory framework does not stifle AI startups with overly restrictive compliance burdens. A balanced approach — where India participates in global safety initiatives while keeping room for domestic AI innovation — would be ideal.

India has a chance to not choose sides and straddle both the US and Europe's approaches to AI. The US is in an AI race with China. Aligning with the US would give India unprecedented access to computing infrastructure, innovation and talent. American big tech firms, which are spearheading AI innovation, have a vested interest in India with its vast English-speaking market, global development centres, and an army of software engineers. India should capitalise on this to build strong ties.

The Paris AI Action Summit was a timely punctuation mark in a story being written rapidly. All countries must now pull themselves together and decide what we want to do with this technology. This is also an opportunity for India to position itself as one of the leaders in this effort.

The writer is the founder of Tech Whisperer Ltd, UK and teaches at Ashoka University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A JUST RESOLUTION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'After Trump's call with Putin' (IE, February 14). The recent news of President Donald Trump's overtures to Russian President Vladimir Putin regarding a potential negotiation over the war in Ukraine has sparked both hope and concern. While the idea of opening talks is a step towards peace, there are critical implications that can't be overlooked. The suggestion that Ukraine may have to concede significant ground, including the exclusion from NATO and likely territorial losses, underlines the dangers of such negotiations. It is troubling that Trump's stance could result in Ukraine's sovereignty being compromised. While peace is an admirable goal, it shouldn't come at the expense of Ukraine's fundamental rights and territorial integrity. Any negotiation should prioritise a lasting, just resolution.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

FOR COMMON GOOD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Open and robust' (IE, February 13). At a time when all leading nations must forge a consensus on the regulation and utilisation of AI for the common good, India and France acted as the voice of reason. They spoke of ensuring that technology builds confidence in people, and is, more importantly, a safe venture. With two competing superpowers, the US and China, representing two extremes, India's call for a collective approach of setting standards will benefit everyone, particularly the Global South.

SS Paul, Nadia

LOOK BEYOND WORK

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The hero workers need' (IE, February 13). The editorial presents a compelling argument against toxic work culture. Most of us no

longer pause to reflect on these things. Our DNA has changed. Work consumes us, not just because of job insecurity or rising costs, but because we have conditioned ourselves to chase something — be it one square meal, a house or a BMW. In pursuit of these, we seldom question the system that demands our relentless effort. If work culture today is indeed toxic, then isn't it sustained by all of us?

Ketan Kishan, Gurgaon

HEAL MANIPUR

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'President's rule in Manipur, Assembly under suspended animation: Centre' (IE, February 14). The decision to impose President's Rule in Manipur after the resignation of Chief Minister N Biren Singh and the failure of the BJP to arrive at a consensus candidate points to the gravity of turmoil in the state. It is critical to integrate the opinion of the people of Manipur while doing the needful towards peace-building. President's Rule would prove to be a worthy decision if peace and harmony prevail in the state consequent to the decision.

Jiji Panicker K, Chengannur, Kerala

EMPOWER MOTHERS

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Silent revolution: Drop in unschooled mothers from 47% to 29% in 8 yrs' (IE, February 13). The report highlights a significant rise in maternal education levels in rural India. An educated mother plays a crucial role in shaping an informed and aware generation. Research consistently shows that children perform better academically when their mothers are educated. This quiet revolution requires policy reinforcement and targeted support. Investing in mothers' education today is the key to building a truly empowered and knowledgeable society.

Sandhya Yadav, Dhenkanal



NILANJAN SINHA

THE INDIAN JUDICIAL system is currently overwhelmed with a backlog of pending cases, particularly those that are long drawn. According to available data, 74.9 per cent of the cases in the high courts and 63.1 per cent of the cases in the lower courts are more than a year old, with other judicial fora similarly saturated. In this context, judicial decongestion has become imperative, with active steps from all stakeholders being critically important.

The adage "justice delayed is justice denied" has been oft-repeated in light of the increasing delays in the disposal of cases. A pertinent question arises: On whom does the onus fall to ensure that justice is not delayed? While we may be quick to blame the overburdened judicial system, there are other key contributors to prolonged litigation.

A recent judgment (September 30, 2024) by the Supreme Court in *K Vadivel v K Shanmugam & Ors* provides insights from the apex court on this issue. The case arose as an appeal from an order of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court in a criminal matter, where the FIR was registered in 2013, final arguments concluded in 2019, and further investigation was ordered by the high court in 2021. While the case presents an interesting interface for as-

sessing certain aspects of criminal law jurisprudence, it also offers a critical insight into the question of delay and protracted litigation. The relevant paragraph of the judgment reads as follows:

"The legal profession has an important role to play in the process. Any proceeding or application which *prima facie* lacks merit should not be instituted in a court. We are constrained to observe this because of late we notice that pleadings/petitions with outrageous and ex facie unbelievable averments are made with no inhibition whatsoever...Reading some of the averments therein, we are left to wonder whether all the deponents were conscious of what has been written purportedly on their behalf, before appending their signatures. These misadventures directly impinge on the rule of law, because they add to the pendency and the consequential delay in the disposal of other cases which are crying for justice. It is time that such frivolous and vexatious proceedings are met with due sanctions in the form of exemplary costs to dissuade parties from resorting to such tactics."

The apex court categorically observes that "all the stakeholders in the process have contributed to the delay." Most notably, the court emphasises the critical role of the legal pro-

fession in ensuring that *prima facie* frivolous or meritless cases are not instituted in courts. Further, the SC suggests that "frivolous and vexatious proceedings" should be "met with due sanctions in the form of exemplary costs to dissuade parties from resorting to such tactics." Courts also play an important role in ensuring that their jurisdiction is exercised only where genuine grounds exist and based on established legal principles. Taking a strong stand, the SC also notes that where parties unjustifiably delay matters, "the courts need to be vigilant and nip any such attempt in the bud instantly."

The goals of justice require a balance between the speedy disposal of cases and ensuring that the pursuit of truth and adherence to legal procedure are not hampered. This requires a coordinated, systemic approach to judicial remedies, with each stakeholder taking responsibility to avoid clogging the machinery of justice delivery. Extrapolating the views of the Supreme Court, it is evident that every stakeholder, including lawyers, corporate entities and individual citizens as well as judges and courts, must reassess their approach and introspect on their role in reducing delay. Particularly in commercial matters, where the time value of money is significant, delay from

any stakeholder can have enormous economic ramifications.

International jurisdictions, such as Hong Kong, Singapore and the USA have evolved such mechanisms to address this issue. The US, for example, has 28 USC § 1927, which provides for sanctions in case of vexatious litigation. Legislative enactments focusing on judicial efficiency, such as Ireland's Court Proceedings (Delays) Act 2024, are other avenues that help to decongest and make the delivery of justice more efficient.

The Supreme Court rightly notes that "denial of speedy and timely justice can be disastrous to rule of law in the long term." As the court aptly underscores "the administration of justice feeds on the faith of the citizenry and nothing should be done to even remotely shake that faith and confidence". While the judiciary has taken several notable steps to ensure faster case disposal, the problem needs to be collectively addressed by all stakeholders. All parties involved, and perhaps society at large, must take on the responsibility to recognise, categorise, and utilise judicial remedies in a responsible, time-bound and prudent manner.

The writer is general counsel, ICRJ Bank

Decongesting the court

Judiciary has taken steps for faster case disposal, but not enough



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Imbalance of power

Trump-Modi summit was, of course, not without benefits to India, but benefits for the US are greater



ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

AN INTOLERABLE TOLL

Second Kumbh tragedy calls into question crowd management measures. Accountability must be fixed, lessons learnt

THE LIVES OF at least 18 people have been snuffed out in the second Kumbh-related tragedy in less than three weeks. Railway officials have attributed the calamitous stampede at New Delhi Railway Station to a combination of factors — the delay of two trains, an inordinate number of travellers waiting on one platform, an announcement of a special train, which led to a crowd surging towards the ill-fated area. There are also administrative lapses and failures. The Railways has ordered a detailed investigation into the incident, which will, no doubt, shed more light on the disaster. But one thing is already clear: The two tragedies should be eye-openers for the authorities that had drawn out extensive plans for the safety of Kumbh devotees. The loss of nearly 50 lives in these incidents should lead to a hard reckoning on what went wrong. It's well known that railway stations and bus depots record a higher than usual footfall during pilgrimage season. Like their colleagues at venues of religious gatherings, officials at these transport hubs should be alert to anything that can trigger panic or anxiety. But, by all accounts, the authorities at the New Delhi Railway Station were caught off guard on Saturday. The inquiry should not only pinpoint the immediate trigger or cause of the commotion, it must also fix accountability for the failures and omissions that led to the horrific stampede. The probe and the subsequent action must be fair and transparent.

Crowds are inevitable. Be it a rock concert or a religious gathering, the challenge of managing them is admittedly difficult when attendance exceeds initial estimates. In 2013, a study published in the *International Journal of Stampede Reduction* pointed out that religious gatherings and pilgrimages account for nearly 80 per cent of the stampedes in the country. That year, a stampede at the Allahabad (now Prayagraj) Railway Station during Kumbh claimed 42 lives. Since then, the National Disaster Management Authority has framed detailed guidelines for crowd management. Yet, authorities at large congregations do not always act promptly to ensure that crowds keep moving calmly. In recent years, experts have advocated the use of technology — drones, for instance — to help law enforcers and event organisers to monitor crowd density and swiftly identify any source of pressure or disturbance. Technology was reportedly used at the Kumbh venue this year. However, the two tragedies should drive home the need to scale up the deployment of state-of-the-art crowd control methods at pilgrimage sites as well as at transit junctions for devotees.

Most railway stations are busy places even on normal days. Conversations on railway safety and technology upgradation must be made more expansive and address the level and security of passengers at these stations. The imperative should be to ensure that pilgrims, migrants, workers, tourists and vacationers who use this mode of transport are safe, at the station and during the commute. The most sincere tribute to the victims of Saturday's calamity would be to learn lessons from it — and to ensure that stampedes, and the toll they take, become a thing of the past.

EASE OF TAXPAYING

New Income Tax Bill is welcome — it omits outdated provisions, restructures sections, simplifies language

THE RECENTLY PRESENTED Budget for 2025-26 will go down as one that provided India's income tax payers — meagre as their number is, relative to the size of the overall population — a massive relief, with the government taking a hit of Rs 1 lakh crore in revenues foregone. But an arguably more substantial move — an economic and regulatory reform as well as an initiative towards improved governance — is the introduction of the new Income Tax Bill in the ongoing Budget session of Parliament. The new Bill, which is now being scrutinised by a select committee of Lok Sabha, intends to restructure as well as simplify the existing statute that dates back to 1961. It is in line with the Narendra Modi government's move to abolish over 1,500 obsolete laws while updating and amending others.

The new Bill is just half the length of the existing law as it cuts the total chapters from 47 to 23, even as it has more tables, sections and schedules. This has been made possible by omitting outdated provisions, restructuring related portions, and simplifying the language. For instance, now there will be a single and separate schedule dealing with all the exemptions applicable to non-residents; as such, a taxpayer will find it easier to read the law. Language has been improved with a view to prevent misinterpretation. For example, "notwithstanding" has been replaced by "irrespective" at several places, and "deemed", which often led to litigation, has been replaced by "treated" in key places. Perhaps the most eye-catching change that will resonate the most with the taxpayer is the dropping of the phrase (and concept of) "assessment year" since it routinely created confusion, replacing it with the concept of "tax year". The new Bill also brings cryptocurrencies under the capital assets' umbrella. It will enable tax authorities to call for information from "virtual digital space", such as online investments and trading accounts etc.

This new Bill is not as substantive a change as the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita replacing the Bharatiya Danda Sanhita, the original intent of the Bill was only to make the Act "concise, lucid, easy to read and understand". But given that complicated laws are difficult to read and easy to misinterpret, they lead to numerous and unending litigations and do more harm to the ease of doing business and ease of everyday living than high levels of taxation per se. The simplification has been done carefully and in a manner that won't upend the existing jurisprudence — something that could have led to more litigation.

THE DAY BEGAN on a business note. Asked whether Elon Musk, earlier in the day, met Prime Minister Narendra Modi for personal business or as a representative of the US government, President Donald Trump said it could well be for his companies. He also immediately added that it was very difficult to do business in India, especially because of tariffs.

The day also ended on a business note. After the summit meeting, both Trump and Modi spelled out a list of interstate business deals. No flourish of high principles impeded the flow of business. No "defining relationship of the century", as Barack Obama would often say. Beyond the tired rhetoric of friendship between the world's largest democracy and its oldest, democracy or freedom, as terms of discourse, did not figure in the public statements.

This was neither surprising nor unexpected. For both Modi and Trump, winning elections is the only meaning of democracy. It is not a higher value to be promoted, nor does it mean enlarging the sphere of citizen freedoms. Indeed, during the press conference, Trump spoke of his great desire to strike deals with China's President Xi Jinping, saying Covid put a serious pause, in his first term, to an emerging personal warmth between them as well as a possibility of deepening state-level cooperation.

What matters to Trump is how powerful a country is, not how undemocratic it might be. Vladimir Putin remains an object of fascination for him, and the idea that the less powerful Ukraine should, and can, be persuaded to part with territory is now being openly articulated in Trump's policy circles, including just before the meeting with Modi. Canada as a 51st state of the US follows the same principle. The less powerful, in Trump's view, should accept the supremacy of the more powerful, for life otherwise could be made rather tough and unpleasant. The issue is not equality or dignity; it is pure power.

Modi had to operate within this larger Trumpian framework of politics. Given India's relative power, Modi did not come to the meeting as an equal partner, but as a junior partner. Consider what Modi has agreed to do

on trade. In full public view, Trump took Modi to task for India having onerous tariffs, and reiterated the idea of "reciprocal tariffs". If India levies a 30 per cent tariff on US goods, the US will do the same. He softened the blow a little by stating it was a new trade principle for the US now. It would even affect a friendly European Union, a larger trade partner.

What was Modi's response? He said he would aim at more than doubling the trade to \$500 billion by 2030. Last year, the value of US-India trade was \$192 billion. India's exports to the US, both goods and services, were worth \$119 billion and imports worth \$73 billion, leading to a US trade deficit of \$46 billion. India, of course, is not even among the top 10 trading partners of the US. Canada, Mexico, China, and the European Union are the top four, trading goods and services worth between \$800 billion to \$1.3 trillion. America's trade deficit with them ranges between \$200-\$300 billion, which is larger than the total volume of trade with India. That is why the loudest complaints have been against them.

But for India to reach \$500 billion by 2030 means not only that it will lose \$45-\$50 billion in income from the current trade, but also import US goods and services worth \$250 billion, while exporting to the US for a roughly identical amount. That is what accepting Trump's trade doctrine would signify.

I don't wish to be misread. My claim is not that India should not lower tariffs. A more open trade regime will arguably be good in the longer run. But that is not what is involved here. India will lower tariffs to accommodate Trump's power, not decrease them across the board for the sake of economic efficiency.

My claim is not that India should not lower tariffs. A more open trade regime will arguably be good in the longer run. But that is not what is involved here. India will lower tariffs to accommodate Trump's power, not decrease them across the board for the sake of economic efficiency.



POOJA PILLAI

A FAMILY MAN

Photo-op featuring Elon Musk and his children with PM Modi tells many stories

BILLIONAIRE AND FIRST Buddy of the United States of America, Tech savant and wannabe coloniser of Mars, Edgeland, Elon Musk wears many more hats than the MAGA cap he wore at a recent press conference with US President Donald Trump in the Oval Office, as well as his meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He's also, as seen in recent photos, including ones from the two official events mentioned above, a Family Man. With his son X, A-Xi — "X" for short — perched on his shoulders, Musk cuts quite the paternal figure. "Father of the year" as some adoring social media users gushed; and if not that, then certainly a warmer personality than his many public pronouncements — on unions and workers' rights, vaccines, the "woke virus", queer rights and race — convey. Not the man who lacks "the emotional receptors that produce everyday kindness and warmth and a desire to be liked", as per his biographer Walter Isaacson's description. A man, in fact, who reveals in the company of his child, indulging him and proudly showing him off to the world and its leaders.

Going simply by recent photo-ops, it does seem like Musk is intent on continuing the "family affairs" vibe that was so prominent during Trump 1.0. If Ivanka, Don Jr, Barron and others from the President's large brood dominated the news cycle during those four years, the next four may very well see the spotlight on X and his 10 siblings — not necessarily of their volition (or even their mothers', perhaps, going by the anguished tweet from X's mother, Claire Boucher, better known as Grimes: "He should not be in public like this"). We are likely to see more of them (or, at least, hear more about them) because it softens the billionaire CEO's sharp angles, making him seem more approachable, less polarising and, almost certainly, more human. What can be more relatable than a doting dad carrying his little piggy-back? Or beaming as a world leader describes one of them as having "high IQ" (Trump about X) or bestows presents on them (PM Modi at his meeting, where three of Musk's children were in attendance, along with the Tesla CEO's partner, Shvonne Zilis, and the children's nanny)?

The billionaire has not been shy about his views on the birth rate, population and children: The first is in serious decline, particularly in the developed world; the second cannot be allowed to shrink if the economy is to grow; and only having more and more of the third can prevent the catastrophe of a demographic decline.

But Musk, much like his expansive CV, is not so easy to encapsulate. No doubt, his children are a source of great joy to him — even if one of them is currently estranged from him in the public eye, they also function as the best promotion for his pronatalist position. The billionaire has not been shy about his views on the birth rate, population and children: The first is in serious decline, particularly in the developed world; the second cannot be allowed to shrink if the economy is to grow; and only having more and more of the third can prevent the catastrophe of a demographic decline. "Humanity's greatest threat" is what Musk has called it — "a much bigger

risk to civilisation than global warming."

That this is a view shared by several in the conservative base that propelled Trump and his buddy to power cannot be ignored. And here, it's not just because of fears about how the economy would fare were there no people to prop it up. Musk has been careful to root his pronatalism in economic arguments — although his belief that smart people are duty-bound to propagate their kind has drawn the side-eye, verging as it does on eugenics — but among the MAGA-ists, the old bogies about divorce, contraception/abortion, "single cat ladies", queer marriage and the decline of American culture hold sway.

Musk has made no bones about wanting several more children of his own; indeed, the first two of his three children with his current partner Zilis, an executive at his company Neuralink, were born via IVF, after Musk encouraged her, as a "smart person", to have children and offered to father them. At the time, he was married to X's mother Boucher, with whom he was having his second of three kids via a surrogate. He also, at the time, already shared five children with his first wife, Justine Wilson. There's no missing the woods for this very complicated family tree: As far as children are concerned, Musk believes the more, the merrier. So what if only the world's richest man can afford them?

pooja.pillai@expressindia.com

FREEZE FRAME

EP UNNY



FEBRUARY 17, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

THE SAME PARTY

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, favoured the idea of the same party ruling at the Centre and in the states. Addressing a series of election meetings in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, he said close cooperation between the central and state governments was necessary to achieve optimum progress. He added the Congress (I) Government had received a massive mandate in the recent Lok Sabha polls and would take a number of steps to fulfill the promises made to the people. He severely criticised the opposition governments in Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir and

Karnataka for what he called "finding excuses for their poor performance."

CHAOS IN J&K ASSEMBLY

RECORDS WERE SET in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly when three out of the nine questions taken up during question hour were deferred and the motion of thanks on the Governor's address was moved and seconded by members other than those belonging to the ruling party. The House witnessed noisy scenes, exchange of abusive language and walkouts. Two walk-outs were staged by National Conference (Farooq) members and one by

the Panthers Party president Bhim Singh.

OPENING ECONOMY

THE PROPOSED LIBERALISATION of imports with a view to exposing the Indian industry to foreign competition and curtailment of the present export subsidies have become issues of major controversy on the eve of the Budget. The Finance Ministry seems to be in favour of both these measures but is facing stiff opposition from other ministries as well as some experts. The matter has been taken to the Prime Minister who seems to have ordered a detailed investigation into all aspects of the issue before a final decision is taken.

SCIENCE

AI-enabled cameras in Similipal Tiger Reserve send poaching plummeting

The devices are tucked away in the reserve's thick vegetation. When they sense movement, they capture an image, and then use a built-in chip to sort between object classes such as 'animals', 'humans', and 'vehicles' in the image. If the chip deems it necessary, a camera can transmit the image to an end-user in 40 seconds

Nikhil Sreekandan

"Last year, we lost two of our men to poachers," Samrat Gowda, deputy director of the Similipal Tiger Reserve in Odisha, said. "Every time we come across them, the poachers are armed with a loaded gun."

But such encounters have become much less common of late. As part of an early alert system called TrailGuard AI, the Similipal Tiger Reserve was fitted with 100-150 cameras loaded with an artificial intelligence (AI) model. The cameras relay images of people and wildlife entering the forest to the model, which looks for poachers among them.

"Earlier, we didn't know when poachers entered. Now we have clear information about the area the poachers are in, so our people are prepared," Gowda said.

In the last 10 months, TrailGuard AI has helped wildlife officials at Similipal arrest 96 poachers and seize more than 86 country-made guns. In December alone, the team arrested over 40 poachers.

"House raids based on photo identification have given very good results," according to Gowda. "If this trend continues, I'm hopeful poaching can be reduced by at least 80%. Once that happens, naturally, our people will be safer, along with the forest and wildlife."

Proactive enforcement

The AI-enabled cameras are tucked away in the reserve's thick vegetation. They operate on a low-power mode by default but switch to a high-power mode when they sense movement, and capture an image. The camera then performs AI inference on the edge, meaning it uses the chip inside to sort between various object classes such as 'animals', 'humans', and 'vehicles' in the image. If the AI deems it necessary, it autonomously transmits an image using the cellular system attached to the camera to an end-user in 30-40 seconds.

"We have set up a control room in our headquarters, with a big screen, where we are alerted whenever there is a photo update," Gowda said. "We then immediately transmit the information on our WhatsApp groups and VHF radio."

Catching poachers in the forest still isn't straightforward. Wildlife officials use intelligence sources to identify the poachers caught on camera. These sources include their regular staff, who go undercover with poachers to collect information about who they are, the villages they hail from, and other details.

"Once we get 100% confirmation that these are the people that entered the



A TrailGuard AI camera unit seen at Similipal Tiger Reserve. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

forest, we will raid their house or village and arrest the person and forward them to the court with proper documentation," according to Gowda.

He also stressed the importance of proactive enforcement mechanisms backing up the inputs provided by TrailGuard. "Getting photos is the easy part, but after that what you do is most important. We are actively going and raiding (houses) and bringing people in. So both the technology and our on-ground efforts complement each other to give us good results," he added.

According to the latest department report, the arrests in 2024 led to one conviction, obtained within six months – fast, according to Gowda. His colleagues are hoping for two or three more convictions soon.

Smaller, cheaper, durable

TrailGuard AI was conceived and made by Nightjar Technologies, a social impact enterprise in Gurgaon that develops remote surveillance devices for conservation settings.

Its founder Piyush Yadav singled the TrailGuard camera systems out for praise. "There are two units," he explained. "One is the camera unit, the size of a pen, and the other is the battery/communication unit, the size of a notepad. They are attached using a two-metre-long cable. So it's not bulky but is rather a spread out design."

But according to Gowda, TrailGuard's best feature is its battery life. He said it

Catching poachers still isn't straightforward. Officials use intelligence sources to identify the poachers. Sources include their staff, who go undercover with poachers to collect information about who they are and the villages they hail from

lasts for "six months to one year based on the number of photos it sends," meaning officials don't have to make regular trips to replace batteries – a blessing in the challenging terrain of Similipal.

According to Yadav, TrailGuard AI cameras cost roughly ₹ 50,000-53,000 per unit.

Access to tribal communities

The villages in and around Similipal are occupied by tribal communities. Hunting is part of their culture, even if many of them have moved away to other forms of sustenance. They need to be able to access the forest, too.

"The tiger reserve has traditionally had a lot of incursions from neighbouring communities around Similipal," said Aditya Panda, a naturalist, wildlife conservationist, and the honorary wildlife warden of Satkosia Tiger Reserve in the same State. "People come in large numbers to engage in bushmeat poaching."

Apart from TrailGuard cameras, the

forest department uses regular camera traps in areas with no network, rendering it almost impossible for anyone in the forest to not be caught on camera.

But one result of this surveillance is that many villagers have stopped going into the forest for fear of being mistaken for poachers and arrested. Their ability to collect firewood and other non-timber forest products has concomitantly declined.

"We are discussing with the [local] people and are facilitating safer ways to access the forest, because it shouldn't be that because of one poacher everyone is restricted," Gowda said.

Wider use-case, adoption

The TrailGuard system has been an effective anti-poaching tool and Panda believes it can do more. "I think this sort of technology can be a gamechanger when it comes to patrolling and monitoring our protected areas, not only to intercept illegal entry and incursions but also in monitoring wildlife," he said.

"We have deployment ongoing in five States right now, at more than 14 sites," Yadav said of TrailGuard. It has also been implemented in the Kanha Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh and Dudhwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh with 20 and 10 cameras respectively, as part of efforts to mitigate human-wildlife conflict.

(Nikhil Sreekandan is an independent journalist who specialises in writing about the environment. nsreekandan@gmail.com)

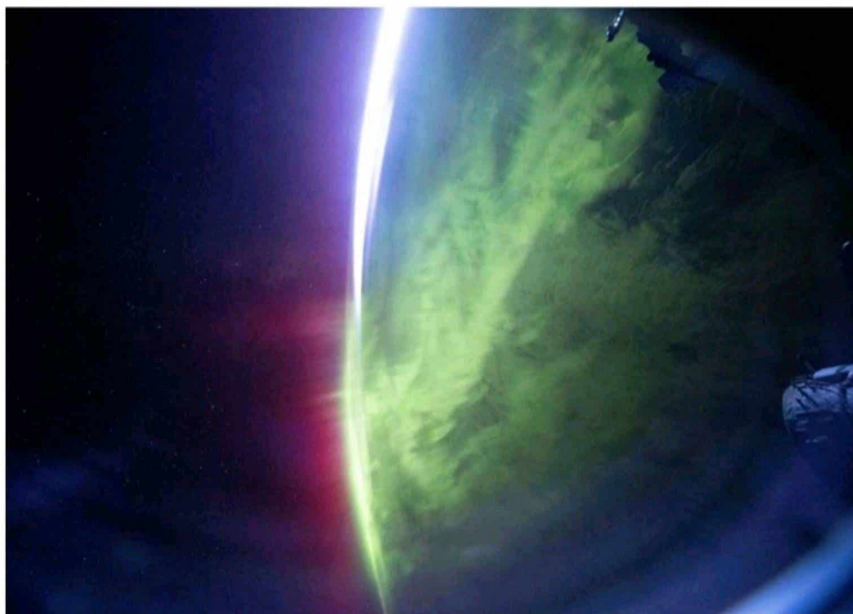
THE GIST

Over the last 10 months, TrailGuard AI has helped wildlife officials arrest 96 poachers and seize more than 86 country-made guns. In December alone, over 40 poachers were arrested. Officials say, 'House raids based on photos have provided very good results'

The TrailGuard system comprises two units: a camera unit, the size of a pen, and a battery/communication unit, the size of a notepad. They are attached using a two-metre-long cable. The battery has a life of six months to one year based on the number of photos it sends

The technology is being deployed in five States at more than 14 sites. It has been implemented in the Kanha Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh and Dudhwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh with 20 and 10 cameras, respectively, as part of efforts to mitigate human-wildlife conflict

BIG SHOT



An image of an aurora was captured by cameras onboard the International Space Station on February 1 at an altitude of 419 km southwest of the coast of Western Australia. Its location makes this an example of aurora australis — the southern lights. NASA

WHAT IS IT?

Carbon capture: a pricey fix?

Vasudevan Mukunth

Global warming is the result of certain greenhouse gases — but especially carbon dioxide (CO₂) — building up in the air and preventing the planet from cooling as quickly as it would without them. Although some natural processes emit these gases, their build-up to dangerous levels is entirely due to emissions from human industrial activity, including the combustion of fossil fuels like coal and petrol.

The human response to climate change has two prongs: adaptation and mitigation. Adaptation deals with how the world, its people, and their activities can adjust to an increasingly warming world. Mitigation is concerned with reducing CO₂ emissions.

An important type of technology that straddles both these efforts is carbon capture and sequestration (CCS). Here, a device sucks carbon or CO₂ out of an emission source, like the chimneys of a power plant, or the atmosphere itself, converts it to a different form, and stores it in a sealed container.



Representative image of a refinery. BRO TAKES PHOTOS

CCS has been controversial: among others, researchers have said it could create more 'room' to pollute by removing CO₂ from the air. A study published on February 9 in the journal *Environmental Science & Technology* has now reported that deploying CCS technologies will also be more expensive than switching to renewable energy. According to the paper, policies that promote CCS "to reduce or offset CO₂ emissions" in 149 countries will incur 9-12-times the social cost of those countries switching entirely to wind, water, and solar power.

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War on highways: The devastating cost of India's road accidents

PANDURANG HEGDE

Among infrastructure projects, road construction is one of the most prominent aspects of modern economic development. In addition to helping people travel, roads facilitate the movement of goods across long distances. A well-established road network is the backbone of economic prosperity.

However, in India, road network expansion has paradoxically been accompanied by a surge in the number of road accidents, leading to huge economic, financial, and human losses that go beyond imagination.

War, by definition, brings destruction—loss of human lives and property, resulting in economic loss for both the countries as well as their citizens. That is why warring nations attempt to bring in a ceasefire. Contrary to this, in India, we wage a war every day, all through the year, without any attempt at a ceasefire.

Strangely, this war is not against a foreign enemy but waged by our own people, against our own citizens. The battlefield is the very road meant to bring prosperity and development. Every hour, 19 people die in road accidents in India—amounting to 462 deaths a day.

According to Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari, "Every year, 4.6 lakh accidents occur, leading to the deaths of 1.68 lakh people. We are losing an estimated 3% of India's GDP because of this. Even when fighting extremist organisations, the death toll is much lower. Even in wars we have fought, the death toll has been much lower."

Obviously, India holds the grim distinction of having the highest number of road accident deaths globally. What makes this even more tragic is that most of these deaths could have been prevented. Instead, road accidents per lakh population have been rising—by a staggering 84% in just one decade (1990-1999). Goa leads with 222 accidents per lakh population, followed by

Kerala (110) and Tamil Nadu (100). India must take note of the devastating impact of these accidents on families. Nearly 80% of those killed are below 45 years of age, meaning they are the primary wage earners in the family. Assuming an average family size of four, this means it impacts 6.8 lakh people directly, and those injured affect 17.7 lakh people. The tangible economic losses are visible in medical treatment, insurance claims, vehicle damage, and administrative expenses. But the intangible costs—the trauma, the loss of a breadwinner—are beyond measure.

As a consequence, the economic impact of this ongoing war is well over 3% of the gross domestic product; the World Bank estimated the cost to be 5-7% of GDP. This economic loss is more than the annual health budget at about 2% and higher than the education budget of 6% of GDP. With only 1% of the world's vehicle traffic, India accounts for the highest number of accident deaths in the world, which is increasing by 9% every year.

This utterly shocking figure reveals the insensitive nature of our policymakers, leaders, and countrymen to a humanitarian crisis that is unparalleled in the history of any country.

Where do these accidents happen? More than half (52%) of accidents occur on national or state highways, which form just 5% of the total road network. Shiny new national highways, hailed as symbols of progress, often lack basic engineering design features like proper drainage, leading to potholes and eventually becoming death traps.

In nearly 78% of cases, driver error is the primary cause—speeding, congestion, drunk driving, and hit-and-run incidents. Economic prosperity has fuelled vehicle ownership, while public transport remains neglected. The policies, too, favour the automobile lobby. Ownership of registered vehicles has increased by 158% since 2000, but road expansion has lagged at just 39%,

leading to congestion and increased accidents. Two-wheelers constitute almost 70% of the registered vehicles. In India, roads are shared by pedestrians, animals, and vehicles of different kinds that lead to more fatal accidents, as there is no designated footpath or demarcation for vehicles.

According to the World Health Organisation, enforcement of speed limits and drunk driving scored 3 on a scale of 0-10. With such weak enforcement combined with unsafe engineering of road construction and low vehicle standards that have no preventive mechanism to save the lives of commuters, the war on roads is bound to accelerate rather than reduce the accidents.

India adopted the National Road Safety Policy in 2010. It suggested the formation of a National Road Safety Board to oversee the issues related to road safety and evolve effective strategies for its implementation. By allocating a percentage of the cess on gasoline and diesel, a National Road Safety

Fund is established to fund the activities of road safety.

India must now launch a nationwide campaign to stop this war. There is an urgency to set a national target to reduce the accidents by improving the road safety measures and relevant laws and to create awareness among the general public. So far we have not set the targets and assume that we will reduce these through ongoing measures, which are not only illogical but have enormous negative consequences for the country.

To address the issue, we need a strong political commitment not only from the transport ministry but from the entire political setup. It has to be a multipronged strategy of enforcing the laws, evolving the road safety network, and changing the behaviour of people who are in the driving seat to be more humane and considerate towards fellow citizens whose lives matter most.

(The writer is a farmer and Uttara Kannada-based environmentalist)

No international body is searching for hundreds of Yazidi women still held captive by the Islamist terrorists. Their fate depends on activists, relatives and armchair detectives

EVE SAMPSON

The investigator's eyes dart between the two photographs. In one, a young girl, maybe 10, is wearing a colorful shirt, her hair loose. In the other, a woman, her face weathered to an indeterminate age and framed by black hijab, stares into the camera.

The first picture is among hundreds of images of young girls sent in by families desperate to find loved ones who were kidnapped years ago, when militants from the Islamic State first roared to power in Iraq and Syria. The pictures of older women come in from a variety of sources.

The woman examining the photographs has become skilled at finding the telling detail that might help confirm an identity—and lead to someone's freedom. But she is not a professional investigator. Her name is Pari Ibrahim, and by day she is the executive director of a nonprofit in suburban Maryland.

At night, by the glow of a laptop screen, that she scans the photos, hoping to locate women taken captive as long as a decade ago.

"Sometimes, late at night, I'm working to see if this girl is someone who can be identified," said Ibrahim, as she compared the two photographs, searching the faces for any hint—the bow of the lips, perhaps, or a telltale mole—that she might be looking at the same person.

"Ten years brings a lot of change into someone's face and appearance," she said. "It's not easy."

The missing people are all members of a religious minority, the Yazidi, who were a particular focus of the brutal campaign of terror that ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, launched in 2014. In the years that followed, according to a United Nations commission, the militants murdered, enslaved, raped and tortured at will. Some 3,100 Yazidis were killed and 6,800 kidnapped in August 2014 alone, one study estimates.

Now, more than half a decade since the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq fell, nearly 2,600 Yazidis remain unaccounted for, according to Ibrahim's nonprofit, the Free Yazidi Foundation; in 2022, the UN Refugee Agency put the number around 3,000. The foundation, which uses an alternative spelling for the ethnonym, provides support services to members of the Yazidi diaspora.

Many are presumed dead, but Ibrahim is hopeful that as many as 1,000 are still in captivity, held by their kidnappers or transferred to fighters' extended families throughout the Middle East.

Although the UN has called for treatment of the Yazidis genocide, the UN agency mandated to collect evidence of ISIS atrocities ceased operating last year. There is no official entity dedicated to finding the women—and their children.

That task has been taken up by a sprawling network of activists, survivors, family members, informants and amateur detectives like Ibrahim, a Yazidi whose family left Iraq in the early 1990s. The New York Times interviewed people based in Maryland, Germany, Australia, Iraq and Syria.

They described a modern-day Underground Railroad, on which journeys often begin with snippets of information and photographs shared via messaging apps.



Al Hol, a detention camp in northeastern Syria. Hope and fear grip Syria's Yazidi community as President Bashar al-Assad's ouster sparks a quest to find missing loved ones, amidst concerns of a potential ISIS resurgence. NYT

Amateur sleuths help rescue women in ISIS captivity

Sometimes that information is conveyed to families of the missing, some of whom hire informants and human smugglers to reunite them with their loved ones. Other times it is shared with the local authorities.

One member of the unofficial network, Abdulhadi Abbas Khalaf, helped free his niece from the Islamic State in 2014 using connections he made working as a beekeeper and honey vendor in Aleppo, Syria. Khalaf, who is Yazidi and is based in Iraq, says he went on to help free other captives through a variety of methods, including impersonating militants online.

Khalaf shared screenshots from what appeared to be ISIS messaging channels on which women and children were being trafficked. The images showed forum users haggling over sex slaves. The Times was not able to independently verify the source of the images because many of the channels have since been made private or deleted.

At the height of the Islamic State's reign in the portions of Syria and Iraq that it conquered, the enslavement and sale of women was conducted openly. Later, it became more discreet, experts said. Women and girls have been bought and sold online, and then transferred across national borders quietly, making the work of those who would rescue them all the more difficult.

"While the public Yazidi slave markets of the Islamic State caliphate period no longer exist," said Deborah Margolin, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "some women remain enslaved by Islamic State affiliates and continued to

be sold by supporters of the group even after the fall of its caliphate."

According to investigators, experts and news reports, captives have been found in homes connected to ISIS members as far away as Turkey and the Gaza Strip. Other Yazidis have ended up alongside their captors in overcrowded and dangerous desert camps.

About 3,600 Yazidis have managed to get back to their families, according to Nadia's Initiative, another nonprofit group that works with the Yazidi.

The upheavals in the Middle East over the past year and a half have further complicated efforts to locate and rescue missing people. In Iraq, for example, the government recently directed a team of international experts investigating ISIS crimes to wind down their work.

In Syria, the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad has led both to hope and fear among Yazidis. They want to take the opportunity to search for the missing, but worry that instability may pave the way for an ISIS resurgence.

As their caliphate fell in 2019, ISIS fighters fled across the region, some taking their captives with them. In many cases women were forced to marry their kidnappers, integrating them into expansive clans that could then traffic them around the world.

Captivity for some Yazidis grew still worse after their captors were themselves detained.

Some ended up in Al Hol, a sprawling nightmare of a detention camp in the desert of eastern Syria. Captive Yazidi women are forced to live alongside ISIS members and their families. The camp, in which thousands of people are held, is dangerous—murders are common and there have been reports of beatings.

For the network of rescuers, Al Hol presents a special challenge. Captives there are reluctant to identify themselves as Yazidis for fear that the ISIS members in their midst, some of whom have organised themselves into a religious police force, will target them. Others may have been taken captive when they were too young to know their heritage.

"The way they were enslaved outside Al Hol camp, they are enslaved inside—the torture, everything," said the camp's director, Jihan Hanan, who has worked with Yazidi investigators to help extricate captives in the camp.

When a woman in the camp is identified as a possible Yazidi captive, Hanan works with security guards to arrange a discreet interview. Hanan said she had seen seven Yazidi girls and women liberated from Al Hol in at least the past two years.

But it is not always simple. Some Yazidi women who have given birth to their captors' babies fear their children may not be accepted by the Yazidi community. Some who have been raped fear returning home only to be shunned. Still others who were captured as young children know nothing but their captors' families and may not even realise that they are Yazidi.

The New York Times

High time Mysuru airport got upgrade

S HIMAN HARIHAR

The expansion of Mysuru Airport promises significant benefits for both the local population and surrounding regions. A key proposal is the extension of the runway from its current 1.7 km to 3.5 km, allowing the airport to accommodate larger, wide-body aircraft like the Boeing 777 and Airbus A350. This upgrade will enhance domestic and international connectivity.

The establishment of a dedicated cargo terminal at Mysuru Airport will be a game-changer for regional trade. It will facilitate the free movement of goods and agricultural produce, connecting local markets to international ones. For example, with a decline in Brazilian coffee production due to adverse

weather, global demand for Kodagu coffee has increased. Expanded cargo facilities will help reduce production and logistics costs, benefiting both farmers and businesses. Additionally, the e-commerce sector will see smoother operations with more efficient cargo movement.

Growth opportunities
Tourism: A major driver of Mysuru's economy, tourism will get a boost with the expansion of Mysuru Airport. In 2024, Mysuru attracted around 40 lakh tourists, a number expected to rise with improved airport infrastructure. Known for its rich heritage, the city will benefit from better connectivity, with taxis, cabs, and buses ensuring easy access to the airport.

Mysuru is already a key destination for yoga enthusiasts, and better air connectivity will make it more accessible for more visitors for yoga and wellness retreats. The government's modified UDAN (Ude Desh Ka Am Nigrah) scheme, which aims to enhance regional connectivity to 120 new destinations, included Mysuru, further strengthening its position as a major tourist hub.

Economic growth: Mysuru's economy is steadily growing, driven by tourism, manufacturing, and information technology. As the economy expands, the disposable income of its population, which is now over 13 lakh—a significant increase from the 2011 census. This growth is also boosting local

demand for real estate, contributing to higher property prices due to supply-demand imbalances.

However, challenges such as high food inflation have impacted purchasing power. Demand-side factors, such as income transfer schemes for low-income households, also influence consumer spending patterns. Despite these challenges, Mysuru's expanding economy has attracted foreign direct investment (FDI), with major industries, large companies, and retail brands looking to establish a presence in the city.

The airport expansion is also expected to ease passenger load at nearby airports, particularly at Bengaluru, by offering a more convenient and direct connection for travellers. Mysuru's favourable weather and flat terrain allow for year-round operations of large aircraft



like the Boeing 777 and Airbus A350. As a Tier-2 city, Mysuru will also serve neighbouring districts such as Kodagu, Chamarajanager, Hassan, and Mandya, extending its reach across the region.

To complement the expansion of the airport, improvements in road infrastructure are essential. For instance, the Mysuru-Gundlupet National Highway (NH 766) should be widened to a four-lane highway, starting from Kalake Gate. The existing two-lane stretch experiences high-speed traffic and frequent overtaking, particularly due to the night traffic ban imposed in the Bandipur National Park, Mudumalai (Tamil Nadu), and Mudumalai (Kerala) reserve forests. Expanding the highway will ease congestion and ensure smoother travel, especially for those relying on the improved airport and connectivity.

The expansion of Mysuru Airport holds immense potential for growth in trade, tourism, and overall economic development in the region. By improving cargo handling facilities, tourism infrastructure, and connectivity, it will attract more visitors, businesses, and investment to Mysuru. Coupled with the proposed improvements in road infrastructure, this will pave the way for Mysuru to become a major economic and transportation hub in South India.

(The writer is an economist)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 1975

Kadidal calls for direct election of PM & CMs

Bangalore, Feb. 16

Mr. Kadidal Manjappa, former Chief Minister, has called for direct election of Prime Minister and Chief Ministers by the people. Inaugurating a new organisation, "Nava Nirmana Kranti," with the aim of launching a new movement to purify the public life, he said the directly-elected Prime Minister or Chief Ministers need not be under the obligation of legislators. He suggested that there need not be the posts of both Governor and Chief Minister in a State. One of them would be enough. He favoured the continuation of direct, adult franchise, but pleaded for electoral reforms.

25 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 2000

'Call anywhere' cards selling now

Bangalore, Feb. 16

The Bangalore Telecom District's Virtual Calling Card (VCC) which can be used to make calls out to any destination from a phone even if it does not have an STD ISD connection has evoked good response with more than 16,000 cards having been sold. The response was not very encouraging in the beginning when the card was launched in July last year. But of late it is picking up. On an average, 800 to 1,000 cards are sold each week," said Mr U S Krishnamurthy, DGM, Bangalore Telecom District. To use the card, one has to dial an access code.

OASIS | SRIDHAR PRASAD SACHIDANANDA

Keep your elders cheerful

My father is 86 years old and in relatively good health. He is independent and extremely Internet savvy. But he often falls sick—ordinary ailments that accompany old age. But he has his share of worries and regrets that plunge him into depression. This affects the speed of recovery. Almost 80% of all his sickness in psychosomatic.

For some time now, I have been wondering how to keep him cheerful and healthy at the same time. Because he does not stir out of the house unless it is a visit to the doctor's. He is not to be blamed for the gloominess that sets in when one does not get enough sunshine.

So, what is a sufficient substitute

for uplifting the mood of our elderly? Such that they stay healthy and smiling?

Social media works for me. What is your hack? I introduced my father to Instagram and tutored him to use the app. He was happy.

He gets to watch funny reels and learn a lot about the world rapidly changing around him. He is like a toddler who has taken to a new toy. His mood changed for the better within minutes of learning to meddle with the app.

The second hack is to invite people home who your elderly were close to,

in their heyday. This gives them an opportunity to swap youthful war stories. Colleagues, best friends, cousins and those kind of people who still share that genuine joy that I introduced my father to. One of these meetings is worth more than a month of medication. Trust me you. A birthday party with such 'soul mates' can do wonders to their health.

The final hack. After having shown them the crazy world they are in today on social media, take them back to their 'day' with movies and music—nostalgia. My dad wanted to hear his favourite (legendary) singer K.L. Saigal. I played the whole album

for him and his fever came down instantly. He was amazed by modern technology serving him his favourite songs using Google voice assistant. He never imagined that a tiny device like the family robot would take him back that far in his life.

Whatever you do or don't, make certain that your elderly eat the food of their choice and enjoy it. Favourite food is 'non-negotiable'.

Lofty and expensive goodbyes to our elderly serve them no purpose. Simply because they are dead and no longer care. Why not take care of ageing parents and parent-like people while they are alive? Why perform ostentatious rituals after their exit? Food for thought, isn't it?





Modi, Trump talks signal new dynamics

Prime Minister Narendra Modi spent two days in the United States for his first interaction with the new administration in Washington. Trade and illegal immigration dominated the talks between him and President Donald Trump. Modi had a good rapport with Trump in his first term and the two are even considered friends. But Trump 2.0 is a harsher version with more difficult programmes. Modi was the fourth head of state to visit Washington after Trump took charge. That might show India's place in the American scene of things, but what eventually matters is how it all works out. The visit took place when Trump's announcement about reciprocal tariffs was echoing and a second flight with illegal Indian migrants was getting ready. India had prepared the ground with some duty concessions for American goods. The mutual praise of the two leaders may also have created a feel-good air, which both may have wanted to make use of.

The meeting saw a welcome assertion of continuity in relations and a declared intention to expand and deepen the strategic relationship that has evolved over the years. There was a focus on defence, trade and technology partnership, but how it will play out and who will benefit more in these areas will depend on the details. India has a big trade advantage with the US, which Trump obviously wants to reduce. A target has been set to double annual bilateral trade to 500 billion dollars by 2030, and a trade deal is being planned. Expansion of trade is a positive idea for trade partners, but Trump will not at the same time want a doubling of the existing trade gap. India will increase imports of US arms, and the existing restrictions on defence technology transfer to India will be reviewed. Some of the most modern defence equipment such as the stealth F-35 aircraft, which have a high bill price, are on offer. Defence purchases may make up a large part of the planned trade increase. Technology co-operation is also set to improve. The unveiling of a new COMPACT (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology) will facilitate advancement in all areas. India is set to buy more oil from the US and there will be greater co-operation in the nuclear energy sector.

This is an impressive agenda for expansion of trade and mutual relations, but in most areas India is the buyer and the US is the seller. The implications will be clear when the threatened reciprocal tariff regime, where India is likely to be a major target, comes into force. The visit will certainly be considered fruitful, but the outcomes will be judged better in the weeks ahead.

Think hard before setting up varsities

A cabinet sub-committee tasked with studying the functioning and financial status of public universities in Karnataka has recommended the closure of nine out of 10 universities established by the previous BJP regime. Under its one-district-one-university policy, the BJP government had established the following varsities: Hassan, Bidar, Charamanjagan, Haveri, Kodagu, Koppal, Bagalkot, Maharani Cluster, Mandya and Nrupatunga. However, Bidar, with 150 affiliated colleges, is being spared, as it is faring much better than the others. The cabinet sub-committee was formed following a report by the Karnataka State Higher Education Council estimating that each new university would require Rs 342 crore for establishment and operation over the first five years. This excludes the cost of land, which averages 200 acres per institution.

Most of these universities lack their own campuses, and are functioning from the premises of the erstwhile post-graduate centres. Basic infrastructure is sorely lacking, and some universities cannot even afford vehicles for their vice-chancellors. Affiliation fees, a primary source of funding, cannot support these institutions, with the Charamanjagan university, for instance, hosting only about 20 affiliated colleges. This clearly indicates that planning was inadequate right from the start. The previous government's decision to establish these varsities was ostensibly to decentralise higher education and make it more accessible. However, a lack of due diligence has resulted in the universities failing to become centres of academic excellence. Critics argue that the creation of these universities was motivated by political and other considerations, and not by academic need. This underscores the need for a more strategic approach to establishing new universities.

While the sub-committee's recommendation to close or merge these universities may appear pragmatic, the problem must be approached with caution. If these institutions are failing to meet their academic objectives, continuing to invest tax payers' money in them is not sustainable, but financial considerations alone should not dictate the fate of educational institutions. Before making any final decision, the government should conduct a thorough review of the academic and administrative functioning of each university. The logistical challenges of demerging and re-emerging universities are significant and must be handled carefully. A well-thought-out student-centric approach that prioritises academic excellence over political or financial considerations is the need of the hour. While closing underperforming universities may be necessary, it must be done in a way that safeguards the academic interests of students and the higher education system as a whole.

Their trade expansion agenda is impressive, but will India mostly end up being the buyer?

Education takes a back seat

Despite a 5.16% increase in allocation for higher education, the budget fails to address the sector's pressing needs

FURQAN QAMAR

The Union Budget 2025 has been commended as a "significant step towards an inclusive and empowered India, aligned with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047". Overall, the allocation for higher education was raised by 5.16% over the 2024 budget estimates to Rs 50,077.95 crore.

The budget allocates Rs 20,000 crore to promote research, development and innovation driven by the private sector; it also provides Rs 500 crore for a Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence for Education, aiming to incorporate AI-driven solutions into the educational sector.

Additionally, five National Centres of Excellence for Skill, in collaboration with global institutions, are proposed to equip youth with skills for the Make in India, Make for the World initiative. To foster technological research in ITIs and IITs, 10,000 researchers have been promised improved financial support under the PM Research Fellowship Scheme.

Encouraged by the number of students in 23 IITs, which doubled from 65,000 to 125,000 over the past decade, the current budget seeks to enhance facilities in the five new IITs established after 2014, enabling them to accommodate 6,500 additional students.

The allocation for autonomous bodies in higher education has risen by 7.42% to Rs 42,732 crore. Central universities have been assured Rs 16,688 crore, an increase of 4.79% over the previous year. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has received Rs 3,335.97 crore, an increase of 9.92% compared to the previous budget.

The funding for NITs, Rs 5,687.47 crore, is 12.85% higher than the previous budget. The budget for IITs, Rs 251.89 crore, reflects an 18.70% increase over the previous budget. IITs will receive Rs 407 crore, indicating an increase of 28.83%.

Funding for deemed universities has also increased to Rs 604 crore, rising by

Rs 8 crore (1.34%). Grants for promoting Indian languages have been raised to Rs 347.03 crore, up by 11.91%.

On the flip side, the allocation for world-class institutions, implemented as the Institutions of Eminence scheme, has been drastically reduced this year to Rs 476.12 crore, compared to the actual expenditure of Rs 1,436 crore in 2023-24.

The allocation for the UGC has increased this year, but only when compared to last year's budget estimate. This year's allocation, at Rs 3,335.97 crore, is merely about 62.65% of its actual expenditure in 2023-24.

Similarly, a significant proportion of the allocation to the centrally fund-



ed higher and technical institutions is meant to repay the Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA) repayment of principal and interest thereon.

The 5.61% increase in the overall allocation for higher education over the last year is only marginal. Discounted for inflation, the Union government's expenditure on higher education may have, in fact, decelerated over time in real terms. It is all the more disquieting that this year's budget estimate is Rs 5,314.73 crore lower than the actual higher education expenditure in 2023-24.

The size of the Union Budget for 2025 has recorded a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.8% over the 2015 budget. In comparison, the growth rate of the budgeted expenditure on education has not surpassed 5.20%.

The allocation for education in budget 2025 is 0.35% of the GDP, compared to 0.55% in 2014-15. In a similar vein, the proportion of the total budget allocated to education has decreased from 4.16% in 2014-15 to a mere 2.25% this year.

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

How I met Yayati

My best-laid plans for my kids' love of science, music, and literature went awry

SHASHIKALA M S

During my first pregnancy, I read Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. I remember understanding very little of it and falling asleep on every second page. But I sincerely and fondly hoped that my child would take to the sciences. I was brought up on the story of Abhimanyu learning to break the *chakravyuha* while still in his mother's womb. I could certainly try to inculcate a love for the pure sciences in my offspring?

I didn't stop at reading during my pregnancy. I bought numerous do-it-yourself kits for my firstborn, and with him I built models of volcanoes, the solar system, made fossils with plaster of Paris, and spent a fortune on science books.

By the time my second one was on the way, I had loosened up a little. I still

read because I wanted my children to develop a love for reading. But this time it was Australian fugitive Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram*, rereading Purnachandra Tejavasi's *Karnataka, Orwell's Animal Farm*, Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, and the like—my kind of books.

And both times, I listened to music from Bach to Balamurali Krishna. I don't have much of an ear for such a class. I am more of a '50s-'60s Bollywood and Sandalwood song type, but anything for my children.

As they—a son and a daughter, in that order—were growing up, I read to them every single night, and they listened to stories from Enid Blyton's *The Adventures of Pip* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to Panchatantra and many more, including a few Kannada ones. They were making good grades, and were enrolled in music classes: *tabla* and keyboard. My daughter was also learning Kathak. All as per plan. I was sure I was raising genius souls.

Then came the 12th year, if there is such a thing. My son was 12 and in

Class 6. He wouldn't touch books, not even his textbooks! And the daughter had enough of her keyboard classes. I made peace. I could see my daughter's graceful *bharatnatya* as my son forcefully played the *Tar* and *Tabla* on his table sometime in the near future. *InshaAllah*.

So what if the chemistry teacher complained of his total lack of interest in the subject? It must be her! He was still scoring well in maths and biology.

Have you heard of Yayati, the king who was punished with the curse of premature old age but tried to live his life in vigour through youth borrowed from his son? The story is in the *Bhagavata Purana*, but I meet Yayati every day in the mirror.

My son is pursuing a degree in economics, plays football, and enjoys listening to hard rock (or is that heavy metal?), does not read at all and hasn't touched his *tabla* in years. Daughter is an avid reader and shows interest in pursuing the sciences. But that doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that they still sit down and talk to me. And we laugh our heads off.

There is strong evidence that the beginning of the end is near. India's demography is changing rather rapidly. The school-going age group population has already started declining, causing declining demand for elementary and, to some extent, even secondary-level education. In the course of time, senior secondary and higher education may also get affected.

There is an imminent danger that India will age before it becomes wealthy. This situation can be avoided only by urgently investing heavily in improving the quality and promoting excellence in higher education. A handful of the best institutions may not be enough, as they serve only a very small section of the population.

At the same time, the nation needs to mitigate the gap between the best and the rest to harness economic, social and strategic benefits. Pressure for global competitiveness further warrants benchmarking the standards of higher education institutions against the best in the world. These can be achieved only by urgently enhancing public investment in education.

(The writer is a former advisor for education in the Planning Commission and is the chief advisor at Integral University in Lucknow)

SPEAK OUT

Love jihad is a reality, and in Maharashtra, incidents of women being duped into marriage and then abandoned once children are born are on the rise... There is no harm in inter-faith marriages but action needs to be taken in case someone defrauds a woman and abandons a woman after marriage.



Devendra Fadnis, Maharashtra CM

The term 'Love Jihad' is not defined under the extant laws. No such case of 'Love Jihad' has been reported by any of the central agencies. G. Kishan Reddy, former minister of state for home affairs, (Lok Sabha, Feb 4, 2020)

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Trump wields the 'big stick' again

His approach, marked by tariff wars and expansionist rhetoric, may usher in a new era of American imperialism

M J VINOD

Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, was known for wielding the 'big stick', which he used as a political strategy and economic weapon to maximise America's national interests. In a speech made at the Minnesota State Fair on September 2, 1901, he famously said, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." After President Donald Trump assumed office for a second term, his inaugural address and the executive orders he signed so far have drawn comparisons to Roosevelt's 'Big Stick Diplomacy'.

During Theodore Roosevelt's tenure, the Spanish-American War of 1898 took place, signifying America's emergence as an imperial power on the world stage. The Spanish were forced to relinquish claims to Cuba and cede sovereignty over Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines to the US. In the process, the US expanded territorially and economically. The outcome later was the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which sought to restrain European influence in the Americas.

The 'big stick' policy played out in the construction of the Panama Canal. The US backed Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903, with Roosevelt as the driving force behind the canal's construction in the Central American isthmus. This demonstrated US power in wielding the 'big stick' to open a new trade route linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. When the Colombian Senate rejected a treaty that would have granted the US a lease on the land across the isthmus in exchange for \$10 million and an annual \$250,000 rental fee, Roosevelt decided to build the big stick.

The US supported the Panamanian revolution against Colombia, sending warships as part of gunboat diplomacy to prevent Colombia from sending additional troops. Roosevelt even recognised the new nation of Panama and offered the same financial terms and conditions that had been offered to Colombia. Panama became an American protectorate. The construction of the Panama Canal commenced in May 1904 and it was completed in 1914.

The message to America's European counterparts was loud and clear—don't mess up again with the Western hemisphere. Trump's second term has started with a bang and on expected lines. Like Roosevelt, Trump's big stick diplomacy is backed by military power, coercive diplomacy and real

politik. Trump's statements and actions evoke memories of Roosevelt's use of the big stick. Trump's tariff war against Canada and Mexico is significant. A recent Wall Street Journal editorial called the 25% tariff "loony" and the "dumbest trade war in history". Although it has now been paused, the *Seattle Times*' David Horsey noted that "maybe he got it through his thick skull that this was a bad idea". Threatening Mexico and Canada with tariffs, despite the existing trade agreement, highlights the brittleness of policies under Trump 2.0.

Regarding illegal migration, Trump's actions were anticipated; respective countries must own up and take back their migrants. However, the manner in which they are being sent back is reminiscent of chained slaves. Perhaps Trump wants to convey a symbolic message, too.

American foreign policy under Trump is becoming increasingly imperialist. Raymond Aron referred to the US as 'Imperial Republic' in his famous 1970s book. Foreign policy cannot be conducted on erratic impulses. Trump's threats towards Greenland, Canada as the 51st state, and the Panama Canal evoke America's 'Manifest Destiny', a term coined by journalist John O'Sullivan while praising Texas' annexation in 1845.

From a realpolitik perspective, acquiring Canada, Greenland, and controlling the Panama Canal matters to Trump due to China's rapid ascent in key areas and influence in America's western sphere. However, Trump's language is full of threats, aggression and expansionism. William Fulbright called this outlook the 'arrogance of power', relegating America's Vietnam fiasco.

Hence, if Marco Rubio says that Panama cannot be taken by US vessels passing through the Isthmus, there can be no better indicator of how Trump's big stick diplomacy works. By this logic, Russia could lay claim to the Awang Dam in Egypt, financed to the tune of \$1 billion during Nikita Khrushchev's era.

Roosevelt also wanted to make America great by speaking softly and carrying a big stick. In contrast, Trump wants to make America great again by speaking loudly and wielding a big stick. These are times of hard, blunt talk and unpredictability—the world better be prepared.

For both Roosevelt and Trump, the threat or actual use of the big stick, backed by military force, is significant. The 'rules-based international order' faces an identity crisis. Trump's inaugural address evokes America's 'Manifest Destiny'. American exceptionalism's 'divine right' to expand into North America. The Trumpism is on!

(The writer is a professor in the Dept of International Studies, Political Science and History, Christ deemed to be university, Bengaluru)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Electoral democracy is as credible as the Election Commission

This refers to 'PM-led panel to meet on Monday to pick new CEC' (Feb 15). Elections are a cornerstone of representative democracy, and their integrity is paramount. The selection of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two other Election Commissioners is crucial, as they ensure free and fair elections in India. However, the CECs who succeeded T N Seshan have been perceived as biased towards the ruling dispensation, compromising their impartiality. The selection committee, led by PM Narendra

Modi and comprising Home Minister Amit Shah and Leader of Opposition (LoP) Rahul Gandhi, will choose the new CEC from a panel of five names proposed by the search committee headed by the Law Minister. It is widely perceived that the Prime Minister's preferred candidate will be selected, potentially on a *quid pro quo* understanding. This undermines the democratic process and must be addressed to prevent further erosion of trust.

M Basavara, Davangere

Stop the stampedes

The tragic stampede at Delhi railway station has sent shockwaves through numerous families. Such incidents underscore the urgent need for improved crowd management and safety measures at public places. It is reported that a last-minute platform change led to panic, sparking a chaotic rush that resulted in multiple injuries and unfortunate fatalities. The priority should be to conduct a transparent investigation and implement measures to prevent such disasters in the future.

It is not necessary to politicise like some opposition leaders appear to be doing. Railway authorities must reassess and upgrade their crowd management protocols. Passenger safety should be the highest priority, with immediate corrective actions

taken to prevent such incidents from recurring. The government and concerned authorities must take this issue seriously and implement stringent reforms to safeguard commuters' lives.

G Nagendra Kavoore, Sandur

Insensitive

The US deportation of 104 Indian illegal immigrants on February 5, in a military plane with legs chained and handcuffed, sparked widespread outrage and protests. The Centre's response was belated and inadequate, with the PM failing to address the issue during his meeting with the American President or in the joint press conference. Another batch of 116 immigrants was deported on February 15, with no statement from the government on their treatment. The

Centre's silence is reprehensible.

S V Venkatakrishnan, Bengaluru

Targeting love

Approach 'Maha minister calls 'love jihad' a serious issue' (Feb 16). It is clear that the proposed law aims to criminalise interfaith marriages, specifically targeting Muslim men who marry Hindu women. By seeking to restrict personal freedoms, the government jeopardises the principles of constitutional democracy. The proposed law must be scrapped.

S S Paul, Nadia (West Bengal)

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OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Reciprocal tariffs: Time for a rethink on trade

In disruption lies opportunity. A US trade policy of mirror tariffs could serve our interests in several export sectors. India should forge a strategy that places trade logic above tactics

President Donald Trump of the US is tearing apart the multilateral trading system with his self-confessed love of tariffs, which he seems to imagine would yield huge extra revenues extracted from trade partners. In a press conference after his talks with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he promised to levy reciprocal tariffs. Whatever duties India levies on imports from the US of specific items (or classes of goods), the US would levy on imports from India. This would not be a big disaster for our US-bound shipments. According to former trade service official Ajay Srivastava, on 75% of the goods we export to the US, we levy an average tariff of 5% when the same are imported. On many labour-intensive goods like garments, textiles and leather, the US imposes tariffs ranging from 15% to 30%. If reciprocal tariffs are levied, India stands to benefit from lower US levies on many items whose exports matter to our economy, especially small and medium enterprises that employ more people than capital. Relatively speaking, to create the same value, so outcomes will go by differences in what gets shipped back and forth.

Which country makes what better (and/or cheaper) is the basis of trade. That will still hold. India would be happy to import high-end semi-conductors from the US at nil duty, and it would be no sweat for the US to grant us tariff-free access to its market, since the only chips India has to export are banana chips. The same argument would largely hold for crude oil, natural gas, aircraft and weapons. If India were to drop barriers for US pistachios, pecans and almonds, reciprocal US action on these nuts would not matter. We do not export such items to the US. India's trade-weighted average import duty for

all products is some 12%; the corresponding figure for the US is 2.8%. If, under American pressure, New Delhi were to lower barriers, our economy and consumers would be better off. By revealing which producer is more competitive on what, it would nudge overall resources accordingly. A policy of protecting local producers from foreign competition conforts that effect. It also applies unevenly across various kinds of value addition. Right now, Indian policy offers low or nil protection to sectors in which our output is small or non-existent, while shielding products that use low-duty goods as inputs. This stunts the growth of input sectors in India. We protect phones, for example, but let electronic components breeze in by paying little. This is likely to keep phone-makers reliant on China for these parts. Other twists and turns to join global supply chains could spell similar distortions. India has time till April, when US tariffs kick in, to finesse a strategic plan to cushion Indian exports from their impact. Negotiations must impress upon US officials that GST levied on imports is necessary to prevent our GST-paying producers from being put at an unfair disadvantage by import shipments that escape this charge.

Globally, the first casualty of Trump's idea of reciprocal tariffs will be the concept of 'most favoured nation', which ensures that every country is treated on par with every other member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), except as part of a preferential trade pact among a subset of its members. To keep the WTO relevant, it might make sense for the rest of the world to revive its dispute settlement mechanism, sans the US, and retain the benefits of its rules. The broad principles that underpin them hold firm, regardless of one country's whimsy.

Democratic systems have a new threat they need to contend with

Redistributive policies could prevent voters from being played but will require global cooperation



KAUSHIK BASU
is a professor of economics at Cornell University and a former chief economic adviser to the Government of India.

Democracy is under threat around the world, but not because dictators are overthrowing elected governments and seizing power. While authoritarian takeovers still make headlines, they are no longer the greatest threat to free societies. The real danger is more insidious: a gradual yet profound transformation of our democratic systems.

On the surface, these systems appear to be functioning as they should. Elections are being held, and voters are casting their ballots for leaders and parties they believe will represent their interests.

But too often, they end up electing politicians who serve only their own interests rather than those of their constituents. While gullibility is not new, it has become so pervasive that it now threatens the very foundation of democratic governance.

To understand how we got here, consider the 'elephant rule.' When I was growing up in Calcutta (now Kolkata), all smart kids playing in the streets and parks knew the rule. When they played games in the neighbourhood, a younger kid—usually accompanied by a doting mother—occasionally would insist on joining them. Rather than refusing outright, the players would whisper to one another the code words 'elephant', signalling that while the new kid could play along, he was not actually part of the game. If he scored a goal, we would cheer and applaud, but we all knew the truth: his goal didn't count.

Today, *elephant* has become a staple of democratic politics, with ordinary people around the world eagerly throwing their support behind demagogues who don't think they count. For these leaders, a commitment to public service is worse than irrelevant; it threatens the relentless pursuit of wealth and power for themselves and their cronies. Voters who believe they are part of the game are just being played.

The result is democratic erosion. Mainstream economists and political scientists have long relied on the 'median voter theorem', which states that in a majoritarian electoral system, political leaders will naturally gravitate toward the preferences of centrist voters, as winning elections requires appealing to the ideological middle rather than the extremes. But today's deepening political polarization and the growing tendency of politicians to embrace radical positions suggest that this assumption no longer holds.

While the underlying causes of this shift remain unclear, it is strongly correlated with the rise of social media. Instead of fostering informed debate, digital platforms have become powerful tools for spreading misinformation, enabling opportunistic leaders to manipulate and mislead people with ease.

Since its inception in ancient Athens, democracy has undergone numerous transformations. As technology advances, certain features of earlier democratic systems become outdated. Evolving moral standards can also lead to fundamental reforms.

For example, in the ancient Roman Republic, the votes of high-ranking officials and the wealthy carried more weight than those of ordinary citizens. We no longer find this acceptable.

Similarly, as democracy evolved, the need for stability became evident, leading to the introduction of constitutions. While constitutions can be amended, doing so requires more than a simple majority, ensuring that core institutions are not subject to impulsive change.

With democratic governance under increasing strain, the world once again finds itself at a critical juncture. Today's extreme inequality is eroding democracy in unprecedented ways. The rise of digital platforms and social media has provided the super-rich with new tools to shape public opinion. Voters believe they are active participants while—*elephant*—real power is concentrated in the hands of the few.

Curbing inequality is thus not just a moral imperative; it is also necessary for protecting democracy against the threat of authoritarianism. To this end, we need a tax system that redistributes wealth and income without stifling innovation and entrepreneurship.

There is certainly scope for this. Once they reach a certain level of wealth, the super-rich are no longer motivated by a desire for more money *per se*, but rather by the desire to outdo their super-rich peers.

This implies an opportunity to implement what I call an 'accordion tax', which taxes high earners and redistributes the revenue to those with lower incomes in a way that preserves the relative ranking among the rich. Such a system would enable us to reduce inequality and maintain the incentives that drive ambition and innovation.

But individual countries cannot tackle extreme inequality by themselves. International cooperation is essential, given the limits of unilateral action in a globalized world. History has shown that when faced with major challenges, the world can come together to translate bold ideas into action. To save democracy, we must do so again. **©2025/PROJECT SYNDICATE**

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The future belongs to nations with grains and not guns.

M. S. SWAMINATHAN

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Our politics is usually shaped by the people we dislike

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoded'

Most people do not have strong beliefs. They arrive at them by developing the exact opposite views of those they despise. The ongoing political drama in the US gives us a chance to see this.

The legend of Elon Musk was the creation of wokes, who include people who call other people wokes. Wokes are those who have to make a guess about what it means to be a decent human being. They are tremendous in building cult figures very fast because they talk a lot about what they adore with others who adore the same things. At the time, the US tech industry was not called 'techbros'; I think it was called Silicon Valley, if my memory is correct, and tech billionaires were all 'good guys.' Facebook was good, cryptos were good, and Apple was so good that the sort of people who would have been hippies in the previous generation stood in midnight queues every time the corporation released a new product. These cool coders were going to change the world. And Musk was an environmental warrior

because he had acquired an electric car company called Tesla and was out to kill the internal combustion engine. Musk said things that wokes loved. He spoke about climate action and direct democracy, for example. He sounded like a Democrat. He worked with Barack Obama and donated to the Democratic Party too. So what happened?

It does happen commonly—men who appear to have the same politics as women are soon revealed as charlatans, or just misunderstood. Still, how did he get associated with Caucasian racism? Does an adult really change his political convictions so fast?

Donald Trump was a registered Democrat for nearly 10 years, and donated to the party. For decades, as an American celebrity, he was probably a regular New York liberal who did not take himself seriously. What could have happened to him? Why is he at war with the whole empathy industry? How is a man not known for believing in anything suddenly the world's most impactful conservative ideologue? It is in fact odd to describe him with any serious word that would end in 'guy.'

The political direction that Trump and Musk took was probably influenced by those who vilified them. They are now at war with all that was dear to their deriders: welfare

state, bureaucracy, unelected institutions, liberal media, wokes, migrants, diversity, feminists, transgenders and probably all of the humanities.

This is how it works with ordinary people too. Most of them are not public figures, so they may not have public enemies. Whom they despise are their preachy colleagues, nasty bosses, acquaintances and spouses, who are the most under-rated counter-influencers. Many political ideas of ordinary men and women are shaped by dislike for their spouses.

That a society changes because of the reforms of career reformers is nonsense transmitted by reformers. Instead, a society changes when people want to defeat those they dislike. Modernity itself occurs chiefly because children do not want to be their parents, or when they want to be the exact opposite. When they are unable to do so, or when they are held under their parents' influence for too long, a society regresses. Apart from modernity, there are other

changes in a society, and these occur in every generation through the same process. The nature of media only changes the speed of transformation: the young hold mild opinions; then some people who form the political mainstream harm or annoy them, and so they develop views that go against those of their mentors.

This mechanism does not distinguish between what is called the 'left' and 'right' in politics. The 'right' is a reaction to the 'left', just as the 'left' is a reaction to the 'right'. No one is born with a political wound. Something happens. It always does. But some people react more than most, depending on their mental health.

Also, political victimhood gives an opportunity to the ordinary evil inside most of us to express evil in the name of ideology. That is why we see such festive aggression in both wokes and ultra-nationalists. They are the same kind of people, just that they have been misled by different sorts of people. Also, strong political opinions give people an easy

way to appear upright and moral. For instance, I have seen corrupt men and those who have sexually harassed their colleagues rant against Trump.

A defining quality of our times is that everyone appears to have a political opinion. But that is only their appearance. People have more trouble with the ambassadors of ideas than the ideas themselves. Most people are in reality moderate because they don't have extreme opinions; just disdain for some people. A large number of Indians dislike sanctimonious evangelists of 'secularism' more than the idea of it; most people dislike climate activists who vandalize art more than what they stand for; many people can explain why they loathe posh socialists, but not why they can't stand socialism.

This is because all mainstream ideas have a point. They have to be moral, otherwise they would not have survived infancy to go mainstream. Morality is the taxan idea has to pay to survive. Even Trump and Musk cloak all their views as concern for Americans. Also, no mainstream political idea violates human nature. Another reason why people don't have trouble with ideas is that they do not know enough about them beyond their synopses. But ambling along people is a different matter. We see a lot in people.



| MY VIEW | ACUTE ANGLE

MINT CURATOR

Anarchy or autocracy: What is Trump's presidency aiming for?

Are the Trump administration's actions meant to sow anarchy or is autocratic rule delivered by state capture the real goal?

**SANJOY CHAKRAVORTY**

is a professor of geography, environment and urban studies and director of global studies at Temple University.

In less than a month, the Trump administration in the US has taken actions that could fill this column for a year. Presidential orders with massive implications have come at dizzying speed. The Democrats and the rest of the world seem shell shocked. Is this the anarchy and arbitrariness of a Caligula or Nero, or are these the opening salvos of an authoritarian attempt at state capture?

Let's begin with things we can be sure about. I believe that at least three trends have been revealed so far. First, a deep antipathy for expert knowledge. Second, blatant racism. Third, a drive for territorial expansion. These features affect not just America, but the world.

Consider the disdain for expertise. There is close to complete consensus on some key tenets in the contemporary world. One is that trade is good for society. Yes, there are losers from trade (as there are from technological change), but the net social gains are indisputable. Another is that climate change is real. The specifics of its future impacts are unknown, but there is little doubt among experts that they will be consequential. Similarly, modern healthcare is built on the foundations of innovations that arise from funding and scientific research. Lay persons may have views on trade, climate change and medicine, but they are usually based more on ideology than knowledge.

In these first few days, Trump has taken a hammer to these building blocks of modern existence. He is instituting a regime of tariffs against China, Canada, Mexico and the EU—that is, friend and foe alike—that could take us back to the trade wars of the 1930s that accelerated a global depression and provided fuel for fascism. Trump, who has called climate change a "Chinese hoax," has taken the US out of the Paris climate accord (just as he did on day one of his first presidency), is gutting the US Environmental Protection Agency, and withdrawing support for clean energy and electric vehicles. He has nominated Robert Kennedy as health secretary—a man widely believed to hold fringe views on medical issues such as vaccines. Trump has tried to stop funding for all research, including medical research, and taken the US out of the World Health Organization.

An antipathy towards dark-skinned people is increasingly transparent in the new administration. Trump is trying to kill the very idea of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in all institutions, public and private, educational and commercial. He openly equates diversity with incompetence. After the helicopter-plane collision in Washington DC, before any details were known about the tragedy, Trump blamed it on DEI.

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the president is Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, who grew up in apartheid South Africa and uses his



media platform X to cheer Caucasian nationalists everywhere, especially in Germany and the UK. Together, they are in the process of destroying the US Agency for International Development (USAID), on which tens of thousands of impoverished lives depend. They have just stopped all aid to South Africa on the grounds that Caucasian landowners the architects and prime beneficiaries of apartheid) are being mistreated.

Trump's territorial ambitions range from merely greedy to outlandish. He has renamed the Gulf of Mexico as 'Gulf of America,' is demanding to buy Greenland and retake the Panama Canal, musing about making Canada the 51st US state, and proposing to occupy Gaza after evicting all Palestinians. Such contempt for the wishes of the international community is unprecedented in the post-war era. An imperialism this naked has not been seen since the 1874 Berlin Conference and scramble for Africa.

What is the purpose of all this? If it is winning US mid-term elections in 2026, it isn't clear that any of these actions will help either his core voters or the swing voters who actually decide elections. The trade war he has initiated can only reduce global and US economic activity and raise prices in the US, with likely job losses. Meanwhile, overt racism will repel the few minorities who were willing to give Trump and Republicans a chance. Blatant land grabs, should they occur, will only undermine the international system and its institutions but translate into few new votes.

If winning the next election is not the Trump administration's objective, what is?

The concept of 'state capture' has been floated as an explanation. According to Tyler McBrein in the *New York Times*, "State capture occurs when wealthy private interests influence a government to such a degree that they can freely direct policy decisions and public funds for their own benefit or for the benefit of their ideological fellow travelers (or both)." This limited view of state capture is one of nightmare capitalism in which the wealthy elite and the state collude to enrich themselves.

But there is another version of state capture of democracies, as shown by the Nazis in Germany less than a century ago. Here the goal is to destroy the institutions of democracy, especially the judiciary and media, to install an autocracy. This is typically done by manufacturing a crisis (such as the Reichstag fire in 1933), followed by the suspension of democratic rights.

There are fears that the Trump administration will provoke a crisis by defying judicial orders. The president possibly believes he has a pliant Supreme Court that would go along with his plans and therefore a final showdown with the judiciary will not be needed. If that turns out to be incorrect, or even partly correct, then all bets are off for the future of American democracy.

It goes without saying that neither anarchy nor autocracy is an appropriate model of governance in the modern world. This is especially true of its oldest democracy, its champion of markets and trade, a country that accounts for a quarter of the global economy and possesses the world's largest and most lethal military. This is a very dangerous moment for the world.

Trump has quit talking about inflation: It's easy to guess why

The US leader tends to change the topic whenever it is brought up

**NITA-MALIKA HENDERSON**
is a politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion.

President Donald Trump has taken a sledgehammer to the US federal government, renamed the Gulf of Mexico, revived plastic straws and pledged to own Gaza, but has done little to address inflation. This issue was among voters' top concerns and helped Trump win. In fact, a study showed that the very mention of inflation, which Trump often did, caused a loss of confidence in the Biden-Harris administration. Well, it seems voters are of two minds when it comes to Trump's first weeks in office. He has high approval ratings, but survey respondents said Trump is not focusing enough on lowering prices.

That poll suggests possible peril for Trump and his Republican allies—and an opening for Democrats, who are searching for ways to counter Trump, who ordered "heads of all executive departments and agencies to deliver emergency price relief," in an executive order. Yet, Trump tends to duck the price question, as seen in an interview with *For News* anchor Bret Baier.

"So, if all goes to plan, when do you think families would be able to feel prices going down, groceries, energy?" asked Baier. "Or are you kind of saying to them, 'Hang on, inflation may get worse, until it gets better.'" Trump's rambling answer made no mention of prices or inflation. "No, I think we're gonna become a rich, look, we aren't that rich right now, we owe \$36 trillion, that's because we let all these states take advantage of us," he responded, pivoting to tariffs. "Same thing, like \$200 billion with Canada... We have a deficit with Mexico, \$350 billion, I'm not going to do that, I'm not going to let that happen."

Trump appears to misunderstand trade deficits, which are usually understood as a sign of a healthy economy, with consumers buying goods and powering growth. Americans aren't being taken advantage of by Canada or Mexico, which supply the US with oil, lumber, fruits and vegetables, among other goods. But, to Trump, Americans have been suckers and he has arrived to settle the score. While Trump has kept up his campaign riffs on this front, he has largely dropped any talk of taming inflation and grocery prices.

Here's Trump. "I hear so much about the word 'groceries.' I used to use groceries a lot on that campaign trail. It's like sort of an old-fashioned word, groceries, but groceries is the word. That's the most accurate word," he said, recalling his approach to inflation during the campaign. "And uh, the price of groceries went through the roof. Bacon was levels like nobody's ever seen... You know, we inherited a mess."



Millions of Americans consider the cost of living a major pain point.

Democrats, largely caught flat-footed by Trump's blizzard of actions following his inauguration, have blasted Trump's failure to focus on lowering costs, pointing instead to the price increases economists predict would follow tariffs. "Trump's response to two out of three Americans who think he's not doing enough on costs? Another Tax," was the subject line of an email sent out by the Democratic National Committee.

Still, Trump seems intent on tariffs and voters have baked in a possible price hike, which could provide a political buffer for Trump. Some 54% of respondents say it will take six months to more than a year for grocery prices to go down. And Trump's approval rating is high, even as the price of eggs continues to climb—those prices rose 14% from November to December, with an additional 20% increase expected this year, according to the US Department of Agriculture. The culprit is bird flu, which has decimated the US hen population but gotten little air time from politicians.

Trump has upended much of the conventional wisdom on politics, marshalling his own unlikely coalition and conjuring his own reality. He is everywhere, all the time, enacting a kind of choose-your-own-adventure agenda. The sheer volume of activity guarantees that something on his agenda will find an audience. Hate pennies, DEI trainings, paper straws? Well, Trump is your guy.

He is the bull in the proverbial china shop, gratifying millions of voters by smashing the *status quo* and sticking it to the elites. In this scenario, for these voters, prices might not matter as much. Especially if price hikes are framed as a kind of patriotic burden to bear temporarily, while Trump promises riches to come. What could matter more is punishment of the right enemies, be they federal workers, undocumented immigrants, transgender athletes or countries that have supposedly been getting one over on the US.

The US president's imperialistic bluster, rebuke of all things woke and his authoritarian approach to governance will not bring down the cost of bacon, but it could channel the pent-up frustrations of millions of American voters who have gotten used to high prices, but now feel seen and heard by Trump. And in the end, that could be enough.

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| GUEST VIEW

Budget: A missed opportunity is our biggest cost burden

SATISH DEODHAR & VIJAY KELKAR



are, respectively, dean (faculty), Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad and vice president, Pune International Centre.

The budget presented on 1 February was important for India's new government, for it had won a mandate for a five-year term in power. Hence, it had to aim for a significant impact on India's economy towards the nation's long-term objectives. It has done a good job on important economic challenges, such as ensuring the government's fiscal health and driving investments for growth. But it failed to initiate programmes to deal with structural problems brought to the fore by farmers from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. This is unfortunate. The finance minister quoted Tehlu playwright Gurajada Appa Rao as saying, "A country is not just its soil, a country is its people." True, but sons of the soil have been crying out for solutions to farming issues and an impending climate disaster. The finance minister also said that "Viksit Bharat" envisioned farmers making our country the "food basket of the world." Yes, of course. But for achieving this, one needs to address distortions of our agricultural

markets. Adam Smith famously said, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest." That self-interest would have been best served by initiating market reforms. Further, the finance minister said that the government considered agriculture one of India's four powerful engines of growth, and that reforms would fuel this engine.

But where are the reforms? The budget did announce productivity-related initiatives, such as a national mission on high yielding seeds, a five-year mission for cotton productivity and a National Institute of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship and Management. There are also steps such as enhancing the limits on Kisan credit cards and boosting the supply of urea through investments in fertilizers. However, these are all technology- and supply-driven initiatives. What the agricultural sector desperately needs are market reforms.

It is a stylized principle in economics that interfering with price signals creates unintended consequences. A bold initiative is needed to assure farmers comprehensive direct benefit transfers (DBT) in lieu of minimum support prices (MSPs) and subsidies for power and fertilizers. This substitution

will benefit the economy in general, apart from farmers. First, while the reach of MSPs is limited, DBTs can benefit all farmers and sharecroppers. Second, a fixed DBT amount per household is more equitable, as poor farmers benefit equally. Third, once a comprehensive DBT system replaces MSPs and input subsidies, market prices will send farmers signals for the optimal use of inputs and choice of crops. This will help check environmental damage caused by the excessive use of subsidized inputs and India's lopsided growth in the production of certain crops. Finally, payment delays and leakages from MSP disbursement will be avoided, as DBTs will take place quickly and periodically, going directly into the Jan Dhan accounts of individual farmers.

Also, farmers must be allowed to sell their produce anywhere to get better prices. Limit on the stockpiling of farm produce should be ended too and contract farming promoted. This will facilitate timely supply of raw materials and avoid the financial losses

and grain spoilage that occur through Food Corporation of India storage arrangements. These changes can be wrought through a structural adjustment programme in which an adjustment period is given to the beneficiaries of existing policies. A staggered approach is better than sudden policy changes of the kind introduced during covid. For example, Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) generate yearly revenues that run into thousands of crores. So, just as states were compensated for five years for losses arising out of the creation of a unified goods and service tax system, APMC can be compensated for their revenue losses if farmers sell their produce elsewhere.

Similarly, market reforms could be staggered across different farm commodities. They could first be introduced for fruits, vegetables and horticultural crops, as these have no MSPs. Thereafter, they can be introduced for cash crops, such as cotton and sugarcane, followed by millets, pulses and oil

seeds; and finally, for cereals like wheat and rice. The adjustment plan can be spread over 5-7 years, so that there are no surprises. These changes will have to be initiated within the contours of cooperative federalism. Towards this, an Agricultural and Food Marketing Council (AFMC) may be set up. It should be chaired by the Union agriculture minister and have the agriculture ministers of states and Union territories as members. Since participation in multilateral agricultural trade negotiations at global forums is entrusted to the Union commerce ministry, its minister should also be part of the AFMC.

The farm reform bills approved by India's Parliament in 2020 had touched a raw nerve among state and farmer organizations, as they weren't discussed by a parliamentary standing committee. Consulting panels with representatives from opposition parties, state governments, technocrats and agricultural experts could aid consensus formation. This would assure stakeholders that their views are being considered and the government isn't pushing changes through.

Given the government's fresh mandate, the budget could have laid a foundation for such bold reforms. Unfortunately, it reminds us of the adage, "Nothing is more expensive than a missed opportunity."

It did a good job on many fronts but let us down on farm market reforms that were the need of the hour



FIRST COLUMN

RESTRAINT IS A DIVINE QUALITY

Many of us give in to fleeting desires, leading to personal degradation



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

Swami Vivekananda was approached by a young Western woman wanting to marry him. He asked her reason. Then, he gave a witty answer and excused himself. Similarly, a young and pretty woman approached a famous scientist. She wanted a child with his intelligence and her looks. He excused himself by stating that there is a possibility that the child may be born with his looks and her intelligence. We remember them because showing such restraint is very uncommon. Rather, it is common that people seek opportunities to cheat on their spouses; they make many efforts, never mind being offered on a platter.

The result is punishment beginning with the degradation of the person. We have ten senses. There are five knowledge-gathering senses, which are eyes, ears, nose, skin and tongue. Then, there are five working senses, which are speech, hands, legs, genital and anus. I will detail how and why restraint should be practiced. Beginning with the eyes, what do our eyes wish to see most? Something very beautiful. This is fine as long as it is something like a beautiful flower, lake or mountain. When it degrades like seeing nudity, it must be avoided. Unfortunately, the mind is very unhelpful in this regard; it pulls us down.

Tongue is another offending sense; it leans towards tastier foods, which may harm. How do you explain eating too much salt or sugar, which benefits little and harms plenty? What is the explanation for eating harmful meat preparations, except for their taste when plenty of choices are available in vegetarian dishes? Here again, the mind is the culprit. Additionally, material intelligence justifies. Restraint is considered foolish. What we do wish to listen to most is? Sorry, dirty jokes.



Then, people love to have friendships with those who will appreciate the moon for some pecuniary benefit. Even in songs, some people strangely prefer to hear sad songs, or which titillate. People do realise that habituated thus we condemn ourselves to the next life also.

Long Krishna warns, "The ear, the eye, the touch sense, the tongue and the nose go to the next body with the mind." (15.7) We are more restrained in the matter of the nose: foul smell repels. But some people eat stale foods; they are under the mode of darkness. (18.10) Skin is generally a friend of all; we like cool comforts in the summer and warm surroundings in the winter.

Turning to the working senses, speech is the worst offender of all. What do you think causes the maximum harm? It is very easy to guess; it is something spoken inappropriately or in anger. What is the explanation for abusing when the reaction is bound to be severe? But people do not control themselves. Even the best of men have weak moments when they slip up. Lord Krishna has counselled, "One who is not agitated by others and who doesn't get agitated by others, he is dear to Me." (12.15) Genitals give the maximum trouble unless controlled from an early age.

It is so easy to abuse oneself, but it is so harmful. Restraint is required, which is why 'brahmacharya' (celibacy) is highly recommended. God has allowed sex enjoyment, which is not against 'dharma' (within moral principles). (7.11) Why not be restrained and enjoy a superior feeling!

(The writer is a spiritual leader; views expressed are personal)

Addressing the crisis in Sikh leadership and religious identity



IQBAL SINGH LALPURA

The revival of Sikhism requires a collective effort from the Sikh community and its leaders to adapt, evolve and work together towards this holy mission

It is humanly impossible to accept the threat of extinction to Sikhism. Without delving into the glorious history and angelic principles of the Sikh religion, the present position is that after leaving Nankana Sahib, Punjab Sahib, and most religious places, including the capital of Khalsa Raj Lahore, Sikh leaders decided to join India without a written agreement from the then Congress leadership. This decision was made despite being part of the Congress leadership, which suffered millions of deaths and loss of property. The Sikhs believed Congress leaders only to be betrayed even after the amalgamation of Shiromani Akali Dal twice in 1948 and 1956 respectively. The majority of Sikh leadership was power-hungry and remained with Congress.

The remaining Sikh leaders started political agitations, from language to statehood, seeking more power for states under the Anandpur Sahib resolution and even advocating for an independent state of Khalistan, using Gurdwara funds and premises under various leaders. To gain within the Sikh community, they did not hesitate to blame and marginalise others. These agitations resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent people and the loss of property and kept Punjab in a state of turmoil.

The Sikh leadership, known as Akalis, eventually gained political power in Punjab from 1967 onwards many times and also became partners in the central government on multiple occasions. However, the loser in these agitations was peace and prosperity in Punjab, coupled with the loss of the image of Sikhs as angels of Guru Nanak, who were perceived as extremists, anti-national, or stankwadi or terrorist or extremist not only in India but abroad also. Every Sikh living in India suffers from this stigma without any fault of their own. Sikh Guru Sahiban organized preaching and propagation through Manjhis, Masands, Nirmale, and Udisas. This took Sikhism to every part of the country and abroad. However, after the demise of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, Britishers took over the control of Gurdwaras.

What to talk of propagation, they started converting Sikhs to Christianity beginning with Maharaja Duleep Singh. The 1920 to 1925 Gurdwara Sudhar lehar after sacrificing several Sikhs and loss of property gave chance to Sikhs to manage their religious places and use donations for community causes. The research, education, and propagation of Sikhism should have been the agenda, but leaders decided differently and joint Congress for politics and freedom struggle. The preaching of the Sikh tenets to every Sikh was ignored. Gurdwaras, the concept of a community meeting, service, and preaching centres were converted into mere places of ritual (banned by Guru Sahib) or platforms for leadership within the community or politics.

Instead of being places of learning, equality, meditation, and service. In the absence of any guidance or unity, the Gurdwaras at the village level also failed to promote the values of making villagers one family as preached by the Guru. The Gurdwara Parbandhak committees lacked plans to take the Sikh religion to every part of their respective states, other parts of the country, and the universe. They even divided Sikhs on political lines instead of uniting them as being Sikh brotherhood.

While comparing one religion to another is impossible, one can learn from others. It is possible to criticise other religions, but one should also acknowledge the dedication of



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SIKH EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS ARE NOT AMONG THE BEST AND ARE NOT WIDESPREAD IN PUNJAB AND OTHER PLACES. WITHOUT STANDARD EDUCATION, SIKHS ARE EXCLUDED FROM BUREAUCRACY AND THE JUDICIARY, THE TWO ESSENTIAL PILLARS OF DEMOCRACY, EVEN IN PUNJAB, BUT TO TALK OF OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY

their preachers, their lifestyle, knowledge, discipline, and humility. In Sikhism, every religious service, from Pathi to Akhand Path, kirtan, Ardas, Dhadi, Katha, and even marriage and cremation ceremonies, has become a means of earning money. Having lost the golden principles of the Nirmal Path, Sikhs are now respected only for their free kitchen and service to society, which is ingrained in their blood and DNA by Gurus.

Sikh educational institutions are not among the best and are not widespread in Punjab and other places. Without standard education, Sikhs are excluded from bureaucracy and the judiciary, the two essential pillars of democracy, even in Punjab, but to talk of other parts of the country.

Due to mismanagement and loss of reputation, even the Sikh community has lost interest in these educational institutions. A review of voting patterns from 1951-52 to 1972, and even 1977, reveals that the Sikh Akali party was unable to form a government in Punjab state or establish itself as a recognized power in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. However, after Operation Blue Star, Wood Rose, Black Thunder, and the killing of thousands of Sikhs, as well as the insult and discrimination they faced, Sikhs joined hands to defeat the Congress in Punjab decisively and bring the Akalis to power.

Nevertheless, after giving them a chance under different leaders, the majority of Sikhs have distanced themselves from the Akalis, as they failed to heal the wounds inflicted by being part of politically motivated agitations or simply being Sikh. Due to their failure to resolve community issues and allegedly joining anti-Sikh forces in 2017, the Akalis are no longer the leading opposition party in Punjab. The latest Haryana Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak committee elections

have made it clear that in a state with over 15 lakh Sikhs, only about 3.50 lakh voters registered, and about 2.46 lakh voted. The leadership, who were in charge under various governments, were wiped out due to disenchantment. Cases of misuse of Gurdwara funds for personal gain have been reported in social media and papers. In Punjab, the situation is no better, with a state having a 1.60 crore Sikh population, but only less than 30 lakh voters registered. The leadership of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak committee must explain what happened to the remaining 1.30 crore plus Sikhs. Have they converted to other religions, or are they not interested in Gurdwaras?

They have been in control of Gurdwara funds for over 100 years and now owe an explanation to the new generation. The state of affairs in Delhi, with regards to the Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, is concerning. A significant majority of Sikhs show little interest in becoming voters, which is alarming. These committees, which oversee historical Gurdwaras numbering around 500 in India, don't represent the thousands of other Gurdwaras across the country. Interestingly, the proposal for an All India Gurdwara Act, which was first introduced in 1956, was put on hold in 1998-99 by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government.

The reason behind this decision was the potential influence of Sikhs from outside Punjab on Gurdwara management, which could have threatened the control of Punjab's Sikh leadership. Moreover, those who left Punjab between 1982 onwards for greener pastures abroad, using political asylum as a pretext, have not contributed to spreading the Sikh religion. Instead, their primary objective has been to blame the Indian government and promote hatred. No person would be attracted to this kind of projection of a reli-

gion of Angels.

Their contribution to Punjab's development is also not visible. The failure of Sikh religious and political leadership after 1839 AD, when Shere Punjab breathed his last, is responsible for the present situation. The intelligentsia and capable Sikhs have lost interest and are not even contacted or consulted. The situation demands that Sikh achievers come forward to save the religion from further damage. In this situation, the first effort should be to save the Sikh religion. This can be achieved by promoting education, distancing oneself from avoidable agitations, and improving relations with the government of India and the majority community to seek their help in reviving the Sikh religion before it is too late.

Furthermore, to achieve this, it is essential to establish a unified platform for Sikh organisations and institutions to collaborate and work towards a common goal. This platform should have Sikh brotherhood much away from politics. They can facilitate dialogue, coordination, and collective action among Sikh groups, enabling them to pool their resources, expertise, and influence to promote the Sikh religion and address the challenges facing the community.

Additionally, there is a need to revitalise Sikh educational institutions, promote standard education, and encourage Sikhs to participate in bureaucracy and the judiciary. This can help restore the community's reputation and rebuild trust in its institutions. Ultimately, the revival of Sikhism requires a collective effort from the Sikh community, its leaders, and organisations. It demands a willingness to adapt, evolve and work together towards this holy mission.

(The writer is Chairman - National Commission for Minorities Government of India; views are personal)

Cooperative commodity zones: A farmer-led revolution for economic empowerment

These zones present a groundbreaking solution, empowering farmers through cooperative-led trade, storage infrastructure and digital platforms

Indian farmers have long struggled with price instability, distress sales and financial insecurity. While the Minimum Support Price (MSP) provides some relief, its limitations and inefficiencies leave many farmers vulnerable. A transformative approach, the Cooperative Commodity Zone (CCZ) model, offers a more sustainable solution by enhancing price security, market access, and financial resilience. As global agriculture shifts toward sustainability and resilient supply chains, India must adopt a farmer-centric model that ensures fair earnings and economic empowerment.



BINOD ANAND

Cooperation), promoting cooperative strength, local enterprise, and self-sufficiency. This model enables farmers to become key stakeholders in commodity trade rather than remaining dependent on middlemen and speculative traders.

India's commodity market structure currently favours traders and speculators, lim-

iting farmer participation. Mandis (APMC markets) are often controlled by cartels that suppress prices, preventing farmers from receiving fair compensation. While platforms like NCDEX and MCX exist for commodity trading, they remain inaccessible to small farmers due to a lack of financial literacy and a proper warehouse receipt system. This forces many into distress sales at low prices, exacerbating their vulnerability. International institutions such as the World Bank and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) have criticised India's MSP system as an economic distortion. Their market-driven recommendations benefit large

agribusiness corporations while ignoring India's agrarian realities, such as fragmented landholdings, inadequate storage, and climate uncertainties. The MSP debate, shaped by these institutions, serves multinational trading firms rather than Indian farmers. The CCZ model offers a paradigm shift toward farmer-led economic hubs.

These zones integrate cooperatives, Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), storage units, processing centres, and digital platforms to ensure stable prices, fair trade, and better incomes. Instead of relying solely on MSP, CCZs provide an "MSP Plus" model where farmers receive either MSP or a higher market-driven price. CCZs establish



cooperative-led procurement and storage facilities, allowing farmers to sell at optimal prices. By participating in commodity trading through cooperatives, farmers can hedge risks and benefit from price appreciation. Digital platforms and cooperative aggregation enable direct trading on national and global markets, reducing

reliance on intermediaries. Storage infrastructure within CCZs stabilises prices and minimises post-harvest losses. Farmers can avoid immediate distress sales through cooperative warehouses and cold storage facilities. Integrating value addition and processing centres ensures that raw produce is transformed into higher-value products, increasing farmer profitability.

Through e-commerce and direct sales channels, CCZs create a transparent, farmer-centric market where farmers dictate prices. Technology plays a crucial role, with AI-based price forecasting, blockchain-enabled transparency and mobile trading platforms providing real-time pricing and secure transac-

tions. Financial literacy programs will equip farmers with knowledge of credit, crop insurance and hedging mechanisms. Successful global models highlight the potential of cooperative-driven commodity management.

The Netherlands, Canada, and India's Amul Dairy Model exemplify how cooperatives can drive agricultural prosperity. Extending this approach to grains, pulses and horticultural products can create a national network of farmer-owned enterprises. CCZs will enhance farmer earnings, reduce post-harvest losses and generate employment in storage, processing and marketing. This system reduces reliance on government procurement, empowering farmers to control their economic destinies.

With the right policies and cooperative leadership, CCZs can make Indian agriculture self-sufficient, prosperous, and globally competitive. The time has come for farmers to transition from survival to prosperity. CCZs provide the roadmap for this transformation, countering misleading narratives from international financial institutions. The CCZ model is more than an idea—it is a movement poised to redefine India's agricultural landscape and place farmers at the center of economic progress.

(The writer was a member of the high-level MSP committee, Ministry of Agriculture; views are personal)

Opinion

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2025

New India, old problems

RBI should initiate an asset quality review of all co-operative banks

MORE THAN FIVE years after the Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative (PMC) Bank was declared insolvent and operations were suspended, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has superseded the board of New India Co-operative Bank for a period of 12 months. Despite the collapse of so many lenders in the past — both scheduled commercial banks and co-operative banks — no lessons appear to have been learnt. Once again depositors have been left in the lurch; they cannot withdraw their money for six months. The bank's business has come to a standstill because it can neither give loans nor accept deposits.

While urban and multi-state co-operative banks are now under the supervision of the RBI after the amendment to the Banking Regulation Act, 1949, it's not clear why there has been no comprehensive review of the way co-operative banks function. Supervision was tightened after the legislative changes that were made in mid-2020; for instance, the lenders were required to report large exposures to the RBI's central repository, exposure limits were reviewed, and other guidelines were introduced. However, this doesn't seem to have been enough. The regulatory oversight needs to be strengthened whether in terms of manpower or legislation or both.

In the case of PMC Bank, a disproportionate amount was lent to a single borrower, and fake accounts were opened to facilitate this. Several other financial irregularities were later uncovered, including under-reporting of bad loans. Police have already arrested a highly-ranked bank employee for misappropriating ₹122 crore. Serious questions should be raised about the bank's internal control mechanism as the fraud happened between 2020 and 2025. Once again, the RBI will need to appoint an administrator and ultimately find a buyer for New India because it is unlikely the regulator will let the bank fail. In the case of PMC this was not easy. There were understandably no takers and so a speedy merger, as in cases like Times Bank or Centurion Bank of Punjab or Global Trust Bank, was not an option. In all these instances, the RBI was able to push through a merger. In the case of YES Bank, it was able to mobilise capital from a clutch of lenders to shore up the lender's net worth.

While the Maharashtra state government did mul over a possible merger of PMC Bank with the Maharashtra State Co-operative Bank, that didn't work out. Finally, the central bank — after receiving expressions of interest — paved the way for the Centrum-BharatPe consortium to take over PMC Bank. This, as many experts observed, amounted to a backdoor entry for both players into the banking sector, an undesirable move setting a bad precedent. To be fair, the regulator did not have a choice. A similar solution might emerge for New India too unless some banks emerge as a white knight. The bank has been grappling with losses in the last two fiscal years.

It is high time a thorough evaluation is made of all co-operative lenders in the nature of the asset quality review that was initiated by the RBI for scheduled commercial banks way back in 2016. A forensic audit is called for on an urgent basis to ensure there are no more casualties. Most importantly, there can be no political interference in the running of the bank; both the management and the boards need to be manned by professionals. Without a complete shake-up we could see more failures.

Alibaba won't solve all of Apple's China problems

APPLE'S CHINA BUSINESS kicked off the Year of the Snake inauspiciously. Revenue dropped 11% during the December quarter and iPhone sales plunged more than 18%. The Trump administration unveiled fresh tariffs on goods from its biggest manufacturing base, and it's still unclear if the Cupertino, California-based company can get out of them this time around. Beijing, meanwhile, is reportedly mulling a probe into its app store fees and practices.

But it may have notched a much-needed win on Thursday: Alibaba Group Holding confirmed it was working with the iPhone maker to finally bring Apple Intelligence to China. The information previously reported that Apple and the e-commerce giant had submitted a proposal to regulators. The company has launched its much-hyped AI features in the US and other jurisdictions, but has been plagued by delays in finding a local partner in a market where demand for personal generative AI services is red hot.

Investors saw it as a major victory for Alibaba, sending its stock soaring on the initial report. Still, it's not clear if the long-awaited rollout of AI-enabled iPhones will be enough to turn things around for Apple in China.

Maybe the process will go over better with Alibaba, but it's hard to imagine Apple Intelligence alone will be enough to overcome the company's new web of obstacles as geopolitical tensions escalate. The AI iPhone hasn't exactly lived up to the hype elsewhere. As my colleague Dave Lee puts it, the sheer experience of many users who have gotten access to the features has been "annoyance". The rollout has been notably un-Apple-like — staggered and imperfect — even with the support of industry leader OpenAI. Perhaps it's a blessing in disguise regulators have forced Apple to take this slow in China.

An even bigger headache is Apple's new, unwilling position as a bargaining chip in the trade war. The company was reportedly added to a list of US tech giants that Chinese officials can target as part of expected negotiations with the Trump administration. Within moments of the US's 10% China levies kicking in, Beijing responded with a probe into Alphabet's Google. It was largely seen as a warning shot given that Google has very limited business left in China. Apple, meanwhile, still gets a major chunk of revenue from consumers there.

It's still yet to be seen if chief executive officer Tim Cook will be able to broker his company out of the fresh China tariffs. Given Cook's negotiating skills in the past, it's likely he will be able to score some kind of exemption again. Even without one, analysts expect he will ultimately be manageable.

But that's only if the trade wars don't escalate. US President Donald Trump has long teased the threat of tariffs on chips from Taiwan. This would be painful: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing powers virtually all the processors in Apple's smartphones.

These mounting US-China tensions could have more concerning ramifications. As one of the few American tech companies still operating in China, Apple has become the target of anti-American sentiment. Some of this backlash has played out in more Chinese consumers opting for domestic brands. It doesn't help that these local companies, such as Huawei Technologies, are already offering AI features.

Bringing Apple Intelligence to China would be a good move, but it amounts to just one play in a new game of 4D chess. Apple will have to find a way to please Trump, Beijing, and notoriously fussy Chinese consumers.

Apple has spent years walking a tightrope as it seeks to please all sides, while mutual animosity has all but snuffed out other hopes of Chinese and American consumer tech companies working together. Yet the recent DeepSeek frenzy showed that this divide may result in the US missing out. Even OpenAI CEO Sam Altman said this week that he is keen to "work with China," adding, "I think that's really important."

An Alibaba partnership wouldn't solve all of Apple's China problems, but it would be a much-needed and mutually beneficial relationship. Perhaps it could serve as an example for policymakers that broader cooperation is possible.



CATHERINE THORBECKE

Bloomberg



ASHOK GULATI

RAYA DAS

Respectively distinguished professor and fellow at ICRIER

NEGLECT OF SAFETY

Congress MP Rahul Gandhi

Considering the large number of devotees going to Prayagraj, better arrangements should have been made at the station. The government and administration should ensure that no one has to lose their life due to mismanagement and negligence

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

THE SUCCESS OF SAHYADRI FARMS PRESENTS A BLUE PRINT FOR THE FRUITS AND VEGETABLES SECTOR

Can Sahyadri do an Amul?

INDIA'S FRUITS AND vegetables (F&V) sector is growing faster than cereals, contributing roughly 30% to the value of crop agriculture. It is also more nutritious. Yet, it receives far less policy focus and institutional support compared to cereals. Without organised value chains, processor, or adequate processing facilities, the F&V sector remains highly vulnerable to seasonal gluts, price crashes, and post-harvest losses. Around 8.1% for fruits and 7.3% for vegetables are lost in post-harvest value chain, amounting to 37% of total post-harvest losses of ₹1.53 lakh crore annually (NABCONS, 2022). Moreover, with highly fragmented value chains, farmers typically receive about 30% of what the consumers pay for F&V. But what if these small holders join hands and form farmer producer companies, the way it was done in case of milk?

The milk story is well known. Cooperatives under the leadership of Verghese Kurien changed India's landscape from a highly milk-deficient country to the world's largest producer of milk with 239 million tonnes, followed by the US at 103 million tonnes in FY24. More interesting is the fact that brands like Amul claim their milk farmers receive 75-80% of the consumer price.

The big question for policymakers is why India cannot replicate this success story in F&V? It is surely challenging. Unlike dairy, where a single commodity (milk) was efficiently organised, F&V involves multiple commodity value chains, each requiring specialised infrastructure. F&V is highly seasonal and often concentrated in specific regions, making them susceptible to extreme price fluctuations. The only way to stabilise their prices is by integrating farmers into well-structured value chains that includes aggregation, grading, sorting, packaging, processing, and then having direct linkages in domestic and export markets.

This is where the role of farmer producer organisations (FPOs) becomes critical. Sahyadri Farmer Producer Company Ltd (SFPL) is one such company operating in Nashik district of Maharashtra,

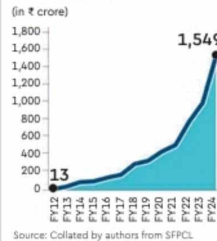
which provides a blueprint for success. Founded in 2004 under the leadership of Vilas Shinde, SFPL started with just 10 farmers. It has grown into a network spanning 252 villages, 31,000 acres, and over 26,500 registered farmers in FY24. SFPL's annual turnover skyrocketed from ₹13 crore in FY12 to ₹1,549 crore in FY24 (Figure 1).

Of SFPL's total revenue, 64.6% comes from the domestic market, while exports to 41 countries contribute 35.4%. Grapes and tomatoes led the revenue mix, accounting for 51.7%, followed by citrus, dry fruits, and mangoes (Figure 2). However, in the total export revenue, grapes have the dominant share (63.9%), followed by mango and other fruit slices (18.2%) and banana (12.8%). At the core of Sahyadri's success is its ability to bridge

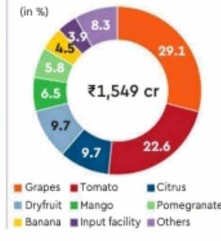
the gap between small farmers and global markets by integrating aggregation, value addition, processing, and direct market linkages. SFPL has built strong relationships with international buyers, ensuring Indian farmers get access to premium markets by adhering to stringent quality and traceability standards following good agricultural practices. SFPL is India's largest grape exporter, exports 90% of the procured grapes to the European Union and UAE, and farmers receive, on an average, about 55% of the free on board price. Another crucial aspect of its success is its investment in processing infra. Tomatoes dominate SFPL's domestic revenue at 35%, with the entire produce going for processing for ketchup, tomato puree, and sauce production. This has ensured price stability for farmers even during gluts.

SUCCESS STORY

Growth trajectory of total revenue of SFPL FY12 to FY24 (in ₹ crore)



Share of various F&V in total revenue of SFPL in FY24 (in %)



Source: Collated by authors from SFPL

Making in India for the world

HONG JU JEON

Managing director, LG Electronics in India

FOR A COUNTRY that broke through the shackles of foreign rule 77 years ago, India has achieved much more than one would have thought of, especially given the diversity of its geography and demography. For a country that was left grappling with lack of resources, India today has emerged as an example of resilience that led to self-sufficiency. A vibrant and young population, aptly supported by a proactive and relevant policy-making has enabled the country to build a base for itself, where it cannot just serve its own consumer base but also cater to the needs of the world.

From home-grown industrial giants, who are today known for their prowess to global corporations, including us, that have reposed faith in the strengths, capabilities, and vibrancy of this great democracy, the success achieved is a testimony of the right decision made to be here and build capabilities.

India: Future of the globe

India has emerged as one of the fastest-growing countries for global corporations. As a global manufacturing and innovation hub, it now leads the vision of "Make in India" solidifying its role as a key driver of multinational operations. A sustained cycle of robust economic growth and resilience has enabled India to navigate global disruptions successfully over the years. India's unique blend of eco-

nomics, resilience, innovative ecosystems, and favourable demographics makes it an ideal gateway for global corporations. By leveraging its opportunities for growth and innovation, businesses can drive global success while contributing to India's development. India is not just a gateway but a cornerstone for achieving sustainable, scalable growth on the world stage.

Factors driving growth

Policy push: Global experience shows that a strong manufacturing industry is a prerequisite for a country to become a global player. In this context, the 2025 Union Budget presented a significant opportunity for India to lay a comprehensive framework that, if implemented, could catalyse India's growing domestic manufacturing sector into a global manufacturing hub. The National Manufacturing Mission announced by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget speech promises to give more teeth to India's push towards realising its manufacturing ambitions. The proposed mission will enable this to cover the entire gamut of manufacturing enterprises — across small, medium, and large industries — and will focus on five key areas:

India is not just a gateway but a cornerstone for achieving sustainable and scalable growth on the world stage

ease and cost of doing business; future ready workforce for in-demand jobs; a vibrant and dynamic micro, small, and medium enterprise sector; availability of technology; and quality products.

Technological advancements: India's journey to becoming a global manufacturing hub is powered by its ability to embrace technological advancements. Innovations like Industry 4.0, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, and robotics are transforming production processes, improving efficiency, and ensuring precision. By leveraging these cutting-edge technologies, Indian industries are not only meeting global standards but also gaining a competitive edge in international markets, making the nation an attractive destination for manufacturing investments.

Upskilling talent: India's vast talent pool is a key enabler of its manufacturing ambitions. With a demographic dividend that includes a large and young working-age population, the country offers a skilled and cost-effective labour force. Government initiatives at skilling the workforce enables them to scale up to the next level of excellence — something that corporations across the globe look for and value.

Our own experience in India has been very encouraging and that is visible in the unwavering commitment that we have made to this country over the years of our presence here.

Infrastructure development: The government's proactive approach to invest in infrastructure development is another crucial factor that helps corporations, small and large, to fulfil their commitment to delivering the right products at the right time and at the right price points to the vast consumer base here. Various projects like Gati Shakti which aim to strengthen logistics and connectivity, enabling smoother operations for manufacturers, are an encouragement to not only look at serving the Indian consumer but also beyond through exports.

The country aims to grow from the fifth largest to the third largest economy by 2027, surpassing Japan and Germany. Global corporations with manufacturing bases here need to proactively develop strategies that can help them benefit from this ambitious target that the country has set for itself. It not only paves the way for the economic development of the country towards becoming a developed nation by 2047, but also sets the tone for the corporations themselves to become global powerhouses of manufacturing with a stable and robust base capable of serving the world.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Treading cautiously with Trump

Apropos of "Pragmatic deal-making" (FE, February 15), Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US saw both optimistic moves and also concerns on tariff issues. It is a welcome sight that India and the US resolved to deepen the bilateral trade relationship since the US is one of India's major trading partners, with the latter enjoying a surplus. Oil and

gas supply by the US, and strong strategic ties on defence are positive outcomes but also routine. US President Donald Trump's continuing pessimistic view that India is a "tariff king" is not in good taste. India must be cautious with the US while reducing tariff, and Modi cannot take the chemistry between him and Trump as a token for minimising tariff distortion between the two nations and softening US immigration policies. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Urgent need for crowd control and safety

The tragic incident at the New Delhi Railway station on Saturday, which claimed the lives of at least 15 passengers including three children, is inexcusable. The horrifying stampede, triggered by an overwhelming rush of passengers heading to the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, has highlighted the alarming issue of overcrowding at major transport hubs, especially

during high-demand events. It is concerning that despite the clear signs of a potential disaster, adequate measures to prevent such chaos were not in place. The fact that so many lives were lost due to suffocation in such a short time is a stark reminder of the urgent need for better crowd management and safety protocols at railway stations. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

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[OUR TAKE]

Falling off the tracks again

New Delhi stampede underscores the need for better crowd control during events like the Maha Kumbh

The stampede that resulted in the death of at least 18 people at the New Delhi railway station on Saturday night was a tragedy waiting to happen, sparked by a combination of events both one-off and ubiquitous. The platform where the accident happened is always crowded. Indeed, a few hours after the stampede, it was again choked with people. Why? And why did Indian Railways think it was alright to sell far more general tickets than the train's capacity? Did the announcement of a new special train, also headed to Prayagraj but from a different platform, or delays in other trains departing from the same platform contribute to the crowding and chaos? What was unconscionable was the initial reaction of the authorities — not very different from that to the stampede at Prayagraj last month. Denial, then an attempt to downplay the loss of lives (starkly highlighted by Delhi's lieutenant governor tweeting about the deaths and then editing his message), and finally, an effort to convey that everything was under control. The administration must conduct a thorough and transparent probe to fix accountability and provide answers — not just about the accident but the response and behaviour after.

The painful scenes at the railway station on Saturday night came just weeks after similarly tragic events played out during the Mauni Amavasya Shahi Snan in Prayagraj. The deaths of at least 30 people at the Sangam site were supposed to act as a warning, but clearly, the authorities are yet to fully respond to it. With mammoth numbers of devotees headed to the Maha Kumbh, Uttar Pradesh as well as other states that act as the source of the pilgrims must install foolproof plans for crowd control, remain vigilant, and not allow any laxity while preparing for big days. With trains acting as the primary source of transport for millions of Indians, railway stations will naturally act as nodes for this sea of humanity headed for the Maha Kumbh. Hence, tighter arrangements and better prior planning will be required to ward off any more untoward incidents. This is all the more important given that roughly two weeks remain in the holy event.

The two stampedes have shown that contrary to claims, planning to prepare for the mega holy event is severely deficient. They have highlighted that crowd control measures have to look beyond policemen with lathis shepherding crowds and mere personnel deployment, and involve better organisation, coordination, scientific planning, and data-driven decision-making, especially by factoring in crowd estimation and identifying pressure points in transit lines and site arrangements. Business as usual is not an option. The human toll of such callousness has proven far too high, and authorities and governments would do well to prepare before — with the same assiduousness that demonstrated in seeking to manage the narrative after.

Europe-army call a sign of a continent in flux

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's call for raising an "armed forces of Europe" is an acknowledgment that the continent may no longer be the beneficiary of security guarantees provided by the US since the end of World War II (WWII), against the backdrop of signals that President Donald Trump is intent on cutting a deal with Russia's Vladimir Putin. Zelenskyy's call reflects a recognition of the storm gathering, following comments by US vice-president JD Vance at the Munich Security Conference that the old relationship with Europe is "ending" and the region "needs to adjust to that".

There has been talk of a European army for decades; the first Trump presidency catalysed efforts in this direction. These slowed down when the Biden regime reverted to a more traditionalist approach towards Europe. Besides the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Trump's demand that Nato members bear more security expenses, his recent conversations with Putin and his promise of ending the war without giving Kyiv a central role in the talks, as well as Vance's attacks on long-standing European values reflect the geopolitical flux in Europe. The rise of Right-wing nationalism fuelled by migration — a fallout of American and European interventions in West Asia and Africa — and Russia's assertions over its borders are changing power equations. X owner and Trump administration official Elon Musk's appeals to the European Right, too, have upset many governments. An inward-looking US poses multiple questions to the idea of a united Europe and should prompt the continent's leaders to forge a more independent path for their security and stability.

[GRAND STRATEGY]
Happymon Jacob

Trump 2.0 is also an opportunity for India

The US president's disruptive politics will reshape the world order. New Delhi must seize the moment

Much of the pessimism about the potential implications of Donald Trump's second term for the international order may be exaggerated. For those of us studying international relations through the lens of history and how States tend to behave, the foreign policy of the newly inaugurated Trump presidency feels like a déjà vu moment. International politics is an anarchic place. Powerful States attempt to set the terms, and the less powerful ones strategise their moves. This framing is important to make sense of not just the world according to President Trump but also Indo-US relations.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to the US led to several significant outcomes, as reflected in the extensive 36-page joint statement. However, not all the developments are positive. In that sense, this visit tells us that Indo-US relations will see many ups and downs in the next four years.

That said, it is important to highlight points: One, isolating America's relations with India from the broader context of Trump's foreign policy will be an analytical mistake. Two, the crisis in world politics today resulting from Trumpian disruption offers an opportunity to realise India's global ambitions.

If so, what does Trump's month-long presidency tell us about the potential impact on international politics? This context is crucial for assessing Modi's recent visit to the US and for speculating about the future of Indo-US relations.

For one, it is abundantly clear by now that tariffs will be a significant focus of Trump's agenda moving forward, impacting friends and foes alike. Secondly, Trump appears determined to increase exports while reducing imports into the US. He is likely to insist that India purchases American energy and weapons, both of which are more expensive than alternatives. Thirdly, in terms of his view of the world, he is unlikely to pursue new wars and is most likely to end the wars in Gaza and in Ukraine. Finally, Trump is also likely to disregard established norms of international politics thereby, potentially curbing the liberal internationalist impulse in both Europe and America.

specifically restraining European normative and regulatory approaches to democracy, human rights, trade, climate, and labour.

If these features persist over the long term under Trump's foreign policy, it will be crucial to view Indo-US relations as a subset of his worldview. In other words, while the bipartisan consensus in the US and the American establishment's positive view of India form a solid foundation for Indo-US relations, Trump's views will have a defining impact on that dynamic.

India's ability to rely on the traditional bipartisan American consensus to navigate the "Trump factor" in US relations will be somewhat limited. Therefore, Indian decision-makers will need to carefully calibrate and manage the deeper relationship India has built with the US to absorb the shocks from Trumpian disruption while being prepared for shocks and surprises. Ultimately, the future trajectory of Indo-US relations will hinge on how both Indian and American establishments navigate the relationship with care and diplomacy. We are in uncharted waters, which will test the foundations of the relationship that India and the US have built over the past two-and-a-half decades.

While India will need to accommodate some of Trump's demands, it is



While India will need to accommodate some of Trump's demands, it is also essential for New Delhi to seek favourable deals from Washington.

also essential for India to seek favourable deals from the US. One area to focus on is nuclear reactors. India should push Washington to accept its liability law (or a revised version currently in the works) to facilitate the sale of nuclear reactors. Additionally, India could seek greater concessions regarding technology transfer and export controls — the US has not been particularly forthcoming in these areas.

Finally, the Trump administration includes several India-friendly officials, including the director of national intelligence, the secretary of state, and the assistant secretary in charge of South Asia. This presents India with a unique opportunity to work with a sympathetic administration in the US, to create a favourable climate for itself in South Asia and the broader region.

Trump 2.0 and the disruption it brings are not entirely negative from an Indian perspective. This crisis in international politics also brings with it a set of opportunities. For instance, Trump's pressure on India to lower

tariffs could encourage the country to further reform the economy. The US retrenchment from its expansive involvement in world politics and its disinterest in global governance present India with an opportunity to engage in creating focused multilateral for regional and global governance and to initiate conversations with other great powers about what the future world order should look like. Just as the end of World War II shaped the current international order, Trumpian disruption could pave the way for a new world order — an outcome New Delhi should welcome. This situation also provides India with a chance to engage in dialogue with European States regarding their respective visions for the future global order. It is more likely to listen to the views of non-European powers such as India than ever before.

Happymon Jacob teaches India's foreign policy at IIS and is editor, INDIA'S WORLD MAGAZINE. The views expressed are personal.

[STRAIGHTFORWARD]
Shashi Shekhar

The Sajjan Kumar story and the politics of hate

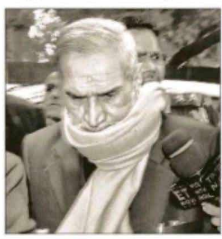
Humans tend to forget history's harsh lessons quickly. Today those fan-fanning communal tensions conveniently overlook the fact that such attempts in the past ended in devastation. Last Wednesday, another court indictment of former Congress Member of Parliament (MP) from Delhi, Sajjan Kumar, not only brought back the memories of the 1984 riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi but forced us once again to reflect on our present-day world.

The court found Sajjan Kumar guilty last week in the murder of Jyotsna Singh and her son. This was the result of a long, lonely and agonising struggle by Jyotsna Singh's widow. During her decades-long travails, a time came when the police even filed a closure report in the case. Even when the brazen tactics to brush the case aside failed, Sajjan Kumar wasn't arrested for a long time. However, the law finally caught up with him.

Until now Sajjan Kumar has been found guilty of murdering five people. Those who perpetrated violence against the Sikhs should have been punished swiftly and decisively, yet even today many have been able to dodge the law. Swift legal action was necessary because the attackers and their handlers were also guilty of killing the spirit of the Constitution that enshrines and upholds human rights and the idea of fraternity as sacred. That makes the delay in delivering justice unpardonable.

Jyotsna Singh and his son were burnt alive in the Saranwati Vihar area of Delhi on November 1, 1984. The mob that attacked them asked women and children to leave the locality and save themselves, but Jyotsna Singh's 14-year-old daughter refused to leave. Her heroic stand turned into a life-long trauma after witnessing the mob burning her father and brother alive. The young girl didn't know who the attackers were. All she knew was that the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, was shot in her official residence a day before and that the killers were from her community. She had nothing to do with the murder or the murderers. She had little to do with the politics that caused carnage in the country.

Sajjan Kumar would have escaped the law



The latest indictment of Sajjan Kumar for his role in the 1984 riots has forced us to reflect on our present-day world as well.

if not for a magazine, featuring him on the cover, that the young girl saw. She recognised him but her complaint took 41 long years to come to fruition and bring him to justice. Today, she's 54 years old.

The Indian State has delivered justice but she's a quintessential example of the axiom, justice delayed is justice denied. The violence that broke out in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's death resulted in more than 2,700 deaths and the loss of billions of rupees worth of property across the country. In those days it felt as if the Sikh community in India would nurse a grudge and stay aloof from the national mainstream. But the community deserves our respect and gratitude for picking up the pieces, rebuilding their lives, doggedly pursuing the perpetrators of violence, and bringing them to justice despite the long procedural delays.

I too was a witness to the countryside violence unleashed against Sikhs. I then lived in Allahabad (present-day Prayagraj). One morning, I received a call from my office that Indira Gandhi had been shot at. I rushed to my office. We were working on bringing out the evening bulletin, but by afternoon violence broke out. Shops run by Sikhs were looted, gurdwaras attacked and mobs ransacked Sikh homes. By evening, three people had been killed and dozens injured. The irony was the then district magistrate of Allahabad was a Sikh officer, but the district administration and law enforcement agencies felt powerless before a bloodthirsty crowd. I can't shake off those images from my mind even today. Unfortunately, the same story was repeated in many cities.

Indira Gandhi's assassination was the fallout of resentment against Operation Bluestar ordered by her to flush out terrorists from the Golden Temple. In the 1990s, we were again subjected to nationwide communal violence. This time the trigger was the Babri Masjid. Riots broke out throughout the country. More than 2,000 Indians died and once again property worth crores went up in smoke. Just like in 1984, people felt that the two largest communities in the country would never live in harmony the way they did earlier. However, the spirit of India won again. We started coexisting peacefully after the dust settled on the communal frenzy.

Circumstances have undergone a sea change since. During those times there was no social media. It made the task of controlling hate that much easier. Social media, meant to bring together diverse people worldwide, is now ending up dividing them.

The dangerous trend is only growing. A recent study by the University of California, Berkeley, found that hate speech on Twitter (now X) had risen by 50% after Elon Musk purchased it. Musk is now an advisor to the most powerful man in the world, the President of the United States, Donald Trump.

Peacekeepers find the going tough when people holding high office, willingly or unwittingly, lean towards hate-mongering. Unfortunately, that is the global pattern these days.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal.

[ALEXANDER STUBB] PRESIDENT, FINLAND

The first phase (in efforts to end the Russia-Ukraine war) is the pre-negotiation, and this is a moment when we need to rearm Ukraine and put maximum pressure on Russia

HINDUSTAN TIMES

Road map for pursuing nuclear energy in India

India's quest for a low-carbon future has led to significant discussions on the role of nuclear energy. The Union Budget has reinforced the government's net zero vision by introducing a nuclear energy mission with a target of 100 GW by 2047, changes in the Atomic Energy Act and Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act for greater private participation, and a ₹20,000-crore research and development (R&D) initiative for small modular reactors (SMRs). The upcoming World Sustainable Development Summit (WSDS) 2025 is set to shape discussions on the role of nuclear power in India's energy transition.

Despite record-high additions in renewable energy (RE) capacity — particularly solar and wind — the grid emission factor that has been on a declining trend has started to rise again, due to India's surging energy demand outpacing the expansion of renewables. Nuclear power contributes to grid stability while contributing to deep decarbonisation. Unlike other energy sources, it provides a high-capacity factor, operates independently of weather conditions, and requires significantly less land. Nuclear plants have a long operational life and lower lifecycle emissions, making them key for India's energy transition.

India's success in scaling up solar energy has been largely driven by government initiatives. Nuclear power requires an equally robust policy framework. The government's proposal to amend the Atomic Energy Act and Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act is a welcome step, as these laws have historically restricted private sector participation and foreign investment in nuclear power. Allowing private enterprises and global partnerships could accelerate capacity addition. Public perception needs to be addressed proactively, given the scepticism due over nuclear accidents and concerns about radioactive waste. NGO-led outreach and transparent communication regarding safety measures, waste management strategies, and the economic and environmental benefits of nuclear energy will be critical here.

The 100 GW nuclear energy target by 2047 signals India's commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2070. This is a significant leap from the current installed nuclear capacity of 8.2 GW. Achieving this target requires strategic investments, international collaborations, and accelerated deployment of advanced reactor technologies, including Bharat Small

Reactors (BSRs), SMRs, and thorium-based reactors.

BSRs, with their safety features and reduced capital costs, present an opportunity to deploy nuclear power across diverse geographic locations, including remote and industrial areas. The ₹20,000-crore R&D initiative for SMRs aims to develop at least five indigenous reactors by 2033, laying the foundation for large-scale deployment in the following decades. This move aligns with global trends, as countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom are investing heavily in SMR development. Amendments to the Atomic Energy Act and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act will pave the way for expanding large-scale nuclear power generation through conventional plants (2025-2035), focusing on Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs) and Fast Breeder Reactors (FBRs).

Expediting ongoing projects in Kudankulam and Gorakhpur is essential to meet near-term energy demands. Deploying BSRs with private sector involvement is key to decarbonising hard-to-abate sectors. Concurrently, scaling up SMRs should be prioritised for the 2030-2040 timeframe. This requires government support for early-stage SMR development, streamlined regulatory approvals, and incentives to attract private investment in reactor deployment. India must also leverage its substantial thorium reserves. From 2035 to 2047, the focus should shift towards fast-tracking the three-stage nuclear programme, transitioning from uranium-based reactors to thorium-fuelled Advanced Heavy Water Reactors (AHWRs). This is key to sustainable nuclear generation.

Finally, revisiting the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement is vital for fostering international collaboration. It will facilitate technology transfer, secure necessary financing, and promote joint R&D initiatives. Addressing liability issues related to nuclear damage is also critical. Amendments to nuclear liability laws must strike a balance between ensuring investor confidence and maintaining robust safety and accountability standards. Establishing an internationally accepted framework will encourage foreign firms to invest in India's nuclear sector.

K Ramanathan is distinguished fellow, and Arunendra Kumar Tiwari is associate fellow, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI). The views expressed are personal.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Charting new course

Prime Minister Modi's recent US visit was an ice breaker and promising despite Trump's insistence on raising tariff walls

Since Donald Trump assumed the presidency of the United States, he has made a significant global impact. Through his "Make America Great Again" initiative, he has repositioned the US on the world stage, aiming to reshape the existing global order. By imposing tariff barriers and taking direct action when necessary, his policies have put several economies, including India's—which heavily depends on exports to the US—at risk. However, some relief appears to be on the horizon. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to the United States has been lauded as a significant milestone in strengthening Indo-US relations. Meeting with President Donald Trump at the White House, both leaders engaged in comprehensive discussions that culminated in agreements spanning trade, defence, energy and technology. Despite previous tensions over tariffs, with President Trump labeling India as a "tariff king," the summit showcased a collaborative spirit. Both nations committed to more than doubling bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030. This ambitious goal is set to be achieved through a forthcoming bilateral trade agreement aimed at reducing duties and enhancing market access. Additionally, the US expressed interest in increasing investments in India's nuclear energy sector, signalling a deepening of economic ties.



A cornerstone of the discussions was defence cooperation. The US offered India the advanced F-35 stealth fighter jets, marking a significant step in military collaboration. This proposal aligns with the ten-year defence cooperation plan, emphasising the US's intent to bolster India's defence capabilities. Such initiatives are indicative of a strategic partnership aimed at ensuring regional stability and countering emerging threats. Technological and Innovation Partnerships Prime Minister Modi's engagement extended beyond political leaders to influential figures in the technology sector. His meeting with SpaceX CEO Elon Musk underscored a mutual interest in space exploration and technological innovation. Discussions encompassed potential collaborations in space technology, mobility solutions and the introduction of services like Starlink satellite internet in India. These dialogues reflect a shared vision of leveraging technology for economic growth and societal benefit. The visit also highlighted India's nuanced position on global issues. While strengthening ties with the US, India maintains its strategic autonomy, especially concerning relations with Russia and its stance on conflicts like the Ukraine war. This balanced approach allows India to navigate complex international landscapes, ensuring its national interests are prioritised. Prime Minister Modi's visit to the United States has set a positive trajectory for Indo-US relations. The agreements and discussions held promise a future of enhanced cooperation across various sectors, reflecting a robust partnership poised to address both nations' strategic and economic objectives.

PICTALK



A pair of Asiatic lions inside their enclosure at Van Vihar National Park in Bhopal

A reluctant pilgrim's awakening: Discovering faith at the Kumbh

What began as a journey of reluctant exploration turned into an experience that reshaped my understanding of faith, devotion and purpose

Triveni is where the three sacred rivers, Ganga, Yamuna, and the now-extinct mythical Sarasvati, merge. It is believed that bathing in the holy waters of Sangam, particularly during certain auspicious days, brings blessings. I am not too fond of visiting religious places. I am used to a certain level of comfort. I have, probably mistakenly, come to associate spirituality and religion with a minimalistic way of living. Standing in serpentine queues for a microsecond glimpse does not appeal to me.

I remember a visit to Tirupati during my railway probation with two other friends. A look at the painfully slow-moving long queue was enough for us to wait outside as the third friend went in to also pray on our behalf. I believe that my God resides within me. Thus, the idea of visiting the Kumbh was not even remotely in my thoughts. An article on the biggest religious and spiritual fair in the world made me realise that this was the Mahakumbh, an event that would repeat 144 years later. It was this novelty that I could not resist. My wife



decreed that we should also visit Varanasi. A premium tent was reserved in one of the luxury camps. We booked waitlisted train tickets without any hopes of confirmation. My younger brother working in the railways assured us to try to get us the seats. I was hoping he might not be able to help, till we boarded the train early in the morning, much apprehensive about the next three days. We had read and heard enough about the stampede and the long walks due to the barricades. The experience in Prayagraj was nothing like my apprehensions. The camp by the banks of the river Ganges, away from the crowded centre, was more of a luxury resort. The roads were crowded,

which resulted in traffic jams. But we managed to take a dip at the confluence and then visit the Akharas, the religious order of Sadhus, the monks. We did not have to walk long distances. The next day was slightly more chaotic. The cab for Varanasi arrived late and we had to take an e-rickshaw to reach the parking lot. The evening saw us jostling with the massive crowd, all walking towards the riverbank for the customary Ganga Aarti, a daily ritual performed at dusk to honour the sacred river. We even managed to brave the humongous crowd the next day to pray at the Kashi Vishwanath temple. I realised that the two cities are more than a confluence of the rivers or a visit to the temple.

The legacy of leadership: What truly endures

Greatness in leadership is not merely about personal glory—it is about creating a legacy that endures across time, geographies and generations



VINAYASHIL GAUTAM



Anyone who has attempted to perpetuate his memory in any institution or community has believed himself to be an institution builder. To be an institution builder, as the words themselves will show, one has to build a purpose, establish a process, gather resources, and pull them together in pursuit of an objective. This pursuit cannot be the pursuit of self-glorification. Usually, a successor tries to outdo his predecessor; this can be by upscaling, ignoring, or finding flaws in the predecessor's efforts. Sooner or later, this destroys everyone involved because everyone must necessarily end up with a successor. That successor, sooner or later, becomes a competitor to the predecessor. This may be an obvious truth, but not many people seem to have recognised it. Hence, if one is seeking glorification, perhaps the most important pursuit should be the search for a successful successor who is not only in sympathy with one's approach but will carry the mission forward. The great leaders of the world have recognised this instinctively, and the epithet 'Great' has come their way. Martin Luther was a good example, as was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Nelson Mandela could also be a good

illustration. The examples are many. In each case, the conclusion is the same. Each so-called great leader needed a succession of people generously following them who proclaimed their greatness from the treetops. This may be easy to propound but difficult to action. One reason for this is that it needs a succession of people after one's own life who would concur with the approach, and indeed have been beneficiaries of that person's influence. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has been widely celebrated for his theories of agitation against foreign rule. There is evidence of his having worked together in tandem, where the situation so demanded, with the rulers. This has since been noted and at times overlooked. There is a hypothesis which has done the rounds in certain quarters that the title of "Mahatma" was conferred upon him because of his request by the foreign rulers. Such observations are difficult to critically appraise decades or centuries later. However, one approach remains. Recognition of one's leadership and contributions is a complex process that has yet to be fully understood. One's greatness is therefore a matter of consen-

suously building which is always difficult in its fullness. The bottom line is there must be something enduring in the actions of an individual to receive kudos across communities generations and geographies. That something must include what is noble in human existence. The succeeding leaders may be helpful but they cannot determine the full range of perceptions. The long and short of it is that petty pursuits of petty objectives for limited periods rarely have given enduring recognition for one's greatness. Sooner or later, for most aspiring leaders, some process of a counterpoint emerges as other contenders for the spot of greatness arise. Very often, these people, as alternate leaders, are from a different vantage point of perception, and debate is generated. Few have claimed eminence for greatness without having survived the crucial test of times and acceptance across generations. History is a telltale testament as to how the pre-eminence of one's contribution or the significance of one's contribution can change with the changing cultures of the times. One may not be so well recognised in one's lifetime, but subse-

quent generations awoken to that greatness as per their vision and their own needs. The case of Birsu Munda is an interesting example. Not so long ago, he was one of the freedom fighters who was remembered in certain parts of India only by certain people. But times changed, and now he is being celebrated with the glory of a true visionary leader who fought for the independence. Times change, and so does the vision. However, if one thing remains constant, it is that few have attained leadership across generations and geographies without having a sound streak of spiritual vision. One may be celebrated for martial glories or administrative contributions, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, for loftiness beyond the constraints of time and space, some elevated spiritual insights valid across people and generations seem a common need. It is obvious that the subject matter of the greatness of leaders and what constitutes the same needs continuing depths of research, iteration and honest conviction.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EXTRADITION OF TAHAWWUR RANA

Madam — The agony of the horrific 26/11 terrorist attack still lingers in India's heart. Hundreds of innocent civilians lost their lives in this massacre. This dreadful chapter of terrorism saw the involvement of Tahawwur Rana, a Pakistani-origin US citizen and an aide of Lashkar-e-Taiba. Now, with the US administration approving Rana's extradition to India, a significant path toward justice has been paved. Rana's extradition is not just about punishing a criminal; it symbolises India's unwavering stance against terrorism and the growing global support for this cause. This decision will not only expedite the judicial process but also bring a ray of hope to the victims' families, who have been waiting for justice for years. Although legal hurdles may arise in the extradition process, if it succeeds, it will send a strong message to terrorists that no matter where they hide, they cannot escape the clutches of justice. This diplomatic victory underscores India's firm resolve and international backing. Now is the time to bring Rana before the Indian judicial system and deliver justice to the innocent martyns of 26/11.

R K Jain | Barwani

RANVEER SPARKS CONTROVERSY

Madam — The controversy around the "India's Got Latent" episode with YouTube content creator Ranveer Allahabadia making mockery of his parents too in the name of dark comedy depicts his actual senses and mindset on camera. Despite Ranveer being honoured with the National Digital Creators Award by the Prime Minister himself just last year, he didn't give a thought before speaking on camera, which will be telecasted on public platforms. It is sheerly surprising that he could not even think about how he could be so vulgar while commenting on his parents. Now that he is deleting all the episodes already seen by the audience or presenting his public apology, it does

President's rule in Manipur



The Centre has imposed President's Rule in ethnic strife-torn Manipur after the ruling BJP's failure to have a consensus on the name of the successor to N Biren Singh. Primarily, the governance failure of the N Biren Singh government may be held responsible for the current situation of the state. But many geo-social factors have also played a big role in an increase in ethnic discord among various communities of the state. Demographic changes and shrinking of

their traditional areas due to the unchecked influx of Kukis from Myanmar over the decades have led to discontent in Meiteis. Intelligence reports suggest that these illegal settlers are indulging in smuggling of drugs and weapons. N Biren Singh's government's tough action against the drug menace and illegal occupation of forest land in hilly districts, particularly Churachandpur, irked Kukis. On the other hand, his government's failure to implement the Manipur High Court's April 2023 direction to consider the request of Meiteis to include them in the ST list led to the loss of trust of his own Meitei community. Fierce opposition of tribal groups to the High Court's direction kept his govt on the back foot.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

n't make any sense. Every action taken by Mumbai police to probe him and the action by the National Commission of Women were the worthy punishments that Ranveer, aka Beer Biceps, must face. The action will message every such public figure to stop believing that not every one of their public comments is always right.

These public personalities hold a greater responsibility of representing the social values and aspirations in good sense. Millions of people follow them to learn something good and inspirational from them, not such a shit mentality. The dwindling following of Ranveer on social media platforms is welcoming. We all must not follow such a person who holds such shit senses about the people in his surroundings, especially the vulgarity about the parental relationship. Society shapes from the morals of a few leaders. If public figures fail to do their job in a manner they should, it is better to boycott such personalities holistically with adequate punishment to them. This will act as a lesson for other social media fig-

ures to be wary of well before speaking in public.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

BUMRAH'S ABSENCE HURTS INDIA

Madam — The absence of Jasprit Bumrah from the Champions Trophy matches is a shock and not in favour of the Indian team. He was a key bowler in Australia, and his absence will be felt very much. Bumrah is a crisis man, making fast bowling look effortless. He rises to the occasion and delivers exceptional spells across formats. He was overburdened in Australia and as a result found unfit now. The selectors, instead of using him in tandem with number one spinner Ashwin, neglect the latter and now pay a heavy price. Bumrah's importance to the team is undeniable, whenever in trouble. With both the star bowlers unavailable, the chances of reaching the Champions Trophy final appear rather bleak.

C K Subramaniam | Sanpada

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

New phase in India-US ties

India will have to deal with unpredictability

High on New Delhi's list of objectives prior to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington would have been the need to demonstrate that India is a willing and active partner for the new administration, led by President Donald Trump. Indeed, while Mr Trump was welcoming Mr Modi to Washington, his vice-president was speaking at the Munich Security Conference — a speech that effectively laid out the many ways in which the new dispensation in the US disagreed with its allies in Europe. Mr Modi's visit will have attempted to convey that, unlike the troublesome Europeans, India is a far more congenial partner for an America being remade by a second Trump term. The positive atmosphere that Indian officials hoped to create is reflected, to an extent, in the joint statement issued following the visit. For one, when it comes to trade issues, the statement reveals a tone somewhat more cooperative than the ones the new President tends to take otherwise. It also sets out a plan for negotiations on a trade agreement — of the early-harvest sort being discussed in 2020 — to be settled before this fall. Given the degree to which trade concerns were de-emphasised in the bilateral relations over the past four years, this could be seen as an important step forward.

Yet it is vital to retain a sense of proportion as well as a clear understanding of the unpredictability that is one of Mr Trump's characteristics as a leader. The fact is that, at the same time as the visit, Mr Trump did characterise India as one of the world's most offenders on trade, and furthermore promised that the tariff structure of the United States (US) henceforth would be based on "reciprocity". It is unclear what Mr Trump means by this, especially since his statements seem to suggest that even duties meant to create a level playing field for value-added taxes would invite "reciprocal" tariffs. It will naturally be quite an effort for officials to come to any agreement when the political leadership they are setting out to please has such a difficult to interpret view of fairness in trade.

Such caution should also be the formula through which the rest of the joint statement is examined. While there have clearly been attempts to create new avenues for cooperation and to expand old ones in domains from critical minerals to defence, the very fact that the US must now be viewed as an unreliable partner reduces the salience of any individual move. And, in some cases, there are questions about how soon India will also be able to take advantage of any offers from the US side. For example, although the Budget promised to amend the nuclear-liability regime in India with a view to enhancing investment in that sector, timelines on such amendments, as well as their quality, are always unknown.

The US' headline-grabbing pledge to review its policy on fifth-generation fighter aircraft to enable their export to India is a similar case; even if such a revision goes through, it is not easy to figure out how soon India will be able to commit billions from the Budget to a new weapons platform. The quickest and most effective line of cooperation with the new Trump administration will likely be on energy security, where the leaders agreed "enhancing the production of hydrocarbons" was an important step. New Delhi should continue to look for low-hanging fruit where the new administration in Washington can be given easy wins that further build trust between the two capitals.

In a tight spot

Sustained correction will test investors

India's stock markets are experiencing increasingly bearish trends. While the benchmark Nifty fell 2.7 per cent last week, the broad NSE500, which tracks 500 largest stocks listed on the National Stock Exchange (NSE), dropped 4.7 per cent. The midcap and smallcap indices dropped 7.4 per cent and 9.6 per cent, respectively. The downturn has been in force for a while. This broadly bearish sentiment is illustrated by the fact that only 47 stocks in the NSE500 advanced in the past week, while 452 stocks lost ground. From a longer perspective, the Nifty has returned a nominally positive 4.6 per cent in the last year. That is less than the yield from treasury bills, or the rate of inflation, for that matter. The NSE500 is up just 2.9 per cent and the midcaps have returned a meagre 2.5 per cent return in the same period, while the smallcaps are down 3.3 per cent. The Nifty smallcap 100 has fallen 21.6 per cent from its highs and is now in bear territory, while the midcap index has fallen over 18 per cent.

There are multiple data points contributing to the pessimism. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have sold equity worth almost ₹1 trillion since January 1. The rupee has lost ground against the dollar, testing ₹87.99 before seeing a small recovery on the central bank's intervention. The Q3FY25 results have been disappointing with slow growth in profits and revenue, and management guidance in most sectors has been cautious. Overall economic growth estimates have been downgraded. Consumption-driven businesses have pointed at weak demand. The Union Budget may not provide much of a stimulus with a pullback on infrastructure spending likely to offset any potential stimulus from the income-tax cut. Investors who were fence-sitting until the Budget have gone bearish while FPIs have continued selling. The Reserve Bank of India's decision to cut the policy rate and possible future cuts may not move the markets materially.

Export-oriented companies have also pointed to demand weakness in key markets, such as the European Union. There is also great uncertainty regarding the direction of the American economy, with the Donald Trump administration apparently set on imposing tariffs. One bright spot is that mutual funds continue to see large inflows, which indicates households are still backing equity. However, a large proportion of mutual-fund subscriptions come from systematic investment plans (SIPs), which are generally locked in for specific periods. For tax reasons, most SIPs tend to end in March — the April data will help in assessing if retail investors retain their bullishness. One negative signal when it comes to retail sentiment is the sell-off in smallcaps; small stocks with little in the way of institutional interest are the focus of retail investors.

However, despite the recent correction, valuations look rich in the case of large stocks, and unsustainably high for smaller stocks. The Nifty is trading at a current price-to-earnings (PE) ratio of around 21, which is somewhat on the high side, going by historical valuations. The midcaps are trading at a PE of 28 while the smallcaps are doing so at 34. Corrections in the Nifty usually bottom out at around a PE of 15. Unless there's significant acceleration in the rate of profit growth, further corrections appear to be on the cards. This may test the resolve of the retail investors, who have driven the market over the past five years.

Running episodic deregulation

In each field, on each regulation, deregulatory projects must run through three questions

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY



There is a lot of concern about government interference in the lives of the people. In the Budget speech, the Union finance minister announced a high-level committee to examine deregulation in the non-financial sector, and a work programme at the Financial Stability and Development Council to do similarly for the financial sector. The new Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor, Sanjiv Malhotra, threw new light when he said "just like there are no free lunches, regulation to enhance stability and consumer protection too is not devoid of costs. There are tradeoffs between stability and efficiency". In the United Kingdom there is optimism about a new "regulatory innovation office".

In the United States there is less optimism about a new "department of government efficiency". Reasoning about regulation involves comparing the costs and benefits. Full freedom allows the people to pursue economic efficiency. This, in turn, generates growth in gross domestic product (GDP) through innovation and rational firm design. Every government intervention reduces economic efficiency and hampers GDP growth. Government intervention is justified only when the societal gains from regulatory compliance outweigh the societal costs.

The environment of pure economic freedom suffers from some market failure (situations of market power, externalities, asymmetric information, and public goods). A good regulation is one that surgically addresses market failure, does not have unintended consequences, and imposes the lowest cost upon society. That is, it yields an acceptable outcome on addressing market failure while imposing the least possible adverse impact upon economic efficiency, innovation, and GDP growth. India's state capabilities are limited. Therefore, it is often wiser to tolerate some market failures than to harm economic dynamism through

poorly designed or implemented interventions.

Real-world governments are shaped by public-choice theory: Officials and politicians respond to incentives and pursue their self-interest. State personnel enjoy having, threatening, and wielding coercive power against private persons. Hence, government intervention often has no connection with market failure. It needs to be identified and removed.

This understanding guides the script to use in episodic deregulatory projects. For each piece of state intervention, deregulatory projects should run through the following steps.

Question 1: Why was the intervention put in place in the outset?

The documents on each intervention need to show the objective and to demonstrate that this objective is grounded in market failure. When an intervention does not clearly show its objective, it is good to immediately reverse it. As an example, the candid preamble to the present payments law says that the objective of the law is to have the RBI regulate the business of payments. This objective has nothing to do with market failure.

When an intervention makes claims about the market failure that it seeks to address, these should be sceptically analysed. There is considerable band-aid-switch in the workings of government: A monster in Tibet is shown to justify an intervention in Kerala. Hence, critical thinking is required in reading the founding documents about an intervention (which articulate objectives) and verifying that the legal instruments connect up with the text correctly.

Applying these two tests — (1) whether an objective is stated when designing the intervention, and (2) whether that objective addresses a market failure — would significantly streamline the Indian state.



SNAKES & LADDERS
AJAYA SHAH

Task before new boards

Barely two weeks after launching the National Turmeric Board to make India the global hub of this multi-utility spice, the government proposed, in the 2025-26 Budget, setting up a similar board for makhana (fox nut), a relatively neglected aquatic agro-product that is gaining popularity the world over as a superfood. With these two new boards, the count of commodity boards in the country swells to seven. The five pre-existing boards are looking after the sectoral interests of coffee, tea, rubber, tobacco, and spices. These statutory, yet autonomous, bodies are mandated primarily to promote the production, post-harvest processing, value-addition, marketing, and export of these commodities. They also provide technical knowhow and financial aid to the producers, and other stakeholders to improve the productivity and quality of the produce and participate in trade fairs, buyer-seller meets, and other developmental activities. The track record of these boards may not be wholly flawless, but they have played a perceptible role in the evolution of their respective commodity sectors.

An elaborate report on turmeric, brought out by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (Icrier), a think-tank, just a day after the establishment of the Turmeric Board, reckons that the value of export of this yellow spice could swell to \$1 billion by 2030 from \$226.5 million in 2023-24. India is the world's largest producer, consumer, and exporter of this key kitchen staple, which is valued also for its therapeutic traits. The country accounts for nearly 70 per cent of global turmeric production and 62 per cent of its international trade.

Turmeric is basically a perennial plant belonging

to the ginger family (Zingiberaceae). Its rhizomes (underground stems) are dried and processed to make turmeric powder, having a slightly acrid, yet sweetish, taste, and the typical yellow colour, which lends an appealing hue to curries. It is also used as a natural dye, drug, and skin tonic, besides as a condiment in cooked foods. The plant is believed to have originated in tropical South Asia, including India, China, and Japan. Its cultivation has now spread to countries like Taiwan, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Australia, Peru, the West Indies, and several African nations.

The Indian turmeric industry, however, needs to brace itself up to capitalise on the emerging opportunities in the world bazaar in the face of escalating competition from several new players, notably Fiji, the Netherlands, and Germany, which are offering better quality and value-enhanced products of turmeric. The new board, which would have representatives of turmeric producers and exporters, apart from the officials of various concerned ministries, would need to formulate sound strategies to step up crop productivity, improve product quality, and explore new export destinations.

Quality is a major issue for Indian turmeric. Though the country has a rich diversity of turmeric varieties, comprising nearly 30 distinct types with distinguishable characteristics, most of these have a low content of curcumin, the main bioactive ingredient responsible for turmeric's therapeutic and skincare properties. Only the "Lakadong turmeric", grown chiefly in Meghalaya, contains adequate, and internationally comparable, level of 6.8 to 7.8 per cent of this key element. Most manufacturers of turmeric-based medicinal and cosmetic products, therefore, need to source

Question 2: Did it work?

The regulations that survive Question 1 are those that were introduced in the past, were motivated by a market failure, and articulated an objective. Now we must ask: Did the intervention deliver? Were the objectives met? Many interventions fail to deliver on their objective and should be reversed. Good intention in public policy is useless. What matters is getting things done.

Question 3: Did the costs exceed the benefits?

Government intervention curbs possibilities for private persons, who respond by innovating less and investing less. The third stage of deregulatory projects consists of sceptically looking at successful intervention (those that articulated an objective, where the objective was indeed addressing market failure, and those that genuinely won in achieving their objective). Yes, the regulation was a success, but at what cost? A regulation that imposes minimum equity capital requirements comes with the cost of blocking entry by smaller firms and reducing competition. A regulation that forces private persons to waste land imposes economic harm by driving up the capital required by firms, and hampers economic efficiency in land utilisation.

There are direct costs of compliance. More important, there are invisible costs of an adverse impact upon the innovation, creativity, and investment of private persons. In the limit, the Indian central planning system forces entire private industries to behave like public-sector undertakings, where all important decisions are made by the government. The RBI controls products and processes in private banks, much like what is done with government banks.

A regulation that imposes high costs (in terms of innovation, growth, and dynamism) that are not commensurate with the benefits (in terms of addressing market failure) should be reversed.

It is always important to look beyond the "de jure" (text of the law) and at the "de facto" (the way intervention operates). When powers are amassed by the Indian state, these interact with the lack of rule of law. Powerful government organisations in India have arbitrary power. This fear holds back private persons from commitment to activities in India. Alongside the deregulatory agenda, solutions also involve improving the rule of law.

This analysis shows us how to run episodic deregulatory projects, and also why these generally work poorly. It is very hard to master one sector (eg aviation or financial derivatives), to build a team that has the intellectual capacity to process the above three questions, and to challenge entrenched government organisations that crave power. In addition, none of this is a root-cause solution because the state's faulty structures, which put out new state interventions every day, are purring away. The daily flow of new kinds of harm overwhelms the possibilities from episodic deregulatory projects. What is needed is a root-cause analysis that will change how regulators work. The field of regulatory theory in India knows how to do this.

The writer is a researcher at XKDR Forum



FARM VIEW
SURINDER SOO

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their raw material from abroad, making India the world's second-largest importer of turmeric, next to the United States, despite being the leading producer. In the case of makhana, the present global market is rather small, worth only around \$25 million, though it is expanding rapidly, thanks to the increasing awareness of its health benefits. Being a rich source of B vitamins, protein, and fibre, and low in fat, makhana is becoming a preferred snack for fitness enthusiasts. Its consumption received a great impetus during the pandemic as an immunity-boosting agent.

Makhana, also known as lotus seed and Gorgon nut, is the seed of the prickly water lily plant, grown generally in ponds or natural stagnant water bodies. It has to be processed and popped to make it a crunchy, light, and delectable snack. In India, it is consumed also as a vegetable curry, sweet porridge, and various other types of popular cuisines.

Nearly 90 per cent of the country's makhana output comes from Bihar, especially the districts of Darbhanga, Araria, Kishanganj, Katihar, and Madhubani, though it is now also being cultivated in states like Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and Odisha. However, the makhana producers of Bihar have not gained much from the surge in domestic and global demand because of inadequate processing facilities and inefficient marketing channels. The bulk of the produce goes to other states for processing, popping, and organised marketing. The board for makhana, proposed to be set up in Bihar, would, therefore, have to not only introduce better production technology but also facilitate developing a post-harvest value chain. The performance of the boards for makhana and turmeric would ultimately be gauged by the impact their policies and programmes have on the holistic development of these sectors.

surinder.sood@gmail.com

Dubious history of the presidential pardon



BOOK REVIEW

JENNIFER SZALAI

When it comes to pardons, presidents are kings," the legal journalist Jeffrey Toobin writes in his new book, *The Pardon: The Politics of Presidential Mercy*. It's not for nothing that President Trump, who has long been dazzled by royal pomp, was keen to brag about his pardon powers during his first term.

In some ways, Toobin's book is impeccably timed. In December, President Joe Biden pardoned his son Hunter despite previous pledges not to. In his final minutes in office, Biden went on to pardon five other members of his family. Trump, upon taking office last year, had pardoned or commuted the sentences of the more than 1,500 of his

supporters who rioted at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Toobin completed this book before Trump started his second term, but in an epilogue he presciently predicted that Trump would issue a "blanket pardon" to all of the January 6 defendants. "When he pardons them," Trump will, in effect, pardon himself.

Toobin explains that "presidential powers of clemency" have their "roots in the royal prerogative of mercy" — a strangely monarchical vestige for a democracy that had rebelled against the king. Still, early proponents of the pardon power insisted that it ultimately benefited the people. Alexander Hamilton called the pardon "the benign prerogative" that would soften the harsh penalties of criminal law. "Without an easy access to exceptions in favor of unfortunate guilt," Hamilton explained, "justice would wear a countenance so sanguinary and cruel."

From such lofty beginnings has flowed plenty of trouble. The fact that there is "no check or balance" on the power of the pardon has invited "chaos in the executive branch," Toobin writes. As much as presidents like to cast pardons as

unequivocal gestures of mercy, he maintains that they are better understood as political acts. Abraham Lincoln offered amnesty to ordinary Southerners in exchange for oaths of loyalty to the Union because he wanted to hold the country together. Andrew Johnson granted pardons to the leaders of the Confederacy without seeming to care about the potential for such impunity to tear the country apart. "Pardons are manifestations of the presidential id," Toobin writes.

Most of his book is given over to recounting what was — at least until recently — "the most controversial presidential pardon in American history": Gerald Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon. On August 9, 1974, Nixon resigned from the presidency after the House Judiciary Committee recommended that he be impeached for obstruction of justice in the Watergate scandal. A month later, President Ford, who had assumed office after serving as Nixon's vice president, announced that he was granting "a full, free and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon," because the former president "and his

loved ones have suffered enough." Toobin offers a granular narrative of that day, Nixon knew that he couldn't be the one to float the idea of a pardon to Ford. "Such an agreement would have been unseemly, making it look as if Ford was getting the presidency in exchange for a pardon. But as Toobin makes clear, Nixon would be consummate schemer: Ford was both blessed and cursed by his "placid temperament and manifest decency."

Before Nixon's resignation, Ford had made a point of never asking him about Watergate; afterward, Ford continued not to talk about it. He delivered his most famous line shortly after being sworn into office: "My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over." The lion resonated powerfully with the public, but

Ford, being Ford, fretted that the line was too close to Nixon.

Toobin traces the steps of this convoluted dance. Nixon wanted a pardon and pretended he didn't. Ford wanted to grant the pardon and had a hard time hiding that fact. Through intermediaries, Nixon used his papers and tape recordings as leverage, maintaining that they belonged to him and not, as Ford insisted, to the government.

THE PARDON: The Politics of Presidential Mercy
Author: Jeffrey Toobin
Publisher: Simon & Schuster
Pages: 287
Price: \$29.99

Toobin calls Nixon's gambit "a form of extortion." (Until the Presidential Records Act of 1978, a president's papers were treated as private property.) By pardoning Nixon, Ford also thought he could "spare the country" and move past the ugliness of Watergate. Toobin calls it a "bad pardon for an honorable reason"; it helped stoke the very cynicism it was supposed to quell. What struck me most about *The Pardon* was how bizarrely quaint all the wrangling over Watergate seems now, compared with the onslaught of our frenzied political moment. Take the

notorious events of October 20, 1973, known as the Saturday Night Massacre, when Nixon ordered his attorney general to fire Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor for the Watergate investigation. The attorney general refused and resigned; then the deputy attorney general refused and resigned.

In 1973, Nixon's abuse of power was outrageous; now the immediate victims of the Saturday Night Massacre could be counted on one hand. Contrast this with what has happened in the last three weeks: the Trump administration has been firing people at such a breakneck clip that a bewildered public can barely keep up. Trump isn't known for his consistency, but he has shown a consistent fascination with making bids for unchecked presidential power.

Toobin's book offers little by way of consolation. Even in a democracy, "the royal prerogative of mercy" has its appeal, especially during cruel times. But as *The Pardon* makes exceedingly clear, it can also serve as a weapon for a leader who insists he can do whatever he wants.

The reviewer is non-fiction book critic for The Times
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KRANTI NATION
PRANALI SHARMA

AI's oxygen: Undersea cables and satellites

Digital connectivity is oxygen for artificial intelligence (AI). As the world organises itself to deploy and control the technology, investments in digital connectivity will be critical.

AI and powerful semiconductor chips are critical dimensions of the partnership India and the United States (US) announced last week in Washington under the COMPACT agreement. Besides such agreements, the billions being invested in undersea cable and satellite connectivity will be key in the smart usage and management of AI.

Social media giant Meta last week announced the launch of Project Waterworth, a subsea cable that "will reach five major continents and span over 50,000 km (longer than the Earth's circumference)". It is the world's longest subsea cable project and uses "the highest-capacity technology available".

Waterworth will bring "industry-leading connectivity" to the US, India, Brazil, South Africa and other key regions. "With Project Waterworth we can help ensure that the benefits of AI and other emerging technologies are available to everyone, regardless of where they live or work. In India, where we've already seen significant growth and investment in digital infrastructure, Waterworth will help accelerate this progress



India's data transmission capacity is expected to quadruple when new undersea cables are activated in 2025 to connect the country to key world markets

and support the country's ambitious plans for its digital economy," said Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and messaging app WhatsApp.

Reliance Jio will have two undersea cables operational this year: India Xpress (IAX) and the India Europe Xpress (IEEX). The cables run for 15,000 km and have a strategic investment from China Mobile. IAX connects Chennai and Mumbai with Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia; and IEEX connects these cities with France, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Djibouti.

India's data transmission capacity is expected to grow four times when new undersea cables are activated in 2025 to connect the country to key world markets. "As of the end of 2023, the total lit capacity and active capacity of these cables stood at 180 tbps (terabit per second) and 132 tbps, respectively," Anil Kumar Lahoti, chairman of Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, has said.

"Multiple next-generation systems are due to become operational in 2025, replacing ageing cables. Once the new systems are fully operational, India's data transmission capacity is projected to quadruple with additional crucial routes," he said. India plays a key role in the global communications network, hosting around 17 international subsea cables across 17 district landing stations (a physical facility that serves as a landing point for submarine cables).

Satellite connectivity is being enhanced, too. American billionaire Elon Musk is keen to launch Starlink in India, as rival Bharti Enterprises waits for government approval to begin a similar satellite broadband service in the country.

Undersea telecom cables serve as a lifeline of the global digital economy by facilitating more than 99 per cent of international data exchange, says the UN's International Telecommunication Union.

India is strengthening rural connectivity with the BharatNet broadband network of optical fibre cables. The objective is to enable mobile operators, internet service providers, cable television operators and content providers to launch various services such as health, e-education and e-governance. As many as 214,000 gram panchayats are connected through the BharatNet project and over 692,000 km of optical fibre cables have been laid till January, according to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. Connectivity infrastructure will deepen India's digital economy. At the global level, the country will have to collaborate in technology systems. Between the regulatory choices of the European Union and the gated digital markets of China, the two global economies that will drive open innovation are India and the US. Convergence will deepen between them will be like oil pipelines that fuel tech-led growth.

It was a house divided at the Paris AI Action summit last week. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, co-chair of the summit (French President Emmanuel Macron was the chairman), stressed the need for global pooling of resources and talent to build open source artificial intelligence. He also called for establishing governance standards for such work.

That appears tough. The United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) did not endorse the joint communiqué backed by 60 signatories at the summit. US Vice President JD Vance took a strident stand, saying that his country is winning the race to build AI and would keep it that way. He took potshots at China (he didn't name the country) by saying that authoritarian regimes are using stolen AI tools and warned allies, especially the European Union, not to tighten regulations on US technology companies.

The summit took place amid what is turning out to be an AI war between the US and China. DeepSeek, which is funded by a Chinese hedge fund founder, disrupted the tech world weeks ago by launching a generative AI (GenAI) model that is as good as ChatGPT of America's OpenAI but at a fraction of the cost and computing power.

DeepSeek has raised hopes among countries like India that it is possible to be a key player in the global AI race through innovation that doesn't require billions of dollars. But is India on time for the party?

"The AI race has just begun, so it is too early to predict the winners or who is falling behind. India has the same potential as other geographies like the US or China and incumbency does not matter in this stage. And India has a better vantage point to start with," said Krishna Rangasayee, founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Sima.ai, which is based in San Jose, California.

Mission AI

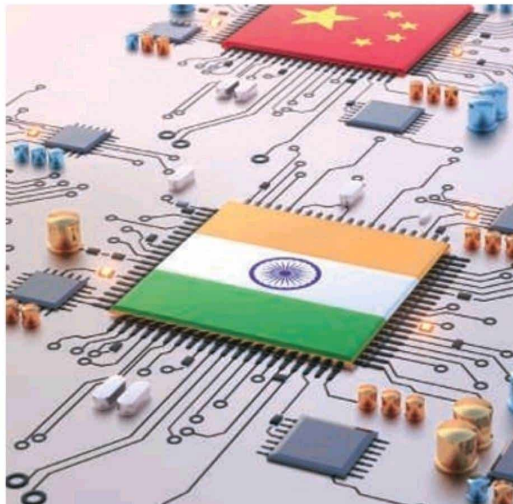
The cornerstone of India's strategy is the government's ₹10,000 crore AI Mission which is building shared compute power, undertaking skill development, financing AI startups, and arranging access to non-personal datasets to develop AI models. Its eventual goal is to build a sovereign AI, a nation's capabilities to produce artificial intelligence using its own resources.

Shared compute is key to train AI models that require extensive processing power. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has finalised empaneling private companies to offer Cloud infrastructure and it has collectively offered over 18,000 graphics processing units (GPU, a high-end chip). IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has said that with subsidy support from the mission, it will be possible to offer compute power at \$1 per hour on GPUs to users one of the cheapest in the world (the average is over \$2 per hour).

Companies say the plan will help them. Akhillesh Sabharwal, founder and CEO of CoKover.ai, said: "We are building a foundational model from scratch which would cost us around ₹4 crore. Now, with the MeitY offer, the cost of setting it up will fall by a fourth." CoKover runs Bharat GPT which offers domain-based AI services to clients.

Experts said MeitY's GPU numbers are good enough for supporting large language models, or LLMs.

Research by Oxford Internet Institute in collaboration with others concluded that there are



For India, there's a world to win in AI

Country has advantages and challenges as it races to be a leader in the tech, reports SURAJEET DAS GUPTA

only 15 countries (leaving out the US and China) that have some quantity of compute relevant to "AI development" (like chipmaker Nvidia's AI100 and H100 GPUs). They are mostly developed countries, like the UK, Australia, France, Japan and Singapore. India is the only developing nation in the list.

Another key requirement in the AI race is skill. India is at the top globally in skill quotient, according to "Stanford AI Index 2024". The country's AI workforce is 2.8 times more skilled in AI competencies than the global average.

India has AI talent

To put numbers into perspective the US has more senior AI talent – the key to leading the new technology – than India, the UK, Germany and Canada put together. The US has 330,000 such professionals and India 111,000, the second largest source, according to research agency Savanah.

But can Indian companies harness talent to build AI models trained on domestic datasets? Vaishnaw has said there are already six developers which can come out with models in six to eight months.

Indian companies are already on the global AI map. Business analytics firm CB Insights has named Bengaluru-based sarvam.ai as one of the 100 most promising startups in 2024 in the world. Sarvam has raised \$53.6 million in two rounds as it develops LLMs.

Yet funding is a challenge. Indian AI startups in 2021 and 2022 collectively raised \$998 million, but in the next two years ending 2024 funding fell sharply to \$261 million, according to Tracxn. Only 40 per cent of the more than 240 plus GenAI startups in India were funded in the first half of 2024 (H1 2024), according to Nasscom.

As a result, average funding size has crawled, growing from \$5.3 million in H1 2023 to \$5.5 million in H1 2024. Private equity investments in

WHAT'S WHAT

■ A foundation model is a machine learning model trained on datasets that can be used for a range of uses

■ Generative AI refers to deep-learning models that can put up text, images and other content based on the data they were trained on

■ Large language models (LLM) are AI systems capable of understanding and generating human language by processing vast amounts of text data

■ General purpose LLM is trained on text from various domains; domain specific LLM is trained on data from a specific domain like legal, financial

■ Open source AI: Source code is public and anyone can modify and distribute it. Closed source AI: Code is confidential for better security

Indian GenAI startups have since 2023 accounted for only 2 per cent of such funding globally.

There are two other technology challenges. As more powerful GPU chips come into the market every 12 to 24 months, Cloud companies will have to invest continuously. Second, with the US limiting the import of advanced processors (50,000 GPUs a year), India will need indigenous alternatives.

Vaishnaw has said the government has held talks with stakeholders in India to build an indigenous GPU and chip ecosystem with Nvidia and AMD (both are American companies) for support. "It will take time but it can happen only with government and private sector partnership," said Rajat Chandak, president of India Electronics and Semiconductor Association.

When a 'Made in India' GPU arrives, how will it be monetised? OpenAI earned just \$3.4 billion as revenue in 2024 despite the international popularity of its ChatGPT model as it looks towards moving from a non-profit to a profit model and has roped in Microsoft as a key investor.

About AI viability, the senior executive of a global technology company said: "The open source model makes sense for Google or Amazon or Microsoft, which already have an existing underlying business model. Building an independent standalone model is not easy."

One option for monetisation is to offer 'AI on the edge' where compute power resides near a customer and not in the Cloud. "We see it as the next big thing. It needs less power, provides more security and safety; it is cheaper and companies providing the service can ease monetisation," said Rangasayee of Sima.ai, which provides the service to 20 Indian companies.

The Stanford Global Vibrancy Index, which measures a country's AI ecosystem based on research papers, private investment and patents, ranked India fourth in the world: After the US, China and UK. That's an indication that India is a key player in the global AI race.

ALGO RHYTHM

AADHAAR TO BHASHINI DIGITAL SERVICES GROW IN NUMBERS



Sources: bharnet.in, bhashini.gov.in, digilocker.gov.in, Aadhaar data from PIB, media reports

India has various programmes to use digital technology for providing state services or making daily life convenient. Four such services have grown rapidly. BharatNet provides high-speed internet access in rural areas. Bhashini is an AI-based tool for translating Indian languages. DigiLocker lets citizens store documents in a Cloud-based locker for easy access and sharing. Aadhaar is the national biometric identity card.

BharatNet
214,000

Gram panchayats connected to internet (as in Jan)

692,000 km

Of optical fibre cable laid

104,000

WiFi hotspots installed in gram panchayats

Bhashini

22+

languages supported

237 mn

translations done

50

stakeholders on board

DigiLocker
480.9 mn

Users (as on Feb 14)

9,24,97 bn

Documents issued (latest data)

202.5 mn

user signups in 2024

Aadhaar

2,840 mn

Aadhaar-authenticated transactions done in Jan

550

Entities use Aadhaar authentication services

90 mn

Authentications done daily

Compiled by Shivani Shinde

'GenAI to become immersive across our businesses'

US investment bank Goldman Sachs was an early mover in India's technology ecosystem, setting up an office in Bengaluru in 2004 for IT and back-office support. In two decades, its operations have grown to cover a wide range of banking functions. **GUNJAN SAMTANI**, co-chairman of Goldman Sachs, India, and country head of Goldman Sachs Services India, spoke with **Avik Das** in Bengaluru about Indian engineers and Generative AI (GenAI) in banking. Edited excerpts:

Goldman Sachs' technology division completed two decades in Bengaluru last year. How will you describe the journey?

At that time, we had a modest ambition that there would be, at some point, a few hundred people doing largely application support, infrastructure support, and some business execution for our operations and finance functions. We made some specific pivots along the way: Going from supporting business functions and technology applications and infrastructure to driving scale. Once we built the scale, we also developed expertise in products and businesses. Then came the pivot to develop deep, quantitative capabilities, which is a function called strats or quantitative finance.

And once we brought in strats, we started the journey of business process engineering. The transformation started as we started to build strats functions across each of our teams. The evolution led us to truly becoming front to back across each of our

businesses — for entities, for almost all products of Goldman Sachs. That means it is no longer just about the traditional execution of business processes in the context of technology, finance, operations and strats. We have equally classic roles in wealth and asset management, sales and trading, and quantitative investment strategies.

What products or platforms developed in India have had an impact on Goldman's global ecosystem?

I will give an example but I wouldn't say rolled out on a standalone basis because we are a global organisation. One of the most sophisticated platforms for data analytics tied to pricing and risk management for commodities, such as oil and gas, metals and crude, was in a big part built out of our offices. The pricing and risk management of that data science is used by almost all our commodity traders and risk managers in the firm. There



are many examples, including the work we did to build a platform for equity, quant trading platforms. We are talking about enabling platforms that operate at a latency of one millionth of a second.

How are you leveraging Gen AI? There are three vectors in which we are looking at GenAI opportunities. The first is business growth and client service; the second is developer efficiencies; and the third is

providing operating efficiencies at scale to the firm. A third of our engineers are in India, the second bucket of developer efficiency truly matters to us. We have enabled a significant proportion of our developers on AI Copilot for software development. That's a journey that we took on. We recently rolled out GS AI Assistant to over 10,000 of Goldman Sachs employees globally. It is built on an AI platform that we designed and architected at the firm. While not the entire team, many of the engineers who built both GS AI platform and GS AI Assistant are based in India. The purpose of GS AI platform is to take away the complexity of integrating with multiple LLMs (large language model).

What are the areas in your firm's investment banking where you think Gen AI can be a path breaker?

I do anticipate AI to become immersive across many aspects of our businesses. Not limited to one or two but right from how we think about our banking workflows on M&A and financing, but to how we think about wealth management and engagement with our clients as well as suitability on M&A and financing, and asset management, and to how we think about risk compliance.

Full interview at business-standard.com