

Peace at last?

Lasting truce demands good faith by Israel, Hamas

Despite jubilation around the world, the prospects of a lasting peace in the 15-month war between Israel and Hamas, with 120,000 dead or wounded, many of them women and children, and 1.9 million Gazans displaced, appear shaky. At stake is the absence of good faith over the terms of a three-stage ceasefire deal to which Israel and Hamas have reportedly agreed after painstaking indirect negotiations by Qatar and the United States (US), owing to the deep mutual distrust. As things stand, the Israeli Cabinet has delayed a final sign-off, which was due on Thursday. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is deeply unpopular in Israel, has since stated that the Cabinet will not meet until Hamas backs down on what he claims are "last-minute concessions". Mr Netanyahu's reluctance to agree to a ceasefire is rooted in domestic political compulsions.

Heading a government in coalition with hardline right-wing parties since 2022, his continuance in power hinges on prolonging the conflict with Hamas, which his government had vowed to destroy after the latter's surprise attack on Israeli citizens in October 2023, killing 1,200 people and taking 250 hostages. The fact that Israel launched an attack on Gaza within hours of the ceasefire accord, killing more than 70 people, is also unlikely to build confidence that the terms of the accord will be honoured.

The ceasefire is expected to come into effect on Sunday. It has been greeted with relief not just by the Palestinians, who had anticipated little advantage from an incoming Trump presidency, but also by Iran, the proxy player in this war via its Lebanon-based group Hezbollah. Although the details are yet to be announced, the broad contours of the deal include an exchange of hostages, the withdrawal of Israeli troops, the unrestricted flow of aid to rebuild Gaza, and the return of displaced Palestinians. Hamas is still reportedly holding 94 of them. In return, Israel is expected to release about 1,000 Palestinian prisoners, some of whom have been in jail for over a decade. The troop withdrawal and prisoner exchanges will comprise the first two stages of the deal and the third would comprise the reconstruction of Gaza. The deal is spread over 84 days but that is just one aspect of the many unanswered questions involved.

For one, Israel is to maintain a presence in a buffer zone in Gaza during the first stage of the ceasefire. The continuing presence of the Israeli defence forces in Palestinian territory is unlikely to promote trust ahead of prisoner exchanges. For another, the complexity of the deal makes the ceasefire somewhat fragile so that any small incident could spark a resumption of hostilities. The Israeli side has complained that Hamas' commitments on hostage releases are opaque. Equally, the ceasefire does not fully address Palestinian concerns. Since 2023, the Israelis have attacked and displaced hundreds of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank after the October 2023 Hamas attack. Without some assurances of Palestinian security in this area, a ceasefire is unlikely to hold. In this long and dispiriting conflict, where millions have been displaced from their homeland, history suggests that ceasefires have proven temporary. Hopefully, this time it will be different.

Improving capabilities

IMD must remain at the forefront of innovation

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has come a long way since its humble beginnings in 1875. It has evolved over time and is now a symbol of India's scientific advancement, specialising in predicting short- and long-term weather patterns and giving early warnings for adverse weather events. As India's weather-tracking department recently turned 150, its importance cannot be overstated. Weather forecasting plays a crucial role in daily operations across various sectors, including agriculture, road and rail transport, flight operations, managing energy output from power plants, and even tourism. For instance, the IMD provides wind speed and direction, global horizontal irradiance forecasts, historical day-wise maximum-minimum temperature for site selection, and designing solar and wind power plants.

Accurately predicting rainfall, cyclones, heatwaves, and droughts is critical to better disaster management in a tropical country like India. Forecast accuracy has increased with time, though there is room for improvement. Following the "super-cyclone" in Odisha in 1999, the IMD has constantly ramped up efforts to enhance its predictive power of tropical cyclones. In fact, the accuracy of cyclone forecasts has increased from about 20 per cent in the early 2000s to over 80 per cent by 2020 in terms of landfall point and timing. Similarly, probabilistic forecasts, offering a lead time of four to five days for extreme weather events, have become a lifesaver. These can be attributed to the IMD's adoption of state-of-the-art technologies like automatic weather stations, automatic rain gauge instrumentation, Doppler radars, and observatories.

Completing 150 years marks a pivotal moment for the IMD as the country aims to become a weather-ready and climate-smart nation. It is set to assume an even more important role as climate change makes weather forecasting challenging. In this context, the recently released IMD Vision document 2047 would serve as a blueprint in the coming years. As outlined in the document, the IMD needs to work towards mainstreaming weather and climate information and bring loss of life to zero in the case of severe weather events. The IMD's vision document lays down clearly targeted goals. These include 100 per cent detection of all types of severe weather at village and household level, zero error in forecast up to three days, 90 per cent forecast accuracy up to five days, 80 per cent forecast accuracy up to seven days, and 70 per cent forecast accuracy up to 10 days.

Further, the recent launch of Mission Mausam is expected to boost the IMD's capabilities in terms of weather surveillance, modelling, forecasting, and even weather modification. With an outlay of ₹2,000 crore over two years, the mission is intended to augment the Doppler weather-radar network across the country to ensure complete radar coverage. Moreover, 15 radionet and 15 wind profilers are to be installed to observe surface measurements and the upper atmosphere, while cloud chambers are to be set up for weather modification research. Nonetheless, the IMD still grapples with several challenges including deterministic forecasts of long-term monsoon patterns, or extremely heavy-rainfall events and flooding. Climate change is rewriting weather patterns, and urbanisation is creating new vulnerabilities. The IMD must remain at the forefront of innovation to address these complexities.



BOOK REVIEW

JENNIFER SZALAI

Maybe this is the year that you have resolved to drink less and exercise more. Or maybe you want to be kinder, gentler and more caring to the people around you. In *Open Socrates*, Agnes Callard suggests that self-improvement isn't so much a matter of willpower, but of ideas. It's not that we are weak-willed creatures, who know what "the good" is and then fail to pursue it; it's that we haven't given

enough thought to what "the good" is in the first place. "The hard work of struggling to be a good, virtuous, ethical person" is, "first and foremost, intellectual work," she writes.

Callard, a philosopher at the University of Chicago, is aware that "more intellectual" isn't exactly an easy sell, which is undoubtedly why she waits until Page 129 to describe her chosen approach as "hard-line intellectualism." But she is so earnestly excited by her subject that even a sceptical reader is bound to feel a swell of enthusiasm as she makes her full-throated case for a life of the mind. She wants her book to do double duty: Advance a "two-Socratic ethics" that can pass muster with her fellow philosophers, and offer lay readers an accessible introduction to how "living a truly philosophical life" can "make people freer and more equal; more romantic; and more courageous."

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also a "midwife" — refuting his interlocutors' falsehoods but also helping them bring true ideas into being. The acts of destruction and creation were connected, arguably even one and the same. Refutation was never to be done for its own sake; only by helping to peel the scales from people's eyes could they see the world anew. Following Socrates' example is a lifelong pursuit. All too often, Callard says, we react instinctively to "save" someone from "doing something" because it is dictated to us in the moment by our body (to pursue pleasure and avoid pain) or by social bonds (to pursue pride and avoid shame). Such commands make us "waver," she says, and contradict our

self: "They might give us a loud, clear answer as to what we ought to do, but the answers don't last." The question of time comes up a lot in *Open Socrates*. There is the matter of our limited time on Earth, and Callard agrees with Socrates that philosophy is preparation for death. Thinking more deeply about what we know and what we don't push us beyond our usual (un)thinking habit of "getting through the next 15 minutes." In *Open Socrates*, Callard describes how we can get so caught up in our own thoughts that we don't let evidence from the world in. Socratic inquiry, with its emphasis on dialogue, reveals thinking as a communal process:

"In the presence of others, something becomes possible that isn't possible when you are alone." I find this notion inspiring, even if I'm not as confident as Callard that "our most fundamental wish" is to be treated "as an intellectual thing." She puts so much stock in the power of thought that she suggests it can get us out of the most intractable dilemmas. "What appears to be a difficulty with life" is "in fact a difficulty in our thinking about life." But she also allows that "thinking about life" isn't necessarily guaranteed to yield the knowledge one seeks. Socrates used to say that he knew nothing other than the fact of his own ignorance. *Open Socrates* encourages us to recognise how little we know, and to start thinking.

The reviewer is the nonfiction book critic for The Times.
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A macro tightrope walk

The challenge for macro policy is to respond to the domestic slowdown without appearing to let its guard down against a hostile global environment

Macroeconomic policymaking in India has its work cut out in 2025.

First, American exceptionalism has induced a significant tightening of global financial conditions. Not only has resilient growth in the United States (US) outperformed other developed economies but has made the last mile of disinflation challenging. Market expectations of easing by the US Federal Reserve have waned from five cuts to just one in 2025. Consequently, US 10-year bond yields have tightened 100 basis points since September and the dollar index is approaching 20-year highs. This has put enormous pressure on emerging-market currencies and the rupee has been no exception.

Second, Trump 2.0 risks making the global backdrop more hostile. US tariffs will ratchet up global uncertainties and depress global capex and growth — as it did in the first trade war. Tariffs should also trigger more dollar strength. Meanwhile, punitive action against China will likely induce it to increasingly redirect its excess capacity to the rest of the world — including India — further threatening manufacturing prospects in those economies. The "known unknown" is whether Trump 2.0 accentuates US exceptionalism or undermines it. A trade war will slow global growth, but will the US be relatively insulated — at least initially — because of offsetting fiscal easing and deregulation at home? This will be the worst of all outcomes for emerging markets — weaker global growth but alongside a stronger dollar and sticky US yields.

Meanwhile, India's growth momentum has slowed in recent quarters. Urban consumption was the mainstay of private-sector demand but has waned as excess savings from the pandemic have been exhausted, formal-sector wages have slowed, and consumption-related lending has been tightened. Rural consumption is lifting but only gradually and there are limits, fiscal and absorptive, to the public-investment push the government embarked upon in the pandemic. Meanwhile, private investment awaits more demand visibility and will be disincentivised if more Chinese excess capacity finds its way into India. So the slowdown is more than just government spending getting off to a slow start this year.



SAIJIZ CHINTOY

anchored as inflation targeting has gained acceptance and credibility, and thereby given monetary policy more degrees of freedom.

To now redirect monetary policy to defend the rupee — as markets will inevitably push for — will be counterproductive. First, it will cede monetary-policy independence at a time when (i) Indian and US business cycles could not be more asynchronous and (ii) domestic fiscal space is constrained. Second, if the rupee is kept artificially elevated, the resulting loss of competitiveness will contribute to an even broader tightening of monetary conditions.

Instead, policy rates and liquidity must be calibrated to domestic inflation-growth dynamics. The exchange rate's impact on monetary policy must matter to the extent that its movements contribute to inflation. There is finally some relief on food inflation. Food prices are rolling over and the Kharif and Rabi harvests should cement these dynamics. The consumer price inflation rate is therefore finally expected to head back to the 4 per cent handle in the coming months. Yes, a weaker rupee may be inflationary, but estimated magnitudes

are not very large and, with demand slowing, some of the input-cost pressures are likely to be absorbed by firms. Meanwhile, the core inflation rate continues to remain in the 3-4 per cent handle, reinforcing the existence of meaningful slack in the economy. Given these dynamics and slowing growth, monetary policy must use the "flexibility" inherent in the framework to gradually ease policy rates to support growth. But easing will be efficacious only if the large liquidity deficit in the banking system — the result of large unutilised FX intervention in recent months — is simultaneously replenished.

Meanwhile, the rupee should be allowed to settle at levels warranted by its fundamentals with FX reserves used only to ensure any depreciation is orderly. Protecting any levels of the exchange rate in this global environment — with the dollar strengthening and the Chinese yuan likely to depreciate in the wake of US tariffs — seems both unsustainable and undesirable. Unsustainable, because even as India still has a war chest of FX reserves, they must be used judiciously, given this is likely to be a protracted battle. Undesirable, because the broad trade-weighted real effective exchange rate was at lifetime highs in November and an uncompetitive rupee will further weigh on growth. As the evidence shows in India, a weaker rupee is economically stimulative. Furthermore, if India is subject to US tariffs, currency depreciation will likely be the inevitable market reaction to tariffs.

On its part, fiscal policy is more constrained. With nominal gross domestic product (GDP) growth in single digits the last two years, public debt/GDP has begun to tick up again. To ensure debt ratios first stabilise and then come down, fiscal consolidation may be necessary — more fiscal consolidation may be necessary in the coming years than currently envisaged. But it's important to distinguish end-state deficit levels from the pace of consolidation. With growth momentum slowing, the pace of consolidation should be very gradual so that fiscal policy does not become pro-cyclical. Prima facie, cutting rates and slowing the pace of fiscal consolidation may seem to defy the conservation that a hostile global environment warrants. But this is where borders and frameworks matter. Both fiscal and monetary policies in India have been governed by credible frameworks that have anchored expectations and reduced risk premia in recent years. This, in turn, allows policymakers to pivot during periods of slowing growth.

Of course, the real tonic that growth needs is persistent structural reforms to both accelerate its pace and make it more labour-intensive. The current moment presents a unique opportunity for India. Externally, another US-China trade war will accentuate the desire for firms to look for other locations. India must be ready, waiting and welcoming of these opportunities. Domestically, this is the first full-year Budget of the government's third term and a unique opportunity to expend political capital and double down on reforms to simultaneously boost growth and employment and increase the economy's external attractiveness.

India's economic history is littered with opportunities stemming from crises. In the slow-burning crisis that the global economy will likely create for itself through trade wars, deglobalisation and economic balkanisation, India must seek and find its opportunity.

The author is head of Asia Economic Research at JP Morgan. The views here are personal.

Infraoutlays: Hopes from the Budget

Truly grasp the importance of infrastructure outlays in the Union Budget allocations. It is important to understand three fundamental public expenditure trends.

One, during a post-Budget interaction in February 2024, a senior finance ministry official revealed on national television that the government had confidential data indicating that every ₹1 spent on infrastructure contributed ₹1.3 to gross domestic product (GDP), whereas ₹1 spent on any form of direct benefit transfer (DBT) added only 90 paise to GDP. Thus, the case for large dollops of public expenditure on infra capex to pump-prime the economy must continue to be part of the core economic strategy.

Two, mainstream political parties now widely agree that India's target for investments in infrastructure, or gross capital formation in infrastructure (GCFI), should be at least 7 per cent of GDP.

Three, the thumb rule in infra spending is that the Union Budget outlays are typically matched by the combined contributions of states, private capital and extra budgetary resources, including public sector undertakings.

The table attempts to use all these perspectives to provide a quantification of the outlays India would need to allocate through 2029-30. As seen in the table, the forthcoming Budget (for 2025-26) is expected to allocate around ₹13 trillion for infrastructure. This should, hope-

fully, result in an overall spend of around ₹22 trillion, thereby faithfully adhering to the 7 per cent of GDP requirement.

The ₹13 trillion outlay would mean an 18 per cent increase over the current year's allocation. The trillion-rupee question is whether that would be enough "pump-priming" in the context of the current sluggishness of the economy.

Consider the following: ● Over half the respondents in the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) Systemic Risk Survey (published on January 2) do not expect a revival in the private capital expenditure in the coming year. This is due to concerns over geopolitical conflicts, commodity price risks, tightening interest rates, tariff hikes, capital outflows and their

impact on the rupee, and fears of a consumption slowdown. ● Estimates of GDP for Q2 of FY25 have raised concerns about the robustness of economic growth for the year. In a December 4, 2024, article in *businessline*, C Rangarajan (former RBI governor) opined that "contractionary government capital expenditure in the first half played a major role in the growth decline."

● The data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) showed a disappointing 22.1 per cent year-on-year decline in new project commencements in the December 2024 quarter, reversing the 64 per cent rise recorded in September.

PROJECTIONS OF INFRA INVESTMENTS REQUIRED (₹ trillion)

Year	Status	Nominal GDP*	A = B+C Infra investment (as % of GDP)**	B Provided in Union Budget (as % of GDP)	C All other investment†
2023-24	Achieved	295	20.0 (6.7)	10 (3.4)	10
2024-25	Anticipated	329	22.2 (6.7)	11 (3.3)	11
2025-26	Expected	367	25.7 (7)	13 (3.5)	13
2026-27	Projected	409	28.6 (7)	15 (3.6)	14
2027-28	Projected	456	31.9 (7)	16 (3.5)	16
2028-29	Projected	508	35.6 (7)	18 (3.5)	18
2029-30	Projected	566	39.6 (7)	20 (3.5)	20

*At current prices. Expected to increase by 5.5% every year (5% growth + 0.5% inflation).

**Assumed 7% GDP (gross capital formation in infra as % of GDP) as target.

†Infra = public + private + extra budgetary resources - Budget outlay

Announcements from both the private and public sectors do not point to any meaningful pick-up in capex.

● The CMIE data also points to a worrying 52.1 per cent year-on-year decline in the value of government projects completed and a 40 per cent decline in that of the private sector.

● Almost all Indian corporations and commercial lending institutions are wary of investing in greenfield public private partnerships (PPP) projects, while foreign investors prefer operating brownfield assets. However, it should be noted that in sectors such as airports, ports, electricity transmission, and renewable energy, private capex has continued, though sporadically.

● The data from states shows a greater slowdown in capex spend compared to the Centre. Therefore, finance ministry officials are trying to motivate states to borrow more against entitlements for state-level infra spend. With all of these to contend with,

what will be the stance of the government in using infra outlays to pump-prime the economy once again?

Well, if it sticks to the past knitting, then we can expect an 18 per cent increase in infra allocations to ₹13 trillion. But if there is a real relaxation to turbo-charge the economy, it may well consider a ₹15 trillion allocation in the Budget, and take a bold public-investment-led-growth stance, similar to the post-2002 strategy.

Even conservative public finance experts and economists would likely not grudge a 0.5 per cent relaxation of the fiscal deficit target if it is used for national asset creation and to revive the economy! In fact, this extra ₹2 trillion can be used for social infra sectors like health and education, which will be hugely appreciated by the public.

The author is an infrastructure sector expert as well as chairman of the City National Council on Infrastructure. The views are personal.

Socrates and the Good Life



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GROUND ZERO



Rescue workers go down 300 metres in search of the men who have been missing ever since the mine in Kalamati in Dima Hasao district of Assam flooded on January 6, 2025. RITU RAJ KOKRAJHAR

Dying for black gold

On January 6, a rat-hole mine in Assam's Dima Hasao district was flooded, trapping nine men. More than 10 days after the incident, only four bodies have been retrieved. Though banned, rat-hole mining, which is dangerous but lucrative, continues unabated in Assam and Meghalaya. **Rahul Karmakar** reports on the incident and the prevalent practice that provides livelihoods while claiming lives

Rajib Barman, 39, had heard that the job of a rat-hole miner was hazardous, but he chose to do it because he had a debt of ₹60,000 to pay off. A resident of Sitlabazar village in western Assam's Kokrajhar district, Barman decided to work at the Kalamati mine in the Umrangso area of Dima Hasao district via a middleman. He hoped to bring home ₹90,000 by working in the mine for two months at about ₹1,500 per day – more than thrice the usual wage in the rural parts of Assam. This translated into earning ₹90-100 per kilogramme of coal extracted at an average of 15 car-loads of the fossil fuel stripped off the mine.

On January 6, 2025, Barman descended into the dark pit for the first day of mining. "The sardar (supervisor of miners) had told us the previous night that we could start working as the water that had accumulated in the mine had been drained out," Barman says. "We went down 250 feet below the ground at 4:30 a.m. and began working inside one of the tunnels."

Barman's body ached as he was working in an awkward position for the first time. After more than two hours, he decided to take a break and crawled back towards the mouth of the tunnel. Rat-holes are the labyrinthine passages that branch out from 300-foot-deep pits.

A few feet from the opening, Barman heard screams and the sound of gushing water growing louder. "Seconds later, I was swept into the pit," he recalls. "I managed to clamber up the chain of the crane (used to haul coal) and get out. But my three room-mates could not make it."

So far, of the nine miners trapped inside, only four bodies have been recovered. Search and rescue operations by the Indian Army, Navy, the National Disaster Response Force, and the State Disaster Response Force were on for the others, but five days ago, Navy divers were withdrawn from the operations. While dewatering of the mine continues, the government has assessed it could take up to 60 days to drain out all the water.

On January 16, the Assam Cabinet approved a judicial inquiry into the tragedy and decided to constitute a Special Investigation Team to probe the incident, one of the deadliest in recent times. It also decided to frame a standard operating procedure (SOP) to enforce a blanket ban on rat-hole mining in Assam apart from sealing some 220 pits surveyed so far.

Dangers lurk below

For Raju Basumatary, 55, this is the second time a disaster like this has taken place. The first time this happened was at Ksan in Meghalaya's coal-rich East Jaintia Hills district on December 13, 2018. Then too, he was about 200 metres from the pit that devoured some of his fellow miners.

These, though, are not the only mishaps that Basumatary has encountered in 26 years as a rat-hole miner. He came to Kalamati from the Khliehriat area of Meghalaya four years ago. "Khibakhibi hoye thaakhe (Something or the other keeps happening)," he says, rattling off all the possibilities. "A miner slips to death in the pit, another is asphyxiated, somebody else dies after smelling toxic gas, the fourth drowns..."



The illegal tag has only increased the price of coal; it has not stopped mining

AGNES KHARSHING
Anti-mining activist

Basumatary says miners put themselves at risk in the dark depths of the earth. All they have is a torch strapped to their head to guide them. "Still, the money is good and it is guaranteed as long as you extract coal during the season," he says.

The "season" he refers to is the mining period between November and March. During the first two months of this period, workers invariably drain the water that fills the mines, which are often interlinked beneath the ground, because of rainfall and seepage from April to October.

Then they crawl into the mines and using pick-axes, extract coal from the walls of a rectangular tunnel that is 2-3 metres high or shovel about 20 kg of coal lumps onto a cart. They drag this to the mouth of the tunnel. Large metal troughs, operated with pulleys from a crane, haul a tonne or two of the coal to the surface.

Joseph Soren, 40, was in charge of loading the coal onto one of the troughs eased down from a crane when disaster struck on January 6. He was the last of the 23 miners who made it after helping those who could not swim escape first.

"I heard shouts of 'water, water!' and rumbling sounds. Before I could figure anything out, water carrying the miners shot out of the tunnels. We grabbed anything – the chains from the crane, the pipe of a water pump, ropes thrown down from people above – to save ourselves. The murky, stinging water made our eyes burn as we moved up. I struggled to keep my head above the water level," he says.

Soren, who is from western Assam's Chirang district, has worked in half a dozen mines in the Umrangso area, of which Kalamati is a part, over as many seasons, but he now has second thoughts about continuing mining. But then, the payment per season is good enough for his family of five to last at least a year.

The money was good enough for Ganga Bahadur Shresth, 38, of Nepal's Rampur village, to travel three days from his home to a mine each season, says his wife, Sushila Rai. His was the first of the four bodies retrieved by rescue workers from the Kalamati mine. "His income from mining made our lives quite comfortable but he never let us know how dangerous his work was. We found this out too late," says Rai, a mother of three.

Shresth came with more than 20 workers from Nepal to work in Umrangso. Among them was Lijan Magar, 27, who also lost his life. He was the second body to be retrieved. "We started liv-

ing here after our wedding two years ago. I don't know where to go with our two-month-old baby," says Junu Pradhan, Magar's wife.

The other two bodies retrieved were of Khushi Mohan Roy, 57, from Kokrajhar district's Fakiragram, who was one of Barman's room-mates; and of Sarat Goyari, 37, who hailed from Thailapara in north-central Assam's Sonitpur district.

'A huge scam'

For Assam's landless or marginal farmers such as Mohammed Saifuddin Ahmed of Dalgao in Darang district, all roads lead to the mines when family expenditure exceeds income. The last time the 55-year-old worked in a coal mine was in March 2012, three months before 15 miners died in a flooded mine at Nongalibira in Meghalaya's South Garo Hills district. The mishap, and a petition filed by the All Dimas Students' Union of Assam, led to the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banning rat-hole coal mining in Meghalaya on April 17, 2014. Upheld by the Supreme Court later, the ban was extended to the other States in the Northeast. "But circumstances made me return to mining after all these years because, ban or not, no other job pays as much," Ahmed says.

The Ksan incident in 2018 and Kalamati now make it evident that the ban has largely been on paper. In Meghalaya, the Justice (retired) B.P. Katakay-headed committee, which was appointed by the High Court of Meghalaya in April 2022 to investigate ongoing illegal coal mining and transportation, continues to receive complaints. One of the new complaints the panel has received relates to illegal mining in Nongalibira, where the process of banning rat-hole mines began.

"The illegal tag has only increased the price of coal; it has not stopped mining," says Shillong-based anti-mining activist Agnes Kharshing, who survived a violent attack by coal mine owners in 2018. "Hundreds of trucks continue to transport coal on the highways feeding the coke units and cement plants. You can see mounds of freshly extracted coal on the roadside. The police, politicians, bureaucrats, landowners... almost all of them are involved." In 2023, the High Court of Meghalaya made a similar observation, saying the complicity of the State with the mafia operating illegal coal mines was "clear and obvious".

The tribal land ownership system in Meghalaya, a Sixth Schedule State, is often cited to justify the rampant mining since the 1980s. A provision of the Sixth Schedule calls for tribal land and resources to be protected. Another empowers the District and Regional Councils to grant licenses or leases for the extraction of minerals within their jurisdiction. Some council administrators and landowners believe that no one can interfere in their operations within their territory.

The Sixth Schedule applies to Dima Hasao, a district governed by a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led autonomous tribal council. Autonomy means limited involvement of the BJP-led Assam government in the affairs of the council.

"That, however, does not mean that the heads of the two governments cannot collude to share the spoils of a high-yielding illegal operation," says Jagadish Bhuyan, a former minister, who had filed Right to Information requests seeking details about rat-hole mining in Assam. He is also the general secretary of the Assam Jatiya Parishad, a political party borne out of the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act movement in 2019.

"If a worker risks his life for ₹1,500-2,000 a day, imagine the stakes the mine owners and everyone else along the chain has, to keep the illegal operations going. It is naive to think that the Centre is unaware of the illegal coal trade in Assam and elsewhere in the Northeast," he says.

Bhuyan continues, "Look at the chronology of events. Soon after the mishap, the Chief Minister threatened that the mine appeared to be illegal. Then he said the mine was abandoned 12 years



If a worker risks his life for ₹1,500-2,000 a day, imagine the stakes the mine owners and everyone else along the chain has, to keep the illegal operations going.

JAGADISH BHUYAN
Former minister

ago, but was under the Assam Mineral Development Corporation Limited (AMDCL). The Government of India, which owns fossil fuels and minerals under the earth, suspended the AMDCL's operating license 12 years ago. So, the AMDCL has no right to extract coal and neither does it have the right to mine or trade OB coal." OB refers to the layers of soil, rock, etc. that need to be removed to extract coal.

The Assam Congress president, Bhupen Kumar Borah, says illegal coal mining in Umrangso, about 260 kilometres from Guwahati, was just the tip of the "Syndicate Raj" iceberg in the State. "Illegal syndicates are controlling everything. If Assam is really under the control of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, he should be aware of the coal syndicate. That it has been allowed to operate for years explains the government's silence on Debobal Gorlosa and his wife," he says.

Politics of former rebels

Gorlosa is the chief executive member (CEM) of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council, which administers the Dima Hasao district. After the mine flooded, Opposition parties fished out an invoice that was issued to Kanika Hojai, Gorlosa's wife, for buying OB coal, or overburden coal, from the AMDCL.

While Gorlosa is incommunicado, his aides believe that he is being targeted. Gorlosa used to be the commander-in-chief of the Dima Haram Daogah, an armed group which was disbanded in 2013. "Once mauled by militancy, Dima Hasao district had three CEMs in as many years before Gorlosa. He ensured peace, stability, and development. Some failed leaders of the Dima Haram Daogah, who are desperate to be in power, are carrying out a smear campaign against him," claims one of his aides.

Meanwhile, others believe that Punish Nuisia, who was arrested for allegedly operating the mine illegally, has been made the scapegoat to keep the focus off the "real culprits".

Money matters

Amid the blame game, the AMDCL has come under the scanner for allegedly doing what it is not authorised to do, which is mining coal or residue.

In the line of fire, Anand Natarajan, the AMDCL's Managing Director, insists that the Corporation has not set a foot wrong. "I am being maligned for reviving the corporation that once struggled to pay salaries to its employees. Apart from helping increase the State's revenue, we acquired a coal block in Jarkhand and won the bidding for two coal blocks in Assam – Garampani in Dima Hasao and Kollajai in the Karbi Anglong district – more than a year ago," he says. Natarajan adds that the AMDCL was the first to lodge an FIR relating to the Kalamati mine, which is 850 metres beyond the area under its Garampani block. The Indian Forest Service officer also says the dealing in OB coal was within the legal ambit.

"If we don't use the OB coal lying in our depot for

ages, our revenue will drop," he says. Miners Basumatary and Ahmed worry that their incomes will drop too because of the incident. "We won't go hungry as long as there is demand for coal. Maybe, we should let the dust settle and wait for the next offer," Basumatary says.



Rescue workers search for the missing miners. RITU RAJ KOKRAJHAR

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Shun corruption

Act on the CJI's plainspeak

SO entrenched is corruption in the Indian social and political reality that any resolve to counter it instantly runs into thick clouds of pessimism. A sense of resignation with regard to the status quo runs deep. Yet, for hope to filter through, the significance of terse plainspeak at the highest echelons cannot be overstated. Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sanjay Khanna's call to reinforce systems of accountability and fairness is a reminder of how the citizen continues to be let down. Corruption as a hydra-headed monster that undermines public trust and hinders the ideals of democracy is an apt description. Equally crucial is the CJI's emphasis that the success of the anti-corruption ombudsman, the Lokpal, hinges on public trust and citizen engagement. It's the ability of the little man or woman to hold the big and powerful accountable, as he put it.

It's indisputable that corruption can be rooted out only with the help of an educated and engaged citizenry. What's essentially missing — and that's the hydra on the ground — is institutional support. The social contract between the government and citizens to safeguard against corruption remains breached, and the gap is only widening. The referee agencies have been found wanting. Public trust is the sum total of the efficacy of the systemic reaction and action on complaints and grievances at every level. Nothing less will suffice.

What the citizen has come to recognise is the futility of standing up against corrupt practices, small or big. Nothing weakens the national character more than a social sanction to graft and an official stamp, as it were, to the right to cheat. All organs of democracy are to blame. If you truly desire change, revitalise the institutions. Else, expect a more shrivelled moral and ethical fibre in an average Indian.

BCCI talks tough

Strict guidelines worth a try

INDIAN cricketers, particularly the male of the species, are a pampered lot. Big bucks and adulation come their way, whether they are playing matches around the world or endorsing products ranging from life insurance policies to American pistachios. They are as popular as Indian film stars, if not more. In recent years, they have performed pretty well in all three formats of the game, winning the T20 World Cup in 2024 and reaching the final of the ODI World Cup as well as the World Test Championship in 2023. However, stunning back-to-back losses in Test series against New Zealand and Australia have hit the team where it hurts. The knives are out, and the brickbats have started outnumbering the bouquets.

Signalling that enough is enough, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has issued strict guidelines for the senior men's squad. The measures are apparently aimed at enhancing discipline, streamlining logistics and promoting team unity during domestic and international tours. The players are now expected to travel with the team for all matches and practice sessions; what's more, they have to adhere to stringent baggage norms. There is also a family travel policy, which will ostensibly "ensure a balance between players' wellbeing and team commitments"; actually, it is meant to minimise distractions for cricketers on foreign tours. Perhaps the BCCI has taken a cue from the L&T Chairman's provocative question: "How long can you stare at your wife?"

It is obvious that the team's no-nonsense head coach, Gautam Gambhir, has a lot to do with these restrictions. The board has also made it mandatory for players to participate in domestic matches to remain eligible for selection in the national team and for central contracts. Non-compliance or defiance could force players to miss the IPL, India's cricket's biggest cash cow. Overall, this is a bold experiment worth trying to draw cricketers out of their comfort zone. How they cope with the changes will matter a lot.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JANUARY 18, 1925

The Commonwealth of India Bill

IT is characteristic of Dr Annie Besant that once she has undertaken to do a thing, she may be trusted to apply herself to it with an energy, vigour and thoroughness which few even among younger workers could equal and none surpass. All these qualities are conspicuously in evidence in the great work in which she has now for some time been engaged, the drawing up of a Constitution for India and the framing of a Bill for presentation to the British Parliament. In an interesting address recently delivered by her to a Calcutta audience, she once again unfolded the essential features of her scheme. The first of these features was that the Constitution must be framed by India herself. Besant was asked in England whether India would ever be satisfied with any scheme that England made over there. Her reply was: "No, India must make her own Constitution. She has a long history behind her extending over thousands of years and she will never be satisfied with a scheme drawn up by a Western nation and passed without consultation with her in a Western Parliament." Here was a repudiation of the preamble to the Government of India Act, as strong, as emphatic and as complete as any ever made by a leader of the advanced wing of the Nationalist Party. CR Das for instance. It is worthy of note in this connection that in this matter, the Liberals were at one time of the same opinion as the Congress. Who does not remember the famous passage in his speech at the Calcutta Congress of 1917 in which Sir Surendranath Banerjee described the part of the August announcement, which made the British Government and the Government of India the

THE GREAT GAME

JYOTI MALHOTRA

BACK in Mumbai this weekend, the whole city, not just Bollywood, remains engrossed with who stabbed Saif Ali Khan and why, in what is a perfect life-meets-Hindi-movie moment.

Here in Punjab, though, the undercurrent of fear and loathing that has greeted Kangana Ranaut, the actor-director of a biopic on Indira Gandhi, 'Emergency', is scaling new unsavoury heights, with the SGPC preventing the film from being screened in theatres even as it was released across the country on Friday.

Now we know that SGPC president Harginder Singh Dhumi is a member of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and that the Sikh institution, which celebrates the 100th anniversary of it becoming a legal body — along with the RSS — is still largely controlled by the Sudhbir Badal-led party. You could argue that an SGPC functionary's description of a Jalandhar Singh Bhindranwale as "maharaja" or "great", even as he illogically explained why the SGPC was boycotting Kangana's movie — ostensibly because "Sikhs are portrayed in a bad light", because "Bhindranwale is seen as telling Mrs Gandhi that he will ensure her the Sikh vote, if she gives a separate state", meaning Khalistan — cannot belong to a world in which fact and fiction are obviously distinct and separate and movies clearly belong to the latter.

But this is Punjab, a state that is not doing too badly on some parameters — it is certainly able to feed, clothe and educate itself, otherwise its cities and villages wouldn't be full of immigrants

An 'Emergency' in Punjab

Many Punjabis fear the film will show the state "in a bad light" to the country and the world



FUROR: The SGPC is leading the protests against Kangana's Indira Gandhi biopic 'Emergency'. (Tribune photo)

from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar — but where the political sentiment is mostly so overwrought that nothing is really what it seems.

So here's the big picture against which the anti-Saif Ranaut and 'Emergency' protests are taking place — five loose strands are clear. First, Kangana is a polarising figure, critical of the farmer agitation that has been taking place on and off these last several months; a CISF constable even slapped her on this count in June last year.

Second, the farmer protests are back, with farm union leader Jagjit Singh Dullewal's hunger strike entering its 53rd day, spurring another "marjheke jatha", literally, a "do-or-die" group of 111 farmers determined to cross into Haryana and therefore into Delhi, to get their demands fulfilled.

But it's equally clear that the farmers have not been able to capture the imagination of Punjab, like they did four years ago — leave alone that of Delhi — which had then forced PM Modi to withdraw the three farm laws, the only time he has been seen to go back on his own word. Dullewal's so-called "ajto-graha" is failing today because it is largely seen as blackmail.

Third, you would expect that as a consequence of the people's

It's clear that the farmers have not been able to capture the imagination of Punjab, like they did four years ago — leave alone that of Delhi.

irritation with the farmer protests, the ground would at least a tad shift towards the BJP. And that, simultaneously, the BJP would hope that the rapidly urbanising Sikh peasantry as well as Punjab's middle class — much more at home in Canada than in the garbage-strewn streets of Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Amritsar — would increasingly gravitate towards Modi. Fourth, that's where the BJP is wrong. Fact is, even if everything is wrong with the farmers' protest, the BJP isn't gaining from it. In fact, quite the contrary. The politics of Punjab may be splintering in many directions — there are as many as three Akali

Dals today, ranging from the newly minted Khudoor Sahib MP and radical Sikh leader Amritpal's 'Waris Punjab De' to Simranjit Singh Mann's Akali Dal (Amritsar), to Badal's grand old party, which is also internally split; even as disgruntled politicians are party-hopping across the spectrum, mostly in the direction of AAP — but the BJP is still seen as anathema. Party candidates, like former finance minister Manpreet Badal, either lost their deposits or finished last in the recent bypolls.

Fifth, the question is why. Why does Punjab fancy itself as the "other pole", doing exactly the opposite of what Delhi likes to do, the "Akali Taldit" versus the "Dil-i-Talikh"? The answer is equally simple. Punjabis believe Delhi either doesn't care enough, that if it did it would help by working with the state government on fixing its many problems — ranging from the procurement of paddy, and now wheat, to the drones-and-drugs problem, failing law and order plus gangsterism and a million more.

But the most important reason why the SGPC — and a large section of unhappy Punjabis — are against the screening of 'Emergency' is because they are afraid

the film will show Punjab up to the rest of the country and the world "in a bad light" — meaning, as latter-day "Khalistanis", not much worse than Bhindranwale. The thought that the rest of India could believe that Punjab today may be going back to those awful years because it has elected a radical Sikh jailed under both NSA and UAPA as an MP besides the son of Indira Gandhi's assassin as a second MP — is enough to give the people nightmares.

Rebellious, yes, but radical? Truth is, few understand how Punjab turned upon itself during those awful years. (No wonder, Canada beckoned.) And now that nightmare may be back, in technicolour, telling Punjab what's wrong with it.

It's enough to depress a people. Jagrup Singh Sekhon and Parmjit Singh Judge, two political scientists in Amritsar, who have watched the decline and fall of Punjab these past several decades, speak today of a listlessness, a lack of trust in institutions, an agrarian crisis, an unclear roadmap. "Logon ne dil chhod diya hai," Sekhon said, the people have lost their will. Judge, more optimistic, insisted that the tide will turn either soon or someday, especially as politics abhors a vacuum.

So, think again, dear Reader, as you flock to watch 'Emergency'. Understand what's special about Amritpal's father Tarsem Singh and Pardeep Singh Saraljeet Singh Khalsa sitting together on an open platform at the Maghi Mela in Muktsar earlier this week to launch Akali Dal (Waris Punjab De). Fact is, it's only in Punjab that a political party can be headed by an MP who is jailed under NSA and UAPA, but has sworn an oath to the Constitution. Only in Punjab that this party, catering to radicals, has been approved by the Election Commission.

Only in Punjab that the past and the present are so intimately held that it's sometimes difficult to separate one from the other, especially when you're watching a movie.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Radicalism and extremism exist in every society on some level. —Edward Snowden

The travellers who need no passport

PREET AMOL SINGH

A popular song by Diljit Dosanjh has this line, "Main kardi fly first, kardi much chakki firde ne tash nash." If fly high, while many people do nothing but look skyward. Gen Z often shares this number on social media to flaunt its sense of superiority.

For me, this line holds a deeper meaning. I realised this during my recent visit to the Hussainiwala border in Ferozepur to witness the Indo-Pak retreat ceremony. Though we stood just a few steps from the zero line, what truly captured my attention as an herbalist was the area's rich biodiversity that brought me closer to nature. In that moment, I experienced an extraordinary connection to the natural world, feeling a profound respect for its beauty and harmony, which taught me the value of coexistence and growth. Simultaneously, the patriotic slogans resonated deeply, instilling a sense of unwavering pride in my nation, its heritage and resilience — values that intertwine to inspire a better future for all.

What left a lasting impression was a pair of birds, merrily soaring from one tree to another and seemingly echoing the sentiment expressed in the Diljit song. They effortlessly crossed over from one country to another in a split second, without having to bother about passports, visas, security checks and other formalities. I couldn't help thinking how lucky these birds were, in stark contrast to humans, who were tied down by all kinds of restrictions.

To an outsider, crossing the border might appear as simple as passing through a gate to enter a new country. However, India and Pakistan are separated by the Radcliffe Line, a boundary deeply rooted in the history of the Partition and the bloodshed that followed. It's hard to fathom the heartbreak of being told overnight that the land where you and your ancestors had lived for generations was no longer your home, and that you now belonged to a different country. This ceremony serves as a symbol of both rivalry and cooperation between the two countries.

There are countless borders that exist today, not just the ones between countries, but also the boundaries on personal and social levels. Most of the conflicts and wars are the direct result of the creation of boundaries and establishment of borders. But just as the ecosystem maintains its natural balance, there is a need to ask ourselves, "Like birds, can we travel freely and live in peace and harmony on this beautiful earth?"

Alas, the bitter truth is that there are a lot of borders that we, the most intelligent species on this planet, have created between ourselves, limiting people-to-people contact. I guess this is the reason why animals and birds seem

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A salute to ISRO's dedication

Refer to the editorial 'Ace in space'; ISRO has reached a significant milestone, making every Indian proud by successfully docking two satellites in space. This is vital for India's future space missions, including lunar soil sample collection and the Bharatija Antariksh Station. ISRO's success, achieved with cutting-edge technology and at a remarkably low cost, is set to position India as a global hub for satellite launches, outpacing competitors like China. This feat also strengthens India's capabilities in safeguarding its space assets. A salute to ISRO's relentless dedication and innovation in space exploration.

VIJAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKULA

Setting the tempo in space

Appropos of the editorial 'Ace in space'; ISRO's successful space docking experiment should cheer up those who felt sad when Chandrayaan-2 faltered at the last hurdle in 2019, given some factors that were beyond the control of scientists. Astronaut Neil Armstrong's famous quote, "one small step for man, a giant leap for mankind", has come true again. ISRO has set the 2025 tempo for other institutions and organisations, despite previous experiences and present constraints.

JAGVINDER SINGH BRAR, PATIALA

Peace in Gaza at a price

With reference to 'Gaza ceasefire', the announcement of an agreement between Israel and Hamas on a ceasefire in Gaza is a relief in every way. This accord is driven by America, but US President-elect Donald Trump's personal interest has also proven to be significant. He has already warned that hostages should be released before he takes charge. This peace is being obtained at a high cost. There are still many uncertainties; even if all sides remain committed to the deal and its execution begins, there is no assurance of permanent peace. Negotiations for a permanent ceasefire will commence later. How the Gaza governance system will function after the truce remains to be determined.

ABHIRAM JYOTI, JAMSHEDPUR

Qatar deserves credit

Refer to the editorial 'Gaza ceasefire'; the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas has come after a long wait of 15 months. If anyone deserves credit, it is Qatar. However, the Trump administration will have to ensure that peace prevails. But considering the complexity of the process and the lack of trust between these two parties, how sustainable this peace agreement would be is a million-dollar question. The humanitarian situation in the region is in dire straits and to correct it should be the sole priority at this point.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Efforts to defame Nehru

With reference to the article 'Nehru-bashing bodes ill for India', there is an ongoing and determined effort by right-wing ideologues to defame Nehru. Many write-ups are being written on the 'perfidious' role of Nehru, Gandhi and the Congress during the freedom movement. History is flexible enough to be stretched either way. Different approaches and perspectives lead to different interpretations. People tend to accept what favours their bias, and reject all that does not. It is a zero-sum game, and until we discover time travel, the truth will be subject to many revisions.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

Misuse of Pay Commission

The Delhi elections are around the corner. If not for this reason, why did the Centre decide to set up the 8th Pay Commission, which has a key role in deciding salary structures, benefits and allowances for government employees? The 7th Pay Commission is valid till December 2025; what was the need to announce the formation of the next one now? Delhi itself has about four lakh employees of the Union Government. The 8th Pay Commission should avoid another hike. What about the EPF of private companies providing minimum pension of Rs 1,000 per month (since 1995) and not eligible for any revision, despite the Supreme Court ruling? Though trade unions have called for hiking the minimum EPF pension to Rs 5,000 per month, the states and the Centre are not doing the needful.

BIDYUT KUMAR CHATTERJEE, FARIDABAD

The history rewrite: Orientalism to religion



PK BASANT
EX-PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND
CULTURE, JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA

ON a cold, rainy winter morning on December 28, 2024, when it would have been prudent to sit by the fireside, more than a thousand historians gathered at Punjab University, Patiala, for the 83rd session of the Indian History Congress (IHC), the largest association of historians in India. Started in 1935 in Pune with about 50 participants, the IHC now boasts about 35,000 members. Its annual sessions across India are the most visible statements on the state of history-writing in our country. Scholars, like Amartya Sen and EP Thompson, have presented papers in various sessions of the IHC. In the recent session, Prof Gautam Sen Gupta delivered the general presidential address, while US-based Prof Richard Eaton was a special invitee.

The inaugural session of the IHC was a result of the energy and enterprise of scholars from Maharashtra. Some of its participants were Father H Heras from Mumbai, Surendra Nath Sen from Kolkata

and SR Sharma from Lahore. Its first president, Sir Shafat Ahmad Khan of Allahabad, insisted that historians should be guided by canons of objectivity and science. The IHC was to rise above prejudice and racial pride.

A cursory look at the Proceedings of the Indian History Congress in the following years brings up names like Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Tara Chand, RC Majumdar, Mohammad Habib, PV Kane, Nilakanta Sastri, HD Sankalia, RS Sharma, Satish Chandra, Bipan Chandra, Irfan Habib, Romila Thapar and Sumit Sarkar — legends in the canons of Indian history-writing.

At the time of the founding of the IHC, the dominant historical narratives were Eurocentric. India was considered merely a geographical expression consisting of a confused congeries of languages, ethnicities and religions, which neither was nor could be a nation. Indian political systems were supposedly characterised by 'Oriental despotism'. Another argument, that India was spiritual as contrasted with the material West, served to justify European rule over the subcontinent.

The IHC was part of a larger intellectual movement that was trying to prove that Indians were capable of democratic self-rule. Indian historians developed 'drain of wealth' arguments against British colonialism. They excavated textual evidence



LUMINARY: American professor Richard Eaton was a special invitee at the recent session of the Indian History Congress held in Patiala. FILE PHOTO

that showed presence of non-monarchical polities (*ganasanghas*) in early India. They demonstrated that the medieval period was not an era of darkness and that Islam ushered in many positive changes in Indian society. They recognised that India was a nation in the making and that diversity of languages, cultures and religious traditions was the strength of India's unique nationalism.

However, nationalist historians persisted with the colonial understanding privileging dynastic history. They even embraced the idea that Indians were spiritual while the West was materialistic. It seemed to soothe their bruised nationalist ego. We Indians still carry this idea like a badge of honour, although no Indian source had ever made such claims.

In spite of disagreements among historians, there is consensus on scientific history-writing.

Using sources composed by upper-caste/class writers, the nationalists believed that the *varna* system minimised economic competition and created a harmonious society based on a friendly division of labour. However, the most pernicious survival of the colonial tradition was the periodisation of Indian history into Hindu and Muslim eras. This was based on the notion that religious identities are unchanging as well as eternal and they define everything about human communities. This understanding was reflected in the Partition wherein nation-states were defined by religious identity.

The patriotic reverie of the nationalists could not wish away caste oppression and the incredible poverty of peasant communities. It denied agency to Dalits, Adi-

vasis and women. Faint murmurs of protest about nationalist history began to be heard in the IHC in the 1950s.

There was a shift in focus from kings and conquerors to common people. There was a conscious attempt to integrate polity with economy, society, religion and art. Processes of change and causality were woven into this new history. Thus emerged the grand narrative of feudalism that punctured the earlier idea of equating medieval India with the arrival of Islam. The medieval period, in this reading, began long before the coming of the Turks. Historians of the modern period began to examine the composition of India's anti-imperialist movements. They pointed out that India's failure in removing stark poverty and caste discrimination was connected with the upper-caste/leadership of the national movement.

The IHC has always been a site for dissent and innovative research. By the early 1970s, Buddhism and Sufi-Bhakti traditions were being analysed as responses to the needs of emergent merchant and agricultural communities. Religion was now seen as a series of multivoiced responses to social needs, not an entity that was frozen in holy texts.

History-writing also learnt from other disciplines. Sociological concepts critiqued the idea of an unchanging caste system. Powerful groups like the Rajputs used Sanskritisation to acquire a higher caste

status and legitimise their control. Historical enquiries showed that there was a continuous shuffling of caste orders in history. Anthropology showed that hunter-gatherers, pastoral nomads, shifting cultivators and peasants represented radically different social formations. It was seen that the society mirrored in the Vedas was a chiefdom society that was different from state societies of the subsequent period. Thus, the processes of the emergence of the state and the monarchy were explored. Similarly, realising that cities did not always exist, historians began studying the emergence of urbanism. Other historians explored gender histories to understand the power of patriarchy today. Historians have also begun exploring the history of environment.

The possibilities and range of questions are endless. Historians, too, cannot escape the gaze of Chronos. Histories will continue to change. Historians at the IHC have never mined words about mutual disagreements. However, there is an overlapping consensus on scientific history-writing. Unfortunately, the last few decades have witnessed a conflict between religious organisations menacingly insisting on their version of the past and professional historians who value canons of historical method. It matters because it will define not only our past but our future too.

How ISRO raced against time to execute space docking



TV VENKATESWARAN
VISITING PROFESSOR,
ISIR, MOHALI

IN the wee hours of January 16, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) made history by successfully docking its two small satellites, SDX01 (Chaser) and SDX02 (Target), each weighing about 220 kg. This remarkable feat, achieved after overcoming nerve-racking hiccups three times in the past two weeks, opens doors for future human space flights, the establishment of an Indian space station, a sample return mission to the moon and a landing and rover mission to Mars.

Consider circus acrobats swinging high, gaining speed and then leaping fearlessly into the air, flying in a perfect arc while briefly extending their arms. The companion, perched high on a platform, leans forward, arms spread like a lifeline. In a wonderful moment of harmony, their hands firmly grip, sealing the daring tie. The task of space docking is no less bold and nerve.

The two crafts have to rendezvous at a specific place at a particular time. Each craft has a circular portal (a door-

way) surrounded by a ring-like handrail. Like the grooves on the lid and jar, the latches on the portal of one craft must align with the partner's portal clasp. Once the two crafts are close, a protruding ring from the Chaser craft enters the Target craft's portal. The latches extend and securely buckle the partner craft in a tight clutch.

Unlike a video game with controllers in your hands, the rendezvous and docking of the two vessels must be done autonomously by the onboard computers employing artificial intelligence algorithms. Each ship is equipped with range finder sensors and cameras, which serve as the eyes and ears for the algorithm for the onboard computers, enabling it to manoeuvre the crafts gently to come closer while aligning their portals.

One craft, designated as the Target, remains relatively passive while the Chaser approaches and wiggles to align the portals and latch mechanism.

As the indigenously created algorithm was being tested for the first time, ISRO proceeded cautiously. In the first attempt on January 11, the two crafts approached with an inter-satellite distance of 230 metres. The docking process was intentionally arrested to evaluate the performance of the sensors. On the next day, a trial attempt was made to reduce the inter-satellite distance to 15 metres



BIG GOAL: ISRO, now led by V Narayanan (right), has ambitions for human space flight. PT

and then just three metres. Hoping to succeed, the attempt to dock was scheduled for January 13.

Ostensibly, there was a problem receiving data from a vital proximity and docking sensor, which tells the onboard computer how distant the partner ship is and what direction it must take to safely dock. This caused the algorithm to switch to the safe mode and abort the docking procedure. Even a minor directional deviation would have resulted in a collision rather than a docking. Due to this malfunction, the docking was halted at the last minute, and the spacecraft was moved to a safe distance.

Given the angle at which the vehicles were orbiting the earth, docking had to be completed before January 22, or else ISRO would have to wait

ISRO is planning to establish a space station akin to the International Space Station, for which docking mechanism is needed.

till March. After January 22, the earth would have obscured the spacecraft for most of the period, decreasing power production for the onboard equipment.

Hard-pressed for time, ISRO reportedly reversed the roles of the two ships — the Chaser with defective sensors became the passive target, while the previous Target became the Chaser, and the docking was successful.

Successful docking was critical for validating ISRO's indigenously built low-impedance docking mechanism, a suite of sensors and rendezvous & docking algorithms. However, there is more to it than technical demonstrations.

Until now, ISRO has been like a goods transporter, building satellites, taking them to space and parking

them in orbit. A container lorry needs no emergency escape door; however, if you are operating a bus carrying passengers, it is a must. ISRO has ambitions for human space flight, courtesy the Gaganyaan mission, and a docking mechanism is imperative for human-rated spacecraft.

Also, ISRO is planning to establish a space station akin to the International Space Station, enabling a few crew members to remain in space for weeks and months to carry out research. The docking mechanism is needed to transfer the crew from the craft to the station and back. Space stations are constructed by docking multiple uncrewed human-rated spacecraft in space.

Most importantly, ISRO has a radical jigsaw to undertake interplanetary missions. Falcon Heavy, the American heavy-lift launch vehicle, can transport a payload of 63.8 tonnes in Low Earth Orbit (LEO), and the Chinese Long March 5-CZ-5B variant can place 25 tonnes in LEO. Even the mighty GSLV (Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle), known as ISRO's *Bahubali*, can place only a meagre eight tonnes in LEO.

However, ISRO has not been hampered in the past. It employed a frugal technique called 'gravity assist' to reach Mars with just a PSLV (Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle), which can only deposit four tonnes in LEO. In this manner,

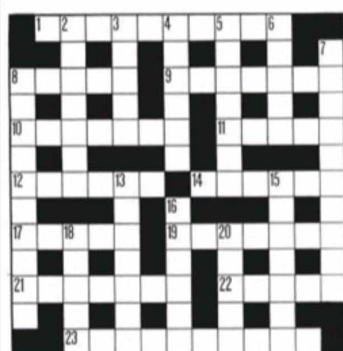
ISRO proposes to make its way to the moon and Mars even without heavy-lift vehicles.

Consider the Chandrayaan-4 scenario: Two launch vehicles will send two vessels into orbit, each carrying two modules. The spacecraft will dock and combine to form a single craft with four modules. Module 1 will serve as the propulsion module, guiding the vessel to the moon.

Once in the lunar orbit, Module 1 will be undocked and jettisoned. Modules 2 and 3 will undock and make a lunar landing, while Module 4 will circle the moon like an orbiter. The rover from Module 2 will go across the surface, collecting lunar soil and rock samples and depositing them in Module 3. Module 3 will lift off from the moon's surface like a rocket and dock with Module 4, circling the moon. The samples will be transported to Module 4, returning to earth. Thus, docking and undocking are critical for the mission plan. Likewise, ISRO is designing a mission to Mars with multiple launches that will place components in space, where they will be assembled and taken to the Red Planet for a soft landing and rover mission.

Experts believe that space assembly will be the future of deep-space missions. It will be cost-effective and permit more ambitious missions. Perhaps ISRO will take the initial steps.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Daybreak (5,5)
- 8 Underwater detection system (5)
- 9 Highly seasoned Hungarian stew (7)
- 10 Cafeteria for soldiers (7)
- 11 Heavy drinker (5)
- 12 Wise old counsellor (6)
- 14 In haphazard manner (6)
- 17 Feel repugnance (5)
- 19 Tool for turning nuts (7)
- 21 Laborious effort (7)
- 22 Refrain from (5)
- 23 Done at latest possible time (4-6)

Yesterday's solution

- Across: 1 Rebuff, 4 Hammer, 9 Jakarta, 10 Venus, 11 Circa, 12 Tolkien, 13 Safekeeping, 18 Allegro, 20 Nadir, 22 Flair, 23 Apology, 24 Entree, 25 Unison.
- Down: 1 Reject, 2 Baker, 3 Forsake, 5 Anvil, 6 Mention, 7 Rising, 8 Battle royal, 14 At least, 15 Pindown, 16 Raffle, 17 Crayon, 19 Gorge, 21 Dross.

DOWN

- 2 Division of cricket match (7)
- 3 Lively extravagant outing (5)
- 4 Traditional story (6)
- 5 Insatiably eager person (7)
- 6 Freighter with no fixed route (5)
- 7 World's developing countries (5,5)
- 8 Inferior (6-4)
- 13 City associated with Joan of Arc (7)
- 15 Statement released to press (7)
- 16 Refuge (6)
- 18 Rowdy fight (5)
- 20 In addition (5)

SU DO KU



V. EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JANUARY 18, 2025, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Posh Shaka 28
- Magh Purnimite 5
- Higeri 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 5
- Sotahana Yoga up to 1.16 pm
- Purnahastanti Nakshatra up to 2.52 pm
- Moon enters Virgo sign 9.29 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	19	09
New Delhi	19	07
Amritsar	13	08
Bathinda	18	09
Jalandhar	18	09
Ludhiana	20	10
Bhiwani	16	08
Hisar	14	06
Sirsa	17	09
Dharamsala	20	06
Manali	13	01
Shimla	16	05
Srinagar	07	-03
Jammu	20	07
Kargil	-01	-10
Leh	-02	-13
Dehradun	—	—
Mussoorie	13	02

Prisoners in foreign land

ARJUN RAGHUNATH
DH NEWS SERVICE

When Nimisha Priya travelled to Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, in 2008, she thought her training as a nurse would help her not only land a good job in the West Asian nation but also set her family at Palakkad in Kerala free from day-to-day economic hardship. She married Tony Thomas of Idukki in 2011 and returned to Sana'a, where the couple had a daughter. Her dreams were shattered in 2017 when she was accused of killing her Yemeni business partner, Talal Abdul Mahdi, in a desperate bid to retrieve her passport which was in his possession. She was sentenced to death in 2018 by a court in Yemen. The head of the ruling dispensation in the conflict-ridden country has approved her death warrant recently.

Nimisha, 36, is now incarcerated in a jail in Sana'a, pinning her hope on her mother's negotiation with the family of Mahdi on 'blood money' - a monetary compensation to be paid to get the pardon from the slain man's clan.

Abdul Rahim, who is also from Kozhikode in Kerala, was sentenced to death in 2006 for allegedly killing the 15-year-old son of his employer in Saudi Arabia. The victim's parents granted the family's old driver pardon after receiving 'blood money' of Rs 34 crore. But Abdul continues to be incarcerated in Saudi Arabia jail, where he spent the last 18 years of his life.

The Ministry of External Affairs in July 2019 informed the Lok Sabha that 44 Indians were on death row in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and they included five who had been convicted of offences related to drug trafficking. The

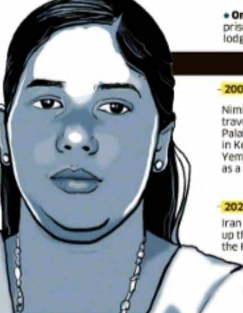
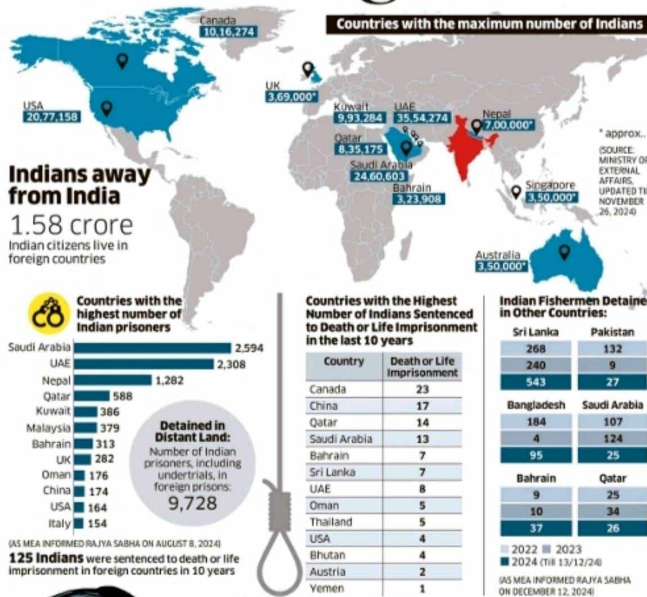
ministry again informed the Rajya Sabha in August 2024 that while altogether 9,728 Indians remain imprisoned in foreign countries, mostly in West Asia, 125 of them were either sentenced to death or life imprisonment in the last 10 years.

"A significant number of Indians remain imprisoned in foreign countries, often due to criminal cases arising from labour disputes," said advocate Femina Pankajassery, who provided legal assistance to Indians in the United Arab Emirates.

A L. Naushad, a 52-year-old auto-rickshaw driver from Kollam in Kerala, had got into a scuffle with a Saudi Arabian man while working in a petrol pump in the kingdom in 2003. The Saudi man lost his eyes. A court then ordered that one of Naushad's eyes would be gouged out. "But for the interventions of the Indian government and pardon given by the Saudi king, I would have been now partially blind," Naushad, who has returned to his hometown, told DH.

The Kerala government set up Pravasi Legal Aid Cells (PLACs) to provide legal assistance to people of the state landing in trouble in foreign countries. The MEA also set up the Pravasi Bharatiya Sahayata Kendra (PBKS).

"We have set up the Pravasi Legal Aid Cells (PLACs) in seven Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and plan to expand it to more countries. It has been effective in extending legal assistance to hundreds," said Ajith Kollaseery, Chief Executive Officer of NORKA Roots - an agency of the Kerala government for the welfare of the NRIs from the state.



On January 1, 2025, Islamabad shared with New Delhi the names of 49 civilian prisoners in addition to 217 fishermen, who are Indian or are believed to be Indian, but lodged in the jails of Pakistan.

Nimisha Priya's Ordeal: A Timeline



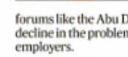
ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN. COMPILED BY: ARJUN RAGHUNATH, DHNS

'People must avoid illegal channels to find foreign jobs'

Nimisha Priya is on death row in Yemen for allegedly killing a citizen of the West Asian nation in a desperate bid to retrieve her passports from him. V. Muraleedharan, former minister of state for external affairs, who helped many Indians in distress in foreign countries, tells DH's Arjun Raghunath that though the laws in the West Asian nations do not permit an employer to take away the passport of a foreign employee, Indians, who take jobs through illegal routes, are often forced to submit the travel documents.

How does the government help hundreds of Indians who end up behind bars in foreign countries?
A large number of Indians are jailed in foreign countries for illegal activities like drug peddling and other criminal

activities. In such cases, the Government of India has limited scope to intervene. There are however many other cases in which Indians end up in foreign jails, for other reasons, including for want of release orders even after the end of their punishment. In such cases, our missions used to help in getting the release orders. We have been constantly taking up issues related to safeguarding the interests of the Indian workers in the West Asian region at forums like the Abu Dhabi Dialogue. There is a considerable decline in the problems faced by the Indian diaspora from employers.



Why are so many Indian citizens landing in trouble after taking jobs in foreign countries?

Unfortunately, a large number of Indians seeking overseas jobs are relying on illegal channels. Most of them go abroad using tourist visas and take up jobs. The majority of the people facing problems are those who are not migrating through proper channels. One can check online the veracity of job offers from abroad as well as the authenticity of the recruiting agents. But people continue to fall prey to fake offers by scrupulous agents. The racket of illegal recruiting agents seems to be very influential too as state governments often fail to act effectively against them, despite specific alerts by the Ministry of External Affairs.

How does the government help Indian citizens in foreign countries in such cases?

I will consider the launch of the Global Pravasi Rishta Portal as one key initiative in addressing issues of the Indian diaspora during my term as MoS in the MEA. Local resolve around 4,000 grievances. Similarly, Pravasi Bharatiya Sahayata Kendra is also extending legal assistance to those in distress.

Many Indians are in foreign prisons as they cannot afford to pay blood money to the families of the victims. Can't the Indian Community Welfare Fund be used for this purpose?

There is no provision for using the ICWF to pay blood money. Blood money is a sort of personal settlement. The ICWF is mainly used by the embassies to extend immediate medical care, arrange transportation of mortal remains, and provide legal assistance in deserving cases.

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

What does the USA's ban on using red dye in foods mean?

The FDA downplayed the cancer risk by saying studies showed cancer in rats, but not in humans, write **Andrew Jacobs** and **Teddy Rosenbluth**

For over a century, food and drug manufacturers have added a synthetic chemical to candies, pills, shakes and more colour than a vivid cherry red. That will end soon in the USA, while other countries will start thinking about it.

This week, the Food and Drug Administration banned using Red Dye No. 3 in food, beverages and drugs, more than three decades after the synthetic colouring was first found to cause cancer in male laboratory rats.

Drug manufacturers who use Red Dye No. 3 have until January 18, 2028, to reformulate their products; food manufacturers have until January 15, 2027.

"It's a great first step for the U.S., but frankly, we're just really behind," said Dr. Sheela Sathyanarayanan, professor of paediatrics at the University of Washington who studies environmental exposures that affect children's health. The European Union, Australia and New Zealand have banned most uses of Red Dye No. 3 in foods.

Why did the FDA ban Red Dye No. 3?

The FDA first allowed food manufacturers to use Red Dye No. 3 in 1907. But in 1958, Congress passed a regulation that blocks the agency from approving food or colour additives that can lead to cancer in animals or humans.

Scientists and public interest groups have raised concerns about the dye for decades. The FDA even banned Red Dye No. 3 in cosmetics like lipsticks and drugs applied to the skin in 1990 after industry-funded research found that it led to thyroid cancer in rats. However, it was still allowed to be used as an additive in food and drugs.

In 2022, several public interest groups petitioned the FDA to revoke its authorisation of Red Dye No. 3. They pointed to studies that showed male lab rats exposed to high levels of the chemical developed thyroid cancer.

"Consumers should not be placed, as they have for the last several decades, in this situation where they need to check the package every time to see if this chemical that FDA should have banned is still there," said Dr. Peter Lurie, the executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a group that petitioned the FDA.



In announcing its decision, the FDA noted that studies had not found a link to cancer in other types of animals. The agency added that any claims that people are at risk because of the use of the dye in food and ingested drugs "are not supported by the available scientific information."

Other concerns

Beyond the cancer risk, some research has found a link between consuming synthetic food dyes, including Red Dye No. 3, and behavioural issues like hyperactivity in some children. However, there are limitations to those studies, including the fact that many

of the trials studying the question have been small.

The dye, a petroleum-based additive, has been used to give candy, soda and other products their vibrant cherry red hue. Consumer advocates said the FDA's decision to revoke the authorisation was long overdue, given the agency's decision in 1990 to ban the chemical in cosmetics and topical drugs.

Hundreds of foods and drugs still contain Red Dye No. 3, including some, but not all, brands of:

- Candies, like candy corn, lollipops, jelly beans and candy necklaces
- Vegan "meats," including imitation bacon and sausages
- Icings, especially red or pink frostings
- Sausages and hot dogs
- Cotton candy
- Cookies
- Cakes, cakes and cupcakes, including

some red velvet products and "funfetti" cakes

- Rainbow sprinkles
- Strawberry-flavoured milk, drinks and nutrition shakes
- Chewing gums
- Gummy vitamins
- Mashed potato mixes
- Certain medications

As with many chemicals and additives, we're exposed to, "there's no way to get to zero," Sathyanarayanan said.

"Are there going to be times when your kid gets red dye?" she said. "Yeah, because they go to birthday parties, they have Halloween." But you can minimize any potential risk, she said, "if you can limit those to just those special occasions, as opposed to every day."

Under federal rules, the FDA prohibits approving food additives that cause cancer in humans or animals.

"This is wonderful news and long overdue," said Melanie Benesh, vice president for government affairs at the Environmental Working Group, one of several organisations that petitioned the agency to take action on the additive. "Red Dye 3 is the lowest of the low-hanging fruit when it comes to toxic food dyes that the FDA should address."

Beginning in 2027, companies must remove the dye from their products. Imported foods sold in the United States must also remove the additive.

Although the dye is still used in hundreds of products, many companies have been switching to other food colourings, a move that accelerated after California in 2023 became the first state to ban Red Dye 3, along with three other food additives linked to disease. The dye has also been linked to health concerns for children.

First approved for use in food in 1907, Red Dye No. 3 was banned in cosmetics in 1990 by US regulators.

It is already banned for food use in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, with a notable exception being maraschino cherries.

The New York Times

DID YOU KNOW?

How fish detect colour and brightness

We see colour because photoreceptor cones in our eyes detect light waves corresponding to red, green, and blue, while dimness or brightness is detected by photoreceptor rods. Many non-mammalian vertebrates, like fish, are known to detect colour and brightness with the pineal gland, which is part of the brain.

An Osaka Metropolitan University research group has further elucidated how the pineal organs of fish do so. The study is published in the journal Science.

Previously, the research group led by Professor Akhisa Terakita and Professor Mitsumasa Koyanagi of the Graduate School of Science revealed that the pineal organ of bony fish detects colours using a mechanism different from their eyes. A pineal photoreceptor cell type containing a protein called parainopsin 1 (PPI) detects colour.

These PPI cells become active and inactive in proportion to the difference in wavelength of light, with longer waves for red and shorter ones for blue, for example.

This inactivation of PPI has been found necessary for colour detection, but the mechanism has not been discovered.

Using zebrafish, the team investigated arrestin proteins in the pineal gland involved in the inactivation of photoreceptor proteins such as PPI. Of the seven types of arrestins in zebrafish, the researchers found that Sagb and Arr3a play major roles with PPI.

Arr3a rapidly inactivates PPI when light is dim, while Sagb takes over inactivation when light intensity increases. The team found that the dual performance of this single photoreceptor depends on switching these two arrestins according to the light intensity.

"Multiple types of arrestins exist in a single cell. Our discovery suggests that the function of arrestins might be used differently depending on the strength of the stimulus, an important finding about these genes," Professor Koyanagi said.

Professor Terakita added, "The elucidation of the mechanism of colour discrimination by a single type of photoreceptor protein is expected to contribute to the realization of optogenetics, which uses parainopsin to control cells by the colour of light."

- Phys.org

THE ASIAN AGE

18 JANUARY 2025

Hindenburg shutdown raises a lot of questions

Nowhere in the world could the shutting shop of a short-seller have hogged headlines as it did in India. When Nathan Anderson, the founder of the American short-seller Hindenburg Research, announced his decision to wind up the activities of his investigative company, it triggered a celebration marked with vindication among the supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. On the other hand, the development led to bewilderment in the ranks of the Indian National Congress that, led by its MP Rahul Gandhi, used Hindenburg reports on some companies in the absence of its high-profile attack on the Adani Group and the Congress' decision to use this to attack Mr Modi. Hindenburg Research would have been just another short-seller that makes money by betting on a probable fall in the stock price of its target company.

Since it was established in 2017, Hindenburg has targeted 63 companies. Of them, nine companies have lost their entire market value. The net worth of 35 companies has halved after the publication of Hindenburg's reports. Of these, two were Indian — Bollywood movie production and distribution company Eros International, which was shut after the Hindenburg report, and the Adani Group, which made a smart recovery after an initial blip.

There is buzz that the incoming US administration led by Donald Trump could be investigating Hindenburg for selective targeting of companies, and links to China and investor-philanthropist George Soros

While Anderson attributed this move to shut his company to his intentions of focussing on his life beyond short-selling and his family, there is speculation that the incoming US administration led by President-elect Donald Trump could be investigating Hindenburg for selective targeting of companies, and his alleged links to China and another world-famous short-seller, the billionaire-philanthropist George Soros. Indian market regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has also been under the scrutiny of Hindenburg as one of the beneficiaries of its report had invested in Adani stocks through Indian stock exchanges.

Though Hindenburg claims that its investigative reports are fair and exposes corporate irregularities, the practice of going short on its target companies based on exclusive information through funds of its own and its affiliates raises ethical questions. A fall in share price reduces the value of the company and its shareholders' wealth, and may put other stresses on the company, including bankruptcy in extreme cases, and resulting job losses.

However, the investigators argue that they are beneficial to the long-term interests of the market because they engage in uncovering fraudulent and/or unscrupulous activities. They expose the rot in publicly listed companies through forensic accounting and other methods. This kind of investigation entails a great amount of expenditure, and there are no agencies or institutions that proactively try to find out irregularities in the companies, which ordinary people believe in. The investigators justify financial benefit occurring from their research by shorting on their target companies.

On the other hand, businesspersons have to navigate their businesses by satisfying the interests of various stakeholders — which could at times fall in grey areas. Unless some external entity points out these grey areas, regulators cannot fix them.

Safe at home? A wake-up call

The burglary attempt at Saif Ali Khan's duplex apartment in Mumbai and the events that followed as the actor bravely intervened to protect his son and household help may have sent a shiver down the spines of people. If the security of a luxury apartment complex in an upscale neighbourhood of Mumbai can be breached, imagine the state of fear among those who live in far less secure environments at night when the security detail is probably an untrained person just making a living.

The fact, however, is that cinema celebrities, who are perceived as rich people, may have greater reasons to secure their homes, both electronically and with personnel. Also, the incident may not have been a random walk-in so much as a targeted entry with an aim that only any suspects could reveal as the police interrogate them. Nothing has been ruled out yet, including a sinister gangland plot to target a well-known actor.

There cannot still be much to a predictable Opposition charge that this break-in reflects a breakdown of law and order in the state or in the Maximum City known for buzzing human activity well into the small hours when most people would only be resting after a daytime full of activity. The probe should reveal what the suspect had in mind when he accessed this actor's apartment after having said to have cased out the place in reconnaissance runs earlier.

Any state or country can offer people a secure environment in which people have no need to stealthily walk in on people at night in their residences with an intention to rob them. Even the humblest people will have, besides belongings they may believe precious, also some amount of jewellery and gold at homes that can be an easy target for burglars.

It is only the politician, with his bloated image of importance, who can command full scale security with armed guards. Everyone else must fend for themselves, which rich do on a bigger scale, but the rest can only bolt the door and hope to get their beauty sleep every night. The cinema celebrities are the ones who may have to worry more as they seem to have a way of attracting attention, some of it unwanted as in this break-in that led to serious physical harm to the celebrity.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani

NO THREAT TO OUR ALLIANCE... WE ARE FRIENDS ONLY AT NATIONAL LEVEL NOT AT STATE LEVEL



Gaza ceasefire can let US focus on China & Russia



K.C. Singh

The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor hinges on normalcy in West Asia. The nine million-strong Gulf diaspora and exports to the region as well as India's energy dependence on it make it vital.

The ceasefire agreement in the Gaza Strip comes as a surprise as historically outgoing US President Bill Clinton's Camp David summit between PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak failed in July 2000. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ignored the repeated American calls for a ceasefire since last May, when already the cost of civilian casualties had far exceeded tangible military gains. A number of factors coalesced for this outcome.

First, Israel has managed to optimise its security by decapitating the top leadership of both Hamas and Hezbollah, demoralising the latter's cadres, through exploding papers and thus creating a security vacuum in Syria that allowed a fringe Islamist Sunni group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), to seize power by overthrowing the regime headed by Bashar al-Assad, that had ruled for decades. In direct military confrontation with Iran, involving mutual missile attacks, Israel destroyed Iranian air defences and missile production plants. Thus, Israel had regained regional military dominance, including restoration of deterrence against foes.

Prime Minister Netanyahu suspected that President Donald Trump, in his second term beginning Monday, may indulge Israel less than during his previous incarnation, when he unconditionally shifted the US embassy to Jerusalem, recognised Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights and cut aid to the Palestinians.

Mr Trump resented Mr Netanyahu immediately congratulating President Joe Biden following his 2020 election victory, while Mr Trump was busy questioning it and inciting mobs to raid the US Capitol complex.

Furthermore, the Trumps have cosy business and financial ties with Gulf rulers, especially the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Steve Witkoff, Mr Trump's designated Middle East envoy, had some of these sovereign funds bail him out of a tangled Park Lane hotel deal in New York.

Finally, Mr Trump sponsored the Abraham Accords, signed on September 15, 2020, which normalised relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain. The Saudis resisted joining and sensibly held back until Israel presented a solution to the Palestinian problem.

Three years later, the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, followed by 15 months of Israeli massacre of civilians in Gaza, West Bank and Lebanon, have undermined those accords. Mr Netanyahu knows that President Trump may resile them to ensure President Jimmy Carter's 1979 Camp David Accords. A Nobel Prize could come what way wash the stains of indictment by a New York court and the leaked report about Mr Trump's culpability for the January 6, 2021 insurrection to stymie the peaceful transfer of power.

The current deal constitutes a 42-day truce. The exchange of hostages for prisoners and entry of 600 trucks carrying humanitarian assistance must occur in that constrained time-frame. The Israeli cabinet's delayed meeting reflects expected resistance from the governing coalition's far-right partners, especially finance minister Bezalel Smotrich and national security adviser Itamar Ben-Gvir, who called the deal a "surrender" to Hamas.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's image, which shattered after the October 7 Hamas attack, has recovered considerably after the Israeli success in decapitating the leadership of both Hamas and Hezbollah. The Assad

regime's ouster in Syria and weakened Iranian influence and diminished support for Shia militias, across West Asia, has enhanced his political standing. Mr Netanyahu must decide whether to side with his far-right coalition allies and reject the ceasefire or ignore them and endanger his government, resulting possibly in a fresh election.

If the ceasefire holds and even gets extended, with more if not all hostages released or their bodies transferred, then a new dawn is possible. But it is still an arduous journey to normalcy and a two-nation solution. Gaza also needs massive relief, rehabilitation and rebuilding of infrastructure and houses. President Trump would expect others to pay, especially the Gulf rulers with trillion-dollar sovereign funds. But Israel also needs to check or even roll back its expansion of the settlements in the occupied territories. Mr Netanyahu has always resisted a two-nation solution.

Purposely an Israeli election is necessary to gauge the public's opinion on these issues. These developments are important for India. The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor hinges on normalcy in West Asia. The nine-million-strong Indian diaspora in the Gulf and India's exports to the region as well as India's energy dependence on it makes peace and security in the Gulf and West Asia vital for India. After an initial pro-Israel stance, due to Hamas' terror attack, India reverted to its traditional stance demanding ceasefire, talks and a two-nation solution to the Palestinian issue. Iran remains an unpredictable factor, unless Mr Trump engages it.

Russia and China would also monitor the US moves as the Gaza ceasefire relieves America from a major strategic distraction. Without that, the US can divert full attention to handling Russia in Ukraine and China in the Indo-Pacific. This indicates the high stakes in the success or failure of the move to end the Gaza war and resolve the Israel-Palestine standoff.

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

LETTERS EXCLUSIVE CLUB

India has become the fourth nation in the world, after the US, Russia, and China, to dock two satellites for their space experiment, Spadex, which will enable it to control its two satellites, Chaser and Target, as a single object. The docking process will now make the following possible — launching multiple rockets to achieve common mission objectives like Chandrayaan-4 and Gaganyaan, helping to establish the Bharatiya Antariksh Station, facilitating manned flights in space and allowing astronauts to change vehicles and stay in space. It will also boost hopes for Venus orbiter, Mars lander and the colonisation of the Moon. The entire team needs to be applauded for bringing India into an exclusive club of nations.

R.S. Narula
Patiala

CHIP CURBS HIT INDIA

THE OUTGOING Biden administration in the US has proposed a framework to restrict the export of advanced computer chips, particularly GPUs used in AI development to maintain America's technological edge and prevent China from gaining dominance. While 20 key US allies will face no restrictions, others, including India, could see high-end GPU imports curtailed, potentially disrupting supply chains and affecting India's ambitious AI plans. India, which relies on imports for building computer capacity, lacks domestic chip fabrication capabilities.

Amarender Kumar
Hazarihagh

NO REPRIEVE

FORMER Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan was handed a 14-year prison sentence by a local court in a land corruption case related to the Al-Qadir Trust on Friday. The sentence in the case, the largest in terms of financial wrongdoing faced by Khan, was delivered by an anti-graft court in a prison in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, where Khan has been jailed since August 2023. Khan's political problems have increased with apparent neutrality from the Army.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

Farruk Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings

"If love breeds confusion
It means the lover is besotted
If it's stretched out like a string
It can easily get knotted
When love is just a wish
Or perhaps part of a dream
— And if it then becomes real
Will the reality redeem?"

— From Please, Please Don't Kick the Desk, by Bachchoo

Of Musk, Trump & Zuckerberg... and why I flip-flopped on NY resolutions

I never denied New Year resolutions, because in my experience they are as brittle as eggs flung at politicians or their facilitators. This year I made an exception. I read on my computer that Mark Zuckerberg, he of Facebook and Instagram, has decided to remove all inhibition to lies from his platforms, a process bureaucratically named "fact-checking". Zuckerberg has, with this announcement, followed Elon Musk, owner of and chief provocateur on the platforms which was once Twitter, which he renamed X. My conjecture was that Musk thought the word "Twitter" gives the impression of bird-song and carries the impression of equal insignificance, whereas "X" (bold capitals please) can stand for assertiveness, for a strong opinion and sometimes to disguise letters in four-letter words to make them acceptable in print.

When he acquired Jitter he announced the free posts won't be subject to fact-checking for truth or propriety. That in his book (book? Xers don't read, surely?) was censorship. He was the apostle of "free speech". Now Zuckerberg has followed him. I can only imagine, to junk the word "truth". Musk-rat — a species which swallows anything — and Zuckerberg have touted their moves to allow anything on their platforms. Do we all know where that could lead? The thought, gentle reader, was the trigger which sparked my non-resolution U-turn. I resolved never to write or read posts on X or Facebook or Instagram. I must admit, to avoid confusion, that I use Google and Safari and of course even contribute small amounts of money to Wikipedia, because these assist me in passing tedious hours in which I have in the past engaged in their whether hamburgers were invented in Hamburg or whether Frankfurters did in fact originate in Frankfurt. I didn't need to ask if "Bombay Aloo" was invented in Bombay because I knew the answer already. I shan't give you, gentle reader, the info I got about hamburgers and Frankfurters, but I can tell you that I once fazed and maybe confused Google by asking it (or must one call it "they" now?) what the connection between Sir Walter Raleigh and masala dosa was? Google was perplexed. @Ode-Af-zero?

The reason for my resolution should surely be evident. Musk-rat, twice daily at the least, posts a lot of

reactionary, provocative, lying, self-centred bulshite at great length on X. I believe a couple of well-intellectually-challenged individuals around the world share his contentions that Britain and parts of Europe are on the brink of, or even in the throes of, civil war. These same millions read Musk-rat's abuse of a conscientious, courageous and sensible British MP, Jess Phillips, calling her a "rape genocide apologist". Phillips has, throughout her political career, championed women's rights and assisted, as best can be done, the female victims of grooming gangs. No doubt some of Ratty's "followers" will mark the infantile abusive post with "like" — the word that American morose teenagers use to punctuate their phrases — interruptions for "like" drawing "like" ominous "like" breaths? Rich-ratty, not the sharpest tool in the kit, doesn't seem to have noted that his touted cleaver, the victims of grooming gangs is not quite consistent with allowing groomers, notorious for using the social media to achieve their criminal aims, onto his X platform unchecked — all in the cause of what he labels "free speech". Groomers, fraudsters, paedophiles, conspiracy theorists, hate provocateurs, deniers of life-saving science, maniacs who threaten the annexation to the US of Danish and Panamanian territory... all welcome to Muskworld X.

It should be quite clear to the world by now that platforms such as X allow thoughtless provocative

musings and, far from offering a voice to the voiceless, act as echo-chambers for maliciousness. Of course, not all of it. Most of what passes on these platforms is harmless rubbish about what one ate for breakfast or where one visited with "selfie" photographs. But some of it is not. I have, as a result of an idiot, signing nothing. Or, as my friend V.S. used to say, "a form of idleness". One exception to my resolution to avoid expressive platforms is because I don't listen to many, believe me, but I am confident that they don't force themselves on me. I have to choose to listen and I choose to listen to the one called The Rest is History, presented by Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook. Fascinating, whatever they pick on. I first encountered Tom Holland through his books on the Achaemenid and Sassanid empires of Persia. I admired him for correcting the Greek-led and European lying myths about the "barbarism" of the suicidal Spartans at Thermopylae and charting the historical truth about Zoroastrian Persia. Oh OK, perhaps another reason for my not banning podcasts is because I've been variously approached to read my English translations of Rumi and Hafiz as a podcast series and have even, perhaps incredibly, been invited to present episodes from my autobiography Fragments Against My Ruin as podcast episodes. So long live podcasts — vehicles of supreme creativity and... err... free speech?

TELANGANA



Green light to inclusivity: G. Sarala, a transgender person who was recently recruited by Hyderabad police as traffic assistant, regulating vehicular flow on a busy stretch in Hyderabad. She is one of the 44 transgender persons inducted as traffic assistants in December 2024 — a groundbreaking initiative by the Telangana government to foster inclusivity and formally recognise the transgender community's contribution to society. NAGARA GORLA

A signal of change

Once seen as outcasts to begging at traffic junctions, a group of transgender persons have now redefined their role in society by taking on the role of traffic assistants with the Hyderabad city police.

Lavpreet Kaur chronicles their journey of surviving stigma and standing proudly in uniforms, paving the way for inclusivity and dignity in public service

Around 4.30 a.m., while most of the world is still asleep, G. Kavi Raju begins a journey that is both physical and symbolic. The 36-year-old, newly appointed traffic assistant with the Telangana State Police, boards a bus from Siddipet district, travelling nearly 100 kilometres to Marredpally Traffic Police Station in Hyderabad. By the time the city stirs to life, Raju is already at his post, directing the chaos of Jubilee Bus Station (JBS) with a firm hand and a proud smile.

Clad in a crisp white shirt, khaki pants and a police cap, Raju beams with pride, something that fuels him through his two-hour daily commute. "It is a long commute, but it gives me time to rest and recharge a bit and allows me to see my fellow villagers gawking with awe as I walk past them. I look forward to moving to the city, and aim to serve better," he shares.

Raju is one of the 44 transgender persons who were inducted as traffic assistants in December 2024 — a groundbreaking initiative by the Telangana government to foster inclusivity and formally recognise the transgender community's contribution to society.

The uniform and the responsibilities it brings with it have given them more than a job — it is a fresh start, a second chance at life where they embrace their identities with pride.

Sharing their story of transformation, they speak of the shift from being social outcasts to figures of authority and respect on the streets. "For the first time, strangers smiled at us and greeted us on new year," they say, reflecting on how life has changed in ways they once thought unimaginable.

A new beginning

At opposite ends of the traffic signal at the bustling JBS junction, just 500 metres apart, Raju and his colleague J. Shiva Ram, 30, command attention and respect from people. Commuters follow their instructions diligently, occasionally offering a nod or a smile of reassurance.

For Shiva Ram, the uniform symbolises a hard-won freedom. Once placed under house-arrest and nearly forced into marrying an older man, he now finds solace and purpose in his role. Reflecting on the darker days, he recalls a time when despair nearly consumed him. "As Sabitha Rani then, I was told the proposal had come because of how I looked and dressed. When I refused, my father thrashed me. Two months later, he passed away, leaving me to shoulder the entire family's responsibility," Shiva Ram shares.

While juggling a dual degree in Engineering and Arts, Shiva Ram also worked as a manager at an organic foods company in Hyderabad. During that time, he attempted the Sub-Inspector and Constable exams four times, narrowly missing the mark each time.

"Even if I had passed, I wouldn't have been known as J. Shiva Ram today. Now, hearing my colleagues call me by this name is the highest

form of respect I could have ever asked for," he says with a smile.

Despite significant physical changes, Shiva Ram lived in fear of being abandoned by his family, friends, and society, unable to truly embrace his identity until 2023. That year marked a turning point. The news of his appointment as a traffic assistant in Marredpally was met with pride and acceptance by his mother and siblings, who reside in Mancherla. Their support extended further when he shared his plans to live life on his own terms.

Meanwhile, for Sania, 26, a trans-woman now deployed in Hyderabad's Tolichowki area, life has truly come a full circle. Over the past decade, she did everything she could to survive — working as a domestic help, stitching clothes, and even selling jowar rotis. However, every time she tried to move ahead, life pushed her back, forcing her to seek alms at traffic intersections. "Today, I am in police uniform, directing traffic at one of the spots where I once begged. I couldn't be happier," she shares, the pride in her voice unmistakable.

A native of Mahabubnagar, Sania reflects on a life of untapped potential, where her skills and determination were overshadowed by a lack of opportunities. She vividly remembers the first time she donned her uniform: "From being looked down upon, shooed away and dismissed as an outsider to being respected and smiled at — it's a wonderful feeling."

Hyderabad-based transgender activist Vyjayanthi Vasanta Mogli has led the initiative as a game-changer, empowering the transgender community to envision lives beyond the confines of traditional livelihoods like begging, sex work, or seeking donations on auspicious occasions.

"Until now, they did not have the ability to even see themselves in any other role beyond the stereotypes that society imposed on them. But this initiative has sparked hope. More individuals from the community are now aspiring to join the services. They are encouraged to change their lives," says Mogli.

Another trans rights activist Rachana Mudraya hopes this groundbreaking initiative will expand into other departments of Telangana government. "It took almost a decade for the community to break the stigma of being labelled a 'fake transgender'. If someone identifies as a trans person, it's not up for debate. We have come a long way, and we are optimistic about the success of this pilot project. Many more from the community are already motivated to join the force," she says.

Rachana adds that they plan to give the initiative at least six months before flagging any challenges or concerns.

Hyderabad Commissioner of Police C.V. Anand emphasises the need to integrate the transgender community into mainstream society rather than looking down on them as someone different. "They have faced a lot of exclusion and

ostracisation since childhood, leaving them with limited options like prostitution, begging and crime. This initiative is an opportunity for them to break out of that cycle, prove their capabilities, and show that they can thrive in other professions," he says, expressing hope that the project's success would set a precedent for other States to replicate.

Inspector of Marredpally Traffic Police, J. Bhaskar says that the city's traffic cops were sensitised to ensure a smooth induction, onboarding, training and work environment for new recruits from the community. "The entire police station staff is regularly trained to treat our transgender counterparts with utmost respect and equality. It has been over a week since they joined, and they have already adapted well to the work. Their obedience and diligence are commendable," he says.

According to traffic police officials, the names of the recruits have been added to the payroll. The pay scale will range from ₹26,000 to ₹30,000 per month, on par with Home Guards.

Commissioner Anand explains that the traffic assistants have been appointed on a six-month pilot basis, similar to the terms for Home Guards. "They are entitled to benefits such as medical treatment at our police dispensary and access to small loans or grants from the Home Guard welfare fund. Based on the outcomes, further expansion of the programme will be considered by June 2025," he adds.

Earning their first paycheck

K. Srivalli, 24, is looking forward to buying her first two-wheeler to commute between Jeedimetla and Mahankali, where she has been posted. "This will be the first paycheck of my life, and it feels special. I am looking at two-wheeler options now, and based on how much I can save from my salary, I will buy the one I like," she shares with excitement.

The journey from being Rajashekhar to becoming Srivalli has been one rife with challenges and self-discovery. A native of Khammam, Srivalli moved to Hyderabad at the age of 14 and underwent her gender-affirming surgery. Since then, she has done everything, from working as a stringer for a local news channel to begging at traffic signals for survival.

"My parents have passed away, but even when they were alive, they never supported me. I was thrashed and even branded with a hot knife. Today, the same people who abandoned me and never checked on me are now calling me up to congratulate me," she says.

Srivalli has her sights set on becoming a Sub-Inspector with the Telangana Police for which she has enrolled in an undergraduate programme at Dr. Ambedkar Open University in Hyderabad. "I also plan to join coaching classes to prepare for the examination," she says.

For Nitya, 30, a native of Karimnagar, her first salary holds a special purpose — she has pledged to give it entirely to her parents, Lingaiah and Lakshmi.

"My entire family, along with the village sarpanch, came to Hyderabad to congratulate me during my onboarding. Getting a job in the police department is not easy, even for regular people.

For the government to recognise us and give us this opportunity is overwhelming," she says, her voice filled with gratitude.

Asked about how commuters treat them, Nitya reflects on the hardships her community has endured, stating that even if someone reacts angrily, they simply brush it off with grace. "However, the response we have received has been overwhelming. People respect the uniform and follow our instructions, often with a sense of reverence. This is all very new to us," she adds.

Sania shares that she plans to set aside ₹10,000 from her first paycheck to throw a party for her friends and well-wishers who stood by her through thick and thin.

Breaking free from fear

At 25, G. Sarala manages traffic at the bustling Masab Tank junction in Hyderabad, but she carries with her a constant worry — the fear of another attack from her own family.

Having left home at the age of 16, Sarala completed her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at a well-known college in Hyderabad before working as a helper at a medical centre. "During that time, my family took me back home thrice and tried to force me into a 'boy cut' hairstyle. I was physically assaulted and even admitted to a rehabilitation centre, but each time, I managed to return to Hyderabad," she recounts.

Asked if her parents knew about her new job, she says with a sigh, "No matter what I do, they will never accept me for who I am."

For 25-year-old Ishaan, the struggles were uniquely painful. After being abandoned by his partner, who he had eloped with, disowned by his family, and rejected by multiple employers, he now manages traffic flow at the Tilak Nagar signal in Amberpet. "After my parents passed away, I lived with my paternal aunt," he shares.

"I used to feel physically sick and itchy whenever I was forced to wear women's clothes. I would mentally count the seconds until I could get out of them. My aunt didn't take this well and insisted that I should only shop for women's clothing. I don't remember her buying me anything new after that," Ishaan recalls.

Although his aunt occasionally checks on him, Ishaan still receives no support or acceptance from his family. "They continue to treat me like a woman, especially in public settings, which makes me extremely uncomfortable. Now, all I do is just let go," he says.

Training and onboarding

In September, the Telangana government launched India's first-ever transgender-specific government recruitment and social welfare programme, followed by an elaborate selection process.

Of the 58 candidates who participated, 44 — 29 transgender women and 15 transgender men — were selected. On December 6 last year, Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy handed over enrolment papers to 39 individuals who officially joined the services.

Following a two-week training at the Traffic Training Institute in Goshamahal, which included physical training, techniques for managing traffic, and addressing various traffic-related challenges, the new recruits were inducted as traffic assistants.

They are now serving across 20 traffic police stations in Hyderabad, including Amberpet, Bahadurpura, Banjara Hills, Begumpet, Bowenpally, Chandrayangutta, Chikkadpally, Chilkalguda, Jubilee Hills, Kacheeguda, Langar Houz, Mahankali, Malakpet, Marredpally, Nalakunta, Panjagutta, SR Nagar, Santosh Nagar, Trimulgherry, and Tolichowki.



FIRST COLUMN

OUR ACTIONS
SHAPE OUR LIVES

Karmaphalas—the results of our actions—are an undeniable force shaping our lives



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

We all should know about karmaphalas. These are the results of both good and bad karma (acts) done by us in the past with our minds, words and bodies. I have mentioned minds separately from bodies because karmas done by the mind are subtle. And they can be quite lethal. What is a mental disease? You have guessed right; it is caused by our minds.

Similarly, words are no less dangerous. Yes, words can be very deadly, as experienced by all of us, when we choose to speak foolishly. And these bad karmaphalas can manifest at any age but they hurt the most in old age when we are weak and not left with many options.

This is when a person laments about his bad luck and there are not many sympathisers. Aren't we written off as we age? This article describes what we can do about it. We are not so helpless after all. The first step is to stop doing all bad acts right from this moment. And we know what these are. Goodness has to increase in us by doing all acts of goodness.

We must speak pleasantly; we should see goodness programmes; we should stick to foods in goodness; and so on. What this will do is protect us from the ill effects of our present acts, to begin with. Controller mental must be curbed; one must become realistic because there is only one controller and that is God. If it wasn't so we will obtain whatever we desire, which hardly even happens.



pens. The ego must be curbed because there is only one superiority, which is God. All our lives we try to prove our superiority and what happens? We become very unpolished with others, especially with our family members, whom we desperately need in our old age. Spiritual practices must be started in the right earnest. They will make a lot of sense if we realise that we are souls, parts of God.

Shouldn't parts be dependent on the whole? Should we not be respectful towards God, just like a son is supposed to be towards his father? Don't we thank others when they do us some favour? God is forever doing us many favours. To begin with, He has provided all essentials free like the light of the sun, water, air containing oxygen, etc. God has to help ultimately because fate cannot be changed by anyone else. He also doesn't, but helps to deal with bad karmaphalas; we won't end up badly. (9.31) This is a very big 'kripa' but more important is His mercy in protecting us from our good karmaphalas, when we are most likely to hurt ourselves badly. Because it is hard to tolerate good times. And God and only God can help in improving our nature, which is also part of our fate. Doesn't our nature let us down time and again? We see people destroying themselves by angry acts, lusty behaviour, envious attitudes, etc. God protects us from foolish acts, if we remain in His shelter. I am very scared about the prospect of ill fate in my old age when I am already weak. God has to protect me.

I am not taking any chances; I have taken God's shelter. Only God is the one who can help, being the owner and controller. God can intervene and God does for His devotees. (The Bhagavad-Gita 18.58) Wouldn't this make us peaceful? It has made me gradually as my connection with God is getting strengthened by my spiritual practices. Please don't take chances.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

Reverse brain drain: A game-changer for growth



WASEEM JAVED

By harnessing the knowledge, networks and expertise of these returnees, India is laying the foundation for a resilient and competitive economy

India has witnessed a mass exodus of talent for decades, as highly skilled professionals and students left the country in search of better opportunities abroad. This phenomenon, known as 'brain drain', has historically deprived the country of its brightest minds. However, the tide is reversing, with individuals returning to their home country, as seen in the recent past. With acquired skills and rich experience, the 'reverse brain drain' is increasingly becoming a powerful force in India's economic growth and development. This comes against the backdrop of India's fast-paced economic growth, combined with government initiatives and an evolving entrepreneurial ecosystem that has made the country an attractive destination for global talent, including those who once left its shores. This shift is not about just people coming back; it's about knowledge transfer, innovation, and global networks essential to building a competitive and resilient economy.

Economic and Entrepreneurial Opportunities Driving Return

In most cases, what has caused this reverse brain drain is the prospect of available opportunities in India. The growth pattern of India as a country with an upward economic trajectory brings with it demand for science, technology, and innovation skills from professionals in their fields.

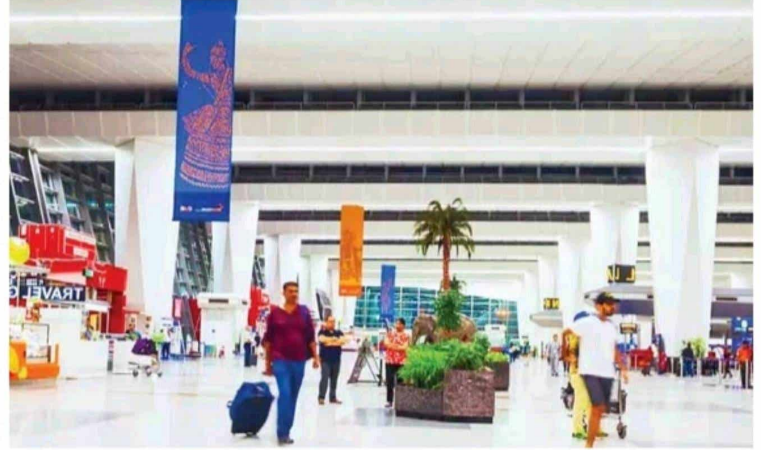
Returnees easily get absorbed in suitable roles since their international experience puts them on top of the sought-after candidates at startups, large multinational companies, and research centres. Government initiatives like Make in India, Startup India, and Atmanirbhar Bharat have further made India more attractive. These initiatives encourage entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and innovation by offering financial incentives, regulatory support, and access to infrastructure. Thus, many Indian professionals who had earlier worked in global hubs such as Silicon Valley are returning to start their startups or take up leadership roles in Indian enterprises.

For example, several Indian entrepreneurs who have returned from the United States or the United Kingdom are at the helm of billion-dollar startups in India today. They cut across fintech, e-commerce, health tech, and renewable energy among other sectors that create jobs and spur economic growth. Their global networks and access to venture capital give them a competitive edge that will allow them to scale their businesses quickly and effectively.

The Role of Overseas Education in Shaping Talent

Education in foreign lands serves as the core of the reverse brain drain. In 2024, more than 13.35 lakh students from India pursued education abroad, of which the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, and Germany were among the top destinations. In general, courses in engineering, business management, medicine, and technology attract Indian students with promising career avenues. This international education equips students with advanced knowledge, technical skills, and a global perspective. Many also gain valuable work experience abroad before deciding to return to India.

A key facilitator in this journey has been the rise of AI-powered consultancy plat-



GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES LIKE MAKE IN INDIA, STARTUP INDIA, AND ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT HAVE FURTHER MADE INDIA MORE ATTRACTIVE. THESE INITIATIVES ENCOURAGE ENTREPRENEURSHIP, SELF-RELIANCE, AND INNOVATION BY OFFERING FINANCIAL INCENTIVES, REGULATORY SUPPORT AND ACCESS TO INFRASTRUCTURE

forms that streamline the process of studying abroad. These platforms help students identify the best courses, universities, and countries based on their aspirations and career goals.

They also help with visa processes, and education loans, and even offer post-admission help, so everything goes off smoothly. These consultancies not only empower students in terms of succeeding abroad but also lay the groundwork for their potential contributions upon returning to India while bridging the gap between students and global education systems.

Benefits of Reverse Brain Drain for India

The reverse brain drain is an economy-changing force for India, bringing skilled professionals back to drive progress across sectors. In the case of technology, returnees provide cutting-edge expertise in areas like artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and clean energy, which ensure that India is not left behind globally.

The knowledge that these returnees provide creates technological advances that benefit both industries and society. Entrepreneurship and innovation also pick up pace as returnees start new ventures, create jobs, and develop innovative products and services that address local and global challenges. This not only increases employment but also makes India a creative solutions hub.

Furthermore, these professionals enhance scientific collaboration by connecting Indian institutions with international research networks, thereby facilitating the exchange of ideas and resources in areas such as healthcare and renewable energy. The economic impact is equally strong as the

reverse brain drain strengthens productivity, draws in foreign investment, and propels GDP growth.

Key Challenges and the Way Forward

Although reverse brain drain promises to boost Indian growth immensely, bureaucratic red tape, infrastructural inadequacies, and differing work environments in India versus the developed world will still prevent most professionals from coming back. This will only come true when registration procedures, tax regimes, and the regime for intellectual property become more simplified, paving the way for returnees to establish enterprises or meaningfully contribute to organizations.

To tap into returning talent effectively, India must improve its infrastructure: world-class research facilities, modern educational institutions, and strong health care. More competitive incentives to attract international talent include tax breaks, grants for research, and easier access to funding. Only then will the reverse brain drain convert into practical input toward the nation's economic growth and innovation.

Government Initiatives and Policy Support

The Indian government has been proactively capitalising on reverse brain drain. By setting up innovation hubs, funding startup companies, and collaborating with world-class research institutes, the country is attracting much-needed talent as well as fostering innovation. Many countries have implemented policies and incentives to encourage skilled professionals to return to their home countries. For example, Taiwan created the Hsinchu Science Park and offered tax cuts to encourage the development of high-tech industries. Such poli-

cies not only encourage the return of skilled professionals but also provide them with a platform to flourish.

The Global Context and Its Implications

Interestingly, reverse brain drain is not an Indian phenomenon alone. Developed countries like the United States and the United Kingdom are losing talent due to restrictive immigration policies and limited opportunities for career advancement. For example, America's flawed immigration policies have inadvertently driven away skilled professionals who are now contributing to India's growth. This shift points to a wider paradigm wherein developing countries are transformational centres of innovation and economic activity. It could also help India emerge as a global leader in sectors ranging from technology to healthcare.

A Bright Future for Reverse Brain Drain

The reverse brain drain represents a new paradigm in India's journey to become a global economic superpower. In this new scenario, talent can be an asset to the country by nurturing innovation and fostering collaboration. With government support, private sector participation, and an emphasis on developing world-class infrastructure, the country is poised to turn reverse brain drain into a sustained growth driver.

In doing so, this movement is not only for India but reshapes the global talent landscape with a new reality of importance— inclusive and dynamic economies in a more integrated and interconnected world.

(The writer is the founder and CEO of EduVib; views are personal)

Andhra Pradesh's journey towards zero hunger and inclusive education

The Dokka Seethamma Mid-Day Meal scheme is a testament to the State's commitment to inclusivity and reforming the education system

Since Independence, food security has been a significant concern in India. Despite notable progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: Zero Hunger, India still grapples with the challenge of undernutrition.

According to a United Nations report, the country accounts for nearly 195 million undernourished individuals, with children constituting 43 per cent of this population. Various initiatives, such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the PM Poshan Mid-Day Meal scheme, have been implemented to address this pressing issue.

Historical Roots of Mid-Day Meal Schemes

The origins of the Mid-Day Meal scheme in India can be

traced back to the colonial era. In 1925, the Madras Presidency proposed the first-ever Mid-Day Meal initiative for underprivileged children. Tamil Nadu became the first state to implement this idea, with Sourashtra Boys Higher Secondary School in Madurai serving meals to children in 1955.

By the 1980s, this programme gained widespread acceptance, particularly with the introduction of the 'Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme' by Tamil Nadu's then Chief Minister, M G Ramachandran. This initiative aimed to provide food to 6.8 million malnourished children in the state. Over the years, the programme has demonstrated the strong correlation between nutritious meals and improved educa-



T V KATTIMANI

tion. For children in tribal and socio-economically disadvantaged communities, the scheme has proven to be a lifeline. Many of these children, previously engaged in household activities or income generation due to food insecurity, could now attend school and pursue their right to education. The programme also had a transformative impact on children from Socio-

Economic Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, De-notified Tribes, Nomadic Tribes, and girl children.

Dokka Seethamma Mid-Day Meal Scheme

In a significant step forward, the Andhra Pradesh government recently launched the 'Dokka Seethamma Mid-Day Meal Scheme'. This initiative, named after Dokka Seethamma—referred to as Apara Annapurna—provides free meals to students in junior colleges across the state. Seethamma, born in 1841 in Mandapet village, was renowned for her compassion and dedication to serving the needy. Despite limited formal education, she imbued strong moral values through



stories and songs from her childhood. Along with her husband, Dokka Joganna, she provided food and shelter to travellers and disaster-stricken communities near the Godavari River. Her legacy of humanitarian service remains a beacon of inclusivity and maternal love. The Dokka Seethamma scheme is the first of its kind in India, targeting intermediate students. Benefiting 148,419 students across 475 government junior colleges in Andhra Pradesh, the pro-

gramme aims to reduce dropout rates, enhance academic focus, and improve overall student health. By lessening the financial burden on low-income families, the initiative also promotes greater equity in education. It sets a model for other states to emulate, addressing hunger while fostering a nurturing environment for academic and personal growth.

Complementary Initiatives for Inclusivity

In addition to the Dokka Seethamma scheme, Andhra Pradesh has revived the 'Anna Canteens' initiative. This programme offers wholesome meals at just Rs 5 to economically disadvantaged individuals, significantly alleviating hunger and improving living standards. By ensuring affordable

access to food, the state aims to bridge socioeconomic disparities and support marginalised communities. For tribal students, particularly girls, the Dokka Seethamma scheme has been a game-changer. Tribal communities often face acute food insecurity due to geographical remoteness and limited resources. Free nutritious meals enable tribal children to focus on their education instead of household chores or income generation. The scheme also addresses educational inequity by encouraging families to prioritise their children's schooling. For tribal girls, the program has a transformative impact. Social and financial pressures often force girls to leave school prematurely, but free meals reduce fam-

ily burdens and promote their continued education.

A Vision for a Better Future

The Mid-Day Meal scheme and similar initiatives signify more than just food distribution—they represent a commitment to empowering the marginalised and uplifting the underprivileged. These programs not only ensure access to nutritious meals but also encourage higher education, better living standards, and healthier lifestyles. By fostering cooperation among teachers, students, and staff, the scheme revives the ancient 'Gurukula' system of holistic education, emphasising both mental and physical wellbeing.

(The writer is Vice Chancellor of Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh; views are personal)

HNIs, Buy-Sell More In a Mature Art Mkt

More non-state institutions to trade

"The Art of India 2025" that is on till tomorrow at Delhi's India Habitat Centre, and the 4-day India Art Fair 2025 that commences on Feb 6 at the Capital's NSIC Exhibition Grounds, both point to a burgeoning art scene in Delhi in particular, and in India in general. The Indian art market has, indeed, been busy with more money chasing works of top artists. Art is an established investment avenue abroad. But despite growing demand — and quality supply — the market here is yet to move much beyond infancy. Price signals usually do not travel beyond the top tier, affecting the supply response from the broader market. Of course, art differs from other goods in how value is determined. The social value of owning a piece of art and financial value of holding on to it should have a bearing on its artistic value. This is hard to achieve in mature art markets, and pretty much impossible when interest in art, either socially or financially, is tepid.

The supply response in art is unusual because of the celebrity phenomenon, which ensures higher turnover through volume rather than the price. Since there is an element of serendipity in acquiring star status, there is usually an excess supply of art at any given point of time. Broadening the pool of buyers improves discoverability in the art market. This places a bigger premium on the social value of owning art. Creation and possession of art are essentially social activities, affecting the individual's interaction with the collective.

Whatever the reason — social, financial or artistic — art ownership is a function of income. The process can be speeded up by an efficient market that facilitates trade. A critical mass of buyers brings more art into the marketplace, so the process is accretive. Part of the reason for India's slow progress in developing a market for art is state sponsorship of culture. With the right institutions in place, the market can deliver better outcomes. This is particularly true of traditional art, where an overarching role of the state has restricted market forces.

Goodbye, Joe, He Gotta Go, Me-O My-O

Joe Biden will end his time in office this weekend much like he began: with a slew of far-reaching executive actions geared to protect American traditions and institutions. This marks a stark difference between him and the man who preceded and now succeeds him. The radical difference in their world views notwithstanding, there are continuities between the 45th and 46th Potus that will persist under the 47th.

As his first act as president, Biden may have signed the US' return to the Paris Agreement on his first day in office, but did little to undo Trump's approach to another multilateral body — WTO. Trump 1.0 had blocked all appointments to the WTO appellate body, rendering the multilateral trade body incapable of adjudicating disputes. Despite four years in the White House and an avowed commitment to multilateralism, Biden made no effort to revive it. Another area of 'let's keep things going as they are' is China. The outgoing prez did not undo the 'Trump tariffs'. And Trump 2.0 will likely pick up the Biden administration practice — tough talk on tariffs while engaging China in some areas of 'common interest' (read: advantageous to US supremacy). This is especially expected given Elon Musk's status as 'presidential CEO' and Tesla's commercial interests in China. On Iran and Israel, there will be more continuity than divergence — the rhetoric probably going more 'orange'. Engagement with Quad should continue, as will the relationship with India, the general tenor of the latter remaining unchanged, but with alteration in the details, pace and optics.

Biden's departure from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue may seem to herald a complete break under his successor. But the truth is likely to be less radical. At least on the non-domestic front.

JUST IN JEST

Sunita Williams stepping out of her 'tin can' must have been, um, liberating

Walking Over to the Balcony... in Space

When US astronaut Sunita Williams radioed down to NASA earlier this week, "I'm coming out," it could have sounded like she was stepping out for a walk in the park. Or it may have sounded like the usual chat-between-colleagues — "Hey, wait, let's go out for a coffee." But this wasn't either of that. It was Williams' first outing outside the 'tin can' since arriving at the International Space Station more than seven months ago. She and Butch Wilmore were initially meant to be there for just a week aboard Boeing's shiny new Starliner capsule. But, then, well, things didn't go exactly as planned. So, the duo is still floating up there. A spacewalk was as much of an outing she could get now. One can only imagine how Williams must have felt, swapping the ISS for a bit of overcast outdoor repair work, all while soaring 320 km above Turkmenistan. She hasn't exactly described the feeling yet. But we suppose it would be similar to how all of us feel when we finally ventured out of our homes after the Covid lockdown. Except with a bit more space junk, and zero chance of bumping into neighbours and their small talk. Plus, let's face it, floating weightlessly while fixing things must feel slightly more accomplished than spending an entire day troubleshooting your Wi-Fi. For Williams, of course, it could have been just stepping out to the balcony.

EYES WIDE SHUT

Conspiracy theories about the US deep state destabilising India are bunkum

It's the 'Foreign Hand' Again!



Neeraj Kaushal

New York: Is America's deep state out to destabilise India? The question is so hot that it deserves an outright dismissal. Yet, the media is rife with conspiracy theories. A critical BBC documentary a video on sexual violence against women in Manipur, the new shut down Hindenburg Research's report against the Adani Group, the farmers' agitation, the US SEC's charge sheet on the Adani Group, even the ousting of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh — all are blamed on the deep state that is allegedly conspiring to destabilise India. In the name of nationalism, we are told, we must not pay any attention to any criticism.

These conspiracy theories point to a highly vulnerable national psyche, uncharacteristic of a country that is an emerging regional power and aspiring to become a developed nation. We must grow up.

In an earlier era, the deep state was the 'foreign hand'. In India, Gandhi branded her critics during the Emergency era as CIA agents. She even blamed her defeat after the Emergency to foreign forces. Rajiv Gandhi, when faced with bribery charges, deflected the focus by evoking references to an invisible 'foreign hand' that he alleged was trying to stall India's development.

Having derided Congress leaders' constant references to the 'foreign hand', BJP now wants us to believe that it's real and active

Identifying UFOs

To the foreign hand, BJP now wants us to believe that it is real and active. Perhaps BJP would like us to thank the foreign hand — not Indian voters — for destabilising India Gandhi and ending her Emergency.

These references to the deep state undermine BJP's achievements in building relations with the US. Indeed, actual instances of cooperation between India and the US show how shallow the conspiracy theories are. The fact is the US prefers a stronger India to check the influence of China in Asia.

Since the Modi government came to power in 2014, the two countries have signed multiple agreements to strengthen defence cooperation. These include: Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) — agreement to transfer sensitive technologies and for the joint research and technology of advanced military equipment.

In the 2022 border clash with China in Arunachal Pradesh, the US provided real-time evidence to the Indian military on the Chinese positions and forces. This averted the massive

Damage of similar previous incursions

Importantly, it led the Chinese to retreat. 'Defence cooperation between the United States and India is creating real challenges for China's national security,' says Chunhao Lei of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations.

Trade between the two countries has increased since 2014 and is close to \$200 bn. Indians are the richest ethnic group in the US, and their presence in high administrative and political positions in the US government has been substantial and growing. Joe Biden has 130 Indian-Americans in his administration. In his first term, Trump had over 100 Indian-Americans.

From the appointments that he has announced so far, his second term appears to be no different. CEOs and COOs of some of the top American companies, US companies have a huge and rising presence in India. In short, the political and economic environment in the US is in support of strengthening ties bet-

These conspiracy theories point to a highly vulnerable national psyche

uncharacteristic of an emerging regional power and aspiring developed nation

unpopular authoritarian leader. The Bangladesh student movement against the hiring process, moving beyond the narrow lens of GPAs and technical test scores.

Tap the potential. Reforming campus placements isn't just about easing student stress. It's also about creating a system that values human potential over numbers. Institutions and employers must work together to design a placement ecosystem that nurtures creativity, resilience and long-term success.

Imagine a future where students graduate not with dread but with confidence, equipped to tackle challenges and pursue meaningful careers. Where companies welcome a workforce that is not only skilled but also aligned with their values. And where society fosters a generation of innovators, dreamers and doers.

It's time to break the chains of the current placement process and reimagine what success truly means. For the sake of our students, institutions and future, let's build a better way forward.

The writer is professor of social policy, Columbia University, US

Redefine Campus-Company Success



Janhavi Rane & Surya H K

Each year, India's brightest minds enter higher education with dreams of success and fulfilment. Yet, by the time they graduate, many are left burnt out, anxious and disillusioned. Why? The relentless pressure of competitive placements has turned education into a rat race, where high-paying offers and placement percentages eclipse personal growth and well-being.

According to a 2022 survey by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), nearly 80% of students experience stress during the placement season. ITs and IIMs are not immune. Placements have become less about matching talent with opportunity and more about chasing sky-high salaries to boost institutional rankings.

As a result, students often compromise their long-term aspirations to secure roles that meet societal expectations. Companies, too, struggle to find candidates who align with their needs, leading to high attrition rates and a workforce that often feels dis-

connected from organisational values

Placement season is synonymous with anxiety and burnout. While some colleges have taken steps to provide counselling services, these efforts remain insufficient. The stigma surrounding mental health, coupled with the sheer scale of the problem, often leaves students to navigate this pressure alone. Without systemic intervention, this cycle will only perpetuate.

The current placement ecosystem prioritises salaries and placement percentages over meaningful career trajectories. Here's how this approach fails students and companies alike:

Mismatched expectations: Many students accept roles that do not align with their long-term goals, driven by societal pressure rather than genuine interest.

Institutional incentives: Colleges focus on maximising placement statistics to climb rankings, sidelining questions about career satisfaction and sustainability.

Employer challenges: Companies face difficulties in identifying and retaining talent, as the high-pressure environment of placements often results in suboptimal matches.

This flawed system erodes student well-being, compromises the quality of talent entering the workforce, and leaves employers dissatisfied. It's time to move beyond quick fixes and address the root causes.

Redefine success: Institutions must shift the narrative from 'LPA's



Cross connections

— lakhs per annum — to 'life', emphasising job satisfaction, growth potential and alignment with personal values.

Alumni mentorship programs can help students identify roles that fit their unique strengths and aspirations.

Bridge the gap: Educational institutions need to collaborate with industries to align curricula with market needs. Internships should be reframed as opportunities for exploration rather than mere stepping stones to job offers.

Programmes like the Pradhan Mantri Internship Scheme, which aims to create 1 crore internships over five years, can play a pivotal role in providing students with real-world experience.

Normalise alternative careers: From entrepreneurship to creative arts, students should feel empowered to pursue non-traditional paths. Placement cells can promote diverse pathways by celebrating alumni success stories and offering resources for students interested in research, public service or starting their own ventures.

Prioritise mental health: Colleges must invest in accessible, year-round mental health services. In-

tegrating stress management and

resilience workshops into the curriculum can equip students to handle the pressures of career planning.

Alumni mentorship programs can also provide invaluable emotional and professional guidance.

Revamp hiring Companies and institutions should jointly develop holistic evaluation processes. Behavioural assessments, psychometric tests and problem-solving exercises can ensure a fairer and more informed hiring process, moving beyond the narrow lens of GPAs and technical test scores.

Tap the potential. Reforming campus placements isn't just about easing student stress. It's also about creating a system that values human potential over numbers. Institutions and employers must work together to design a placement ecosystem that nurtures creativity, resilience and long-term success.

Imagine a future where students graduate not with dread but with confidence, equipped to tackle challenges and pursue meaningful careers. Where companies welcome a workforce that is not only skilled but also aligned with their values. And where society fosters a generation of innovators, dreamers and doers.

It's time to break the chains of the current placement process and reimagine what success truly means. For the sake of our students, institutions and future, let's build a better way forward.

Cleanliness is Next to Godliness



Akshay Raut

The Mahakumbh in Prayagraj is easily the largest congregation of humanity in a single place. A devout person may anchor her visit solely in faith. But for most others, any place of pilgrimage has given rise to numerous high footfall destinations, primarily in urban areas. Whether it's Tirupati, Vaishno Devi, Golden Temple, Amritsar, Ajmer Sharif, Amaravathi, Puri Jagannath Temple, Dwarka, Somnath, or Mahakaleswar in Ujjain, they all share one defining trait: millions flock to them.

For managers of India's 4,000-odd cities and towns, maintaining safe sanitation and a clean environment remains a challenge — at parks, markets, beaches, theatres, cinema theatres and rail stations. Mohandas Gandhi expressed anguish over narrow lanes and filth during a visit to Varanasi. More recently, Narendra Modi, while speaking about Kosharnath Vaidya, referred to the filth encountered by devotees.

Tourism depends on organised sanitation, cleanliness and hygiene, along with other amenities for safe and comfortable travel and stay. Lack

of quality sanitary infra and proper waste management deters domestic and foreign tourists, even at otherwise excellent locations.

Places of faith like Mahakaleswar and Omkareshwar in MP have been notified from their proximity to Indore, crowned India's cleanest city for seven consecutive years. Gujarat, too, is working on enhancing sanitation standards at destinations, among other initiatives, to boost tourism.

In 2001, under Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), Govt launched a programme to improve cleanliness, select historic, religious and tourist heritage sites. The SBM stamp was evident at Kumbh 2019, which was lauded as the 'cleanest' Kumbh. Last year, the PM launched a community cleaning initiative at pilgrimage sites as part of the Swachh Teerth campaign.

Mahakumbh 2025, with its scale, tech and accountable systems, is a monumental response to the anticipated mass of sanitation and related health issues. Both G and the UP

government have invested significant resources to achieve a Swachh and Swasth Mahakumbh.

About 1.5 lakh portable toilets are strategically located across 4,000 hectares along roads, ghats, vending zones and areas vulnerable to open defecation. These toilets are colour-coded for easy identification and supported by jet spray cleaning, scientific odour neutralisers and ICT-based monitoring and maintenance.

25,000 litter bins have been placed at short intervals to ensure the congregation remains litter-free.

GPS-enabled tipper trucks and compactors operate 24/7. A workforce of 15,000 sanitation workers, equipped with PPE and secured by welfare provisions, ensures cleanliness.

Iso and Bare are providing advanced solutions for managing millions of litres of faecal sludge and grey water generated daily.

A ban on plastic bags, utensils and bottles has been enforced, with biodegradable alternatives like donna pottery, khadi and non-plastic bags, and facilities for returning and recycling plastic items offered as substitutes.

The time has come to replicate the Kumbh model across India's tourist centres, including centres of faith. The task is far less complex than organising the Mahakumbh. A checklist for action:

Adequate numbers of functional, accessible, clean and safe toilets.

Reliable access to clean drinking water through sufficient water kiosks, khud and non-plastic bags, and facilities for returning and recycling plastic items offered as substitutes.

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to ensure zero tolerance for littering. It's also critical to eliminate single-use plastics and promote eco-friendly alternatives.

Prevention of untreated water discharge into water bodies.

Deployment of sufficient sanitation workers, removal of encroachments near main sites, streamlining of vending zones and hawkers (similar to Indore's famous food street), regular use of begging, eco-friendly beautification of public spaces and installation of proper signage.

Control of stray animals like dogs and monkeys.

Meticulous care for airports, bus stops, railway stations and approach roads leading to pilgrim centres.

These efforts must be complemented by improved sanitation-conscious behaviour among visitors and locals, alongside a robust citizen feedback and complaint redressal mechanism. Achieving sustainable sanitation at these centres requires active ownership by local institutions, management bodies, market associations and civil society. Incorporating a systematic element of volunteerism can further accelerate progress towards these goals.

A promising start is evident as the world's largest ultra-cleanliness survey, Swachh Survekshan, underscores the importance of cleanliness and maintenance in high footfall areas.

Lessons from Mahakumbh 2025 can seamlessly guide future planning for cleanliness at India's tourist and pilgrimage centres.

The writer is former DG, Swachh Bharat Mission, India



THE SPEAKING TREE

How Can I Let Go?

THICH NHAT HANH

Often, people have trouble letting go of things like relationships, jobs, feelings and so on. It is good to remember that to 'let go' means to let go of something. That something may be an object of our mind, something we've created, like an idea, feeling, desire or belief. Getting stuck on that idea could bring a lot of unhappiness and anxiety. We'd like to let go, but how? It's not enough just to want to let it go; we must recognise it first as being something real.

With the energy of mindfulness and concentration, we can look deeply and discover the roots of ideas, feelings, emotions and desires — insight that can help us release the object in our minds.

Say you have an idea about what will make you happy. The idea has its roots in you and your environment. The idea tells you what conditions you need to be happy.

So, you have an idea about what will make you happy. The idea has its roots in you and your environment. The idea tells you what conditions you need to be happy.

On the other hand, you know that you have moments of joy, release or true love. You recognise these as moments of real happiness. When you have had a moment of real happiness, it becomes easier to release objects of your mind because you are developing the insight that these objects will not make you happy. Fear is an element that prevents us from letting go. We're fearful that if we let go, we'll have nothing else to cling to. Letting go is a practice; it's an art.

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ROLLING ON SATURDAY

How Now B&W Cows?

Before the Union budget, a report from a national newspaper was sent to a village to interview a farmer.

Reporter: How much milk does your cow produce?

Farmer: 'Who one?' The black cow or the white cow?

Reporter: The black one.

Farmer: 2 litres per day.

Reporter: And the white one?

Farmer: 2 litres per day.

Reporter: The black one.

Farmer: In the cowshed.

Reporter: And the white one?

Farmer: In the cowshed.

Reporter: Your cows look healthy. What do you feed them?

Farmer: Which one? The black one or the white one?

Reporter: The black one.

Farmer: Barley, millets and hay.

Reporter: [Annoyed] But why do you keep on asking if I'm asking about the black or the white cow when the answers are just the same?

Farmer: Because the black one is mine.

Reporter: Oh! And the white one?

Farmer: It's also mine.

Chat Room

Green Power Rises in the East

Apr 2005 'End of the World Is Not Nigh' by Swaminathan Sankaranarayanan Aiyar (Jan 17), irrespective of climate-change doomsday predictions being real or not, developing countries need not harness solar power efficiently by creating energy storage infrastructure, which requires significant capital. India can learn from Chile that it has installed giant battery energy storage systems (BESS), such as the one near the Coya-Solar Park that has a storage capacity of 680 MWh and installed capacity of 120 MW, sufficient to supply five hours of green energy to 100,000 homes. In contrast, India's largest such facility in Ladakh has a storage capacity of just 120 MWh. Govt can partner Tesla to install BESSes and significantly upgrade India's power infrastructure. *Chandrasekhar Engira*

Chandrasekhar Engira

UTTAR PRADESH



Anita Devi (far left), mother of Vishal Sahani, with Vishal's cousin Vijay Sahani and his aunt Anita, in Sihorwa village of U.P.'s Gorakhpur district. Vijay and Anita are the brother and the mother of Rajkumar Sahani, who is also stranded with Vishal in Libya; (above) youth working in a field in the village; (below) Ramesh and Vikash Vishwakarma, the father and the brother of Mithlesh, who is stuck in Benghazi, Libya. **SAVDEEP SAXENA**

Anita Devi, 48, barely eats two meals a day. Her leaky roofed two-bedroom house in Sihorwa village in Uttar Pradesh's Gorakhpur district requires urgent repair. But she cannot stop thinking about her 22-year-old son Vishal Sahani, who left for Libya in June 2023, for what appeared to be a well-paying job at the Libyan Cement Company in Benghazi, the war-torn North African country's second largest city.

"I think of him all the time. On the phone, when he tells me he often goes hungry, my heart sinks," Devi says, her eyes welling up, as she looks forlornly onto the dirt road that leads to the village from her house.

Two of Devi's family members are at the factory in Benghazi, "one of the largest cement production companies in Libya" founded in 1968 with a total production capacity of 2.9 million tons, says the company's website. The Sahanis are among 16 Indian men, 13 of whom are from the Gorakhpur district. They have been at the factory for times ranging between one and five years. The other three are from western Bihar.

Their stories are starkly similar: rural distress, poverty, and joblessness leading them to traps laid out by a wide network of fake employment agents working across the region who prey on the vulnerabilities of such communities by promising them lucrative jobs largely in West Asia and North Africa.

With prison-like conditions, work hours that stretch to 16-hour days, and odd and unscheduled shifts, their passports are confiscated on arrival in the guise of 'updating their visa status'. For the past four months, these men have been without work or wages, following a confrontation with their 'contractor' Abu Bakr, a Libyan national, over unscheduled shifts and extra work hours.

Two of the men say Bakr facilitated their travel from Dubai to Benghazi. Bakr had obtained tourist visas and not work permits, which could have allowed them legal status in Libya, but such permits are expensive, says Vijay Sahani, 31. His younger brother, Rajkumar, 28, had travelled to work at the cement factory in 2022. Rajkumar had suggested Vishal join him.

Responsibility and limited choices

Devi's family belongs to the Nishad community in U.P. They are categorised as Other Backward Classes but have been demanding that they be identified as a Scheduled Caste. This demand was supported by former Chief Minister and Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav but was stalled by the courts.

The Sahanis are marginal farmers who own just half an acre of land that hardly fetches them ₹5,000 a month. "It does not even support our basic needs. Vishal's father has an alcohol problem," says Devi, as she explains the reasons that forced her son to seek greener pastures.

Vishal dropped out of school after Class 10 and began working on the family farm. In Uttar Pradesh, traditionally, sons must finance their sisters' weddings, and as Devi's only son, he began to feel the pressure of getting his third sister married. He is one of five children.

"We are forced to take loans from local moneylenders for marriages or health issues at high interest rates, as agriculture has become unsustainable," Devi says.

In eastern U.P.'s villages, local moneylenders charge anywhere between 5% and 10% a month on the principal. They generally lend without documentation or a paper trail, exploiting the vulnerabilities of impoverished rural families. The enticement of earning ₹40,000 a month was enough for Vishal to travel 6,000 kilometres west to a country he knew nothing about.

The extended Sahani family is in deep financial crisis. "We took a loan of more than ₹80,000 from a moneylender at 10% monthly interest to finance Rajkumar's travel. Now it seems like a debt trap with our lives at stake," says Vijay.

He adds that an acquaintance - Raju Chouhan, from neighbouring Deoria district - who had worked in Libya for 12 years and is among those at the cement factory, "facilitated the travel and the job opportunity," says Vijay, who himself worked for four years in Dubai as an iron welder

The maybe-escape from Benghazi

Indian workers, most of them youth from Uttar Pradesh, say they are being held in prison-like conditions in Benghazi, Libya, lured there by fake recruitment agents. Their families point to cycles of debt and poverty at home, and the hope of economic mobility abroad as reasons for stepping into the unknown, find **Mayank Kumar** and **Kunal Shankar**



I was able to construct a 'pucca' house of two rooms and finance my sister's wedding with my savings from the five years I spent in Dubai

VIJAY SAHANI
Brother of Rajkumar, who is trapped in Libya

and foreman before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vijay says thousands of unemployed youths from low-income families of the region who lack skilled training or graduate degrees, work as welders, plasterers, ceramic tilers, foremen, mine workers, drivers and more, in factories and industries in West Asia and North Africa, or WANA.

"I was able to construct a 'pucca' house of two rooms and finance my sister's wedding with my savings from the five years I spent in Dubai," says Vijay, explaining how such stints in WANA countries help low-income families. He says the family received between ₹35,000-₹40,000 from his brother Rajkumar every two months "for a major part of the period" since January 2023.

The unemployment challenge

U.P., a State of roughly 240 million people with a per capita income of ₹70,792 measured in terms of Per Capita Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) in 2021-22 according to the Government of India's reply in the Rajya Sabha, is three times lower than developed States like Maharashtra with ₹2,15,233, in the same period.

While the latest available annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report compiled by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation estimates U.P.'s unemployment rate (UR) at 2.4% in 2022-23, critics have questioned its methodology. They say it includes data for unpaid work, which does not accurately capture the state of unemployment in the country. The grim picture of unemployment in the State can be gauged by the fact that more than 43 lakh youths appeared for 60,244 constable posts in the police examination in 2024.

The State has witnessed a rise in unregistered recruitment agencies, many of them in the Gorakhpur region, attracting overseas job seekers through manipulative, and often fake advertisements. "People from low-income families fall in

the trap of such agencies and get cheated," says Mujahid Husain Khan, president, U.P. chapter of the Indian Personnel Export Promotion Council, an association of recruiting agents.

Khan says he has written multiple letters to U.P. government officials including to the Deputy Inspector General (DIG), Gorakhpur, in the past couple of months seeking action against such fake recruitment agencies. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)'s eMigrate portal mentions only 36 registered agencies/recruiting agents that promote 'safe and legal migration' in the Gorakhpur Administrative Region consisting of four districts in eastern U.P.

While the eMigrate portal mentions only 22 registered agencies in Gorakhpur district alone, when *The Hindu* visited the Singhariya locality near Gorakhpur's All India Institute of Medical Sciences, there were at least two dozen training and testing centres that promise to facilitate jobs in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Their charges range between ₹10,000 and ₹1 lakh, depending on the nature of work and salary structure. The staff at the centres say engineers and foremen will be called for an interview this month. They did not disclose any information about their registration status or details of the prospective employers.

Rajesh Mani, the director of Manav Seva Sansthan, a Gorakhpur-based non-profit that works on socio-economic development, has been peti-

tioning the MEA seeking the government's intervention to extradite the 16 men in Benghazi. But he says aside from assurances that he received for his initial letter dated October 19, he hasn't seen any action.

During his weekly briefing on December 20, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal had acknowledged the problem, saying, "We reached out to our workers through our community there." The Indian Embassy in Tripoli, which was reopened in late July 2024 after being shut for five years, is "closely following" the situation, he had said.

In the past four months, the Indian workers have been supported by their Bangladeshi counterparts at the cement factory. They have been buying their groceries and food, the money for which has been repatriated to their families back in Bangladesh through the Indian workers' relatives in Dubai, says Mithlesh Vishwakarma, another worker from Gorakhpur who travelled to Benghazi in September last year.

"I have also sent ₹40,000 to my son, but he is in serious trouble, and we want him back," says Ramesh Chandra Vishwakarma, 26-year-old Mithlesh's father, who is also from Sihorwa, the same village as Vishal and Rajkumar Sahani.

Ramesh recalls how his son - an athlete - wanted to join the police force after he graduated with a BSc degree. But the family's debts of more than ₹4 lakh spent on Mithlesh's younger sister's wedding led him to look for better-paying jobs abroad. "We used to receive ₹32,000 a month in our account, which helped us pay off ₹2.5 lakh that we had borrowed from the money lender at 6% monthly interest rate," Ramesh says.

He is a welder - one of the traditional occupations of the Vishwakarma caste - and runs his shop from home. The family owns half an acre of land and earns about ₹15,000 during peak harvest season from it. Ramesh is a Bharatiya Janata Party booth-level president. He says he took the matter to his local MP and Union Minister of State for Rural Development Kamlesh Paswan, who took cognisance of the matter and in turn wrote to the Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar.

Fragmented landholdings, a collapse of agriculture, the lack of awareness of global events, and the paucity of skilled education avenues have led the men of this region to pursue work abroad. Gorakhpur's Gross District Domestic Product at constant price in the financial year 2020-21 was less than one-fourth of Gautam Buddha Nagar district, which abuts neighbouring Delhi.

Waiting for an escape

Mani, from Manav Seva Sansthan, says Indians from eastern U.P. and western Bihar who travelled for work led by similar fake recruitment agents have been rescued from other war-torn African countries like Somalia. He also gives examples of dozens of workers being brought back from the Gulf and other countries with his organisation playing a key role.

Lalit Mohan Prajapati, from Dhanni Patti village of Kushinagar district, is one of two evacuated from Somalia in October 2023. "An acquaintance took me along with him through a Mumbai-based agent, who promised us better wages at a metal bar making factory in Somalia," says Prajapati, who spent almost a year between 2022-23 in the war-torn country.

Recollecting his ordeal, he says that cooped up in the factory premises, he had no idea of his whereabouts. "Outside the factory there was firing every week, while inside, there was no work and no wages," Prajapati says. He was not aware of the protracted inter-caste wars in Somalia and went there lured by the prospect of being able to save and repatriate ₹50,000 every month.

In October last year, U.P. law enforcement authorities sent out circulars to field staff asking them to act against unauthorised recruitment agents. They were to ensure that those who are registered follow protocols like obtaining enrolment letters from the Protector General of Emigrants division within the MEA, and to adhere to the rules specified in The Emigration Act, 1983.

Meanwhile, following *The Hindu's* reporting, the 16 workers were shifted out of the cement factory on New Year's Eve, to two rooms in the backyard of Bakr's house. "At first, we were told it's for a medical check-up. We were hustled into two buses with all our belongings, and they brought us here," says Mithlesh over the phone.

The Indian Embassy in Tripoli has assured the workers of a return "within weeks". The Libyan authorities have promised safety, food, and water. Tabassum Mansoor, a non-resident Indian social worker, has been following up on the workers. "She told us the documentation to enable us to leave has been done, and that only buying the tickets is taking time," Mithlesh says. In response to a question from *The Hindu*, the MEA reiterated their December 20 response and said that India is currently working with Libyan authorities to process 'exit cards' for the workers, which would enable their repatriation. However, they did not give a definite timeline on when the repatriation will take place.



Inflation matrix

December's price rise numbers
do not ring in enough relief

In the final inflation print before the Union Budget for 2025-26 is presented, followed by the first review of the monetary policy led by the new Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in early February, the price rise faced by Indian consumers eased to 5.22% in December. Although a four-month low, this still marked only a mild decline from November's 5.5% uptick in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and was largely driven by a sequential easing in food prices. Food inflation moderated from over 9% in the previous month to 8.4% last month, and though inflation in vegetables cooled from 29.3% to 26.6%, it still remained generally high. Households still forked out a lot more for their meals than they did a year ago — it must be recalled that overall inflation was 5.7% and food price rise, over 9.5% in December 2023. While prices of some food items, including vegetables, are seen cooling further this month, those of a few critical ingredients have started spiking, including of edible oils, that rose at a 33-month high pace of 14.6% in December. Eggs, meat and fruits also saw inflation accelerating last month along with the relatively humble potato (up 68.2%). Moreover, inflation in wholesale prices has gained pace, signalling that there is room for higher costs to be passed on to consumers for food items as well as manufactured products.

The government and industry want the RBI to cut interest rates to reinvigorate consumption and fading growth impulses by looking through "volatile" food inflation. But even industry captains admit that just keeping food prices out of the interest rates and growth-inflation balancing act will not suffice. Moreover, even if the weightage for food in the CPI is reduced in line with the recent household consumption spending survey results, food price trends have a material impact on the spending propensity of households and their inflation expectations. Inflation may yet average 4.5% through January to March, as the RBI expects, but the central bank that has committed to a durable alignment to its 4% goal before slashing rates, has a difficult call to make in February. Tangible measures, if any, to ease price pressures in the Budget, along with some visibility on the Centre's fiscal glide path, could help tip the scales for a rate cut cycle to begin soon, if not next month. There are a few new imperatives that have compounded the trade-off matrix for policymakers in North Block as well as Mint Street — the swift unravelling of the rupee vis-à-vis the dollar in recent weeks which raises the risk of importing inflation, among other collateral effects, especially as global oil prices have resurged to multi-month highs. A very nuanced approach is imperative to avoid fresh missteps.

Script reading

The deciphering of the Indus script
should not be clouded by politics

The recent announcement by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, of a ₹1-million prize scheme for deciphering the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), seems to have revived popular interest in the subject, which remains a puzzle to archaeologists, historians and linguists. His invitation for further research was made in the context of the centenary celebration of the IVC discovery, which was published by John Marshall of the Archaeological Survey of India, then Chief, in September 1924. Spread across 1.5 million square kilometres in the territories of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan during the Bronze Age (3000-1500 BCE), the IVC, also known as Harappan Civilisation, was regarded as complex as the better-known civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt and China. The Indus civilisation was essentially urban. Even though there has been a large number of objects and materials of archaeological value in support of the IVC, the decipherment of seals and tablets has not been to the satisfaction of all. About 20 years ago, a group of western scholars had argued that writing was not a necessity of ancient urban settlements, not even those as massive as those of the Harappans, and that "a handful of unknown symbols" could no longer be claimed as evidence of writing. Since then, there has been an exchange of scholarly views for and against the theory of the Indus civilisation being a highly literate society. It is against this context that Mr. Stalin's announcement needs to be seen. There is also a school of thought that there was a script which was "proto-Dravidian", "non-Aryan" and "pre-Aryan". This could be a reason why a southern State, Tamil Nadu, has made the offer. The State government has also supported a study on Indus signs and graffiti marks of Tamil Nadu as part of a project of the documentation and the digitisation of graffiti and Tamil (Tamil-Brahmi)-inscribed potshers of Tamil Nadu.

Researchers face certain challenges while resolving the Indus riddle. There is a complaint that the entire database regarding the seals has not yet been made available in the public domain. While allowing free access to these resources, central and State authorities should ensure that context for them is also provided. More importantly, studies should be carried out without any interference. The likelihood of the proposed study's findings going against the established and particular narrative should not be allowed to cloud intellectual pursuit. There is also scope for well-coordinated work among South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, to unravel the mystery. But if political differences are permitted to adversely impact the execution of any such study, the world, and India, will be much the poorer for it.

The First Advance Estimates (FAE) of National Accounts for 2024-25 show a real GDP growth of 6.4% and a nominal GDP growth of 9.7%. These numbers have fallen short of the Reserve Bank of India's revised growth estimate of 6.6% for real GDP, as in its December 2024 monetary policy statement and 10.5% for nominal GDP growth as in the 2024-25 Union Budget presented in July 2024.

The annual growth of 6.4% can be seen as consisting of 6% growth in the first half and 6.7% growth in the second half. There is, thus, a clear improvement expected over the Q2 growth of 5.4%. The sharp fall in 2024-25 annual GDP growth from that of the previous year at 8.2% is seen only in the case of GDP. With respect to Gross Value Added (GVA), this difference, between 7.2% and 6.4%, is much less. On the GVA side, it was the manufacturing sector which suffered a sharp fall in sectoral growth from 9.9% in 2023-24 to 5.3% in 2024-25.

Growth prospects for 2025-26

The Gross Fixed Capital Formation rate at constant prices has ranged between 33.3% and 33.5% during 2021-22 to 2024-25. Thus, it appears to have stabilised around 33.4%. It is expected to continue at this level in 2025-26. The average Incremental Capital Output Ratio (ICOR) has been marginally higher than 5 in recent years. Assuming ICOR to be 5.1 in 2025-26, we may consider a 6.5% real GDP growth to be realistic.

There may not be much change in the global economy even though Donald Trump's assumption of office may create more uncertainty. India will have to largely depend on domestic demand.

In particular, the Government of India has to ensure that there is no relaxation in its investment expenditure. In fact, the slightly lower



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Over the next five years, the best that India may hope for is a steady real GDP growth rate of 6.5%

growth in 2024-25 is largely linked to the slowdown in the Government of India's investment growth which has remained negative at (-)12.3% even after eight months into the fiscal year.

With a lower nominal GDP growth in 2024-25 of 9.7% as compared to the budgeted nominal GDP growth of 10.5%, the budgeted Gross Tax Revenue (GTR) of ₹38.4 lakh crore may not be realised if the budgeted buoyancy of 1.03 is maintained. As per Controller General of Accounts (CGA) data, GTR growth for the first eight months was 10.7%. If this growth is maintained for the remaining months also, the realised buoyancy would be about 1.1, which is higher than the budgeted buoyancy. In such a case, tax revenue shortfall will be minimal. In other words, any revenue constraint or likely pressure on fiscal deficit would not constrain the government's ability to achieve its capital expenditure target of ₹11.1 lakh crore.

Reason for the dip

However, after the first eight months, the level of the Government of India's capital expenditure has remained limited to ₹5.14 lakh crore, that is 46.2% of the Budget target. In the remaining four months, the Government of India's capital expenditure may be accelerated. It may still fall well short of the target. This has been the main reason for the dip in overall real GDP growth in 2024-25.

Going forward in 2025-26, the Government of India will have to continue to rely on an accelerated capital expenditure growth which can be kept at least at 20% on the revised estimates for 2024-25. Sustained government capital expenditures can have a favourable effect on private investment. The size and the pattern of investment expenditure of the government

should be designed to accelerate private investment as well.

Medium- to long-term growth prospects

Over a period of next five years, the best that India may hope for is a steady real GDP growth rate of 6.5%. This is in line with the International Monetary Fund's real GDP growth projection for the Indian economy, as in its October 2024 release, which is at 6.5% over the period 2025-26 to 2029-30. This real GDP growth may be accompanied by an implicit price deflator (IPD)-based inflation of about 4% which can give a nominal GDP growth in the range of 10.5%-11%. In years in which global conditions improve and the contribution of net exports to GDP growth becomes significant, real GDP growth may touch even 7%. If a real growth of around 6.5% and a nominal growth in the range of 10.5%-11% are maintained over the long run with an average exchange rate depreciation of 2.5% per annum, India should be able to reach a per capita GDP level consistent with a developed country status in the next two and half decades. But the task is not going to be easy. It will be hard to grow at 6.5% as the base keeps on increasing. In fact, in the earlier years, the growth rate will have to be higher. But, at present, the potential rate of growth appears to be 6.5%. However, it can change.

In the light of a potential growth rate of 6.5%, the achievement of 6.4% in 2024-25 should not be considered as disappointing. In fact, the achievement of 8.2% in 2023-24 should be considered as a flash in the pan. The current year's growth rate of 6.4% as in the first advance estimates should be seen in the context of India's potential growth rate.

The views expressed are personal

The multiple layers of the Gaza ceasefire



Kabir Taneja

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Just days before the swearing in of United States President-elect Donald Trump, and a few hours before outgoing President Joe Biden gave his final address to the American people on January 15, 2025, Israel and Hamas announced that the long-elusive ceasefire agreement over Gaza had been struck. The state of Qatar, long stuck in between as a mediator, said the deal was to take effect from January 19, 2025, a day before Mr. Trump takes charge. An exchange of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners is at the centre of this arrangement.

The deck and the cards

The news of the agreement saw Palestinians in Gaza take to the streets in celebration, having faced death and destruction at the hands of the Israeli military whose response to the October 7, 2023 terror attack went on for over 15 months even as political deadlocks continued. In a statement, Hamas has highlighted that the movement "dealt with all responsibility towards our patient and steadfast people in the honorable Gaza strip, by stopping the Zionist aggression against them and putting an end to the massacres and war of genocide to which they are being subjected".

In Washington DC, Mr. Trump and Mr. Biden reportedly went in unison to deliver the deal even as both tried to lap up the credit. For Mr. Trump, who previously demanded that such a deal be reached before his presidency, this was a marketable advertising of renewed American strength as promised in his election campaign. For Mr. Biden, it is an attempt to salvage legacy.

The joker in this geopolitical deck is Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Amidst misplaced perceptions that Mr. Trump would allow Mr. Netanyahu a longer leash to continue his military operations in Gaza unabated, opinion prevailed that anyone but Mr. Biden would be good for both stemming the ongoing conflicts and

Despite the complexities, the international community must play its role by pushing for the sustainability of this deal

reigning in Israel's military posturing. It is in all likelihood not a coincidence that the Israeli leadership agreed to the deal — which, in parallel with Hamas, it has scuttled many times — to send a message of partnership and resolve to Mr. Trump.

Why Mr. Netanyahu would go out of the way to court Mr. Trump, even after the Israeli leader was invited by the Republicans to address a joint session of Congress in July 2024, is a question that has a simple answer. Mr. Trump prioritises personality over policy. Agreeing to this deal with Hamas is offering Mr. Trump a victory at potentially big domestic costs for Mr. Netanyahu. For long, Mr. Netanyahu has maintained that only a complete victory over Hamas is acceptable. With this deal, he becomes an Israeli Prime Minister who has cut a political settlement with the arch foe, but without a complete elimination of Hamas.

On Hamas and Israel

There is no doubt that Hamas and also Hezbollah in Lebanon have had their capacities diminished over the past year after leadership decapitation operations conducted by Israel.

Simultaneously, outgoing U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has also said that assessments show that Hamas has recruited as many new militants as it has lost. The lack of a political track acting as insurance for the ceasefire remains a concern. Hamas is expected to continue to be in control of Gaza in the time to come as barely any movements have taken place to reorganise Palestinian politics in a way where the group can be brought under a wider and more mainstream Palestinian-led political ecosystem.

Hamas, by itself, will remain steadfast in its ideology against Israeli security and sovereignty, while Hamas and Israel continue to remain on the same page against a two-state solution, despite a global push for this being the only viable option

available for lasting peace.

The prevailing situation of this status quo, despite the ceasefire, can be leveraged by Mr. Netanyahu in case Hamas resumes attacks against Israeli territories and populations. In such a situation, Mr. Netanyahu will be able to approach Mr. Trump from a vantage point, having agreed to the Hamas deal. A return to retaliatory tactics at this juncture will in all likelihood come with the full support of Mr. Trump, manoeuvring the Israeli position back to one of strength — like one it enjoyed under Mr. Biden. Previously, Mr. Trump has publicly stated that there would be 'hell to pay' for Hamas if Israeli hostages, which includes American citizens, are not released.

Gaza and its rebuilding

Beyond the political intricacies of this ceasefire arrangement, the most important deliverable would be that of critical aid to the people in Gaza as food and medical shortages surpassed critically a long time ago. Beyond the aid front, the rebuilding of Gaza may yet be a premature discussion until alternative political mechanisms are envisioned within the Palestinian fold. This is where the Arab powers have an opportunity to exert influence, and seek a remoulding, a re-shaping, and a revitalisation of the Palestinian Authority to better equip Palestinian politics as a core stakeholder for a challenging future, where the much sought-after two-state solution remains a distant reality.

Finally, the international community must also play its role to push for the sustainability of this deal. The future of West Asian prosperity, newer geo-economic architectures such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, a potential expansion of the Abraham Accords, and even the radicalism of a Saudi Arabia-Israel normalisation, ultimately hinges on this momentum. At the end of the day, the management of regional geopolitical fissures by regional powers will determine all outcomes.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Disaband

Expectedly, on the eve of Donald Trump assuming the presidency of the United States, high profile Hindenburg Research has announced its closure (Page 1, January 17). The short seller's abrupt shutting of its shutters is undeniably a blessing in disguise for the Adani conglomerate, which was rocked by its startling revelations. One can make a safe guess that the high-pitched calls by the Opposition parties in India, particularly the Congress (inside pages, January 17), for a probe of the Group by a Joint Parliamentary Committee will fade away sooner than later.

V. Johan Shanakumar,
Chennai

Memorial and legacy

It is silly that the controversy regarding a suitable memorial for former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh continues (inside pages, January 17). It is time to revisit the relevance and the viability

of allotting vast acreage of land for this purpose. A more viable option would be to set up an institute for economic research in Dr. Singh's name or have a museum, a library or a park which would be of much greater benefit to the people as well as be a more befitting memorial for a great leader.

P.J. Thomas,
Vazhappally, Kottayam, Kerala

The effect is visible

There is little doubt that the emphasis in T20 cricket, on 'power hitting' and aggressive stroke play, has affected the skills of Indian batters in matches or series where it calls for one's temperament to stand up and carry the day with sound technique (Opinion page — 'Parley', January 17). While India's dominance in limited-overs formats continues, its performance in Test cricket has been inconsistent. This shift raises the important question whether the passion for the longest

format has been replaced by the instant gratification offered by T20 cricket. Also, the influx of foreign players in the Indian Premier League and the overwhelming attention given to it have overshadowed the value and the importance of Indian domestic cricket.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

The debate on whether exposure to T20 cricket has an impact on the performance of Indian batters in the longer versions of the game has been raging for quite some time. And, if statistics are any indication, the effect is plainly visible. As far as batters are concerned, they should possess different mindsets for T20, which is nothing but slam bang cricket. In Test cricket, the batters have to concentrate more on defensive techniques, as longevity at the crease is paramount. It is this factor that makes someone such as

Cheteshwar Pujara an asset in the five-day game, and Sanju Samson and Tilak Varma perfect choices in T20 cricket.

C.V. Aravind,
Bengaluru

India is a huge country and it may make sense to have separate cricket coaches for separate formats. For example, Gautam Gambhir is perhaps more suited to be a T20 (head) coach as the game here needs a hit out approach from the very first ball. Cheteshwar Pujara, V.V.S. Laxman and Rahul Dravid may be more suited as Test match coaches as the game here needs more of a defensive approach and staying at the crease. ODIs (with 50 overs) need both a defensive and hit out approach. Virender Sehwag may be more suited as an ODI coach. It would be ideal to have three separate teams for the three different formats so as not to mix up batting styles.

P.V. Madhu Nivriti,
Secunderabad

Deadly event

The report in this daily, "Six persons die in jallikattu and other bull-related sports in T.N." (January 17), highlights the urgent need to ban 'jallikattu', a savage sport and an annual event during Pongal festivities. How this abhorrent and abominable sport attracts youth participation is unfortunate. One wonders how the Chief Minister and the Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu continue their stoic silence. Readers must join hands to ask the Chief Minister to end this 'sport' once and for all.

Mani Natarajan,
Chennai

The disturbing picture in the report, of a group of people trying to tame a bull, is nothing short of torture and violence inflicted on a lone animal. Ancient Tamil literature describes jallikattu as 'Eru Thazuvudhal' (embracing the bull) without causing the animal any harm or pain. There is no gainsaying

the fact that today's jallikattu is a blood sport. The humane treatment of bulls has been described in classical Tamil literature.

Kangayam R. Narasimhan,
Chennai

It is painful to note both man and animal experiencing trauma for the sake of some cash awards for the winners. There is cruelty to animals and grave danger for many innocent people.

A.J. Rangarajan,
Chennai

'Lit for Life'

Literature has the power to inspire, challenge and transform lives and it is wonderful that 'The Hindu 'Lit for Life', a festival for the exchange of ideas, stories, and creativity, begins in a few hours. Many of us look forward to celebrating the magic of words in Chennai.

T.S. Karthik,
Chennai

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



As many as 16 families settled in Saragodu Reserve Forest in Mudigere taluk are scheduled to be shifted out of the forested area. The families have been living there without proper roads, electricity, or other amenities. SATHISH G.T.

Tale of two villages deep within forests

January 10 was a special day for 16 families living within the Saragodu Reserve Forest area in Chikkamagaluru district as they were on that day allotted land to finally move out of their original habitation where dealing with wild animals is an everyday ordeal. But people of Bidarathala, who face similar problems in the same district, have a longer wait, writes **Sathish G.T.**

Seven-year-old Anagha of Byrigadde village studies in class 2 at the Government Primary School, Kundur, about three kilometres from her place deep in the Saragodu Reserve Forest of Mudigere taluk in Chikkamagaluru district. Every day, her father, Narayana, drops her off and picks her up from school. Narayana rides his bike in the uneven forest terrain, keeping his eyes and ears alert for any wild animal's sudden appearance.

A few days ago, Narayana was busy at the brick kiln where he works. Anagha's mother had the responsibility of dropping her off at school. They had just walked a few yards from their house when they found a wild tusk right in the middle of their path. "The elephant was only a few feet away from us. We managed to run back home. The elephant remained there for a while, forcing us to stay indoors. And that day, I missed my school," said Anagha.

For the girl and other residents of the locality, encountering a wild animal is not unusual. Her grandmother, Bhagirathi, said, "We spot them regularly around our place. Over the years, the number of people living around here has come down while the number of wild animals has increased."

She has lived in Byrigadde for more than 60 years but has never had the luxury of good roads or electricity supply. Her son, Narayana, 52, cultivates a couple of acres of land that was never registered in his name and works at a kiln to augment his income.

Ready to move out

This family of four is one of 16 families scheduled to be shifted out of the Saragodu Reserve Forest area. On October 28, 2024, the Karnataka Cabinet cleared the proposal to rehabilitate the families in Saragodu Reserve Forest and gave consent to shift them to Huduoni village in Bahur hobli of Mudigere taluk. The Chikkamagaluru district administration has identified 33 acres and 24 guntas of land for rehabilitation. Each family will get two acres of land for cultivation and four guntas each to construct a house.

Saragodu Reserve Forest, spread over 3,690 hectares, was notified in 1904. However, many families have lived within this reserved area over the years. Following the directions of the Central Empowered Committee (CEC), which oversees the implementation of the Supreme Court's orders regarding forests, the Forest Department identified the families within the reserve forest for relocation.

"The department relocated 148 families in 2006. However, these 16 families were left out, as they had been staying there since before 1978. Considering them as traditional forest dwellers, they were not included in the rehabilitation package back then," said N. Ramesh Babu, Deputy Conservator of Forests of Chikkamagaluru division.

The families, including those from Other Backward Classes and Dalits, urged the government to relocate them as living in the forest was highly challenging, including sending their children to school. Sumithramma, who also stayed at Byrigadde, has three children. Her eldest son gave up his studies soon after the government gave him a bicycle in class 8.

"At that age, for him, a bicycle was more important than education. He stopped going to school

We have to cross the fencing to reach the nearest shop, which is about 3 km away. Most of us have suffered electric shock while crossing the solar fencing.

RAJESH,
Resident of
Mandahuliha

from the day he got the bicycle. Now, he works as an agricultural labourer. However, my two other children studied well as I sent them to hostels at a young age," Sumithramma said.

The Karnataka government introduced a bicycle distribution scheme in 2006-07 to encourage children in rural areas to continue their studies. However, in this case, it worked quite the opposite way.

Solar tentacles

The families' woes grew when the Forest Department put up tentacle solar fencing to stop wild elephants from entering human habitats. The department laid the solar fencing for about 24 km. "We have to cross the fencing to reach the nearest shop, which is about three kilometres away. Most of us have suffered electric shock while crossing the solar fencing. We felt as if we were in a cage," said Rajesh, a resident of Mandahuliha, another village within the reserve forest. He works as a writer in a private coffee estate at Merasanige, where his job is to look after the estate and manage the labour.

Now, they are all ready to leave their places for a better life at Huduoni. They thank the officers and elected representatives, including MLA Nayana Motamma, for their efforts in getting the proposal for rehabilitation approved by the Cabinet.

H.D. Rajesh, a KAS officer who was Assistant



The road connecting the residents of Bidarathala near Kottigehara in Mudigere is in very bad condition. Only vehicles with four-wheel drive can go on it. The villagers are seeking rehabilitation. SATHISH G.T.



The residents of Bidarathala village in Mudigere taluk are seeking rehabilitation. Due to the frequent movement of wild elephants and other wild animals, they have not been able to cultivate their lands. SATHISH G.T.



Saragodu Reserve Forest, spread over 3,690 hectares, was notified in 1904. However, many families have lived within this reserved area over the years. SATHISH G.T.



On October 28, 2024, the State Cabinet cleared the proposal to rehabilitate the families in Saragodu Reserve Forest. SATHISH G.T.

Commissioner in Chikkamagaluru, identified land at Huduoni for rehabilitation. In fact, the Revenue Department had recovered land that had been encroached upon by a coffee estate owner. The officers retained the coffee plants, and the same land is being allotted to forest dwellers. Locals say district in-charge secretary Rajender Kataria, Chikkamagaluru DC Meena Nagaraj, and Additional DC Narayanaraddi Kanakaraddi worked hard to get the proposal approved.

"We are thankful to elected representatives and officers for fulfilling our demand," said Puttaraju, 65, who lives at Mandahuliha with his family. Until the Cabinet cleared the proposal, he was not confident that his family would shift to a new place one day. "No matter how much money and effort we have spent to develop the forest land so far, we are keen on moving to the new place. With not even minimum facilities and security, we cannot live here for long," said Geetha, Puttaraju's wife.

Finally, an alternative

Getting the proposal approved by the Cabinet was not an easy task, according to Mudigere MLA Nayana Motamma. "These people were left out of the initial rehabilitation package. But they could not stay there for long with constant fear of attack by wild animals."

"The government has assured the families of land to cultivate and build houses. They are also expecting a financial package from the Forest Department. Meena Nagaraj said, "We have identified developed coffee estates, ready for harvest, for the families. It will help them financially." The Forest Department will provide financial assistance for transportation and other family needs.

The DC and other district officers allotted the plots and sites for houses to the families by picking lots at Chikkamagaluru on January 10, 2025. The families chose their plots by picking up chits with plot numbers. They hope to move to the new place within a few days. Finally, their days amidst the thick forest appear to be coming to an end.

Bad road to Bidarathala

While the families in Saragodu Forest have hopes of moving to a better place soon, the residents at Bidarathala in Mudigere taluk may have to wait for longer. The families at Bidarathala (Madhugundi) village, close to Charamdi Ghat, have been urging the government to rehabilitate them for many years. As many as 10 families, all related to each other, are ready to give up their private land if the government offers each of them an alternative land of two acres each to cultivate.

The major reason they want to leave is the lack

of connectivity. Thanks to the restrictions on developing roads in forest areas, the village road is hard to walk on, let alone drive a vehicle.

B.R. Sathish, 42, a native of Bidarathala village, recalled that he lost his father because of the road in April 2017 because it was impossible to transport the sick man to a hospital. B.K. Girish, 38, says that he also lost his father, Krishne Gowda, in a similar way about 26 years ago. He was a boy of 12 when his family members carried his father on a 'doli' as no vehicle could reach the village. By the time they reached the hospital, he was dead. "We brought the dead body back in the same way for cremation," said Girish.

The nearest school is at Kottigehara, about 11 km away. As there is no transport facility to the village, only those who were admitted to hostels in distant places studied. "Altogether, we have eight-and-a-half acres of land in the village. We grew lemongrass, paddy, coffee, areca, and cardamom for several years. However, for the last eight years, safeguarding crops from wild animals has been difficult," said B.R. Nagesh, also a native of Bidarathala, who runs a hotel at Kottigehara.

Lemongrass trade

The families remember a time when they earned well for about 15 years when they grew lemongrass (Cymbopogon) and extracted its oil. Rajappa, a native of Kerala who came to Bidarathala somewhere in 2003, showed the residents how to earn by processing lemongrass. The villagers, particularly the youth, of whom many had no formal education, picked up the skill. They grew lemongrass on their land and extracted oil from the grass. For that, they invested money and purchased machines required to extract oil. "After growing lemongrass for 45 days, we cut it and extracted oil. The maximum amount we got was ₹1,200 per kilo of oil. Each family produced 25 to 30 kg of oil every 45 days. That was a good earning," recalled Sathish.

However, they stopped growing lemongrass about eight years ago when the number of wild elephants in the area increased. "After 2009, when Charamdi Ghat was closed for road work, wild animals crossed the highway and entered human habitat in the locality. They increased in number gradually. Repeated incidents of crop damage forced the farmers to give up farming and look for alternative jobs. A majority of them shifted to Kottigehara and Mudigere in search of jobs," said Sanjay Gowda, a resident of Kottigehara.

In 2019, the Chikkamagaluru district witnessed heavy rains that resulted in landslides. Hundreds of houses, including those in Bidarathala, were damaged. The residents were kept in temporary shelters. Later, the administration sanctioned sites for the rain-affected people at Banakal, about 15 km from Bidarathala. "Now we have sites at Banakal to construct houses, while agricultural land is still at Bidarathala. Given the road conditions, we cannot travel regularly. We are expecting the government to come to our rescue and provide us with an alternative land as well," demanded Sathish.

They want to relocate to build their lives and earn by cultivating the land. "In our families, there are seven men, aged between 25 and 43, all unmarried. Our children are not getting proposals because of the conditions in our village. As there is no road to the village and no yield from the land, who will marry our boys?" asked Nagesh. "We are hoping that life becomes better if we move out of this place. I have been living here for over 50 years with no electricity or road," said Meenakshamma, 70.

The families have brought these issues to the attention of the district administration and the Forest Department. Ramesh Babu, DCF, said a few from the village recently met him and requested rehabilitation.

"We are aware of the problems the villages are facing. The department will look into the issue and prepare a proposal. All that they require is about 20 acres of land for rehabilitation," the officer noted. Earlier, IAS officer G. Sathyavathi, who was DC in Chikkamagaluru, had visited the village and interacted with the villagers. Both MLA Nayana Motamma and DC Meena Nagaraj said they are yet to get details of the issue. People of Bidarathala hope to, one day, move out for a better life as those in Byrigadde village will soon be able to.



A fragile pause in ravaged Gaza

The ceasefire agreement formalised between Israel and Hamas – and brokered by Qatar, Egypt, and the US – marks a significant point in the conflict and enables stoppage, however brief, to a 15-month war. Initial takeaways from the deal, announced by Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, are largely about the first phase of this agreement which starts on Sunday. These pertain to a six-week ceasefire, the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza's populated parts, a phased release of 33 hostages held by Hamas, and in return, a staggered release of Palestinian prisoners from jails in Israel. The terms for the second and third phases of the agreement are expected to be firm up during these 42 days. More than 46,000 Palestinians are estimated to have been killed since Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack on Israel. The deal marks a period of respite for civilians in the war-torn enclave and allows thousands to return to what is left of their homes in the north.

However, this is no roadmap to peace. There is ambiguity regarding the terms that would steer the subsequent phases of the deal. The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has confirmed the agreement to release the hostages but only after delaying a cabinet vote to ratify the ceasefire – Hamas was accused of reneging on parts of the deal. Furthermore, Israeli attacks on Gaza have continued; the Palestinian Civil Defence estimates that more than 100 people have been killed since the announcement of the ceasefire. Scepticism is a given because the first such deal since the beginning of the war, in November 2023, fell apart in a week. There is greater intent this time, from the negotiators, to ensure a follow-through to the first phase of the deal but it is only pragmatic to look at the initial period less as a sign of attainable peace and more as a critical time for the stakeholders to coordinate the inflow of humanitarian aid and supplies.

The ceasefire has materialised as a culmination of sequential events – Israel's successful offensives that left Hamas depleted, weakened Hezbollah and Iran, and activated the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. In the US, Joe Biden and Donald Trump have claimed credit for the agreement. While the Biden administration took the lead in the months-long negotiations, president-elect Trump is believed to have played a crucial role in fast-tracking what he called the "epic" deal. There is guarded optimism; there are signs of incremental hope. However, this pause in hostilities should not make the world look away from Gaza which, even if the truce holds, will need extensive international support in its reconstruction and to establish a system of governance.

Convergence of glorious contradictions

The Maha Kumbh Mela, which commenced in Prayagraj this week, is a symbol of everything that makes India – spirituality and materiality, individuality and collectivity, tradition and modernity, past and present, and other apparent contradictions. These contradictions disappear at the confluence of holy rivers in the great congregation that has taken place for thousands of years. Every person who makes it to the Kumbh goes there as an individual to cleanse the self but does that in a collective act with millions of others. The Kumbh tradition acquires modern idioms and styles with every passing edition and the past flows into the present. It also shows that spirituality is not an ethereal experience beyond oneself but a journey and an act of dipping into the river in time. It is also an expression of simple faith, uncorrupted by meaning and an act of discovery of India in all its complexities and contradictions.

The Kumbh Mela is a huge logistical and organisational challenge with over 450 million expected attendees, including 1.5 million foreign tourists. To accommodate so many people and to provide them the amenities, such as healthcare, is not easy. The UP government has allocated Rs 7,000 crore to create a state-of-the-art temporary city spread over 4,000 acres, with 1,50,000 tents, AI-enabled surveillance, and enhanced security measures. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure the welfare and security of all the pilgrims. In the last mela in 2013, a stampede left at least 30 people dead. The state will also benefit much from the mela. It is estimated that the event will inject not less than Rs 2 lakh crore into the state's economy, and will give a major boost to local businesses and tourism. It can also improve the potential of India's religious and cultural tourism and enhance its soft power.

The Kumbh Mela has always been known for its pluralistic ethos, inclusivity, and tolerance. But the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad has announced that non-Sanatanis will not be allowed to do business at the mela venue. It has also sought to change the Urdu words associated with the mela. Some activists have tried to enforce the dictum and removed the stalls of those who failed to prove that they are Sanatanis. Such acts go against the values and ideals represented by the mela. The police have turned a blind eye to the incidents. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had in his *Mann Ki Baat* programme last month expressed the hope that the Kumbh Mela would foster national unity. There can be no unity and equality where there is discrimination and intolerance.

Intolerance has no place at the Maha Kumbh, noted for its pluralism and inclusivity

Rising unemployment underscores the need for policies that support skilling, reduce market barriers

PALASH BARUAH AND D L WANKHAR

Unemployment is a multifaceted challenge that affects individuals across various demographic groups, including gender, age, and the length of their job search. A comprehensive understanding of unemployment spells – the period during which individuals remain unemployed while actively seeking employment – is vital for effective policymaking, economic analysis, and workforce planning. This can be attained by analysing the percentage of the population within distinct timeframes, based on how long individuals have been unemployed. By comparing data from two periods from the NSSO's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2020-21 and 2023-24, the shifting unemployment patterns can be better understood. These changes provide us with a clearer picture of labour force participation, economic recovery, and the specific obstacles different demographic groups encounter.

A key finding among males is the notable rise in long-term unemployment. In 2020-21, a significant portion of unemployed men (37.5%) were in the 6-12 months and 15.4% in the less than or equal to 6 months unemployment category. By 2023-24, this number decreased to 25.9% and 12.2%, suggesting that a significant share of previously short-term unemployed males is now experiencing longer job search durations. Specifically, the percentage of males in the 1-2-year unemployment category rose sharply from 23.9% to 30.9%. This shift indicates that many men are facing difficulty in securing jobs beyond the initial months of unemployment, and similar trends are visible in both the 2-3 year and over 3-year categories.

Shifts in the labour market – such as automation and changes in demand for certain industries – have likely resulted in longer job search times for men. Additionally, the post-COVID restructuring of industries has altered the types of skills employers seek, leaving a segment of the male workforce either underemployed or struggling to adapt to new sectors.

While females still experience shorter unemployment spells than their male counterparts in the 6-12 month and the less than or equal to 6 months unemployment category, the 2023-24 data reveals a clear trend toward longer job searches. In 2020-21, 35.4% of unemployed women had been seeking work for 6-12 months. By

2023-24, this figure dropped to 21%. However, the percentage of women unemployed for more than two years increased substantially, from 10.7% in 2020-21 to 16.3% in 2023-24. The rise in long-term unemployment among women can be attributed to several factors. During the pandemic, many women, particularly those in caregiving roles, were disproportionately affected by job losses, leading to longer unemployment spells. Additionally, gendered labour market segregation – where women are often concentrated in sectors like retail, hospitality, and education – may contribute to extended job search times, especially since these sectors were hit hardest by the pandemic.



Among younger individuals (15-29 years), the data reveals a concerning trend. While the proportion of youth unemployed for less than or equal to 6 months decreased between 2020-21 and 2023-24 (from 14.7% to 11.8%), there was a significant increase in the length of unemployment lasting more than one year. Specifically, the percentage of young people unemployed for 1-2 years increased from 23.3% to 32.1%. A similar upward shift is observed in both the 2-3 years and over 3 years categories.

This shift reflects the growing challenges faced by young job seekers in an increasingly competitive and complex job market. The youth labour market is heavily influenced by factors such as educational attainment, skill gaps, and the availability of entry-level positions. The rise in long-term unemployment among young people can be attributed to several key factors: slower recovery of the job market post-pandemic, mismatched skills and job requirements, and heightened competition for limited opportunities. Moreover, technological advancements like automation and digitalisation have exacerbated the issue.

Evolution of industry demands
For middle-aged individuals in the 30-45 age group, the data reveals significant changes in short-term

and long-term unemployment patterns. In 2020-21, this group had the highest proportion of individuals unemployed for 1-2 years (25.4%), and 23.2% were unemployed for 2-3 years. By 2023-24, long-term unemployment became even more pronounced, with 41.4% now unemployed for more than 3 years. This shift is driven by the transformation of industries and the growing demand for advanced, technology-driven skills. Middle-aged workers, while experienced, often find their qualifications outdated. Family responsibilities may also limit their ability to pursue retraining or relocate, compounding their challenges.

Older workers encounter significant barriers to re-entering the workforce. While the percentage of individuals (aged 46-60) unemployed for less than 6 months decreased from 20.1% in 2020-21 to 17.3% in 2023-24, long-term unemployment in both the 1-2 year and 2-3 year categories remained significant. Older workers face unique challenges when re-entering the workforce, including age discrimination, declining industry relevance, and a lack of modern digital skills, all of which make it more difficult to secure employment. For individuals aged 60 and above, the situation is even more challenging and severe. The percentage of this group unemployed for over 3 years increased sharply from 22.6% in 2020-21 to 47% in 2023-24.

The data from 2020-21 and 2023-24 reveals a complex and evolving unemployment landscape, with significant shifts across gender, age, and the duration of unemployment. Long-term unemployment is rising across all demographic groups, highlighting the need for policies that support skill development, reduce labour market barriers, and create greater employment opportunities for workers at all stages of their careers. There is another factor that needs to be accounted for, where some sections of the employable youth are looking forward to maintaining life-work balance rather than going all out to grab and slog for whatever employment opportunities are available. This phenomenon will potentially leave such youth unemployed for longer periods.

As economies continue to recover and adapt to new technological realities, it is essential to provide targeted support for the most vulnerable groups in the labour market, including youth, women, middle-aged workers, and older workers. By focusing on reskilling, enhancing job market accessibility, and addressing specific demographic challenges, policymakers can help foster a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable labour market for all.

(Palash is fellow at National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi; Wankhar is a retired Government of India officer)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Memories painted in moonlight

Remembering a 'dark era' of simple joys and celestial celebrations

RENUKA KRISHNARAJA

A few days ago, while witnessing the exclusive full moon popularly known as the Hunter's Moon in the cloudy night sky, my mind sailed back to the enduring memories of the 1980s when we were school-going children.

My father was posted in a quaint town, and we were settling down in our new house. Our next-door neighbours were a large, interesting family with several children of varying ages, with some of them being college students.

As one would expect, their house was always abuzz with unique activities, including science experiments, lively

games, and amusing ingenious ideas. To our pleasant surprise, they had a fascinating ritual of enjoying dinners in the open air on full moon nights. They called it the 'moonlight dinner'. And pretty soon, as we got along, our family too became a part of their beautiful ritual of dinner al fresco.

Come full moon nights, special meals would be cooked in their house, wherein my mother too readily offered to contribute some dishes. Certain fun events were arranged as well. At nightfall, we would all gather on their terrace beneath the vastness of the open sky with great enthusiasm. Remember, it was the 1980s. Back then, there were no high-rise buildings, and all lights would be off by 9 or 10 pm at the most in our sleepy little town.

Lying long, bright and full, the moon would be in all its glory, the looming central figure in the sky, hogging all the limelight. It is a distant memory now, yet I can vividly recall appreciating the

moon illuminating the dark sky and the gentle light dispelling the darkness around. With no other sources of light in the vicinity and no other distractions, the glow of the moonlight would cast a soft silvery hue upon the surroundings. Sounds magical, doesn't it? It truly was. And then, as planned, all the songs, dances, and games would ensue, followed by a sumptuous meal in the soft glow of the moon. What a celebration of the monthly celestial event it was!

Memories are making me smile spontaneously. As long as we resided in the town, we looked forward to the full moon and to partaking in and rejoicing in the moonlight dinners. After leaving the place, though, we did not have or create any such opportunity. Years, in fact, decades, have passed since. I realise now, though the full moon comes every month, we cannot recreate those moonlight dinners in such an ambience because of the towering constructions and the city lights flooding the sky.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A bitter pill for taxpayers?

Apropos 'Cabinet nod for 8th Pay Commission' (Jan 17), the announcement will undoubtedly please a vast number of civil servants, comprising both employed and retired individuals, whose numbers are significant. The previous Pay Commission resulted in an additional outflow of Rs 1 lakh crore from the exchequer. It remains to be seen how much the new commission will cost the government, considering increased salaries, pensions,

and retrospective arrears. Typically, bureaucrats and these commissions selectively make recommendations for implementation. Citizens must now prepare for potential increases in taxes on their incomes and cost of living. Perhaps we should consider reforming the bureaucracy to weed out inefficiencies and promote a culture of accountability.

HN Ramakrishna, Bengaluru

Attitude must change

I refer to 'A poor recipe for productivity' (Jan 16). L&T Chief S N Subrahmanyam's statement about working 90-hour weeks is a stark reminder of the need for a paradigm shift in corporate attitudes. His remarks on personal relationships undermine the importance of family time. Focusing on 'nation-building' while ignoring employee welfare is a dangerous approach that disregards personal

health and perpetuates the outdated notion that overwork equals success.

SS Paul, Nadia (West Bengal)

Litmus test for AAP

Apropos 'Excise case: ED gets MHA nod to prosecute Kejriwal' (Jan 16), the BJP-led central government's relentless attempts to prosecute AAP Chief and former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for alleged money laundering in the Delhi

excise policy scam are nothing new. The AAP has accused the BJP of misusing power ahead of the Delhi polls. While this drama appears to be an attempt to end Kejriwal's career, the upcoming Delhi elections will be a litmus test for Kejriwal.

MB Sasvaral, Davangere

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

SPEAK OUT

There has not been a single discussion on any power-sharing. Who said there will be power-sharing?... We are party cadres. People of Karnataka have given us strength, we have given 5 guarantees. The BJP is discussing about us because their house is in disorder. They want to create fake news...



D K Shivakumar, Karnataka Deputy CM

Never believe anything in politics until it has been officially denied.

Otto von Bismarck

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Mix the medium to bridge the divide

A hybrid medium of instruction with English and Kannada can help students retain cultural roots and build global edge

PRAMOD SRIDHARAMURTHY

The debate over the medium of instruction in Karnataka's government schools – which is true for other states – has been long and contentious. On one side are proponents of Kannada-medium education across all grades, emphasising its importance in preserving Karnataka's cultural identity. On the other side are advocates of English-medium instruction across all grades, arguing for its necessity for accessing global opportunities and excelling in higher education.

Over the years, Karnataka has seen numerous policy initiatives and public representations promoting Kannada as the primary medium of instruction. The 1994 State Language Policy mandated Kannada as the medium of instruction for Classes 1 to 7 in all schools, but this was later struck down by the Supreme Court of India.

More recently, writer Go Ru Channabasappa (GoRuCha) advocated for Kannada to remain the primary medium of instruction up to Class 10 while highlighting the need for infrastructure investments to make this feasible. The Karnataka Knowledge Commission has also recommended a multilingual approach, with Kannada as the primary medium of instruction up to Class 4.

While the majority of government school students continue in Kannada-medium education, there is growing interest and demand for English-medium education. According to the state education minister, government schools receive 500 applications for every 50 available English-medium seats, justifying the introduction of more English-medium classrooms.

English-medium education is seen as a gateway to better job opportunities, exposure, and success in higher education. This demand has driven increased enrolment in private schools over the years. Karnataka already has about 2,500 English-medium classrooms in government schools, with plans to add 1,000 more in the next academic year.

So, how do we reconcile these two seemingly opposing perspectives? Is one approach inherently better than the other? Are we, in meeting the demand for English-medium education, risking the established advantages of learning mother-tongue in early education? Is there a middle ground?

The solution may not lie in choosing one medium over the other but in integrating both meaningfully into the curriculum.

A bilingual, mixed-medium model in higher primary – starting from Class 5 – with ver-

nacular medium education up to Class 4 could be a practical approach.

Math and Science in English: Teaching these subjects in English can be beneficial as they are technical and universally standardised, helping students become familiar with global terminologies and resources. In the first two years of higher primary school (Classes 5 and 6), textbooks could be offered in both English and Kannada to facilitate smooth transitioning to English.

Social Sciences in Kannada: History, civics, and geography often require cultural and historical contexts. Learning these subjects in their mother tongue fosters a deep connection to local history and social systems and enhances understanding.

Research consistently shows that students grasp complex concepts more effectively when taught in their native language, especially in the foundational years. Introducing English for technical subjects in higher primary classes can facilitate a smoother transition to secondary education and beyond.

Teaching social sciences in Kannada helps students stay connected to their cultural roots, fostering a sense of identity and pride, while learning science and math in English from higher primary grades prepares them for higher education, competitive exams, and global opportunities.

This mixed-medium approach addresses parental concerns about English proficiency while preserving the importance of Kannada, ensuring a smoother transition from Kannada to English in higher classes.

The Department of Education has already developed bilingual resources, including textbooks and training materials, which are actively used in Kannada and English-medium sections. This eliminates the need for a massive curriculum overhaul; instead, the focus should be on aligning existing resources with a bilingual teaching approach.

While the idea is feasible, its success depends on effective implementation. Teachers will need specialised training to manage bilingual classrooms seamlessly. Furthermore, parents and communities must be actively engaged and informed about the benefits of mixed-medium learning to dispel any misconceptions. Additionally, initiating pilot programmes in select schools can provide valuable insights, allowing for the gradual scaling of mixed-medium education based on the observed outcomes.

The medium of instruction debate need not be divisive. Karnataka has the resources, policy frameworks, and cultural richness to pioneer a model that combines technical proficiency in English with cultural depth in Kannada. A well-executed mixed-medium approach could serve as a blueprint for other states grappling with similar challenges.

(The writer is secretary, India Literacy Project, a non-profit organisation working in the area of education)



Opinion

SATURDAY, JANUARY 18, 2025

Bullet train ambitions

Plans for indigenous high-speed trains are laudable, but innovative financing models will be needed

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi recently stated that it won't be long before the country witnesses the operation of its first bullet train. Obviously, he was referring to the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high speed rail (MAHSR) project, whose ground-breaking ceremonies were held when the then Japanese PM Shinzo Abe visited India in mid-September 2017. Indications are that it will start in Gujarat in 2027 and later expand to Maharashtra. The PM's statement, however, must be seen in the context of the journey of modernisation of the Indian Railways symbolised by Vande Bharat trains, Amrit Bharat stations, and Namo Bharat Rail. Upgrading the semi-high-speed Vande Bharat to high-speed status is already on the anvil with the railways' own Integral Coach Factory and state-run BEML collaborating to design and manufacture two prototype trainsets (of eight cars each) with a speed of 280 kmph. The first prototype will be developed in the next two years and will undergo extensive trials on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed corridor.

The plan is that the first indigenous bullet train, too, could be in operation before long. Recently, the new sleeper version of the Vande Bharat train hit a speed of 180 kmph during its trial run. The increase in the speed of Vande Bharats to 280 kmph is based on Japanese experience as the first Shinkansen in 1964 ran up to 210 kmph which later reached 320 kmph. Bullet trains are an integral part of Modi's vision of big-ticket infrastructural investments driving growth. He envisioned a "diamond quadrilateral" of bullet trains connecting major metropolitan areas on the Tokaido Shinkansen model, besides dedicated freight and industrial corridors and smart cities. Japan's willingness to help out with such proposals is reflected in a massive investment commitment comprising a mix of public and private funds and Overseas Development Assistance of which India is the largest recipient.

The Shinkansen, however, has a high price tag, while the indigenous bullet train is much more economical as the tab is ₹28 crore per car which is almost half the price of Japanese rolling stock on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad stretch. However, arranging finances for local bullet trains could still prove to be a challenge. Agencies like the Japan International Cooperation Agency extended soft loans for the MAHSR project, as they saw net gains for their domestic economies in terms of large contracts bagged by global firms like Siemens. Innovative financing models designed to pool in global patient capital, and private-sector funds, would be required for making the diamond quadrilateral with indigenous bullet trains a reality.

The Shinkansen plying between Mumbai and Ahmedabad and indigenous bullet trains connecting other metropolitan areas will indeed be a transformative moment as it will integrate urban India much more closely. Researchers like Kyle Chan at Princeton University have observed that "Regional clusters of cities can become converted to a single commuting zone, improving job opportunities for workers. Imagine a Hyderabad-Bengaluru-Chennai hi-tech cluster connected by bullet trains. And high-speed rail like conventional railways benefits from network effects where each additional line improves the value of the other existing lines". It is difficult to quantify the benefit of bullet trains on the economy although there are suggestions that cities connected by high-speed rail economically benefit more than those who are not. Positive externalities of high-speed rail include reduced CO₂ emissions. As bullet trains are powered by electric power unlike diesel/petrol and aviation turbine fuel needed by cars and airplanes, they will reduce energy dependence on imports.

Europe, don't bow to Trump on tech

HE HASN'T TAKEN office yet, but the potent influence of President-elect Donald Trump may have already extended from Silicon Valley to Brussels.

Just days after Mark Zuckerberg said he would shut down Facebook for American users on Meta Platforms, an obvious placating move to Trump, the European Commission has said it is "assessing" investigations into the market dominance of Apple, Alphabet and Meta.

Confirming any information in Brussels is often a messy endeavour. "There is no such assessment taking place," a spokeswoman for the commission told me. But at a press conference on Tuesday, another representative said "there may be a political reality that puts pressure on the technical work," in response to queries about Trump.

Of course there is. It would be foolhardy for Europe's antitrust cops to ignore what's happening on the other side of the Atlantic. Among other things, Trump has threatened the region with tariffs, and Zuckerberg has accused the EU of "screwing with" US firms and urged the incoming president to stop the bloc's fines and new standards.

But there's a reason why this is in the news. Read between the tea leaves and it seems there's concern in Brussels that its new antitrust officials won't hold the line and enforce the quick and blunt regulatory tools given to them by the new Digital Markets Act (DMA), which came into force in January. The *Financial Times* first reported the assessments on Monday, citing a senior official as saying that Trump's election "was a factor." That leak itself suggests worry.

At stake is the outcome of three ongoing cases against Apple, Alphabet and Meta, all under the DMA. None have yet been fined, but there have been efforts to extract changes in behaviour. That's no bad thing. For years, fines have simply been a cost of doing business for the largest tech companies, and shareholders know it. When the US Federal Trade Commission imposed a \$5 billion fine on Facebook in 2019, its stock went up.

But the commission is also working to change the more egregious behaviour affecting its citizens. For instance, as part of its efforts with Meta, it has pushed the company to offer EU users an option to use Facebook without targeted advertising. Meta recently started providing that option — with a €12.99 (\$13.34) subscription fee. That wasn't good enough, the commission told Meta. There should be a version that better protects personal data and is free. In November, Meta agreed to lower that subscription price by 40%.

This was like pulling teeth, but it was progress. Europe's previous antitrust cases against Big Tech took many years because they hinged on old, vague laws that put the burden of proof on the regulator. The DMA with its 22 concrete rules about market abuse was designed to allow the commission to move more quickly. And at a time when the biggest tech firms have copied the ideas of their competitors, absorbed their teams or found ways to lock customers into their ecosystems — often without much pushback thanks to their armies of lobbyists and lawyers — smarter tools for policing were sorely needed.

As the commission evaluates its cases, it must resist pressure to hold back on its enforcement plans. In 2023, Brussels officials said they might order a break-up of Alphabet. The idea was ludicrous not long ago, but the following year, the US Department of Justice made the same proposal. One must wonder if that could slide off the table, too, if the commission decides it's politically expedient to roll back antitrust efforts.

That would be highly unfortunate both for businesses and the public. The EU has already shown it can yield real behavioural change, as seen with Meta's concessions on ad-free access. With new leadership taking the helm in Brussels, backing down would signal that political pressure can impede its role of fostering market competition and protecting European citizens. That's a message the bloc can't afford to send.



PARMY OLSON

Bloomerg

TRUMP 2.0 PREDICTIONS

THERE'S NO SHORTAGE OF DOWNSIDE RISKS FOR 2025, BUT DON'T EXPECT SUPPORTERS TO TURN ON HIM

Retrospective on first year back

JEFFREY FRANKEL

Professor of capital formation and growth, Harvard University, and research associate, US National Bureau of Economic Research



States was on an unsustainable fiscal path, they disagreed on the solution. One faction touted lower taxes as the key to fiscal virtue (dismissing the "experts' view" that this would worsen the budget balance rather than improve it), and the other, spurred by Elon Musk, emphasised spending cuts. (The much-hyped Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) — headed by Musk and former Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy — had little impact in 2025.)

Budget negotiations devolved into an all-too-familiar game of chicken. When neither side flinched, the US faced a fiery collision, in the form of a month-long government shutdown and credit downgrades by three major ratings agencies, which in turn crashed stock and bond markets.

As the year drew to a close, some observers argued that the US is in recession. In any case, rising inflation — fuelled by Trump's tariffs and his attacks on the US Federal Reserve's independence — augurs the return of 1970s-style stagflation.

At the same time, there was a vast divergence between what Trump's supporters and opponents expected and what they got in 2025. As it turned out, the business community unexpectedly prevailed on him for higher caps on the number of H-1B visas (for high-skilled workers) and expansion of other legal immigration channels. Trump also re-

versed himself on TikTok. He made big changes to his cabinet, firing secretary of health and human services Robert Kennedy, Jr, who sought tougher regulations for pharmaceutical companies.

Beyond the economy, Trump took other unexpected steps. His most startling volte-face was his support of states guaranteeing a woman's right to abortion. He insisted that he has always believed the matters should be decided at the state level.

In terms of foreign policy, one big shock was the first armed US incursion into Mexico in over a century.

Before that, Trump withdrew support from Ukraine, as expected, effectively surrendering to Russia and thereby fatally undermining US credibility in the eyes of potential adversaries, not least Russia. President Vladimir Putin himself. Russian troops moved into parts of Georgia and ominously popped up along its 1,500-mile border with NATO, tying down their Western counterparts throughout the year.

With the US distracted, and a new precedent set regarding respect — or the lack thereof — for national borders, Venezuela invaded Guyana, Ethiopia invaded Somalia, and Indonesia invaded Timor-Leste. Unencumbered by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, from which Trump withdrew in 2018, and weakened by the decimation of its proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, the Iran-

regime completed its development of nuclear weapons.

Most alarming, however, were naval actions by China, whether a reaction to its economic downturn, which Trump's tariffs have exacerbated, or an effort to exploit America's current weakness. Throughout the year, Chinese forces were active in the waters around Taiwan and on newly fortified islands that it claims in the South China Sea. With Trump's tough-guy reputation roundly questioned, he surprised everyone when he responded to a ship collision, in which several US sailors were killed, by sending a joint US-Philippine naval force to retake Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands. In a pattern familiar from modern history, the Trump administration carried out a threat of military intervention that it had neglected to signal in advance.

At year end, China's coast guard appeared to be installing a "quarantine" of Taiwan. Trump has now sent all naval forces the US can spare to break the blockade if necessary. As 2026 gets underway, fears of a hot war between the two nuclear superpowers seem all too real.

Throughout 2025, Trump's opponents consorted themselves with thoughts of a silver lining: their fellow Americans would finally see the consequences of having such a president. Before long, his influence would plummet, both in Congress and among the electorate, as he spent more time playing golf at Mar-a-Lago.

No such luck. As usual, Trump blames the disruptions and disasters of 2025 on anyone or anything other than himself. Likewise, his supporters do not see the adverse developments of 2025 as his fault. Why should they, when they never have before? True, Trump's supporters are unable to distil the appropriate lessons from history. But in predicting that they will, his opponents are ignoring history as well.

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AI's rise: Progress, power, and ethical peril



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Is AI shaping our future or stealing our humanity?

This global race for AI supremacy risks sidelining the very essence of what makes us human

THE GLOBAL DISCOURSE surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) has largely been dominated by an obsession with technological achievement. Conversations brim with excitement about creating smarter systems, optimising computational efficiencies, and redefining innovation's boundaries. Yet, a troubling silence looms large — one that sidesteps the profound ethical and social questions AI raises. Are we, as a global society, so captivated by the "can we?" that we've lost sight of the equally important "should we?"

Science and technology have undeniably propelled humanity forward, yet the rise of AI poses challenges that transcend their domains. At its core, AI forces us to grapple with questions about trust, justice, and fairness. Can an algorithm genuinely understand morality, or does it simply simulate ethical reasoning through statistical models? After all, as human society with centuries of existence, we still have not understood morality as binary. These are not technical conundrums, for they are deeply human dilemmas. Yet, they are too often sidelined, overshadowed by metrics of policy optimisation and regulatory scale.

The technologists and policymakers shaping AI frequently operate within a framework of accuracy and performance. But this focus begs critical questions: Accuracy for whom? Performance to what end? The assumption that technological progress automatically translates into societal advancement is dangerously naive. When algorithms determine access to

healthcare, credit, or even justice, they wield moral authority far beyond their intended design. The societal consequences of these decisions demand scrutiny — scrutiny that technologists are neither trained nor equipped to provide.

Globally, attempts to regulate AI reveal a fragmented landscape. The European Union's AI Act is among the most comprehensive efforts, categorising AI systems by risk and enforcing strict requirements on high-risk applications. The US has taken a more sector-specific approach, while China, with its vast data resources, has embedded AI deeply into surveillance and state control. India, meanwhile, stands at a crossroads, attempting to balance aspirations for technological leadership with the need to address its unique challenges of data sovereignty.

In a country defined by its sheer size and complexity, how do we ensure fairness in AI systems when digital literacy and access are still uneven? How do we protect individual consent in a socio-economic environment where power dynamics are deeply entrenched? These are questions that must inform India's regulatory frameworks.

Adding to this complexity is the glaring absence of diverse voices in the AI debate. Industry leaders and governments often reduce AI to a geopolitical chess piece, toutting it as a tool for economic

dominance or national pride.

Consider how harm and benefit are often assessed in AI. Utilitarian principles dominate, measuring outcomes by the greatest good for the greatest number. But is this approach sufficient when fundamental rights are at stake? If an AI system benefits 99% of users but discriminates against 1%, can its existence be justified?

Moreover, the ethical challenges of AI are evolving at a pace that far exceeds our ability to regulate them. Autonomous weapons, deepfake technologies, and pervasive surveillance are realities.

AI implications extend beyond governance to consumerism itself. AI is already reshaping how we consume, with algorithms subtly influencing the products we buy, the news we read, and even the values we hold. This transformation is especially significant for India, where more than half the 1.4 billion population is under 30. As digital natives, this demographic will drive consumption patterns.

AI systems can nudge preferences, shape aspirations, and manipulate choices, often in ways that serve corporate profits over individual well-being. For a young India, this raises troubling questions about agency and freedom.

The impact of AI on labour markets further complicates the picture. Automation will challenge traditional job structures, creating a dual imperative for up-

skilling and redefining work itself. India's demographic dividend could quickly become a liability if its workforce is not prepared for an AI-dominated future. This preparation must go beyond technical skills, fostering critical thinking, ethical awareness, and adaptability.

The rise of AI also forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about ourselves. Are we so enamoured with our technological prowess that we overlook its limits? In our quest for efficiency, are we neglecting the larger societal challenges AI creates? It is not enough to regulate AI after its deployment; we must embed ethical guidelines.

This shift demands a multidisciplinary approach. Philosophers must grapple with questions of machine morality. Anthropologists must study how AI reshapes cultures and social norms. Artists and writers must imagine alternative futures, envisioning technologies that prioritise human over efficiency.

The way AI will shape up, and probably even steer humanity, will not be merely a reflection of our technological capabilities. It would be the ultimate litmus test for our moral courage. India faces a delicate balancing act: crafting stabilising AI regulations while avoiding the trap of ceding emerging technology leadership to entrenched Western dominance, as happened with Web 1 and Web 2. If losing technological sovereignty is the price of ethical governance, does India truly have a choice — or is this a Hobson's choice in disguise?

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Benefits of nowcasting

Apropos of "The power of nowcasting" (FE, January 17), with the digital expansion and influence of machine learning and artificial intelligence across sectors, adopting nowcasting does not appear a big hurdle. However, integrating isolated platforms as source of information to a common grid in tapping, extracting, and processing the inputs to suit a consumable format is a mammoth

task. In agriculture, nowcasting may help monitor the progress of crops sown, hectares covered, pest attacks, quantity of fertilisers required, and the harvested quantity. The data from it would help the authorities to regulate production, analyse the watering patterns of crops, damage caused by droughts or floods, and help plan exports of surplus produce. It would also help policymakers and planners in fine-tuning policies.

—RV Baskaran, Chennai

Space milestone

Apropos of "A first: Isro docks 2 satellites in space" (FE, January 17), APJ Abdul Kalam would have been the happiest had he been alive as India's space agency scripted history yet again. India has entered a niche club — that includes the US, China, and Russia — with a technological milestone that underscores our ambitions to expand our share, which is just 2% now, in the global space

market. Space docking is a stepping to building a space station and various other missions. Besides payloads, eight cowpea seeds were sent to space which were germinated within four days of the mission's launch, suggesting food can be grown in long space missions. The Centre's approval of a third launch pad will further boost the agency's space ambitions.

—Bal Govind, Noida

19 BIG PICTURE

AT HOME WITH THE WOMEN'S WORLD RAPID CHAMPION

Queen Koneru

The youngest woman to be grandmaster, three decades of playing the sport and now twice World Rapid Champion. Yet, as she says, her "chess ends when I finish a tournament". AMIT KAMATH visits Koneru Humpy at her home in Vijayawada where she is as tactical about family time as she is about her moves on the chess board

A FORTNIGHT after she won her second World Rapid Championship title, Koneru Humpy is sitting in her living room in Vijayawada flanked by her husband Dasari Anvesh and her father Ashok. There is laughter in the air that bounces off the white walls of the room. There is some gentle leg-pulling and lots of reminiscing.

Humpy is still basking in the glow of her World Rapid title in New York — her second World Rapid crown after the one in 2019. This title caught Humpy herself by surprise, coming as it did after a series of tepid results over the past few months besides health issues that have plagued her over more than a year.

Playing in New York in a strong field of 110 women, she made it through the event battling jet lag that would see her waking up at unearthly hours, much like an irritating alarm clock without a snooze button. She slumped to a defeat in the first round of the World Rapid Championship, losing on time despite having a slightly better position on the board.

Then, came the comeback. With nothing going her way, Humpy fought. Humpy won.

It's this quality of hers that her father and first coach Ashok greatly admires.

"As a youngster, I was very ambitious. I never used to agree for draws. There are several games where I rejected a draw, pressed too hard and then lost," Humpy elaborates.

"Nowadays, in my opinion, she is less aggressive. I want to see her at her best: as an aggressive player. She never compromised for a draw (when she was young). Always fought for a win. That's what I want to see," says Ashok, who played that same brand of never-say-die chess as a state-level player.

In the family, Ashok is the true chess obsessive.

"He plays online chess every day from morning to evening. There will be days when I don't see chess at all. But he does not miss playing chess even for a single day," says Humpy about her father. "He traveled with me until 2011, we used to work together. Then from 2011, I started preparing on my own. But he still gives me guidance."

At the World Rapid Championship, that guidance from Ashok came in the form of some out-of-the-box advice: train without using a chess engine, watch videos of past world champions, play plenty of online games and solve puzzles.

"You are my pride, mom"

Here in her comfy apartment in a luxurious high-rise complex on the Chennai-Vijayawada Highway, Humpy has created an idyllic cocoon for herself. Her parents live in the same apartment complex. Her in-laws live not too far away. Both sets of parents help with her daughter Ahana when Humpy is abroad playing in events.

Unlike most other elite players who struggle to switch off from the sport, Humpy's life has a harmonious balance.

"My chess ends when I finish a tournament. And then chess only happens when I am practising in my room or talking to my dad. That's when chess happens. Otherwise, chess doesn't occur in my life at all. I wanted to be like that. I wanted to separate the two things. I don't take the stress from the board into my home," says Humpy.

After three decades of playing the sport, the 37-year-old's life is neatly compartmentalised in two aspects. First, is her chess career. Ashok, who wields considerable influence over her on the board, is the patron saint of this aspect. When Humpy plays in international tournaments, Ashok is the only one at home who tracks the event diligently.

The second compartment is her family life. This is the part which husband Anvesh and daughter Ahana inhabit. Aged seven, roughly the age at which Humpy denied heading into the rabbit hole called chess, Ahana has very limited interest in the sport. When Humpy returns from tournaments, she can expect Ahana to pop up at the airport to ask if she won. At the World Rapid Championship, with New York being half an earth's spin away, Humpy and Ahana never spoke on the phone until the World Rapid title was won. Then, when she returned to India, Ahana greeted her with a handwritten card.

"You are my pride, mom. You are my greatest motivation. You are an inspiration to me. Your devotion, hard work, love and faith inspire me to do more, learn more and

to reach my goals. I love you mom," wrote Ahana with pencil.

These twin forces take charge of Humpy's daily life almost by appointment: the first half of the day is usually reserved for chess; the second half is all about the family. If she gets the competitive fire from her father, her husband and daughter provide emotional sustenance.

Humpy's days in Vijayawada start early, with an hour-long session in the gym starting from 7 or 7.30 am. Then she trains from 9.30 or 10. A little break around 1.30 follows before she's back training from 3 pm. It's not a very elaborate setting either — "just a laptop and me," she says.

Finally, when her daughter returns from school around 4.45 pm, Humpy spends as much of it as she can with Ahana, helping her with homework or going for walks to the park.



A lot of her own childhood was spent blissfully commanding a wooden chess army on the battlefield of 64 squares with her father watching every move with pride. Now she's determined to spend as much time as possible chasing another kind of bliss, with her partner and daughter



Humpy with father Ashok and husband Anvesh. While her first half of the day is usually reserved for chess, the second is for the family. Photos: Amit Kamath



In the evenings, Humpy spends time with daughter Ahana



When Humpy returned to India after the World Rapid Championship, Ahana greeted her with a handwritten card. "You are my pride, mom. You are my greatest motivation..."

"When there is a tournament coming up, I train for five to six hours minimum. But when there's nothing coming, I am not very particular that I have to train everyday. I train based on what's happening with Ahana," says Humpy.

A lot of her own childhood was spent blissfully commanding a wooden chess army on the battlefield of 64 squares with her father watching every move with pride. Now she's determined to spend as much time as possible chasing another kind of bliss, with her partner and daughter.

Anvesh, a businessman who accompanied Humpy once to a tournament, admits

he doesn't follow the sport too much.

"Ahana knows more (about chess) than him," Ashok good-naturedly chides his son-in-law. Everyone heartily guffaws at this.

Family members of many elite grandmasters don't necessarily learn the sport itself, but they get pretty good at interpreting body language cues. Over time they figure out when to steer clear, especially after a particularly bruising defeat.

Humpy's husband says she's always the same, with rarely any of her chess mood spilling over at home. There is no glowering athlete that necessitates family members gingerly tiptoeing around her.

"One thing about her is that she always likes to spend time with family. Even if she's not done well, she likes to have the company of the family around. Of course angry thoughts will come up, but after having played for more than three decades, she is very mature about her feelings. She will never show that anger to the family," says Anvesh.

Anvesh paints a picture of Humpy at home as a bit of a perfectionist. Humpy says she cooks rarely, but when she does, she's determined to get it right. If she's making biryani, she chuckles, she starts watching as many videos of it as possible the night before.

Away from the board, Humpy says she enjoys watching movies. But post-pandemic, visits to the theatre have reduced while they do movie nights at home via OTT platforms. "Movies are mostly on weekends. Ahana prefers to watch cartoons. So we give her priority in the evenings," says Humpy.

No sponsor, no second

Twice last year, Humpy felt she was ready to walk away from the sport after particularly bruising performances. Both occasions were after bad tournaments: she was second from last at the Norway Chess event and last in the Tata Steel Rapid Championship in Kolkata. But after every such setback, when she

HUMPY'S CAREER MILESTONES

2002

Humpy becomes the youngest woman in history to achieve the grandmaster title at the age of 15

2011

Humpy fights for the Women's World Chess Championship — the top prize in women's chess — against Hou Yifan in Tirana but loses.

2019

Back after a lengthy break due to childbirth, Humpy wins the World Rapid Chess Championship

2020

Humpy leads the Indian team to clinch joint-gold at the Online Chess Olympiad

2022

leads the Indian women's chess team to a bronze medal at the Chess Olympiad in Chennai

2022

Humpy wins a silver medal at the 2022 World Blitz Championships

2024

Humpy wins her second World Rapid Championship title in New York

felt she couldn't do it anymore, an overwhelming sentiment would prevail — not like this, not because of a defeat.

"I'm fine to quit the sport anytime if I feel like I'm not performing as per my expectations. But I didn't want to quit only because I lost the tournament. I wanted to make it a point that I still have that quality of a champion. I want to prove that. And somewhere inside me, this triggered me and probably that was one of the reasons for me to sustain for such a long period," says Humpy.

She points to being in a similar frame of mind in 2018, when she was making a comeback after a sustained break due to pregnancy.

"Sometime around 2018, after I came back from the break, I played at events like the Chess Olympiad and the World Knockout Championship. In the World Knockout, I lost in the second round. I was very upset. At that time, my daughter was just a year old. I was wondering if I will ever be able to come back to my best form."

At that stage of her life, support came from her parents and Anvesh, who egged her on. Right after that, she won her first World Rapid title.

The greatest female chess player from India does not have a trainer or a second (a strong grandmaster who helps with preparation) at the moment. Nor does she have a corporate sponsor. She has been helped by ONGC since 2006, but besides that, there are no sponsors. She says she hired her first second when she competed in the World Women's Championship in 2011. But since then, she only occasionally takes help from seconds.

This takes the father-daughter duo back to her childhood, when, despite the fact that she was the world's youngest woman to become a grandmaster (at the age of 15 in 2002), sponsorships were hard to come by.

"In fact, before I became a grandmaster I had sponsorship from a bank. Then they withdrew my sponsorship and started sponsoring a cricketer," says Humpy. Ashok wrote to corporates asking for

sponsorship, but none came. He kept the rejection letters that came from sponsors. They were all politely worded, but the whiff of rejection was unmistakable.

Humpy last went to school in Class 4, but by Class 7, she quit studies. Now she gets invited to events at universities as the chief guest.

"I believe that you should always do whatever you are passionate about. I don't wonder at all (what studying would have been like). But I do miss the experience of enjoying with friends and all these things. But if you want to be a professional, you have to sacrifice something. Now I wait for my daughter to come home from school and I listen to all the conversations that she has at school with her friends. That's fun!"

Ashok's first plan for Humpy was to make her a tennis player, like his own father, who was a club-level player.

"I learnt chess from my father. He used to play both tennis and chess. When the Willis sisters were making a mark in the world, I observed that there is a lot of money in tennis. That's why I wanted her to play tennis. He was attracted to chess while I was studying the game. I myself started playing chess because of Bobby Fischer. I followed that Boris Spassky versus Fischer match closely on the radio. When Humpy started playing, I thought I could make her like Judit Polgar (the Hungarian chess grandmaster who is the strongest woman chess player of all time)," reveals Ashok. "So the first thing I told her was to beat my father. He was a club-level chess player, but she beat him by the age of eight. After that, I played against her. I was a tournament-level player. By the age of 11 she was able to beat me."

Those early games would see Ashok give his daughter a deliberate advantage on the board to get her to beat him.

"I wanted her to learn how to exploit their own weaknesses," he says, chuckling proudly. "After some months, she didn't need those chances also."



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Bonanza before budget

The Cabinet has greenlit the 8th Pay Commission, setting the stage for a revision of salaries of central govt employees

The Union Cabinet's approval of the 8th Pay Commission ahead of the budget marks a significant step toward revising the salary and pension structure for over 49 lakh central government employees and nearly 65 lakh pensioners. Chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the decision emphasises improving quality of life and stimulating economic activity through enhanced consumption. The 8th Pay Commission will be tasked with revising salaries, allowances and pensions for central government employees and pensioners. Consultations will be held with central and state governments and other stakeholders before finalising its recommendations. The Commission's chairman and two members are to be appointed shortly, and its findings will replace the existing 7th Pay Commission framework, whose term ends in 2026. Historically, pay commissions are constituted every decade to address inflation, economic growth and employees' changing financial needs.



Prime Minister Modi underscored that the revised pay structure will boost consumption by increasing disposable incomes. Higher salaries and pensions are expected to lead to increased spending on goods and services, driving demand in sectors such as retail, real estate, and automobiles.

This consumption surge could further stimulate production and employment, creating a positive feedback loop in the economy. The Commission's recommendations are expected to address the rising cost of living and improve the financial wellbeing of central government employees and pensioners. While the revisions will inject liquidity into the economy, they will also impose a significant financial burden on the exchequer. Increased salary outlays may necessitate budgetary adjustments, potentially impacting allocations for other sectors like infrastructure and welfare. Although PSU and state government employees are outside the direct purview of central pay commissions, the 8th Pay Commission's recommendations often set a benchmark. Many state governments and PSUs align their pay scales with central government standards, amplifying the financial impact across the broader public sector. This could also have adverse effect on the economy. Higher disposable incomes could lead to demand-pull inflation, particularly in essential goods and services. Managing inflation will require a balanced monetary policy. Besides, the exclusion of PSU employees and 'gramin dak sevaks' from central pay commission benefits may intensify demands for similar revisions, potentially leading to unrest and political pressure. Increased spending on salaries and pensions may constrain the government's ability to invest in capital-intensive projects, potentially slowing long-term economic growth. Despite challenges, it can serve as a catalyst for the economy by generating demand and boosting production.

who guide the masses. Various 'Akharas' (monastic orders) play a pivotal role in preserving and propagating Sanatan Dharma. The ascetics, often clad in saffron robes or ash, symbolise the renunciation of worldly desires. The ritual bath in the rivers further holds deep symbolic meaning. It signifies the washing away of one's ego and sins, allowing a fresh spiritual beginning. Historian William Dalrymple observes, "The saints at the Kumbh Mela are the custodians of India's timeless spirituality." The Kumbh Mela beautifully embodies the fusion of religion and science. Its timing, rooted in precise astronomical calculations, reflects the profound significance of Hindu cosmology. When Jupiter enters Aquarius and the Sun moves into Aries, planetary alignments create an auspicious period for spiritual connection. This sacred festival links cosmic phenomena with earthly rituals, highlighting the deep interconnection between the universe and human spirituality. Aryabhata's pioneering work in celestial phenomena, including planetary motion and eclipses, continues to influence the Kumbh's timing. The Kumbh Mela is also a melting pot of cultures, philosophies, and humanity. Participants range from reclusive ascetics to common people and even international visitors. This diversity underscores the universality of the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Sociologist Sudhir Kakar once wrote that the "Kumbh Mela is not merely a religious event but a grand celebration of human interconnectedness." The exchange of ideas, rituals, and philosophies at the Mela fosters a unique sense of global unity. Hosting millions of pilgrims at the Kumbh Mela demands meticulous planning, leveraging cutting-edge technologies like AI-powered crowd management systems, drone surveillance for security, and mobile health clinics to handle medical emergencies. Mobile apps and live-streaming services ensure smooth communication and global accessibility for devotees. The 2025 Kumbh will span an expanded area of 800 hectares, featuring 1.8 lakh tents and 101 smart parking facilities for five lakh vehicles daily. Despite the challenges, the event seamlessly blends tradition and modernity. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

PICTALK



Tourists at Mall Road amid snowfall, in Marali

A spectacle of faith, unity and cosmic significance

The Kumbh Mela highlights the blend of tradition and modernity. It links cosmic phenomena with earthly rituals while fostering community feeling

The grand Maha Kumbh Mela, one of the most magnificent spiritual gatherings in the world, is here. The Uttar Pradesh government has meticulously prepared to host this sacred festival – happening once every 12 years – with Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally monitoring the developments. Began on January 13, 2025, the Maha Kumbh is anticipated to draw an awe-inspiring congregation of over 45 crores – a footfall of around 450 million pilgrims, saints, ascetics and tourists – devotees.

At the heart of this divine celebration, is the (coming together) 'Sangam' – the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mystical Saraswati rivers. Millions of devotees will come together to take a holy dip, seeking spiritual cleansing and blessings. The Maha Kumbh is a timeless testament to faith, unity, and the eternal connection between humanity and the divine, that owes its origins to mythology and history. Devotees believe that a dip during the auspicious planetary alignments cleanses sins and paves the way for Moksha (liberation). Swami Sivananda, the Yoga Guru, and a proponent of Vedanta, rightly pointed out that "The holy dip at the Kumbh Mela is not just a ritual; it is a profound surrender to the divine. Mythologically connected, the legend of 'Samudra Manthan', or the Churning of the Ocean, is the cornerstone of its mythological significance. According to ancient scriptures, gods and demons churned the ocean to obtain the nectar of immortality (Amrit).

As the Gods carried away the nectar, a few drops fell at four locations – Haridwar, Prayagraj, Nashik and Ujjain – and these places became sacred. Thus began the tradition of the Kumbh Mela. Scholar Diana Eck, professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University notes that "The Kumbh Mela reflects the Indian ethos of integrating mythology with geography, turning the mundane into the sacred." References to Kumbha appear in Vedic texts like the Rigveda,



Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. It is also linked to the zodiac sign Aquarius, an astrological interpretation influenced by Greek ideas in the late 1st millennium CE.

'Mela' means "assembly" or "gathering" and signifies fairs or communal celebrations, as found in ancient Hindu texts. Together, Kumbha Mela refers to a "gathering centered around water or the nectar of immortality." Historically, the first recorded mention of the Kumbh Mela can be traced back to the writings of the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang in the 7th century CE. Hiuen Tsang documented several key events during Harsha's (Harshavardhana) rule over much of northern India from 606 to 647 AD and his reign is regarded as one of relative peace and prosperity) reign. Tsang also documented the Kumbh Mela festival in Prayag which Harsha attended. Over centuries, the festival evolved from a modest gathering of ascetics to a colossal event that attracts millions. The historical transformation of the Kumbh Mela underscores its resilience and adaptability, blending spiritual fervor with societal changes. A defining feature of the Kumbh Mela is the presence of saints, seers, and spiritual leaders



REFERENCES TO KUMBH APPEAR LIKE VEDIC TEXTS LIKE THE RIGVEDA, YAJURVEDA, SAMAVEDA, AND ATHARVAVEDA. IT IS ALSO LINKED TO THE ZODIAC SIGN AQUARIUS, AN ASTROLOGICAL INTERPRETATION INFLUENCED BY GREEK IDEAS IN THE LATE 1ST MILLENNIUM CE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The silent struggles of a daughter-in-law: A call to change

Allowing a daughter-in-law to flourish in her own right doesn't diminish the family's unity—it strengthens it

Living in a joint family is rarely simple, but for a daughter-in-law, it may be a delicate balancing act filled with judgement and criticism. In many households, the role of a daughter-in-law is laden with unspoken expectations, leaving little room for her individuality. It's time we acknowledge these silent struggles and push for a more inclusive and empathetic family dynamic.

A daughter-in-law often steps into a household as an outsider, expected to adapt seamlessly to a new way of life. From changing her surname to understanding the intricacies of family traditions, she embarks on a journey of transformation. Yet, the term "in-law" itself can feel like a trap—a constant reminder of her peripheral status in the family. For many, this word symbolises the invisible cage of societal expectations and sacrifices that are seldom reciprocated. "It feels as though I'm constantly being watched," shares Anonymous, 37, who recently relocated to live with her in-laws following her marriage. "It can be exhausting to sense scrutiny at every corner,



RACHNA LAKHPATI

whether it's about your outfit or your manner of speaking." These tales are not one of a kind. Across the nation, countless women grapple with the challenge of fulfilling the expectations of others while striving to maintain their sense of self. Some of my friends and cousins have admitted to bending the truth just to carve out a little time for themselves—a brief coffee catch-up or a quick getaway to relax with friends. Some even refer to it as a means of 'escaping' the steadfast pressures of family life. But why should it come to this? Why must a daughter-in-law justify her need for a breather?

The narrative that has been perpetuated for generations—that she must be the glue holding the family together—needs an overhaul. Living in a joint family should not mean sacrificing one's freedom or sense of self. It's high time families rethink the dynamics and extend the same courtesy of individuality and space to their daughters-in-law that they offer their sons. Empathy and equality within a household aren't luxuries; they are necessities for harmony. Allowing a daughter-in-law to flourish in her own right doesn't diminish the family's unity—it strengthens it. Moreover, it sets an exam-

ple for future generations, teaching them to prioritise respect over rigid roles. Transformation begins with dialogue. It is essential for families to recognise the contributions a daughter-in-law makes and to foster open communication regarding shared responsibilities. Partners also hold a crucial position in connecting their spouses with their families, making certain that everyone feels appreciated and heard. At its core, a family is about mutual love, respect, and support. Let's replace the stifling word "in-law" with something more inclusive—perhaps "in-love", symbolising acceptance and belonging. After all, isn't that what a family should truly be about? For daughters-in-law across the world, the message is clear: You are not alone in your struggle. For families, the challenge is to listen, adapt, and foster a space where everyone, regardless of their title, feels at home. It's not just about rewriting roles—it's about rewriting the narrative for a more equitable tomorrow. (The writer is a freelance writer; views are personal)

ISRO'S DOCKING MISSION SUCCESSFUL

Madam — ISRO docking two fast-moving spacecraft in space is a highly complex operation with numerous benefits. Docking enables the assembly of modular space stations, telescopes, or other large structures in orbit that cannot be launched in one piece. Example: Docking was essential in constructing the International Space Station (ISS). Docking allows for the transfer of astronauts and cargo between spacecraft or from a spacecraft to a space station. This supports long-term missions, resupply and the exchange of crew. This extends the operational life of expensive assets like communication or scientific satellites. Docking technology allows spacecraft to refuel in space, enabling longer missions or supporting reusable spacecraft. This is crucial for deep space exploration missions.

Docking is a critical step for assembling spacecraft or transferring crew for missions to the Moon, Mars, or beyond. Modular spacecraft for such missions often require multiple launches and dockings to combine their components. Docking facilitates international cooperation, as different countries can launch modules or experiments that dock with a shared platform, like a space station. Docking provides a means for evacuation and rescue in case of emergencies aboard a spacecraft or space station. Spacecraft like crew capsules (e.g., SpaceX Dragon, ISRO's Gaganyaan) rely on docking to connect with orbital stations, making them reusable and cost-effective. Successfully executing docking operations demonstrates technological prowess, boosts national pride, and establishes the country as a leader in space exploration. Docking operations are a cornerstone of space exploration and mission sustainability, enabling long-term presence and work in space. This achievement has placed India in the exclusive and elite league of the US, Russia, and China! This docking was successful on January 16, 2025!

India strengthens its naval fleet



After two days of the inauguration of the strategically important Z-Morh or Sonamarg Tunnel in Jammu and Kashmir, Prime Minister Narendra Modi dedicated to the nation three frontline naval combatants—the destroyer INS Surat, the frigate INS Nilgiri and the Scorpene-class submarine INS Vagha—on their commissioning at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai on the occasion of Army Day on

Wednesday. It is for the first time that all three frontline platforms have been indigenously developed in the country. The simultaneous commissioning of these vessels is a shot in the arm for the Indian Navy, which is preparing itself to challenge China's hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. Equipped with the advanced technology, all three vessels have boosted the Indian Navy's capabilities to respond to various maritime challenges more effectively. In fact, public sector shipyards such as GRSE Kolkata, MDL Mazgaon, CSL Kochi, GSI Goa and HSL Vizag Besides immense contributions to defence preparation, the Indian Navy has contributed immensely to boosting operational preparedness of the Indian Navy by completing various shipbuilding projects in a very efficient and time-bound manner.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

ACTOR SAIF ALI KHAN ATTACKED

Madam — Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan was stabbed six times after confronting an intruder, who had a confrontation with Khan's maid before the actor intervened, resulting in a physical struggle, in his Bandra residence early Thursday morning. The intruder fled after a violent altercation, and Khan was rushed to Lilavati Hospital by his son, Ibrahim and a caretaker, where he has successfully emerged from surgery and is now out of danger. The actor is currently recovering, with doctors closely monitoring his condition. People wonder how an intruder can enter the building and reach the 11th floor in a high-profile building that is well guarded and then escape also. Moreover, all in Bandra. An area that has the highest concentration of celebrities, which is supposed to have adequate security. No doubt 54-year-old Saif is a fit person, so he could have the intruder. Wishing Saif Ali Khan a speedy recovery, trusting that the law will take its course and those responsible will be held accountable.

Gopalaswamy | Chennai

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

HAMAS-ISRAEL TRUCE DECLARED

Madam — The ceasefire accord emerged after mediation by Qatar, Egypt and the US to stop the war that began with deadly Hamas attacks on Israel and saw Israeli forces kill tens of thousands of Palestinians and devastate Gaza. It is a welcome move. As per the deal, Israel and Hamas have agreed to halt the war in Gaza and see the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners. It is the most significant breakthrough in 15 months of war that began in October 2023. Firstly, hostages in Gaza and Palestinian prisoners in Israel would be freed, and Gazans who have been displaced would be allowed to start returning home. During this period, Israeli troops would pull out of all populated areas in Gaza while the Palestinians would also return to their neighbourhoods in all the areas of Gaza. The second stage would be a permanent end to the war, according to Biden.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

GROUND ZERO



Rescue workers go down 300 metres in search of the men who have been missing ever since the mine in Kalamati in Dima Hasao district of Assam flooded on January 6, 2025. RITU RAJ KOKHAR

Dying for black gold

On January 6, a rat-hole mine in Assam's Dima Hasao district was flooded, trapping nine men. More than 10 days after the incident, only four bodies have been retrieved. Though banned, rat-hole mining, which is dangerous but lucrative, continues unabated in Assam and Meghalaya. **Rahul Karmakar** reports on the incident and the prevalent practice that provides livelihoods while claiming lives

Rajib Barman, 39, had heard that the job of a rat-hole miner was hazardous, but he chose to do it because he had a debt of ₹60,000 to pay off. A resident of Sitalabazar village in western Assam's Kokrajhar district, Barman decided to work at the Kalamati mine in the Umrangso area of Dima Hasao district via a middleman. He hoped to bring home ₹90,000 by working in the mine for two months at about ₹1,500 per day – more than thrice the usual wage in the rural parts of Assam. This translated into earning ₹90-100 per kilogramme of coal extracted at an average of 15 cartloads of the fossil fuel stripped off the mine.

On January 6, 2025, Barman descended into the dark pit for the first day of mining. "The sardar (supervisor of miners) had told us the previous night that we could start working as the water that had accumulated in the mine had been drained out," Barman says. "We went down 250 feet below the ground at 4:30 a.m. and began working inside one of the tunnels."

Barman's body ached as he was working in an awkward position for the first time. After more than two hours, he decided to take a break and crawled back towards the mouth of the tunnel. Rat-holes are the labyrinthine passages that branch out from 300-foot-deep pits.

A few feet from the opening, Barman heard screams and the sound of gushing water growing louder. "Seconds later, I was swept into the pit," he recalls. "I managed to clamber up the chain of the crane (used to haul coal) and get out. But my three room-mates could not make it."

So far, of the nine miners trapped inside, only four bodies have been recovered. Search and rescue operations by the Indian Army, Navy, the National Disaster Response Force, and the State Disaster Response Force were on for the others, but five days ago, Navy divers were withdrawn from the operations. While dewatering of the mine continues, the government has assessed it could take up to 60 days to drain out all the water.

On January 16, the Assam Cabinet approved a judicial inquiry into the tragedy and decided to constitute a Special Investigation Team to probe the incident, one of the deadliest in recent times. It also decided to frame a standard operating procedure (SOP) to enforce a blanket ban on rat-hole mining in Assam apart from sealing some 220 pits surveyed so far.

Dangers lurk below

For Raju Basumatary, 55, this is the second time a disaster like this has taken place. The first time this happened was at Ksan in Meghalaya's coal-rich East Jaintia Hills district on December 13, 2018. Then too, he was about 200 metres from the pit that devoured some of his fellow miners.

These, though, are not the only mishaps that Basumatary has encountered in 26 years as a rat-hole miner. He came to Kalamati from the Khleiriat area of Meghalaya four years ago.

"*Khibakhibi hoie thakhe* (Something or the other keeps happening)," he says, rattling off all the possibilities. "A miner slips to death in the pit, another is asphyxiated, somebody else dies after smelling toxic gas, the fourth drowns..."

The illegal tag has only increased the price of coal; it has not stopped mining

AGNES KHARSHING
Anti-mining activist

Basumatary says miners put themselves at risk in the dark depths of the earth. All they have is a torch strapped to their head to guide them. "Still, the money is good and it is guaranteed as long as you extract coal during the season," he says.

The "season" he refers to is the mining period between November and March. During the first two months of this period, workers invariably drain the water that fills the mines, which are often interlinked beneath the ground, because of rainfall and seepage from April to October.

Then they crawl into the mines and using pickaxes, extract coal from the walls of a rectangular tunnel that is 2-3 metres high or shovel about 20 kg of coal lumps onto a cart. They drag this to the mouth of the tunnel. Large metal troughs, operated with pulleys from a crane, haul a tonne or two of the coal to the surface.

Joseph Soren, 40, was in charge of loading the coal onto one of the troughs eased down from a crane when disaster struck on January 6. He was the last of the 23 miners who made it after helping those who could not swim escape first.

"I heard shouts of 'water, water!' and rumbling sounds. Before I could figure anything out, water carrying the miners shot out of the tunnels. We grabbed anything – the chains from the crane, the pipe of a water pump, ropes thrown down from people above – to save ourselves. The murky, stinging water made our eyes burn as we moved up. I struggled to keep my head above the water level," he says.

Soren, who is from western Assam's Chirang district, has worked in half a dozen mines in the Umrangso area, of which Kalamati is a part, over as many seasons, but he now has second thoughts about continuing mining. But then, the payment per season is good enough for his family of five to last at least a year.

The money was good enough for Ganga Bahadur Shrestha, 38, of Nepal's Rampur village, to travel three days from his home to a mine each season, says his wife, Sushila Rai. He was the first of the four bodies retrieved by rescue workers from the Kalamati mine. "His income from mining made our lives quite comfortable but he never let us know how dangerous his work was. We found this out too late," says Rai, a mother of three.

Shrestha came with more than 20 workers from Nepal to work in Umrangso. Among them was Lijan Magar, 27, who also lost his life. He was the second body to be retrieved. "We started liv-

ing here after our wedding two years ago. I don't know where to go with our two-month-old baby," says Jumi Pradhan, Magar's wife.

The other two bodies retrieved were of Khushi Mohan Roy, 57, from Kokrajhar district's Fakiragram, who was one of Barman's room-mates; and of Sarat Goyari, 37, who hailed from Thailapara in north-central Assam's Sonitpur district.

'A huge scam'

For Assam's landless or marginal farmers such as Mohammed Saifuddin Ahmed of Dalgaoon in Darang district, all roads lead to the mines when family expenditure exceeds income. The last time the 55-year-old worked in a coal mine was in March 2012, three months before 15 miners died in a flooded mine at Nongalibira in Meghalaya's South Garo Hills district. The mishap, and a petition filed by the All Dimasas Students' Union of Assam, led to the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banning rat-hole coal mining in Meghalaya on April 17, 2014. Upheld by the Supreme Court later, the ban was extended to the other States in the Northeast. "But circumstances made me return to mining after all these years because, ban or not, no other job pays as much," Ahmed says.

The Ksan incident in 2018 and Kalamati now make it evident that the ban has largely been on paper. In Meghalaya, the Justice (retired) B.P. Katakay-headed committee, which was appointed by the High Court of Meghalaya in April 2022 to investigate ongoing illegal coal mining and transportation, continues to receive complaints. One of the new complaints the panel has received relates to illegal mining in Nongalibira, where the process of banning rat-hole mines began.

"The illegal tag has only increased the price of coal; it has not stopped mining," says Shillong-based anti-mining activist Agnes Kharshing, who survived a violent attack by coal mine owners in 2018. "Hundreds of trucks continue to transport coal on the highways feeding the coke units and cement plants. You can see mounds of freshly extracted coal on the roadside. The police, politicians, bureaucrats, landowners... almost all of them are involved." In 2023, the High Court of Meghalaya made a similar observation, saying the complicity of the State with the mafia operating illegal coal mines was "clear and obvious".

The tribal land ownership system in Meghalaya, a Sixth Schedule State, is often cited to justify the rampant mining since the 1980s. A provision of the Sixth Schedule calls for tribal land and resources to be protected. Another empowers the District and Regional Councils to grant licenses or leases for the extraction of minerals within their jurisdiction. Some council administrators and landowners believe that no one can interfere in their operations within their territory.

The Sixth Schedule applies to Dima Hasao, a district governed by a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led autonomous tribal council. Autonomy means limited involvement of the BJP-led Assam government in the affairs of the council.

"That, however, does not mean that the heads of the two governments cannot collude to share the spoils of a high-yielding illegal operation," says Jagadish Bhuyan, a former minister, who had filed Right to Information requests seeking details about rat-hole mining in Assam. He is also the general secretary of the Assam Jatiya Parishad, a political party borne out of the anti-Citizen-Ship (Amendment) Act movement in 2019.

"If a worker risks his life for ₹1,500-2,000 a day, imagine the stakes the mine owners and everyone else along the chain has, to keep the illegal operations going. It is naive to think that the Centre is unaware of the illegal coal trade in Assam and elsewhere in the Northeast," he says.

Bhuyan continues, "Look at the chronology of events. Soon after the mishap, the Chief Minister tweeted that the mine appeared to be illegal. Then he said the mine was abandoned 12 years



If a worker risks his life for ₹1,500-2,000 a day, imagine the stakes the mine owners and everyone else along the chain has, to keep the illegal operations going.

JAGADISH BHUYAN
Former minister

ago, but was under the Assam Mineral Development Corporation Limited (AMDCL). The Government of India, which owns fossil fuels and minerals under the earth, suspended the AMDCL's operating license 12 years ago. So, the AMDCL has no right to extract coal and neither does it have the right to mine or trade OB coal. OB refers to the layers of soil, rock, etc. that need to be removed to extract coal.

The Assam Congress president, Bhupen Kumar Borah, says illegal coal mining in Umrangso, about 260 kilometres from Guwahati, was just the tip of the 'Syndicate Raj' iceberg in the State. "Illegal syndicates are controlling everything. If Assam is really under the control of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, he should be aware of the coal syndicate. That it has been allowed to operate for years explains the government's silence on Debolal Gorlosa and his wife," he says.

Politics of former rebels

Gorlosa is the chief executive member (CEM) of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council, which administers the Dima Hasao district. After the mine flooded, Opposition parties fished out an invoice that was issued to Kanika Hojai, Gorlosa's wife, for buying OB coal, or overburden coal, from the AMDCL.

While Gorlosa is incommunicado, his aides believe that he is being targeted. Gorlosa used to be the commander-in-chief of the Dima Haram Daogah, an armed group which was disbanded in 2013. "Once mauled by militancy, Dima Hasao district had three CEMs in as many years before Gorlosa. He ensured peace, stability, and development. Some failed leaders of the Dima Haram Daogah, who are desperate to be in power, are carrying out a smear campaign against him," claims one of his aides.

Meanwhile, others believe that Punish Nunisa, who was arrested for allegedly operating the mine illegally, has been made the scapegoat to keep the focus off the "real culprits".

Money matters

Amid the blame game, the AMDCL has come under the scanner for allegedly doing what it is not authorised to do, which is mining coal or residue.

In the line of fire, Anand Natarajan, the AMDCL's Managing Director, insists that the Corporation has not set a foot wrong. "I am being maligned for reviving the corporation that once struggled to pay salaries to its employees. Apart from helping increase the State's revenue, we acquired a coal block in Jharkhand and won the bidding for two coal blocks in Assam – Garompani in Dima Hasao and Kolajan in the Karbi Anglong district – more than a year ago," he says. Natarajan adds that the AMDCL was the first to lodge an FIR relating to the Kalamati mine, which is 850 metres beyond the area under its Garompani block. The Indian Forest Service officer also says the dealing in OB coal was within the legal ambit. "If we don't use the OB coal lying in our depot for ages, our revenue will drop," he says.

Miners Basumatary and Ahmed worry that their incomes will drop too because of the incident. "We won't go hungry as long as there is demand for coal. Maybe, we should let the dust settle and wait for the next offer," Basumatary says.



Dima Hasao



Rescue workers search for the missing miners. RITU RAJ KOKHAR

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, SATURDAY, JANUARY 18, 2025



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

IT IS THE OBLIGATION OF EVERY PERSON BORN IN A SAFER ROOM TO OPEN THE DOOR WHEN SOMEONE IN DANGER KNOCKS. — DINA NAYIRI

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A PEACE THAT HOLDS

Israel-Hamas ceasefire is belated but enormously welcome. This moment must not be squandered

A CEASEFIRE IS not peace. However, in a conflict that began with an act of terror and was followed by an outsized response that has left a region devastated — over 46,000 dead, many of them children — and which threatens to engulf much of West Asia, it is a reason for cautious hope. Israel and Hamas have agreed to pause hostilities and accepted a ceasefire deal after months of negotiation. The first of three phases under the agreement is set to begin on January 19. Hamas has agreed to release 33 Israeli hostages, including men, women and children over 50 and Israel will release Palestinian prisoners. A little over a fortnight into phase 1, talks on implementing phase 2 will begin — the remaining hostages are to be returned, a permanent ceasefire negotiated and all Israeli troops withdrawn from Gaza. Finally, in the third phase, the hope is that the reconstruction of Gaza will begin under the aegis of UN agencies, Egypt and Qatar.

The deal that has gone through was reportedly on the table for some months. The question that arises, then, is: Why was it accepted now? The outgoing US administration will indeed get some credit for the ceasefire. However, President-elect Donald Trump, too, has warned of dire consequences if the violence in Gaza did not abate and Hamas did not return hostages. While much of his rhetoric was directed at the latter, he also sent signals to the Benjamin Netanyahu government by, for example, reposting a particularly critical video about the Israeli PM featuring economist Jeffrey Sachs on his social media platform, Truth Social. Netanyahu is reportedly unlikely to visit Washington for Trump's inauguration. Even before the war, Netanyahu's diminished political capital was framed by protests on changes in the law regarding judicial reforms. The coalition he leads has bled allies; Netanyahu has held on to power by increasingly relying on the far-right parties. The unpredictability of Washington's attitude ahead of Trump's inauguration next week may have pushed Israel into a ceasefire. The three-phase plan, though, will require genuine effort by both sides. Netanyahu's political ambition and Hamas's intransigence both threaten to play spoiler. Reports of both sides using the ceasefire as an opportunity to regroup are also disquieting.

The hurdles notwithstanding, the ceasefire represents the first major respite for the besieged people of Gaza. It is in Israel's best interests — as well as of the other major actors in the region and beyond — to ensure that it is the first step to a more lasting peace. Before the Hamas strike on October 7, 2023, there were significant strides in ties between Israel and moderate Arab states, including the Abraham Accords with Bahrain and the UAE. Reviving the Accords in letter and spirit will require an accommodation of Palestinian aspirations, which is only possible if all sides act in good faith. Delhi too has stakes in the region and enjoys goodwill among the various players. Along with its friends in the Gulf and the US, it should push for the promise of the ceasefire to be realised. The current moment, belated but enormously welcome, must not be squandered.

A MATTER OF SKILLS

QS World Future Skills Index shows India's market is ready for new technologies. But education system needs to reboot

THE INAUGURAL QS World Future Skills Index has ranked India's job market as second only to the US in terms of readiness to recruit for advanced digital and green technologies. But the report also frames the country's challenges on the knowledge-economy front. Despite its near-perfect score — 99.1 per cent — in market preparedness, India is placed 25th overall in terms of capacity to harness the opportunities opened up by new technologies. In other words, while job advertisements analysed by QS show that Indian companies are seeking competencies in advanced technologies, the country's education system has not kept pace with these demands. A score of 59.1 per cent in the "skill-fit" parameter, the lowest among 30 countries, points to a deficit long underlined by industry bodies. As the QS report also points out, "Employers across India are highlighting a critical gap in the workforce's ability to meet the demands of a rapidly changing economic landscape".

The All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)'s latest data also illustrates the system's failure to embrace advanced knowledge. The fact that nearly two out of three post-graduate seats in India's engineering colleges were vacant last year shows that M-tech courses provide little value addition. The AICTE's criteria for setting up engineering colleges largely pertain to infrastructure such as classrooms, laboratories and libraries and human resources such as teacher-student ratio. The agency does frame model curricula. Its latest mandate to institutes to start courses in new technologies — AI, robotics, data sciences and cyber security — is in line with NEP's vision of turning engineering colleges into nurseries for industry. However, keeping curricula in tune with rapid technological advancements is a formidable challenge, especially for middle- and lower-rung colleges which do not always attract the best faculty. The country needs to find ways to add to its pool of educators and also keep teachers updated with state-of-the-art knowledge. NEP underlines the need to set up teachers' training colleges. That might take some time. For starters, smaller colleges could tap into the expertise of top institutes such as the IITs to train their faculty.

Part of the problem stems from the low investment in research and development. At 65 per cent, India's R&D expenditure to GDP is very low compared to the global average of 1.79 per cent. In their relation over the country's high score in one section of the QS index, India's policymakers should not miss the larger message: Aligning the educational ecosystem with the rapidly changing knowledge economy will require action on multiple fronts.

PERILS OF CONQUEST

Earth is not only celestial body scarred by human desire — Moon is now on the list of threatened heritage

IN ORBITAL, SAMANTHA Harvey's 2024 Booker Prize-winning novel, the exhilarating distance of space evokes a sobering realisation in her six astronaut protagonists: "The planet is shaped by the sheer amazing force of human want, which has changed everything, the forests, the poles, the reservoirs, the glaciers, the rivers, the seas, the mountains, the coastlines, the skies, a planet contoured and landscaped by want." Going by the World Monuments Fund (WMF), the international body dedicated to the conservation of cultural heritage, it appears that the Earth is not the only celestial body scarred by human desire. On the day that India successfully docked two satellites in space, the WMF's list of threatened cultural sites saw an extra-terrestrial addition — the Moon. In particular, Tranquility Base, Apollo 11's landing site and other associated areas.

In 1969, when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin first stepped on the Moon, it marked a triumph of imagination and ambition. It was a moment that framed the technological aspirations of the 20th century, affirming the belief that human ingenuity could overcome the greatest odds. But the Moon landing was also the beginning of a geopolitical race. In the years since, burgeoning commercialisation of space exploration, including private space tourism, has raised a philosophical dilemma: Where does curiosity end and greed begin?

There is a counterargument, one that resists the imposition of conservation ideals on uncharted domains. The Moon is, after all, a place of scientific opportunity. The challenge, then, is not just about how the Moon's heritage is preserved, but over its reconciliation with human ambitions. The WMF's intervention comes as an invitation to deliberate on how progress and preservation can coexist in a world of ever-expanding frontiers.



ASHIMA GOYAL

DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURAL reforms tend to dominate thinking on macroeconomic policy in India, which is understandable given the growth imperative. Post the pandemic macroeconomic policy helped induce a robust recovery by effectively smoothing external shocks — the cycle also helps growth.

Slowing government spending during the election months is one reason for the slowdown in the economy. Up to the end of November, the Centre had spent only 46.2 per cent of its capital expenditure target compared to 58.5 per cent this time last year, although its revenue expenditure is about 1 per cent higher. States have spent only Rs 0.88 trillion of the Rs 1.5 trillion made available for capex. So, does countercyclical fiscal policy require the government to spend more or to cut taxes? It should certainly meet its spending targets but continuing fiscal consolidation is also essential since India's combined fiscal deficit is above 7 per cent of GDP — one of the highest in the world. Interest payments eat up as much as 19 per cent of the Centre's expenditure. Falling debt and deficit ratios are required to build fiscal space, reduce risk premia and interest rates spreads.

Since the slowdown followed that in public investment, despite revenue expenditure being maintained, it is clear that better quality of spending itself provides stimulus — so increasing the share of public investment must continue. Efficiencies in spending can release resources for this. But incentives are required, more than resources, to increase investment. For example, conditionality that has helped increase states' capex must continue.

Corporate investment has not risen much despite tax cuts, showing that resources alone do not deliver. High growth and profits have raised the ratio of private corporate savings from around 1 per cent of GDP before the 1990s to an average of 10.7 per cent after 2005-06. But private sector fixed capital formation peaked at 27.5 per cent in 2007-08, then fell, averaging only 21.5 per cent over 2015-21. As a result the share of corporate non-business income has increased four times. The budget could consider a tax on

Budget priorities must facilitate an improvement in conditions of production

non-business income offset by an investment tax credit, in addition to inducements to raise employment.

Just as domestic savings are underutilised, so are foreign savings. Inflows to the economy normally exceed our current account deficit, which is the excess of investment over savings. The excess is absorbed by foreign savings. So it is investment, not resources, that is the constraint government has to act on. The K-shaped recovery and consumption as the demand constraint seems overdue. A number of recent independent as well as official surveys show good overall consumption growth (8-9 per cent last year, GDP data shows 7.3 per cent) and recovery in lower income groups.

Studies show the Indian middle class broadly defined is large, but numbers are concentrated at the bottom. Thus 31 per cent (432 million) were in the Rs 5-31 lakh per annum bracket in 2021. The market for FMCG goods is that size. But one estimate of those with annual income of Rs 8 lakh or more is only 5 per cent (60 million) in 2023. Since income tax payers remain low, studies such as those of Piketty that use income tax data, give unrealistic tiny middle class numbers.

But corporate premiumisation strategies are focusing only on the narrower top. It is not surprising that they find demand growth to be slow. Poverty has fallen to 5 per cent. A characteristic of Indian middle classes is mobility, especially at the lower end. Products created for these price-sensitive groups will do well. Income tax cuts for lower slabs can further increase their spending and faster than the government can spend. It is also fair since inflation increases real taxes while eroding real incomes. But the main focus of tax reform must continue to be on simplification, removing loopholes and increasing the base.

Recent surveys show the food share of consumption has fallen below 50 per cent, and even in that, processed foods have the largest share, followed by milk products. The cereals share has fallen below vegetables. Demand for diversified foods is rising as government schemes transfer more to lower income groups. Vegetable supply is the most

disorganised. It is no wonder the economy has struggled with price spikes over the past several months.

But agricultural marketing reforms are progressing at the state level — 26 states have adopted private markets and allowed direct farm gate sales, although only 14 have notified the rules. There is also movement on other measures to develop agricultural supply chains and a unified market. Research shows that farmers who diversified production made more profits than those who relied on MSP sales. Easing sales of diverse produce is the best way states can help their farmers.

Last year the budget had proposed a framework for better coordination with states. Food supply should be a focus area. Another is simplifying regulations. The Centre tells us they have removed thousands of archaic laws, but businesses do not find life to be any easier. The simplification has to percolate down to the second and third tier of government, reaching local officials who interface with firms. States are more open to reforms as they compete for GCC centres.

As cost push inflation falls, interest rates can come down. Low real interest rates are one of the most effective incentives to increase demand, with the large number of Indian households borrowing and equipping them. While resources are not a bottleneck, their cost and opportunity cost matters. The argument that conservative macroeconomic policy is required in response to Trump and geo-economic fragilities, goes back to the old way of thinking that neglects our ability to produce and make available at lower prices. Just resources will not achieve results, well-designed incentives are essential.

Budget priorities, to be aligned to the needs of the economy, must facilitate an improvement in conditions of production, so more can be produced and made available at lower prices. Just resources will not achieve results, well-designed incentives are essential.

The writer is former member, Monetary Policy Committee and Professor Emeritus, IGIDR



POOJA PILLAI

EASE IS THE name of the game. Just as one can easily shed kilos now, thanks to "miracle" drugs like Ozempic, Zepbound and Saxenda, one can determine whether said kilos need shedding at all, thanks to the easy-peasy method of calculating Body Mass Index (BMI). From govt websites to neighbourhood gyms, calculating one's BMI is usually presented as the first steps towards better health. The higher the BMI, the greater the need for interventions like exercise and diet control — maybe even drugs and surgery. Simple. But also, as it turns out, not so simple.

A report published in *Lancet Diabetes and Endocrinology* has called for an overhaul of our understanding of obesity, citing an over-reliance on BMI, which has had the peculiar effect of leading to both underdiagnosis and overdiagnosis of the condition. This is because BMI does not provide a reliable picture of health. Neither is it a direct measure of fat, nor does it give accurate information about how fat is distributed in an individual's body. It frequently fails to capture the true state of health of a person who may have excess body fat, while having "healthy" BMI. And just as frequently, it overlooks that while a person's BMI may be in the "normal" or "obese" range, their organs and bodily function may be normal, with no signs or symptoms of an illness.

Rethinking the overreliance on BMI is long overdue, not least because of how it has

IT'S NOT YOUR BMI, STUPID

Human bodies are too complex for one-size-fits-all prescriptions

been misused to reduce conversations about health to mere numbers on a scale. It has played a role in perpetuating myths about what a healthy or fit person looks like (thin) as against one who is not (fat), with associated sub-myths that attach subjective values like beauty, wealth and efficiency to an individual's appearance.

What the *Lancet* report underlines, in fact, is how little we understand about the combination of bones, flesh and blood that is the mortal coil — and by extension, how limited our understanding is about the actual state of our bodies. Space may be the final frontier, but the original, unconquered frontier remains the human body. This is something that medical practitioners, who rely on a combination of scientific evidence, experience, patient history and gut feeling — their clinical judgement, in other words — understand and acknowledge.

The problem is that this acknowledgement of the gaps in medicine — that the right diagnosis, the best cure, the fullest understanding, are still in the future — fails to trickle down into the wider culture, even as medical jargon/tools become widely used by laypersons to self-diagnose. This is the case with the "may increase the Covid risk" 19 pandemic, but it was certainly not impeded by it. Our larger anxieties about our bodies — are we getting enough sleep/water/protein? Is it gas/IBS/lymphosarcoma of the intestine? — have always existed. After

all, the great joke that kicked off Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* is not that the narrator used a medical book to conclude that he suffered from "every malady but housemaid's knee", but that every one of us has, at some point, arrived at exactly that conclusion. In the digital age, where anxieties seem to have entered some sort of hyper-speed mode thanks to the vast amounts of information that the right (wrong?) device and an internet connection can pull up, BMI is but one of the many widely-misunderstood and abused tools that, in medically uneducated hands, can trigger panic and over-reaction. Over the past decade, obsessive tracking of indicators like sleep quality, calories, macronutrients, heart rate and fertility has been linked to conditions like clinical anxiety and eating disorders.

Every individual is a unique constellation — not only of genes and other biological variables, but also socio-economic conditions, habits and that most unreliable factor known as luck. One diagnosis does not fit all, a fact that must be underlined, especially at a time when "miracle" drugs used to treat conditions like diabetes are being widely used/abused as a weight-loss measure. Can the use of such drugs be a nuanced approach to identifying obesity help dispel some of the myths we cling to, including the reliability of mere numbers?

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JANUARY 18 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

ANTI-DEFECTION BILL

PRESIDENT ZAIL SINGH announced that an anti-defection bill would be introduced by the Government in the current session of Parliament in keeping with its objective of striving for a healthy public life. In his address to the joint session of both Houses, the President said the Government intended to initiate wide-ranging discussions on electoral reforms with other parties.

EULOGY FOR INDIRA

PARLIAMENT CONDOLED the death of former PM Indira Gandhi. Identical resolutions

were passed unanimously in both the Houses where they eulogised her as "one of the greatest Indians of the 20th century." "Future generations, rising above the tumult of our times will look with love and gratitude on the magnitude and splendour of her achievements," the resolutions noted.

IFFI ENDS

DAYS OF EXCITEMENT, wonder, and even disappointment, which the 10th International Film Festival of India generated, reached its finale with an elegant and enjoyable ceremony at Vigyan Bhawan. The man of the ceremony was Kabir Bedi, who, as the guest speaker,

came out with short, witty and intelligent prefaces. The jury chose two pictures as the best Feature Film award — *"Future Generations"* from the UK and *"Ruthless Romance"* from the USSR.

PM'S SECURITY

SECURITY FOR the Prime Minister fragmented into apparent confusion with hundreds of men from the defence and dozens of various agencies on the job. Amid this multiplicity — some were saying because of it — lapses in security had been noticed. The Intelligence Bureau was believed to have proposed setting up a new Special Task Force to provide security for the Prime Minister.

Ahmedabad



Inflation matrix

December's price rise numbers do not ring in enough relief

In the final inflation print before the Union Budget for 2025-26 is presented, followed by the first review of the monetary policy led by the new Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in early February, the price rise faced by Indian consumers eased to 5.22% in December. Although a four-month low, this still marked only a mild decline from November's 5.5% uptick in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and was largely driven by a sequential easing in food prices. Food inflation moderated from over 9% in the previous month to 8.4% last month, and though inflation in vegetables cooled from 29.3% to 26.6%, it still remained generally high. Households still forked out a lot more for their meals than they did a year ago — it must be recalled that overall inflation was 5.7% and food price rise, over 9.5% in December 2023. While prices of some food items, including vegetables, are seen cooling further this month, those of a few critical ingredients have started spiking, including of edible oils, that rose at a 33-month high price of 14.6% in December. Eggs, meat and fruits also saw inflation accelerating last month along with the relatively humble potato (up 68.2%). Moreover, inflation in wholesale prices has gained pace, signalling that there is room for higher costs to be passed on to consumers for food items as well as manufactured products.

The government and industry want the RBI to cut interest rates to reinvigorate consumption and fading growth impulses by looking through 'volatile' food inflation. But even industry captains admit that just keeping food prices out of the interest rates and growth-inflation balancing act will not suffice. Moreover, even if the weightage for food in the CPI is reduced in line with the recent household consumption spending survey results, food price trends have a material impact on the spending propensity of households and their inflation expectations. Inflation may yet average 4.5% through January to March, as the RBI expects, but the central bank that has committed to a durable alignment to its 4% goal before slashing rates, has a difficult call to make in February. Tangible measures, if any, to ease price pressures in the Budget, along with some visibility on the Centre's fiscal glide path, could help tip the scales for a rate cut cycle to begin soon, if not next month. There are a few new imperatives that have compounded the trade-off matrix for policymakers in North Block as well as Mint Street — the swift unravelling of the rupee vis-à-vis the dollar in recent weeks which raises the risk of importing inflation, among other collateral effects, especially as global oil prices have resurged to multi-month highs. A very nuanced approach is imperative to avoid fresh missteps.

Script reading

The deciphering of the Indus script should not be clouded by politics

The recent announcement by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, of a \$1-million prize scheme for deciphering the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), seems to have revived popular interest in the subject, which remains a puzzle to archaeologists, historians and linguists. His invitation for further research was made in the context of the centenary celebration of the IVC discovery, which was published by then Chief of the Archaeological Survey of India, John Marshall, in September 1924. Spread across 1.5 million square kilometres in the territories of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan during the Bronze Age (3000-1500 BCE), the IVC, also known as Harappan Civilisation, was regarded as complex as the well-known civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt and China. The Indus civilisation was essentially urban. Even though there has been a large number of objects and materials of archaeological value in support of the IVC, the decipherment of seals and tablets has not been to the satisfaction of all. About 20 years ago, a group of western scholars had argued that writing was not a necessity of ancient urban settlements, not even those as massive as those of the Harappans, and that "a handful of unknown symbols" could no longer be claimed as evidence of writing. Since then, there has been an exchange of scholarly views for and against the theory of the Indus civilisation being a highly literate society. It is against this context that Mr. Stalin's announcement needs to be seen. There is also a school of thought that there was a script which was "proto-Dravidian", "non-Aryan" and "pre-Aryan". This could be a reason why a southern State, Tamil Nadu, has made the offer. The State government has also supported study on Indus script and graffiti marks of Tamil Nadu as part of a project of the documentation and the digitisation of graffiti and Tamil (Tamil-Brahmi)-inscribed potshards of Tamil Nadu.

Researchers face certain challenges while resolving the Indus riddle. There is a complaint that the entire database regarding the seals has not yet been made available in the public domain. While allowing free access to these resources, central and State authorities should ensure that context for them is also provided. More importantly, studies should be carried out without any interference. The likelihood of the proposed study's findings going against the established and particular narrative should not be allowed to cloud intellectual pursuit. There is also scope for well-coordinated work among South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, to unravel the mystery. But if political differences are permitted to adversely impact the execution of any such study, the world, and India, will be much the poorer for it.

The First Advance Estimates (FAE) of National Accounts for 2024-25 show a real GDP growth of 6.4% and a nominal GDP growth of 9.7%. These numbers have fallen short of the Reserve Bank of India's revised growth estimate of 6.6% for real GDP, as in its December 2024 monetary policy statement and 10.5% for nominal GDP growth as in the 2024-25 Union Budget presented in July 2024.

The annual growth of 6.4% can be seen as consisting of 6% growth in the first half and 6.7% growth in the second half. There is, thus, a clear improvement expected over the Q2 growth of 5.4%. The sharp fall in 2024-25 annual GDP growth from that of the previous year at 8.2% is seen only in the case of GDP. With respect to Gross Value Added (GVA), this difference, between 7.2% and 6.4%, is much less. On the GVA side, it was the manufacturing sector which suffered a sharp fall in sectoral growth from 9.9% in 2023-24 to 5.3% in 2024-25.

Growth prospects for 2025-26

The Gross Fixed Capital Formation rate at constant prices has ranged between 33.3% and 33.5% during 2021-22 to 2024-25. Thus, it appears to have stabilised around 33.4%. It is expected to continue at this level in 2025-26. The average Incremental Capital Output Ratio (ICOR) has been marginally higher than 5 in recent years.

Assuming ICOR to be 5.1 in 2025-26, we may consider a 6.5% real GDP growth to be realistic.

There may not be much change in the global economy even though Donald Trump's assumption of office may create more uncertainty. India will have to largely depend on domestic demand.

In particular, the Government of India has to ensure that there is no relaxation in its investment expenditure. In fact, the slightly lower



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Over the next five years, the best that India may hope for is a steady real GDP growth rate of 6.5%

growth in 2024-25 is largely linked to the slowdown in the Government of India's investment growth which has remained negative at (-)12.3% even after eight months into the fiscal year.

With a lower nominal GDP growth in 2024-25 of 9.7% as compared to the budgeted nominal GDP growth of 10.5%, the budgeted Gross Tax Revenue (GTR) of ₹38.4 lakh crore may not be realised if the budgeted buoyancy of 1.03 is maintained. As per Controller General of Accounts (CGA) data, GTR growth for the first eight months was 10.7%. If this growth is maintained for the remaining months also, the realised buoyancy would be about 1.1, which is higher than the budgeted buoyancy. In such a case, tax revenue shortfall will be minimal. In other words, any revenue constraint or likely pressure on fiscal deficit would not constrain the government's ability to achieve its capital expenditure target of ₹11.1 lakh crore.

Reason for the dip

However, after the first eight months, the level of the Government of India's capital expenditure has remained limited to ₹5.14 lakh crore, that is 46.2% of the Budget target. In the remaining four months, the Government of India's capital expenditure may be accelerated. It may still fall well short of the target. This has been the main reason for the dip in overall real GDP growth in 2024-25.

Going forward in 2025-26, the Government of India will have to continue to rely on an accelerated capital expenditure growth which can be kept at least at 20% on the revised estimates for 2024-25. Sustained government capital expenditures can have a favourable effect on private investment. The size and the pattern of investment expenditure of the government

should be designed to accelerate private investment as well.

Medium- to long-term growth prospects

Over a period of next five years, the best that India may hope for is a steady real GDP growth rate of 6.5%. This is in line with the International Monetary Fund's real GDP growth projection for the Indian economy, as in its October 2024 release, which is at 6.5% over the period 2025-26 to 2029-30. This real GDP growth may be accompanied by an implicit price deflator (IPD)-based inflation of about 4% which can give a nominal GDP growth in the range of 10.5%-11%. In years in which global conditions improve and the contribution of net exports to GDP growth becomes significant, real GDP growth may touch even 7%. If a real growth of around 6.5% and a nominal growth in the range of 10.5%-11% are maintained over the long run with an average exchange rate depreciation of 2.5% per annum, India should be able to reach a per capita GDP level consistent with a developed country status in the next two and half decades. But the task is not going to be easy. It will be hard to grow at 6.5% as the base keeps on increasing. In fact, in the earlier years, the growth rate will have to be higher. But, at present, the potential rate of growth appears to be 6.5%. However, it can change.

In the light of a potential growth rate of 6.5%, the achievement of 6.4% in 2024-25 should not be considered as disappointing. In fact, the achievement of 8.2% in 2023-24 should be considered as a flash in the pan. The current year's growth rate of 6.4% as in the first advance estimates should be seen in the context of India's potential growth rate.

The views expressed are personal

The multiple layers of the Gaza ceasefire

Just days before the swearing-in of United States President-elect Donald Trump, and a few hours before outgoing President Joe Biden gave his final address to the American people on January 15, 2025, Israel and Hamas announced that the long-elusive ceasefire agreement over Gaza had been struck. The state of Qatar, long stuck in between as a mediator, said the deal was to take effect from January 19, 2025, a day before Mr. Trump takes charge. An exchange of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners is at the centre of this arrangement.

The deck and the cards

The news of the agreement saw Palestinians in Gaza take to the streets in celebration, having faced death and destruction at the hands of the Israeli military whose response to the October 7, 2023 terror attack went on for over 15 months even as political deadlines continued. In a statement, Hamas has highlighted that the movement "dealt with all responsibility and positivity, based on its responsibility towards our patient and steadfast people in the honorable Gaza strip, by stopping the Zionist aggression against them and putting an end to the massacres and war of genocide to which they are being subjected".

In Washington DC, Mr. Trump and Mr. Biden reportedly worked in unison to deliver the deal even as both tried to lap up the credit. For Mr. Trump, who previously demanded that such a deal be reached before his presidency, this was a marketable advertising of renewed American strength as promised in his election campaign. For Mr. Biden, it is an attempt to salvage legacy.

The joker in this geopolitical deck is Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Amidst misplaced perceptions that Mr. Trump would allow Mr. Netanyahu a longer leash to continue his military operations in Gaza unabated, opinion prevailed that anyone but Mr. Biden would be good for both stemming the ongoing conflicts and



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Despite the complexities, the international community must play its role by pushing for the sustainability of this deal

reigning in Israel's military posturing. It is in all likelihood not a coincidence that the Israeli leadership agreed to the deal — which, in parallel with Hamas, it has scuttled many times — to send a message of partnership and resolve to Mr. Trump.

Why Mr. Netanyahu would go out of the way to court Mr. Trump, even after the Israeli leader was invited by the Republicans to address a joint session of Congress in July 2024, is a question that has a simple answer. Mr. Trump prioritises personality over policy. Agreeing to this deal with Hamas is offering Mr. Trump a victory at potentially big domestic costs for Mr. Netanyahu. For long, Mr. Netanyahu has maintained that only a complete victory over Hamas is acceptable.

With this deal, he becomes an Israeli Prime Minister who has cut a political settlement with the arch foe, but without a complete elimination of Hamas.

On Hamas and Israel

There is no doubt that Hamas and also Hezbollah in Lebanon have had their capacities diminished over the past year after leadership decapitation operations conducted by Israel. Simultaneously, outgoing U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has also said that assessments show that Hamas has recruited as many new militants as it has lost. The lack of a political track acting as insurance for the ceasefire remains a concern. Hamas is expected to continue to be in control of Gaza in the time to come as barely any movements have taken place to reorganise Palestinian politics in a way where the group can be brought under a wider and more mainstream Palestinian-led political ecosystem.

Hamas, by itself, will remain steadfast in its ideology against Israeli security and sovereignty, while Hamas and Israel continue to remain on the same page against a two-state solution, despite a global push for this being the only viable option

available for lasting peace.

The prevailing situation of this status quo, despite the ceasefire, can be leveraged by Mr. Netanyahu in case Hamas resumes attacks against Israeli territories and populations. In such a situation, Mr. Netanyahu will be able to approach Mr. Trump from a vantage point, having agreed to the Hamas deal. A return to retaliatory tactics at this juncture will in all likelihood come with the full support of Mr. Trump, manoeuvring the Israeli position back to one of strength — like one it enjoyed under Mr. Biden. Previously, Mr. Trump has publicly stated that there would be 'hell to pay' for Hamas if Israeli hostages, which includes American citizens, are not released.

Gaza and its rebuilding

Beyond the political intricacies of this ceasefire arrangement, the most important deliverable would be that of critical aid to the people in Gaza as food and medical shortages surpassed critically a long time ago. Beyond the aid front, the rebuilding of Gaza may yet be a premature discussion until alternative political mechanisms are envisioned within the Palestinian fold. This is where the Arab powers have an opportunity to exert influence, and seek a remoulding, a re-shaping, and a revitalisation of the Palestinian Authority to better equip Palestinian politics as a core stakeholder for a challenging future, where the much sought-after two-state solution remains a distant reality.

Finally, the international community must also play its role to push for the sustainability of this deal. The future of West Asian prosperity, newer geo-economic architectures such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, a potential expansion of the Abraham Accords, and even the radicalism of a Saudi Arabia-Israel normalisation, ultimately hinges on this moment. At the end of the day, the management of regional geopolitical fissures by regional powers will determine all outcomes.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Disbanded

Expectedly, on the eve of Donald Trump assuming the presidency of the United States, high profile Hindenburg Research has announced its closure (Page 1, January 17). The short seller's abrupt shutting of its shutters is undeniably a blessing in disguise for the Adani conglomerate, which was rocked by its startling revelations. One can make a safe guess that the high-pitched calls by the Opposition parties in India, particularly the Congress (Inside pages, January 17), for a probe of the Group by a Joint Parliamentary Committee will fade away sooner than later.

V. Johan Dhanakumar, Chennai

Memorial and legacy

It is silly that the controversy regarding a suitable memorial for former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh continues (Inside page, January 17). It is time to revisit the relevance and the viability

of allotting vast acreage of land for this purpose. A more viable option would be to set up an institute for economic research in Dr. Singh's name or have a museum, a library or a park which would be of much greater benefit to the people as well as be a more befitting memorial for a great leader.

P.J. Thomas, Vazhappally, Kottayam, Kerala

The effect is visible

There is little doubt that the emphasis in T20 cricket, on 'power hitting' and 'aggressive stroke play', has affected the skills of Indian batters in matches or series where it calls for one's temperament to stand up and carry the day with sound technique (Opinion page — Parley, January 17). While India's dominance in limited-overs formats continues, its performance in Test cricket has been inconsistent. This shift raises the important question whether the passion for the longtest

format has been replaced by the instant gratification offered by T20 cricket. Also, the influx of foreign players in the Indian Premier League and the overwhelming attention given to it have overshadowed the value and the importance of Indian domestic cricket.

R. Sivakumar, Chennai

The debate on whether exposure to T20 cricket has an impact on the performance of Indian batters in the longer versions of the game has been raging for quite some time. And, if statistics are any indication, the effect is plainly visible. As far as batters are concerned, they should possess different mindsets for T20, which is nothing but slam-bang cricket. In Test cricket, the batters have to concentrate more on defensive techniques, as longevity at the crease is paramount. It is this factor that makes someone such as

Cheteshwar Pujara an asset in the five-day game, and Sanju Samson and Tilak Varma perfect choices in T20 cricket.

C.V. Aravind, Bengaluru

India is a huge country and it may make sense to have separate cricket coaches for separate formats. For example, Gautam Gambhir is perhaps more suited to be a T20 (head) coach as the game here needs a hit out approach from the very first ball. Cheteshwar Pujara, V.V.S. Laxman and Rahul Dravid may be more suited as Test match coaches as the game here needs more of a defensive approach and staying at the crease. ODIs (with 50 overs) need both a defensive and hit out approach. Virender Sehwag may be more suited as an ODI coach. It would be ideal to have three separate teams for the three different formats so as not to mix up batting styles.

P.V. Madhu Nirviti, Secunderabad

Deadly event

The report in this daily, "Six persons die in jallikattu and other bull-related sports in T.N." (January 17), highlights the urgent need to ban 'jallikattu', a savage sport and an annual event during Pongal festivities. How this abhorrent and abominable sport attracts youth participation is unfortunate. One wonders how the Chief Minister and the Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu continue their stoic silence. Readers must join hands to ask the Chief Minister to end this 'sport' once and for all.

Mani Natarajan, Chennai

The disturbing picture in the report, of a group of people trying to tame a bull, is nothing short of torture and violence inflicted on a lone animal. Ancient Tamil literature describes jallikattu only as 'Eru Thozuvudhal' (embracing the bull) without causing the animal any harm or pain. There is no gainsaying

the fact that today's jallikattu is a blood sport. The humane treatment of bulls has been described in classical Tamil literature.

Kangayam R. Narasimhan, Chennai

It is painful to note both man and animal experiencing trauma for the sake of some cash awards for the winners. There is cruelty to animals and grave danger for many innocent people.

A.J. Rangarajan, Chennai

'Lit for Life'

Literature has the power to inspire, challenge and transform lives and it is wonderful that *The Hindu* 'Lit for Life', a festival for the exchange of ideas, stories, and creativity, begins in a few hours. Many of us look forward to celebrating the magic of words in Chennai.

T.S. Karthik, Chennai

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

15 THE IDEAS PAGE

Warrior-ascetics of Kumbh

We can invoke *atma* and *moksha* to celebrate the Mela.
It is also about *siddhi* and *shakti*



DEVUTT PATTANAİK

KUMBH MELA REVEALS a side of Hinduism that is often not talked about. There are no temples, no gods, no devotion, no songs, no saints. It is primarily a ritual, dominated by boisterous masculine energy embodied in naked ascetics (*digambara*), covered with ash (*bhābhū*), with matted hair (*jata*), holding staffs (*danda*), belonging to various gymnasiasts (*akhara*), evoking the followers (*gana*) of the wild form of Shiva (*Bhairava*).

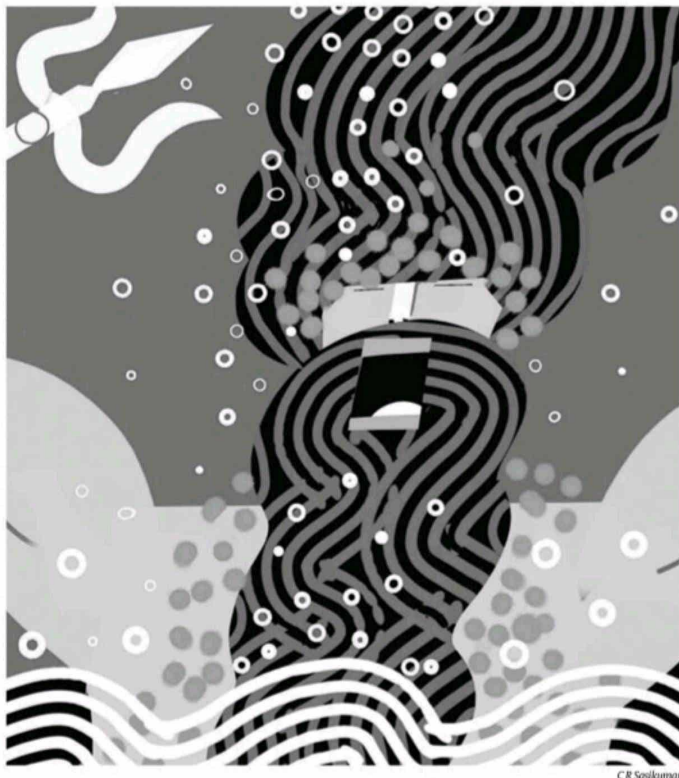
It is a ritual gathering that has nothing to do with meditation or contemplation. It is all about taking a dip in a particular spot in the river at the right time after it has been consecrated by bathing ascetics. We can argue that the roots are Tantrik, as it involves the body (*tanu*, in Sanskrit).

Such rituals happen in many parts of India, wherever the ash-smeared ascetics congregate as part of their rhythmic wanderings. These ascetics probably originated in the east, in the Terai region, and challenged the Vedic order which came from the western Punjab region, possibly around 1000 BC. They clashed at Gangadwar, now called Haridwar. This event is captured in the story, first narrated in the Mahabharata, of the ascetic Shiva beheading Daksha, the Brahmin patriarch. Since then, these ascetics (some who carry skulls) have been known by many names: Pashupata, Kapalika, Kalamukha. But they changed over time, becoming milder, influenced by later ideas like Nathism, Vaishnavism, even Sikhism. Currently, they are called Naga (from *naga* or naked).

The calendar of the wandering ascetics was determined by the movement of the moon (every month), sun (every year) and Jupiter (every 12 years) through the Zodiac. It was known as Kumbh in Haridwar and Simhasana in Nashik when Jupiter was in the Aquarius (Kumbh) and Leo (Simha) constellations. Calling all gatherings as "Kumbh" and linking it to "nectar of immortality" is a conscious branding effort that began after 1857, to reaffirm the Hindu identity, threatened by the new British regime.

The akhars typically trace their origin to Adi Shankaracharya, who played a major role in popularising Vedanta in the 8th century. He opposed Buddhism, not Islam. Stories of Adi Shankara's wanderings, resistance and debates were codified much later, only in the 13th century, by Brahmin scholars of the Vijayanagar Empire, who saw Hinduism being threatened by the arrival of Turks from Central Asia. Unlike earlier Huna, Saka and Kushan hordes from Central Asia, these were not just incoming seeking wealth and power; they were seeking to change the local culture. Known as "Turku Dharma" it involved a formless god, rejection of idols, and a strict form of worship in a community hall, facing west, where caste rules did not matter. We now refer to Turku Dharma as Islam.

The warrior-ascetic traditions of Hinduism, though ancient, became prominent after 1500 AD, in reaction to the rising power of Islam. The mystical musical Sufis were mirrored by the mystical musical Sufis of Hinduism. The militaristic Gazis were challenged by the aggressive Nagas. These



Nagas protected trading caravans, and in exchange received patronage of kings and merchants. This happened mostly in the river basins of Ganga (Haridwar, Varanasi, Prayagraj, Ujjain) and upper Godavari (Nashik), which were contested zones in the 18th century between the warring Mughal power and the warring Maratha rule. Words like *shahi* and *Peshwa*, reveal the Persian-Maratha influence. This culture is not so prominent in the South.

For the ascetics, celibacy was key. As was caste, but that is currently downplayed. This celibacy was not mere renunciation of the worldly life, as preached by Buddhists and Jain monks. This was about power (*siddhi*) obtained by retaining and ritually charging bodily fluids and then using the power of mind and mantra to push the fluids up the spine to germinate inside the head. Only men could do it. This granted them occult powers to walk on water, fly through the air, travel on wild animals, change shape and form, and control the minds of people. These were the original "Jedi" masters. The rituals are explicitly depicted in Tantric Buddhist art of the Himalayan region. So the warrior-ascetics were seen as containers of great power, and sought after by kings who could

The akhars typically trace their origin to Adi Shankaracharya, who played a major role in popularising Vedanta in the 8th century. He opposed Buddhism, not Islam. Unlike earlier Huna, Saka and Kushan hordes from Central Asia, these were not just incoming seeking wealth and power; they were seeking to change the local culture. Known as "Turku Dharma" it involved a formless god, rejection of idols, and a strict form of worship in a community hall, facing west, where caste rules did not matter. We now refer to Turku Dharma as Islam.

use them for military glory.

These medieval ideas, popular since the time of Adi Shankaracharya, are today downplayed, even forgotten. What is remembered is that the power of these warrior-ascetics is present in their bodily fluids. This is soaked by the special cow-dung ash smeared on limbs which gets washed off during the "Shahi Snan". This makes the water special — nectar-like — capable of transforming one's health and fortune. The potency is increased by the perfect alignment of stars and planets, at the grand confluence of three rivers — the Ganga, which came from the sky, the terrestrial Yamuna, and the subterranean Saraswati.

The Kumbh Mela is distinctly male, ascetic, ritualistic, occult, military, and royal in nature. It is about displays of Hindu power. It is about the mighty Bhairava of the mountains, the mighty Hanuman of the forests, and the mighty Dattatreya of the plateaus. We can couch it with Vedic words like *atma* (soul) and *moksha* (liberation) and *dharma* (order), but it is primarily about *siddhi* (enlightenment) and *shakti* (power), revealed in the Tantras.

Pattanaik is a writer and mythologist

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The federal government's ability to regulate immigration, a basic function of any nation, is broken. Instead of an immigration policy calibrated to the needs of the country, both Americans and immigrants are being let down by a set of outdated laws." — THE NEW YORK TIMES

A reckoning for the Deep State

Donald Trump enters his second term with greater political capital, experience. Entrenched interests will be up against more this time



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

DONALD TRUMP'S INAUGURATION will take place on January 20, formally setting the stage for Trump 2.0. Unlike his election in 2016, which was seen more as an accident and aberration, Trump 2.0 is generating a lot of discussion across the world, both in anticipation and with trepidation.

For the elite lobby — federal bureaucracy, political and financial elites, defence contractors and media moguls — that wields enormous influence in Washington DC which Trump describes in derision as the "deep state", his return with enhanced power is going to be a nightmare. The America First Policy Institute, a conservative think tank closely aligned with Trump, alleged that during his first term, Trump had come up against the power of the liberal and Left-wing bureaucracy, entrenched in thousands of agencies over decades, when department after department either disobeyed his orders or deliberately derailed them. In fact, an anonymous Op-Ed in *The New York Times* in 2018 with the title 'I am part of the resistance inside the Trump administration' described internal efforts to scuttle and sabotage the new President's initiatives. A year later, the author, who eventually identified himself as Miles Taylor, the former chief of staff at the Department of Homeland Security, published a book titled *Warning*. In a remote corner of the White House exists a classified safe that contains a stack of documents listing the extraordinary powers a US president is authorised to use. They are called the Presidential Emergency Action Documents or PEADs. They are also described by some as the "Doomsday Book". In a revealing article, *Time* magazine reported a few months ago that only a privileged few have access to those documents, and even members of the US Congress were not allowed to see them. "When Donald Trump was in the Oval Office, members of his national security staff actively worked to keep him from learning the full extent of these interpretative presidential authorities, concerned that he would abuse them", it said.

This deep state bureaucracy is what Trump wishes to dismantle. During his election campaign, he announced a 10-point plan to this end. As he returns to power as an experienced and determined leader, Trump is reiterating that commitment. The US administration comprises more than 200 departments that employ over two million people. A few thousand change with the change of political leadership, but a large section of the bureaucracy is largely permanent. It is not easy for presidents to remove those bureaucrats. President Gerald Ford once said that "one of the enduring truths of the nation's capital is that bureaucrats survive" while the elected officials come and go. President Reagan quipped that a government bureau is "the nearest thing to eternal

life we'll ever see on this earth!"

But Trump is a known disruptor. He has deployed loyal supporters like Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy to prepare a plan for slashing government spending on bureaucracy by affecting a 75 per cent cut in the federal workforce. Trump's plan to weaken the power of the "deep state" includes reducing power concentration in Washington DC and dispersing government departments across the US cities.

Doing this will be a challenge. Whether Trump 2.0 succeeds in dismantling the "deep state" strategists is something to be watched. However, the message appears to have reached the desired quarters.

Hindenburg, a notoriously murky short seller that portrayed itself as an investment research firm and indulged in hit jobs, suddenly announced it was shutting shop. Founder Naveen Andrews, who claimed he took the decision seeking a "better work-life balance". Several last-minute executive orders that outgoing President Biden issued in the last couple of weeks, including a presidential pardon to his own son, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honour, to the controversial investor George Soros, also smack of the deep state's desire to create hurdles for the new administration.

With the deep state actively working overtime, Trump will have his hands full in the next several months tackling domestic challenges. But he seems determined not to be bogged down by them. Besides his *Making America Great Again* (MAGA) agenda, Trump is actively cultivating a world leadership that shares his conservative vision and is willing to challenge deep state assets in their respective countries. The US State Department records in the last 150 years show no instance of any foreign leader ever attending the inauguration ceremony of a president. Trump broke that convention and invited several world leaders.

The inauguration committee's choice of leaders invited for the January 20 ceremony speaks volumes about the disruption that Trump would cause in Europe and elsewhere. Leaders invited include surprising choices like President Xi Jinping of China, who has deputed his Vice President Han Zheng to attend. While leaders of important European countries like Germany, France and the UK were ignored, the Prime Minister of Italy, George Meloni and Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban received invitations. Trump's choice of inviting Nigel Farage, a UK conservative politician and Brexit zealot, a French conservative leader, besides Meloni and Orban indicates his intention to end the liberal dominance of European politics and promote a conservative leadership. The foreign ministers of India and Japan too received invitations, suggesting that Trump would continue to work with Quad partners.

Neither American leader has generated so much anticipation and anxiety in recent history. The liberals may continue to jeer and sneer, but Trump 2.0 is going to be an agenda-setting event for the entire world. Unlike in the past, the trump card of President Trump will be his structural disruptions. The deep state should watch out.

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



AAKASH JOSHI

IN 2017, AT *The Indian Express* adda, Saif Ali Khan drew on the history of Hindi cinema as a framework for understanding the inequalities, deprivations, oppressions and contradictions of India, in all their complexity: "Earlier the villain was the feudal system, then money, followed by parents and later, yourself... There are two Indias in schizophrenic growth at the moment. One has energy and intelligence while the other is the same old villains weighing us down."

In light of the brutal attack on Khan at his home in Bandra West — a place that straddles both aspiration and achievement in its posh lanes — at least two of the "same old villains" have reared their ugly heads.

The first is the proximity to violence that every Indian — and so many others around the world — are both used to and shocked by. The veneer of safety, security and that ineffable sense that tomorrow will be much the same as today, that life has a broadly predictable trajectory can be shattered in an instant. While the motives, modus operandi and even the culprit(s) in Khan's stabbing are still far from certain, the violation of his home and person has a broader resonance precisely because it reminds each of us, high and low, of exactly how vulnerable we are.

Don't narrow the frame

Let's look for answers after Saif Ali Khan attack, not scapegoats

It perhaps this realisation that prompts reactions that are unthinking, insecure and seem to be looking not for answers but scapegoats. Those who give in to such an impulse, perhaps understandably fail to realise in the moment of their anguish that a crime is sensational, "big news", precisely because it is an aberration. As the cliché goes, "dog bites man" isn't news — "man bites dog" is.

It is in this aspect of the aftermath of the crime in Bandra that the second of the "same old villains" has reared its head. Ravenna Tandon, who has worked with Khan, expressed shock at the attack. Unfortunately, she went on to assign blame to the "hawkers", "encroachers" and "land grabbers". She also complained that Bandra is "losing out to unruly elements".

Tandon may not have realised that in the fraught and competitive socio-political landscape of Mumbai, these terms are not innocent. They have consistently been used to demonise "outsiders" — people who come from outside Maharashtra and/or belong to particular linguistic and religious communities.

The expressions of anger by Tandon and others who have worked with and know Saif Ali Khan well are still understandable. Many, if not most people look for someone to

blame in the aftermath of a tragedy, and sensitivity to broader concerns sometimes takes a back seat at such moments. In the age of social media, a private fulfilment is often performed on a public platform (in this case, X), which is perhaps why it garnered so much attention.

The "concern" after the attack, though, isn't limited to those who know Khan. The political class, predictably, has begun a blame game and sleight-of-foot, each side blaming the other and portraying Mumbai as a city where crime is so rampant that the streets are unsafe. This lack of imagination in the face of a public misfortune is, unfortunately, a reason that moral leadership is so rare from the powers that be.

The greatest of the "villains", though, might just be the privileged Indian who has taken so keenly to the rhetoric of "safety" in the aftermath of a tragedy. Over the last couple of days — in white-collar offices and the WhatsApp groups of gated colonies from Gurgaon to Whitefield, Bandra to Ballygunge — the speculation about the crime is accompanied by barely-disguised prejudice. The concern over safety — "if this can happen in a list-elite in Bandra, what about us?" — is the same order as CCTV cameras to monitor the people who work in our homes,

the separate "service lifts", the registers at the gate that record the details of the delivery "boy" but not the visitor in a luxury car. That the assailant was allegedly — in fact, the details of the case are, at this point, practically rumours — let in by domestic help at the Khan-Kapoor home seems to be the major cause of these paroxysms.

Instead, even as we express concern for Saif and his family, it is important to look at how a majority of those who work in the household acted. They reportedly cared for the children. Such a task is one only the most trusted — and the most decent — people undertake. They are not a security threat, by and large, even if there are — as with any group of people — some who commit crimes. In fact, they are the heroes of the story. They are a microcosm of the broader scheme of things in an unequal society that lives in paroxysms centuries at once — each in "schizophrenic growth" — the people who subsidise our lives with their labour, who are "hawkers" and are called "encroachers" because formal housing is unaffordable in a skewed unequal society.

As we search for the villain in the Saif Ali Khan attack, let's also celebrate the heroes.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RAHUL'S REMARKS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Frozen petulance" (IE, January 17). Despite his growing experience and stature in politics, Rahul Gandhi continues to display rashness and naivety in political communication. His party's limited success in the Lok Sabha elections, and the debacles in the Haryana and Maharashtra, should have made him rethink his electoral strategy. His foreign travels in between the polls do not seem to have made him politically astute. Instead of exhorting him to adapt to the changing political ecosystem, his party leaders spend a lot of time defending his controversial utterances.

pend on bridging deep-seated divides.
Sankar Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the article, "A faraway peace" (IE, January 17). A pause in the war in Gaza is the bare minimum that the region needs. Displaced people will return to their homes, most of which are reduced to rubble. It is crucial that Israel, Hamas, the US and the other parties involved do everything they can to honour the deal. Otherwise, they risk a worst-case scenario of the destruction and chaos of the past 15 months. Actors on both sides need to prioritise the return of innocent people taken as hostages and prisoners.

Anany Mishra, Bhiilal

AFTER THE CEASEFIRE

THIS REFERS TO the article, "A faraway peace" (IE, January 17). It is crucial that the parties involved do all they can to ensure a complete end to the Gaza war, else there will be a repeat of the mindless destruction and chaos. The promising developments reflect the power of dialogue and diplomacy in resolving even the most entrenched conflicts. It is a reminder not only of the importance of persistence and compassion in the pursuit of peace, but also of the challenges that await the millions of people displaced by the war. While the ceasefire is a step forward, its success de-

CALL THEIR BLUFF

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Balance, not burnout" (IE, January 17). A pause in the war in Gaza is the bare minimum that the region needs. Displaced people will return to their homes, most of which are reduced to rubble. It is crucial that Israel, Hamas, the US and the other parties involved do everything they can to honour the deal. Otherwise, they risk a worst-case scenario of the destruction and chaos of the past 15 months. Actors on both sides need to prioritise the return of innocent people taken as hostages and prisoners.

Gurnoor Grewal, Chandigarh

Ahmedabad