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{ OUR TAKE }

The focus on the Air India pilot

Full transparency regarding the probe is the most compelling way forward in light of new claims.

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) has reported that cockpit voice recordings suggest Air India Flight 171's captain switched off engine fuel during take-off, catching his co-pilot by surprise. The revelation significantly changes understanding of one of India's deadliest aviation tragedies, though deliberate human action had emerged as a focus after the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB)'s preliminary report showed fuel switches moved "one after another" to cutoff position, with "one pilot asking the other why did he cutoff" and receiving a denial — without identifying who said what. AAIB said reports in Western media were irresponsible and it was illogical to reach "definite conclusions".

WSJ paints a disturbing picture of the aircraft's final moments. It says black box recordings suggest captain Sumet Sabharwal operated the fuel control switches, prompting first officer Clive Kunder to confront him. The captain reportedly denied responsibility while remaining calm as his junior colleague expressed surprise and panic, potentially struggling to prevent the crash that killed 241 on board and 19 others on the ground. And it isn't clear whether WSJ had access to the transcript of the recordings. AAIB's report indicated aviation psychologists and medicine specialists would join the probe. Authorities could reasonably argue that premature release might irreparably damage a deceased pilot's reputation before determining whether his actions were deliberate or stemmed from medical incapacitation or other factors. Protecting the dead from unfounded speculation while examining all possibilities represents a legitimate investigative principle. That said, immediate transparency may be the most compelling way forward for three specific reasons.

First, the transcript appears to contain damning evidence that was always going to emerge through other investigation stakeholders, including the NTSB, Boeing, and Air India itself. Expecting such information to remain confidential was unrealistic. Second, lack of information breeds exactly the suspicion and conspiracy theories that any responsible investigation seeks to prevent. The preliminary report's evasive approach has fuelled extreme arguments — one side alleges a cover-up at the behest of corporate powers, while the other was quick to blame the crew, even with scant information. Third, and most importantly, facts speak loudest. Yet the preliminary report offered frustratingly few. Beyond establishing the timeline of switch movements, investigators provided minimal insights. The report needed to detail not just the known facts but also the known unknowns — the questions investigators are pursuing, the evidence still required, and the efforts to gather them.

The path forward requires abandoning half-measures for full transparency. AAIB must release complete cockpit voice recorder transcripts alongside detailed analysis of what investigators know, what they suspect, and what remains unknown.

Curious case of Tamil Nadu's coalition politics

With assembly elections due in less than a year, political circles in Tamil Nadu are asking if the era of single-party governments is set to make way for coalition rule. The context is BJP leader Amit Shah's remarks a few weeks ago that Tamil Nadu is poised for an NDA government next year. The AIADMK that leads the NDA in the state is distinctly uncomfortable with any talk of power-sharing, for it contravenes the first principles guiding the approach of the two Dravidian majors — the DMK and AIADMK — to coalition politics in Tamil Nadu. Since 1967, one of the two Dravidian parties has been in office and they have always won office by aligning with national parties such as the Congress. But they have never shared office with allies. Not surprisingly, AIADMK general secretary Edappadi Palaniswami, has clarified that his party has no power-sharing deal with the BJP.

All this can potentially change after 2026. If either the DMK or the AIADMK fails to win a clear majority, allies may demand a stake in government. The arrival of the BJP as a major influencer in state politics has changed the dynamic of negotiation. The Congress was willing to barter ministries in the state government for a larger share of Lok Sabha seats. However, if the AIADMK agrees to the BJP's power-sharing proposition, it may have a bearing on the DMK-led alliance as well. Share in power can be a powerful inducement to its current constituents to shift loyalties. The principle that has guided coalition politics in Tamil Nadu all these years may be up for review soon.

The true picture on inequality in India

In India, where large-scale social welfare programmes have significantly boosted the living standards of the poor, consumption will inevitably be higher and more equitably distributed than income.

The recent decline in India's consumption-based Gini coefficient — from 28.8 in 2010-12 to 25.5 in 2022-23, as reported by the World Bank — has prompted considerable scrutiny, particularly when juxtaposed with income-based estimates from the World Inequality Database (WID), which peg India's Gini at an ostensibly alarming 62 in 2023. This necessitates a closer interrogation of the underlying metrics, data sources, and conceptual frameworks.

At the core of this divergence is a critical conceptual distinction: The difference between consumption inequality and income inequality. In a country like India — characterised by a large informal workforce, extensive in-kind transfers, and a rapidly expanding welfare architecture — income is often volatile, underreported, or difficult to capture comprehensively. Consumption, by contrast, tends to be smoother over time and more reflective of actual living standards. The World Bank's Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP) adopts this logic, using either disposable income or consumption expenditure depending on national context.

The World Bank paper titled 'The World Bank's New Inequality Indicator' gives a way of converting consumption

Gini to income Gini and vice versa. The Bank estimated that the average ratio of income-to-consumption Gini coefficients across 84 country-years where data was available for both is 1.13. Applying this directly to India's consumption-based Gini of 25.5 yields an approximate income Gini of 28.8. This still places India at 12th position, even under income-equivalent assumptions. This simple approximation gives a way of comparing welfare types within the PIP database.

Why has this not been more widely acknowledged? The answer perhaps lies in the tendency to selectively emphasise outlier estimates. When the simple approximation is used for a large-scale comparison across nations, India's inequality, even when measured in income terms, is significantly lower than the US and Europe. Among the 48 nations where welfare approach is consumption-based, India ranks third. India's consumption-based Gini coefficient of 25.5 in the PIP database is also internationally striking. China's consumption Gini, for instance, stands at 35.7, according to the same database and using the same welfare concept. This 10-point difference is significant.

Why is the impact of large-scale social welfare schemes conspicuously absent from the analysis? In India, where large-scale social welfare programmes — subsidised grains, LPG, housing, rural employment guarantee, health insurance, and direct cash transfers — have significantly boosted the living standards of the poor, consumption will inevitably be higher and more equitably distributed than income. These forms of public provi-

sioning raise welfare, especially in rural and informal segments.

The 2025 budget estimate pegs the Centre's spending on beneficiary schemes at ₹7.1 lakh crore, states add another ₹7.4 lakh crore. This totals to nearly ₹14.5 lakh crore. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)

data, the average monthly earning of a regular salaried worker is approximately ₹21,000. It is approximately ₹14,000 for the self-employed. The average earning per day by a casual labourer is ₹433. Using these approximations and accounting for dependency assuming a family of four, this translates to an income of ₹55,000 per capita. Assuming 80% of the total beneficiary schemes reaches bottom 50%, this translates into ₹15,000 per year per person, accounting for leakages and overlaps through direct and indirect benefits. This uplift of approximately 20% in effective resources translates into consumption. Thus, even under these conservative assumptions, this significantly compresses effective inequality.

These interventions have also led to a dramatic fall in poverty, with the extreme poverty rate dropping from 16.2% in 2011-12 to 2.3% in 2022-23. At the lower-middle-income line of \$3.65 a day, poverty fell from 6.8% to 2.8%.

The WID database's benchmark income concept is: "Pre-tax, post-replacement national income" — that is, before taxes and transfers, except for social insurance components like pensions and unemployment benefits. This means they exclude most non-contributory welfare transfers — like DBT, food subsidies, LPG schemes, Ayushman Bharat, rural



India's inequality, even when measured in income terms, is significantly lower than the US and the UK.

housing, and more.

India's social protection system relies much more heavily on non-contributory transfers than contributory insurance. These are not counted in the WID's income concept, even though they materially raise real income and purchasing power.

This creates a systematic downward bias when WID measures inequality in India, by ignoring the redistributive effect of these targeted schemes and inflating the apparent concentration of national income at the top. So, under WID's income inequality framework, we are essentially saying that India's major schemes have zero impact on inequality.

WID also relies heavily on tax records to compile its database. Gini coefficient estimated using income-tax returns data of taxable income of individuals shows that individual income inequality has decreased from AY5 (FY14) to AY23 (FY22) from 0.472 to 0.402 — 43.6% of individual ITR filers belonging to income group of less than lakh in AY15 (FY14) have left the lowest income group and shifted upwards.

A comparison of disparity in income during FY14 and FY23 shows that there is a clear shift in the income distribution curve, signifying people in lower income brackets are increasing their income to converge towards their share in population. In FY14, the share of the top 1% in total income was 16.4%, which has fallen to 7.7% in FY23. Furthermore, tax buoyancy of 11 alongside

falling cost of collection actually shows better compliance and hence must not be misread as rising inequality.

If India's official tax data shows improving progressivity, and large-scale consumption surveys indicate a sustained reduction in inequality, then why are WID estimates telling such a different story?

To argue that India remains deeply unequal based solely on selectively elevated income estimates is much like claiming the country lacks water because Rajasthan faces water scarcity. Inequality, like deprivation, is not monolithic — it varies across dimensions, regions, and measurement tools; but that does not invalidate the broader progress being made. Any evaluation that ignores these dynamics in favour of a narrow, partial view risks obscuring the very progress it seeks to critique. Improved reporting is not the same as increased disparity — and we must resist reacting to shadows cast by better data. And welfare economics must always return to its core question: What improves the lived experience of the bottom half? In that, India's story over the past decade is less about divergence at the top and more about convergence at the base.

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A Bill for Big Brother to weaponise speech

Towards the end of June, it was reported that the government of Karnataka was planning to introduce a bill for the prohibition of "misinformation and fake news". Shortly after that, the media accessed an unofficial version of the proposed Bill. This Bill is not, admittedly, the first attempt in India to prohibit "fake news". Two years ago, the central government amended the Information Technology rules, seeking to proscribe news about the central government that was "fake, false, or misleading". This attempt was eventually struck down as unconstitutional by the Bombay High Court. If this version of the Karnataka Bill is enacted, however, then it will go even beyond the unconstitutional IT Rules amendment, and cause a serious chilling effect on the freedom of speech.

The problems begin from the definitions themselves. The Bill contemplates the establishment of a 'Fake News on Social Media Regulatory Authority', whose task, among other things, is to proscribe online content that is "anti-feminism", disrespectful of "Sanatan symbols and beliefs", promotes "superstition", or is not based on "authentic research on subjects related to science, history, religion, philosophy, or literature". As is obvious, these are very vague and subjective terms, which will result in the casting of a very broad net of censorship. One of the cardinal rules of free speech philosophy is that restrictive laws should be worded as precisely as language permits, and leave as little discretionary power as possible in the hands of executive agencies.

The Bill falls on that front. Furthermore, the section on misinformation proscribes information that is "prejudicial to public health, public safety, public tranquillity or the conduct of free and fair elections". This goes considerably beyond the mandate of Article 19(2) of the Constitution, which limits restrictions upon speech to those that are in the interests of "public order". There is, however, a deeper problem with the Bill. In its definitional section, it makes a valiant effort to distinguish between "fake news" and "misinformation" on the one hand, and matters of "opinion" on the other. The Bill goes to great lengths to do so, for example, by stipulating that "opinions, religious or philosophical sermons, satire, comedy or parody or any other form of artistic expression" will be excluded from the regulatory ambit, as long as a "reasonable person" would not think of them as "statements of fact".

ONE OF THE CARDINAL RULES OF FREE SPEECH PHILOSOPHY IS THAT THE LAW SHOULD BE PRECISELY WORDED, LEAVING LITTLE DISCRETIONARY POWER WITH THE EXECUTIVE.

The issue, however, is that the line between "fact" and "opinion" is nowhere near as clear as the law would have us believe. This is especially true in contexts of political speech or public dissent — contexts where the freedom of speech is particularly important. Consider, for example, a situation where I call a particular politician a "thief". While I may be using the word "thief" to refer to their ethical and moral character, or their failure to keep their political promises, the regulatory committee can easily use my statement to initiate a untrue accusation that the politician has committed the crime of theft. This is not a problem that can be solved by precise legislative drafting. It is something embedded in the very manner in which we wield language, and relate to each other in the world.

While civil defamation law (and, in India, election law) is also premised on the fact/opinion distinction, there are safeguards there (such as the requirement of a trial and determination by a judge) which are absent in the Karnataka Bill. Here, the executive-driven regulatory authority is the body that initiates proceedings, which are, in turn, channelled through the police, and to special courts.

Furthermore, one of the most disturbing provisions of the Bill is Section 12, which is the bail provision. The provision adopts the notorious "twin test", which is used in terrorism laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) or money-laundering laws such as the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA). This provision reverses the presumption of "innocent until proven guilty", and forces an accused to virtually establish their innocence even for the grant of bail. It is a well-known fact that because of this provision, people accused under UAPA and PMLA spend years in jail without trial. The Karnataka government now seeks to extend that draconian provision to what are pure speech offences (at the highest).

In short, therefore, the Karnataka Fake News and Misinformation Bill is vague and over-censorious in its content, vests vast amounts of discretion in an executive regulatory body, lacks procedural safeguards, and authorises draconian and disproportionate punishment. It violates the Constitution and the guarantee of free speech every step of the way.

While the spread of misinformation and fake news on the internet is no doubt a problem, which requires some degree of regulation, the Karnataka Bill wields an indiscriminate, coercive sledgehammer instead of a deft, regulatory scalpel. It should not see the light of day — and if it does, it should be swiftly struck down by the courts.

Gautam Bhatia, a Delhi-based advocate, is the author of *Off the Bench or Behind the Free Speech Under the Indian Constitution*. The views expressed are personal.

{ JITENDRA SINGH } MINISTER OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

We are looking forward to having a space station of our own. Most likely it should be possible by 2035

operation Sindoore should be discussed in Parliament

Moments of national crisis often unify a country, prompting collective grief, introspection, and institutional learning. In the aftermath of Operation Sindoore, India stood at such a juncture. While the courage and professionalism of our armed forces are beyond question and deserve the nation's deepest gratitude, the conduct of our political leadership has raised serious concerns about transparency, accountability, and responsibility in matters of national security. It is now confirmed that India lost fighter aircraft during Operation Sindoore. However, this critical information was not disclosed by the political leadership. There was no formal statement in Parliament either. Instead, the information emerged through veiled references and fragmented admissions.

On May 6-7, Air Marshal AK Bharti, director general air operations, made the first indirect acknowledgment. "We are in a combat situation and losses are a part of combat," he said. On May 31, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan confirmed the loss of aircraft at the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, adding that it was not as critical information was not disclosed by the political leadership. It is not as if we did not ask how many jets fell, but why they did.

That "why" matters deeply, especially given what reportedly went down. Several accounts suggest that India has lost an undisclosed number of Rafale fighter jets during Operation Sindoore. Now, with the crown-jewels of IAF reportedly downed in combat, the silence from the political leadership is a matter of concern.

On June 29, Captain Shiv Kumar, India's defence attaché to Indonesia, while speaking at a seminar, claimed that India lost "some" jets to Pakistan and that the Indian Air Force incurred losses during Operation Sindoore because of constraints imposed by the political leadership. The implication was that political leadership imposed operational limits that compromised mission effectiveness and exposed our pilots to greater risk. The Indian Embassy in Jakarta issued a clarification, claiming the comments had been misrepresented. But, notably, the government did not deny the core of Captain Kumar's remarks.

On July 4, Lt. General Rahul R Singh, DCOAS, said that 21 targets had been identified in Pakistan but at the last hour of the operation, it was decided that the defence forces would engage with nine targets. Whose decision was it to reduce the scope of potential targets in

Pakistan? Was this constraint imposed by the political leadership? Could India have avoided loss of aircraft if the scope of targets had not been reduced?

Unfortunately, we don't have answers to these questions because the government has refused to face Parliament on this matter. In retrospect, however, it becomes clear that the government would never have convened a special session of Parliament. It is not that there has been no precedence. The Congress government under Jawaharlal Nehru held a special session of Parliament on November 8, 1962 in the backdrop of the Sino-India war after a delegation headed by then Jana Sangh leader, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, demanded it. By contrast, the present government has avoided accountability. They know they've compromised national security, and they're worried what the Congress will expose before the people of India. In this context, the words of our defence personnel will echo long because they make visible what the nation deserves to know but the government so desperately wants to erase; they said what Delhi's political managers and TV generals could not.

Not Indian pilots were sent into hostile airspace with their hands up. This is troubling because civilian control over the military is a cornerstone of our democracy, built on trust that the political leadership will act with strategic foresight and responsibility. That trust is shattered, when national security becomes part of a publicity campaign, and strategy is replaced by optics.

From Pulwama to Balakot to Operation Sindoore and rallies in Bihar, this government has repeatedly used the military for electoral mileage. It wants the glory, but not the grief; the applause, but never the accounting. Soldiers are not need more metaphors of war in campaign speeches. It needs truth in service. Leadership is not about how loudly one performs from a podium or in slogans. It is about wisdom, character, and empathy, in the quiet truths told to the nation, to the victims of war. The military has done its duty. Now it is time for the government to face the questions.

Pawan Kherra is a senior Congress leader. The views expressed are personal.

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The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

WORDLY WISE

HE WILL WIN WHO KNOWS WHEN TO FIGHT AND WHEN NOT TO FIGHT.

— SUN Tzu

A foothold in the cosmos

Success of Axiom-4 mission offers invaluable lessons and a powerful impetus for India's space aspirations



SOMAK RAYCHAUDHURY

THE SAFE RETURN of Group Captain Shubanshu Shukla from the International Space Station as part of the Axiom-4 mission, where he was the pilot among the four-member crew, marks a watershed moment not just for Indian human spaceflight, but for the entire strategic arc of India's space programme.

For the first time since Rakesh Sharma travelled on a Soviet spacecraft in 1984, an Indian has completed a complex scientific mission, in a journey to and from the ISS, spending more than two weeks aboard, this time under the banner of international partnership and indigenous resolve.

The successful conclusion of the Axiom-4 mission, marking another milestone in the burgeoning era of commercial human spaceflight, resonates far beyond the confines of Earth's orbit. For India, a nation rapidly asserting its prowess in the global space arena, this achievement offers invaluable lessons and a powerful impetus, particularly for its ambitious Gaganyaan mission and the grander vision for its future ventures in space.

Axiom-4's journey underscored several critical advancements that are reshaping the space landscape. It highlighted the increasing reliability and capability of private-sector space transportation. This mission, executed with professionalism and a clear focus on its objectives, reinforced the growing accessibility of the low-Earth orbit for a multitude of purposes, from cutting-edge scientific research and technological demonstrations to the nascent but rapidly expanding commercial ventures.

Many Indians were following the mission, among them the young people in schools and colleges across the country, who were born long after Sharma's heroic journey. For them, in addition to the importance of the Indian role model who achieved this rare feat, the journey also showcased the efficiency and necessity of international collaboration, even in commercially driven missions, where diverse expertise works together towards shared objectives.

For India's Gaganyaan mission, which aims to send Indian astronauts into space on an indigenous vehicle, the insights gleaned from Axiom-4 are profoundly relevant. While ISRO's approach is distinctly national, the global landscape of human spaceflight is increasingly collaborative and increasingly driven by the commercial sector.



MILIND SOMAN

TODAY, THE WORLD grieves the loss of Fauja Singh, the indomitable "Turbaned Torpedo". We have lost a legend, a man who didn't just run, but who rewrote the meaning of movement itself. Even writing down his age, 114, feels surreal. Not because he lived that long—but because he lived that well.

I have been greatly inspired by Singh's life, especially his running tales. I had the honour of meeting him years ago at the Mumbai Marathon. I remember thinking that this was someone who didn't just defy age, he made it irrelevant. No grand philosophies, no high-tech training gear, just discipline, simplicity, and a heart that beat with purpose.

Singh's death is heartbreaking, not only because we have lost a symbol of resilience, but because it was avoidable. He was killed by a person driving recklessly while Singh was crossing a road near his home. His death shines a light on a harsh truth: In India, pedestrians, especially the elderly, face daily dangers from unsafe roads, lack of crosswalks, and our could-n't-care-less attitude to drunken driving and hit-and-run. Singh defied limits all his life, only to be failed by a society that couldn't protect him. His passing must not be in vain—it must become a call to action for safer roads, stricter laws and respect for every person's life.

Although my own running journey began over two decades ago, Singh reminded me that sport isn't about speed or medals—it's about spirit. He started running marathons at

Axiom Space's declared long-term goal of building its own commercial space station, intended to succeed the ISS, is a bold undertaking. ISRO has already declared India's ambitions to deploy the Bharatiya Antariksh Mission. It plans to, perhaps in the following decade, send Indians to the Moon, maybe even build a base on its surface. Observing the progress of Axiom's efforts, including the challenges they encounter, and the solutions they devise in developing and integrating modules into the ISS, will provide rare invaluable foresight for India.

Axiom-4's experience provides a rich case study in several key areas. Of primary and critical importance is crew training and preparation. Observing how commercial astronauts from various professional backgrounds, who are not necessarily all career military pilots, are rigorously trained and seamlessly integrated into a complex mission profile offers valuable perspectives. India can meticulously refine its own astronaut selection and training methodologies by studying these models. This includes incorporating best practices for physiological adaptation to microgravity and psychological conditioning for isolation. Both simulation-based drills and real-time problem-solving scenarios can enhance the preparedness of Indian "vyomanauts".

Mission operations and logistics present another vital area of learning. Managing a human spaceflight mission involving multiple international partners and commercial entities, as Axiom-4 successfully did, provides an invaluable blueprint for streamlining complex operational flows. This encompasses pre-flight preparations and launch sequences to in-orbit activities, rendezvous and docking procedures, and the critical re-entry and recovery phases. Understanding the intricacies of communication protocols, real-time decision-making under pressure, and robust contingency planning, can significantly help ISRO anticipate potential challenges and optimise its own mission control strategies for Gaganyaan.

Equally important are the areas of technology validation and integration. While Gaganyaan is built upon ISRO's formidable indigenous capabilities and decades of expertise, Axiom-4's reliance on established commercial launch and crew vehicles (like Space's Falcon 9 and Crew Dragon), and its focus on specific in-orbit scientific and commercial objectives, demonstrates how new technologies can be rapidly integrated, tested, and validated in the space environment. This could inspire India to explore strategic partnerships for certain sub-systems or adapt specific commercial methodologies for its own technological development and validation processes.

If it hasn't already, the public visibility and success of this mission will inspire and strengthen international collaboration. As the global space community becomes more interconnected, missions like Axiom-4 highlight

the benefits of pooling resources, expertise, and technological capabilities. This mission's success will certainly accelerate private-sector participation, demonstrating the viability and potential profitability, encouraging more Indian companies to invest in space infrastructure, services, and human spaceflight support. This could lead to a thriving ecosystem of Indian suppliers, manufacturers, and service providers for future missions.

The transition from short-duration missions like Gaganyaan to a continuous human presence requires mastering complex logistics, radiation protection, and psychological support for astronauts, all areas where these new transnational collaborations can offer insights. As India's space program evolves, ISRO has already declared India's ambitions to deploy the Bharatiya Antariksh Mission. It plans to, perhaps in the following decade, send Indians to the Moon, maybe even build a base on its surface. Observing the progress of Axiom's efforts, including the challenges they encounter, and the solutions they devise in developing and integrating modules into the ISS, will provide rare invaluable foresight for India.

In essence, the successful conclusion of Axiom-4 is not just a triumph for commercial spaceflight; it is a beginning for the space ambitions of a nation such as India. It underscores that human spaceflight is no longer solely the domain of a few state-funded agencies but is evolving into a more dynamic, collaborative, and commercially viable enterprise. One can only hope that these ventures will also support purely scientific projects such as the planned ISRO missions to look for life by studying the atmospheres of extra-solar planets, or detect gravitational waves from space.

By meticulously studying its successes and drawing pertinent lessons, India can not only ensure the triumphant realisation of Gaganyaan, but also confidently chart a course for an even more ambitious and impactful future in the cosmos. The stars, it seems, are increasingly within reach, and India is well-positioned to seize its moment.

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THE SANCTIONS STICK

New Delhi should disregard NATO threat on doing business with Russia, pursue its own path, even as West seeks to dictate terms

DURING OPERATION SINDOOR, the S-400 formed the outermost layer of India's air defence. This is the missile system that India acquired from Russia a few years ago despite the US threatening sanctions under CAATSA—a law mandating punitive measures against countries engaging in "significant transactions" with Russia, North Korea, or Iran. India made it clear that it would proceed with the S-400 deal anyway. Eventually, the US House carved out an India-specific waiver. A similar episode is playing out again, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte warned this week that countries like India, China, and Brazil could face secondary sanctions if they continue doing business with Russia. This comes as several US senators back a new sanctions bill proposing a 500 per cent tariff on nations buying Russian goods. US President Donald Trump, too, said this week that the US would impose 100 per cent secondary tariffs targeting Russia's trade partners if a peace deal with Ukraine did not happen in 50 days.

The Ministry of External Affairs' sharp rebuttal on Thursday—underlining that the energy requirements of the Indian people are the overriding priority, and cautioning against "double standards"—serves as a timely reminder to the West, particularly Europe, of its own manoeuvres in pursuit of energy security. Yes, India was quick to seize the opportunity to purchase discounted Russian oil after the West imposed price caps and turned away from it. But while Russia's emergence as India's top crude supplier has helped meet domestic energy demand and stabilise prices, it is no secret that a substantial volume of refined fuel, derived from the Russian oil imported to India, is ultimately exported to Europe. A CREA report noted that by late 2024, "capitalising on the refining loophole", India had become the EU's largest exporter of oil products. Europe also imported LNG at record levels from Russia last year.

The sanctions threat to its trade partners is intended to choke Russia's war funding and pressure President Vladimir Putin into agreeing to a ceasefire. In doing so, however, the US and NATO risk undermining their relationship with one of the world's largest economies and an essential ally in the Indo-Pacific. The West cannot have it both ways: Penalise India for pursuing national interest while simultaneously expecting cooperation in regional and global initiatives. It is high time the West engaged with India as an equal partner. Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said on Thursday that there was nothing to worry about even if sanctions were activated because India has expanded its crude sourcing slate. New Delhi should remain firm in pursuing its own path, even as the West seeks to dictate terms.

PROBLEM WITH ANI

The internet has long been plagued by sexism. The GrokAI 'companion' will only make regressive attitudes harder to root out

FRANKENSTEIN REDUX it was not, but reports of one of the "companions" launched by Elon Musk's GrokAI describing the billionaire as having "more money than brains" come close to the creator-vs-creation trope first encountered in Mary Shelley's classic novel. That, however, is the least of the problems posed by the GrokAI companions unveiled this week by Musk. These companions include, for now, two animated characters: A "rude" red panda named Rudi—who dissed the billionaire after being prompted by users—and a "flirty" Japanese anime woman named Ani.

Of the two, Ani represents the far thornier challenge. Already, it has been flagged as potentially promoting objectification of women. If it feels like regression, it's because it was not so long ago that public outcry forced Big Tech to roll back or modify the heavily gendered aspects of early AI voice assistants like Siri (Apple), Alexa (Amazon), and Cortana (Microsoft). Bestowed with feminine names and programmed with women's voices, the initial versions of these assistants were heavily criticised for reinforcing harmful stereotypes about "submissive" or "eager-to-please" women. While Apple and Amazon added male personas in response to the outcry, allowing users a greater degree of choice in how they interacted with the digital assistants, Cortana was eventually phased out in favour of the gender-neutral Copilot. Ani, with her servile manner, offering to make users' lives "sexier", takes several steps back from that moment of accountability by Big Tech.

LLMs like Grok become "intelligent" by trawling through vast amounts of data. That they've absorbed not just facts and figures but also human attitudes has already been widely documented—for example, a study of five popular LLMs published in June showed chatbots routinely suggesting that female applicants for a job ask for lower pay than male applicants for the same position. If the internet has long been unkind to and about women, creations like Ani will only make it harder to root out the sexism coded into it.

AT HIS OWN PACE

Fauja Singh is a reminder that we run not to escape life, but to embrace it

In the world of fitness, we tend to idolise young achievers bursting with speed and promise, but Singh taught us to reverse the spark in the soul of an elder. He even carried the London Olympic torch in 2012. That's what running is. Not escape, not exertion—but expression. A meditation. And Singh showed us how it could heal. Running teaches you everything you need to know—about patience, resilience, joy, and pain.

Most people would have given up on their bodies by then. He chose to believe in his "Running showed me kindness and brought me back to life," he shared. What I admired most about him was not his stamina or strength, but his spirit. He began running to cope with grief after losing his wife and son. He chose to move, one step at a time, until that movement became something the world noticed. His journey culminated in the 2011 Toronto Marathon, where he became the first centenarian to finish a full marathon.

His life was more than a testament to physical endurance. It spoke of resilience. It reminded me, and everyone who watched his turban bob along the route, that it is never too late to start exploring anything you love. In the world of fitness, we tend to idolise young achievers bursting with speed and promise, but Singh taught us to reverse the spark in the soul of an elder. He even carried the London Olympic torch in 2012.

That's what running is. Not escape, not exertion—but expression. A meditation. And Singh showed us how it could heal. Running teaches you everything you need to know—about patience, resilience, joy, and pain. With every mile he ran, Singh reminded us that age is not a limitation; the mind is.

What's heartbreaking is how, in India, running becomes an act of bravery. Every runner who steps out of the door—especially women, elders, and those without access to

private clubs—is quietly pushing back against fear, neglect, and indifference.

India has the spirit for running. But to become a country that welcomes runners, it needs more than marathons. It needs safer streets, respectful public spaces and a cultural shift that sees runners not as obstacles on the road, but as inspiring people who deserve to move freely and safely.

There's something truly sacred about long-distance running. What makes it special is not the distance—it's the journey inward. With every kilometre, you're not just moving forward, you are also peeling back layers of fear, doubt, and fatigue. It's not about outrunning others; it's about discovering the strength you didn't know you had.

Would I recommend long distance running? Absolutely. Not just as a sport, but as a way to know yourself, as a way to happiness. Fauja Singh is a humbling reminder that we run not to escape life, but to embrace it. He raced the clock and, for a while, beat it. I hope we remember him not just for his race, but for the grace with which he lived. The discipline of his days, the gratitude in his words. He has passed on to us a legacy not measured in kilometres, but in courage. We must carry forward that torch by running our own races—towards self-belief, discipline and purpose.

The writer is a long-distance runner, actor and model



JULY 18, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

KANISHKA 'CLUES'

COMPUTER ANALYSIS OF the "Kanishka" aircraft's digital flight data recorder (DFDR) gave "definitive clues" of a mid-air explosion before it plunged into the Atlantic on June 23. This further confirms the sabotage theory advanced by aviation circles and strengthened by the hearing of the cockpit voice recorder (CVR) at the Bhubhai Atomic Research Centre. The analysis of the DFDR tape suggested cracking of the aircraft material seconds after the explosion.

BHOPAL TRAGEDY PROBE

JUSTICE N K Singh, who is inquiring into the

Bhopal gas disaster, said the Madhya Pradesh government was not cooperating enough to enable him to expedite the inquiry. He said he was "handicapped" as the government had not appointed sufficient staff to assist the commission, and the technical experts required to assist in the investigation. He also cited instances when government departments objected to the commission's requirements on financial grounds.

AHMEDABAD VIOLENCE

FIVE PERSONS WERE killed and more than 20 injured as large-scale violence erupted anew in the communally sensitive Kalupur and Dariaipura areas of the walled city, less than 40 hours after

the Army handed over control of the walled city to the police. Indefinite curfew was imposed in these two areas. However, the Director General of Police, J F Ribeiro, ruled out deployment of the Army, saying, "no chance at all".

DEADLY COLLAPSE

AT LEAST 38 persons are feared to have been killed and 42 others injured when an Army building under construction collapsed near Akhnora, about 34 km from Jammu. Eight bodies have reportedly been recovered and the rest were still buried under the debris. The building collapsed due to the heavy downpour. The victims were labourers from Madhya Pradesh.

OUR VIEW



THEIR VIEW

Long haul: A national ropeway policy would aid urban mobility

This 'touristy' mode of transport can be integrated with transit systems to serve urban commuters



KAVERI BAMZAI
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tourist zones and decongest traffic. Early pilots such as the Varanasi Urban Ropeway and Shimla multi-line project have shown promise.

The ground reality of multiple government agencies: India's ropeway sector suffers from an unclear and fragmented institutional structure, with multiple government agencies like the departments of tourism, forest, public works and urban local bodies hindering urban adoption. The 1.8km Guwahati-Umananda ropeway, for example, took a long time to move from concept to execution, mired as it was in archaeological permissions and inter-departmental conflicts. But it has been running smoothly since 2020, says Guwahati entrepreneur Shyamkanu Mahanta. We have no national policy that explicitly promotes ropeways as a solution for urban congestion. While the Parvatalma Pariyojana has sparked interest, its focus is largely on tourism and hilly terrain, not urban areas. The absence of a clear roadmap is reflected in the project's design framework. While the government has proposed a model concession agreement based on the design-build-finance-operate-transfer (DBFOT) model, recent pilot projects, such as the Varanasi ropeway, are being developed under the hybrid annuity model (HAM).

Unlike DBFOT, HAM offers a more balanced risk-sharing structure, with the government funding a portion of the capital cost and making annual payments. This approach is especially relevant for urban ropeways, which often serve financially sensitive corridors where farebox revenue alone may not guarantee viability. Designed primarily for public transit rather than tourism, HAM prioritizes affordability, multimodal integration and last-mile connectivity over financial returns. It scores well on long-term sustainability.

Overhead opportunity: India must adopt a National Ropeway Mobility Policy under the ministry of housing and urban affairs and integrate ropeways with flagship programmes like Amrut, Smart Cities and Gati Shakti. The policy should clarify institutional roles, enable single-window approvals and set clear safety and design standards. States must incorporate ropeways into urban mobility and development plans, with Unified Metropolitan Transport Authorities overseeing multimodal integration. A dedicated national safety authority is also critical to regulate operations.

Financially, ropeways should be reclassified under the 'transport and logistics' category in the Harmonised Master List of infrastructure to unlock priority lending and viability gap funding. A standard HAM model tailored for urban contexts, along with state-specific frameworks, can attract private investment. Additionally, ropeways should be given access to the Urban Challenge Fund, which supports pilot projects in cities with topographical or congestion challenges. Linking funding with outcomes like ridership and emissions reduction will ensure impact. Domestic ropeway manufacturing under 'Make in India' can reduce imports and create jobs.

With over half of India expected to live in cities by 2050, urban ropeways need the regulatory support and a bold shift in mindset to fulfil their potential.

QUICK READ

Ropeways offer an energy efficient and cost effective solution for India's urban mobility needs. They can't replace metros but are ideal for medium-density corridors and last-mile links.

India needs a national ropeway policy that integrates cable cars with other infrastructure plans to realise their potential. We also need a regulator to ensure that safety standards are met.

We need to break free of patriarchal clutches

Last week's murder of tennis coach Radhika Yadav should make us confront the patriarchal prejudices that hold not just Indian women back from success, but the country as a whole

Success can be fatal. Last Thursday, 25-year-old Radhika Yadav, a tennis player running a small coaching school, was shot dead in Gurugram. Her father, Deepak Yadav, confessed to the killing. The police said that he killed his daughter over her refusal to shut down her tennis training centre. Reports of the confession state that he was being taunted for "living off her income" and facing questions over her "character", and since their family was financially well-off, he felt that she need not run her business. This motive has drawn gasps of shock across India. It reveals all too starkly a sinister reality that multitudes of women face—the insistence that an adult daughter must forever stay under the family patriarch's command, with no right to live on her own terms.

In another part of the world, two days after Radhika's domestic murder, 24-year-old Iga Świątek won the Ladies' Singles title at Wimbledon. But this time, the gleam of her trophy was a reminder of how hard-fought such success must be for so many of us back home. This is not the first time a sport has lost an ambitious Indian woman. Two years ago, star wrestler Sakshi Malik retired from the mat after India's wrestling federation failed to address the rampant sexual harassment faced by women wrestlers. The story of women being held back—violently, if need be—from success, freedom and other worthy pursuits is largely the same in most other spheres, formal work included. As attitude gaps between urban and rural homes are not always wide, village settings offer some clues. According to a J-PAL study in 197 gram panchayats in Madhya Pradesh, a majority of surveyed women stated that their husband had the most say in whether they took jobs. This

rural study also found that most men estimated that a majority of their community members would consider them 'bad providers' if their wives worked outside the home for pay. This illustrates the 'male breadwinner norm,' by which men are expected to be the main earners for their families. Women, on the other hand, are largely seen as 'emergency providers,' according to demographer and sociologist A.L. Sharada, who attempted to puzzle out India's trend of women doing paid work. Urban and rural sub-trends vary, but the country's broad picture has been dismal. The proportion of working-age women in India who surveys found were either employed or seeking work has both risen and fallen over the past three decades. Recent official data shows a recovery and then drop in the labour force participation rate of women, but what exactly has been going on remains a big puzzle. Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin's U-shaped curve would suggest a decline in women working as incomes rise in agrarian and early industrial settings, followed by a rise led by modern jobs as an economy develops for socially empowered women to take on wider roles. India is in various stages of development. Our rural trend seems to track classic old income sufficiency, while urban participation appears driven by a mix that includes liberal forces in favour of gender equity.

Yet, as Radhika's case has shown, rigid social attitudes are a factor we have not been able to cast off. In global comparison, we have far too few women in paid jobs. The question we must ask ourselves is: How long will we let patriarchal convictions hold the country back? A male dominated society is bad for the emergence of our economy. And evidence of gender inequity shows up much too often for comfort.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights.

HILLARY CLINTON

MY VIEW | EYE ON AI

Learn to blink slowly if the fear of good times creeps up

NILESH JASANI



is a Singapore-based innovation investor for Genlinov Pte Ltd

When markets and portfolios rise as relentlessly as they have lately, the first feeling is not gratitude. It is dread. It is the curse of investors who have seen cycles before: you can't enjoy the climb. Every new high looks like a future correction in disguise. Every rally whispers a reckoning to come. The mind wanders in that silence. You begin to question your own thesis—at times justifying new price levels, at others to support an urge to lock in gains. Long-term holds feel brittle; short-term trades seduce. You read Benjamin Graham on the vanishing margin of safety; then read George Soros on reflexivity. For every conviction you hold, you can find the ghost of a greater thinker to support it. And another to take it apart.

As a young analyst, somewhat obsessed with the equational purity of abstraction, I was fascinated by the weak scaffolding under almost every concept in portfolio theory and valuation: Beta, PEG, WACC. Most hides hairline cracks in its own algebra. Most

of these rest on a strange mix of untidy math and messy thumb rules. But their inventors were honest about shortcomings and conversations created space for doubt.

One great exception is the Sharpe ratio. This measure of portfolio efficiency—reward versus risk—is treated as gospel in many circles, but masks a subtle flaw. The more often you measure performance, the worse the Sharpe ratio tends to look. Daily ups and downs make things appear more volatile than they really are. And that's the point: volatility isn't just about the asset—it's about how often we choose to look.

The result is misleading. A strong long-term performer can look fragile when viewed through a short-term lens. It tempts managers to reduce daily swings, even at the cost of long-term returns. It's not just about the number. It's about what the number encourages us to do.

Agents, incentives and a mirror: Now the awkward part. The mismatch between those who own the money and those who manage it. Pension funds think in decades but people managing them think in quarters; their bonuses demand it. I say this without malice. I'm a fund manager too. It's me in the mirror. This is the agency problem in its most common form. A fund's mission demands a tele-

scope while the incentives of its managers demand a microscope. To protect their careers, agents go to extraordinary lengths to cut downside risk in short periods—even before accounting for the lure of high-margin products. The result is excessive hedging and an obsession with minimizing volatility, even if it means dulling returns.

This is a tension I feel keenly. The pull between the portfolio's true needs and the human need to manage the immediate is a constant, quiet struggle.

Liquidity and the comfort of darkness: There is another way to solve the problem: turn off the lights. Buy an illiquid asset. Mark it to market once a quarter—or once a year—and call the silence 'stability'.

This is the allure of private markets. There is no daily ticker. No constant, unnerving judgement of every macro headline or quarterly earnings blip. Private investments feel like an antidote. You invest in businesses, not daily drama.

But darkness brings its own hazards. Illiquidity corrodes optionality. Valuations ossify into lore. By the time price finally speaks, the story may have drifted far from that neatly pencilled internal rate of return. Embracing illiquidity worked wonders in the internet era. But in the GenAI era, we need to retain the option to adjust. No innovation trend is assured for more than a few quarters. The freedom to rethink is a feature, not a flaw.

Innovation's roar against the ticker tape: In public markets, when you stare at prices tick-

by tick, you see only noise. Volatility, we learn, is not just a property of the asset—it's a property of our gaze. Let's lift that gaze. Web traffic is down by a third—not because people read less, but because answers arrive before the question fully forms. GenAI orchestrates half the product recommendations on the internet. A quarter of travel bookings begin with a chatbot. AI investments are rising fast. However, there's also the roar of innovation against the ticker tape's tyranny. Blinking slowly could help investment managers absorb a tech-driven future faster than its unfolding ever faster.

Consumer behaviour is being rewritten. This isn't just about tech. Cars are delivering themselves and the skies have flying taxis, while machines talk and see like humans. One could go breathless on what's coming in diagnostics, drug discovery, climate management, material sciences or finance.

What of price volatility. We can learn to breathe through it. The real risks are not 10% or 20% corrections every few quarters, but getting obsessed with managing them that we miss the historic transformations unfolding before us. Learn to blink slowly: In the end, I'm as mortal as the next price-addled soul. I'll refresh the screen again just to better judgement. To watch the ticker is to be human. To feel the pull of fear and greed as prices dance is unavoidable. The difference, I hope, is that afterwards, I will close the laptop and pick up a research note on generative proteins. Or a press release on a gigawatt data corridor. Blinking slowly is our edge.

We count raindrops, but only to remind ourselves of a flood. And when the next correction arrives, remember: the water was rising long before the alarm sounded. We can't be perfect market timers. But we can be steady partners in an era of change that will be studied centuries from now.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

A nationwide GST identification mandate can simplify the regime

India should relieve businesses operating across the country of the need to comply with multiple sub-national GST systems



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The goods and services tax (GST), which recently completed eight years in India, was originally envisioned as a "good and simple tax." However, over time, it has become increasingly complex. While a national GST would have been an ideal value added tax (VAT) system, the imperatives of a federal structure led to a compromise, resulting in a dual GST system comprising Central GST (CGST), State GST (SGST) and Integrated GST (IGST). Under this system, the Centre and state governments have concurrent authority to tax the consumption of goods and services based on the principle of incidence at destination, in contrast with the previous indirect tax regime, which followed an origin-based taxation approach.

While the uniformity of SGST laws across states has reduced compliance complexities compared to the VAT regime, challenges remain. Businesses with a pan-India presence still need multiple SGST registrations and must manage compliance separately for each state, including GST payments and return filings. This fragmented approach retains some of the administrative burdens of the VAT era despite the procedural standardization.

Compliance burden: The Indian GST framework, often referred to as a "one nation, one tax" system, has unified tax rates across states and Union territories (UTs), eliminating other taxes on goods and services under its scope. While this standardization simplifies the tax structure, businesses that operate across multiple states or UTs, as mentioned above, are required to obtain separate GST Identification Numbers (GSTINs) for each state or UT and file individual GST returns by using separate usernames and passwords for each jurisdiction. This has led to complex compliance procedures and a notable increase in related costs, especially due to the extensive reconciliations needed on a monthly and annual basis.

On another front, the central government is working to address inter-governmental settlement issues related to IGST. Between April and July 2024, excess IGST allocations amounting to ₹10,659 crore were made to certain states. To resolve this, an internal committee has been set up that is chaired by the additional secretary of revenue at the Centre and comprises officials from both state and central governments. This panel aims to review the IGST mechanism and develop strategies for recovering these excess transfers. These developments highlight the operational complexities and financial implications associated with the implementation of GST, despite its overarching goal of creating a unified tax system.

E-invoicing: The GST compliance process is largely digitized, with e-invoicing now mandatory for all business-to-business (B2B) transactions for taxpayers with an annual turnover exceeding ₹5



crore. There are plans to extend this requirement to all taxpayers and eventually to business-to-consumer (B2C) transactions. Once fully implemented, e-way bills should be eliminated. This move would significantly reduce the compliance burden for taxpayers and streamline operations, leading to faster turnaround times for transport vehicles and improved efficiency in the supply chain.

PAN 2.0: The Union government recently unveiled plans to introduce PAN 2.0, an upgraded version of the longstanding Permanent Account Number system used by the Income Tax department as a unique taxpayer identifier.

PAN 2.0 aims to modernize and streamline operations for businesses and citizens alike. The revamped system will leverage advanced technology to enhance efficiency, integrate PAN as a single identifier for specified business activities and introduce a unified portal for all PAN-related services. This presents an ideal opportunity to design a single GSTIN for taxpayers operating across India. Under this system, tax allocation can occur seamlessly at the back-end, using

place-of-supply rules and data captured through e-invoicing. Such a framework would eliminate the need for an integrated GST administration across levels of governments under the GST Council. Since transaction-wise granular data would be available, GST revenues can be allocated equally

between the Centre and states—and, on a destination-based principle, between states.

In this context, lessons can be learnt from the experience of other federal countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where a single VAT registration number is used for operations across all its constituent emirates. In the UAE, a unified VAT applies to intra-emirate, inter-emirate and import transactions without the need for separate registration in each emirate.

India's next GST Council meeting should discuss this crucial aspect as well, since taking

such simplification steps for GST compliance could significantly ease operational challenges for businesses and reduce administrative overheads, thus fostering economic growth by creating a more efficient and business-friendly tax regime.

These are the authors' personal views.

India's trade pact with Asean is becoming a casualty of tariffs

That New Delhi views Asean as 'China's B-team' speaks volumes



MIHIR SHARMA is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.

It's still far from clear what US President Donald Trump's tariffs will eventually look like. But the pressures they will put on stable trading relationships—even those that don't directly involve the US—are already visible.

Ties between India and the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) are already fraying. The two partners are being pushed into different camps and the free-trade agreement they signed in 2010 could become an unexpected victim of the turmoil.

Trump's policies might be the immediate cause of this rift, but, as always, China's massive manufacturing overcapacity is at the heart of the problem. Even if no country knows what US rates they or others will face, everyone can be reasonably sure that tariffs on imports from the People's Republic will be among the highest. Unfortunately, this also means that there's a big incentive to help Beijing game the system enough that we all trust each other less.

Many Asian countries are reasonably pleased at the thought that duties on their exports will be lower than on those out of China. They've all been searching for a way to regain a sliver of competitiveness and this might help. But the same nations are also a little scared. They fear a flood of underpriced Chinese goods, once meant for the US, will inundate their fledgling manufacturing sectors.

In fact, that's already happening to an extent, and policymakers are responding. Vietnam has introduced anti-dumping tariffs on certain kinds of Chinese steel. Indonesia has banned direct shipping of e-commerce apps like Temu.

But, for some, there's also the tempting possibility that China's overcapacity can be turned from an enemy into an ally. Any country that remains integrated both with China and those that are putting up tariff walls could, if wanted, become a location for the trans-shipment of goods. Instead of paying the higher China levies, importers would pay lower ones imposed on the third country—and share a bit of the take with local partners.

Tariff arbitrage could become as profitable in the future as interest rate arbitrage is today. The more countries that impose anti-dumping duties on China, the more money a successful trans-shipper would make. The US, for one, is already very concerned that parts of Asean might take this route—which is why Trump's trade deal with Vietnam included a clause that any goods suspected of being trans-shipped would pay double tariffs.



Trump's trade policy reset is driving India and Asean further apart.

For countries like India, it's an even greater fear. India's commerce minister caused a bit of a stir recently when he described Asean as "China's B-team." That may have been impolitic but perhaps not entirely unjustified.

New Delhi has been trying to update its free trade agreement (FTA) with Asean for a while. Its particular focus has been to tighten rules-of-origin requirements—the way in which you ensure that a free trade agreement only benefits local producers in both countries, not those shipping goods that originate elsewhere.

Indian officials feel that Asean has been going slow on these discussions. Meanwhile, news broke in May that the bloc had expanded the scope of its parallel FTA with China. They achieved that in double-quick time—negotiations only started in November 2022—which raised a few eyebrows in New Delhi.

Some in India, possibly including its commerce ministry, now seem to think that tariff-free trade with Southeast Asia is the same as opening your market to China. That isn't true—or, at any rate, not yet. But the fact is that member states simply aren't doing enough to reassure their other trading partners, including India.

It would be a nightmare for most countries, including India, if closed-off blocs were to replace today's open trading system. Yet Trump's trade policy actions, when combined with China's overcapacity, are taking us there.

Any country that wants to trade with both sides of the divide—which, clearly, many in Southeast Asia would prefer—will also need to be very transparent about the goods it is exporting and how much value has been added domestically. In other words, it's Asean's move. Its members will have to step up and give most of their trade partners, not just India and the US, a clearer view into their supply chains.

The US is clearly worried that some countries will evade its tariffs. Those concerns will be shared, especially by India. New Delhi seems to believe that, if world trade blocs form, then Asean has already chosen its side—and it won't be the one that India picks.

Trade is impossible without trust and these two partners will have to work to rebuild it.

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MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Humour cannot save the world but deserves a chance

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Have you noticed it too? That quiet absence in the spaces between work meetings or in those late-night scrolls through your phone. Somewhere between quarterly reviews, perfectly filtered photos and social media feeds that never end, we seem to have misplaced something that was once so ordinary that it barely needed a name. Humour.

Think back to that tense meeting where an offhand quip helped everyone breathe again. The argument at home that ended not in silence but in shared laughter. The sting of a sharp remark softened by a grin and witty line offered at just the right moment. If you have had those moments, consider yourself fortunate. You belong to a shrinking group that still remembers humour as more than entertainment.

Yet, it remains a way of being. If anything, it may be more valuable than ever. There is something almost rebellious

about humour today. In a world obsessed with polishing flaws out of existence, humour gently insists it is alright to be human. Traditionally, Indian humour loved imperfection. Folk stories, street plays and Bollywood comedies all found warmth in the hero who stumbled and the friend who laughed at his own expense. Humour was never about mocking others so much as laughing with them and the unpredictable mess of being alive. And maybe that is what we risk losing now as curated perfection replaces candour and every word feels weighed by unseen judges.

Watch a laughter club gathering on a park lawn at dawn. Notice how postures soften, faces brighten and spirits lift. This is actually healing at work. Science has long backed what we feel in those moments. Laughter eases stress, strengthens immunity and brightens perspective, helping us remember that not every burden must be carried in silence.

It is also quietly magnetic. Match.com found that more than nine out of 10 singles look for someone who can make them laugh. Being funny is not only charming, but also comforting because it hints at perspective. And perspective, more often than not, is what keeps us balanced.

Yet, in Indian offices, humour can feel like contraband. Hierarchies run deep in workplaces and speaking too freely can feel risky. But humour, when offered with sincerity, can do what manuals forget. It makes leaders relatable. In high-pressure meetings, a light remark can open conversations that might otherwise get missed. Teams remember they are not just roles on an organizational chart, but people who can laugh together before getting to the task at hand.

Marketers of well-known brands have understood this for years. Pepsi and Coca-Cola's playful rivalry, BMW and Mercedes exchanging clever winks and Amul's tongue-in-cheek billboards never made these brands seem frivolous. They made them seem human. Global names speak in a language we all recognize when they choose to laugh with us.

Humour also holds more than momentary amusement. It carries

our cultural memory across time. Proverbs, idioms and jokes made in family chats keep a shared language alive, even when generations disagree on almost everything else. Humour becomes the soft thread that reminds us of where we come from and who we were, even as we keep moving forward.

We also forget that humour often grows strongest in adversity. Think of roadside vendors trading jokes under a punishing sun or a crowded train compartment breaking into laughter over an absurd announcement. It is not because life is easy. It is because humour shared with strangers is sometimes the only luxury everyone can afford. In those small moments, laughter becomes an equalizer.

Perhaps humour matters most when it helps us see life's small contradictions without turning bitter. The neighbour who complains about noise yet plays devotional music at dawn, the friend who posts well-

ness quotes while staying up long past midnight, or even cursing making big resolutions on Sunday night only to snooze them away by Monday morning. Humour gently shows what makes us human and reminds us that we are all gloriously inconsistent—that which might just be worth a smile.

Despite all this, the age that promised greater connection sometimes makes us hesitate. The fear of offending others, the anxiety of being misunderstood and the risk of evoking outrage can all weigh down humour's lightness. Where laughter once came easily, it now pauses, checks itself and often never arrives.

But humour is not an indulgence. It keeps us human in a world that can feel transactional. It helps us cope and reconnect, and offers perspective when nothing else fits. Without it, life may go on but it becomes somehow flatter, a little less alive. So, watch that ridiculous meme. Share a story that pokes fun at yourself. Notice the small ironies of your daily grind. Allow yourself and those around you to be imperfect.

Laughter cannot solve everything. Yet, it makes solutions easier to reach. And it reminds us to take ourselves just a little less seriously.

THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The children of Gaza have the same rights as children anywhere – to water, to food, to shelter, to education, to play, to hope, to joy. To life." —THE GUARDIAN

When every question counts

In Parliament, Question Hour is among the few tools still available to hold the current government accountable



ZERO HOUR
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

THE MONSOON SESSION of Parliament begins next week. The dates were announced 45 days ago. Unusual. Normally, schedules for Parliament sessions are put out 18-20 days in advance. The reason for the early announcement of dates for this Monsoon Session, by a skittish NDA government, is simple: Avoid a Special Session of Parliament and delay discussion in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha where hard questions on Palagangam, Poonch, and Rajouri have to be answered. In the forthcoming session, in what format will this discussion be held? This government has shied away from allowing even one discussion proposed by the Opposition (under any rule) since December 2023. A dubious record. What can we look forward to in the upcoming 21-day session?

For Narendra Modi and his team, there is no running away from answering 21 hours of questions in each House this session. A total of 42 hours. Question Hour, for 60 minutes a day, puts Union ministers in the hot seat. They are obliged to reply, either orally on the floor of the House (stated questions), or in writing (unstarred questions). On average, nine questions are answered orally on the floor of Parliament every day, and over 400 questions receive written replies daily.

With notices for discussions on important subjects not being accepted for the past one-and-a-half years, Question Hour is one of the few tools still available in our parliamentary democracy to hold this government accountable. Here are 12 questions asked in the Budget Session of Parliament, 2025. Each answer from the government tells a story.

Atal Pension Yojana: The reply to Mallikarjun Kharge's (INC) question on the Atal Pension Yojana revealed that over 1.1 crore accounts have been closed since the scheme's inception. From 1 October 2022, the scheme's rules were revised and income tax payers were made ineligible to be enrolled in the scheme.

PM Internship scheme: Prakash Chik Barak's (AITC) question revealed that in Phase of the scheme, only 28,411 applicants had accepted internships out of the 1.27 lakh opportunities published. A meagre 22 per cent.

UDAN scheme: In reply to a question by Priyanka Chaturvedi (Shiv Sena-UBT), the government stated that 619 routes were operationalised under UDAN, of which 48 per cent are non-operational now. 114 routes had been discontinued before the completion of three years.

Samagra Shiksha scheme: John

Brittas's (CPM) question was on the integrated scheme for school education. The answer showed that Rs 2,152 crore was allocated for Tamil Nadu, Rs 1,746 crore allocated for West Bengal, and Rs 329 crore for Kerala. No funds were released to any of the three states.

Vacancies in Kendriya Vidyalayas: In response to Ranji Lal Suman's (SP) question, the Union government replied that as of December 2024, there were 8,977 vacancies in Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, of which 7,414 (83 per cent) were for teaching posts.

Manual scavengers: Gopinath's (INC) question on manual scavenging revealed that 430 deaths occurred due to hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks between 2019 and April 2025. Consider this: Manual scavenging has been banned in India since 1933.

Cyberattacks: Sanjeev Arora (AAP) sought details on cyberattacks that target India's critical sectors (banking, healthcare, energy, and others). The government gave a composite figure which showed that between 2020 and 2024, there have been over 75.86 lakh cybersecurity incidents. A 76 per cent increase in 2024 compared to 2020.

Digital frauds: In an answer to Neezar Dangi's (INC) question, the government answered that from 2022 to 2023, the number of digital payment frauds had increased by 334 per cent. In rupee value, the rise was 425 per cent (from Rs 277 crore in 2022 to Rs 1,457 in 2023).

PM Kisan Ujjwaala Scheme: The PM-KUSUM scheme was launched to provide energy and water security to farmers. Bajrang Manohar Sawarni's (NCP-SP) question revealed that out of the 10,000 megawatts (MW) sanctioned for renewable energy-based power plants, 431 MW has been installed; that is, only 4.3 per cent.

Loan write-offs: Amra Ram (CPM) asked a question on loan write-offs by scheduled commercial banks. The answer stated that between 2014 and 2023, loans worth more than Rs 16 lakh crore were written off, out of which 57 per cent were of large industries and services.

Malnutrition: Rajeev Rai (SP) and Hanuman Bhatwal (RLP) asked about children suffering from malnutrition. The answer stated that two out of five children up to five years of age who are enrolled in Anganwadis and registered on the poshan tracker of the Ministry of Women & Child Development are stunted in India.

Indebtedness of farmers: Your columnist (AITC) questioned the government on the increasing debt burden of farmers. In response, government data revealed that the average amount of outstanding loan per agricultural household was Rs 74,000. The highest levels of debt were in Andhra Pradesh (Rs 2.46 lakh), followed by Kerala (Rs 2.42 lakh), Punjab (Rs 2.03 lakh), Haryana (Rs 1.83 lakh), and Telangana (Rs 1.52 lakh).

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party. Additional research: Ayashmita Day, Dheemant Jain

In a country of vast linguistic diversity, should those who live and work in other states learn the local language?

Language issue is a distraction

Linguistic divisions have got an alarming amount of air time and newsprint, while our garbage-laden streets are sinking in the monsoon



LEHER KALA

IN A NOW viral video from April, an auto driver in Bangalore can be heard arguing with a female passenger to speak in Kannada. His tone is almost menacing and he eventually explodes and screeches, "Bengaluru belongs to Kannadigas!" Sure enough, the simmering anger against outsiders flourishing in the Silicon Valley of India found echo elsewhere: At a DMart in Mumbai's Versova, a staffer very politely told a customer that he could speak in Hindi, not Marathi. At which point, members of the MNS roughed him up. In the disturbing clip, the young man is seen covering, holding his ears. This is how easy it is to sow discontent. And then, all you need to do is slyly record some obnoxious people raving and ranting at other angry people, demanding they learn the local language (or else). Next step, post it online. And voila! Just like that, a cleverly spun political narrative has regions waging a manufactured war against each others' languages. The debate spreading dangerously, on LinkedIn, Reddit and YouTube.

A puzzling binary is at play: To defend your language, you must reject all others. The irony is, for all this posturing on linguistic pride, if somebody were to offer these injured regional patriots a magic potion of immediate English fluency, it wouldn't take them a microsecond to kiss their mother tongue goodbye. And for good reason. Since Independence, English has been the language of progress, sidelining those who don't have access to it. Official government business, court work, billings and transactions would be very difficult, if not impossible, without English. Instinctively, every Indian totting away in the most far-flung corner of this country knows the way out of grinding obscurity is learning English. It's been said repeatedly, lately, that India doesn't have a "connecting" language. Realistically, English is the pan-Indian language that some dream, wrongly, that Hindi might become. Because, everyone is in full agreement that to improve one's prospects, you're better off speaking it than not.

When it's so evident that upward mobility depends on English proficiency, it was deeply unsettling to hear the Home Minister declare recently that a day will come when Indians who speak English will feel "ashamed" to do so. That's simply not true. The founder of PayTM has said in interviews what a disadvantage he was at, having gone to a

Hindi-medium school, because he couldn't understand the lectures at the Delhi College of Engineering. He had to teach himself the language of instruction one word at a time, but most of us aren't Vijay Shekhar Sharma. We wouldn't be able to manage it even if we tried because learning any new language is painstakingly difficult. Besides, Sharma upped his prospects by learning English but the reverse isn't true. Unless someone's working in regional cinema, there are questionable benefits to learning Marathi or Tamil (other than the fact that disgruntled locals won't get aggressive with you). The expectation, that busy adults caught up with eking out a living and the hundred other mundane chores we have to perform, must now also learn the language of the city we work in, is unfair, and frankly, impossible.

Of course it's painfully obvious this isn't actually about Marathi versus Hindi versus Tamil. It's the old tactic of provoking conflict where none exists, to distract the public from other serious economic problems plaguing this country: Prop up Hindi as a link language; create an irrational fear that repeated attempts to promote Hindi in non-Hindi-speaking states will finish off the mother tongue. But languages only fade away when people stop speaking in them voluntarily. For that to happen, it takes decades, if not centuries. Even then they don't vanish. All that happens is that the mother tongue becomes a second language, for the most pragmatic of reasons: Progress. People want money. They want to do better. A local dialect restricts work life to a 50 km radius. Cross the state border, the script changes. To expand one's opportunities, there's really no choice but to move way beyond one's own history.

It doesn't need to be said that when living in a different state or country, one should pick up common courtesies in the local language. It wasn't just Walt Whitman who contained multitudes, most of us do. Indians reach adulthood proud of their multilingual backgrounds. Delhiites move easily between using English at work, Hindi with friends and Punjabi with a grandparent. Personally, I love Urdu. Its poetic and musical qualities transport one into a different realm. Learning it is an absorbing hobby, but it serves no practical purpose. Our ancestral glories and interests must be explored in a private capacity. Any imposition of a language on a 10-hour shift worker is unfair because that precious time could be used skilling up in some other way. As citizens and professionals, we need to worry about the kind of issues that dominate public discourse. These linguistic divisions have got an alarming amount of air time and newsprint, while our garbage-laden streets are sinking in the monsoon.

The writer is director, Hutyak Films

It masks a deeper anxiety

Language forms the basis of culture and identity. Lumpen politics aside, concerns should not be dismissed



AAKASH JOSHI

Language lies at the root of human identity, and to tamper with that is either poetry or treason." —Terry Eagleton

OVER THE LAST decade or so, there has been a seeming regression in political conversation. Issues that plagued India at the time of Independence had largely receded; debates had evolved not just in the ivory towers of academia and chatter, but through the negotiations essential in a democratic, diverse and federal polity. The question of "Hindi imposition" is such an issue. It is ideological and political, and it will play out across those registers.

There is, however, another "language question" that has been hijacked by a lumpen, empty politics that seeks to "impose" Marathi, Kannada, etc., through simplistic policies and violence against those who cannot retaliate — shopkeepers, migrant workers (rarely white-collar ones, though), minorities. The recent attacks by Maharashtra Navnirman Sena members are the most egregious examples of this parochial worldview. In the outrage against "imposition", though, we might be losing sight of a deeper question: What does the migrant owe to the city that becomes a home and a workplace? More importantly, is learning the "local" language something that is, in and of itself, desirable?

It is easy to "profile" most migrants who come to India's megapolises. They are, in a very real sense, economic refugees. Labour-exporting states such as Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal are, as a corollary, the poorest and with some of the worst human development indicators in the world. These migrants form the vast army of labour that keeps our cities running. They are the security guards, the rickshaw drivers, the people who paint houses and make furniture. For the well-heeled, they cook, clean and raise children. In fact, the availability of this cheap labour allows upper-middle-class couples the luxury of two incomes.

For this category, whether or not to learn the "local language" is not a question of choice, but necessity. In cities like Delhi, where the lingua franca of the working class is Hindi, there is no question of imposition: Even the Bengali-Bengali manages to communicate, a heavy accent notwithstanding. In Bengaluru and Chennai, learning the language is harder for those from the Indo-Gangetic plain, but often, they pick up the working knowledge needed to get by. Second-generation migrants, especially those who have gone through government schools, also tend to pick up the language of their cities.

The anger over "outsiders" not learning the local language — beyond class politics — is the symptom of a deeper anxiety. Language is arguably at the root of the most important and primordial identity. Indian states and na-

tion-states across the world are founded on that principle, and a perceived decline of language is connected to the sidelining of entire cultures. This is a state of France and Germany as it is of Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. And while it is easy to blame the migrant at the margins for this decline, it is perhaps more important to look at the elite — the software engineer, the corporate executive, the college professor, the journalist.

The class that occupies the gated community, whose children go to "international" schools, who do not live in the city but above it, finds little use for the "local" (unless, of course, it's local, organic, "produce"). This is not necessarily a willful act. A confluence of economic, cultural and social factors is at play here.

Let's start with a counterfactual. Why is there no politics around migrants, beyond the stray statement, in Kolkata? The city has its share of migrants from neighbouring states, and yet, Bengali continues to be the most commonly spoken language and the language of the workplace and marketplace. A likely explanation is that the city's elite continues to speak Bangla, at home and in the workplace. That the city offers few opportunities at the top of the value chain post-liberalisation may also contribute to this. Bengali is not, at least in the minds of Bengalis, a "local" language. Most people (elite or otherwise) who spend more than six months in Kolkata end up with a passing fluency because it is in their interest to do so.

In Mumbai and Bengaluru, this is not the case. In offices, English and even Hindi are enough to make do. So too in bars, restaurants and airports. Does that mean, however, that people who live in these cities — particularly the rich — should remain aloof and unconnected?

In a recent article ('The Millennium Village', IE, July 16), Sanjay Srivastava argued that one of the reasons for Gurugram's poor urban planning is that "urban life in Gurugram is largely organised through the idea that there is no public except that which belongs to one's family, caste and class circuits". This logic of separation applies as much to the migrants as to the "locals". The essence

of this argument can be extended to language as well. If social and economic well-being is seen merely as a ladder, one that is more isolating with each rung ascended, the haves have no reason to engage with anything outside their bubble. Such a narrow life impoverishes cultures and cities. No language should be imposed. However, learning a language opens up a world.

There are certainly challenges — logistical, of time and money — in learning a new language, especially as an adult. However, the notion that the many tongues that make up India's tapestry are superfluous, of little value to the English-speaking elite, is a function of the gated-community ethos. But a gate doesn't just keep people out. It boxes you in as well.

The writer is a journalist and author of the book 'The Language of Power'.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONTENTIOUS DRIVE

THIS REFERS TO the article 'A much-needed pruning' (IE, July 17). It is ludicrous to claim that Bihar voters gave a "thumbs-up" to the CEC's contentious SIR just because both-level officers found lakhs of voters on the rolls who are either deceased or have migrated. The assertion that the BLOs personally reached out to 7 crore voters in such a short time raises severe concerns about the exercise's integrity. Reports from the ground have found BLOs filling out and signing enumeration forms in bulk themselves. The BJP should not invoke "national security and interest" every time it is caught on the wrong foot.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

TIME TO ENGAGE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'An intent to repair' (IE, July 17). '5 Jaishankar's visit to China marks a significant shift in New Delhi's relations with Beijing. A lot of water has flown under the bridge since the 2020 Galwan clashes. Jaishankar has made it very clear to Wang Yi that India expects China to be sensitive to its core concerns of terrorism and Pakistan. At a time when the world is deeply polarised, and especially after the US threat of imposing sanctions on countries that buy oil from Russia, it makes all the more sense to engage with China.'

Raj Govind, Noida

NEED FOR RESPECT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Act of disrespect' (IE, July 17). It highlights a matter of grave concern: The house arrest of an elected Chief Minister in a state with a long history of internal disturbance. This is particularly serious given its occurrence on Martyrs' Day, which holds immense importance for Kashmiris. Sheikh Abdullah notably dedicated his memoir, Aitish-e-Chinar, to the martyrs. It is worth noting that Sheikh Abdullah is reported to have spent more time incarcerated in independent India than during princely rule. Restoring peace and, more crucially, fostering confidence and mutual respect, are processes that demand years of dedicated effort.

Imshal Wafa, Malegaon

PRUNING HISTORY

THIS REFERS TO the reports, 'Class 8 new book lumps "brutery" of Muslims, with no-blame disclaimer' (IE, July 16) and 'New Class 8 book chapter on colonial period skips Tipu Sultan, Anglo-Mysore wars' (IE, July 17). The ongoing revisions to NCERT's social science textbooks raise serious concerns. Such changes, without adequate context, may mislead rather than educate. Tipu Sultan and the Anglo-Mysore wars are significant episodes in India's colonial history. Their exclusion appears less an academic decision and more a selective pruning of the historical narrative.

Rahul Gaur, Gurugram

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How scientists detected a colossal merger of black holes

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, JULY 17

SCIENTISTS HAVE reported the discovery of gravitational waves from the merger of two black holes — the biggest such waves to have been observed in a black hole merger till date.

Although rare, black hole mergers are some of the most spectacular events in the universe, releasing a massive amount of energy that is propagated to a very large distance through gravitational waves.

Much like the movement of a boat in a lake produces ripples in water, gravitational waves are ripples in spacetime created by movement of massive objects. But such waves are extremely weak, and only the ones produced in very big events can be detected by instruments on Earth.

The existence of gravitational waves was proposed in Albert Einstein's General Theory

of Relativity in 1915. However, it was only in 2015, exactly 100 years later, that scientists were able to detect these for the first time.

This was thanks to the Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory (LIGO): two detectors in the US with extremely sensitive equipment which can detect gravitational waves.

Since then, scientists have discovered gravitational waves from hundreds of cosmic events.

The new findings

In general, a black hole is a region in space where the pulling force of gravity is so strong that neither matter nor light can ever escape. The latest discovery involves black holes that are more massive than any seen in previous such detections, and something that current theories find hard to explain.

One of the black holes was 140 times the mass of the Sun in our solar system, the other 100 times bigger. Their merger resulted in a



The supermassive black hole in the centre of the galaxy Messier 87. Representation/Wikimedia Commons

black hole that was about 225 times larger than the Sun. The previous record for such mergers, detected through gravitational waves in 2021, involved black holes about 80 and 65 times larger than the Sun.

That said, much bigger black holes do

exist in the universe. Supermassive black holes are millions of times more massive than the Sun.

However, what is surprising in the latest discovery is the fact that black holes in this specific size range, roughly between 100 and 150 times bigger than the Sun, are not expected to exist according to our prevailing understanding of black holes. The stars that can produce black holes in this particular size range are currently understood to meet a different kind of end, and do not generally end up collapsing into a black hole.

Additionally, at least one of the black holes involved in the event was spinning at very high speeds, almost at the limit of what is possible under the General Theory of Relativity.

This is why this event has generated a lot of scientific interest around the world. It has the potential to refine the current understanding of black hole formation, the evolution of stars, and, possibly, the current models of the universe itself.

Studying gravitational waves

Gravitational waves offer scientists a new way to glean information about the universe. Until they were first detected in 2015, scientists had to depend largely on the electromagnetic waves, like light, X-rays or radio waves, to study the universe. But most of the universe comprises dark matter and dark energy, which do not interact with electromagnetic waves.

These areas, and the events that happen therein, are therefore 'invisible' to traditional measuring devices like telescopes. Black holes were a classical example. Scientists knew they existed, but could not 'see' them. Detection of gravitational waves has provided a new tool to detect and study them.

Gravitational waves are generated by all moving objects in the universe, though only those that are produced by sufficiently large events can travel vast distances and get detected on Earth. Still, they offer information that was hitherto unavailable to the scientists. Gravitational waves, thus, provide a new 'vision' to scientists to view and study the

happenings in the universe.

LIGO's capabilities

The first detection of gravitational waves, in 2015, was made by the two observatories in the US. After that, a few more observatories have come up, notably the Virgo detector in Italy and the KAGRA (Kamioka Gravitational Wave Detector) in Japan. Together, these are known as the LVC collaboration. The latest discovery has come from this collaboration.

Incidentally, the LIGO is proposed to have a third observatory in India, to be called the LIGO-India observatory. But its construction is running way behind schedule: it was originally supposed to begin operations in 2024, a final government approval earmarking Rs 2,600 crore for the project came only in 2023.

The Department of Atomic Energy, which is handling the project, has selected a site in the Hingoli district of Maharashtra to set up this observatory. As per the latest information, its construction is expected to start later this year and be completed by April 2030.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT THE AFRICAN KINGDOM OF ESWATINI, WHERE THE US HAS SENT 5 DEPORTEES



THE UNITED STATES has deported five immigrants from Vietnam, Jamaica, Cuba, Yemen, and Laos to Eswatini, a small country in southern Africa where the king still holds absolute power.

Eswatini, which has become the latest nation to accept third-country deportees from the US, has said it is holding the men in correctional facilities until they can be sent to their home countries.

Here's what to know about the landlocked kingdom of Eswatini.

The king is supreme

Eswatini is one of a handful of countries that are still absolute monarchies, and the only one in Africa. That means the king has absolute power over the government and is not just a figurehead or a ceremonial ruler.

King Mswati III has ruled Eswatini since 1986, when he turned 18 and was allowed to take his place as the monarch. He can make decisions by decree. He succeeded his father, Sobhuza II, who died in 1982.

The now 57-year-old Mswati III has long been criticised for running a government that suppresses political dissent, while he lives a lavish lifestyle in one of the poorest countries in the world. He has been the subject of scrutiny for buying luxury cars, and his personal wealth has been estimated at between \$200 million and \$500 million. This is in stark contrast with the king's subjects — the World Bank says more than half of Eswatini's 1.2 million people live on less than \$4 a day.

No political parties

Political parties were banned by Sobhuza II in 1973. Some exist now, but they are not allowed to play any role in elections or the political process, and function essentially as civic society groups. Candidates seeking public office in Eswatini's parliament or Senate stand as individuals without any party affiliation and are generally approved by traditional leaders loyal to king Mswati III.

Some pro-democracy protests have been seen in recent years, which Eswatini authorities under Mswati III have been accused of crushing. Many dissidents live in exile.

Previously Swaziland

The country was previously known as Swaziland. It changed its name to Eswatini in 2018 after the king announced it should revert to its traditional name in the Swazi language. British colonial rule over the country ended in 1968.

Severely affected by HIV

Eswatini has the highest prevalence of HIV in the world, with an estimated 26% of the adult population being HIV positive, according to the United Nations AIDS agency. Progress in the battle against the disease is heavily dependent on foreign aid, including assistance from the US, which, however, has been cut by the Trump administration.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



SHUBHAJI ROY

IN AN interview given to the BBC this week, United States President Donald Trump said he was "disappointed in" Russia's leader Vladimir Putin, even though he was "not [yet] done with him". Asked if he still trusted President Putin, Trump said he trusted "almost nobody".

Hours earlier, Trump had announced he planned to send weapons to Ukraine and threatened severe tariffs on Russia if there was no ceasefire deal in 50 days.

During the interview, Trump endorsed the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the anti-Russia Western alliance that he has previously described as obsolete. Almost on cue, NATO chief Mark Rutte warned India, China, and Brazil that they could be "hit very hard" with economic penalties if they continued to do business with Russia "and buy their oil and gas".

Rutte "encouraged" the leaders of these countries to "tell [Putin] that he has to get serious about peace talks [to end the war in Ukraine], because otherwise this will slam back on Brazil, on India and on China in a massive way".

A change of heart

Trump's statements demonstrate a remarkable turnaround from his position this May, when he described Putin as a "nice gentleman", and defended the Russian President on some occasions.

At a disastrous White House meeting, he berated Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a "dictator" who was "gamboling with World War III". Trump also choked US military supplies to Ukraine, and stopped US intelligence-sharing with the Ukrainian government.

In starting conflict, the US President has made increasingly angry comments about the Russian President this past week. His publicly expressed frustration with Putin marks a significant departure from the way he has so far viewed the war in Ukraine.

Trump's seeming change of heart could also be a lifeline for NATO. America's European partners have been concerned



US President Donald Trump (centre) with NATO chief Mark Rutte to his right, and Vice President J D Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio to his left in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington DC on Monday. The New York Times

about Trump's commitment to Article 5 of the treaty — the principle of collective defence, which means that an attack against one ally is considered an attack against all.

Putin has got 50 days to negotiate, and NATO has got a lifeline in the process. Europe, apprehensive of the future of the transatlantic alliance, seems to have regained some unexpected goodwill with Trump.

The President has also sanctioned US-made artillery shells and mobile rocket artillery systems for Ukraine, and there has been some talk of shipping Patriot missiles to Kyiv.

Zelenskyy has said he has discussed "weapons supplies and strengthening air defence" with Trump's Ukraine envoy Keith Kellogg. Trump has also reportedly approved key Ukrainian requests for military aid "based on a detailed list that Zelenskyy handed him last month when they met [during the NATO summit] in The Hague".

Impatience, uncertainty

The turn in Trump's attitude has been seen as resulting from Putin's increasing demands — not only does Russia want to keep the Ukrainian territories that it currently occupies and a ban on Ukraine's membership of NATO, but also the removal of Zelenskyy.

Trump, who is impatient to show the world that he has stopped the war in Ukraine

and aspires for the Nobel Peace Prize, possibly feels slighted that he hasn't got anything from Putin yet.

What Trump certainly does not want is to be seen to be "weak" — and to be mocked for allowing himself to be played by the Russian president.

That said, it is simply too early to say that Trump has definitively changed his view of Putin. America's leader is famously unpredictable — his disappointment with his Russian counterpart could well be momentary and temporary, and he is entirely capable of reverting to praising Putin and berating Zelenskyy.

Dealing with Trump

What is the message for India in all of this? From the perspective of New Delhi, as it negotiates with Trump and his team — be it on trade or on Pakistan — the instructive learning is to stay the course.

There are two things that matter. FIRST, as NATO and Europe have shown, it is important to build one's own capacities. As Trump appeared ready to abandon their relationship, Europe increased its military spending, called around Zelenskyy, and doubled down on its support to Ukraine.

It is important for India to ensure that its national political and economic interests re-

main paramount. On the US demand for concessions on tariff and non-tariff barriers in the negotiations for a trade deal, New Delhi must stay focused on what is good for its own interests. If some tariff walls and barriers need a relook, India must consider that not for America's or any other country's benefit, but as part of its own reforms.

SECOND, the US President needs to be engaged diplomatically and officially, but also through unofficial and informal channels. This is something that Pakistan has been seeking to do by engaging with Trump's inner circle of family and advisors. Some European leaders too have done the same by playing golf with the President, or by praising and letting him.

New Delhi will have an opportunity to engage with the President if he travels to India for the Quad leaders' summit later this year. While that will be the official track, the Indian establishment is well-placed to engage with him through its networks in the Indian diaspora.

The Trump White House has its own informal layers of engagement through family and trusted advisors, and South Block may have to make use of those channels of communication to get through to the President.

In this context, New Delhi can perhaps learn a thing or two from Zelenskyy.

Cutting sugar, oil: Why govt wants to 'nudge' people to eat healthy

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, JULY 17

A RECENT letter by Union Health Secretary Punjya Salila Srivastava to all ministries and government departments has proposed that "sugar and oil boards" should be displayed in their institutions "as an initiative to promote healthier dietary habits".

These boards, which will provide information on the sugar and fat content of foods, are meant to serve as "behavioural nudges" reminding people to eat healthy. Despite some reporting to the contrary, these are not intended to be warning labels (like legally mandated ones on tobacco packets), and do not specifically target beloved Indian snacks like *jalebis* and *samosas*.

A looming crisis

The incidence of obesity, along with associated increases in lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart diseases,

and some cancers, is rising in India.

The Union Health Secretary's letter, quoting *The Lancet's* Global Burden of Disease study from 2024, states that the number of obese and overweight adults in India is projected to increase from around 18 crore in 2021 to 44.9 crore by 2050.

Another representative study from India estimated that 25.4 crore people (28.6% of the population) live with generalised obesity, and some 35.1 crore people (almost 39.5% of the population) live with abdominal obesity, which is linked to higher risk of diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart attack, and stroke even at a lower body mass index.

These worrying trends have prompted the central government to make concerted efforts to tackle obesity in India. Earlier this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged citizens to adopt an active, healthy lifestyle, and cut down on the consumption of oil.

The Central Board of Secondary Education recently directed affiliated schools to monitor and reduce sugar intake

among students, highlighting the increase in the incidence of type 2 diabetes among children over the past decade. Several studies have linked the consumption of calorie-dense foods, high in sugar, salt and fat, to the rising incidence of obesity in India.

Sweet danger

The problem with sugar is that there is too much of it in modern diets. This is often in the form of "added sugars" (these include any loose sugar, honey, or other sweeteners) and not "natural sugars" present in fruits, vegetables, grain, and dairy products.

"If possible, added sugar may be completely eliminated from one's diet as it adds no nutritive value other than calories. Calories are healthy only when accompanied by vitamins, minerals, and fibres," the Indian Council of Medical Research's (ICMR's) National Nutrition Guideline states. Even natural sugars should be con-

sumed in moderation.

The consumption of excessive amounts of sugar has been linked to increased incidence of obesity, diabetes, and a host of cardiovascular issues.

The ICMR guidelines state that sugar consumption should be restricted to less than 5% of one's total energy requirements, which comes to about 25 g or five teaspoons daily. Note that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has recommended the use of artificial sweeteners — which provide the sweet taste with fewer or no calories — for weight loss.

Good fat, bad fat

Fats are not inherently bad, and certain fats are necessary for the body's proper functioning. The ICMR's National Nutrition Guidelines suggest consuming between four and 10 spoons of oil every day, and meeting most of one's daily requirement of

fats from seeds, nuts, pulses, and beans.

The guidelines recommend using a mix of two or three different oils, ideally ones that are high in monounsaturated fatty acid (MUFA) and polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA), such as sunflower, safflower and soybean oils. The consumption of fats high in saturated fatty acid (SFA), such as palm and coconut oils, as well as butter and ghee, should be minimised. This is because SFA is known to increase the levels of bad cholesterol in the body, which is linked to an increase in the risk of heart attacks and strokes, as well as the onset of type 2 diabetes.

But given its versatility, affordability, and shelf-life, SFA-rich palm oil is ubiquitous in packaged foods today. It can be found in potato chips, biscuits, ice creams, and chocolates, among other popular confectioneries.

Packaged foods not containing palm oil often use trans-fat containing hydrogenated vegetable oils. Trans fats not only increase the levels of bad cholesterol in the body but also bring down the levels of good cholesterol.

They are linked to an increase in the risk of diabetes, breast cancer, colon cancer, pre-eclampsia (high blood pressure during pregnancy), and nervous system disorders.

A packaged problem

Many have linked the rise of obesity in developing countries to the entry of multinational food and beverage companies who have made ultra-processed foods, high in fats, sugars and salts, ubiquitous across the country, and which are consumed by nearly all sections of society.

The regular consumption of ultra-processed foods is linked to high levels of obesity. Not only do these foods increase the amount of calories individuals consume, they also reduce the share of healthy foods, with essential micronutrients, fibres, and vitamins, in diets. Ultra-processed foods can also be addictive — multiple studies have demonstrated the cravings such foods trigger. Given the easy access, individuals find it hard to avoid them.

A concentration problem

Policymakers should support markets, not champions

It has long been understood that one of the malign consequences of tariff walls, combined with domestic subsidies for industry through focused "industrial policy," is the growth of entrenched industrial conglomerates. Indian policymakers should have understood this better than most, given that this was part of the country's economic history after independence. It was not until the 1990s that liberalisation created some churning in the economy. There are worrying signs, however, that in the most recent phase of the Indian economy, aspects of this post-liberalisation trend have begun to be reversed. As economist Ajay Chhibber has pointed out in these pages, some recent research has shown that industrial concentration — the dominance of sectoral output by a small set of bigger firms — has grown over the past decade. This has been accompanied by an increase in these companies' pricing power — their ability to generate revenue over their variable costs. There are also problematic findings about the salience of competition for such sectors, with faster-growing sectors paradoxically having higher barriers to entry, and with new entrants being negatively correlated with the size of the firms currently in the sector.

A disturbing picture emerges if these pieces of evidence are put together. India's growth has come to rely on the investment and operational choices of a relatively small number of large business groups, many of which continue to be controlled by specific families. Such a structure does not necessarily lead to productive investment, or provide consumers the benefits associated with competitive pressures. As investor and commentator Akash Prakash recently highlighted in these pages, Indian businesses are more focused on short-term profits than investment. Why, then, is this form of market structure taking hold? Partly it may be because some of the most productive sectors at the moment — telecommunications and e-retail, for example — feature network externalities that advantage incumbents of size. But it must also be acknowledged that a large share of the blame must accrue to deliberate policy choices.

India's conscious decision to return to industrial policy and state-guided investment has had the inevitable consequences of empowering the larger conglomerates. The government will find it easier to cooperate with such entities rather than designing policies to incentivise a host of smaller players. Some will argue that this is not necessarily bad news for growth and productivity. After all, countries like Japan, South Korea, and even the United States, during the "glided age" of the late 19th century, grew fast through using what were variously called *zaibatsu*, *chaebols*, or "robber barons". These cooperated with the state to build new sectors like railways or electronics. The difference, however, is that they also improved efficiency because they were not always protected by tariff walls and were encouraged to focus on the export market.

National champions abroad may provide some dubious mercantilist utility; national champions at home are clearly a problem. As former Reserve Bank of India governor Raghuram Rajan has pointed out, India's new breed of national champions is not exactly creating world-beating new products or internationally renowned brands. It could also be argued that they are soaking up investible resources, which might be more effectively deployed elsewhere. The fundamental problem lies not with these companies, which are simply maximising profits as they should. The error lies in the direction of policy, which should increase economic openness and reduce government control — but is instead doing the opposite.

Optics to outcome

Corporate India needs to do more on diversity

The appointment of Priya Nair as the first woman managing director and chief executive officer (CEO) of Hindustan Unilever marks an important milestone for corporate India, which has witnessed slow progress in terms of gender diversity in leadership roles. Regulatory measures, such as the listing regulations mandating at least one woman director on the board of a listed company, have pushed companies towards greater boardroom diversity. However, progress has not been as desired. Women hold just 21 per cent of board seats, and only around 5 per cent of National Stock Exchange-listed firms have women as CEOs or managing directors.

However, despite some progress at the top, the broader picture remains uneven. According to human resource advisory firm Marsh & McLennan's "Marching Sheep Inclusion Index 2023", released recently, 63.45 per cent of listed companies in India still lack women in leadership roles. Such a situation prevails, though, companies that perform well on inclusion have reported much higher net profits than their peers. Diversity isn't just a moral issue, it also makes commercial sense. However, a closer look reveals that gender diversity in India is imbalanced both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, women are well represented in entry-level roles and increasingly visible at the top, but there is a significant "missing middle", a sharp drop in representation at middle-management level, which serves as the critical pipeline to senior leadership. Vertically, women are mostly placed in functions like human resources and corporate social responsibility, which are important but rarely central to strategic business decisions. Areas like finance, operations, and core business units remain largely male-dominated, according to a 2024 McKinsey report.

This pattern clearly limits not only women's career growth, but also the quality of decision-making in companies. The lack of gender diversity in critical business functions can lead to narrower perspectives and missed opportunities. Women make up just 22 per cent of corporate employees in India, which is even lower than their participation in the general workforce. Thus, to fully harness India's demographic dividend, inclusion must shift from optics to reality. Companies could embrace data-driven transparency by tracking gender-disaggregated metrics across recruitment, attrition, pay, and promotion, not just at board level but throughout all functions. Just as large companies regularly report environmental and governance indicators, diversity data can help identify gaps and drive targeted intervention. There is also a need for focused talent development through structured mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership training for high-potential women, particularly in roles like finance and operations.

Thus, fostering supportive work environments is essential. Inclusive policies like flexible schedules, parental leave, and re-entry programmes could be seen as enablers of productivity. Regulators can play a supporting role by encouraging voluntary disclosures on gender in different roles, much like ESG (environmental, social, and governance) frameworks. Large investors are increasingly also factoring in diversity in their evaluations of corporate governance and long-term risk. Ultimately, corporate India must move from symbolic inclusion to substantive influence. This means not just counting women in leadership but enabling them with authority, resources, and decision-making powers. The goal is not just equity. It is to build resilient, innovative, and future-ready organisations, and gender-balanced leadership is central to that effort.

Jane Street is a wakeup call

The revelations in this recent case should lead to a reassessment of the foundations of India's financial markets

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Arbitrage refers to the practice of simultaneously buying and selling an asset in different markets to profit from tiny price differences caused by market inefficiencies. Arbitrage plays a role in making financial markets more efficient by bringing the prices of the same asset closer to parity across markets. Market abuse, on the other hand, refers to a range of unethical and illegal activities that can undermine the integrity of financial markets.

Whether Jane Street's actions were legal arbitrage or market abuse is the core question in the enforcement action initiated recently by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). While Sebi's order is public, it is prudent to suspend final judgment until Jane Street's defence is presented and the matter is finally decided by the prescribed judicial fora. But this episode offers a critical moment for sober reflection.

Beyond this specific case, however, lies a more profound imperative: A rigorous examination of the current health and future trajectory of India's financial markets.

Well-functioning financial markets serve as the central nervous system of the economy, efficiently processing information, allocating capital, and facilitating essential risk transfer. Among India's economic reforms, the development of our equity spot and derivatives markets stands as perhaps the most significant and undisputed success. Yet, this very success now exhibits symptoms of distress, necessitating a focused and intellectually honest assessment to ensure its continued vitality.

Our attention must be directed towards the primary concern that poses a substantial risk to the future efficacy and integrity of the Indian financial system: The pervasive inhibiting influence of the spot market, compounded by critical issues in regulatory practice. A robust and intellectually honest assessment to ensure its continued vitality.

attributable to the cumulative impact of the securities transaction tax (STT) and a multitude of Sebi regulations. While these measures may have been conceived with laudable objectives, their practical implementation has often yielded unintended and counterproductive consequences.

Empirical evidence substantiates this observation. The turnover ratio, defined as annual trading volume divided by market capitalisation, serves as a direct indicator of market liquidity. Historically, this ratio for the Indian market frequently exceeded values of 0.50, 0.47, and 0.64, respectively. This consistent decline offers compelling evidence of reduced activity and liquidity in the spot segment.

The most concerning structural distortion arising from this policy amalgam has been the pronounced — and arguably excessive — emphasis on the options market. Unlike developed financial markets globally, which typically exhibit a balanced interplay between spot, futures, and options segments, India's market structure is characterised by an overwhelming dominance of options, alongside notably weaker futures, and spot markets. This asymmetry is not a natural market evolution. It is a direct consequence of the over-reliance on state intervention, a confluence of Sebi's regulatory stipulations and the Ministry of Finance's (MoF) fiscal policies. When the foundational spot segment is rendered less attractive due to elevated transaction costs, market activity will inevitably gravitate towards segments perceived as less encumbered, irrespective of their fundamental economic efficiency.

One factor that shapes the liquidity and market efficiency of the financial market system is the quality of regulation. Financial market players will invest more in building systems, processes and knowledge



AARTHIKAM
CHINTANAM
K P KRISHNAN

Coal, clean air, and a welcome resolution

In a sweeping policy change, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) on July 11 recalibrated its 2015 mandate for flue gas desulphurisation (FGD) systems in coal-fired power plants. Backed by scientific studies and stakeholder consultation, this shift reflects the government's commendable move towards region-specific, evidence-based regulation — balancing environmental priorities with India's energy realities.

This recalibration comes after decades of judicial and regulatory action on air pollution. The MC Mehta public interest litigation (1985), targeting Delhi's air pollution, expanded to include emissions from thermal power plants (TPPs), prompting judicial and regulatory scrutiny. This led to the 2015 MoEF&CC notification mandating the installation of FGDs for all TPPs by 2017. Aimed at reducing sulphur dioxide (SO₂) emissions, the mandate tightened limits from 600 to 100 milligrams per normal cubic metre. The directive triggered over 25 petitions from public and private power producers, citing high capital costs, technical constraints, and unclear cost recovery leading many to invoke "Change in Law" for tariff pass-through. Environmentalists petitioned the National Green Tribunal (NGT) for stricter enforcement. The NGT, in turn, directed the MoEF&CC to withhold environmental clearances for new TPPs unless they complied with the norms. In 2017, due to these legal disputes, the lack of power generation capacity, and the downtime required for retrofitting, the FGD deadline was extended to 2022 by the MoEF&CC. In 2020, the Association of Power Producers petitioned the Supreme Court (SC) for a blanket extension to 2024, which was rejected. Meanwhile, progress on FGD installations lagged significantly.

In April 2021, the MoEF&CC released an amendment, superseding the 2015 notification for the third time, categorising TPPs into three groups: Category A: TPPs within 10 km of the National Capital Region (NCR) with populations over 1 million — deadline by December 2023. Category B: TPPs within 10 km radius of critically polluted areas/non-attainment cities — deadline by December 2023. Category C: All other TPPs — deadline by December 2024.

In 2022, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) extended the deadlines for Category A, B, and C TPPs to 2024, 2025, and 2026, respectively. In April 2023, the SC, reviewing compliance near Delhi, condemned repeated delays, rejected blanket extensions, and directed the government to issue legal notices to nine non-compliant plants.

Meanwhile, a reassessment of India's FGD policy was initiated, leading to the amendment of July 11. It retains the CPCB's 2022 TPP categorisation but relaxes installation mandates and timelines. Of the 537 identified plants, only 65 Category A units must now install FGDs by December 31, 2027. For the 66 Category B plants, decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis, while the 406 Category C plants are exempt if they meet stack height norms. Importantly, SO₂ emission limits remain unchanged, in line with the original 2015 standards.

India remains heavily reliant on domestic coal, which powers around 92 per cent of the country's electricity generation — with no significant reductions projected in the medium term. According to the September 2024 report by the National Institute of Advanced Studies, the coal used in TPPs typically has a high ash content (35–45 per cent by weight) and low sulphur content (0.2–0.7 per cent). This is significantly lower than the sulphur content of US coal (1–1.8 per cent) and Chinese coal (over 1 per cent), classifying Indian coal as "very low sulphur coal".

A survey in May 2024 by IIT Delhi revealed that 50, levels in all surveyed cities — including those with coal-based TPPs lacking FGD units — remained within the National Ambient Air Quality Standards limit of 80 micrograms per cubic metre. The study found that acid rain is not a major concern in India due to the presence of alkaline dust and coastal sea breezes. India's rollout of FGD installations has been sluggish. Out of the identified 537 TPPs for retrofitting, only 44 TPPs (central — 17, state — 8, private — 19) have formulated plans in place. With only through such ₹1.2 crore per MW, total capital outlay could reach ₹96,000 crore. Many older TPPs struggle to justify such high investments. For consumers, FGD costs are "passed through", thereby raising electricity prices by ₹0.30–₹0.40 per unit.

In sum, the July 2025 amendment is being widely appreciated by energy experts for four broad reasons: One, it acknowledges that SO₂ pollution from TPPs is less debilitating than previously feared. Two, it replaces a one-size-fits-all mandate with a tiered compliance framework. Three, consumers benefit from not having to pay a higher electricity tariff.

Four, it saves substantial capital expenditure (both for central, state and private generators), thereby freeing up scarce funding for greener, higher-impact investments that better serve India's long-term sustainability goals. India's decision also sends a clear message to the global community that it will not blindly adopt Western-style environmental mandates designed for high-sulphur coal contexts. Instead, it is embracing a region-specific, evidence-led strategy that balances air quality goals with climate and economic interests.

Clearly, this is not a rollback — but a confident assertion of regulatory maturity, scientific integrity, and rational national interest. The author is an infrastructure expert. He is also the creator & managing trustee of The Infravision Foundation

Mistress of wine

BOOK
REVIEW



NEHA KIRPAL

In 2016, Sonal C. Holland became the first Indian to earn the title of Master of Wine (MW), the highest qualification in the world of wine. The coveted certification is conferred by the Institute of Masters of Wine via a rigorous three-stage programme — consisting of a preliminary exam, a main exam of theory and blind-tasting papers, as well as a 10,000-word research paper. Ever since, Ms Holland has been inspiring a whole new community of wine lovers in the country and beyond.

Contrary to what most people think, Ms Holland did not come from a privileged background. She grew up in a lower-middle-class family and had a modest upbringing. A school topper and a caffeine fiend, she was thrown out of college. That was when she decided to change her field to hotel management. After she graduated, Ms Holland landed a job as a management trainee in the Taj Group of Hotels in Mumbai. Thereafter, she pursued a Master of Management Studies course and joined the Oberoi Towers as a sales executive. It was here that she met her future husband, Andrew Holland, who had come to India as an expatriate and is now a reputed expert on the Indian stock market.

At the age of 33, Ms Holland had a high-paying corporate job but it didn't make her happy. She quit her job, dropped out of a wine professional school and found her calling. "She went on to

become the first Indian to earn the two-year WSET diploma programme, which required her to taste 230 wines and fly to London eight times. Given her credentials, Ms Holland also began to head ITC Hotels' wine and beverage programme.

Over the course of the book, Ms Holland describes her wine tours of various countries, such as Australia, Hungary, Spain, Italy, France, the US and the UK. After attaining the MW title, she focused on building her personal brand. Promoting wine in a country where the per capita consumption of wine is less than a teaspoon, was no easy task. In 2016, she launched SO to Wine Club, a community of wine lovers for whom she would host events and organise shipments of wines. She received invitations to judge several international competitions, and launched the India

Wine Awards. She also consulted with a premium lifestyle food supplier to launch her wine counters, and her first venture into wine retail, VineWine, was born.

Ms Holland also took advantage of the social media boom to start regularly posting videos. The "TikTok Wine O'Clock" series explained simple wine-related concepts. She started an Instagram video series called "A Great Glass with Sonal Holland", for which she got well-known celebrities like Francis Ford Coppola, Dominic West, and Gagan Anand. She also hosted weekly Ask Me Anything sessions with her 100,000 followers. From English, the content diversified into Hindi and Marathi, as the intention was to make wine accessible across all social demographics.

Further, she founded the Sonal Holland Academy, and has been a strategic advisor to international brands looking to enter and gain a strong foothold in the Indian wine market. She regularly curates bespoke wine and spirits experiences for leading corporate houses, premium member clubs and prestigious networking groups. Recently, she also launched a French chateau with personalised testimonials from people in Ms Holland's life — her parents, sister, husband, daughter, and friends. "If you believe in an idea and know it makes sense, you should not give up on it, even if others cannot see its potential," she concludes.

The reviewer is a New Delhi-based freelance writer

Srinagar's 'waste' crisis

It must be tackled to avert a health emergency

Bilal Gani

On the outskirts of Jammu and Kashmir's summer capital, Srinagar, lies Achan — the Srinagar Municipal Corporation's (SMC) largest waste-management facility, which handles 550 tonnes of solid waste per day. Established in 1986, this dumping site initially functioned as a landfill but has since evolved into a critical processing hub for Srinagar, which generates 600 tonnes per day (tpd) of municipal solid waste. However, the unsanitary management of waste at the site has led to foul odour and environmental concerns, adversely impacting the health and well-being of residents in the surrounding areas.

Environmental activists and lawyers have raised serious concerns about a potential outbreak of diseases in the area due to emission of methane gas and contamination of groundwater if immediate scientific measures are not taken to dispose of the waste. They warn that the surrounding residential areas may become uninhabitable, as unregulated and unsanitary waste management poses a serious threat to public health and the local ecology. The untreated leachate from the landfill is polluting groundwater and is impacting the ecologically sensitive Anchar Lake, which is connected to Dal Lake.

In March 2025, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) criticised the unsanitary waste management at the Achan facility and ordered action against eight SMC commissioners who served between 2017 and 2025. The Tribunal also directed the SMC to clear 1.1 million tonnes of legacy waste. Unsatisfactory waste management has impacted around 700 acres of land in the area and the presence of leachate is damaging the surrounding wetlands. It is imperative that a leachate treatment plant (LTP) be made operational at the site to safeguard the health and lives of 215,000 households in the area. Polluted air and toxicity emanating from the site are leading to increasing cases of bronchitis and stomach ailments. Trees are dying due to soil toxicity and precious agricultural land has become uncultivable and barren.

FAULTY REGULATORY MECHANISM

Rapid urbanisation and excessive exploitation of natural resources are producing a massive amount of solid waste in J&K — it



ACHAN LANDFILL. Health hazard (this week)

averaged 1,518.91 tonnes per day in 2019-20. Out of this, only 35.6 per cent was properly treated. In 2020-21, the daily waste generation dropped slightly to 1,463.23 tonnes. In 2017, J&K Solid Waste Management Strategy was formulated. It highlighted several key challenges in solid waste management, which include low capital investment and the inability to sustain ongoing operational and maintenance costs. Shortage of technical expertise, lack of public awareness about proper waste management practices, and finding suitable land for dumping waste — as such often face opposition from nearby residents — are among the other challenges.

With the Achan landfill already overflowing and the SMC failing to acquire 20 hectares of land for an alternative site, solid waste is now being indiscriminately dumped into water bodies, particularly wetlands and rivers. These are affecting the water level and damaging agricultural and horticulture production, the mainstay of the region's economy.

In 2017, the Srinagar Smart City Mission was launched to develop infrastructure, improve governance, and create sustainable real estate. However, the mission has failed to address the growing menace of solid waste in the city. The government should ensure the immediate relocation of the Achan site. It is imperative to adopt an integrated approach towards waste management, based on the type of waste, cost effectiveness and topographical constraints. To reduce the burden on the already overflowing Achan site, it is essential that bio-mining and sanitary land-filling techniques are implemented to remediate old waste dumps, reclaim land, and minimise environmental hazards.

Gani is an academic and a writer based in Kashmir

SHUPINDER SINGH HOODA

The recently released Class 12 results from the Haryana School Education Board starkly reveal a catastrophic learning crisis, laying bare the deep-rooted structural decay crippling public education in one of India's most advanced States. Alarmingly, 18 government schools in Haryana achieved a zero pass percentage this year, while 82 others saw fewer than 35 per cent of their students succeed.

The crisis in school education permeates all government institutions across Haryana. At Government Girls Senior Secondary School in Shikwa (Nuh), only one student passed the board examination. In Autha and Nuh, all 13 students failed. The All Boys Senior Secondary School in Punhna reported that 95 out of 105 students failed the examination. These instances are not mere anomalies; they highlight a systemic issue. Central to this problem is a long-ignored crisis: an acute shortage of qualified teachers, particularly subject specialists, across the State's government schools.

Despite Haryana sanctioning over 115,000 teaching positions, more than 15,000 remain vacant. In districts like Nuh, government schools are often left without qualified teachers in essential subjects, such as science, English, and mathematics, for years on end. Hindi teachers are usually forced to teach English, while generalist teachers are often assigned to fill critical specialist roles. When a teacher in Hindi takes on the responsibility of teaching English or physics, the outcomes are predictably dismal, as the board exam results overwhelmingly indicate.

Furthermore, over 500 schools are operated by a single teacher, and more than 3,100 schools cater to fewer than 50 students. This crisis is not just about the sheer number of teachers; it encompasses their inadequate deployment, poor subject matching, and a complete absence of accountability in staffing rural and underprivileged schools. The consequences are dire. This crisis is directly undermining student enrolment and retention. In the academic year 2023-24, Haryana's school enrolment has plummeted by nearly 140,000 students compared to the previous year. Government schools alone witnessed an exodus of 230,000 children. Many of these individuals are likely dropouts — students who have either failed their exams or left in frustration due to family pressure or because they have lost faith in the failing educational system. We must confront this reality head-on and take decisive action to revitalise the education system in Haryana.

GIRLS DISADVANTAGED

The educational failures are brutal, particularly for girls and students from



DEVI KUMAR PUNJAB

Haryana must re-imagine its education system

HUMAN CAPITAL. Students' learning outcomes in the State are abysmal. The huge teacher vacancy needs to be addressed first

economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In rural regions like Mewat, girls face overwhelming pressure to marry as soon as they are perceived to have "failed" in school. Boys, conversely, are often pushed into informal, low-wage jobs to contribute to their family's income. Once a child drops out, the chances of their return are alarmingly slim. The education system lacks pathways for reintegration, and communities begin to question the value of sending children to schools where failure is almost a certainty.

Learning outcomes for those who remain in school are shockingly inadequate. According to the latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), only about 54 per cent of Class 5 students in Haryana's government schools can read a simple text at a Class 2 level. In mathematics, fewer than one-third can perform basic subtraction. By the time these students reach secondary school, they are already years behind the expected learning standards, making it nearly impossible for them to catch up without proper, subject-specific teaching support. Consequently, when

they sit for board exams, these students are not only unprepared but also actively set up to fail.

The cost of inaction is staggering. A single year's cohort of dropouts equates to a loss of thousands of crores in future productivity, skilled workforce, and State development. Each dropout not only limits their opportunities but also imposes a significant economic burden on the State, contributing to increased poverty, unemployment, and social instability. Education is not merely a human right; it is the foundation of Haryana's growth and economic future. The State's per capita income and its thriving industrial sectors mean little if our youth cannot read, calculate, or think critically.

MISSION MODE RESPONSE

To reverse this decline, Haryana requires an urgent, mission-mode response — no more committees or half-hearted policy drafts. The first imperative step is to fill every sanctioned teaching vacancy, particularly in science, mathematics, and English, by March 2026. This process must undergo rigorous public monitoring, district by district.

Furthermore, teacher postings must be made rational and transparent, with robust incentives for those willing to serve in challenging areas.

Implementing a bonded scholarship programme for science and engineering graduates from Haryana's colleges — offering tuition waivers in exchange for three years of rural teaching — could be a game-changer. In schools with low

enrolment, students must be consolidated into cluster schools that can provide subject-specific teachers and access to essential labs and libraries. Mobile science labs and rotating teachers must supplement education in areas with sparse populations.

Additionally, the State must invest in early warning systems that track absenteeism and identify students at risk of dropping out. Technology-driven attendance systems, integrated with local outreach, can prompt timely interventions — such as counselling, transportation support, or conditional cash transfers — especially for adolescent girls. Ultimately, Haryana must overhaul its approach to training and supporting teachers. Subject-specific online refresher courses, peer mentoring circles, and performance-linked promotions should be essential components of a comprehensive professional development framework that restores dignity and competence to the teaching profession.

Haryana's vision as a key player in the NCR region is hollow if the foundations of its human capital — its students — remain in peril. The BJP government must guarantee that every school has a qualified teacher, that every child has equitable opportunities, and that every classroom is a centre for genuine learning, not just a space with blackboards. Haryana can no longer afford to fail the future of the next generation.

The writer is ex-Chief Minister, Haryana

the hindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

July 18, 2005

Uneven monsoon pushes up farm goods prices

Prices of various agricultural commodities have shown a tendency to rise on delayed monsoon and uneven rainfall coverage since June 1, the official date for onset of monsoon. The prices, which reflect the trader's perception about kharif crop prospects, are not showing any signs of tapering off. This is despite the Centre's statement that all is well with the sowing of kharif crops.

Poor response to HLL's VRS offer

Workers of Hindustan Lever Ltd (HLL) think that having a regular job is better than a VRS package of ₹30 lakh. Hardly 100 workers out of 1,000 at its Severi plant in Mumbai have opted for the VRS offered prior to the plant being sold to a company's subsidiary.

SBI opts for dual remedy to recover bad debts

State Bank of India has decided to pursue its bad debt recovery efforts simultaneously under the Securitisation Act and the Debt Recovery Tribunal (DRT) Act. SBI's decision runs contrary to the Finance Ministry view that simultaneous proceedings are not permitted under the existing debt recovery laws.

China's reputation up, US' drops: Survey

Bloomberg News

Public perceptions of China have improved over the past year, according to a new survey, while those of the US have dimmed — a trend that coincides with US President Donald Trump returning to office.

A median of 32 per cent of respondents in high-income countries had a favourable opinion of China, according to a report by Pew Research Center released on Wednesday — the highest level in six years. In contrast, the figure for the US fell to 35 per cent, the lowest in data going back to 2017.

Also, more respondents expressed confidence in Chinese President Xi

Jinping than in a US leader, the first time that has happened since Trump's first term. Still, the figures were low, at 24 per cent to 22 per cent. The broadest part of the research was done from January to late April — a period that includes Trump announcing tariffs on nations around the world on his so-called Liberation Day, though the levies were later paused while trade deals were negotiated.

Pew said some 28,000 people around the world were surveyed but didn't indicate how many participated in the rich nations.

A separate document outlining their methodology showed some 10,100 respondents were from 18 rich nations. While Trump has

sought to rebalance in a fundamental way America's vast trade networks, Xi has tried to improve relations with Southeast Asia, Africa and Europe.

The Pew survey seems to indicate Xi has had some success on that front, though China's relationship with the European Union remains difficult over Beijing's support for Russia since it invaded Ukraine.

On Monday, Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee accused the Trump administration of "ceding global leadership to China."

The latest Pew research also found that more people around the world see China as the top economic power, overtaking the US.

On businessline.in

Pace of poverty reduction in India seems to have slowed

The benefit of rise in per capita income has not percolated to the masses to the extent it was happening before 2015-16, argues **Jatinder Singh Bedi**

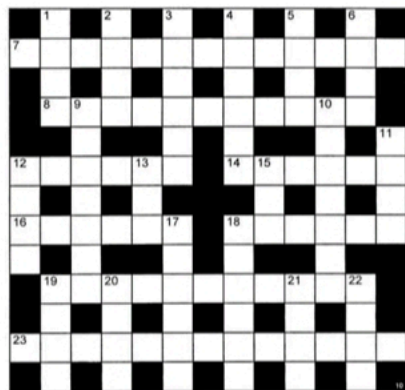
<https://tinyurl.com/2s482c93>

How India's online shopping habits have shifted

Online buying is growing, but its contours are defined by geography, category, and consumer confidence, say **Ashish Kumar** and **Sakshi Abrol**

<https://tinyurl.com/42m859e>

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2742



EASY

ACROSS

- Gold, silver etc (8,5)
- Those with care of birds reared for shooting (11)
- Wading-bird (6)
- Very sad, catastrophic (6)
- Unconscionable, very wicked (6)
- One hundred cents (6)
- Delivered on ship without charge (4,2,5)
- Put off what one should do today (13)

DOWN

- Rum, etc, mixed with water (4)
- Confidence trick, shady business (4)
- Net on billiard table (6)
- Agreement (6)
- Only, just that (4)
- Get through test (4)
- A different person (7)
- Like clockwork (7)
- Mark of cut (4)
- The cuckoo-pint (4)
- Old cloth measure (3)
- Kangaroo (3)
- Gentleman in noble household (6)
- Contention in words (6)
- Take shape (4)
- Everyone separately (4)
- Female relative (4)
- Shove excessive love (6)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Gold silver or platinum has a price Leo must adjust (8,5)
- Match with the goalies to look after the pheasants? (11)
- A wader needed, going out to cave (6)
- Extremely sad US soldier put in the returning cart (6)
- Very wicked Hun turned, only to leave out the North (6)
- All Rod could make in Australian currency (6)
- Fob delivered to ship for nothing (4,2,5)
- Put off what should be done to earn: practise endlessly thus (13)

DOWN

- Spirits and water blossom red on the nose (4)
- American uncle holding cent to be a swindle (4)
- One may have a hand in it, and sink a snooker ball (6)
- Acquiescence to a variety of nests (6)
- It is nothing more than a Maori war-club (4)
- Hand one a pretty predicament (4)
- One more or then to be put out (7)
- Left and Right could argue about such a soldier (7)
- A parrot-warrior may leave its mark (4)
- A spirit of the wake-robin (4)
- It was 45 inches from 'Ades (3)
- A marsupial turning up in the doorway (3)
- One may become a Beekeeper (6)
- Discussion about bed before tea-break (6)
- The shape children take in class (4)
- Topless place at the seaside for everyone (4)
- Don't start to tease Mum's sister (4)
- Be foolishly fond of little Dorothy East (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2741

ACROSS 1. Improvident 7. Magsman 9. Aval 11. Learn 12. Antler 14. Deliverance 18. Revolt 20. Inner 22. Sail 23. Lending 24. Necessities
DOWN 2. Magistrate 3. Vine 4. Novel 5. Smile 6. Clary 8. Mandible 10. Invasion 13. Gem 15. Concise 16. Braze 17. Frogs 19. Voice 21. Plus

thehindubusinessline.
FRIDAY, JULY 18, 2025

Right truck

Electric trucks need smarter policy support

There have been reports bemoaning the viability of electric trucks, citing high initial costs (possibly 20-30 per cent more than combustion engine vehicles) and the difficulties associated with charging. CNG trucks score over them, so goes the argument. This is an oversimplified view, for several reasons. The cost of e-trucks and issues of charging time and range anxiety can be addressed with inexpensive policy shifts. The push is well worth it for reasons of energy security and lower pollution. While CNG is a clean fuel, it needs to be imported.



E-trucks, it can be countered, entail import dependency for the critical elements that go into the batteries. However, technology is evolving rapidly to reduce such dependence — such as the use of lithium-iron-phosphate batteries by market leaders, as opposed to the nickel, manganese and cobalt combination. Battery costs are falling with scale and innovation, just as they did earlier in the case of solar panels. E-trucks have picked up in other parts of the world, notably in Europe. In India, they are sputtering, just as any infant industry does.

The evolution of any infant industry depends on creating the right conditions for scale. With scale and technological improvements (which will inevitably happen in a competitive scenario), viability will surely follow. Ironically, the argument advanced by CNG supporters that charging is a constraint with respect to e-trucks cropped up about three decades ago with respect to CNG fuelling stations, when the shift from diesel to CNG had just begun. Rising demand for CNG vehicles and a concerted effort to improve availability of the fuel resolved the problem. However, charging stations today must evolve on priority, even as another set of policies is perhaps needed to ramp up demand. For a truck that consumes 1-1.3 kw per km, it is important that the charging capacity of stations and trucks is ramped up to reduce down time for the trucks. The Centre's recent decision to set up 360 kw DC chargers on highways and expressways (generally 240 kw now) can make a difference. The production linked incentive (PLI) to develop batteries may start picking up once the market evolves.

The current subsidy regime, based on number of units sold (through the Faster Adoption of Manufacturing Electric Vehicles and the PM e-drive schemes) should be reviewed, even as GST and income tax breaks on EVs can remain. Clearly, a sale of about two million electric vehicles in a year is a very small proportion of the 25 million sales of all vehicles, given that India is aiming for 30 per cent EV sales by 2030. Despite consumer subsidies over a decade (routed to the producer), the price difference between ICE and e-vehicles is too high. There is room for more competition. Mandates would raise output and competition among OEMs. Oil marketing companies can set up charging stations. The fiscal outgo can, in fact, be reduced with better outcomes. The resistance to EVs from entrenched players should be discounted. As for CNG vehicles, they can co-exist as a green option.

POCKET



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NEERAJ RAJAN SABITHA
SURENDAR SINGH

The Trump administration has declared its intention to establish the US States as a global leader in seabed mining. On April 24, US President Trump signed an executive order making it a priority of the US to develop its domestic capabilities in exploration, recovery and processing of seabed mineral resources.

The Order gives marching orders to a number of US government agencies to report back to the President on America's commercial capacity in this area, the potential to collaborate with America's foreign allies in the extraction of seabed mineral resources.

There has been an increased interest in seabed mining, and in particular deep seabed mining, in recent years considering the important role that mineral deposits in ocean floors could play in the realisation of energy transition goals.

Surveys estimate that the deep seabed holds a rich vein of potato-shaped nodules containing critical minerals that form the building blocks of energy transition technologies — from nickel and cobalt that power EV batteries to rare earth elements that rotate wind turbines.

One such swathe of the ocean floor in the Pacific Ocean between Mexico and Hawaii, the Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone (CCZ), is estimated to hold more copper, nickel, cobalt, manganese, and rare earth minerals than all known terrestrial reserves combined. The exploration and commercial recovery of critical minerals from the deep seabed however raises a number of legal and environmental challenges.

RESOURCES OWNERSHIP First, to whom do these mineral resources in international waters belong? Under the 1994 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), mineral resources in the deep seabed are the "common heritage of mankind" meaning that they are available for the use and benefit of all States, coastal and landlocked, and the sharing of benefits must take into particular consideration the interests of developing countries.

The International Seabed Authority (ISA) was set up under the auspices of the UNCLOS as an autonomous international organisation to oversee the equitable sharing of benefits from resources in international waters.

Activities in the deep seabed can only be carried out under a contract with the ISA and subject to its rules.

Trump's Order authorising US national agencies to expeditiously issue

Digging deep into Trump's deep sea mining order

MINERAL SEARCH. The US' plan to gain ownership of critical minerals may run into legal and environmental hurdles



permits to private mining companies seeking to mine the deep seabed could therefore conflict with the international framework of rules regulating deep seabed mining. While the US is amongst a handful of countries that have not ratified the UNCLOS, this does not mean that it can unilaterally regulate commercial activities and the apportioning of mineral resources in the deep seabed.

The "common heritage of mankind" principle, and the concomitant obligation to co-operate in the use of international commons, has the status of customary international law which means that it binds all States, irrespective of whether they are parties to the UNCLOS.

Interestingly, in March, a Canadian mining firm, The Metal Company, through its US subsidiary had submitted its application to obtain permits for deep sea mining from US government

Trump's Order authorising US national agencies to issue permits to private mining companies seeking to mine the deep seabed could conflict with international framework of rules regulating deep seabed mining

agencies. This provides a possible route to expedite the timeline for commercial deep-sea mining by entirely bypassing the ISA ratification process. If this pathway is successful, other firms may follow the same path, thereby jeopardising the global imperatives to establish international standards for deep sea mining.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT Second, what are the environmental implications of mining for critical minerals in the deep seabed? The potential effects of deep seabed mining on the marine environment remain inadequately understood, not least because it is prohibitively expensive and technological complex.

Mineral-containing nodules are scattered across the deep sea that covers 70 per cent of the earth's surface and hosts disparate ecosystems presenting distinct research challenges and equipment requirements.

What we do know of benthic species is that they survive on little food, have very low metabolic rates, live long and reproduce slowly. Some of them are also reliant on the mineral-containing nodules for laying eggs. Recovery from any disturbances to the habitat could be ploddingly slow or even irreversible. Citing these risks and the need for more information, more than 25 countries have called for either a moratorium or a precautionary pause on deep-sea mining.

Third, the processing and supply of

recovered critical minerals to downstream industries could be girded by national security considerations. In addition to being indispensable for green energy infrastructure, critical minerals also underpin advanced technologies that are essential for economic and military security.

The US' motivation in getting a head start on deep seabed mining is at least partially driven by its concerns that the supply chains of critical minerals from terrestrial mines are increasingly monopolised by China, which constitutes a serious geopolitical risk for the US.

The Executive Order therefore identifies establishing a robust domestic supply chain for critical minerals from seabed resources as a priority for the US. It remains to be seen how the US will go about in fulfilling this objective.

If the US decides to clamp down on exports of critical minerals in order to guarantee protected access of these minerals to US domestic industries, such export restrictions could potentially impact the US' obligations under the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Ironically, the US has thwarted similar initiatives adopted by the Chinese government in 2012 by successfully challenging the Chinese measures in a WTO dispute.

Neeraj is an international lawyer at law firm White and Case in Geneva; Singh is Associate Professor, O.P. Jindal Global University. Views expressed are personal

The phenomenal rise in unclaimed deposits

Despite RBI's measures, unclaimed money in bank accounts has zoomed from ₹2,795 crore in 2014, to ₹97,545 crore in 2025

Ganga Narayan Rath
Manas R. Das

The Depositor Education and Awareness (DEA) Fund (hereafter Fund) was established by the RBI on May 24, 2014.

Any bank account which has not been operated upon for 10 years or any deposit or any amount remaining unclaimed for over 10 years is credited to the Fund within three months from the expiry of the said 10-year period.

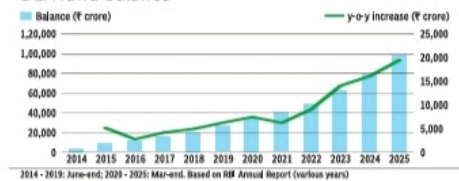
The corpus of the Fund which initially stood at a modest ₹2,795 crore (June-end 2014) leaped to ₹97,545 crore at March-end 2025, registering a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 38.1 per cent. More importantly, 52.0 per cent of the incremental corpus during 2014-25 accrued during the past three (out of 11) years (Chart 1).

If the above CAGR is sustained, the Fund may cross ₹100 lakh crore in the next eight years unless the measures taken in recent years start yielding optimal results.

The Fund is to be utilised for promotion of depositors' interests. Over the years, the RBI has registered over 25 organisations and associations for grant of financial assistance from the Fund for spreading awareness among depositors by holding seminars and workshops.

The depositor is, however, entitled to

DEA fund balance



claim from the bank her/his deposit or any other unclaimed amount even after such amount has been transferred to the Fund, on fulfilment of the necessary Know Your Customer (KYC) guidelines. The bank is liable to pay the amount to the depositor/claimant and claim refund of such amount from the Fund.

Banks have been mandated to host details of unclaimed accounts on their websites with search option.

In order to facilitate the depositors to search the unclaimed deposits easily, the RBI has developed a centralised web portal — UIDGAM — in April 2023. In May 2023, the RBI announced a "100 days 100 pays" campaign for banks to trace and settle the top unclaimed deposits of every bank in every district within 100 days.

Despite these efforts, the Fund has kept growing. Therefore, the RBI

recently amended the extant KYC norms, advising banks to "make available the facility of updation of KYC for activation of inactive accounts and unclaimed deposits at ALL branches."

Besides, banks have been asked "to provide the facility of updation of KYC in such accounts and deposits through Video-Customer Identification Process (V-CIP)."

Services of Business Correspondents could also be used to activate inactive accounts.

WAY FORWARD Though the RBI has initiated moves to return unclaimed money to depositors, these initiatives will take time to bear results.

This is evidenced from our finding (based on the data in Notes to bank

balance sheets) that during 2014-15 to 2023-24, 33 public and private sector banks "existing" today were reimbursed a total sum of ₹7,910 crore by the Fund towards their claims, constituting just 10.1 per cent of the Fund balance at March-end 2024.

The RBI's annual accounts disclose the Fund balance at March-end of a year, and the Notes on accounts give some more accounting details.

The RBI Annual Reports do not give much information about the Fund-assisted financial literacy programmes.

Individual banks disclose their transactions with the Fund in their Notes to annual accounts.

The RBI publishes annually the data on unclaimed accounts and deposits (bank- and account type-wise), but they relate to December-end, which needs to be changed to March-end and be up-to-date.

In short, the information on the Fund is scattered, incomplete and discontinuous. Therefore, the RBI may consider publishing a brief, but comprehensive, report, separately from its annual accounts, on the operations and performance outcome (including by banks and agencies funded) of the scheme on the lines of the Integrated Banking Ombudsman Scheme.

Rath is a central banker, and Das is a former Assistant General Manager (Economics), SBI. Views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO EDITOR

Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to "Letters to the Editor", The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

No wild guesses please

This refers to the news report 'Air India fuel control switch inspections on Being 787 Fleet; no issues found' (July 17). But something must definitely be wrong with the '8 fated' A171 flight that crashed soon after taking off from Ahmedabad airport. Our hearts truly go to all those who lost their lives and their bereaved families. The investigating agencies must "clear the air" about the unsubstantiated stories being spread.

Kumar G. R.
Pune (Maharashtra)

Space feat

Apropos the Editorial 'Space Craft' (July 17), the pace with which India was put in a greater space really deserves a pat. The smiling Shukla all through his journey and at his work site would give the GenX the confidence and encouragement to take him as a role model to become future astronauts. India has proved to the world that it is second to none. The experiments conducted under the leadership of Shukla on muscle regeneration, growth of sprouts and edible

microalgae, survival of tiny aquatic organisms, and human interaction with electronic displays in microgravity would give enough inputs for the ensuing Gaganyaan mission to put three Indians aboard the spacecraft. Per report, India has spent close to ₹70m in getting him trained which needs to be considered as an investment in the space mission. Getting such arduous tasks executed by an Indian astronaut goes to prove the confidence built and exhibited by India through its

successive earlier missions such as Mangalyaan, and Chandrayaan-3.

R. V. Baskaran
Pune
This refers to the article 'Unhackle private schools from not-for-profit rule' (July 17). While advocating for allowing private schools to profit on commercial lines, the authors conveniently ignore the fact that it is the primary responsibility of the state to provide enough public schools with modern infrastructure to impart free, quality education to all segments of society. The indifference by the state is the underlying cause of the current huge mismatch between demand and supply of decent schools, fuelling parents' clamour for private schools. The Constitution declares education a fundamental right. Governments must therefore prioritise free or low-cost, compulsory, and high-quality education for all children.

Kamal Lodha
Bangalore

Should political leaders retire at 75?



Manisha Priyam

Sir Louis Matheson Distinguished Visiting Professor, Monash University



Rahul Verma

Associate Professor, Shiv Nadar School of Law, and Fellow, Centre for Policy Research

PARLEY

The suggestion of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat last week that leaders should step aside at the age of 75 triggered a debate. Opposition leaders saw Mr. Bhagwat's comment as a nudge from the RSS to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is turning 75 in September, to step down. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has maintained a studied silence on the issue. Should political leaders retire at 75? Manisha Priyam and Rahul Verma discuss the issue in a conversation moderated by Sobhana K. Nair. Edited excerpts:

Is politics across the globe and especially in India geared in such a way that politicians reach their peak only in old age?

Manisha Priyam: Do people prefer younger leaders? Yes. But why don't they get younger leaders? This depends on several imperatives such as who controls the party machinery, who controls the party purse strings, and whether such leaders can garner resources.

We have often seen that those who reach the top hold on to their position. For instance, Lahu Prasad gained popularity at a young age. At the age of 42, he became Chief Minister of Bihar in 1990. He held on to the president's position at the Rashtriya Janata Dal. In Uttar Pradesh, Akhilesh Yadav had to fight his father Mulayam Singh Yadav for the leadership position in the Samajwadi Party.

Regarding Mr. Bhagwat's suggestion: this is not the first time that such a remark is coming from the RSS. This (unwritten rule) was used effectively in 2014 to allow Prime Minister Narendra Modi to (push out some older leaders and) nominate his own people at the top levels. But come September, I don't see Mr. Modi stepping down. Today, the RSS requires the BJP machinery much more than the BJP requires the RSS. Mr. Bhagwat does not control the levers of power in India; they clearly remain with Mr. Modi.

Rahul Verma: As per one research study, less than 10% of all elected representatives globally are below the age of 35. Once you come to India, this problem actually accentuates. From the first Lok Sabha in 1952 to the current Lok Sabha in 2024, the average age of our parliamentarians has actually gone up. The number of MPs who are below the age of 40 has declined over time and the number of MPs who are above the age of 60 has increased. The problem is not that we don't have newer faces coming into politics; the problem is, as Professor Priyam said, that the



RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat. PTI

older generation of leaders does not easily cede space to younger ones. Also, perhaps, a political party itself is unwilling to bid farewell to an established leader fearing that it will destabilise the existing structure.

At the same time, I am not sure that voters would actually prefer younger politicians. It might be alright to have a 30-35-year-old MP or MLA, but I think voters would prefer older candidates for the post of Chief Minister or Prime Minister.

As far as Mr. Bhagwat's comment is concerned, I concur with Professor Priyam that we are unlikely to see any change (regarding Prime Minister Modi's position).

Is there any evidence which shows that nations led by younger leaders perform better?

MP: We have a large number of nations where there is no form of democracy, let alone change of political leadership. These include China and Russia. And we see various forms of either party authoritarianism or one-man rule in these countries.

In parallel, we also have the example of the U.K. where there have been several Prime Ministers taking office in their 40s, from Tony Blair to David Cameron. The British example tells us that when people want political change, that political change also comes by way of political leadership change. And I think we need to understand that link better.

As for India, we are now the world's youngest nation. Our political leadership needs to reflect this aspect of our democracy. A political democracy survives by reincarnating legitimacy



Age is not the only criteria; the health and mental faculty of a leader is equally important. Unfortunately, we have no empirical evidence to point out a direct correlation between a nation's economic health and the age of its leadership

RAHUL VERMA

and renegotiating its social compact with people. On the question of age and political leadership, it must turn towards seeking younger people as political leaders. And these younger leaders should not come from established political families alone.

RV: As per the available performance analysis of Indian parliamentarians, we know that younger leaders may not necessarily be better parliamentarians. Data shows that MPs above 60 years of age have 80% attendance in Parliament, while those below 40 have 73-74% average attendance. The older MPs ask far more questions in Parliament.

At the same time, I would add the caveat that age is not the only criteria; the health and mental faculty of a leader is equally important. Unfortunately, we have no empirical evidence to point at a direct correlation between a nation's economic health and the age of its leadership.

Some studies have pointed out that the governance models of younger leaders may vary drastically from that of an older leadership. There can be material differences in the decisions taken by a younger or an older leader.

Younger leaders are much more likely to invest their budget in economic activities of job creation and infrastructure development, while their budgets for social welfare measures, especially health-related schemes, may be low. Younger leaders do govern differently, but one can't say if it is necessarily better.

Should there be a concrete law or regulatory mechanism to retire political leaders or to ensure that a leader who is facing mental or physical challenges steps down?

MP: There has been a lot of speculation around Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's health, especially after some of his television appearances. Even in the election season, his political statements were few and far between. Under the provisions of the Constitution, it would be perfectly legitimate for the Governor to seek a health report of the Chief Minister. People have a right to know if the health of the

Chief Minister has been severely compromised. But in Mr. Kumar's case, it is unlikely that such a step will be taken. I do feel this is a mockery of democratic processes. And it is not only Bihar; we have seen numerous examples in the past from various States. In Tamil Nadu, the truth about former Chief Minister Jayalalitha's health was concealed from the voters. The unfortunate reality is that in such cases, the people have to wait until the elections to force the change.

Though we never had a similar situation at the Centre, considering that the Prime Minister is always under the public glare, should we have a hard cut-off date for retirement? I am not sure. But we must have a transparent mechanism by way of which the electorate is kept informed about their leader's health. Here though, the greater responsibility is of the political parties. We could have a term limit for the Prime Minister and for Chief Ministers, though.

RV: Yes, it is desirable to have politicians who are in the best of health and are able to make sound decisions. But how do we achieve this end? Every solution to address this issue comes with its own set of problems. Prescribing a retirement age will also require creating structures that enable career progression in politics faster. That can't be done if we have fixed the minimum age to contest elections at 25 years. Over 8,000 candidates contested the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. Less than 100 competitive candidates were below the age of 30. So just bringing in laws won't change any of this.

Even term limits are not exactly an effective solution. Look at the U.S. It has a term limit, yet we saw Joe Biden leading the country at 81 while struggling with cognitive issues. He was succeeded by Donald Trump, who is 79 years old. But as Professor Priyam says, there is a conversation across the globe about how the citizens are perhaps entitled to have access to health bulletins of their leaders. Though, again, this isn't exactly an elegant solution. What if the country is on the verge of a war or some kind of economic crisis? An adverse health bulletin of the leader would only add to panic in such a situation. It doesn't even have to be a catastrophic problem; even the markets could react badly if the medical bulletin of the leader is not good. So while it is desirable that no person should remain in office if they aren't mentally or physically fit, it cannot be regulated through legislation or any formal system.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

The icing on the cake while covering a sport

Reporting on sports tournaments across the world gives journalists the opportunity to explore multiple culinary worlds

N. Sudarshan

More than a decade ago, my professor at journalism school advised us to always carry a few chocolates or an energy bar while we were on the field. This was to counter the uncertain world of day-to-day reporting, where both availability of food and windows to eat are erratic.

However, I took up sports journalism, where a day is more structured. We know of events beforehand, and we usually cover a sport which has designated breaks for lunch and tea, and of late, even dinner. This has given us the opportunity to explore multiple culinary worlds. So much so that the lunch and tea spreads rank second in the list of our curiosities, just below the great sport itself.

There are those who consider catering at stadiums as an enabler and not a main event. It helps scribes do their jobs without having to worry about filling their stomachs. It is a complimentary service, not a right. But cricket in India – at least at a majority of the stadiums – has such good arrangements for food that it has become an integral part of our experience.

In this, I can say with authority – and can speak for a lot of others too – that Chennai and its iconic venue Chepaak ranks the best. It did when I worked there from 2012 to 2015, and it still did when I went back last year.

During IPL 2024, one favourite dish was kalan pattani milagu peratal (mushrooms and green peas cooked in crushed black pepper and onion masala). It was rich and layered, in line with its long name and elaborate explanation.

Bengaluru, my home city; Indore, widely regarded as the street food capital of India; and Ahmedabad, which I have visited often in the past two years, offer excellent spreads too.

In fact, cricket reporters regularly upload photos of 'today's menu' on social media platforms, and two enthusiastic journalists even started a web portal to document each venue and the food it had to offer.

A month ago, I landed in Leeds, United Kingdom, to cover the opening match of the ongoing five-match Test series between England and India. I had, of course, packed my usual set of ready-to-eat meals, but I was very much looking forward to the lunch and tea buffets at the famed cricket ground in Headingley.

Mac and cheese and one boiled vegetable welcomed me on day one. With that, my bubble, which had swollen disproportionately because of years of pampering, burst immediately.

The local press corps was upset with the cuisine too, and though things got better in the days ahead and the desserts were outstanding throughout, the first afternoon was a rough reminder that catering was indeed a service and not a right.

My colleagues from other Indian media houses, who had past experience of covering cricket in England, assured me that I would be better off in Birmingham, the venue for the second Test. The West Midlands city has a significant Asian population and I was desperate to see that rich diversity reflect in my plate.

The Industrial Revolution-era megapolis did not disappoint, with the first afternoon offering masala chickpea salad, Indian chopped salad, slow cooked carrots and broccoli, and home-made flavoured bread. To round it off, there was chocolate mint with chocolate mousse and egg custard tart, tickling my taste buds no end.

Wimbledon, my last stop of the work tour, was predictable but perfect. From the menu to the chefs to the counter-managers in the media cafeteria, nothing had changed much since my first visit in 2019. The world famous strawberries and cream was inflation-proof from 2010 to 2024 at £2.50, and rose by 20 pence only this edition.

And like a champion tennis player's respectable technique, the catering at the All England Club delivers every single time. A great service that everyone rightfully enjoys.

sudarshan.naryanasam@thehindu.co.in

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Reaching for the stars



Astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla meets his son a day after returning to Earth from the International Space Station (ISS), at Houston, Texas. On June 25, Shukla lifted off with three other astronauts from NASA's Florida spaceport to the ISS as part of the Axiom-4 commercial mission. It was the first time an Indian was onboard the ISS and also the first time an Indian had gone to orbital space since Rakesh Sharma in 1984. PTI

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 18, 1975

Full utilisation of apprentice schemes planned

New Delhi, July 17: Steps will be taken to ensure fuller utilisation of the apprentice training schemes by the Union Labour Ministry. The Directorate General of Employment and Training will also launch immediately a vigorous drive for the utilisation of available training places for trade apprentices including the placement of graduate engineers and diploma holders in over 5,000 establishments covered under the Apprentices Act. The Government is also taking measures to give due representation to candidates from the rural population, the minorities and other weaker sections including the physically handicapped. To increase the placement of more apprentices nearly 40 additional trades are being designated in consultation with the Central Apprenticeship Council which is meeting here on July 31. At present out of nearly lakh training places located in these establishments nearly 66,000 apprentices are undergoing training giving an overall percentage of nearly 66. In the Central sphere out of about 31,000 seats about 21,000 are being utilised while in the State sphere, nearly 45,000 are being utilised against nearly 69,000 seats. The matter would also come up for discussion at the forthcoming State Labour Ministers' Conference. At a recently convened meeting of the Central Government Ministries it was decided to fully utilise the existing capacity and also to increase additional capacity to place maximum number of trainees under the apprentice schemes.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 18, 1925

Indian reforms

London, July 17: In an article on "The Government's offer to India", *The Spectator* reviews its suggestion made in March 1924, that representative men drawn from all classes and races of India should frame a draft constitution and submit it to the Government of India, who will advise the Imperial Government with regard to it. The paper says the constituent convention to whom the work should be entrusted of drafting a constitution on the lines laid down in its proposal of March last year, should consist solely of Indians.



Stepping stone

The NASA-Axiom-ISRO tie-up is an admirable outcome

A crew of four astronauts including India's Shubhanshu Shukla completed their roughly two-week mission to the International Space Station on July 15. Mr. Shukla's trip was presumed to have been an intensive rehearsal ahead of his flight as part of India's first batch of astronauts for ISRO's 'Gaganyaan' mission, currently expected in 2027. The presumption is because the goals of Mr. Shukla's trip, which ISRO arranged for by paying north of ₹500 crore to Axiom Space, have not been officially communicated by Indian authorities. Fortunately, clarifications from Axiom and NASA have since cast more light on its purpose. While ISRO and the Department of Space are still expected to proactively disseminate what they know about their activities under Gaganyaan, not least because of the mission's ₹20,000 crore price tag, Mr. Shukla's trip ought to strengthen ISRO's preparations. Human spaceflight is a highly involved endeavour; once in space, the crew is on its own and the resources to respond to a variety of situations are limited. According to a statement ISRO published after the mission launched on June 25, Mr. Shukla and Prashant Nair — who is also part of Gaganyaan's first cohort of astronauts and was part of the Axiom mission's backup crew — were familiarised with "advanced spacecraft systems, emergency protocols, scientific payload operations, microgravity adaptation, space medicine, and survival traits". As the mission pilot, per Axiom, Mr. Shukla was also coached on docking and undocking, manual operations, atmospheric reentry, and anomaly management. Onboard the space station, Mr. Shukla was exposed to operations in the Japanese and European modules, for which he and Mr. Nair were trained in Japan and Germany. ISRO Chairman V. Narayanan has also said that the Axiom mission cost less than what ISRO might have had to invest if he had to train Mr. Shukla on its own. In all, the NASA-Axiom-ISRO tie-up emerges as an admirable outcome, even as space agencies continue to closely guard space technologies for their strategic value.

Concerns that the limitations imposed by the U.S.'s International Traffic in Arms Regulations would prevent the duo from learning much may also be laid to rest. Instead, they may be replaced by concerns about ISRO's piecemeal communication. Astronauts cut inspirational figures and appeal to all ages. As India prepares for its first human spaceflight mission, there can be no better way to build excitement than by facilitating access to India's astronauts. The lack of initiative is hard to rationalise, although it is still not too late. ISRO as well as India's soft power platform will make copious gains by expanding outreach and easing public access to the spacefairs.

Middle ground

Trump must ask Russia to back down from its maximalist position

President Donald Trump has made a U-turn on Ukraine, shifting from his campaign pledge to end the war within 24 hours of taking office to promising to send more weapons to Ukraine and threatening to impose "severe tariffs" on Russia and its trading partners if the crisis is not resolved in 50 days. The shift reflects the complex realities on the ground. Ukraine, which has lost more than 20% of its territories, including its Sea of Azov coastline, to Russia since 2014, agreed to a ceasefire, under pressure from the Trump administration, based on the current frontlines. Russia had initially responded to Mr. Trump's peace push. It agreed to a naval ceasefire in the Black Sea, and halted attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure for 30 days. Moscow also declared brief ceasefires and sent negotiators to Istanbul for talks with Kyiv on June 2, despite a drone strike by Ukraine deep inside Russia, targeting its bombers. But after the U.S. joined Israel to bomb Iran, despite Tehran's nuclear talks with Washington, Russia accelerated attacks on Ukraine with drone attacks and troop advances in the Dnipropetrovsk region. In a call with Mr. Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he would not back down from his goals in Ukraine. Caught between an intransigent Moscow and pressure from his allies, Mr. Trump seems to have decided to change course.

Nevertheless, Mr. Trump has ruled out giving Ukraine long-range offensive weapons. The plan is to send defensive weapons, including Patriot systems and ammunition to Ukraine through NATO allies. While Patriots could be effective in shielding Ukraine's skies from Russian missile strikes, they are unlikely to alter the balance in the battlefield. And, the U.S.'s ability to hurt Russia through direct tariffs is limited as bilateral trade stood at just \$3 billion in 2024. But if Mr. Trump opts for secondary tariffs, the impact would extend to other countries, including India, China, and Brazil. Since the start of the Ukraine war, the U.S. and Europe have imposed multiple layers of sanctions on Russia, which have failed to impact the Kremlin's war policies. By threatening to penalise third countries for Russia's actions, Mr. Trump is doubling down on a failed policy, and also jeopardising the energy security of countries such as India, an American partner. Mr. Trump must realise that he cannot resolve global conflicts through imperial-style ultimatums and threats. Instead, sustained diplomacy with Moscow and Kyiv is essential. Russia must come down from its maximalist demands, and Ukraine's security concerns should be addressed. His focus should be on finding a middle ground between the Russian and Ukrainian positions to achieve a durable peace.

The parameters of 'success' in Bihar's poll roll revision

Measuring success is complicated; assessing the impact of one's action can be even more challenging. The desire to be successful is different from the desperation to demonstrate success.

Stakeholders have different yardsticks for measuring performance depending on their interest leaving the vital question "how does one measure one's own success?" The Election Commission of India (ECI) could perhaps be in a dilemma in the wake of its June 24, 2025 announcement of its Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of Electoral Rolls in Bihar, caught among political parties, citizens, the judiciary, and its own conscience.

Once again, it finds itself in an avoidable imbroglio, responding to the judiciary's questions arising out of the justified anxiety of millions of electors, valid apprehensions of neutral observers and unverified suspicion of political interest groups.

The ECI embarked on a seemingly laudable and perfectly legal exercise to purify electoral rolls, declaring its resolve to include all "eligible" and exclude "ineligible" persons. The underlying assumption was that some "ineligible" people had infiltrated the electoral rolls, escaping detection during its due process of documentary and physical scrutiny that Electoral Registration Officers carry out before listing anyone in the electoral rolls. Even the mandatory periodic revisions could not filter them out over the years. No one could possibly object to this effort, however formidable the task. Yet, the ECI found itself facing a barrage of opposition from political parties and civil society organisations for undertaking this mammoth exercise and imposing an impossible demand on clueless citizens in Bihar as they prepare to exercise their most powerful right — of electing their representatives. It is akin to asking for a marriage certificate after years of happy married life with children as proof of a legal union.

An institution of repute

To be sure, if there is one organisation in the country that is capable of carrying out gigantic exercises, it would, without doubt, be the ECI. From preparing the first electoral rolls in the 1950s in trying circumstances, to updating the rolls necessitated by the reorganisation of States



Ashok Lavasa

is former Election Commissioner and Union Finance Secretary of India

It remains to be seen whether the Election Commission of India is able to ensure a fair exercise of verification in Bihar

in 1956 when it was suggested that the term of the House be extended to allow the ECI enough time to revise the rolls. The ECI did not want a constitutional amendment because of its inability to complete a mandatory requirement and lived up to the challenge. Since then, it has repeatedly demonstrated its capabilities in handling mega tasks with astounding success.

Whether it is enrolling a billion people or setting up a million polling stations, mobilising over 18 lakh polling officers for conducting elections and training them, or dealing with moving 30 lakh electronic voting machines, the ECI has done it with aplomb, ably supported by the government machinery. In the process, it has earned the gratitude of an entire country and the envy of democracies across the world. Countries that may have the spirit but not the systems have often looked upon the ECI as a model in creating standard operating procedures, in galvanising resources, and its effective consultative approach in building consensus among political parties.

This has earned the ECI the trust of voters and imparted it a credibility that has been acknowledged by the media, supported by civil society organisations and earned it the respect of the judiciary. Indeed, some have referred to it as "gold standard", belying the cynics who believe that "all that glitters is not gold."

The Bihar exercise

It is in this backdrop that the sudden announcement by the ECI to carry out a purge of the Bihar electoral rolls has invited unpleasant reactions. As opponents question the ECI's motives of raising the spectre of mass disenfranchisement, the ECI is in overdrive trying to demonstrate the ease with which this apparently unwieldy operation involving nearly eight crore registered electors in Bihar is being completed.

Meanwhile, it has eased some stringent procedures, allowing those enrolled after 2003 to use the entries of their parents in the 2003 electoral rolls to support their citizenship claim. It has also allowed Booth Level Officers (BLO) to accept enumeration forms without the prescribed document to prove the eligibility of the post-2003 electors. The relaxations by the ECI obviously ramped up the daily submission of enumeration forms giving the ECI the basis for claiming

success of its operations and the 'support' of the affected electors. This, supposedly, would deflate the clamour of the complainants and perhaps convince the higher judiciary that the political sound and fury signifies nothing.

It, however, remains unclear how the BLOs will "recommend" for inclusion in the draft roll such electors whose forms are not accompanied by documents and how the Electoral Registration Officer/Assistant Electoral Registration Officer decides their eligibility in the absence of those documents. Will the ECI ask such electors to provide the proof of their eligibility/citizenship after the draft roll is published on August 17 if it agrees to expand the list of prescribed documents, as suggested by the Supreme Court of India (to consider the Aadhaar card, Electoral Photo Identity Card, or EPIC and ration card), will it not simply amount to verification of identity, and not citizenship? Are we then not back to square one?

Will the indicator of the ECI's success be the number of "duly filled" forms submitted along with "self-attested documents" and electors readmitted to the rolls that were supposed to be purified? Or, will its success be the number of "ineligible" electors disenfranchised? Those who are dead, who have migrated or have enrolled twice should have been weeded out in the normal course. Did their exclusion warrant this extraordinary exercise?

On presumption of citizenship

By ascribing presumption of citizenship to the electors in the 2003 list, is the ECI claiming that after its current SIR, all those in the electoral rolls will be accepted by the government as citizens as in the Citizenship Act and no one's credentials will hereafter be questioned? Is the government willing to accept this presumption?

No individual is responsible for being born where she is, nor for creating documentary evidence of the date and place of her birth, parentage or citizenship. The authority empowered by the law is. Like many countries, India too has a law under which it is not the ECI that is designated as the competent authority: at least not as yet. However, broad the ECI's shoulders are, they may not be strong enough to carry someone else's burden.

Let us see for whom the bell tolls in Bihar.

A better terror fight with J&K police under state reins

On June 16, 2025, the Lieutenant Governor of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Manoj Sinha, emphasised that the eradication of terrorism from J&K was the government's top priority. In his address on the occasion of the passing out parade at the Sher-e-Kashmir Police Academy, Udhampur, he called upon the J&K Police (J&KP) to utilise the modern technology to counter security threats, prevent radicalisation and triumph over adverse situations. He exhorted the J&KP to adopt a multi-pronged approach and harness the power of intelligence, community engagement, technology and inter-agency collaboration, based on good old beat policing.

Crucial asset

Mr. Sinha could not have been more accurate in underlining the role of the local police in fighting terrorism. The primacy of the local or State police as the fulcrum of counter-terror operations is a well established fact. The central forces — to include the armed forces and central police forces — always supplement and can never supplant the State forces. The strength, and hence the advantage of the local police in the given context, comes from the fact that its personnel belong to the region and know the terrain and demography like no outside force would know.

This intangible asset, as part of the repertoire of the local police, is mainly due to their connect with the local population, facilitating high-grade intelligence of terrorists who operate amidst the population. Can we deny the fact that the terrorists who were behind the Pahalgaon strike on April 22, 2025, are still at large mainly due to an existing gap in human intelligence (HUMINT)? Or, for that matter, there indeed was a lack of HUMINT prior to the strike and that had it been present it could have averted Pahalgaon? Unless we acknowledge the gap, learn lessons and proceed accordingly, it will be challenging to ward-off potential terror strikes.

It is upon the government to constantly



Shashank Ranjan

is an Indian Army veteran (colonel) with substantial experience of serving in a counter-terrorism environment. He currently teaches at the O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana

Placing the J&K police under the command of the elected government will ensure policing strategies that align with the local population's concerns

improve the functional aspects of J&KP, which could contribute to the overall consolidation of the security situation. A beginning needs to be made by placing the J&KP under the command of the government that has been elected by the people.

The local population has the most intimate connect with the elected representative, who cannot be kept out of the loop as far as the security situation is concerned. Developments such as terrorist movements and overground workers' activities in an area can never escape the notice of peoples' representatives, who are one of the most crucial stakeholders in the security matrix. It is reiterated that locals always feel more comfortable to share information with their *sarpanch* or their Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) than with someone from a central agency.

Restore the democratic structure

J&K has a rich and vibrant democratic culture wherein the population has always participated in local body elections with much enthusiasm. In fact, the participation percentage in elections decreases as one goes up the structure to Assembly and parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, due to the fragile security situation, the local elected representatives — though elected from time to time — have never been empowered as in the constitutional provisions.

The democratic order in J&K needs to be restored, with all tiers in the structure of governance from panchayats/municipal bodies to MLAs and Members of Parliament activated and made responsible for security. In the laid-down tiered structure, the J&KP has a vital role towards participatory execution. If not, there will be an attitude of indifference on the part of peoples' representatives, with a likely trickle-down effect — of an indifferent local population — which will be detrimental to counter-terrorism.

Policymakers will have to encourage a

structured dialogue between police forces and local leaders to collaborate and address community concerns, gather information on terror-related activities and enhance public safety initiatives.

This partnership can lead to more informed decision-making and improved community engagement in policing efforts. In a diverse situation that exists in the various sub-regions of J&K, terrorism has a local flavour, contextualised by participation of local terrorist cadres operating with foreign terrorists. These diverse challenges will have to be tackled by respective local governance, against the one size fits all approach. The J&KP, with its basic unit at the *thana* level, has always been enmeshed with local governance to produce amazing results.

Bridging the gap

In the present situation of elected representatives having been kept out of the security matrix, the desired end will always be found wanting. The policy measure of restoring the control of the J&KP under the elected government will facilitate better accountability and responsiveness to community needs, ensuring that policing strategies align with the local population's concerns and aspirations. Elected officials can play a vital role in bridging the gap between the police and the community, fostering trust and cooperation essential for effective law enforcement and counter terrorism.

By holding Assembly and parliamentary elections in J&K, we have acknowledged the agency of the people; the measures undertaken will remain an unfinished agenda if not addressed in an inclusive manner. More than terrorism, it is about granting a participatory governance model as against an elitist model, to the people. Mr. Sinha's overall aim of community engagement will remain a pipe dream if elected representatives are not incorporated with vigour, to respect the decision of the people in electing them. An improved security situation will follow.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bihar poll roll revision

There is a wide gap between how the Election Commission of India (ECI) has planned the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar and how it is being conducted on the ground. In a State with low literacy and poor administration, it is highly suspect that an exercise of such a magnitude can be carried out in a fair manner in a short period. Ground reports have exposed major rigging of the process, with voters not receiving a copy of the submitted forms and groups of booth-level officers filling out applications in bulk and signing them on behalf of

unsuspecting voters. This is alleged to be happening in several locations. One can extrapolate the situation in rural Bihar, away from the media glare. A greater challenge awaits voters in the second part of the campaign, when a majority will be required to validate their claim of citizenship with a mandated document: an onerous task that is likely to result in their widespread disenfranchisement. Perhaps, there could be no other time than now for the top court to act.

Kamal Ladha,

Bengaluru

With the Supreme Court

refusing to stay the ongoing SIR in Bihar, a State which goes to the polls later this year, the ECI has been given a free hand to conduct the exercise. There is political advice to ensure that the SIR does not end up as a citizenship verification drive, which appears to be a distinct possibility. There could be an unseen hand where the SIR is concerned.

C.V. Aravind,

Bengaluru

One must not undermine the sincere efforts being made by the Booth Level Officers working under pressure and limited resources. The ECI must act decisively to protect both

voter rights and institutional credibility. The ECI should pay attention to constructive criticism as fault-finding may reveal practical solutions. Strengthening, not politicising, this process is essential for electoral integrity.

Avinashnappan Mylamsi,

Coimbatore

Noise pollution

Intoning religious verses in highly reverent and godly blarney for one section but a nuisance for others. Despite knowing fully well the relation between silent prayer and peaceful life, even the educated religious virtuosos

seek out ghoulish noise. It is unfortunate that highly literate and thickly populated Kaniyankumari district has become an epicentre of noise pollution. It has become tiresome for people to stay within closed rooms with eardrums hurting. A blanket ban on noise pollution may help improve the quality of life of the passive listeners.

T. John Paulus,

Kaniyankumari, Tamil Nadu

Food on Vande Bharat

On at least a few occasions, the food served on the Vande Bharat trains does not meet quality standards. I have travelled on this train and there is no doubt that it

saves travel time even though the tickets are expensive. I travelled recently to Kozhikode and the food and beverages served do not take into account the needs of people who are concerned about their general health and diabetic health. The masala tea is premixed with sugar. The rice, mango drink, chocopie, and the sweet *kesari* are not food choices diabetics like me want. The Railways should include options for passengers who have health problems.

Jiji Panicker K.,

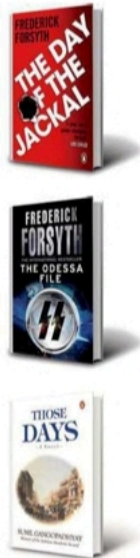
Chengannur, Kerala

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

BIBLIOGRAPHY



Prolific writer: British writer Frederick Forsyth poses for a portrait in London in 2016. AFP



The Outsider: how Frederick Forsyth used facts to inform his fiction

Spurning the conventional spy genre's tropes, Frederick Forsyth, a foreign correspondent for British papers, dived into his geopolitical expertise to write successful thrillers. Other writers like Truman Capote and Sunil Gangopadhyay are also well-known practitioners of 'faction'

Archisman Ghosh

The conventional spy genre's analog charm has withstood the test of time largely due to its universal entertainment value. The generous helping of hair-raising action coupled with overt acts of machismo, prevalent in novels like those of Alistair MacLean feed into a primal, adrenaline-pumped, cycle of pleasure derived from doses of violence. Ian Fleming romanticised the genre, with James Bond conforming to a patriarchal society's constructions of ideal masculinity. But his characters also serve as vehicles of wish fulfilment and modes of deferred rebellion through their highly individualistic and anti-establishment tendencies. Conversely, in John le Carré's writing, the psychological impact of an existence defined by betrayal and confusion takes centre-stage. In his work, spectacle is replaced with characterisation, fantasy with reality, and sympathy with empathy.

Free-flowing narratives

In a genre thus alternatively populated by action and emotion, acclaimed British spy-thriller writer Frederick Forsyth's novels, much like him, identify as "the outsiders". Forsyth (1938-2025) does not resort to scenes of gaudy violence or high-octane fights, instead choosing understated motion and smooth efficiency as his tools of tension. His narratives are neither rigidly structured nor conventionally plotted, thereby imbuing them with a free-flowing, procedural linearity.

His central characters generally cannot be boxed into the good-bad dichotomy, and often behave as emblems or caricatures rather than emotional human

beings who can be empathised with. In spite – and often because – of this blatant and conscious flouting of established "rules" and tropes, Forsyth's classic novels are not only critically acclaimed hallmarks of the genre, but also remain equally entertaining for the modern Hollywood action-addled reader base. Much of this enduring appeal and feeling of contemporaneity almost 60 years since their writing can be attributed to Forsyth's unique style of amalgamating a spy-thriller with a non-fiction novel.

Also referred to as "faction" – a portmanteau of the words fact and fiction – the non-fiction novel is characterised by its mode of presenting real historical events in a dramatic format. Forsyth's appropriation of faction largely adheres to a more developed style of the genre popularised by the likes of Truman Capote.

Archetypal faction novels include Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965) and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979). Forsyth, who in the 1960s worked as a journalist for *Reuters* and the *BBC* before going freelance, was not only in the epicentre of the then-rapidly emerging form of New Journalism, but also debuted as a writer with the non-fiction book *The Biafra Story* (1969) – one of the first eyewitness accounts of the war from a Biafran perspective. It thus comes as no surprise that when he turned towards fiction in order to make ends meet, Forsyth's proclivity towards the journalistic mode of writing imbued his thrillers with certain key non-fictional aspects.

Realist fiction

The Day of the Jackal (1971) opens with the dramatisation of a real-life assassination attempt on French President Charles de

Gaulle by members of the OAS (Secret Army Organisation), who opposed his decision to grant freedom to Algeria. *The Odessa File* (1972) includes

pages-upon-pages of information on the socio-political scenery of the world post the Third Reich's fall. The entire first act of *The Negotiator* (1989) is designed to paint an accurate and expansive picture of the geopolitical chessboard during the Gulf oil crisis, and even features real figures like Margaret Thatcher and Mikhail Gorbachev. These interludes, while language-wise dry and heavy-handed, prioritise journalistic insight and economy of words, and are purposefully designed to inform more than entertain.

Forsyth's decision to thus incorporate his intricate and accurate knowledge of the inner workings of world powers and their covert operations into his novels serves not only to add to their verisimilitude and urgency, but also allows him to treat historical events as the first domino fall – *Jackal's* events are written as the fictional consequences of the factual failed assassination attempt.

In his historical epic *Shi Shomoy* (1983) (Those Days), Sunil Gangopadhyay tackles an issue similar to that faced by Forsyth – writing a fictional story set in a world defined by fact. Both authors end up taking similar approaches.

Gangopadhyay states in the afterword that the characters of his novel exist as emblems, meant to embody specific socio-cultural ideologies and institutions – the "protagonist" Nobinkumar is a personification of Time itself. Similarly, Forsyth deliberately crafts one-dimensional characters, whose identities are defined by what they personify. In *Jackal*, the Jackal represents the Outsider, de Gaulle the Establishment,

the OAS the Opposition, and Lebel the Idealist. None of them undergo a transformation, and none of them tread a character arc.

Imperfect like life

Historical characters and events are central to both novels, with the authors deciding to conduct their stories alongside the established course of history, often intertwining but generally not contradicting it. Similarly, both Gangopadhyay and Forsyth forego adopting any codified, traditional narrative. In both novels, the authors are unafraid to depict days passing by without any significant developments.

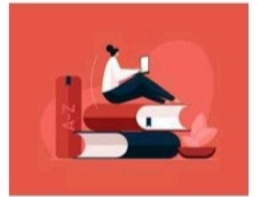
The primary focus is always on the logical progression of events and the realistic passage of time, irrespective of the impact this has on the story beats. The original question, then, still remains – in the face of such extensive rule-breaking, why do these novels work? The answer might be simple.

It is a truth undeniable that real life rarely adheres to the rules of literature. Normal people do not become heroes following a 12-step programme. The sum of our lives does not always fit squarely into character arcs. Tragedy does not discriminate between the righteous and the flawed – it comes for everyone.

And because facts never die, Forsyth's fiction will not either.

In essence, the "imperfections" in his novels are perfected by the imperfections of our lived reality, and if there is any lesson to be learned from the width of the master's bibliography, it is that of spontaneity, motion, and enjoying the journey without worrying about its destination.

Archisman Ghosh studies English at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"Hi! What happened to you? You look like something that the cat dragged in."
"Look like something the cat dragged in! What's that supposed to mean?"
"When you say that someone looks like something the cat dragged in, it means they look very untidy or dirty. For example, after playing in the mud, the kids looked like something the cat dragged in."

"My friend Ram always looks like something that the cat dragged in."
"And you are trying to be like him, I suppose? Why do you look like something that the cat dragged in?"

"I was playing kabbadi."

"... playing kabbadi! Don't you have a chemistry test tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I do. But I'm not too worried about it. You know why? Because I got more marks than Sujatha on last week's physics test. Isn't that great?"

"That's wonderful! But I wouldn't let that go to your head."

"Don't let that go to my head! What are you talking about?"

"What I want to say is, don't let your success make you overly proud. If success or praise 'goes to someone's head', it makes them conceited or proud."

"So the expression 'to go to someone's head' is used to show disapproval. Is that right?"

"That's right. For example, after scoring three centuries in a row, Venugopal let success go to his head and soon became a complete failure."

"That happens to a lot of people. A few years ago, my cousin came first in the university. He received a gold medal. He let that go to his head. Soon he lost all his friends."

"I guess it's only human to let success go to your head. But my father keeps warning me, 'Don't let anything go to your head.' I try to follow his advice."

"Must be difficult to follow, though."

"... I feel peckish. Do you want something?"

"You feel what?"

"P.e.c.k..t..s..h. The first syllable 'peck' rhymes with the words 'neck', 'deck' and 'check'."

"And the 'ish' in the second syllable is like the 'ish' in 'childish', 'fish' and 'wish', I suppose."

"That's right! Do you know what 'peckish' means?"

"No, I don't."

"Peckish is a word that is mostly used in British English. It is used in informal contexts. If you say you're feeling peckish, it means you are hungry. Not very hungry, but slightly hungry."

"Is it o.k. to say, I usually feel peckish around 10:30 in the evening?"

"Sounds good to me. I usually feel peckish in the afternoon."

"If I say I feel peckish, it means I'm only slightly hungry, right?"

"That's right."

"But what if I'm very hungry. I mean really hungry. What do I say then?"

"You could say a number of things. For example, you could use the word 'famish'. By the time I returned home, I was famished."

"Can I say, please give me something to eat. I'm famished?"

"You certainly can!"
Published in *The Hindu* on April 15, 1997.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Nelson Mandela was born on this day in 1918. A quiz on the South African leader

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1
Mandela belonged to which ethnic group in South Africa?

QUESTION 2
What is the name of the political party that he served as the president of?

QUESTION 3
What is the term used to define the separation of people into racial or other ethnic groups in daily life?

QUESTION 4
uMkhonto weSizwe was associated with Mandela. What was it?

QUESTION 5
What was the name of the

trial that took place in apartheid-era South Africa between October 9, 1963 and June 12, 1964, after a group of anti-apartheid activists were arrested on Liliesleaf Farm?

QUESTION 6
What is the term used to describe a situation where specific false memories can sometimes be shared by a large group of people? Hundreds of people recorded having vivid and detailed memories of news coverage of South African anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela dying in prison in the 1980s, despite Mandela actually dying in 2013.



Visual question: In this image, Mandela is raising his clenched fist. What is it called?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. This player holds the record for most singles titles at the tournament. **Ans:** Martina Navratilova, nine titles
2. This food combination is famously associated with the tournament. **Ans:** Strawberry and cream
3. The original colour of the balls used in the tournament and the reason why it was changed to the current yellow. **Ans:** White; it was difficult to spot white balls on colour television
4. The electronic line judging aid introduced at Wimbledon in 1980. **Ans:** Cyclops
5. The spoof movie starring Andy Samberg that was partly inspired by the first-round match between John Isner and Nicolas Mahut in 2010. **Ans:** 7 days in hell
Visual: Name this bird. **Ans:** Rufus the Hawk; it scares pigeons away from the courts
Early Birds: Sukdev Shefi Tamal Biswas, Haridas Pal, Piyali Tuli, Sumana Dutta

Word of the day

Boffo: resoundingly successful and popular

Usage: For years, he was a boffo box office certainty.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/boffo

International Phonetic Alphabet: /boʊfoʊ/

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Text & Context

THE  HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Indians deported from the U.S. since Trump's second term began

1,563 The Ministry of External Affairs reiterated its advisory urging Indian travellers to respect local laws. Meanwhile, India and the U.S. are in their fifth round of bilateral trade talks, with Mr. Trump hinting at a potential deal soon. **ANI**

Football banning orders in England and Wales as of June 1

2,439 Active football banning orders (FBOs) in England and Wales increased by 12% over the previous season. An FBO is a legal ban that stops a person from attending matches due to disorderly behaviour. Over 685 new FBOs were issued last season, as

Rape cases in Maharashtra in first five months of 2025

3,506 A total of 1.6 lakh criminal cases were registered in the State between January 1 and May 31, including 30,000 thefts, 924 murders and 156 dacoities. In Nagpur alone, 10,423 cases were registered, of which 6,000 were from the city. **ANI**

Number of people
killed in a shopping
centre fire in Iraq

60 The massive fire broke out at the newly opened Corniche Hypermarket Mall in Kut, eastern Iraq, on late Wednesday. Among the dead were 14 charred bodies, still unidentified. The five-storey building, opened just a week earlier, reportedly lacked proper fire safety measures. **AGENCIES**

The rise in AI adoption among U.S. small businesses in 2025

41 in percent. The jump was even greater among firms with 10-100 employees, where adoption rose from 47% to 68%. Top uses include data analysis (62%), content generation (55%), and customer engagement tools (46%). AGENCIES

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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How is China leading the green energy sector?

China's renewable energy revolution is the result of decades of strategic state planning and massive investments in innovation. State-owned enterprises and banks had a key role to play in the rise of China as a clean-energy superpower

[FULL CONTEXT](#)

Kabir Jeet Singh

China installed more wind turbines and solar panels in 2024 than every other nation combined. This statistic alone underlines how China has sped ahead in the global green energy race, cornering the entirety of the renewable supply chain due to firm control over the extraction of key raw materials such as polysilicon and lithium. China also asserts dominance over the manufacturing of solar panels, wind turbines, and batteries.

China's renewable energy revolution is the result of decades of strategic state planning and massive investments in innovation. Starting with modest pilot projects in the early 2000s, Beijing is now leading in solar panel and battery production. In 2024 alone, China allocated a remarkable \$940 billion into the renewable energy sector, according to U.K.-based research organisation Carbon Brief, from an initial investment of \$10.7 billion in 2006. In comparison, India's renewable energy sector received a combined total investment of \$3.4 billion in 2024-25 as per the Council on Energy, Environment, and Water, highlighting the stark gap.

Turning crisis into opportunity

Apart from climate goals, what mainly inspired China's green revolution was a mounting crisis of extremely high levels of air pollution, coupled with concerns about energy insecurity. By the early 2000s, the country's reliance on coal had made its cities nearly unlivable, resulting in air pollution so bad in Beijing and Shanghai that it was visible from space and had garnered global attention. Importantly, growing public awareness about the adverse affects of air pollution played a key role in pressuring the government to act.

Moreover, surging electricity demand left parts of the nation teetering on the edge of blackouts. Also, increasing dependence on foreign oil triggered concerns over energy security. China's oil imports are largely dependent on West Asia and sensitive shipping lanes through the Strait of Hormuz and the South China Sea.

Therefore, what began as a survival strategy quickly evolved into a platform for national ambition. In less than two decades, China transitioned from an environmental underdog to a clean-energy driven superpower. The turning point came with the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), which elevated renewable energy to a national strategic priority. The passage of the Renewable Energy Law in 2005 created legal backing for this vision, offering grid access guarantees and price incentives for wind and solar producers, particularly private enterprises that received generous government subsidies. The state poured resources into infrastructure and R&D, while provinces like Gansu, Inner Mongolia, and Jiangsu were identified as early testing grounds for wind and solar farms, in keeping with the Chinese economic practice of starting with pilot projects before scaling up.

The role of SOEs

State-owned Enterprises (SOEs) and banks had a key role to play in executing plans that were led by China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the National Energy Administration (NEA). Public sector banks provided heavy loans, while industrial



Clean power: Workers install solar panels at a floating solar plant in Huainan, Anhui province, China in 2017. REUTERS

THE GIST

From the start, Beijing had a global vision for its ambitions, using programmes such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to push green trade, whether through the exports of solar panels, construction of hydropower stations in Africa or building wind farms in Latin America.

Apart from climate goals, what mainly inspired China's green revolution was a mounting crisis of extremely high levels of air pollution, coupled with concerns about energy insecurity.

The key difference between Chinese SOEs and Western private enterprises is the ability of the Chinese state to mobilise large-scale manufacturing capabilities and properly utilise their vast scale.

global dominance in renewable energy. Without them, China's rapid leap from fossil-fuel giant to renewable superpower with global influence would not have been possible.

Lessons learnt

China's green energy push wasn't without bumps along the way. For instance, in the mid-2010s, wind and solar installations outpaced the ability of the national grid to absorb their output. This led to the curtailment of energy, especially in northern provinces such as Inner Mongolia, Jilin, and Gansu where wind power curtailment was as high as 20% in 2014. These bottlenecks revealed a critical gap in transmission infrastructure.

Although the creation of renewable energy projects was rapid, other aspects of national infrastructure could not keep up with the growth. Beijing responded through heavy investments in ultra-high voltage transmission lines and more focus on better integrating renewables into the national grid. Over a decade, State Grid doubled its investment from \$33.31 billion in 2010 to \$88.7 billion this year, according to *Reuters*.

Another problem was haphazard subsidy policies to SOEs that encouraged wasteful expansion, without adequate oversight. The vast expansion of projects encouraged a build-at-all-costs mentality, leading to redundant projects and inefficiencies across the sector. To correct those issues, Beijing tightened oversight mechanisms and emphasised planning that favoured efficiency and grid-readiness over capacity. One lesson for Beijing was that in the race for renewable development, speed could not trump structure and organisation.

Global influence

With a sprawling global network spanning 61 countries and a web of joint ventures, with local state-owned enterprises, from

Angola to Hungary to Bangladesh, China's geopolitical presence in this sector has become deeply entrenched. The current focus is on ensuring dominance in the next wave of clean energy technologies. With support guaranteed by the state to firms such as Longi, Goldwinding, and CATL, production costs have been slashed due to market dominance, leading to vertical integration and economies of scale. The next wave of advancement in renewable technology will arrive in the form of AI-powered smart grids, green hydrogen, and next-generation nuclear technologies. The Chinese government, of which Beijing has set its eyes on with the same formula of aggressive state investment, breakthrough deployment, and focus on the export of technology and influence.

The world now faces a bifurcated energy landscape, as the U.S. and its allies scramble to pump billions into reshoring clean energy industries through mechanisms like the Inflation Reduction Act. The key difference between Chinese SOEs and Western private enterprises is the ability of the Chinese state to mobilise large-scale manufacturing capabilities and properly utilise their vast scale. This enables low-cost, high-speed deployment of renewable tech, while the West grapples with higher costs, slower implementation, and far more complex political considerations on the adoption of green energy within each of their countries. The contest of the future, ultimately, will not be about panels or turbines or alternate targets but who sets the rules of the energy game. Will the future of climate tech be Beijing's centralised, scale-driven blueprint, or will any other player be able to innovate fast enough and demonstrate a credible counter-model to offer to the world?

Kabir Jeet Singh is a student and writer based in Beijing, with a deep interest in global economics, energy policy, and China's ascent.

SCIENCE

Navigating nutrition information in the era of social media

Social media thrives on black-and-white thinking, and much of the information is not always accurate; nutrition science is all about context, dose, and individuality; genetics, gut microbiome, lifestyle, stress levels, and cultural background all determine what works for you, say experts

Nabeela Khan

Do you start your mornings with detox water, flaxseeds, chia seeds, eat collagen for skin during the day and add a dose of magnesium for good sleep? If your answer is yes, you are not alone.

The global health and wellness market stood at \$1.4 trillion in 2024 according to a report by McKinsey, the multinational consulting firm. The report highlighted that people are prioritising wellness more than ever and are looking for science-backed products.

How is wellness and nutrition a central narrative of our conversations these days? Clinical nutritionist Amita Gadre explained: "Today, the ultimate status symbol is health and vitality. A glowing skin, a high-energy lifestyle, and a fit physique are the new aspirations. And social media is the perfect stage for this display."

However, in an information-filled world, people are struggling to understand nutrition science, an area of study that is already a complex subject.

A recent peer-reviewed study conducted of Indian students highlighted how "social media impacts an individual's eating patterns by acting as a stimulus for immediate consumption of food, cravings and trying trends." Another study from South Africa also found that social media is used to "access and implement nutrition information while showing the inability of participants to assess whether nutrition information on social media is evidence-based and correct."

A simple Google search tells us what to eat or drink and how much, for our weight concerns, skin concerns or even conditions such as diabetes. However, this information is not always accurate, as it is sometimes not backed by strong scientific evidence, may promote conflicting views and could even distort scientific findings to promote one particular food item or product.

"While social media has raised awareness, it has simultaneously created a 'Wild West' of information that has deeply complicated the public's understanding of nutrition," said Ms. Gadre.

So what is the science behind nutrition and food? Vikrant Ghanekar, scientific officer, Biology Cell at Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education explained that the small intestine has an extensive supply of blood vessels to facilitate the uptake of nutrients. He added that "excess vitamins, minerals may not give immediate benefits because water-soluble vitamins (Vitamin B and Vitamin C) are lost through body fluids (urine) and excessive oil-soluble vitamins can be harmful for metabolism. Regular supply through fruits and leafy vegetables is enough to maintain a balance," he said.

Ms. Gadre explained how eating one food may not immediately impact our



Consumption patterns: A recent peer-reviewed study of Indian students found that social media significantly influences eating behaviours by triggering immediate food consumption, intensifying cravings, and encouraging participation in food trends. GETTY IMAGES

health. "Take Vitamin C as an example (from oranges). It is water-soluble, so it is absorbed in the small intestine and carried in the blood. Your body takes only what it needs. The rest is excreted in urine. No amount of oranges can force your skin to glow instantly. Glow comes from a combination of hydration, healthy fats, protein and antioxidants, not just one vitamin. Also, absorption depends on gut health, the presence of other nutrients, and overall balance." "So yes, eat your oranges. But also eat your dal, rice, ghee, sabzi, nuts – glow comes from nourishment, not gimmicks."

'Food as a cure'
What many struggle to understand or often misunderstand, is whether food can cure diseases or medical conditions. Krish Ashok, author of the book *Masala Lab* explained "good food provides ingredients for the body's immune system to function at its best (genetically determined) capacity. But beyond that, food cannot act like medicine."

It is the same with seeds, spices and water. According to Ms. Gadre, kitchen ingredients such as carom seeds or fennel seeds (*ajwain, dalcchini, jeera, saunf*) are great in culinary doses and have traditional digestive benefits. When asked if they could help lose weight, she said, "To expect them to cure obesity or diabetes is taking it too far. Superfoods don't undo overeating or inactivity. Weight loss and metabolic health require exercise, stress and sleep management and calorie balance,"

Commenting on daily water

requirements, she said, "Hydration is vital, but that 8-glass rule is generic. Overhydration can lead to electrolyte imbalance. A good rule of thumb: drink when you're thirsty, sip more in hot weather or after workouts, and observe your urine colour – pale yellow is ideal. Water doesn't flush toxins."

A simple keyword search – 'how to lose weight' unwraps a whole lot. Search results lead to multiple videos explaining how to lose weight with the help of "natural ozempic". These videos say that a concoction of vegetables such as cucumber, celery, and bitter melon constitute 'Nature's Ozempic' and claim that this can lower blood sugar and melt fat. Ozempic is an anti-diabetic and anti-obesity medicine which is prescribed under medical supervision for weight management.

There are multiple videos promoting juices of certain vegetables and drinking these on empty stomach for weight loss. Ms. Gadre, commenting on this trend, explained: "There is no clinical evidence supporting these drinks for sustainable weight loss. Moreover, Ozempic is a prescription GLP-1 drug used for type 2 diabetes under strict medical supervision. You can't DIY that with karela (bitter melon)." She further warned that "Overconsumption of raw vegetable juices can cause bloating, nutrient imbalances, risk of kidney stones and even blood sugar dips if not combined with meals."

While social media promotes certain foods, it also creates fear around a few food products. This makes understanding what to eat and what not more complex.

Both sugar and carbohydrates have earned a bad reputation on social media. And while too much of either can be detrimental, many take extreme measures to curb it from their diets. The Mayo Clinic prescribes: "people need at least 130 grams of carbohydrates every day to meet the body's energy needs." A Johns Hopkins blog post on sugar explains, "Our bodies run on sugar. Removing natural sources of sugar and other carbohydrates from your diet – fruits, dairy products and grains – is not a healthy choice". Diets that cut out all carbohydrates and sugars, such as the ketogenic diet, can be harmful to your health, it says.

Ms. Gadre added: "Social media thrives on black-and-white thinking. Nutrition science is all about context, dose, and individuality. Is sugar 'bad'? It depends. A spoonful in your chai is vastly different from drinking a litre of soda. The diet that worked for a 22-year-old actor in Bollywood is unlikely to be the right fit for a 45-year-old working mother in Delhi. Genetics, gut microbiome, lifestyle, stress levels, and cultural background all determine what works for you." When it comes to a nuanced understanding of nutrition science, randomised controlled trials are the gold standard to understand how and why certain foods get easily absorbed by the body. But a lot of claims are based on observations and observational studies, and therefore can or cannot be applied to everyone.

(Nabeela Khan is a Delhi-based health and science journalist. nabeelainayati@gmail.com)

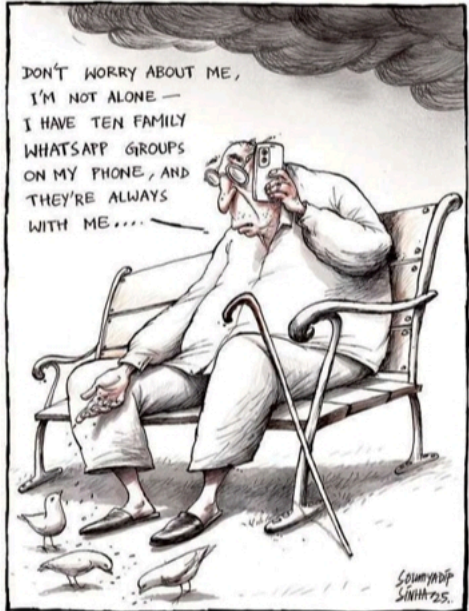
THE GIST

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HUMERUS



Lab-grown cells help restore insulin in 12 persons with severe type 1 diabetes

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

Every day, people with type 1 diabetes track blood sugar, adjust insulin, brace for highs and lows, and watch for signs of the next crash. Even the best technology, including pumps and sensors, can't fully replicate the natural rhythm of a healthy pancreas.

But a new study suggests an innovative approach: instead of working around the damage, what if you could replace what's missing?

A small clinical trial, reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in June, tested a therapy called zimiscelel: stem cell-derived islet cells infused into the liver. In 12 people with severe, long-standing type 1 diabetes, these cells began producing insulin again, improving blood sugar control and preventing dangerous lows.

It's early days and challenges remain. But for a condition where every treatment has meant compromise, zimiscelel signals a way to restore what the disease took away without relying on donor organs.

Type 1 diabetes begins when the immune system attacks the islets cells, which produce insulin and



People with type 1 diabetes track blood sugar, adjust insulin and watch for signs of the next crash. GETTY IMAGES

other hormones that regulate blood sugar. Without these cells, people rely on external insulin, adjusting doses by trial and error. But despite automated delivery systems, about 75% don't reach their recommended blood sugar targets and some continue to experience episodes of low levels.

The idea of replacing lost islets isn't new. Transplants from deceased donors have reduced or eliminated insulin use in some patients. However, as it stands today, the procedure is limited by several practical and logistical hurdles, Nihal Thomas, professor of endocrinology and head of the Centre for Stem Cell Research at Christian Medical College, Vellore, said.

"Once the pancreas is removed, the clock starts ticking," Mr. Thomas said. "Extracting the islets isn't straightforward either. You need a Ricordi chamber, a skilled lab team, and, even then, one pancreas may not give you enough. The actual infusion is not that complex, but everything that leads up to it makes the process demanding."

Instead of harvesting islets from donors, scientists made zimiscelel by growing islets from pluripotent stem cells in the lab. These were matured into functioning islets and infused into the hepatic portal vein, with the hope that these cells would take root and begin producing insulin inside the body.

The trial enrolled people who had type 1 diabetes for more than two decades, no detectable insulin production, and experienced two to four severe hypoglycaemic events in the previous year. All 12 participants received a full dose of zimiscelel and were followed up for at least a year.

To prevent their bodies from rejecting the transplanted cells, they

were placed on an immunosuppressive regimen free of glucocorticoids. Within 90 days, all participants were producing C-peptide, a marker of insulin production, with levels more than doubling by day 365. Blood sugar control improved in tandem.

Phase 3 trials of zimiscelel are already underway, with 50 participants from around the world who will be followed for five years.

"This study marks a promising step forward in a field that has seen remarkably slow progress over the last 70 years," Mr. Thomas said. "But if the therapy is eventually introduced to the market, important questions will remain around its cost and the side-effects related to life-long immunosuppression."

(Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from Delhi. anirban.genetics@south.du.ac.in)

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

Temasek, others can invest more if the ecosystem is conducive

The announcement by Temasek Holdings that it intends to deploy \$3 billion—4 billion annually in India is good news, especially against the backdrop of less-than-desirable foreign direct investment (FDI) that we get. Net FDI, for instance, had a steep fall of over 96 per cent, to just \$353 million, in 2024-25. There was recovery too, though, as in April received net FDI of \$3.95 billion, the most in 35 months.

The exposure of Singapore's sovereign wealth fund to India has increased to over \$50 billion, as of March this year, up from \$37 billion a year earlier. In March, Temasek picked up a 10 per cent stake in Haldimart at a valuation of around \$10 billion, which was termed as a "prized asset."

"We've been very active in investing behind family-run businesses, we can invest across the value chain," Vishesh Shrivastava, managing director of Temasek's India investment team, said in a media interview. Earlier, Temasek invested in many family busi-

nesses in India, such as Manipal Hospitals and Dr Agarwal's Health Care.

Temasek and other investors can become more bullish about India if our policy makers get their act together. To be sure, investors are closely watching India, which is widely regarded as one of the most promising emerging markets. With a large domestic market, a young and growing population, a thriving services sector, and increasing digital penetration, India offers tremendous potential for high returns over the long term.

However, this optimism is often tempered by concerns over policy inconsistency, regulatory unpredictability, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. If Indian policymakers can address these challenges with clarity, consistency, and foresight, institutional investors like Temasek may significantly ramp up their commitments.

Temasek has already invested in sectors such as financial services, technology, and healthcare in India. Yet, its future decisions

will be influenced by the ease with which it can navigate India's regulatory environment, repatriate profits, and find long-term policy stability.

A proactive policy framework, free of sudden reversals or overregulation, would send a strong signal of reliability. For instance, India's ongoing tax disputes and retrospective taxation policies have, in the past, deterred many investors. While some steps have been taken to reverse such measures, greater transparency and policy continuity are needed to rebuild long-term trust.

Additionally, infrastructure bottlenecks, delays in project clearances, and land acquisition hurdles are key concerns. If the government expedites structural reforms—such as simplifying labour laws, digitising approval processes, and strengthening contract enforcement—it would greatly enhance the investment climate. Investors are also seeking greater alignment between central and state policies, as contradictions and delays in

implementation at the state level can hamper project execution.

Moreover, geopolitical tensions and trade dynamics increasingly factor into capital flows. With global investors diversifying away from China, India stands to benefit—but only if it positions itself as a stable and reform-oriented alternative. Clear communication from policymakers, timely execution of flagship initiatives like Make in India and Digital India, and consistency in environmental and ESG-related norms will help boost investor confidence.

Temasek and other institutional investors are not just looking for growth—they are looking for predictable, rules-based systems where they can make long-term bets without fear of regulatory shocks. If Indian policymakers can deliver on this front, India could attract not just higher investment volumes but also longer-term, strategic capital, thus driving deeper transformation across its economy.

LETTERS

Majoritarian mindset

THE NCERT's revision of the contents of the textbooks is in line with the BJP's and the Modi government's pursuit of a Hindutva agenda. The Hindu Right's worldview and its fixation on other faiths run through the newly-added texts, as is easily seen from their phrasing.

The Hindutva brigade's "fascination" with the Mughal rulers has more to do with the use of history for political manipulation and mobilisation than its interest in understanding Indian history. It is "fond" of this particular period of history as it provides the grist for its political discourse. The emphasis is laid on the Mughal period to buttress the argument that Hindus and Muslims have been constantly in conflict—nothing could be further from the truth—and make a case for Hindu revivalism.

The reference to the British colonial rule as one which "drained India of its wealth" seems to be a feeble attempt to claim objectivity. As for the mention of "Christianisation", schools and hospitals built by the Christian missionaries to benefit the masses, mainly the low-oppressed lower castes, too could have been mentioned. The lament in the revised texts that the British destroyed India's traditional ways of life and its indigenous educational system and "imposed foreign cultural values" is of immense sociological significance. History is not to be looked at through tinted glasses. Unfortunately, the NCERT gives students exposure only to a sanitized version of history.

G David Milton, Maruthanode, Tamil Nadu

Long overdue move

THE revised NCERT Class VIII textbook is a long-overdue correction of colonial narratives. By acknowledging the massive economic drain from India and exposing how "modernisation" came at the cost of indigenous systems, it encourages critical thinking. Including local education models and the rise of the Marathas adds depth to the period often overshadowed by Mughal-British binaries. Importantly, the balanced approach showing both exploitation and exchange helps students grasp history with nuance. This bold, evidence-based shift deserves appreciation for reclaiming forgotten perspectives and fostering a more self-aware generation.

Dr H K Vijayakumar, Raichur

Is still Akbar 'The Great'?

THE new Social Science text book to be newly introduced by the NCERT for students in the 2025-26 academic year, portrays Mughal rulers, especially Akbar among others, as intellectually endowed and also those who plundered the Indian population. So, how can his name tagging with the rarest title "The Great" still holds apt and relevant?

Seethagiri Row Karriy, Hyderabad

Unbiased journalism

MY heartfelt congratulations to The Hans India newspaper on completing 14 years of publication and entering into its 15th year. I am very happy to write that The Hans India is the only newspaper which has an Education page published every day. I eagerly look forward to your Sunday Edition for the Reader's Pulse. Yours is the only newspaper which has a page entirely for the readers and we feel free to share our thoughts with you. I am also glad that many of my thoughts and opinions have been published in The Hans India. Your reporting is unbiased and highly professional. Wishing Team Hans India a very bright future.

Parimala G Tadasi, Hyderabad

Save Nimisha Priya

THE fate of Kerala nurse Nimisha Priya sentenced to death under Yemeni law for murdering her business partner and Yemeni national Abdul Mehdi looks bleak with Mehdi's family rejecting the offer of blood money made by her family. The international community must, through good offices, mediate Nimisha's release, as the woman was forced into the diabolic crime to escape harassment by, and get back her passport from Mehdi. Yemen, an Islamic nation must do justice to the spirit of forgiveness espoused in the Holy Quran.

Dr George Jacob, Kochi

Too much Hindutva on display

WHAT is going on in Uttar Pradesh? Kanwar yatra is a major Hindu pilgrimage held usually in July, August. Giving more importance to the pilgrimage many educational institutions have been closed, roads have been opened to pilgrims only, and meat shops and eateries maintained by minorities have been asked to close against Supreme Court order.

About 17,000 trees have been cut in Ghaziabad and Meerut to make way for new routes, UP government's too much support to Hindu religion is against secularism. Supreme Court must interfere to maintain democracy and secularism.

P Victor Saravraj, Tirunelveli

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Dharmasthala murders: Court-monitored SIT probe sought

BENGALURU: A retired Supreme Court judge and several activists have demanded a Special Investigation Team (SIT) probe into the shocking Dharmasthala murders, to be monitored by the Supreme Court or the Karnataka High Court.

The case involves the alleged killings of multiple women and others. Dharmasthala is a renowned Hindu pilgrimage centre in Karnataka. Addressing a press conference at the Bengaluru Press Club on Thursday, retired Supreme Court judge Justice V. Gopala Gowda demanded that, "Given the gravity of the alleged offences and the distressing information suggesting that these crimes may have been committed by highly influential and powerful personalities with significant political clout, we strongly recommend the following immediate actions."

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

SURGICAL STRIKE



K. KRISHNA SAGAR RAO

EVERY now and then, as predictably as pre-election freebies, certain state-level political leaders raise the bogey of 'Hindi imposition.' It's as if they have a trigger switch tied to their political survival that goes off whenever a central government initiative mentions Hindi in any capacity. The recent noise from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Kerala is a perfect example.

These states have yet again accused the Modi government of trying to impose Hindi on them, even though no such law, bill, or directive has ever been passed. What's truly baffling is that even when the Centre merely promotes multilingual education or recommends Hindi as one of the national working languages for optional learning, it is somehow painted as a threat to their regional identity. Let me say this upfront: this is not about language. It never was. This is about politics. Regionalism is not a cultural assertion anymore, it is a political lifeline.

The political design of division

Over the years, regional parties have mastered the art of staying electorally relevant by building niche vote banks rooted in identity—language, region, caste, and in some cases, even dietary habits. They protect these vote banks as aggressively as a monopolist guards a dying product, not because it's valuable, but because it's all they have left.

Whether it's the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Congress and JD(S) in Karnataka, or the Left parties in Kerala, Udhav Sena, MNS in Maharashtra the pattern is clear. They feed the fear of cultural annihilation. They amplify a false sense of 'otherness' when it comes to the idea of India that the BJP or any national party propo-

ses. And they particularly thrive on positioning Hindi as a weapon of domination. Let's be honest, these parties don't fear Hindi because of what it is. They fear it because of what it symbolically represents today, the growing acceptability and spread of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's idea of a unified India, one that embraces all languages without dividing people through them.

Linguistic diversity is not the enemy

India is not a monolith. It is a civilisational mosaic of cultures, scripts, sounds, and dialects. The Constitution of India recognizes 22 official languages under the Eighth Schedule. Hindi is just one of them. And so is Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam or Marathi. To pit one against the other is a perversion of the very idea of Bharat. Knowing Hindi does not diminish Tamil identity. Speaking Hindi in Kerala does not erode Malayali pride. Using Hindi does not lower Marathi abhiman. Language is not a zero-sum game. It is about subtraction. It is about addition.

I believe language is a bridge, not a boundary. A multilingual Indian is a more empowered Indian. And regional politicians need to understand that unity does not come at the cost of diversity. It comes through it.

The hypocrisy of English love and Hindi hatred

Here's what exposes the real agenda of these regional parties, their unspeakable promotion and dependence on English. From state government websites to high court judgments, from elite schooling to bureaucratic communication, English is the default in almost all southern states.

Yet, not once have these parties accused the Union Government or anyone else of 'English imposition.' Not once have they stood up to question why primary education in urban areas of their own states has moved away from regional languages toward English medium.

If English is acceptable for courts, commerce, con-



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tracts, and education, why is Hindi such a problem? Why is English celebrated as modern, but indigenous Hindi ridiculed as hegemonic? That is not cultural logic. That is political expediency.

Let me put it bluntly, they're not against Hindi. They're against the political threat that comes with the spread of Hindi-speaking leadership.

Is Hindi being imposed? Let's check the facts

Let's strip the rhetoric and look at the facts.

- There is no constitutional amendment imposing Hindi on non-Hindi speaking states.
- The Modi government has not issued any directive mandating Hindi in official state communication.
- NEP 2020's three-language formula gives complete autonomy to states in choosing which three languages to include in their curriculum.

- Most central government exams, including UPSC, are now being offered in multiple regional languages.
- The push has been for inclusion, not imposition.

Promoting Hindi alongside Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada is not the same as replacing them.

Yet, even the mention of Hindi in a national context becomes a cause for statewide protests. It's performative outrage, driven

by electoral anxiety. Employment and national integration. Let's talk about who really matters—the Indian youth. In today's economic landscape, mobility is key. People no longer work where they're born. A student from Telangana may get posted in Himachal. A nurse from Kerala might land a job in Gujarat. An engineer from Tamil Nadu could be working in Delhi.

In this context, knowing Hindi is a competitive advantage, not a cultural burden. It helps non-Hindi speakers navigate interstate opportunities more smoothly. It opens doors in the government sector, armed forces, hospitality, transport, and retail industries. It increases efficiency, eases communication, and builds bonds. Is that such a terrible outcome?

What the Modi government is actually doing

The accusation of Hindi imposition rings hollow when you consider what the Modi government is really doing with languages.

- The National Education Policy encourages foundational education in the mother tongue, not Hindi.

- The government is investing in translation of technical, engineering, and medical textbooks into Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and more.

- E-Governance platforms and services are now available in multiple In-

dian languages, not just Hindi and English.

- Initiatives like 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat' actively promote cultural and linguistic exchanges between states.

This is not imposition. This is preservation, promotion, and partnership. The Modi government is enabling the growth of regional languages, not undermining them.

Who's really failing regional languages?

If anyone is responsible for the weakening of regional languages, it is these very parties who cry wolf over Hindi. Their state school curricula are poorly funded. Their public universities are often linguistically disconnected. Their budget allocation for language research and promotion is negligible. These parties use their language only as a slogan, not as a policy priority. Their turn up the volume on identity politics when needed and mute their concern when in power. There's no cultural war here. Just electoral theatre.

The false dichotomy: Hindi vs. regional identity

I find it dangerous how a false dichotomy has been manufactured. The idea that you can either be Tamil or learn Hindi, that you must choose between being a Kannadiga and being a multilingual Indian. This binary thinking is regressive. It undermines our very ethos as a civilization that absorbed and evolved through dialogue, linguistics, philosophical, and cultural. Language is not the enemy. Political weaponization of language is.

We need political maturity, not linguistic paranoia

India is at a crucial point in its journey, politically, economically, and culturally. We cannot afford to squander this moment over invented fears. The political maturity required now is to rise above identity-based manipulation and look at language through the lens of national progress.

Let's be clear, no one is forcing Hindi down anyone's throat. But we should also not allow a handful of insecure regional leaders to

block opportunities for millions of Indian youth.

Let's not make it harder for a Tamil boy to dream of a job in Madhya Pradesh. Let's not limit the aspirations of a Kannada girl wanting to work in Chandigarh. Knowing Hindi helps them, not harms them. And let us not forget, a multilingual India is not a divided India. It is a stronger, more connected, more confident India.

Unity through language

Over the years, I've had the privilege of working and speaking across many Indian states. I've seen firsthand how knowing a few key Indian languages changes the way you connect, influence, and lead.

In my own political and public life, the ability to speak Hindi and English, while thinking in Telugu, has been a powerful advantage. It has not diminished my identity. It has enhanced my effectiveness and connect across the nation.

The same principle holds for our youth. Don't be held hostage by those who want to limit your growth under the guise of protecting your culture.

Bharat is a symphony

The idea of Bharat is not built on linguistic uniformity. It's built on cultural harmony. One can speak Kannada and be a proud Indian. One can write in Malayalam and serve in the Indian Army. One can think in Tamil and lead in Delhi. We need to end this manufactured war on Hindi. We must call out the politics of regionalism for what it is, a desperate attempt to remain electorally relevant in the face of a rising, unified national narrative.

Let our children learn any language they intend to—Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Hindi, and English. Let them dream in many languages, think across borders, and work across states. Because in the end, the language of unity is understanding, not uniformity.

(Author is the Chief Spokesperson of BJP, Chairman for Nation Building Foundation & a Harvard Business School certified Strategist.)

Why drones and AI can't quickly find missing flood victims

ROBIN R MURPHY, THOMAS MANZINI, HOUSTON

FOR search and rescue, AI is not more accurate than humans, but it is far faster. Recent successes in applying computer vision and machine learning to drone imagery for rapidly determining building and road damage after hurricanes or shifting wildfire lines suggest that artificial intelligence could be valuable in searching for missing persons after a flood.

Machine learning systems typically take less than one second to scan a high-resolution image from a drone versus one to three minutes for a person. Plus, drones often produce more imagery to view than is humanly possible in the critical first hours of a search when survivors may still be alive. Unfortunately, today's AI systems are not up to the task. We are robotics researchers who study the use of drones in disasters. Our experiences searching for victims of flooding and numerous other events

show that current implementations of AI fall short. However, the technology can play a role in searching for flood victims. The key is AI-human collaboration. AI's potential Searching for flood victims is a type of wilderness search and rescue that presents unique challenges. The goal for machine learning scientists is to rank which images have signs of victims and indicate where in those images search-and-rescue personnel should focus. If the responder sees signs of a victim, they pass

the GPS location in the image to search teams in the field to check. The ranking is done by a classifier, which is an algorithm that learns to identify similar instances of objects—cats, cars, trees—from training data in order to recognize those objects in new images. For example, in a search-and-rescue context, a classifier would spot instances of human activity such as garbage or backpacks to pass to wilderness search-and-rescue teams, or even identify the missing person them-

selves. A classifier is needed because of the sheer volume of imagery that drones can produce. For example, a single 20-minute flight can produce over 800 high-resolution images. If there are 10 flights—a small number—there would be over 8,000 images. If a responder spends only 10 seconds looking at each image, it would take over 22 hours of effort. Even if the task is divided among a group of "squirrels," humans tend to miss areas of images and show cognitive fatigue.

The ideal solution is an AI system that scans the entire image, prioritises images that have the strongest signs of victims, and highlights the area of the image for a responder to inspect. It could also decide whether the location should be flagged for special attention by search-and-rescue crews. Where AI falls short While this seems to be a perfect opportunity for computer vision and machine learning, modern systems have a high error rate.

(The Conversation)

DECCAN Chronicle

18 JULY 2025

Subhani

Shukla impact on youth, science, policy will echo

A Group Captain Shubhanishu Shukla emerged from the spacecraft Grace after his successful 18-day mission to the International Space Station (ISS), he became far more than just India's first space traveller in four decades. He emerged as the new face of India's space ambition and became an inspiration for children and students.

Shukla's space voyage marks a significant turning point in India's space journey, which began in 1984 with Rakesh Sharma's flight into space aboard the Soviet Union's Soyuz spacecraft. However, the current space journey is qualitatively different from the 1984 mission, as Shukla represents a new India that has emerged as one of the major global powers.

India's partnership with Axiom Mission 4 is crucial, as it prepared Shukla to lead the country's human space mission, Gaganyaan, in 2027. The experience gained through Shukla's training with Nasa and SpaceX, including real-time crew-ground coordination and the endurance of the physiological effects of spaceflight, has equipped Indian agencies with insights that would have otherwise taken years to accumulate.

Apart from helping India gain real-time knowledge about space voyages, Shukla's mission may well serve as a psychological booster for new generations to take up careers in science and technology.

His images and videos from the ISS could serve as an inspiration for lakhs of young minds in India. At several schools across the country, space clubs were formed, and science teachers reportedly discussed microgravity, which was one of the subjects Shukla experimented on at the ISS. The ripple effect is undeniable: India's next generation is now dreaming not just of becoming engineers or doctors, but astronauts, astrophysicists and space entrepreneurs as well.

With Beijing having bigger plans for space, India cannot remain uninterested, both for the sake of its youth as well as for accessing the best technologies in the world. Even if a fraction of the students this mission chose space sciences or space entrepreneurship, India's future as a leading space power will be much more secure.

A successful space mission, while enhancing India's global standing, could also help the country perfect several military technologies, which are widely used in space missions.

The dual-use technologies involved in the mission could be applied in secure military communication, navigation, remote sensing, border surveillance, defence gear, HVAC systems, protective clothing and electronics cooling, submarines, heat-resistant lightweight microgravity shields, SIT from trade aviation, robotic arms, military drones, bomb disposal robots, military surveillance equipment, and defence command systems, among others.

The space mission could also equip India, which houses a sixth of the world's population, with several technologies that could improve its healthcare, agriculture as well as industry. An example of an exclusive military product that runs the whole world now is ARPANET, which is known as the Internet today.

Shukla's space mission will also contribute to India building its own space station by the 2030s and achieving a moon landing by 2040. His mission may have lasted just 18 days in orbit, but its impact on Indian youth, science and policy will echo for years to come. While Shukla has just returned to Earth, India's space ambitions have achieved the true liftoff.

Learn to respect different views

You don't need him; you need a dictionary," the Supreme Court's curt reminder to the special investigation team (SIT) of the Haryana police, formed on its orders to investigate two cases against a professor of Ashoka University, points to the way the law and power are being abused by the State. It is also a reflection on how they harass citizens and seek to strip them of their fundamental rights, including their right to speech and expression. The SC's intervention, surely, is a step towards expanding the scope of the probe and calling the teacher for a fifth time in the name of investigations is, indeed, a welcome step.

The two FIRs filed against the academic were based on two Facebook posts he had written referring to Operation Sindoor. The court ordered the setting up of the SIT comprising senior IPS officers "to understand the complexity and for proper appreciation of the language used in the post". After two months, the court found the SIT was misdirecting itself and seizing devices the academic used apart from questioning him over his foreign trips. The court refused to buy into the argument suggesting that it is the prerogative of the investigating officer to decide on the mode of investigation, and insisted that its scope was limited to ascertaining the contents of his two social media posts only.

There was no doubt India was attacked by Pakistan-based terrorists and that the country had every right to retaliate but that does not mean that no citizen can share their opinion on the matter. Such an opinion may or may not be palatable to the powers-that-be even and may or may not fit into the government's narrative; but the government still cannot take away the agency of the citizen at will. And if it does, such a repressive can't call itself a democracy. The apex court must see to it that attempts to muzzle a citizen are not welcomed in this country. Moreover, it must ensure that the institutions of the government have no overbearing power to harass anybody under the guise of conducting investigations. Free will is a sign of a healthy democracy, and the government must learn to live with its critics and dissenters.

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Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu

Top secretaries do not retire, they just acquire some new roles

There was a time when "superannuation" meant something. Now it's just the date you pencil in until the next extension arrives. Union home secretary Govind Mohan is the latest to join the Great Indian Extension Club. He was due to retire in September 2025. Not anymore. He's now staying on until August 2026. Or later.

It's all very smooth and above board. The appointment committee of the Cabinet signs off, the paperwork proceeds, and another top officer avoids the retirement ritual. Extensions have now become more routine than retirements. The Cabinet secretary lives on an annual renewal plan. Ravi Singh of RAW, sadly, wasn't so lucky. Parag Jain in RAW made it in time, thankfully.

Similarly, across states, it's become a proud tradition. In West Bengal, chief secretaries rarely retire. They just acquire more titles. Others? Not so fortunate.

This brings us to an uncomfortable question. What about all the highly capable officers waiting their turn? It's hard not to feel for them — the ones who played by the book, ticked all the boxes, and still didn't make it. Maybe they were too junior by a month. Or too distant from Delhi. Or just unlucky.

Meanwhile, the extended family of babus marches on. Retirement is for the lesser mortals.

THE SOFT POWER OF COACHING

It was only a matter of time before the parallel universe of IAS coaching centres collided messily with the real world of judicial process. Dr Vikas Divyakirti, the founder of Drishat IAS, has trained thousands to clear the world's most grueling civil services exam. Now he now finds himself learning the hard way about due process. From the other side of the table.

An Alpana court has taken cognisance of a defamation complaint against him for remarks allegedly disparaging the judiciary in a video. It is a classroom-style monologue comparing judges and babus. Perhaps his tone was flippant, but it proved to be a tripwire for legal action.

Most know Drishat as a civil services production factory. Its founder isn't merely a teacher; he's a philosopher-king for lakhs of hopefuls. Coaching gurus like him are unofficial institution-builders. They shape attitudes, internalise hierarchies, and, as this case shows, occasionally overstep.

Dr Divyakirti may not hold a post, but his cultural capital runs deep. His words carry further than some government circulars. And when you're indirectly influencing the next generation of district collectors, it pays to measure your metaphors.

So, while the court decides the legal merits, the larger takeaway is clear: in the bureaucratic food chain, even the feeders must mind their diet. What's said in jest in a classroom can echo dangerously in a courtroom. When perception is policy, that's a lesson worth filing away.

HOW GOVT PREFERS NUCLEAR FAMILIES

There are few things in life more complex than Indian family trees, except, perhaps, government rules trying to keep up with them. Enter the department of personnel & training (DoPT), which has just updated its Leave Travel Concession (LTC) guidelines with the kind of bureaucratic poetry only sarkari memos can deliver. A fresh July 4 circular clarifying who counts as "family" for LTC purposes. And tucked away in the officialise is a gem: "Not more than one wife."

You read that right. While listing those

excluded from LTC benefits — parents-in-law, grandchildren of estranged daughters, and even grandparents — the circular slips in a little marital limit. Let's leap to conclusions, this isn't some bold new policy. It's a reiteration, a clarification, a tightening of screws in response to RTIs and complaints about who's eligible to tag along on sarkari-sponsored vacations. But the phrasing is classic bureaucracy-meets-blunt-truth.

It also inadvertently opens a window into the complex web of personal laws, family arrangements, and the Centre's cautious dance around them. India allows for plural marriage under certain religious laws, but the state? The state prefers its travel parties nuclear, thank you very much. Humour aside, this is part of a larger challenge: Our rules often lag behind the reality of modern relationships. Live-in partners, step-parents, blended families — none of them sit neatly inside Rule 4 of the CCS (LTC) Rules, 1988.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the babu guarantee and Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com.

LETTERS UNBECOMING ACT

It is surprising that several people in India want the family of the victim to pardon Nimisha Priya who in spite of being a nurse with a heart full of compassion not only murdered her business partner but also indulged in bizarre acts of dismembering, mutilating and hiding the body. Expecting the kin of the victim to accept 'blood money' is ridiculous considering the brutality of the crime and mental torture of the family. The victim Talal Abdo Mahdi may have been swindled, abused, coerced and tortured the nurse physically or mentally as is being alleged, but a gruesome act is not the answer.

M.C. VIJAY SHANKAR
Chennai

AIADMK-BJP ALLIANCE

Edappadi K Palaniswami's recent statements that his word would be final in the AIADMK front in Tamil Nadu and his party will secure a single-party majority in the 2026 assembly elections in TN are understandable, given the BJP's interest in the coalition government. If the AIADMK alliance wins the polls, it's certain that the BJP will insist on a coalition government. It's better to clear the air before the elections. With anti-incumbency and other factors weighing against the ruling government, the AIADMK may have an edge over the DMK, though the elections are almost nine months away.

S. Sankaranarayanan
Chennai

GIVE HEALTH FOOD TO THE POOR

With reference to your report that Parliamentarians will be given ragi millet idli, jowar upma, moong dal chilla and grilled fish with vegetables as per a new health menu. The plan is to serve up a plateful of nutrition for the lawmakers, officials and visitors to the temple of democracy, as they do work long hours. Though we do appreciate their concern to be healthy to serve the people, ironically none of them do attend even 25% of Parliament sessions, which sees regular washouts due the walkout or boycott by opposition parties.

N. Mahadevan
Chennai

Mail your letters to chennai@deccanmail.com



Orbiting Earth in the spaceship. I saw how beautiful our planet is. People, let us preserve and increase this beauty, not destroy it

Yati Gagarin
newindianexpress.com

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

— Ramnath Goenka

TREAT BALASORE TRAGEDY AS A NIRBHAYA MOMENT TO MAKE EDUCATION SAFER

A sexually-harassed 20-year-old driven to immolate herself on her college campus is not just one shocking tragedy—it's a damning indictment of the country's educational system, where the supposed protector of ten turns predator. Look at the larger canvas beyond Balasore, and you will find such abominable acts happening at some of the nation's elite institutes, too. According to the government's submission in parliament, between 2019 and 2023, top-tier institutions such as IIMs, IITs, central universities and National Institutes of Technology reported 666 cases of sexual harassment lodged by students, faculty and non-faculty members. These are only the cases reported to the Union government; as the Odisha example shows, not all institutes submit such annual reports. And all this happened despite the existence of stringent laws against sexual harassment at workplace and the University Grants Commission's well-laid norms. The National Education Policy of 2020, too, makes a strong pitch for enforcing all anti-harassment rules. However, the rampant nature of such crimes across the country is a telling commentary on how ineffectively educational institutions and governments have acted on this front. In 2024, the Delhi High Court underlined the disgusting nature of the beast—the abuse of power by a teacher—in the case of a professor who was forced to retire after sexual harassment charges.

The FM Autonomous College incident must jolt the collective conscience of India. With the student, what also went up in flames was the most sacred thread of the fabric of gurushishya tradition, the trust and respect that Bharatiyata espouses as a core value system. An eroding bond between the student and the teacher is a dangerous sign. It's also a wake-up call to put a stop to the perversion that has permeated our educational institutions—from elementary schools to top-notch post-graduate management institutes. The political slugfest over the current incident must go beyond politicisation of the issue; it must address the elephant in the room—how to root out a malaise that poses an existential threat to students. A healthy and safe social, physical and psychological environment is every student's fundamental right, which the current framework is failing to deliver. The Balasore tragedy is a crying call for an urgent national discourse and a sincere policy dialogue. It must be treated as the Nirbhaya moment for the country's education system.

EXPLORE ALL AVENUES TO SAVE NIMISHA PRIYA

THE people of Kerala are anxiously watching the developments in Northern Yemen that will decide the fate of Nimisha Priya, an Indian nurse sentenced to death for murdering her business partner, a Yemeni national, in 2017. Yemen's Supreme Judicial Council dismissed her appeal against the execution order in November 2023. In 2024, the country's president approved the order. The execution, which was scheduled for July 16, has been temporarily halted at the request of religious scholars.

It was the intervention of Indian Grand Mufti Sheikh Aboobacker Ahmed, popularly known as Kathanparam A P Aboobacker Musliyar, that kindled hopes for the beleaguered Kerala woman. He stepped in when all diplomatic and informal efforts to save Nimisha reached a dead end. The central government recently admitted to the Supreme Court that it felt helpless in the case, citing its limited diplomatic clout in Yemen. Reports indicate that the relatives of Aboobacker Ahmed, the murdered Yemeni national, are not ready to pardon Nimisha. Yet, Islamic scholars are continuing their efforts to persuade the family to show mercy by invoking the provision of blood money in Sharia law.

Though it is not yet clear whether Kathanparam's efforts will bear fruit, the Islamic scholar's gesture has won many hearts in the country. Kathanparam said that his plea to Sheikh Habib Umar bin Hafiz, his Sufi friend in Yemen, to initiate dialogue with the victim's family was a humanitarian gesture. Despite his partial success in bringing about the temporary halt, some unfortunate developments unfolded in Kerala while the deliberations with Talal's family were progressing. Save Nimisha Priya International Action Council was constrained to come up with a statement asking the public to remain calm and stay away from provocative debates on social media. What prompted the council was the desperate and deplorable attempts by some elements to ridicule the efforts undertaken by Nimisha's pardon. These posts were translated in Arabic and circulated in Yemen, triggering protests in the country.

It's no secret that many people have ideological, sectarian differences with Kathanparam and Habib Umar. But this is not an opportunity to settle old scores, because what is at stake is a precious life. The Indian government must not spare any effort to save Nimisha and must be willing to rely on all those who can contribute towards achieving that goal.

QUICK TAKE

CHOPPERS ON THE BLOCK

A part from campaigning politicians and those ill in remote places, pilgrims form the biggest market for India's civilian helicopters. Chopper travel is a fast-growing market expected to be worth more than \$1 billion by 2030. So, the death of at least 13 people over just 40 days in May and June on the Char Dham trail should worry everyone. The predictable reasons include ageing fleets, too few maintenance operators, and overworked pilots. Add the lack of adequate air traffic control and weather stations in hilly areas—and you have a deadly cocktail. The government needs to take a hard, close look at this segment of the aviation industry, too.

THE global consulting business, worth \$250-300 billion, is dominated by the Big 4 audit firms plus McKinsey, BCG and Bain. Let's call them the Big 7. While the balance sheets of these firms are opaque, estimates suggest that their revenue from consulting (excluding audit) in India alone is to the tune of \$5-6 billion and is growing rapidly. Even though a lot of public attention is focused on the audit business, the consulting business is a factor of magnitude larger.

Interestingly, this is an industry where Indians thrive worldwide, including in the Big 7. Yet, there are no large Indian consultancies that can rival the Big 7. Here, we explore the factors that constrain the emergence of large Indian consultancies to compete globally. Quite apart from the economic case, this is also a national security issue. If all expertise is outsourced, the dependence can be weaponised. In 2023, for instance, it was reported that a Big 7 firm leaked confidential Australian government information to US companies, leading to multiple investigations.

The current framework in India has three constraints that perpetuate the dominance of the Big 7. The first set of challenges relate to government contracts that account for 40 percent of the market. We found that restrictive clauses prevent domestic firms from meeting the eligibility criteria. Excessive balance-sheet thresholds, for example, prevent domestic firms from even competing. Consider a January 2025 request for proposal worth ₹1.3 crore from the industries and mines department of a state government to hire management consultants. Its pre-qualification criteria required a consulting revenue of ₹21-50 crore over the last three years, between 200-300 consultants on the payroll, plus experience of having done at least five government projects worth over ₹5 crore (almost four times the project value). Such conditions make it very difficult for most Indian firms to qualify.

Another major issue is that the technical track record is evaluated at the firm level, and not the individual level. This benefits the incumbent Big 7 and not the individuals who worked on the projects. If the same people move to an Indian firm or start a firm of their own, their past credentials are not counted in evaluating technical expertise in bids for government contracts.

The government was aware of similar issues in the audit business. The prime minister exhorted Indian chartered accountants to build their own Big 4 firms in his July 2017 address to the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI).

India still depends on the global Big 7 of the lucrative consultancy business. That's because self-imposed curbs embedded in various professional rules stop our own talent from flourishing

TIME TO ENABLE INDIA'S OWN BIG 4 CONSULTANCIES



SANJEEV SANYAL
Member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister

APURV KUMAR MISHRA
Consultant to EAC PM

Then, in April 2021, the RBI issued a circular to diversify the auditing of financials, which led to significantly higher participation by Indian firms. However, similar efforts by the government to support domestic firms in consulting have had limited success. In 2017, the central government issued a Public Procurement (Preference to Make in India) Order, giving preference to local service providers. However, the definition of 'local content' in the order is so loose that the Big 7 qualify simply because they hire Indian staff or have Indian proxy firms.

The second structural constraint that holds back Indian consultancies is the lack of an enabling framework for multi-disciplinary partnerships (MDPs) that can match the full-service capabilities of foreign firms. The big obstacle to MDPs comes from professional regulatory bodies such as the ICAI, the Bar Council of India and the Institute of Actuaries, which either prohibit clubbing of Indian expertise or impose prohibitory restrictions that defeat the purpose.

For instance, the ICAI technically allowed MDPs in July 2021 under Regulation 53B of the Chartered Accountants Regulations, 1988. But the conditions are so stringent that virtually no MDP has emerged. Only six notified professions are allowed to become partners in an MDP, but it specifically excludes professionals such as MBAs, insolvency practitioners, IT and cybersecurity experts. Moreover, those not registered as chartered accountants are treated as second-class citizens by insisting that the firm names should end

F-35 WOES NO LONGER IN STEALTH MODE

FROM the moment a British F-35B made an emergency landing at the Thiruvananthapuram International Airport over a month ago, there has been a re-evaluation of the US-made 4.5-generation stealth fighter, and a silent but rolling global upset in the \$80.2-billion aerospace and defence industry.

This aerial sector in the international arms industry is estimated to hit \$75.5 billion by 2030—an increase by a quarter from now caused by military aircraft escalating performance by AI-enhanced design and the use of rare, exorbitantly-priced composite materials.

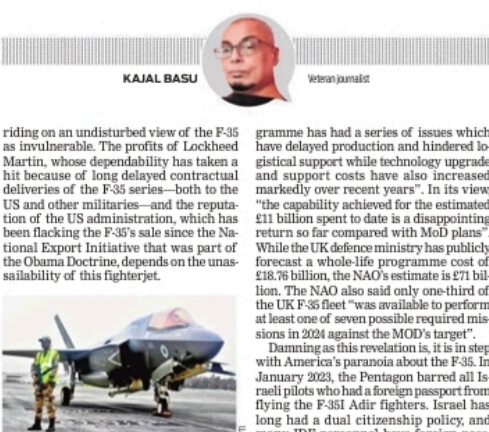
The F-35 is apparently at the very cutting edge of technology, although its abilities are reportedly in some fundamental aspects, more manufacturer-driven mystique than real. Nonetheless, it remains the most guarded piloted aerial weapon in existence. Its digitalisation and technology—all F-35 fuselages are assembled at a facility in California—shrouded in impenetrable American operational rights. In more ways than one, the jet is treated as an undeclared American national treasure.

And treasure means inaccessibility. This is what happened with the F-35B—the second-generation of F-35s—that plunked down on July 17 at Thiruvananthapuram. Initially, the British refused to let any Indian technician—or security personnel—approach it on the tarmac. This distancing continued for weeks while the southwest monsoon rains pelted down. The \$109-million aircraft just stood in the open until July 6 while the UK tried to fathom what had gone wrong, finally zeroing in on hydraulic failure.

It was eventually shifted to an isolated hangar. Twenty-four British personnel—14 technical experts from the Royal Air Force (RAF) and 10 ground crew—are now trying to repair the breach, so to speak. Hydraulics, however, seems to be one of the more minor issues besetting the aircraft. There are reports that, after a month of trying to 'fix the fubared' (to employ military colloquialism), the technicians might have to dismantle it and cart it off in a giant C-17 Globemaster military transport plane.

There are no CCTV in the hangar or outside. Discussions between the repair facility and F-35B's primary operating base at RAF Marham in Norfolk, England are carried out on unsecured satellite communication. There are no Indian personnel anywhere in the vicinity.

None of this is going well for the credibility of the F-35. There is a lot in the US



KAJAL BASU

Veteran journalist

riding on an undisturbed view of the F-35 as invulnerable. The profits of Lockheed Martin, whose dependability has taken a hit because of long delayed contractual deliveries of the F-35 series—both to the US and other militaries—and the reputation of the US administration, which has been backing the F-35's sale since the National Export Initiative that was part of the Obama Doctrine, depends on the unsalability of this fighterjet.

But this might already have been in question. The 'stealth' British F-35, reportedly on a routine flight outside the Indian Air Defence Identification Zone, was tracked by India's Integrated Air Command and Control System—despite being 'invisible' to radar. This is also because, as Navy Look-out, an independent Royal Navy news and analysis platform, reported, 'The Aircraft Signature Assessment Facility needed to verify and maintain the aircraft's stealth characteristics, was originally due in 2021 but will not be available until the 2030s.'

So badly is the UK hamstringing that, in a July 11 report titled 'The UK's F-35 capability', its independent National Audit Office (NAO) headed by the Comptroller and Auditor General said the F-35 'global pro-

gramme has had a series of issues which have delayed production and hindered logistical support while technology upgrade and support costs have also increased markedly over recent years'. In its view, 'the capability achieved for the estimated £11 billion spent to date is a disappointing return so far compared with MoD plans'. While the UK defence ministry has publicly forecast a whole-life programme cost of £18.7 billion, the NAO's estimate is £71 billion. The NAO also said only one-third of the UK F-35 fleet 'was available to perform at least one of seven possible required missions in 2024 against the MoD's target'.

Damning as this revelation is, it is in step with America's paranoia about the F-35. In January 2023, the Pentagon barred all Israeli pilots who had a foreign passport from flying the F-35I Adir fighters. Israel has long had a dual citizenship policy, and many IDF personnel have foreign passports. (A Shiluv/panel survey in 2016 for the Channel 2 news channel found 17 percent of Israelis with foreign passports—and, surprisingly, 56 percent desiring one.)

Included in the US's stipulation was that all F-35s ground crew—avionics technicians, weapons loaders, fuellers, maintenance personnel (in charge of electricals, hydraulics, engines, airframes), emergency responders, etc.—also hold only an Israeli passport.

The degree of paranoia is mindboggling. It imagines, first, that only 'pure' Israelis should be allowed to fly the F-35, even though some of the first pilots in the Israeli Air Force, which was founded in 1948, were foreign volunteers. In any case, the force today has only a tiny handful of pilots with dual citizenship—and none among the 400 reservist pilots, 300 of who are fighter pilots. The US directive taints those with a second passport as insufficiently—indeed, questionably—patriotic. And the Netanyahu-led Israeli government, as Netanyahu is it is possible for a state to be, wholeheartedly agrees.

The US essentially laid down the law for a sovereign country. This is the aircraft that President Donald Trump was pushing India to buy in March. Imagine the stipulations that he can lay down for India.

(Views are personal)
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MAIL BAG

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Chinese détente

Ref: Jaishankar in China: A recalibration for regional stability (Jul 17). Stable bilateral relations with China can only be built on mutual respect, sensitivity, trust and understanding. China also needs to emphasise zero tolerance towards terrorism, abandoning its expansionist policies and resolving the border disputes with India.

Nablit Panigrahi, Rayagada

Inspiring words

Ref: Being 'saare jahaan se achchhi' in space too (Jul 17). Shubhashankar Shukla has truly echoed the golden words in their glory and spirit. This phrase, as said by Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma, has inspired countless Indians and boosted their morale to conquer heights.

Jayashree Thampi, Thiruvananthapuram

Diplomacy overhaul

Ref: New foreign policy for a new world (Jul 17). To unpredictable and abrupt transition, the administration of the Trump 2.0 presidency has strained the multi-polarity equilibrium, challenging India's ability to remain equidistant from competing global powers. As the geopolitical landscape shifts toward greater polarisation, India must reassess its foreign policy tools, ensuring strategic autonomy while building resilient partnerships.

Narayanan Kizhupanday, Thiruv

Bihar decisions

Ref: Last grasp of Mandal messiahs (Jul 17). Though the huge youth population may be the deciding factor in forming the next government in Bihar, there stands the obvious confusion among the voters over the identity politics of the Mandal messiahs.

R Pichumani, Thanejavur

Tariff bullying

Ref: Don't let it again in India deal (Jul 17). Donald Trump's statement over sealing a trade deal with India is a brazen attempt to make unilateral decisions by a global bully which merits no response and concurrence. The US under Trump is no longer the nation it once was.

George Jacob, Kochi

ST rapped

Ref: 'ST misdirected itself' in Ashoka prof case, says SC (Jul 17). The SC deservingly got an earful from the Supreme Court. The investigating style amounted to beating about the bush and barking up the wrong tree. The SIT's whole intention was to keep the powers that be in good humour.

C G Kurukote, Ernakulam