



Trade shocker

November's low tally scuppers expectations of goods exports recovery

This October's foreign trade numbers had offered a sliver of hope for India's generally weak export story over the past couple of years, as goods exports grew at a 28-month high pace of 17.2%. Any prospects of a sustained turnaround with better global demand for this Christmas season, have, however, come undone with November's trade estimates released on Monday. In a double whammy of sorts, not only did the value of outbound shipments sink to the lowest in a little over two years at just \$32.1 billion but the import bill also hit a record high of \$70 billion, rising 27% year-on-year which is the fastest uptick in more than two years as well. Relative to October, goods exports were 18.1% lower. Three of the last four months have now clocked record-breaking import bills, with \$64.3 billion in August and \$66.3 billion in October. As in August, November's import bill spike was led by gold imports that jumped 331.5% from last November to a whopping \$14.9 billion. Overall gold imports are now up 49% this year, and while higher prices and seasonal spikes for the festive and wedding season explain some of the uptick, this warrants some examination, especially as exports of gems and jewellery are sputtering, including in the employment-intensive businesses such as diamond polishing and gold ornaments. Gems and jewellery exports are down 10.2% between April and November, while imports have widened over 30%, with November seeing a record high deficit of \$14.4 billion in the segment.

The overall gap in merchandise trade also expanded to a fresh high of \$37.8 billion in November, perhaps the first time that the deficit is higher than the export tally. Apart from precious metals, petroleum also played a key part in this widening, with exports halving to \$3.7 billion while imports rose 7.9% to \$16.1 billion. Officials have sought to downplay concerns by linking the export slump to lower oil prices, but the same should also hold true for imports. It may well be that the discount gains on Russian oil India had capitalised on to ramp up its exports, are fading, and domestic demand is stronger than before, but economists are a tad puzzled at this phenomenon of recent months. The Commerce Ministry top brass has often argued that rising import bills are not a worry because India is growing faster than the world, much of the imports are directly correlated to, or are inputs for exported goods, and non-oil exports that are rising should remain the focus. But oil and jewellery remain among India's top tradables, and policymakers must glean a better sense of the dynamics behind this tumult, even if they are unfazed by the expanding trade deficit.

More of the same

India and Sri Lanka need to go beyond stated positions to take ties forward

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's visit to India, also his first overseas trip in keeping with tradition, marks a continuity in India-Sri Lanka bilateral relations. The joint statement, after his meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, covered aspects similar to the one subsequent to the visit of his predecessor, Ranil Wickremesinghe, in 2023. Mr. Dissanayake's assurance that Sri Lanka will not permit its territory to be used in any manner inimical to India's security and regional stability, on the face of it, appears to be a reiteration of Colombo's long-standing position, but it was significant in view of a perception that Mr. Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is a Left-leaning pro-China party. India viewed his observation as one that could have a bearing on the clearance for Chinese ships visiting Sri Lanka in the light of the Wickremesinghe government's one-year moratorium (after India's concerns) on all "foreign research vessels" visits ending next month. In the last 10 years or so, the frequent presence of Chinese ships became the main irritant in bilateral ties. It remains to be seen how far the dispensation will be sensitive to India's concerns – the Wickremesinghe's regime took a stand about six months ago that it "cannot only block China".

That the statements of the two leaders or the joint statement did not touch upon the status of projects by the Adani Group was expected. The joint statement talked of India's commitment to help Sri Lanka in areas such as agriculture and the digital economy. The proposal to have a joint working group on agriculture is a welcome development. There was a mention of the proposed Economic and Technological Cooperation Agreement – 14 rounds of negotiations have been held so far. On the fisheries dispute, the two sides apparently stuck to their stated positions but Colombo should help facilitate an early meeting between the fishermen's associations in both countries. More importantly, there seems to be a nuanced shift, going by the English version of Mr. Modi's statement at the joint press conference. There is no reference to the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, which envisages a measure of autonomy to Provincial Councils, despite Mr. Modi covering matters such as reconciliation, the need for Sri Lanka fulfilling its commitments towards "fully implementing" its Constitution and conducting Provincial Council polls. The JVP ran a virulent campaign against the Amendment, an outcome of the 1987 India-Sri Lanka Accord. As the coalition that Mr. Dissanayake heads secured a massive mandate across the country in the November 14 parliamentary election, he is in a comfortable position to show a new direction to ties with India. It is an opportunity for both countries to resolve their differences.

The legal gaps in India's unregulated AI surveillance

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In 2019, the Indian government made headlines by announcing its intention to create the world's largest facial recognition system for policing. Over the next five years, this ambition has materialised with Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered surveillance systems being deployed across railway stations and the Delhi Police preparing to use AI for crime patrols. The latest plans include launching 50 AI-powered satellites, further intensifying India's surveillance infrastructure.

While technological integration in law enforcement is commendable, it raises substantial legal and constitutional concerns. The use of AI for surveillance has global parallels, often resulting in "dragnet surveillance", a term that refers to indiscriminate data collection beyond just suspects or criminals. As observed with Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) in the United States, even well-intended surveillance laws can result in overreach, infringing on citizens' rights.

This article explores the legal frameworks, gaps, and concerns surrounding AI surveillance in India and how they intersect with constitutional rights, particularly the right to privacy.

The Telangana Police data breach earlier this year revealed deep-rooted concerns about the data collection practices of Indian law enforcement agencies. According to reports, Hyderabad police had access to databases from social welfare schemes, including "Samagra Vedika", raising questions about the scope of data being collected and the lack of transparency regarding its use.

Lack of proportional safeguards

While data-driven governance offers solutions for public welfare and crime prevention, these practices must be measured against the individual's right to privacy, as guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court of India, in *K.S. Puttaswamy vs Union of India* (2017), recognised privacy as a fundamental right, extending its scope to "informational privacy". The judgment emphasised that the era of "ubiquitous dataveillance" brings challenges that must be addressed through robust legal frameworks. However, the extent of surveillance infrastructure in India currently lacks proportional safeguards, leading to legitimate concerns about the implications of AI-driven data collection.

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA), passed in 2023, was meant to provide a framework for managing consent and ensuring accountability for data privacy in India. However, the law has been heavily criticised for broad exemptions that grant the government unchecked power to process personal data.

For instance, Section 7(g) of the DPDPA waives

the need for consent when processing data for medical treatment during an epidemic. Section 7(f) further exempts the government from consent requirements for processing data related to employment, a particularly concerning clause given that the government is India's largest employer. These exemptions raise red flags about the potential for misuse, especially when applied to AI-powered surveillance technologies that operate on vast quantities of personal data.

Moreover, the DPDPA introduces obligations for citizens that could further exacerbate privacy concerns. Section 15(c) mandates that citizens not to suppress any material information when submitting personal data. This provision, while intended to ensure data accuracy, could lead to punitive measures for something as simple as an outdated address or technical error in data collection systems.

In short, the DPDPA places heightened scrutiny on individual data while offering the government broad leeway in its use and collection. Given the profound implications of AI technologies in processing sensitive personal information, the legal framework appears unbalanced, skewed in favour of state surveillance over individual rights.

The approach in the West

India is not alone in grappling with AI and its impact on civil liberties. The European Union (EU) has enacted regulations that could serve as a useful guide for India. The EU's Artificial Intelligence Act takes a risk-based approach to AI activities, categorising them into unacceptable, high, transparency, and minimal risk levels. Unacceptable risk activities, such as real-time remote biometric identification for law enforcement, are prohibited under EU law unless exceptions apply, such as searching for victims of serious crimes or responding to imminent threats. In stark contrast, India has begun deploying AI-powered facial recognition technology and CCTV surveillance in public spaces with little to no legislative debate or risk assessment. For example, Delhi and Hyderabad have integrated AI into policing without any publicly available guidelines on how data is collected, processed, or stored, or how potential abuses of the technology will be prevented.

As of now, AI remains largely unregulated in India. In 2022, the government promised that AI technologies would be regulated under the upcoming Digital India Act, but draft legislation has yet to materialise. This regulatory void leaves citizens vulnerable to the risks associated with AI-powered surveillance, including the infringement of privacy, discrimination, and data breaches.

Countries such as the United States and members of the European Union have already begun to legislate on the use of AI in public

systems, with clear categorisations and restrictions for technologies that could pose a significant threat to civil liberties. The absence of a similar legal framework in India is troubling, especially given the government's ambitious plans to expand surveillance capabilities.

At its core, the debate over AI surveillance in India touches on fundamental constitutional questions. The right to privacy, as enshrined in Article 21, and the principle of proportionality, as outlined in the Puttaswamy judgment, demand that any intrusion into personal data be backed by law, pursue legitimate aims, and be proportionate to the goal pursued. However, the existing surveillance framework, bolstered by AI technologies, appears to stretch these principles to their limits.

Address the impact on civil liberties

It is not the use of AI in governance itself that is problematic, but rather its unchecked application without sufficient safeguards. A comprehensive regulatory framework that addresses AI's implications for civil liberties is urgently needed.

It would help protect public interest in consonance with the 'Right to Privacy' if such a framework includes provisions for transparent data collection practices, where it is publicly disclosed, what data is being collected, for what purpose, and how long it will be stored. Furthermore, the framework must ensure consent gathering mechanisms have narrow and specific exemptions for processing data with independent and effective judicial oversight. This will not only ensure transparency in consent gathering but also safeguard the constitutionality of such applications of AI-based data processing. In this context, India could benefit from adopting a risk-based regulatory approach, such as the EU's, which categorises AI activities based on the risks they pose to citizens' rights.

India is at a crucial juncture in deploying AI-powered surveillance. While integrating advanced technologies in law enforcement and governance offers immense potential, it must be balanced against citizens' constitutional rights. Policy decisions that embed privacy measures into infrastructure before deployment, with inherent safeguards in surveillance protocols, are vital. Consent mechanisms, transparency reports, and judicial oversight at relevant stages of data collection and management can avoid costly retrofits and retraining.

Though the DPDPA Act addresses some issues, criticisms persist, and the long-awaited DPDPA Rules remain unnotified. To mitigate risks from AI-driven surveillance, regulating "high-risk activities" through restrictions on digital personal data processing and transparent auditor oversight of data sharing is crucial. A proactive regulatory approach will ensure AI serves public interest without compromising civil liberties.

Stuck in the classroom — students, teachers, NEP 2020

Indian students in Higher Education (HE) are spending considerably more time in the classroom than their European Union (EU) and North American counterparts. Yet, they remain at risk of being relatively undereducated. There are primarily two reasons: higher proportion of teaching time in course credits and higher number of courses a semester under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

A contrast and the academic impact

An average student in a university in the EU or North America takes approximately four courses a semester with a maximum of three hours of lectures a course a week. This brings the total classroom time to a maximum of 12 hours a week. On the other hand, Indian students enrolled in the new four-year undergraduate programmes in Indian universities must take five courses a semester with four hours of lectures a course a week. This amounts to 20 hours of classroom time a week. These extra eight hours in the classroom do not leave much time for essential academic activities outside the classroom such as self-study, reading, or working on assignments, most likely leading to exhaustion and reduced learning.

A casualty of this increased classroom time is the number of assessments that are actually feasible in a course. In the earlier version of the choice-based credit system in the three-year undergraduate programme, where students took only four courses a semester, there was relatively more scope for continuous assessment. Now, with increased classroom time, students find it difficult to work on anything more than two assessments a course. This could impact the diversity of assessments, privileging multiple choice questions-based assessments that are easily graded via phone apps over assessments such as a term paper or a reflective essay that



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Increased classroom time runs the risk of students becoming passive recipients, affecting the vision of the NEP 2020

requires more time and effort from students.

Thus, increased classroom time risks incentivising rote learning and perpetuating the school dynamics where teachers are owners of knowledge and students are passive recipients. At least at the university level, students need to be pushed to own their learning. This is possible only if they are allowed time to reflect, plan, and execute their learning, explore learning outside the classroom individually and with peers scaffolded by assignments such as reflective essays, group projects, and cross-disciplinary problem solving.

The subject of continuous assessment

Addressing this reduction in the number of possible assessments is important because NEP 2020 lays emphasis on continuous assessment. In this system, the final grade can be aggregated from three or four assessment components spread over the semester. Such a system provides an opportunity to design a mix of low and high stakes assessments, incentivising continuous effort and learning, rather than cramming up before one or two examinations. Continuous assessment allows considerable flexibility for faculty to tailor assessment frequency and type to meet the learning outcomes of their courses. It is also a way to receive continuous feedback for faculty to adjust teaching strategy and for the students to adjust self-study strategies.

The increased classroom time impacts the quality of teaching as well. The extra eight-hour a week in the classroom for Indian teachers eats into the time available for research, course revisions, development of new courses, and cross-disciplinary collaborations. This negatively affects the quality and currentness of teaching. The classroom time of two to three hours a course a week in the EU and North American universities, with a total teaching load of two to

three courses a semester brings the average weekly classroom teaching load of a typical university teacher in these countries to nine hours. In contrast to this, an average Indian faculty is expected to teach 14-16 hours a week, with time spent in the classroom varying from eight-16 hours depending on how flexible the institutional administration is in interpreting University Grants Commission guidelines.

The centres of learning

Teaching a course as per the vision of the NEP 2020 includes designing the course, selection of reading materials, development and administration of assessments, as well as grading. This is in complete contrast to the earlier model where teachers were responsible mostly for classroom lectures with assessment and grading taken care of centrally by the affiliating university. The elite central universities, Indian Institutes of Technology, and the Indian Institutes of Management could be an exception to this with possibly fewer than eight hours a week in classroom teaching a faculty along with substantially higher resources. But it is important to note that the bulk of teaching and learning in India happens in public universities and colleges, and not in these elite institutions.

Thus, to realise the vision of the NEP 2020 fully, a serious reconsideration of the number of courses and classroom time a course in the new four-year undergraduate programmes across India is necessary. Doing so will improve the teaching and learning outcomes for Indian students putting them on a par with their global counterparts. It will also get students out of the habit of rote learning, improve their self-learning skills, and ensure their readiness for further higher-level educational pursuits.

Inputs by Devayini Thirball, an educational researcher

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Business in Upper House

Eminent personalities and educationists in public life are among those Members who occupy the seats in the Rajya Sabha. But even the proceedings in this House are dismal. Of late, one is witness to uproarious scenes and frequent violations of constitutional values, so much so that its democratic functioning is flouted with ease and without compunction. It is

time that the Members of the Upper House also realise that they are accountable and engage in constructive debate.
N. Visweswaran,
Chennai

Another angle

As a regular train traveller, I would like to raise another very visible, yet blatantly ignored, fallout of the electrification of certain railway lines: the mindless

destruction of greenery that was the hallmark of certain stations (Editorial page, "The hidden cost of greenwashing the Indian Railways", December 17). With deep pain, I highlight the total desecration of the enchanting tree-lined railway stations on the Shoranur-Nilambur railway route in Kerala, in 2024. In the name of electrification. As a septuagenarian, whose mother hailed from a village

near Cherukara railway station, I have always chosen to travel on this route quite regularly on my visits from the Himalayan Arunachal. All these stations had century-old trees (Several YouTube vloggers had showered praise on these scenic stations). But, in February 2024, I received the shock of my life to find the total destruction of every single tree on the platforms of the stations

between Shoranur and Cherukara. I learnt that all this was for electrification. It was even more distressing to have this happen in a State that won worldwide appreciation for saving the Silent Valley forests in the 1970s. Such trees are national wealth but the Railway authorities or their mindless contractors think otherwise.
Sathyaranayan Mundayoor,
Lohit, Anusachi Pradesh

Ustad Zakir Hussain

The reports (Inside pages, December 17), on tabla maestro Zakir Hussain, brought out almost every aspect of his great life. Readers must be reminded about how he composed music for the Malayalam classic, *Vanaprastham*.
V.J. Sreekumar,
Coimbatore

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

The challenge of universal health coverage

The ongoing national conversation on what India needs to do for universal health coverage (UHC) often misses the complexity of multiple health systems and the unique challenges they bring. Almost every health system type that is seen globally is present in different parts of India. Sometimes, more than one type can be seen within the same State.

Government expenditure (per capita) on healthcare, for example, varies significantly from State to State. Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu spend ₹3,829, ₹2,590, and ₹2,039, respectively, while Uttar Pradesh and Bihar spend only ₹951 and ₹701, respectively (National Health Accounts – Estimates for India 2019-20).

West Bengal, a predominantly rural State, has a low fertility rate at 1.64, but it also has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates (16%). This is very different from other States with low fertility, such as Kerala and Himachal Pradesh, where teenage pregnancy rates are 2.4% and 3.4%, respectively (National Family Health Survey-5, 2019-2021). A UHC plan for States must be developed considering these very different realities.

Not the solution
Government health expenditure in West Bengal, which was ₹1,346 per capita in 2019-20, is only about 61% of the estimated ₹2,205 (research-based and inflation-adjusted) required to offer UHC. This number compares with a similarly populated State such as Madhya Pradesh where government health expenditure is ₹1,249 per capita.

Growing government health expenditure is good but may not solve the problem. West Bengal's government health expenditure has been growing at 11% per annum over the last few years and, at this rate, could grow to fully meet the funds estimated to be required for UHC by 2030. However, the State's out-of-pocket expenditure was high at 67% in



Divyuti Sen
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2019-20 and had only reduced by 2.3% from the previous years (National Health Accounts – Estimates for India 2019-20). The story is no different in Andhra Pradesh, which saw a 3% increase in per capita government health expenditure in 2019-20 from the previous years, but had a high out-of-pocket expenditure of 64% (National Health Accounts – Estimates for India 2019-20).

Deeper challenges

Thus, increasing government health expenditure does not appear to be working to contain a key issue relating to the health burden on citizens. This suggests that there are deeper design challenges with the health system. Without addressing these, increased government expenditure on health may do little to reduce out-of-pocket expenditure rates. The implications of this are significant. Out-of-pocket expenditure already accounts for a majority of health spending in most of the States. A paper published recently (Sangar et al. 2018) noted that out-of-pocket expenditure accounted for more than 50% of health spending not just in poor States such as Jharkhand, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh, but also in comparatively prosperous States such as Kerala and Punjab, which have strong healthcare systems.

In the case of West Bengal, high C-section rates even within the public sector strongly indicate that there is an adequate supply of public sector hospitals at which free care can be offered. This negates the need and relevance of the State's Swasthya Sahi scheme, which is intended to allow patients to seek care in private hospitals using the government's limited tax resources. It is designed to compensate for a deficiency in the supply of government hospitals.

On the other hand, that there is a significant share of adults with high blood sugar rates across West Bengal, relative to the rest of the country; and also relatively low

rates of hypertension in the State suggests high rates of genetically inherited insulin insufficiency, which needs to be addressed with urgency in primary care settings. Similar trends are observed in Bihar and Gujarat, which also have high blood sugar levels and relatively lower hypertension rates, in contrast to Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana, where both conditions are prevalent. This necessitates tailored health system strategies and region-specific public health messaging to address the varying trends in non-communicable diseases across different areas.

Data also show that while there is an income gradient, even the very poor in West Bengal have high blood sugar rates. It is clear from the high blood sugar rates that the current, largely out-of-pocket expenditure-driven health system design cannot address this challenge and that a much more proactive approach needs to be taken at the primary care level. However, with a 58% shortfall in primary health centres and health and wellness centres, the primary healthcare system in the State faces challenges in meeting the healthcare needs of its population; this needs to be addressed urgently.

A mosaic of challenges

The data here illustrate how healthcare is an interconnected system that presents a complex mosaic of challenges and opportunities. These cannot be addressed by blanket solutions that are unimindful of the uniqueness of the local area health profile, and its deeper relations to history, culture, and ways of working. Thus, leverage points vary and blunt instruments or even throwing resources can have little impact and, in some cases, make the situation worse. A holistic approach is essential, integrating public health initiatives, regional policy adaptations, and climate resilience, to build a robust and equitable healthcare system.

A universal health coverage plan in India must be developed considering the very different realities in each State

Failing PDS beneficiaries in Odisha

Digitalisation is not the panacea for making social policy effective

STATE OF PLAY

Subhankar Nayak



In November, three women died after consuming gruel made of mango kernel in Kandhamal district of Odisha. The tragedy has brought issues surrounding the implementation of the National Food Security Act, 2013, in the State into the limelight. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Odisha is facing criticism for stalling the public distribution system (PDS) on technical grounds, leading to deprivation among marginalised communities.

In 2001 too, 24 Adivasis lost their lives in Rayagada district due to the same reason. The fact that hunger deaths are re-emerging in Odisha after more than two decades is telling.

Mandipanka village in Kandhamal, where the recent tragedy took place, is dominated by the Kandha Adivasi community. The area is plagued by poverty and deprivation with limited welfare interventions. The inhabitants primarily depend on agriculture and forest produce to eke out a living. Many men from the village also migrate to other States for employment. During the monsoon, starting from July, as livelihood options come down, people in Mandipanka, as in other remote areas of Odisha with Adivasi populations, become dependent on the PDS apart from traditional food that is stockpiled during the summer months. Traditional food items, such as gruel made from mango kernel, are consumed by Adivasis in this region during times of acute food shortage. Sometimes, due to improper storage, food items that are preserved for months become toxic for

consumption.

After the BJP government took charge in June, it decided to further digitise PDS. This included making e-KYC mandatory for PDS beneficiaries, which led to delays in distribution. The people of Mandipanka claimed that they had not received their PDS rice for three months. With no other life support system and out of hunger, some families began preparing gruel from mango kernels to eat with some stored fermented rice. Unfortunately, according to officials, the food was fungus-infected. Three women died while receiving treatment.

According to statements of Odisha ministers and the district administration, the victims are to blame for their food practices and improper storage. This is despite findings that acute hunger among the Adivasis in this region compels them to resort to substitute food such as mango kernels gruel.

It is also concerning that all those who had consumed the infected gruel were women. In rural belts, women often eat inferior food within the family, due to prevailing sociocultural factors; this affects nutrition. The absence of a focused policy intervention for women in this district is particularly concerning, as about 49% of women in the age group of 15-49 years in Kandhamal are anaemic. Strengthening the capacities of women self-help groups and community health cadres to improve public service delivery, especially in such marginalised areas, could go a long way in enhancing the agency of women in managing their nutrition.

Notably, Odisha was one of the early reformers of PDS. It brought in multiple measures to minimise leakage and expand coverage. However, distribution in the most remote areas remains a significant challenge. In the case of Mandipanka, beneficiaries had to travel up to 10 kilometres to collect their PDS rice and it took a tragedy for the administration to finally set up a PDS sub-centre near the village.

Timely supply of PDS food items is critical in these regions where people depend on them as their primary source of nutrition. Furthermore, the policy decision mandating that phone numbers be linked with Aadhaar for accessing welfare measures is made with the assumption that all beneficiaries have mobile phones. Many remote areas such as Mandipanka do not even have cellular coverage.

The tragedy should serve as a cautionary lesson for policymakers while making changes to critical welfare policies, as temporary withdrawal of State welfare schemes can cost lives. The idea that digitalisation is the panacea for making social policy effective is flawed. Further, we need to move beyond a one-size-fits-all policy approach in key service deliveries, such as PDS. Interventions in marginalised areas require tailored approaches and regular feedback from the ground.

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China is world's largest debt collector

The country is majority responsible for the rapid rise in external debt in many countries in the last 20 years

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Over 25% of the world's bilateral external debt was owed to China by the end of 2023, making the country the leading debt collector. Two decades ago, the country rarely lent money; Japan lent the highest amount, followed by Germany, France, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Further, over the last two decades, when China's external lending increased massively, the amount of bilateral external debt owed by countries surged exponentially too. In other words, China is majority responsible for the rapid rise in external debt in many countries in the last 20 years.

Bilateral external debt is a country's debt to foreign governments. In this analysis, only bilateral debt is considered and not debt owed to agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and bondholders.

Chart 1 shows the bilateral external debt stocks owed to all countries and to China specifically over time. It also shows (in %) China's share in the total bilateral external debt stock owed. External debt stock is the debt owed by a country to non-residents repayable in currency, goods, or services. It is the sum of all public, publicly guaranteed, and private non-guaranteed long-term debt and short-term debt.

The external debt stock owed to all countries increased from \$49.5 billion to \$741.4 billion between 1973 and 2023. The external debt stock owed to China increased from \$1 billion to \$193.1 billion in the same period. In percentage terms, the share of debt owed to China remained around the 1% mark until 2003, surged to 16.6% by 2013, and to 26% by 2023.

Chart 2 shows the share of external debt stock owed to top lenders in the 1973 to 2023 period. By

the end of 1973 and 1983, the U.S. was the top lender. The U.S. was later surpassed by Japan, which remained the top lender by the end of 1993, 2003, and 2013. External debt stock owed to the U.S. drastically reduced from 36% in 1973 to just 4% in 2023. Notably, by the end of 2023, the Netherlands was the third biggest lender after China and Japan.

Chart 3 shows the external debt owed by all countries to China in absolute terms and percentage terms. For instance, Pakistan owed \$22 billion to China by the end of 2023, which is close to 60% of all the bilateral debt owed by the country. The farther a nation is to the right, the higher the share of its bilateral debt owed to China by 2023. The bigger the size of the bubble, the higher the debt owed to China in absolute terms.

Notably, many countries to which China loaned money were either in a financial crisis which then worsened or later descended into a financial crisis. For instance, Laos, one of the poorest nations in Asia, owed \$6 billion to China in 2023, which was over 75% of its bilateral external debt. The nation's economic situation turned difficult with persistent high inflation, currency depreciation, and slow growth. In 2021, China opened a high-speed rail line with Laos as a part of its Belt and Road initiative.

Angola, the second largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, owed \$17 billion to China, which was about 58% of its external debt. In fact, 16 sub-Saharan nations owe over 50% of their external debt to China. According to the *New York Times*, 15 of the 19 cobalt-producing mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo were owned or financed by Chinese firms. The nation owes 88% of its bilateral debt to China.

Sri Lanka, which owes \$8 billion to China, about 50% of its bilateral debt, was struggling to repay its debt and handed over the major port of Hambantota to China in 2017.

Debt trap diplomacy?

The data for the charts was sourced from the International Debt Report 2024. The report was released recently by the World Bank.

In this analysis, only bilateral debt is considered and not debt owed to agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and bondholders. Bilateral external debt is a country's debt to foreign governments

Chart 1: Bilateral external debt owed to all countries and to China over time

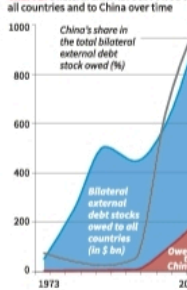


Chart 2: The chart shows the share of external debt stock owed to top lenders in the 1973 to 2023 period. The wider the stream, the higher the amount owed to the corresponding country in that year. Each stream represents a country

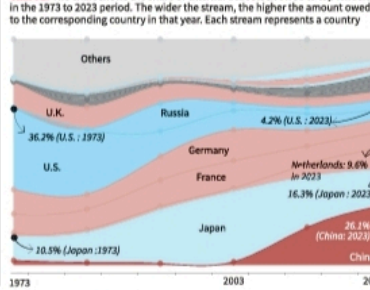
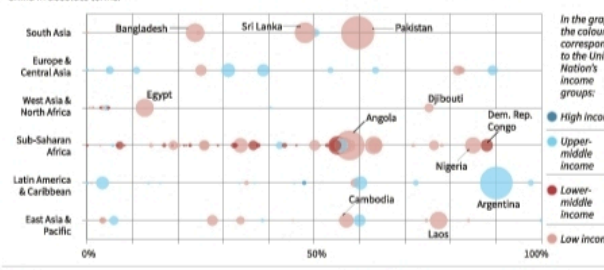


Chart 3: Chart shows the external debt owed by all countries to China in absolute terms and percentage terms. The farther a nation is to the right, the higher the share of its bilateral debt owed to China by 2023. The larger the bubble, the higher the debt owed to China in absolute terms.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindustan

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 18, 1974

Indo-Bangla trade to be in free currency

New Delhi, Dec. 17: Trade transactions between India and Bangladesh will in future be in freely convertible currencies instead of rupee as at present.

This is one of the important features of the protocol to the existing trade agreement, finalised after a two-day meeting at the ministerial-level between the two countries.

The protocol was signed to-day by Mr. D.P. Chattopadhyaya, Commerce Minister, and Mr. K. Mushtaq Ahmed, Foreign Trade Minister of Bangladesh.

At one stage during the talks it appeared that no agreement would be possible, but the two sides sat till mid-night yesterday to reach agreement on the main issue of changing the basis of trade and payment from rupee to free currency.

After the signing ceremony, Mr. Chattopadhyaya told newsmen that experience had shown that trade in free currency would be more useful and beneficial in the long run than trade on rupee payment basis. This, he said, was clear from the example of Indo-Yugoslav trade which was changed into free currency a few years ago. Mr. Chattopadhyaya said that payment in free currency acted as a booster and gave fillip for developing trade.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 18, 1924

Autonomy for the provinces

The "Observers" support: A "New Empire" special cable from London on December 14 states that the "Observer" supports Lord Willingdon's proposals formulated at the recent meeting at the Royal Colonial Institute suggesting a wider devolution from Whitehall to Simla and Delhi and from the Central Government to the Provinces, no change at present in the Constitution of the Central Government but immediate advance towards responsible Government in the Provinces. The "Observer" thinks no more practical method than that proposed by Lord Willingdon has been suggested of simplifying the Indian Reforms without contracting them or of fixing responsibility in the new conditions.

Concurrent debates

Simultaneous elections need careful consideration

On Tuesday, the Union government introduced in the Lok Sabha the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill to enable simultaneous elections to the House of the People (Lok Sabha) and the state Assemblies. A separate Bill was also introduced to enable simultaneous elections in the Union Territories with Assemblies. As expected, the Opposition, led by the Congress, weighed in against the proposed amendments, largely on the grounds that they violated the basic-structure doctrine of the Constitution and were beyond the legislative competence of the House. The Opposition also raised other objections such as additional powers envisioned in the Bill for the Election Commission of India. Since constitutional amendments require a special majority in both Houses of Parliament, all proposed provisions are expected to be discussed in detail. The Bill is expected to be referred to a joint parliamentary committee.

The idea of holding simultaneous elections is not new for India. In fact, elections for many years after independence were held simultaneously. The cycle was disturbed after Assemblies were prematurely dissolved, starting in the late 1960s, largely for political reasons. Various bodies, including the Law Commission, have suggested going back to synchronised elections. More recently, a high-level committee under the chairmanship of former President Ram Nath Kovind unanimously endorsed the idea and recommended the way forward, which is reflected in the Bill introduced. In principle, it makes sense to conduct simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the Assemblies. Besides the expenditure incurred by both the Indian state and political parties during elections, there is a broader policy dimension that needs attention. Once elections are done and governments are formed at both Union and state levels, political parties can get back to governance and policy issues. Given the competitive nature of politics, which is a great strength of India, the conduct of political parties on both sides of the aisle is often determined by impending state elections. Further, the technical analysis presented by the Kovind committee showed that growth, inflation, investment, and public expenditure outcomes tend to be better following simultaneous elections.

However, the way envisaged for simultaneous elections needs to be debated. It will also be important to consider the unintended consequences of making the proposed amendments to the Constitution. The Bill, for instance, proposes that the five years from the first meeting of the Lok Sabha will be referred to as the full term of the House. If the House is dissolved before the completion of the full term, the period between the date of dissolution and five years from the date of the first sitting will be termed the unexpired term. A new House will be constituted after elections only for the unexpired term of the immediately preceding House.

Theoretically, if the House is dissolved four years after the first sitting, the new House will be constituted only for a year. Given that the electoral process takes time, the term of the House may potentially be less than a year. Such outcomes might influence the choices of political parties. It is possible that, hypothetically, the Opposition may not bring a motion of no confidence after a certain point during the term of the House. Consequently, a government may stay unchanged even after evidently losing the confidence of the House. A similar thing can happen in states as well. Besides, the possibility of two or more elections to the Lok Sabha or Assemblies within five years in the case of dissolutions somewhat weakens the economic argument for simultaneous elections. Parliament will need to debate all such possibilities.

Sri Lanka reset

President's visit points to positive first steps

Sri Lanka's newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's choice of India for his first overseas visit signals a positive dynamic in ties between the two countries. Mr Dissanayake, who heads the Marxist-leaning Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the senior partner in the ruling National People's Power coalition, was seen as ideologically leaning towards China. Beijing already wields considerable power over the island-nation's political economy as its biggest bilateral lender and a top source of foreign direct investment. At the same time, the JVP has been anti-Indian, having led the opposition, often violent, to Indian intervention in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s after accords saw the introduction of Indian soldiers in the Sri Lankan civil war with the Tamil separatists. With the emergence of China's aggressive Mission Indian Ocean, which targets India, New Delhi's concerns had multiplied. On Monday, statements from Mr Dissanayake assured India that he would not allow Sri Lankan territory to be used in a way that would be detrimental to India's interests. This was reflected in an embolism joint statement that spoke of the two countries' shared security interests and the need for regular dialogue based on mutual trust and transparency.

These assurances are significant in the context of China's presence in Hambantota port, which it has leased for 99 years after Sri Lanka defaulted on a loan for the development of the port. Located in southern Sri Lanka, Hambantota is the country's second-largest deepwater port, just 535 nautical miles from Chennai. China's presence here is considered an example of how Beijing uses loans to build a strategic presence. The menacing potential of this presence was demonstrated in 2022, when a Chinese satellite- and missile-tracking ship docked there. On Monday, India's foreign secretary clarified that Mr Dissanayake's statement could be an indicator of Sri Lanka's clearance for foreign research vessels docking at its ports, on which Colombo had imposed a moratorium since January this year. Mr Dissanayake's statement, therefore, is seen as a strong signal that his regime would play, at the very least, a pragmatic geo-strategic balancing act. His inclination for doing so may be rooted in gratitude for India's help in riding out its economic crisis with \$4 billion worth of aid and support towards securing a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). More assistance has been discussed for infrastructure projects such as railway signalling systems and energy projects to rebuild its shattered economy.

Some issues remain to be sorted. Among them is the long-standing 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, devolving some powers to the Tamil provinces, which the JVP had fiercely opposed in 1987. It is possible that relations between Mr Dissanayake's party and the Tamil minorities may have changed, given that the east and north also voted in large numbers for his coalition. Also hanging fire is the possible cancellation, which he had promised, on environmental grounds of an Adani wind-power project. It is worth noting that this is Mr Dissanayake's second visit to India in 10 months. Though Indo-Sri Lankan relations look set to revert to a mutually beneficial template, much will depend on how successfully Mr Dissanayake negotiates his country's IMF and bondholder obligations with his welfarist pop promises and fashions his relations with China, the country's largest creditor.

China prepares for Trump

With tariff war set to intensify, China shifts focus to the Global South, increasing competition for India

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



China's annual Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC), usually held at the end of each year, is eagerly awaited as it indicates how the Chinese leadership is assessing the country's economic performance over the past year and how it proposes to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

This year, the CEWC met on December 11 and 12 under the shadow of the incoming Trump administration in the US. It was preceded by a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which decided on the message to convey regarding the health of the economy and the policy directions for the future. The CEWC elaborates on these, but as in the past, there were no specifics. While the report of the conference mentioned an adverse international economic environment, it made no reference to the potential risks posed by a tariff-wielding Trump in the White House.

When contrasted with the proceedings of the CEWC meeting of 2023, the following points are noteworthy.

One, recognising the seriousness of the persistent slowdown of the Chinese economy, with stagnant domestic demand and worsening external economic headwinds, the leadership has opted for a more expansive economic stimulus. Its earlier stress on "prudent monetary policy" and on "targeted intervention than sweeping change" has now been replaced by a "moderately loose monetary policy" overall.

This means lower interest and mortgage rates, lower bank repo rates and larger issue of long-term treasury bonds. This terminology was last used during the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-08, when China had unleashed a stimulus package of nearly \$600 billion, then seen as massive, to rescue the economy. But while the previous stimulus was mainly focused on infrastructure investment, the

current package is targeted towards raising domestic demand and consumption expenditure.

Two, China has been very conservative in its fiscal policy, and has strictly followed an informal limit of 3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on fiscal deficits. For the first time in recent years, a rise in fiscal deficit is being embraced. There are reports that a 4 per cent deficit is likely in 2025.

Three, despite these more ambitious stimulus measures, the technology-driven "high-quality" growth model that is associated with President Xi Jinping has been reaffirmed at the meeting. Industrial policy will continue to promote a "new type of industrialisation", focusing on the digital economy and artificial intelligence-led growth.

Four, in 2023, the CEWC had stressed "prioritising development before addressing problems". While economic growth remains the "top priority", now there must be a "balance between the pace and quality of development." Bottom line: Xi Jinping is willing to sacrifice higher growth rates in the short term while developing the new, high-tech-driven sectors of the economy.

There is a notable omission of any reference to Mr Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from the report. Chinese worries over risks posed by Mr Trump to its economic health were, however, front and centre in a meeting on December 10 that Mr Xi had with heads of 10 international economic organisations, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Brics Development Bank, and the Asian Development Bank, among others. At this meeting, Mr Xi drew pointed attention to the adverse international economic situation, saying that "with the acceleration of unprecedented global transformation, the world has entered a new period of turbulence and change and once again come to

critical crossroads." He expressed confidence that China would meet its growth target of 5 per cent and continue to contribute 30 per cent of global GDP growth, as in the past several years.

He also mentioned the BRI as a major contribution by China to the development of the Global South and sought the partnership of international economic organisations in taking it forward. He made specific reference to China's relations with the US, expressing readiness to engage in a dialogue, manage differences and cooperate to advance mutual benefit. But he also rejected the American "small yard, high fences" strategy, warning that tariff, trade and tech wars would "produce no winners". There was a veiled threat of Chinese retaliation, a readiness to "resolutely safeguard its sovereignty, security and development interests."

If Mr Trump remains undeterred and follows through on his tariff war, what will be China's options? Very few in the short run as China remains joined at the hip with the US and with Western economies (Europe and Japan) in general. In the medium to long term, there will be a pronounced shift towards other trade and investment destinations, in particular Southeast Asia, the Gulf, Africa and Latin America. This diversification is already taking place. Latin America has supplanted the US as the chief source of soybeans and other agricultural products.

The Global South is coming into prominence as a preferred economic and commercial partner. There will be direct tit-for-tat retaliation against punitive trade measures. China has already halted the export of rare metals such as gallium to the US, which is heavily dependent on China for these metals used in batteries and computers. China has opened an investigation against chip maker Nvidia in an alleged anti-trust violation. At the same time, it has conveyed its willingness to significantly increase its imports of US oil and gas in a future trade deal.

China is not only looking at the Global South as geopolitical ballast but also increasingly as a trade and investment partner. The BRI will continue to be an important lever in this respect. India will confront even more fierce political and economic competition with China in the constituency of developing countries. This re-orientation of China's strategic direction should be factored into our own calculations.

With respect to the US, Europe and Japan, India has so far not been able to take advantage of the shifts that are taking place in global supply chains and investment flows away from China. There are voices, especially from our own corporate sector, arguing that we may gain more from the impending shift that China is making, away from its current heavy reliance on the US and Western markets. China is encouraging such thinking. This is a complex issue and requires very careful examination before we are once again faced with a *fait accompli* fashioned elsewhere.

The author is a former foreign secretary

A parallel media ecosystem

Trinayani (Zee Telugu) protects her family with her powers to see the future. Phulki (Zee Bangla) dreams of being a boxer. Bhabhiji (from Bhabhiji Ghar Pe Hain on And TV) is a funny, small-town woman. And from And TV is a funny, small-town woman. And from And TV is a funny, small-town woman.

Earlier this year, Zee launched Diffeuser. The initiative tells advertisers that characters like Trinayani or Phulki are better influencers than some internet celebrity. Its pitch — these characters have a unique connect with audiences in small towns thanks to their presence in homes every night. Marico, Birla Opus, Pineflex, and L'Oréal, among others, agree. Their products now feature in reels with Bhabhiji and others on Instagram.

Think of Zee as part of a circle that houses the mainstream media with its professionally created programmes and films. In another circle sit Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and the sea of user-generated videos featuring everything from cats and dogs to reels.

Diffeusers sit at the intersection of these two circles. This column is not about Diffeusers. That is just one, random, example. It is about the creation of that Venn space where mainstream and user-generated content intersect — and about the speed at which Zee, JioStar, Sony or others are able to expand it. That will determine the course of the battle between mainstream media and tech-media giants. Here's the context.

For almost four years now, a parallel media ecosystem has been rising. It comprises 3.5 to 5 million influencers, two large media-tech platforms (Google and Meta) and a bevy of digital agencies. In 2023, advertisers spent \$5,700 crore, or about 10 per cent of their digital advertising budget, on influencers.

That figure has been growing by double digits every year.

"An influencer is someone who has access to an audience and the power to affect their purchasing decisions or opinions about a product, service, brand or experience, because of the influencer's authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with their audience," defines the Advertising Standards Council of India. Think of Virat Kohli having funny chats with his *namd* in Gujarat and slipping in a brand into the conversation. The influencer is the media now.

This "user-generated content" world is one that is dominated by two of the largest media players in the world — the \$306 billion Google and the \$335 billion Meta. This is true for India too. Meta with Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook, and YouTube from Google reach almost all the 523 million Indians browsing online. India has one of the highest social media penetration in the world (92.6 per cent), according to a Comscore report. Indians spend about 22 hours a month browsing through Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and other apps. Of all the things they watch, media and entertainment content drives highest engagement at 39 per cent; influencer content comes second at 27 per cent. Engagement — defined by likes, reposts, comments and shares, not reach — is the metric that drives revenues in this world. Google and Meta, which get over three-fourths of digital advertising spends, increasingly depend on audiences from social media for a large chunk of their growth.

Then, there is the world of mainstream media. Television reaches 900 million of us in an array of languages. Films populate every aspect of entertainment from music and TV to streaming and theatres. A Zee or a Star television in professionally created and curated films, shows and series that take months

and years to write and make. Their strength lies in their ability to keep audiences coming back every day with an algorithm (like Netflix or SonyLiv does) or without one (like Zee's linear channels do). To reach this steady TV audience, advertisers pay two-thirds the ad rates they would for streaming video. Many big streaming apps come from media firms — Disney+Hotstar, SonyLiv and Zee5, for example.

However, nowhere in the world is a media company better able to combine the reach of TV with online video to reframe the conversation. This is where the Venn diagram comes in. It is about using a format that the tech giants have used to disrupt consumption — shorts and influencers — with the creative chutzpah of mainstream. On Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and X, the shorts, video or text, generated by professionals or regular media firms, do better. Short clips from Sony's *Kapil Sharma Show*, BBC's *Graham Norton Show*, Shah Rukh Khan's *Jawan*, CBS's *The Big Bang Theory* make a large chunk of the audience scrolling.

Cosmocre salman Khan, Sara Ali Khan and Ram Charan as the top three "influencers" on Instagram, X and Facebook in September 2024 in India. Across the board, brands use influencers like a Bhuvan Bam or Kusha Kapila as the second or third rung of their strategy. The first rung is always a celebrity that has been created outside the Internet, through mainstream media. Shakti Mohan, a dancer and TV personality, is also an influencer who promotes to display how flexible *Pepe jeans* are. But it is film star Kriti Sanon (*Himml*, *Bareilly Ki Barfi*) who serves as the brand's global ambassador.

Diffeusers and similar initiatives in the making bring the two ecosystems closer — one for characters and stories, its hold over audiences across big and small-town India — into the Google/Meta territory. The social media and influencer boom has so far benefited only two firms. Time to spread the spoils a bit.

<https://cx.com/vanitikohli>

MEDIASCOPE

VANITA KOHLI-KHANDEKAR

content drives highest engagement at 39 per cent; influencer content comes second at 27 per cent. Engagement — defined by likes, reposts, comments and shares, not reach — is the metric that drives revenues in this world. Google and Meta, which get over three-fourths of digital advertising spends, increasingly depend on audiences from social media for a large chunk of their growth.

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Life in a migrants' Eden



BOOK REVIEW

SAURABH SHARMA

In his 2004 article titled "Cities: An Anthropological Perspective" for the journal *Anthropology Matters*, Andrew Irving, professor of anthropology at the University of Manchester, notes that a "city does not exist in an individual's mind or 'out there' as an objective physical landscape but as a collective entity that gathers people's emotions and memories, mixes them with architecture and elicits distinctive practices and ways of being. Or put another way the city is not simply architecture alone, but a curious melding of 'flesh and stone'."

These qualities are precisely what

Chitvan Gill documents and investigates in her book *Dreaming a Paradise: Migrations and the Story of Buland Masjid*.

Ms Gill is a Delhi-based writer, filmmaker and documentary photographer. In this book, she meticulously — and often poetically — offers her readers an oral history of Buland Masjid (one of 1,797 unauthorised colonies in Delhi) in nine brief chapters together with arresting pictures from the area. She also offers insights into the personal histories of people migrating for livelihood. Alongside, she depicts the cartography of the hate that's engulfing the country and tells the untold story of how people who were made to feel unwelcome still end up giving back to the city. She writes, "Expulsion and eviction... these themes suffuse the human narrative, right from the earliest epochs." The book is peppered with these struggles.

"Each dripping fetid mass is a new city, an Eden built by those who have endured migrations through hell. They

redefine and reshape paradise on earth to a modern incarnation. In one such Eden, Buland Masjid, we hear the story of the men who walked all the way to this bleak and hostile place of land, to create a place they could eventually call home," writes Ms Gill in the Prologue before introducing Buland Masjid's principal architect, Allama Maqsood.

Maqsood "spat in the face of destiny" and built a home for himself and others. Ms Gill notes how people in the colony continue to reverse him, remembering his "sacrifice" to get basic resources for the colony. The semantics of this word often signal that a personal narrative of Maqsood's struggles will follow. But Ms Gill attempts to unravel the colony's history through Maqsood — a memory flashes in front of him, and he begins to tell her that what he can't forget is the "violence of words." Other hardships, it seems, were part of the process to build this paradise. What hurt Maqsood most was being spat upon and being asked, "Tum Musalman hain? (Are you a Muslim?), as if he were a lesser human,

Despite everything, he persevered to gain legitimacy for Buland Masjid's residents.

Ms Gill also shares the efforts of Haji Aneesud Din towards helping people with access that can be related to Buland Masjid only with the help of a political party. Haji's story from riches to rags is eye-inspiring. However, as Maqsood observes: This city is filled with stories of such people. The common thing between these people is that they were co-opted into their purpose. They wanted to survive. Most such stories, however, are that of men. Ms Gill doesn't fail to acknowledge this. She writes, "Women are to be seen everywhere, but their stories, narratives, get overwritten by the sales of triumph and survival." That is why she also shares the journeys of Krishna Devi, Nafisa, Shahana, and Naseeba. Their enterprising efforts and resilience in the face of adversity are compelling.

Then, Ms Gill reflects on how the

east side of the capital, "Jamnapaar," (trans-Yamuna) is perceived. She remembers what a police officer once said: "Most of East Delhi is full of criminals from parts of Uttar Pradesh who find refuge here. Totally counterproductive. Such contradictory viewpoints enable the othering of people; Buland Masjid is just a symbol of such othering."

Although there's harmony among people of different religious groups in the Buland Masjid, Ms Gill rightly notes that within this space of equanimity, "each is 'the other', separated by the rampant fault lines of belief, culture, the long-festering wounds of history. Here, within this secular edifice of the idea of 'one nation, one community, one bloodline that runs across this country.' The recent incident of communal violence in Sambhal in Uttar Pradesh is one example. One other such hint is the principal of the municipal school in the Buland Masjid noting how several

students "leave to study in the local madrassas" because the mad medium of instruction is Hindi. This dropout in itself is a kind of migration. With the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights' call to stop funding madrassas, one can only hope for the better education of these students' next migration.

But most of all, by telling the story of this "unauthorised" colony, Ms Gill is asking questions of the authorities: "What aspect of planning fits in with the total collapse of an agrarian economy and urban economies that have no machinery to absorb and support that an employed urban workforce? What vision of justice can reconcile with the reality and degradation of the thousands of Buland Masjid across India?"

For its masterly narration, eloquent prose, and engaging political discourse, *Dreaming a Paradise* is one of the finest works that explores the confluence of "flesh and stone." It is a must-read and asks existential questions that concern and confront each one of us.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based queer writer and freelance journalist. On X/Instagram: @writorty.life

Text & Context


THE  HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Underweight children registered in M.P's Anganwadi centres

5.41 In lakh. The State government informed the legislative Assembly that at least 5.41 lakh underweight children were enrolled at Anganwadi centres in Madhya Pradesh this year, with Dhar district having the highest number. 35,950 children were registered in Dhar. 


Septic tank workers belonging to the SC category

67 In per cent. According to official data, over 67% of sewer and septic tank workers (SSWs) in India belong to the Scheduled Castes category. Union Minister of State Ramdas Athawale said that out of 54,574 validated sewer and septic tank workers, 37,060 are from the SC category. 


The death toll due to Cyclone Chido in Mozambique

34 At least 34 people have been killed by Cyclone Chido in Mozambique since it made landfall there, the UN humanitarian agency OCHA said on Tuesday, citing figures from the southern African country's disaster agency. The French island of Mayotte bore the brunt of the storm. 

Uttar Pradesh government's second supplementary Budget

17,865 In ₹ crore. The Uttar Pradesh government presented the second supplementary Budget for FY2024-25, amounting to ₹17,865 crore. The Budget was tabled on the second day of the winter session of the State Assembly. 

Magnitude of the earthquake recorded in Vanuatu

7.3 An earthquake with a 7.3 magnitude struck just off the coast of Vanuatu on Tuesday, causing widespread destruction in the South Pacific island as the injured began arriving at a hospital and unconfirmed reports of casualties emerged. 

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The Constitution on minority rights

The preservation of diversity is the rationale behind minority rights in the Indian Constitution. On Minority Rights Day, it is essential to remember Franklin Roosevelt's words, 'no democracy can long survive which does not accept as fundamental to its very existence the recognition of the rights of minorities'

LETTER & SPIRIT

Faizan Mustafa

The debate on minority rights should be lifted from its current framework of communalism versus secularism and placed in the theoretical field of democracy and substantive equality. Recognising the importance of minority rights, the UN General Assembly adopted a declaration on the 'Rights of Persons Belonging to National, or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities' on December 18, 1992. This date is celebrated as Minority Rights Day all over the world. Minority rights are essential in a democratic polity because as Franklin Roosevelt reminds us "no democracy can long survive which does not accept as fundamental to its very existence the recognition of the rights of minorities".

Origin of minority rights

Article 19 of the Austrian Constitutional Law (1867) acknowledged that ethnic minorities have an absolute right to maintain and develop their nationality and languages. Similar provisions were found in Hungary's Act XLIV of 1868, and in the Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 1874, which granted the three languages of the country equal rights in civil services, legislation and in courts. The provisions of the peace treaties after the First World War, focused particularly on the status of minorities. Minority protections were codified in the five treaties negotiated between the allied and associated powers on the one hand, and Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Greece and Yugoslavia on the other. Special provisions for minorities were incorporated in the peace treaties with Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey, while Albania, Finland and Iraq declared that they would protect their minorities. Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights gives every individual a right to community – that is the right to enjoy their own culture and to participate in cultural forums, associations etc.

Debate in the Constituent Assembly
The framers of the Constitution showed profound sensitivity to the needs of minorities. Pandit G.B. Pant, moving the resolution to set up an Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights and the Rights of Minorities, explicitly stated that the "satisfactory solution of questions pertaining to minorities will ensure the health, vitality and strength of the free State of India... now it is necessary that a new chapter should start and we should all realise our responsibility. Unless the minorities are fully satisfied, we cannot make progress; we cannot even maintain peace in an undisturbed manner." The committee headed by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel examined the issue of minority rights and accordingly Articles 25 to 30 were enacted in our Constitution. The underlying argument in these Articles is that individualistic universal rights are not of much use in a heterogeneous country such as India, and that one needs to have discussions on the basis of multiculturalism, difference, and the rights of minorities that mark contemporary political theory.

Rationale behind minority rights

The preservation of diversity is the rationale behind minority rights in the Indian Constitution. In fact, individualistic rights under Articles 14-18 (equality), 19 (free speech) and 25 (freedom of religion) are not enough for



Nation for all: A woman holds up a poster during a protest against the CAA during Republic Day at Shaheen Bagh, in New Delhi in 2020. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

the conservation of language, script or culture which comes under Article 29. One may not be individually unjustly treated but it hurts if the group to which one belongs is subjected to ridicule or denied any value. This also undermines an individual's right to dignity. An individual's right to culture holds little meaning or significance, unless the community of which a person is a member of, or is identified with, is accorded the right to exist in a viable form. It requires not only the presence of a group that shares a common culture but a conducive environment in which such cultures can flourish. Thus, under Article 30 both religious and linguistic minorities are allowed to establish and administer institutions of their choice so that such a space is created in these institutions. Recently, a seven judge Bench in *Aligarh Muslim University* (2024) in unequivocal terms described Article 30 as a 'fact of equality and non-discrimination'. A nine judge Bench in *St. Xavier's College Society* (1974) too had observed that "the whole object of conferring the right on minorities under Article 30 is to ensure that there will be equality between the majority and the minority. If the minorities do not have such special protection, they will be denied equality." In *Keshavananda Bharati* (1973), rights under Article 30 were held to be part of the basic structure which even Parliament cannot change through a constitutional amendment.

What are minority rights?

Interestingly, though the term 'minority' has been used in four places in the Constitution no definition of the term 'minority' has been given. The Supreme Court has consistently held that minorities are to be defined at the level of the State. Since Hindus are a religious minority in Punjab, Kashmir and in the northeastern States, they too are entitled to minority rights. There are hundreds of Hindu minority institutions in India.

Article 29(1) lays down that 'any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct

language script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same'. This provision signifies two vital dimensions. First, it concedes that different groups do have different cultures and that all people may not have just one culture. Since these linguistic and religious cultures are valuable for their members, they need to be given explicit rights to conserve their own culture especially since such minority cultures can face disadvantages in a majoritarian society. Secondly, the right to culture is an individualistic right, that is, individuals have been given the right to preserve their distinctive culture. Article 30 guarantees that all religious and linguistic minorities shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of 'their choice'. In the *re Kerala Education Bill* (1957), the Supreme Court said that the dominant word in Article 30 is 'choice' and minorities can expand their choice as much as they want. The court also said that the term 'educational institution' includes universities. The courts have also been consistent in extending protection under Article 30 to pre-Constitution institutions in cases like *S.K. Patro* (1969), *St. Stephens* (1992) and *Azeez Basha* (1967). In the latest judgment of *Aligarh Muslim University* (2024), the majority has held that even an institution of national importance can claim minority character.

Additionally, Article 350 A provides for instruction in the primary stages of education in the mother tongue, and Article 350 B for the appointment of a special officer for linguistic minorities. Their religion based personal laws have also been constitutionally protected, for example, the customary law of Nags. There is no religious qualification attached to the holding of high constitutional positions. There is also a National Commission for Minorities and a National Commission For Minority Educational Institutions to deal with the problems of minorities.

Defining a minority

The 11 judge Bench in the *TMA Pai Foundation* (2002) case had left

unanswered the question of the indicia of minority institutions. Former Chief Justice Dr D.Y. Chandrachud in a historic judgment in the *Aligarh Muslim University* (2024) case has now laid down the indicia.

Interestingly, on the issue of indicia there was broad agreement amongst the seven judges. They all preferred holistic, broad and flexible yardsticks such as ideology – looking at the genesis or ideology or brain behind the idea. Moreover, the person taking the initiative must belong to the minority community. His intent must be to found an institution 'predominantly for the minority community' and other factors to be considered would be the collection of funds, getting land, construction of buildings and governmental approvals. It is not necessary that the administration must be vested within the minorities themselves. Right to administer is the consequence of establishment.

Though there is no right to get governmental aid, Article 30(2) explicitly says that the State cannot discriminate against a minority institution while granting aid. In the *re Kerala Education Bill* (1957) case, Chief Justice S.R. Das held that the State cannot impose such 'onerous' conditions either in granting aid or in giving affiliation to minority institutions that require surrendering the minority character of their institutions.

Furthermore, the Supreme Court has consistently maintained that minorities have no right to maladminister their institutions, and that the government can come up with reasonable regulations to insist on proper safeguards against maladministration, to maintain fair standards of teaching, and to ensure "excellence of the institutions." In *St. Xavier's* (1974), the top court explicitly observed that "under the guise of exclusive right of management, minorities cannot decline to follow the general pattern. In fact, they may be compelled to keep in step with others."

Faizan Mustafa is a constitutional law expert and Vice-Chancellor of Chanakya National Law University, Patna.

THE GIST

Recognising the importance of minority rights, the UN General Assembly adopted a declaration on the 'Rights of Persons Belonging to National, or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities' on December 18, 1992.

Article 29(1) lays down that 'any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same'.

One may not be individually unjustly treated but it hurts if the group to which one belongs is subjected to ridicule or denied any value. This also undermines an individual's right to dignity.

LOKNITI-CSDS



Fully secure: EVMs and VVPATs kept in a storage room ahead of the vote counting for the Maharashtra Assembly elections, at a polling counting centre, in Akola on November 23. ANI

Are Congress's EVM allegations a legitimate concern or a strategic diversion?

It is important to note that the trust in Electronic Voting Machines has remained relatively steady over the past five years. In 2019, the then NES study indicated that over half the voters placed high trust in the machines, with nearly a quarter expressing moderate trust

Devesh Kumar
Sanjay Kumar

After the Maharashtra Assembly elections, the echoes of alleged Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) manipulation has once again reverberated through political spaces, particularly from the Congress party and its allies. This narrative of doubt had begun soon after Congress's unexpected loss in Haryana, bringing the EVMs under scrutiny.

The Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's strong demand to reintroduce ballot papers by replacing the EVM highlights a recurring scepticism about the established electoral process. While such concerns warrant attention, it is equally vital to evaluate the degree of public trust in EVMs and probe why such claims persistently surface.

Public confidence in EVMs

If EVMs were indeed vulnerable to manipulation, public opinion – would reflect such apprehensions. Understanding how much people trust EVMs provides crucial insights into whether voters feel their democratic rights are compromised. The National Election Study (NES) conducted by the Lokniti-CSDS earlier this year sheds light on this issue. In a survey across 21 States, the study revealed that a significant majority of voters expressed confidence in EVMs. Nearly one-third (31%) reported trusting the machines 'a lot', while another two-fifths (43%) said they 'somewhat' trusted them. This cumulative trust – approximately three-quarters of voters – indicates a strong vote of confidence in the EVM technology.

However, distrust lingers among a notable minority. Around one fifth (17%)

Trust in the machine

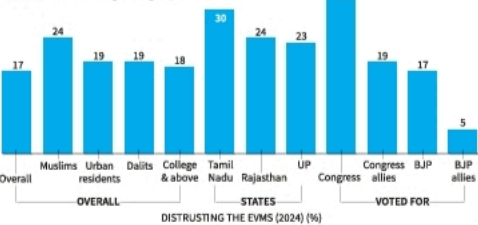
If EVMs were indeed vulnerable to manipulation, public opinion—the cornerstone of any democracy—would reflect such apprehensions. Understanding how much people trust EVMs provides crucial insights into whether voters feel their democratic rights are compromised

Table 1: Over two-thirds indicated trust in EVMs in the last two Lok Sabha elections (2024 & 2019)

Trust in EVMs	National Election Study 2024	National Election Study 2019
A lot of trust	31	52
Some trust*	43	26
Not much	-	8
No trust at all**	17	6

Note: The rest did not respond.

Table 2: Most distrusting social groups



of respondents stated they did not trust EVMs at all, a figure that merits attention. This scepticism was particularly pronounced among urban voters (19%), individuals with college degrees (18%), and marginalised groups such as Dalits (19%) and Muslims (23%). Furthermore, distrust peaked in some States as compared to others. This scepticism was observed the highest in Tamil Nadu (30%), Rajasthan (24%), and Uttar Pradesh (23%). These findings indicate the need for a focused electoral outreach, and confidence-building measures by the

Election Commission of India.

It is also important to note that the trust in EVMs has remained relatively steady over the past five years. In 2019, the then NES study indicated that over half the voters placed high trust in the machines, with nearly a quarter expressing moderate trust. While these proportions remain largely consistent in 2024, the share of those who distrust EVMs has risen slightly, from 14% in 2019 to 17% in 2024. This shift coincides with Congress's sustained narrative questioning EVMs, which seems to

resonate among its voter base. Among those expressing distrust, nearly one-third voted for Congress (35%) and another one-fifth (19%) voted for its allies (Table 1 & 2). This pattern suggests that EVM scepticism has become a political tool – a strategic plank for Opposition parties rather than a pressing concern for the Election Commission of India to resolve.

Broader implications

While Congress is entitled to question its electoral setbacks, as the principal Opposition party, it bears a greater responsibility to present credible alternatives to voters. Relying on EVM-related conspiracy theories as a 'primary' critique of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party not only undermines the integrity of democratic institutions but risks alienating voters seeking substantive changes in their lives and policy solutions. For instance, alleging that the BJP 'allowed' the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) to win in Jharkhand reflects a narrative that can not only be implausible but is also mean-spirited.

Instead of fixating on claims that have not yet been verified by the Election Commission of India, Congress must confront a larger question. Is the party genuinely offering a compelling vision for India, or is it merely evading the need for introspection by blaming its defeats on external factors? To make a strong comeback the party must craft a distinctive agenda capable of countering the BJP's ideological narrative that runs at a mega scale. Resorting to allegations of EVM manipulation without real-time, verifiable evidence risks eroding public confidence in India's electoral process.

Devesh Kumar is a researcher with Lokniti-CSDS. Sanjay Kumar is a professor with CSDS and a political commentator. Views expressed are personal.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"How was the party last night?"
"We had a good time till Suresh started throwing bones into the bonfire."
"Why did he do that?"
"He said he wanted to make a 'bonfire'.
"A bonfire! How interesting! Do you know that the word 'bonfire' was originally 'bonefire'?"
"Really? Why would anyone want to throw bones into a fire?"
"I'll tell you. The first syllable of 'bonefire' is actually from the middle English word 'bane' meaning 'bone'.
"O.K. But it still doesn't answer my question."
"Patience! Patience! You see, during the middle ages, the plague used to occur regularly in Europe."
"The plague? You mean the disease that killed hundreds of people."
"Not hundreds, but thousands and thousands of people. In order to prevent the disease from spreading, what people used to do was to throw the dead bodies into a fire."
"You mean they used to burn them?"
"Exactly. Big fires were made and the bodies were thrown into them. And these fires were called 'bonefires'.
"How terrible! So to begin with, the word 'bonfire' was not associated with anything pleasant."
"Definitely not. And it was to forget this unpleasant association with the word that over the years it was slowly changed from 'bonefire' to 'bonfire'. Now 'bonfire' means 'a large fire made outdoors for burning rubbish or as a celebration.'
"Thank goodness for that. No one can refute that sitting around a bonfire is an enjoyable experience these days."
"Refute? You mean 'deny', don't you?"
"Is there a difference between the two?"
"There most certainly is. When you 'deny' something, all that you're doing is asserting that what has been said is not true. For example, I can accuse you of stealing my watch. If you deny it, you would merely be making a statement that you didn't steal it."
"So it would be my word against yours."
"Exactly. But if on the other hand, you refute it, you provide evidence to disprove what I have said. Your evidence will prove that my accusation is false and groundless."
"I see. So you cannot use the word 'refute' without any evidence. You've made the distinction between the two words very clear. I can't deny that!"
"Thank you very much."
Published in The Hindu on June 7, 1994.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on the various events that happened on this day throughout history

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

On this day in 1865, by proclamation of the U.S. Secretary of State, the _____ amendment to the Constitution, outlawing slavery, officially entered into force, having been ratified by the requisite States on December 6. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 2

This Swiss-born German artist was born on this day in 1879. His highly individual style was influenced by movements in art that included expressionism, cubism, and surrealism. He was a natural draftsman who experimented with and eventually deeply explored colour theory, writing about it extensively. Identify the artist.

QUESTION 3

An important milestone became a part of

the U.S. history on this day, involving President-elect Donald Trump. What was it?

QUESTION 4

This TV special, an adaptation of Dr. Seuss's classic children's book, aired for the first time on this day, in 1996, and became a holiday staple. Name the special.

QUESTION 5

Two Hollywood celebrities, who, although have never worked together in the same film, were born on this day, one in 1963 and the other in 1946. If the former is known for his portrayal of unconventional characters, the latter enjoyed great commercial success with movies Jaws and Schindler's List. Name them.

QUESTION 6

A British guitarist of the rock band the Rolling Stones was born on this day. Name him.



Visual question:

Identify this Czech writer and later, President, who died on this day in 2011.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The only major American sport team that is community-owned. Ans: Green Bay Packers

2. The club playing in English league Two that was founded in 2002 by supporters of another club. Ans: AFC Wimbledon

3. This country legally requires teams to give '50%+1' voting rights to its fans in order to compete in top domestic leagues. Ans: Germany

4. Name the only fan-owned professional football club currently existing in India. Ans: Travancore FC

5. Name the four Spanish first division clubs that have resisted legal restructuring remaining under the control of its fans or socios. Ans: Real Madrid FC, FC Barcelona, Athletic Bilbao, and CA Osasuna

Visual: Fans of this community-owned English club displayed this banner. Ans: FC United of Manchester

Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| Parimal Das| Arun Kumar Singh| Mohan Lal Patel| Tito Shiladitya

Word of the day

Vocational:

of or relating to a vocation or occupation; especially providing or undergoing training in special skills

Synonyms:

career, calling

Usage: A key part of our campaign was to emphasise the importance of vocational education.

Pronunciation:

newsth.live/vocationalpro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /və'keɪʃənəl/

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THE ASIAN AGE

18 DECEMBER 2024

India, Sri Lanka head to a win-win relationship

As the signs are pointing to the possibility of a major win for India's foreign policy as the meeting between Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and Prime Minister Narendra Modi went off swimmingly. Far from the rancour of the days when Sri Lankan leaders viewed India suspiciously and, to compensate, walked into a Chinese embrace willingly, there was genuine warmth to be seen in the new President who chose to make his first foreign trip to New Delhi rather than Beijing.

From the bitter experience of the time of crisis post-Covid when the economy tanked, Sri Lanka had been seeking change, which it embraced in installing a completely new leadership while steering away from older, dynastic and family-led political parties. The island nation may have learnt who its true friend is though the realisation may have come in the form of a harsh lesson.

The swivel away from China and a new direction in restoring old civilisational ties with India may have come not only because of the leadership change but also with the genuineness of India's outreach in its neighbourhood first foreign policy, not to forget the \$5 billion-plus aid to get over the meltdown in what was the worst financial crisis in the island's modern history.

Mr Dissanayake's assurance that he would not allow Sri Lanka's territory to be used against India in any way affecting its security comes as sweet music to Indian ears from a time when the Rajapaksa family flirted with China and were led up the debt trap garden path, ending in the island signing away the rights to the Hambantota port. Chinese naval vessels that were being allowed free access to its ports for pit stops while on their spying missions will not have as smooth a passage now.

India's strategic shift from debt-driven models towards investment-led partnerships is a key aspect of the diplomatic initiatives it is pursuing in all countries of the Global South

While India's strategic shift from debt-driven models towards investment-led partnerships is a key aspect of the diplomatic initiatives it is pursuing in all countries of the Global South. The readiness with which it has decided to finalise an MoU on debt restructuring is also part of a measured investment in creating win-win situations for both countries.

A sticking point in ties will remain the Tamil Nadu fishermen's problems in their forays into Sri Lankan waters in search of a better catch and their treatment at the hands of their navy. The issue was brought up along with the need for Sri Lanka to fulfil the aspirations of Sri Lankan Tamils.

It was no one's expectation that Indian fishermen poaching in Sri Lankan waters and using bottom-trawling fish catching methods or mechanised boats would be solved in the meeting of the leaders. The improved outlook of overall ties could, however, lead to more acceptable outcomes. A total of 537 fishermen were arrested this year alone. A diplomatic approach to the problem in more extensive talks with Sri Lanka might help New Delhi show it appreciates the Chennai point of view.

Time to focus on service sector

India's service exports outstripped merchandise exports for the first time ever in November 2024, according to the commerce ministry's trade data. After sustained growth beginning from February 2024, service exports stood at \$37.5 billion and merchandise exports at \$32.1 billion in November 2024.

While India is known to export more services than it buys from other countries, the value of merchandise exports remained a few billions more than service exports, reflecting the country's strengths. However, the gap between merchandise and services has begun to get narrower since August.

In November, the growth in merchandise exports declined mainly because of a drastic fall in exports of iron ore (70 per cent), oil meals (51 per cent), petroleum products (50 per cent), gems and jewellery (26 per cent), mica and other mines (10 per cent).

However, out of the top six contributors to exports, namely engineering goods, petroleum products, gems and jewellery, electronic goods, drugs and pharmaceuticals, and organic and inorganic chemicals, four have posted positive growth indicating continued industrial growth in the country.

As most of the sectors that witnessed a contraction represent primary sectors, it hints at a tightening of the global market. The government should remain cautious about a cascading effect on manufacturing, which is a secondary sector in the coming months.

For several years, the government has been keen on pushing the Make in India programme by giving subsidies to manufacturing sectors. However, it did not result in any massive growth in the country's manufacturing capacities.

The government should, therefore, think of supporting the country's strength — i.e., services — to take it to the next level. When one looks at the top five exported services, software services outstrips the aggregate value of the next four sectors, viz., business services, travel, transportation and financial services.

The financial services sector has an immense untapped potential, which the government should encourage by bringing in required reforms in education to allow Indian commerce and business graduates to recreate the magic that IT professionals have created for the country.

KALISHA MITTAL

Editor

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Anita Anand

Things to consider if you're planning to go to Goa: It's not for everyone...

Are you planning a holiday in Goa, considering investing in a property or business, or relocating to the state? Goa may not be for you — it is definitely not for everyone.

The state on India's west coast is a former Portuguese colony with a rich history. It is a collection of villages spread over 3,702 sq km with a population of approximately 1.58 million, it is fairly small by Indian standards. Its unique mix of Indian and Portuguese cultures and architecture attracts an estimated 2.5 million visitors annually, including about 400,000 foreign tourists.

Most recently, there have been concerns about the drop in the number of foreign visitors, mainly from Russia, Israel and Ukraine, probably because of the wars and conflict in those countries and regions. There is also increasing competition from equally attractive countries with similar beaches and a good time atmosphere — such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, among others — which are more financially attractive with better facilities.

After the 1961 Indian annexation of Goa, the increasing flow of visitors included hippies, returning expatriates Goans, charter tourists from Europe, and pilgrims visiting Catholic and Hindu shrines, people choosing Goa as their primary or second home, and those attending seminars, conferences and health retreats. Currently, it is also advertised as a destination wedding venue.

The permanent residents of Goa are divided in their responses to the influx of mass tourists, which

Subhani



Centraising India amidst imperatives of coalitions



Shikha Mukerjee

Reversing the inexorable advance towards centralisation of executive power, programmes and election schedules reflected in the Narendra Modi 0.3 government's rush to get legislative approval for the 'One Nation One Election' blueprint appears impossible. Stick as it might in the gutlets of the anti-BJP Opposition and a scattering of voices, mostly muted, within the ruling NDA, the proposed bill amending the Constitution will be approved by a tame Parliament that has learnt to submit to the will of the executive in the person of the Prime Minister, who claims a direct connection to both God and to the Hindu majority, bypassing the diversity of religious minorities, especially Muslims.

By using the BJP-led Mahayuti coalition in the recent Maharashtra election and the party's third-term win in Haryana, the Modi government has effectively overcome the numbers deficit of the Lok Sabha 2024 election. The fact that the BJP doesn't have a majority on its own strength and therefore doesn't have the mandate to bring in a paradigm-shifting constitutional legislation like the One Nation One Election proposed bill is a piece of irrelevant quibbling.

It is in this context that Mamata Banerjee's difficult to refuse offer to lead the anti-BJP INDIA bloc, which is in considerable disarray is, for now, a loser's gambit: as a better late than never move. The responsibility of the INDIA bloc's dismal performance after the 2024 Lok Sabha election, in which it won 238 seats versus the 240 seats won by the BJP and the NDA's 236 seats in the total 543 seats lies with the Congress. It failed miserably in Haryana, snatching

defeat from anticipated victory; it failed in J&K and in Maharashtra by underperforming and it failed to sustain the momentum the INDIA bloc picked up during the Lok Sabha election.

The point that the Congress and INDIA bloc should have acted on was the wide gap between the Congress' tally and the mandate from the election results in these two states, prepares to change the basic structure of India's politics.

The One Nation One Election is an unequivocal declaration of the supremacy of the executive over the legislature, where the judiciary can go take a walk. It is a reordering that cements a hierarchy between the Centre and the states, upending the uniquely federal structure that the Constitution established.

The One Nation One Election arrangement will prioritise the schedule for elections determined by the Centre over that of the states. The draft proposal said as much by working out what would happen to elected state governments that were midway through their five-year terms as and when the next Lok Sabha election was called. It laid down details of what would happen should an elected state government lose its majority. It specified that fresh elections to let the people decide would not be allowed under the One Nation One Election template.

There is no way that the INDIA bloc in Parliament can stop the BJP and the Modi government, armed with its new and in this context irrelevant mandate from the Maharashtra and Haryana state elections, from passing the bill on One Nation One Election. The Congress failed to anticipate that it needed to lead the coalition and create the pressure necessary to stall for time over this legislation that every politi-

There is no way that the INDIA bloc in Parliament can stop the Modi government, armed with its new and in this context irrelevant mandate from Maharashtra and Haryana polls, from passing the bill on One Nation One Election

ing to the INDIA bloc's effectiveness in Parliament and in national politics is necessary, never more so than now when the Modi government, armed with a mandate from the election results in these two states, prepares to change the basic structure of India's politics.

The One Nation One Election is an unequivocal declaration of the supremacy of the executive over the legislature, where the judiciary can go take a walk. It is a reordering that cements a hierarchy between the Centre and the states, upending the uniquely federal structure that the Constitution established. The One Nation One Election arrangement will prioritise the schedule for elections determined by the Centre over that of the states. The draft proposal said as much by working out what would happen to elected state governments that were midway through their five-year terms as and when the next Lok Sabha election was called. It laid down details of what would happen should an elected state government lose its majority. It specified that fresh elections to let the people decide would not be allowed under the One Nation One Election template.

There is no way that the INDIA bloc in Parliament can stop the BJP and the Modi government, armed with its new and in this context irrelevant mandate from the Maharashtra and Haryana state elections, from passing the bill on One Nation One Election. The Congress failed to anticipate that it needed to lead the coalition and create the pressure necessary to stall for time over this legislation that every politi-

cal party knew was going to happen. The Congress, by failing to win in the two states and win significant seats in the 48 byelections, has to own up to its entirely irresponsible actions of allowing Rahul Gandhi's obsession over the alleged nexus between the Adani Group and Narendra Modi to supersede the larger responsibility it needed to fulfil in leading the INDIA bloc and strengthening the opposition against the BJP.

Whereas the regional parties used to be progressives to see clearly where India's politics is headed, the intractably myopic view of most regional parties, including Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress, is also responsible for the triumphant progress of the subversion of the basic structure of the Indian State as established by the Constitution in the hands of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary maintain a balance and keep each other in check, on the one hand, and the constituent powers of the Union have the freedom to conduct their politics on their own terms and as per their schedules, so long as whatever they do is permissible under the Constitution.

There was never any confusion about the nature of the Indian State that the BJP wanted; its political DNA drives it towards centralisation and hierarchy and laying down the law by which the most insignificant of pracharaks and karyakartas function. Armed with this mindset, a centralising constitutional legislation is the obvious outcome. With a vote share of 36.7 per cent for the INDIA bloc against the 43.6 per cent vote share of the NDA, the collective of leaders of the opposition have a duty to voters to represent their aspirations and interests. By succumbing to the counter-pressure of the BJP and failing to fight back, the INDIA bloc has enabled the Modi government to centralise power and turn the structure of representative democracy upside down.

Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist based in Kolkata

LETTERS BRISBANE CAVEAT

The repeated failures of mainstays like Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli are a big cause for worry for Team India which is touring Down Under. India could manage to avoid follow-on in the Brisbane Test against Australia due to the efforts of K.L. Rahul, Ravindra Jadeja and the tailenders, Akash Deep and Jasprit Bumrah. Rohit's Test scores have been very disappointing in the recent matches. Seniors like Rohit and Kohli should deliver in future matches.

S. Sankaranarayanan
Chennai

SIGN OF CHANGE?

IRAN'S NATIONAL Security Council has put the brakes on implementing the highly contentious "hijab and chastity law" that was slated to take effect last Friday. This sudden pause comes amidst escalating domestic and international backlash against the law which proposed stricter penalties for women and girls who fail to fully cover their hair, forearms, or lower legs, including fines, longer prison sentences of up to 15 years, and mandatory reporting by businesses.

Sankar Paul
Chakdhara, West Bengal

EVMS ARE ALRIGHT

WE FULLY endorse the views of Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee that those raising questions on electronic voting machines should give a demonstration of any discrepancy to the Election Commission. To be frank, the chiefs of Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah are also not credible for the same reasons. Ironically, excepting the Congress Party leaders, none of the INDIA alliance partners have any grievances with EVMs. Incidentally, even the Congress Party had no grievances in the states of Karnataka and Telangana where they won convincingly. Similar is the case with DMK which won their Assembly elections and even the general election with thumping margins. Hence the complaints of the Congress leaders against EVMs are nothing but a demonstration of childish petulance and are flimsy.

N. Mahadevan
Chennai

business between 1 pm and 4 pm for a sista. With a high literacy rate of an average of 65 per cent, most Goans seem to be clear about their lifestyle — slow and in tune with their priorities. They are neither overly ambitious nor want to make much money and are happy with what they have. This explains the high rate of migrants who work in daily wage labour and are skilled plumbers, electricians, and builders from the neighbouring states of Maharashtra and Karnataka.

Goa has changed and will keep changing. It will probably become more expensive, the topography will change, and there will be large housing projects, luxury villas, casinos, haphazard development, and degradation of the environment. Civil society movements and vigilance have highlighted the dangers to present and future developments in Goa. Still, they cannot combat the muscle of commercial interests and built-in systemic corruption. The high season has started in Goa, but there are some challenges. However, if you cannot accept Goa for what it is, wars and all, then it is not for you.

The high season has started in Goa, but there are some challenges. However, if you cannot accept Goa for what it is, wars and all, then it is not for you. Outsiders, in turn, often scoff at the laidback attitude of the Goans, such as shutting down shops and

The writer is a development and communications consultant

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2024

Wealth tax: A bad idea

More revenue is needed for health and education, but Piketty's recommendation is problematic

THIS IS NOT the first time Thomas Piketty has argued for a tax on wealth rather than on just income. He has, over the years, written on how inequality would only worsen and not only in the world's poorer nations. A research paper put out earlier this year by Piketty and three other economists estimated that inequality in India started rising in the early 1980s and has skyrocketed since the early 2000s. They found that between 2014-15 and 2022-23, the rise of top-end inequality had been particularly pronounced in terms of wealth concentration. By 2022-23, the richest 1% of the population, or about 9.2 million people, owned 40% of the country's wealth and 22.5% of the income, their highest historical levels. The growth, the paper said, came mainly at the expense of the middle class. Moreover, India's income inequality was among the very highest in the world, behind only Peru, Yemen and a few other small countries.

In India last week, the renowned economist once again spoke of the need to impose a 2% wealth tax on India's ultra-rich. The levy imposed on some 167 billionaires, Piketty estimated, could help the government mop up resources amounting to 0.5% of GDP. These resources could then be put to use to improve public services, health and so on. There is no doubt, as he has pointed out, that these wealthy individuals have all cashed in on the country's infrastructure, education and legal systems to earn the money; some have also made use of political connections. So, now, it's payback time.

While it's clear that the gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening, a wealth tax might not be the best way to tax the rich. Globally, top economists have argued against a wealth tax saying it is not feasible; most have expressed the view that taxes are best levied on flows of money, not stocks of wealth. An income tax can be levied easily while wealth is not always seen and not easy to measure. Valuing assets can be tricky, especially in the case of real estate and shareholding in unlisted ventures. Back home, in line with the recommendations of the Chelliah Committee (1993) and the Kelkar Committee (2002), the wealth tax was abolished in the Union Budget 2016-2017 and was replaced with an additional surcharge of 2% on those with a taxable annual income of over ₹1 crore.

No one can deny that the government needs to collect more by way of taxes so as to be able to spend more on health and education. One way to do this could be by raising the personal income tax (PIT) rate for the super-rich. To be sure, the highest rate is already 43%—including the cesses and surcharges—and it might seem unfair to raise this further. However, some kind of redistribution of wealth is required to improve the living standards of those at the bottom of the pyramid. There may have been an improvement in the living standards in that few go hungry today but can that be enough for a country which prides itself on becoming Viksit Bharat? Even today, even basic health and education facilities are beyond the reach of many. So a higher income tax rate for the wealthy is a good option; in any case, it's better than reintroducing a wealth tax which can lead to harassment.

Porsche billionaires are in a tight spot, again

PORSCHE AUTOMOBIL HOLDING SE sure knows how to do drama. Last week, the listed holding of the Porsche and Piech families warned it may have to book up to €22 billion (\$23 billion) of impairments amid a decline in the market value of its 31.9% stake in Volkswagen AG and 12.5% economic interest in the Porsche AG automaker.

The write-downs were triggered by technical reasons related to its accounting and VW's restructuring, and the adjustments are non-cash. Nevertheless, Porsche SE investors should pay attention to VW's diminished capacity to pay dividends amid a bruising labour conflict over possible factory closures and the auto giant's deteriorating competitiveness in China.

These dividends are important for the billionaire Porsches and Piechs, who borrowed heavily to acquire a 25% voting stake in Porsche AG's initial public offering in 2022 and need the cash to pay down the debt.

While Porsche SE's survival isn't imperiled like it was in 2008 when it tried and failed to acquire the much larger VW, the families are once again in a tight spot partly of their own making. But they're not backing down.

Porsche's IPO provided institutional investors with a way to directly own a stake in the €11 maker, while Volkswagen paid out roughly half of the IPO proceeds via a €9.6 billion special dividend. VW shareholders were free to use the payout to diversify their holdings beyond the structurally challenged car industry—which would have been a wise move in hindsight. But the Porsche and Piech families had other plans: One reason for the IPO being structured this way was to help them acquire a 25% voting stake in Porsche AG. The families once owned all of Porsche's voting shares, but they squandered that birthright in 2008, and VW ended up acquiring Porsche's car making operations instead.

While history doesn't repeat, it does rhyme. The family holding had to fork out around €10 billion in 2022 to acquire a direct stake in Porsche, which it financed by borrowing roughly €7 billion.

The holding paid €88.69 per Porsche AG voting share—a 7.5% premium to the non-voting share price—meaning the Porsche/Piech clan is already sitting on a paper loss of more than 30%; Porsche's sales in China have collapsed and its electrification strategy has been found wanting. The holding has managed to do a leveraged bit, but net debt was still around €5.1 billion at the end of September.

In theory, Porsche SE allows institutional investors to buy exposure to VW and the Porsche car unit on the cheap—because it trades on a market more than 30% discount to net asset value. The holding makes investments in adjacent areas like mobility and industrial technology, where its management have plenty of expertise. But its market value has declined, less than €11 billion—bad news for the families who own half of its share capital. (However, they're not short of a penny, having received more than €3 billion euros in dividends in the past decade, according to my calculations based on Bloomberg data.)

Porsche SE received €1.4 billion of dividends from VW last year, but the outlook for the next couple of years isn't as rosy. VW has signalled that the dividend for the 2024 financial year will be lower because the automaker usually aims to pay out a relatively modest 30% of net income, and profits are expected to fall. And if VW proceed with plant closures, high restructuring costs could weigh on its bottom line.

Dividends are also becoming extremely political at VW's Wolfsburg headquarters. With management threatening to close German plants and axe thousands of jobs, shareholders should make sacrifices too, trade unions and politicians agree. The upshot is that Porsche SE may become more constrained in its ability to fund acquisitions, cut debt or pay dividends—or all of the above.

It's encouraging to see the Porsche and Piech families backing VW's management, which is taking long overdue action to tackle bloated costs—a painful though this is for workers. Hopefully, those hard decisions will pay off for all of VW stakeholders in the long term.

But even if the consequences are much less serious in 2008, using leverage to acquire shares in cyclical automotive companies is clearly not without drama or risk.



CHRIS BRYANT

Bloomberg

● HUMANISING HEALTHCARE

ADDRESSING THE RURAL-URBAN HEALTHCARE DIVIDE REQUIRES A SYSTEMS-FOCUSED APPROACH

Transforming rural health systems

AS INDIA APPROACHES its centenary, the vision of Viksit Bharat—a developed and equitable nation—guides our aspirations. While a thriving economy, empowered workforce, and quality education are critical pillars, the foundation of all remains a healthy population. Health, intricately linked to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), shapes broader outcomes like poverty reduction and social equity.

However, the rural-urban divide remains one of India's most pressing challenges in healthcare. While 70% of the population resides in rural areas, only a third of the nation's doctors serve these communities. This disparity is exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure, limited economic opportunities, and a dual burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Key health indicators underscore this inequity: rural India experiences an infant mortality rate of 31 per 1,000 live births, compared to 19 per 1,000 in urban areas. Institutional delivery rates are at 86% in rural regions, compared to 93% in urban centres. Immunisation coverage is hindered by logistical barriers and limited awareness.

These disparities highlight challenges of access, quality, and deep-rooted cultural scepticism toward modern medicine, further complicating health outcomes in rural areas. Addressing this divide requires a systems-focused approach that integrates community-driven solutions with inclusive practices. This must be supported by compassionate leadership and strengthened by robust information networks, paving a path for sustainable and equitable healthcare systems.

Strengthening healthcare leadership at the grassroots

India's frontline healthcare workers—Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) and anganwadi workers—are the backbone of rural healthcare delivery. These frontline workers are critical



SWATI PIRMAL

Vice chairperson, Pirmal Group

in providing maternal, child, and adolescent healthcare, often serving as the primary link between rural communities and the healthcare system. However, their potential is often hindered by limited training and inadequate support systems, including proper housing, transport, and professional mentorship. Initiatives like District Mentoring Teams (DMTs) in Bihar are changing this narrative. These teams, led by experienced nurses, mentor ANMs to focus on critical areas such as pregnancy-induced hypertension, anaemia during pregnancy, and maternity care. By balancing capacity-building with hands-on support, DMTs not only enhance the skills of healthcare workers but also cultivate a pipeline of professionals deeply attuned to the needs of communities.

The success of such initiatives, however, hinges on a healthcare system driven by empathetic leaders who inspire collective action and foster trust. By investing in leadership development, we can create a cadre of healthcare professionals who can manage systems while building a legacy of accountability and compassion. Healthcare leadership must extend beyond technical proficiency to embrace a human-centred approach grounded in ethics and empathy. It is about ensuring that every patient feels seen, heard, and valued—because dignity is essential to healing as medicine itself.

It is imperative that young doctors during their internship are trained in building empathy and understanding, the building blocks to providing compassionate healthcare that considers the

sensitivities of the communities they serve, ensuring care is delivered respectfully and without judgment. This will go a long way in helping bridge the trust deficit in rural communities, where people distrust formal healthcare systems. This vision of leadership must also integrate diverse voices from the community. In rural and tribal areas, traditional healers command deep trust and influence. Incorporating certified tribal healers into the healthcare workforce bridges the gap between traditional practices and modern medicine.

When these healers recommend individuals to seek advanced care at medical facilities, they initiate a cycle of trust, breaking down social and cultural stigmas surrounding modern healthcare. Such integration of traditional wisdom with evidence-based practices fosters a holistic and inclusive rural healthcare system—one built on compassion, collaboration, and community empowerment.

Partnerships power progress

Building a skilled healthcare workforce requires collaboration across public and private sectors to scale initiatives and bridge healthcare gaps. These partnerships are transforming healthcare in underserved regions through training programs, technology, and logistical support. Public-private partnerships have successfully connected remote communities to vital healthcare networks through telemedicine hubs like eSanjeevani. Similarly, partnerships with the National Health Mission (NHM)

have yielded remarkable outcomes in Assam, where Mobile Medical Units were able to reach over 54.5 million beneficiaries in the past 16 years.

Alongside workforce development, robust infrastructure investment is key to effective healthcare delivery. Innovations such as modular health units, online health portals, mobile clinics and telemedicine hubs provide immediate solutions to accessibility challenges, while permanent facilities are being built.

In addition to improving access, digital tools are revolutionising healthcare governance. Initiatives like Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) led by the National Health Authority (NHA), have demonstrated impressive outcomes in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The integration of the Command-and-Control Centre have equipped healthcare workers with actionable data, enhancing transparency, and improving care delivery. Technologies such as health data systems like Affordable Medicines and Reliable Implants for Treatment (AMRIT) facilitate online monitoring of patient health, integrating point-of-care testing to help workers make faster, more informed decisions.

Programs like Nirmay II, a partnership between NHM and Cisco, has strengthened the ABDM ecosystem in Assam enabling early detections of 34,000 presumptive tuberculosis cases and facilitating 64,000 institutional deliveries, ensuring continuum of care.

The commitment to holistic, inclusive healthcare—rooted in empathy and driven by innovation—holds the potential to bridge the rural-urban divide and ensure that no one is left behind on India's path to 100. In rural India, where healthcare challenges are most acute, solutions must be as multifaceted as the issues themselves. By building a skilled, compassionate healthcare workforce supported by robust infrastructure and empowered through partnerships, we can create a rural health system that is equitable and sustainable—laying the foundation for a prosperous and inclusive Viksit Bharat.

● THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The upkeep of urban infrastructure



AKHILESH TILOTIA

Distinguishing fellow at The Infrastructure Foundation and co-founder, Thuro

AS URBANISATION ACCELERATES across India, a striking trend has emerged: once-peripheral roads, originally designed to connect satellite cities, are now vital urban arteries. In many cases, these roads were financed through long-term tolls—typically spanning 25-30 years—to offset the initial construction costs. However, as cities like Delhi and Mumbai have expanded, tolls that once served as financing mechanisms have been phased out, raising a critical question: How to reconcile the interests of urban residents with those of private investors who bankroll such infrastructure projects?

The removal of tolls can ease the financial burden on daily commuters, but it poses a challenge to the economic viability of the roads themselves. Many of these infrastructure projects were designed with tolls as a key revenue stream, and eliminating them undermines the financial assumptions that underpinned their construction. This necessitates a careful recalibration of funding models—one that considers both public convenience and investor expectations.

Several approaches have been tried to mitigate the impact. These include partial toll reductions based on vehicle type—differentiating between commercial and passenger vehicles—or based on emissions, with lower charges for greener vehicles. Globally, such differentiated tolling schemes have been implemented with varying degrees of success. A more funda-

mental insight, however, lies in the fact that urban expansion has driven up land values around these roads. With this increase in land value, it may be possible to capture some of the economic gains to alleviate the need for tolls without eroding the financial integrity of the infrastructure projects.

Yet, any solution must pass a dual test: fairness to commuters and operational efficiency. While easing toll burdens may be politically appealing, it is crucial that such measures are implemented in a way that preserves the financial sustainability of urban infrastructure.

In some Indian cities, toll collections from passenger vehicles (PVs) are substantial, but in the broader context of state finances, the total amount may be relatively manageable. In an era of electronic toll collection via FasTag, the state government could assume the role of the toll payer, rather than individual commuters. This would allow the state to pay the tolling entity for the vehicles passing through, effectively shifting the financial burden from the public to the state without disrupting the economic calculations that underpinned the original infrastructure financing. This approach is particularly feasible when the tolling agency is under the control of the state government, as it offers a straight-

Creative financial solutions, such as charging fees for high-emission vehicles, can help alleviate toll burdens for city natives while keeping urban infrastructure viable

forward mechanism for implementation.

One approach to mitigating toll burdens could involve exempting PVs from tolls, as has been done in Mumbai. As noted previously, toll collections from PVs account for only a small fraction of the total toll revenue, despite comprising a much larger share of traffic volume. Commuters are also more likely to voice dissatisfaction with tolls when they are waiting times and costs rise, compared to commercial vehicles.

To address this, a lump-sum toll tax could be levied at the time of vehicle registration. While this might seem unfair—particularly to those who predominantly use toll-free roads—it could appeal to those who prefer to avoid the hassle of tolls to avoid the hassle of tolls.

An alternative and politically attractive option would be to exempt green vehicles—those with low emissions—from tolls. With a clear and well-established system for labelling vehicles with green number plates, this exemption would be relatively simple to implement. It could be a nudge towards greener transportation, aligning with national policy objectives to reduce emissions. This concept mirrors policies in other global cities, such as London's ultra-low emission zones, which incentivise the adoption of greener vehicles by charging higher fees for those with

higher emissions.

Infrastructure development, particularly roads, creates significant value in the surrounding land (A Faster Road on the Periphery of a City Spawl Can Have Immense Value, Pavar and Tilotia, India Infrastructure Review, 2004). As urban sprawl evolves, once-peripheral roads become key internal arteries, increasing the value of surrounding land. This densification typically leads to a surge in property values, creating a pool of untapped economic potential that can be harnessed by local or state governments.

To capitalise on this, authorities could adjust "circle rates" or stamp duty levies in the areas surrounding the new or upgraded infrastructure. Alternatively, governments could increase property taxes or sell additional development rights, as improved infrastructure can support higher population densities and increased traffic. These measures would generate additional revenue streams for the city or state, which could be allocated to a fund designed to continue paying tolls to the operating entity without further burdening commuters.

The challenge for policymakers lies in fostering inclusive growth without undermining the financial sustainability of infrastructure development. Creative financial solutions are needed so that cities do not choke on the infrastructure that was meant to help them expand.

Views are personal

strengthen India's financial system.

—Narayanan Kizhundayadur, Thiruv

Simplify taxation

Apropos of 'Swiss confusion' (FE, December 17), the Indian government needs to rethink the misconception that all the nations are willing to do anything to operate in India. The Swiss government has downgraded India's

MFN status because of convoluted taxation laws. We must note that we need the other nations more than they need us. The sooner the glitches in the Indo Swiss are smoothed out the better it will be for the economic health of the nation.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Modernising remittances

Apropos of "Upgrade cross-border payments" (FE, December 17), India's position as the world's largest recipient of remittances highlights the critical need for a modern, efficient, and inclusive payment system to handle these significant inflows securely and cost-effectively. Simpli-

fying cross-border transactions, reducing transfer fees, and ensuring faster settlements are essential to maximise the economic benefits of remittances. Leveraging tech like blockchain, UPI, and central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) could revolutionise the ecosystem. A robust, modernised payment infrastructure would support remittance flows and

ONOE a litmus test for the NDA government

FOR a change the Lok Sabha saw a real and interesting discussion on rules and procedures. The question is not who was right and who was wrong, but it presented an altogether healthy scenario bereft of theatrics when the Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal introduced the Constitution Amendment bill on one nation one election.

The former Union Minister and Congress spokesperson Manish Tiwari had set the tone in shortest possible time explaining his view as to why the Congress party was opposing the introduction of bill.

His argument was crisp when he said, "My view is that this entire thing is a folly. Many of the leaders raised technical objections. But of course, there were

some like the Samajwadi Party who were caught off guard and tried to make a political statement on why it was necessary now and why government was not focusing on Sambhal riots, attack on Hindus in Bangladesh etc.

The law makers should not assume that they are super intelligent. They should understand that they cannot take people for granted. Well, some tried to twist the issue by saying that the government does not have two thirds of majority in the house and hence it cannot introduce.

May be the law makers should refresh their knowledge on such matters before arguing. They also patted their backs saying that they have demonstrated that BJP does not have two third majority re-

quired to pass the constitutional amendment. But what is the new discovery in this? The numbers of the NDA and the opposition are known.

Well coming back to technical issues, M N Kaul and S L Shukla in their book Practice and Procedure of Parliament say, "taking a strict interpretation of the constitutional provision, the special majority prescribed therein may be required only for voting at the third reading stage.

At all other stages simple majority has been provided for in the rules, e.g., motion that the Bill be taken into consideration; motion that the Bill as reported by the Select or Joint Committee be taken into consideration; for passing of clauses and schedules to the

Bill; and the motion that the Bill be passed. Thus, motions that the Bill be circulated for eliciting public opinion thereon or that the Bill be referred to a Select or Joint Committee are passed by simple majority only."

Two thirds are not required at the time of introduction. So, the opposition did not claim any victory. The government was aware of all these issues and at the last cabinet PM Narendra Modi himself said that they would refer it to the Joint Parliamentary Committee for wider discussion. The JPC normally would have to give its report within 90 days. Which means it can be taken up for discussion in Parliament during the budget session beginning February.

Certainly, getting the bill passed will be a litmus test for the government who will have to do a lot of homework and micro forum management. After all permutations and combinations, they are still short of about 25 members in Lok Sabha. Which means that they may even have to ask some members to remain absent so that the rule that two thirds of the members present, and vote is followed.

Well will it be advantageous or not, will it help the national parties or regional parties, it is necessary to have ONOE is something that would come up for discussion when the JPC report is tabled in the parliament. Till then the public debate would continue.

LETTERS

Ustad Zakir Hussain an immortal maestro

TABLA maestro Zakir Hussain is in a league of his own. He was a percussionist par excellence. He did magic with humble hand drums and his rhythms fused with melody enthralled audiences across India and around the world. As ducks take to water, he took to music. "Felicity" is one word without which he cannot be thought of. "Dexterity" is another word. He learnt how to play the percussion instrument from his father Ustad Alla Rakha at the age of 7. As an accomplished musician, Zakir Hussain transcribed genres and crafted (and conjured up) beats with his "dancing fingers". His virtuosic performances transported us to a world of pure joy. His riveting music has that indefinable something that makes it sublime (and divine) in its true, uncorrupted sense. In collaboration with jazz guitarist John McLaughlin, he formed Shakti, a band that took the world by storm by a trail-blazing blend of Indian classical music with the Western jazz music. Zakir Hussain personified the blend of brilliance and humility - brilliant as a musician and humble as a man despite being clad in fame and flamboyance. He ex-emplified India's composite culture at its best and always put humanity above everything else. It is un-fathomable that a musician who gave his whole being to music and brought so much joy in our lives suffered from fibrosis affecting air sacs in the lungs. The line on the screen before the start of each film in the ongoing International Film Festival of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram, where we made his audiences on a few occasions, "Zakir Hussain's rhythms echo in our hearts" is a fitting tribute to the immortal maestro.

G.David Milton, Maruthanad, Tamil Nadu

Will AI save the planet? Why evidence is flawed

JO LINDSAY WALTO
BRIGHTON

OPTIMISTIC advocates for AI say this environmentally costly technology will become more sustainable with time. We can use AI more efficiently, and explore less energy-intensive designs inspired by the human brain. We can build data centres more sustainably, using wood or low-carbon concrete and steel. The heat from the data centres can warm homes in the local area. Of course, if we start using AI systems too widely (including where we don't really need them), the growth might outweigh any of these potential gains in efficiency. But recently, I've been hearing another argument: that AI itself is tackling climate change. AI can help to model wildfires, optimise energy consumption to stabilise the grid, accelerate the development of low-carbon materials, and much more. My research team recently published a report that digs into these claims - and found some cause for concern. As it turns out, it's difficult to compare the environmental impacts of asking AI to carry out a task versus asking people.

Take writing and making art. One study says that

it is much more environmentally friendly for AI to do these creative tasks than humans. But one of its methods for investigating this is to allocate a slice of the carbon footprint from all human activities (eating cows, catching planes and so on) to the creative activity. By this logic, there would be the same carbon emissions from an hour's work by an artist, a dairy farmer, a billionaire CEO, or an ecologist restoring a wetland. A related paper acknowledges the simplification and instead allocates carbon just for the electricity a human consumes. The authors say this is a practical approach to carbon accounting. Establishing a fair comparison between human and AI work is hard because the tasks may look alike, but their underlying processes are fundamentally different.

What about the current total carbon impact of AI? Another paper, partly funded by Microsoft, mentioned that AI is today responsible for just 0.01 per cent of global carbon emissions. When we looked closer we found this figure was based on the emissions of one year's AI server sales by Nvidia - the biggest manufacturer of such hardware - as estimated in one analysis. This prediction hasn't been ver-



There are in fact diverse forms of AI: big, small, discriminative, generative, machine learning, symbolic and more. There are different types of climate action too. Climate mitigation is about getting carbon emissions down to net zero to stop global warming. Climate adaptation is about learning to live and thrive in a warmer world. We need both. AI for climate adaptation is very welcome indeed. But it doesn't simply offset the carbon cost of AI. Whenever AI is celebrated for amazing achievements, let's remember that it had some human help.

ified, and if it is accurate, it wouldn't include AI being run on servers installed in previous years. When contacted for comment, some of the authors said that this estimate wasn't the article's main focus. Assessing the climate impacts of AI is complicated because we don't know how future AI models will be built, operated and used, they added.

Another study reviewing AI's sustainability benefits cited several other articles

that, in our view, appeared to feature mistakes - like referring to studies to back up their claims which did not contain relevant information. AI systems sometimes make mistakes - known as "hallucinations" - like when Microsoft's Copilot accused a journalist of committing the crimes he had reported on. So we asked the authors if they had used an AI to write the article. They dismissed this idea and stood by the integrity of their review. They

agreed that not all of the AI sustainability solutions their review referred to can be supported by existing studies. But they said that they had also included predictions about what AI might one day be capable of, based on their own expert judgement, which they said was standard practice. The authors also pointed out that their work has been widely shared without complaint. But the fact that articles can be read widely without eliciting alarm is exactly the issue. Would every reader assume that the article was predicting what AI might one day do, rather than explaining what AI can already do? Overall, how reliable is current research on AI and sustainability? - not sure. We haven't yet had the chance to conduct a more comprehensive investigation. But assessing AI's future potential requires a deep understanding of its achievements to date. Such an investigation is urgently needed.

Questions to ask about AI: Meanwhile, we should avoid lumping all kinds of AI together.

There are in fact diverse forms of AI: big, small, discriminative, generative, machine learning, symbolic and more. I can be excited about more AI that excels at counting carrots, and helps farmers to

plant them more effectively, without offering a blanket endorsement of all AI systems. There are different types of climate action too. Climate mitigation is about getting carbon emissions down to net zero to stop global warming. Climate adaptation is about learning to live and thrive in a warmer world. We need both. AI for climate adaptation is very welcome indeed (say, helping us to increase carrot yields, despite more volatile weather). But it doesn't simply offset the carbon cost of AI. It would be like comparing apples with oranges (or carrots). It's a tricky calculation to make, one with political and ethical dimensions. Whenever AI is celebrated for amazing achievements, let's remember that it had some human help. What time, effort, energy and other resources were invested in the project? Could similar results have been achieved using more traditional data collection and analysis, potentially at a lower environmental cost? The authors of our report have missed views on AI. None of us went against it, but against using it to solve environmental problems. But to properly govern AI's net impact on the climate, its benefits must not be overstated. (The Conversation)

ZAKIR Hussain, a world tabla artist breathed his last on Monday at California in America. It is reported that he had been suffering from lung disease for the last few years. Zakir who started his music journey at the age of 3 and began to give concerts at age of 11. His first guru was his father. He was known for fusing music which combined Hindustani and Western music with jazz. He was popular by reaching every house hold through his loud for Tajmahal tea. His death has created void in the music world. He transcended cultures, caste and religion with his music. He could be in the minds of people as long as music lives.

Pratap Reddy Yanamala, Tiruvuru, AP

THE passing away of Ustad Zakir Hussain, the globally revered tabla virtuoso on December 16 at a hospital in San Francisco, is an irreparable loss to the field of world music. Known for his amazing finger-work and rhythmic brilliance, he brought the tabla to a global stage, collaborating with some of the world's finest musicians. His gargantuan contribution to music was recognised with Padma Shri awards and the Sangnet Natak Akademi award. On the global stage, he was a four-time Grammy award winner. His unparalleled skills earned him the reputation of a "fearless technician" and a "whimsical in-ventor". Beyond his musical prowess, his life was a testament to the power of dedication, passion, and cultural exchange. His influence extended beyond the concert stage, as he mentored countless young musicians and left an indelible mark on the world of music education. His collaborations spanned various genres, from traditional Indian classical music to jazz, rock, and film scores, making him a true ambassador of global musical harmony. As fans, fellow musicians and admirers around the world mourn his loss, his legacy remains a lasting symbol of the power of music to transcend borders and unite people across cultures. In his career spanning six decades, he worked with several renowned international and Indian artists, but it was his 1973 musical project with the English guitarist John McLaughlin, violinist I. T. Shankar, and percussionist T.H. "Vikku" Vinayakram that brought together Indian classical with elements of jazz in a fusion hitherto unknown.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

Debate on constitution lacked depth

THE debate on the constitution in the parliament has disappointed many, due to lack of depth. The good thing is that both rival groups have expressed their reverence towards that sacred document. The leader of the House called it the unifier of country; the leader of the opposition recognised its pre-macy. But the bad thing is that both couldn't raise their own political interests to find a common ground to spread the philosophy of the constitution. They squandered the precious time to prove the other side destroyers of its values with the help of selective examples. Had the opportunity been used to discuss the new challenges to intended goals, be it social, economical or political in the backdrop of changed world, it could have shed some light on policy making. The ultimate purpose of spreading constitutionalism among people could have been served. It is a wasted opportunity, thanks to the conventional thinking of parties.

Dr DVG Sarikara Rao, Vizianagaram, AP

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The ten best novels of 2024 - according to literary experts

LONDON

FROM Samantha Harvey's spellbinding Booker winner *Orbital* to Percival Everett's ambitious retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*, James, these are the books that made the most lasting impression on our expert reviewers.

1. *The Safekeep* by Yael van der Wouden Recommended by Maniet Riden, associate dean international for the faculty of arts, design and humanities, De Montfort University. *The Safekeep*, a novel about the expropriation and theft of Jewish property during the second world war, revisits a dark chapter of Dutch history. Before being deported, Dutch Jews were stripped of their homes and belongings, and forced to flee Amsterdam with what little they could carry. Van der Wouden's debut novel shines an ironic light on the act of keeping or maintaining things that were to be reclaimed by their rightful owners, but which were lost or stolen in the war. The trauma of this history hangs over the lives of three siblings grieving the loss of their mother, Isabel, the novels' lonely protagonist, lives alone in the family house, keeping it in order as her late mother would have wanted.

2. *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey Recommended by Debra Benita Shaw, reader in cultural theory, University of East London. Winner of the Booker prize, *Samantha Harvey's* *Orbital* skillfully exposes the human cost of space flight, set against the urgency of the climate crisis. While a typhoon of life-threatening proportions

gathers across south-east Asia, six cosmonauts hurtle around Earth on the International Space Station. Their everyday routine of tasteless food and laboratory work is in stark contrast to the awe-inspiring spectacle of the blue planet, oscillating between night and day, dark and light, where international borders are meaningless.

3. *Gliff* by AI Smith Recommended by Sarah Annes Brown, professor of English literature, Anglia Ruskin University. *Gliff* shares many of the same concerns as Smith's recent *Seasons* (2016-2020): the effects of climate change, the plight of refugees, and the growth of intolerance and authoritarianism. But this novel is set in a dystopian Britain where all these problems have intensified in frightening ways. Smith follows in the footsteps of a growing number of literary novelists who have turned to sci-fi fiction in recent years, as boundaries between genres become less rigid. This is the first of a planned pair of novels - the second to be called *Gliff* - although the two worlds sound identical, their meanings are quite different.

4. *Intermezzo* by Sally Rooney Recommended by Orlaith Darling, postdoctoral fellow in contemporary English literature and critical theory, University College Dublin. *Intermezzo* is perhaps Rooney's most mature reflection on how relationships operate - it exercises in optimism, both in our world and in the world itself. The novel is remarkable and bracing on the exchange of promises that happens in



relationships, on the currency of hope they run on and the mutual, voluntary emotional debts they create. These debts, of course, are not always repaid, and that is part of the point: the stakes of love are high, and we run the risk of defaulting and being defaulted on. And yet, for Rooney, this risk is always worth taking. It must be, because it is all there is. Rooney's is a world in which relationships sustain us and in which small daily miracles make life seem more bearable than is proportionate.

5. *James* by Percival Everett Recommended by Emily Zobel Marshall, reader in postcolonial literature, Leeds Beckett University. *James* is an incredible rewriting of Mark Twain's 1884 American classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Everett has reclaimed Twain's "Jim" from the peripheries, boldly placing him centre stage. Just like the original book, it's set in the pre-civil war plantation south. It's 1861, war is brewing, and James hears that he may be sold to a new owner in New Orleans and separated from his family. He goes on the run with the resourceful young white boy, Huck Finn. This is a literary, wittily and scholarly novel. 6. *Remember* by Yasu-

McBride, PhD candidate in literature, University of Galway. Asako Yuzuki's *Remember* melts into your mind. Descriptions of food, sex and violence become transcendental, almost detached from anything physical. The prose is intense and immersive, but also clear, never dense or heady. *Remember* Rika conducts prison interviews with murderer Manako Kaji, a woman who lured lonely men with her delicious and deadly gourmet meals. As Rika talks with this strange woman, she finds herself drawn deeper into her world, fascinated by Kaji's obsession with physical pleasure. This is something that affects all aspects of Rika's life, from relationships with friends and family to her own body and childhood memories. 7. *Martyr!* by Kareh Akbar Recommended by Alice Kelly, assistant professor of literature and history, University of Warwick. How do we make meaning out of death, especially when it is violent and senseless? This question preoccupies Cyrus Shams, the protagonist of Iranian-American poet Kareh Akbar's debut novel, *Martyr!* Cyrus is trying to make sense of the death of his mother, Roya, who was lost in an aeroplane shot down by US military forces over the Persian Gulf. In the wake

of her death, Cyrus and his father Ali move from Iran to the US.

8. *Parade* by Rachel Cusk Recommended by Scarlett Baron, associate professor in the department of English, UCL. *Parade* is a searching book, written against conformity. It is an exploration of the role of gender in the genesis and reception of art - a novel in which selfhood, creativity and family relations are submitted to unflinching analytical scrutiny. Cusk's examination of these subjects is conducted through a kaleidoscope of narratives, told from different points of view, in which the same themes crystallise and dissolve again and again. The book's four chapters focus on the lives of artists, each of whom is referred to as "G". The Shuntman tells the story of an artist who, "perhaps because he could find no other way to make sense of his time and place in history, began to paint upside down".

9. *Brotherless Night* by V.V. Ganeshanathan Recommended by Anki Mukherjee, professor of English and world literatures, University of Oxford. This is an unforgettable novel of formation - an awakening from tribal loyalties into new possibilities of identity and agency - set in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, during the civil war (1983 to 2009). The protagonist, Sushikula Kulenthiran, is a Tamil teenager, walking away with her brothers toward medical or engineering degrees, and elaborations of a future peaceful with books, dialogue and organic living. When the government atrocities and the call of militancy

start dis-appearing boy after boy from the peninsula, Sushikula is reduced to a bit-player of history. She becomes discomfited by grief for fallen or embattled brothers. However, she finds strength and survives with a woman's collective that agitates, organises and treats hypermasculinity, instead of serving it. Ganeshanathan anatomises a separatist movement without once glorifying its concerted violence. The book is history-adjacent, the narrator says.

10. *Kairos* by Jenny Erpenbeck Recommended by Edward Sugden, senior lecturer in American studies, King's College London. In Jenny Erpenbeck's *Kairos*, a character asks whether a human being is "a container to be filled by time with whatever it happens to have handy" or if there can be life beyond history. The novel dramatises this question throughout. The book, which won the 2024 International Booker prize, is set in the last years of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (1949-90) as western capitalism erodes a collapsing socialism. Against this backdrop, anatomies the ageing writer Hans and the late teenage Katharina, live out a doomed affair, having met on a bus one rainy evening. The mum-dane deceptions of infidelity that make up the book - Hans and Katharina meet in cafes, watch films, listen to music, go shopping, take secret holidays - are freighted with history and emotional intensity as the plot plunges towards its ending, where the links between politics and the personal become tragically clear. (The Conversation)

BENGALURU ONLINE

Ecofix used instead of tar to close potholes in Bengaluru

BENGALURU: The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) Principal Engineer Dr BS Prashad said that Ecofix mixture has been used experimentally to quickly close potholes during the rainy season in the BBMP area.

The problem of potholes in Bengaluru city not only causes traffic congestion but also leads to road accidents. To address this challenge, India's leading road research in-stitute CSRI - CRRI, Ramkula Global Services and the municipality have launched a pilot project of steel slag-based Ecofix technology by closing potholes on Avenue Road near Anjani Temple in Bengaluru, he said.

India's leading road research institute CSRI - Central Road Research Institute (CRRI) has joined hands with the municipality to repair potholes on Bengaluru city roads. He said that Ecofix technology will be a boon to the city's roads to repair damaged roads in an eco-friendly manner when the city's roads are not able to function during the rainy season.

Ecofix is developed using industrial waste from steel industries i.e. iron and steel slag and can repair water-filled potholes without any dewatering. No need for tack coat. To close potholes, the potholes need to be drained and cleaned and a tack coat applied. However, Ecofix mixture can repair potholes even in water-filled condition without any tack coat.

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

THE IDEAS PAGE

Closing the Gulf circle

Modi's visit to Kuwait, the first by an Indian prime minister in more than four decades, is an important first step in upping Delhi's game in a Middle East poised for deep structural change



RAJA-MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's visit to Kuwait this weekend will close the last gap in India's expanded diplomatic engagement with the Gulf region that is so vital to the country's security and prosperity. Modi will be the first prime minister to visit Kuwait in more than four decades. His visit comes soon after the fall of the Assad dynasty in Damascus, whose consequences could involve a radical restructuring of the regional order in the Middle East.

When the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded and occupied Kuwait in August 1990, the coalition government in Delhi was so paralysed by the event that it could not bring itself to unambiguously condemn the fact that Saddam Hussein had sought to wipe out Kuwait as a sovereign nation from the map of the Middle East. It is impossible to escape the parallel with the Indian reluctance to criticise the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Then, as now, there was little internal criticism of the government's refusal to condemn Saddam Hussein's unacceptable aggression by India's political class or the foreign policy elite. Many arguments were offered to suggest that Saddam Hussein was "provoked" or "trapped" into invading Kuwait — somewhat similar to the argument that Brezhnev had no option but to send troops to Afghanistan and Putin was provoked to attack Ukraine.

To be sure, as a post-colonial nation, India is deeply committed to the inviolability of territorial sovereignty as the core principle of international relations. Delhi was reluctant to condemn these invasions because Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Brezhnev's Soviet Union were, and Vladimir Putin's Russia is a close partner of India. Many countries don't like criticising their partners. India is not alone in finessing the tension between principles and interests. All countries do. India's problem in 1990 was not about hypocrisy that is endemic in international relations.

Part of the problem was in assessing and dealing with the geopolitical implications and consequences of Saddam Hussein's attempt to annex Kuwait. The Gulf Arabs as well as Egypt and Syria got together to support a massive American expeditionary army to force Saddam Hussein to vacate the occupied territories and restore the sovereignty of Kuwait within a year.

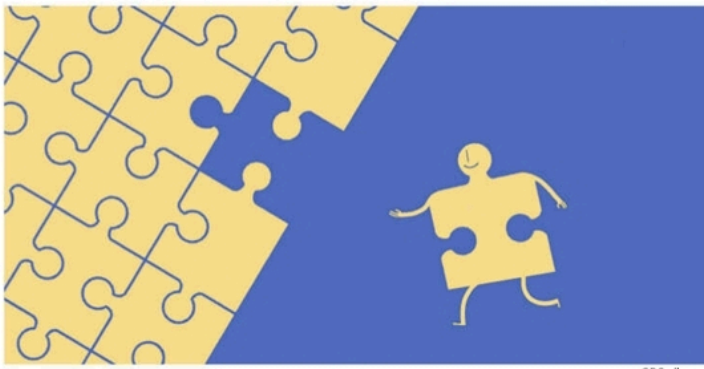
Another element of India's problem was its well-established affinity with Ba'athist leaders like Saddam Hussein in the Middle East. Hafez al Assad and his son Bashar are part of that Arab tradition as well. In the second half of the 20th century, Delhi was comfortable with the radical nationalist Arab Republics that espoused pan-Arabism, socialism, secularism, anti-Zionism, and anti-imperialism. But the Ba'athists tragically turned out to be extremely authoritarian as well.



KIRANJOT KAUR

YOGEN德拉 YADAV (IE, December 10, 'The dimension of a party' maintains that in the events that unfolded at Akal Takht Sahib in Amritsar, three red lines have been crossed. First, the regression of the Akali Dal from a secular to a religious party; second, the constitutional propriety of the proceedings; and third, propriety of the Akal Takht in political matters. The Akali Dal started as a religious party in 1920 and its core has always been Sikhs. Even though the Akali Dal watched Sikh interests, its approach has been secular, not interfering on the interests of other communities. That is because the Sikh religion rejects divisions in society on the basis of religion, caste and gender. It recognises the divine soul in each human being and warmly embraces people from different religions and cultures, welcoming them to Sikh sacred spaces. If Yadav means "secular" that is minus religion, then Congress, Shiv Sena, the ruling party BJP should also raise concerns because they openly practice Hindu religion in government public programmes.

An observer not very conversant with the Sikh doctrine and traditions is likely to miss the nuances of the public hearing of Sukhbir Singh Badal, President of the Shiromani Akali Dal. Yadav's basic argument is to separate religion from politics. He vaguely refers to the concept of *Miri-Piri*, comparing it with the advent of modern-day *bahay*, *yogis* and *swamis* in the BJP regime. The problem actually originated because the "secular" Akali Dal, post the 1995 Moga conference, interlarded directly



C R Sasikumar

Despite much goodwill for India in the conservative Gulf monarchies and the growing energy imports and labour exports, Delhi tended to view them through the prism of Pakistan and struggled to develop a positive engagement strategy. The relationship with Kuwait, unsurprisingly, was a casualty from India's Iraq policy during 1990-91. It was well into the 2000s, when high level visits between Kuwait and India resumed. After Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit to Kuwait in 1981, Vice President Hamid Ansari's visit to Kuwait in 2009 was the highest visit.

Even as the Gulf's energy, economic, and security salience grew in the 21st century, the region remained low on India's diplomatic priorities. During the UPA's decade-long rule, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited three Gulf countries one time each — Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The Modi years have seen a definitive change. The PM has visited the region frequently — seven times to the UAE, two times each to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and once to Bahrain and Oman. His travels to Kuwait this weekend closes the circle on this comprehensive engagement. The past few months have seen preparations for Modi's visit with the exchange of visits by the two foreign ministers setting the stage for the PM's travel. High-level visits are only one metric of the engagement between any two nations.

What we have seen in the last decade is the qualitative transformation in ties between India and the Gulf monarchies — from strong personal rapport between the PM and the Gulf rulers to the intensity of commercial engagement and from security partnership to connectivity projects. The Arab Gulf today has emerged as one of the highest strategic priorities for Delhi. Few other relations of India have transformed as dramatically as Delhi's ties with the Arab Gulf nations over the last decade.

It is entirely accidental that the PM's visit to Kuwait comes days after the swift collapse of the last Ba'athist ruler in Syria. If India's ties with Kuwait were troubled by Delhi's impersonating as Guntur Gobind Singh was the core issue. The "secular" Akali Dal President Sukhbir Singh Badal, also deputy CM Punjab then, manipulated and pressured the *jathedars* of five *Takhts* to forgive the *Sadhi* without him seeking an apology, thereby floating *thundering martyrdom*.

The *jathedars* exonerated him, but the decision had to be rescinded when Sikh masses stood up against it, making the movement of religious and political leaders among common people almost impossible. This was followed by the sacrifice of the Guru Granth Sahib by Dera men and the Akali government in power did not act against them. Instead, "unidentified" police fired at the peaceful Sikh protesters, killing two young Sikhs. State terrorism and police face encounters of the 1980s is an open wound. Parkash Singh Badal as CM of Punjab at that point in time is seen as responsible for not ensuring justice for Sikhs. Singh was such that the Sikh vote started drifting away from the Akali Dal and the party started losing its core vote bank.

From 2017 onwards, the fall was swift. The AAP was the fluke winner. This was within Akali Dal became vociferous, seeking introspection and course correction. A group of senior leaders went to Akal Takht seeking forgiveness from the community for being silent partners in the anti-Sikh decisions taken by Parkash Singh Badal, then CM

Deeper engagement with the moderate Arab states demands better appreciation of their core concerns in Delhi. This, in turn, will involve discarding many of the old Indian premises about the region. Delhi also needs a clear assessment of the hierarchy of contradictions between the moderate Arab states and the non-Arab powers of the region — Iran, Israel, and Turkey. The moderate Arab states have no desire to restore the Ottoman imperial hegemony over their lands or acquiesce in Persian claims for regional primacy. Nor do they want radical Islamist republicans to replace the Ba'athist Republics and sow regional chaos. They deeply resent Israel's refusal to accommodate the Palestinian concerns.

lines the tragedy of Ba'athist republics that turned into horrible dictatorships in which the security services brutalised the populations. The monarchies, which were once revered by progressives around the world, have turned out to be less repressive than the Republics in the Middle East.

Some of them, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are now undertaking significant reform that seeks to promote religious moderation, social modernisation, and economic transition away from oil revenues. On all these counts, the Arab Gulf is a natural partner for India. Meanwhile, Pakistan has ceased to be a complicating factor in Delhi's relations with the Arab monarchies that now attach higher weight to ties with India. India's partnership with the moderate Arab states — including Egypt, the Gulf, Jordan, and Morocco — acquires a new importance amidst the scramble for post-Assad Syria and the inevitable reordering of the Middle East.

Deeper engagement with the moderate Arab states demands better appreciation of their core concerns in Delhi. This in turn will involve discarding many of the old Indian premises about the region. Delhi also needs a clear assessment of the hierarchy of contradictions between the moderate Arab states and the non-Arab powers of the region — Iran, Israel, and Turkey. The moderate Arab states have no desire to restore the Ottoman imperial hegemony over their lands or acquiesce in Persian claims for regional primacy. Nor do they want radical Islamist republicans to replace the Ba'athist Republics and sow regional chaos. They deeply resent Israel's refusal to accommodate the Palestinian concerns. A more flexible Israel could make it easier for the moderate Arab states to build cooperation with the Jewish state in stabilising the Middle East. Having bet on hopes for positive ties between Israel and moderate Arab states in the form of the Abraham Accords, India ought to nudge Tel Aviv in the direction of accommodation. Modi's visit to Kuwait, then, must be seen as an important first step in upping India's game in a Middle East poised for deep structural change.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Global commodity prices remain low, taking pressure off inflation and the import bill, and growth prospects seem to have improved as industrial activity gains traction and downside risks to the crop outlook subside. But that is where the growth story ends and risks start emerging." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

Preparing for Trump 2.0

India would have to weigh its choices — between spending limited budget on costly US hi-tech versus *atmanirbharta* in defence manufacturing



SUJAN CHINNOY

WITH THE TRUMP presidency around the corner, there is much speculation about its impact on an already uncertain international situation. One may see a reduced proclivity to dabble in India's internal affairs, especially with respect to so-called human rights and democratic freedoms. Defence cooperation, on the other hand, is likely to deepen.

Although the Biden administration had dispatched the multiple F-35A Joint Strike Fighter to participate at the Aero India 2023 show and had offered the MIM-104 Patriot surface-to-air (SAM) missile system and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) advanced anti-ballistic missile defence system, India's acquisition of the Russian S-400 reportedly created technical and strategic challenges in integration, apart from US concerns about data exposure to Russia. Since 2016, when the US upgraded India to a "Major Defence Partner" and granted it Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 (STA Tier-1) status, Indian companies have become an integral — although this is still at a nascent stage — part of the value chain for US aircraft manufacturers. Major US Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) such as Lockheed Martin and Boeing are already collaborating with Indian companies. Under Trump, the US is unlikely to take any steps that undermine the supply chains and operating margins of US defence conglomerates anchored in India.

At the same time, many OEMs view India's scale of procurement as sub-optimal. This may explain their reluctance to invest in Indian manufacturing facilities. However, in instances where manufacturing in India is made an integral part of the acquisition criteria, US companies can be expected to fall in line alongside other vendors. For example, Lockheed Martin appears willing to manufacture the F-21 in India as the Request For Proposal (RFP) for the Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA) is likely to mandate such a requirement. Sig Sauer has announced its interest in setting up a 100 per cent owned manufacturing entity for making assault rifles in India because, in this case, the scale of procurement is considerable. US OEMs seem to prefer wholly owned subsidiaries in India to avoid profit-sharing or transfer of technology (ToT) to joint venture partners.

Yet overall, the Trump administration is likely to be less inhibited about high-tech sales to India, given its geopolitical contention with China. India would have to weigh its choices carefully, between spending a limited budget on costly US platforms versus *atmanirbharta* in defence manufacturing.

Stricter H-1B visa rules could impact the IT sector. The cost of Indian IT firms but the focus of the new US administration is likely to be on illegal immigrants. With Republicans controlling the political firmament, stability in decision-making, a stronger dollar and possible cuts in corporate tax rates may, in fact, benefit Indian companies.

Indians make up the third largest group of illegal immigrants in the US. Over 90,000

Indians are reported to have illegally entered the US in 2022-2023. India might have to countenance the return of a large number of deportees. If it prompts stringent action against human trafficking, that would be the silver lining. India should also prepare to deal with possible demands by Trump's evangelist constituency for relaxations in India's visa policy.

Past records point to the likelihood of higher customs duties on India's export of automobiles, textiles and pharmaceuticals, as part of an America First agenda. After all, it was a Trump administration that increased import duties on steel and aluminium and withdrew GSP trade preferences for India. At the same time, a tough posture on trade issues with China could create new opportunities for Indian exporters. Renewed emphasis on "friend-shoring" of supply chains could lead to a manufacturing push in India.

Climate action goals may receive a setback with the expected reorientation towards fossil fuels. There could be fresh US demands on India to increase imports of US oil and gas.

Private players like Elon Musk, a strong Trump supporter, as well as Peter Thiel who played a key role in the selection of JD Vance as Vice-presidential nominee, are entrepreneurs who will leverage high-end technologies to promote their business interests in the defence and national security sector, through Starlink/SpaceX and Palantir. Musk's push for lower entry barriers for satellite broadband services and Tesla electric vehicles in India may receive a shot in the arm. If Trump rolls back strict emission standards in the US market and fulfils his "EV" promise, attention could quickly shift to secure other markets for Tesla, including in India's growing automotive sector.

AI policy in the US is also likely to be driven by prominent Trump supporters, including Elon Musk and Marc Andreessen. As a fallout of the geopolitical contention with China, the Trump administration may create more firewalls around AI innovation in the US. This could still lead to some opportunities for India to secure open access to AI innovation in US labs and provide greater scope for Indian start-ups to build AI applications using US open-source models. India's large talent pool is attractive for the US.

Civil aviation is one of the fastest-growing sectors in India, with estimates of more than 500 million domestic and international air travellers by 2030. It is important for India to engage the Trump administration in developing infrastructure for design, development, production and servicing of passenger aircraft. India should also seek deeper engagement with the US in space technologies, building on the Axiom Mission 4 initiative which will deliver an Indian astronaut to the International Space Station in 2025. There is a case for closer collaboration on earth observation satellites such as NISAR as well as India's planned mission to Venus, the manned Moon mission and the development of open space stations.

Speculation notwithstanding the return of President Trump to power heralds fresh possibilities for India's strategic partnership with the US.

The writer is the director general of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. Views are personal

An internal matter of Sikhs

In directing Sukhbir Badal to do penance, Akal Takht crossed no red lines

in religious matters for vote politics. A *hukamnama* that directed Sikhs not to have any social or political dealing with Dera Sirdar Sahib for impersonating as Guru Gobind Singh was the core issue. The "secular" Akali Dal President Sukhbir Singh Badal, also deputy CM Punjab then, manipulated and pressured the *jathedars* of five *Takhts* to forgive the *Sadhi* without him seeking an apology, thereby floating *thundering martyrdom*.

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Punjab, and Sukhbir Singh Badal beginning in 2007. There was no option but for Akal Takht to summon Sukhbir Singh Badal and seek his explanation. Badal admitted to "being guilty" on all accounts. He was summoned according to Sikh *maryada* and what followed was soul stirring.

For many Sikhs, it brought a sense of closure to the anger that was simmering for over a decade. The community may not forgive easily but a beginning has been made, if the Akali Dal undergoes its penance with humility. Historically, the Akal Takht represents the Sikh doctrine of *Miri-Piri*. Like the body takes guidance from the soul for its actions, temporal issues should take guidance from spiritual principles for harmony in society. The actions of a person living in a diverse society should be for *sarbat* *da bhal*, well being of everyone. Politics should be based on higher values of social justice and inclusivity of the less fortunate. Through centuries this is the place where Sikhs gather to resolve their religious and political issues. In fact, the Akali Dal was born at Akal Takht Sahib and it will remain accountable to it unless they no longer represent the Sikhs.

Coming to the second point, APIL was filed by Syed Waseem Rizvi seeking directions to the Election Commission to cancel the names and symbols of political parties with religious connotations. The EC filed a response to a notice by a bench comprising Justice M R Shah and Justice Krishna Murari in the

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CLARITY NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Scholars without borders' (IE, December 17). In this revenue model, journals accept and publish papers submitted by scholars and charge those who want to read them. Research institutes also subscribe to these journals, so scholars can avail all the papers through their libraries. As fees increase, librarians band up in consortia to increase their bargaining power at negotiations. UNOS replaces these consortia with the national government and obliges journals to provide single fee to access them. This could be beneficial for underfunded government institutions but it isn't specified how UNOS would be implemented and how it would support efforts to make research open-access. We need more clarity on this to evaluate its effectiveness.

Sankar Paul, Nadia

A PRESSING PROBLEM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A crisis in the making' (IE, December 17). India's increasing population, while often regarded as a positive factor, also means dealing with challenges like deteriorating health, nutrition, and underdeveloped skill sets. The writer points at malnutrition, anaemia and stunted growth,

particularly among women and children, and declining education standards of the population, as pressing problems. These could result in a country losing out on the economic growth. The writer suggests inclusive approaches towards food security and health welfare as well as skill formation initiatives to overcome these problems. If actions aren't taken soon, the country can end up converting its demographic dividend into a demographic nightmare.

Harsuja Tiwary, Patna

HUSSAIN'S LEGACY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Thank you, Ustad' (IE, December 17). As news about the legendary tabla maestro Zakir Hussain started circulating, what stood out was how everyone began recalling his music as a divine force that would defy mortality. His art was a unifying force and the compelling power of his music transcended religion and culture. The grand maestro's legacy is not just a collection of work but a testament to how the musical genius elevated the percussion instrument to glorious heights. This could not have been imagined even in the time of his father Ustad Allarakha who mentored him. Let his legacy live on.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

The writer is member, SGPC Amritsar

The
Hindustan Times
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[OUR TAKE]

When Colombo comes calling

President Dissanayake's visit should allay fears of a Sri Lankan pivot towards China

It is significant that Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Disanayake used his first meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to convey an assurance that his government will not allow Sri Lanka to be used against Indian interests. It is also significant that, at a time when the leaders of Nepal and the Maldives have moved away from the convention of travelling first to India after assuming office, Disanayake chose India for his first foreign trip. In some ways, this is the result of India's outreach to Disanayake and his Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party in the months preceding the presidential and general elections in Sri Lanka, when it became evident that the political tide was turning in the island nation. Disanayake also conveyed Sri Lanka's appreciation for the economic aid worth nearly \$4 billion that was provided by India during the unprecedented economic crisis two years ago, and New Delhi, for its part, pledged to continue supporting Colombo's economic stabilisation efforts and announced several grants to further ease the pressure on the Sri Lankan government. The economic sphere is one area where the Indian government's timely assistance has gone down well with the Sri Lankan leadership, especially as China's response — both in terms of actual assistance and debt restructuring — has been found to be wanting.

India also used Disanayake's visit to flag two issues that are of importance to New Delhi — the activities of Chinese surveillance vessels in regional waters and their berthing in Sri Lankan ports, and the need to address the aspirations of the island's Tamil minority, especially their demand for meaningful devolution of power through the implementation of constitutional provisions and the holding of local elections. Colombo's responses on both indicated that this is a work in progress, though Indian officials pointed to Disanayake's acknowledgment of the support he garnered in Tamil-dominated areas and the attendant expectation that he would address the aspirations of Tamils. India also unveiled several measures to ramp up security and strategic cooperation, including the supply of military platforms and cooperation in hydrography and maritime security — steps that appear clearly aimed at countering Chinese influence.

The optics of the visit were encouraging and should set at rest fears that Disanayake and JVP, which was hostile to India in the past, could pivot Colombo closer to Beijing. Disanayake will next travel to China and that visit will be keenly watched in New Delhi.

Ministerial blues haunt Mahayuti

Dissent within the Mahayuti is out in the open after Chief Minister (CM) Devendra Fadnis expanded his team of ministers on Sunday. This was not entirely unexpected since the legislators who failed to land a ministry included heavyweights such as Chhagan Bhujbal and Dilip Walse-Patil. Considering that all Mahayuti constituents — the Bharatiya Janata Party, Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) — did well in the polls, numerous ministerial aspirants were expected to miss out. Multiple factors, including region and caste, are considered to ensure the right social mix in the ministry. That logic, however, has not impressed those who missed berths. Many stayed away when 39 ministers were inducted into the ministry on Sunday. In Nashik, Bhujbal's supporters blocked traffic and torched vehicles. The senior leader, a critic of the demand for a Maratha quota, stressed his credentials as an OBC leader to question his exclusion from the ministry. Eknath Shinde, who had gone into a sulk when he lost out on the CM's office, has come out with an ingenious plan to contain the dissent within his party — the Sena plans to collect signed affidavits from its ministers that they will quit office midway into their tenure. The ostensible reason is to enable the party and CM to drop underperformers. These affidavits have no legal sanctity but serve as a balm to legislators who missed out in this round.

The disgruntlement within the Sena and NCP suggests the nature of politics today — a secular non-ideology based approach to capturing power (which has meant splits such as those that saw these versions of the Sena and NCP being created), cascades down into legislators holding parties to ransom. The alliance will need to ride the storm without letting it impact governance. The fact that the arithmetic is overwhelmingly in the Mahayuti's favour will make the task easier.

The disenchantment with the secular ideal

The secular ethos envisaged in the Constitution should be the foundation for governing India

On December 12, through an interim order, a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court led by the current Chief Justice of India Sanjay Khanna, delivered a brief respite against the rising tide of communalism. The bench has temporarily barred trial courts from admitting petitions and passing "effective orders" allowing surveys in cases related to the Places of Worship Act, 1991 until the validity of the 1991 law is determined. In so doing, the Supreme Court has put a temporary lid on the Pandora's box opened by former Chief Justice Dhananjaya Y. Chandrachud's observations in the Gyanvapi mosque case that merely allowing a "survey" did not violate the Places of Worship Act.

But this respite may well be short-lived. Open majoritarianism and shrill bigotry are now the dominant culture of our polity. We are allowing this to transform us from a society that, in its founding moment, audaciously attempted to build a sense of civility on the basis of mutual respect and tolerance based by constitutional values of secularism into

one that has fallen prey to insecure, aggressive pettiness. The plethora of petitions to examine whether temples stood where mosques do and reinterpret history are an outcome of this. The violence in Sambhal after the survey team arrived in late November is just a fleeting glimpse of what could lie ahead. To confront this malaise, we desperately need to restore our secular ethos. The real tragedy is that secularism today has very few champions.

It wasn't always this way. On December 6, when India marked the 32nd anniversary of the dissolution of the Babri Masjid, social media was full of newspaper articles and debates of the time. "Nation's Shame" is how India Today described the act of demolition, capturing the fact that even at the moment was being celebrated in some quarters, there remained active political contestation. This contestation was framed within the grammar of our constitutional, secular ethos and it is this that generated the pressure, the height of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, for Parliament to pass the Places of Worship Act, 1991. This was acknowledged in the Ayodhya judgment that observed that the Act was "intrinsically related to the obligations of a secular State...to preserve and protect the equality of all faiths as an essential constitutional value".

It is a measure of how far we have come that secularism today has no defenders. Those who speak in its name are labelled "anti-Hindu". Its core value — the principled distance between the State and religion — has few takers.

This is partly a consequence of competitive party politics that reduced the secular ideal to a politics of appeasement and vote banks, thus opening the doors for secularism's political opponents to delegitimise the ideal while simultaneously legitimising majoritarianism as the alternative. This is Hindutva's core appeal. But its real success has been its ability to effectively trap the ideological opposition, pushing it to respond to the Hindutva juggernaut through the prism of religiosity rather than a reclamation of the constitutional ideal. This is best illustrated through the Congress whose own complicity in undermining the secular principle is well recognised.

Post-2014, once the BJP and Hindutva emerged dominant, the Congress, floundering on the back of its own assessment of being a "Muslim party", spent years playing with the idea of soft majoritarianism, seeking to prove its Hindu credentials and remained remarkably reticent when it came to defending civil liberties and rights of Muslims. More recently, Rahul Gandhi's ide-



Yamini Aiyar



The violence in Sambhal after the survey team arrived in late November is just a fleeting glimpse of what could lie ahead.

ological response to Hindutva has become sharper. However, it is a response that has carefully avoided the political vocabulary of secularism, choosing instead to draw on the grammar of religion to distinguish between "Hinduism" of peaceful tolerance and Hindutva. This is a critical dialogue that India must have. However, in the political realm, it falls short, for it fails to articulate and defend norms to govern and practice tolerance and coexistence in society.

The secular ethos envisaged in the Constitution — that all religions are equal in the eyes of the law and that the State shall not propagate one particular religion — provided the foundation for governing a society that negotiates multiple identities to coexist in security and harmony. It is

this ethos in our polity that pushed Parliament to defend the constitutional ideal and legislate the Places of Worship Act, 1991. The awareness that a continual rekindling of disputed pasts and the remaking of history will only lead us to a path of violence and hate-motivated this legislation. It was a political response to the politics of resentment and based on the recognition that the secular ethos must shape our norms of governance.

The Supreme Court has given the country temporary respite. Our polity and society must shed its disenchantment with the secular ideal and restore its ethos. It is not too late.

Yamini Aiyar is a visiting senior fellow at Brown University. The views expressed are personal.

Pragmatism undergirds New Delhi's China policy

The outcome of two recent meetings, one between external affairs minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi and the other between defence minister Rajnath Singh and Chinese defence minister Dong Jun, indicate that the reset of India-China relations is proceeding apace. National Security Adviser Ajit Dorais in China today to hold talks with China's foreign minister Wang Yi under the Special Representatives mechanism to address pending border issues.

The problems between the two, aggravated by Chinese actions in eastern Ladakh, had complicated bilateral relations. The Indian response was two-tiered, involving security and economic ties. On the security front, New Delhi took nuanced steps, instead of escalation; it matched the Chinese deployment on its side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and pivoted its military's orientation away from Pakistan to China. It pointedly also enhanced the nature and scale of its engagement with the United States.

On the economic side, India intensified policies to restrict Chinese business activities in India, including investment screening, product bans and tax investigations. Approvals of Chinese proposals became rare in the wake of the Galwan clash and the process intensified in 2023 when a four-border negotiations to roll back the 2020 Chinese actions yielded no results. Chinese motor vehicle companies seeking to invest billions of dollars in India were blocked. India also banned over 350 Chinese mobile apps.

Direct flights to China were halted and tax investigations were mounted against Chinese telecom majors, and they were banned from India's 5G trials. India also blocked all visas for Chinese nationals since 2020, even though this hit projects that needed Chinese advisers and technicians.

Another aspect of Indian policy was to give an additional fillip to the domestic economy through measures like the Production Linked Incentives (PLI) to attract companies that wanted to leave China. The PLI scheme is beneficial but will take time as well as continued supply-chain links to China to be successful. The Chinese reaction was quite different. If India chose not to escalate things militarily, Beijing sought to do the same on the economic front. It sought to persuade India to separate the border issue from those relating to the economy and people-to-people ties. Goods imports from China surged 56% since Galwan, and India's trade deficit with China has nearly doubled to \$85 billion, so Beijing has not been complaining. Among the bigger successes of the Chinese companies has been

their ability to capture a significant section of the Android smartphone market. The Chinese policy paid off when in 2024 Indian officials began taking a different track. In January, a top department for the promotion of industry and internal trade bureaucracy hinted that India could ease restrictions on Chinese investments if peace on the border could be achieved. Importantly, the Economic Survey tabled in Parliament during the budget session in July noted that India needed to boost its global exports and could either integrate into China's supply chains or seek foreign direct investment (FDI) from there. It said that "focusing on FDI from China seems more promising". The FDI route could also help arrest the trade deficit that India had with China, its top export partner.

In August, China's Global Times reported that India had begun approving Chinese investment proposals in electronic manufacturing with relation to two companies, Luxshare and Huaqiang Technologies. These, the newspaper noted, were the first such approvals in recent times. In November, Niti Aayog CEO BVR Subrahmanyam had said India should be part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as well as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). India had pulled out of RCEP after entering negotiations in 2013, fearing that its manufacturing sector would suffer on account of China.

India's pragmatic approach to China, which has led to its engagement at Chinese blockade points in Ladakh, is sharply focused on promoting its self-interest. Delhi now recognises that a blanket ban approach towards China was harmful. Instead of rushing headlong in the other direction, it is carefully unravelling a new approach. For example, it is planning to ensure a clause that investments from firms with up to 10% Chinese shareholding will no longer require government approval. But, it is also planning to set up a joint investment monitoring framework that will involve tracking the investments of Chinese companies. It has also taken steps to facilitate business visas for Chinese technicians, who were needed by Indian manufacturing companies involved in PLI schemes.

There is another important factor here. New Delhi views its multi-alignment and multi-polar posture as the kernel of its foreign policy, one that gives it leverage to engage meaningfully with the United States, Russia, the European Union and countries of the Global South. An approach that is uniformly hostile to China only serves to undermine it. So, India, which is already a major trade partner of China and cooperates with it in institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS, and G20, is now seeking to fine-tune its policies.

Manoj Joshi is a distinguished fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal.

India's pragmatic approach to China is focused on promoting its self-interest.

[URSULA VON DER LEYEN] EUROPEAN COMMISSION PRESIDENT

Now, we (the EU) have to step up and continue our direct engagement with the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham... the risk of Daesh (the Islamic State terror group) is real. We can't let this happen

After talks with Turkey on the new regime in Syria

Simultaneous polls are an imperative for India

Following the Union Cabinet's approval, the introduction in Parliament of amendment bills to usher in simultaneous elections is a significant moment for India's storied parliamentary democracy. When implemented, "one nation, one election" will reclaim the sanctity and spirit of our Constitution, as bequeathed by the creators of our foundational document, in the context of simultaneous elections. This is the Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's commitment to further strengthen cooperative federalism and consolidate nation-building.

The historic Constituent Assembly, which spanned nearly three years, was tasked with the crucial responsibility of framing our Constitution. The Constituent Assembly debates witnessed the finest minds of the time deliberate and discuss a wide range of topics like the Preamble, untouchability, uniform civil code, right to equality, and federalism among other areas of national relevance. But, very conspicuously, there seems to have been no detailed dialogue nor debate on simultaneous elections. Our Constitution creators probably felt that a synchronous cycle of simultaneous elections was the natural way forward and thus would be retained. They could not have envisaged how democratically elected state governments would later be toppled by Congress-led Union governments, showing scant regard for cooperative federalism while throwing all constitutional norms to the wind.

By and large, the first three elections to the Lok Sabha, from 1952 to 1967, witnessed a synchronous cycle of simultaneous elections along with various State assemblies. In 1959, the Jawaharlal Nehru-led government at the Centre imposed President's rule in a state for the first time ever, by dismissing Kerala's elected Communist government. Indira Gandhi, during her time as the prime minister, dismissed elected state governments about 50 times using Article 356. Between 1966 and 1977, her government toppled 35 state governments. In 1970, for the first time ever, a Lok Sabha's tenure was cut short and dissolved ahead of time.

The Indira Gandhi government, elected in early 1971, launched a frontal assault on democracy and tried to crush our Constitution by imposing the declared Emergency in 1975, which lasted for 21 months. Since the government could not legally continue beyond five years without an election, Article 172 was amended to extend the duration of the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies

from five to six years. This was done singularly to ensure that the Indira Gandhi government could continue with its Emergency regime, without having to face an election.

The Congress party's premature dismissal of democratically elected state governments shattered the synchronous cycle of simultaneous elections, which had prevailed since 1952. The Election Commission of India (ECI), in 1983, proposed simultaneous elections, but the then Congress government decided against it. The Law Commission of India, in 1999, headed by Justice BP Jeevan Reddy, who had been a judge at the Supreme Court, said in its 170th report, "We should go back to the situation where (elections) to the Lok Sabha and all the Assemblies are held together". In 2015, a parliamentary standing committee headed by Congress Member of Parliament, EM Sudarsana Natchiah, offered its view on the feasibility of holding simultaneous elections. It said that simultaneous elections would mitigate and reduce the massive expenditure undertaken on asynchronous polls, policy paralysis due to the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct, impact on delivery of essential services, and burden on crucial manpower deployed during elections. In 2020, addressing the All India Presiding Officers Conference, PM Modi said

one nation, one election can't be thought of merely as a subject of debate; rather, it was a necessity and need of the nation. When the high-level committee constituted by the government and headed by former president Ram Nath Kovind consulted various stakeholders, 32 political parties supported simultaneous elections, many even breaking ranks within the Opposition.

The introduction of "one nation, one election" into the fastest-growing economy in the world, "One nation, one election card" (in 2018) empowered crorehs of families with food security. PM Modi, with the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, effected one nation, one Constitution throughout our country and then "one nation, one health card", launched in 2020, secured nationwide health care support for our citizens. One nation, one election is a step in the right direction. This will pave the way for ensuring political stability, enhancing good governance, increasing voter turnout, reducing the burden on our security forces, and substantially eliminating corruption during elections.

CR Kesavan is a national spokesperson of the BJP. The views expressed are personal.

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BUILDING BRIDGES

Sri Lankan President's India visit frames enormous potential of bilateral relationship. Realising it requires pragmatic diplomacy

ANURA KUMARA DISSANAYAKE's visit to India — his first overseas trip since becoming Sri Lanka's president — has come at a crucial moment in the bilateral relationship. The positive tone of the joint statement could augur the beginning of a deeper economic and strategic relationship between the two countries. Part of the reason for optimism is that Dissanayake enjoys a broad mandate domestically: After winning the presidential election in September, the coalition led by his party, National People's Power (NPP), won a decisive majority in the legislature last month. One of the main hurdles to deepening ties in the past has been the fragmented nature of Sri Lankan governments, making it hard for Colombo to deliver on promises. In the last few months, Dissanayake and the NPP have also done much to show their pragmatic side and assuage fears that stemmed from the party's violent past. The government has, for example, confirmed that it will continue with the IMF programme for its economic recovery, albeit with greater spending on welfare programmes. It is important now for both countries to resume dialogue on a Free Trade Agreement and focus on energy supply, trade, technology exchange and Indian FDI in Sri Lanka.

The joint statement also recognises the positive role digital public infrastructure can play in Sri Lanka's development — including an Aadhaar-like identity and UPI payments interface. Addressing two longstanding issues, however, require patience and sensitivity from both sides. The first is of fishermen from both countries crossing the maritime border, as well as overfishing. This requires high diplomacy to think of the best interests of the fisherman and businesses. The answer may lie in some form of coordinated fishing. The second issue is of Sri Lanka's Tamil minorities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "We hope that Sri Lanka will fully implement the [Sri Lanka] Constitution and fulfil its commitment to hold provincial council elections", while avoiding an explicit mention of the 13th amendment to the country's constitution, which guarantees rights to minorities. The volatility of the issue demands such subtlety. Dissanayake and NPP are, broadly speaking, Sinhala nationalists and the government's political compulsions must inform how Delhi approaches the issue — especially because in India, too, it has an emotive and political background.

Arguably, the most important takeaway from President Dissanayake's visit was his assurance that "we will not have our land... be used in a manner that is detrimental to the interest of India in any way" and the evocation of a "free, open, safe and secure Indian Ocean Region (IOR)". This seeming reference to Beijing's activities in the IOR comes even as China is involved in developing the Hambantota port. While Dissanayake's assurance is a positive augury, Delhi must realise that it does not have a veto over Colombo's ties with other powers. Both sides need to establish their red lines on the matter and have a clear line of communication. That will go a long way in preventing misunderstandings as well as elevating the relationship to one of the most significant in the Subcontinent.

SUPREME JURY?

SC interim order staying T M Krishna's award is needless intervention, chips away at artistic freedom

THE SUPREME COURT'S decision to put on hold the recognition of Carnatic vocalist T M Krishna as the recipient of the Sangita Kalanidhi M S Subbulakshmi award until the appeal by M's grandson V Shrinivasan is decided raises questions about the role of art, free expression, and institutional boundaries. Shrinivasan's contention has been two-fold: That Krishna has besmirched M's legacy in his writings and that the conferment is violative of her will which forbade the institution of any award, grant or statue in her name. The first is up for debate, the latter only honoured selectively. What the court's interim order has done in the meantime is to needlessly draw the highest court into an arena that is not theirs, undermine civil society's decision to honour an individual and chip away at artistic freedom.

One of the most prestigious honours in Carnatic music, the annual Sangita Kalanidhi award, conferred by the Music Academy in Chennai, is a tribute to a singer who transcends boundaries, social and musical, to become a cultural icon. Whether Krishna deserves the award can be debated endlessly — let the naysayers and the cheerleaders argue their case but that's not the point. To argue against his selection on the basis that his views detract from the sanctity of the art form and that his writing has done a disservice to M's legacy is narrow-spirited and sets a precedent that can undermine any award. In a democracy where contestations in art are de rigueur, Krishna's advocacy for progressive ideals is a daring attempt to break down walls. It defies simplification in much the same way as M's music did — building bridges, in Krishna's words, between the everyday and the exalted by "reorienting the aesthetics of her art" through a form of calibrated Brahminism.

Indeed, the apex court, in its interim order, has clarified that the stay is not a reflection of Krishna's "stellar performance". But the very fact of the stay and that the court has termed the matter "very important and sensitive", undermines the spirit of artistic freedom and intellectual independence, fundamental to art and artists. Surely, the court's crowded roster doesn't need the extra burden of playing the jury for award ceremonies. The award to Krishna, in its most meaningful form, is about celebrating the courage to innovate, to challenge, and to speak out. The court should, with all due respect, stay away.

POPEYE, NO SPINACH

Several beloved comic characters and literary pieces go out of copyright in few weeks. Don't let that limit creativity

OH, I'M POPEYE the Sailor Man... I'm strong to the finish / Cause I eats me spinach... Popeye with spinach is like Thor with Mjolnir (his hammer) — strong and packing in a mighty punch. So the fact that the set of comic characters and literary works entering the public domain, after going out of copyright, includes only Popeye's first appearance in 1929 by cartoonist E C Segar in the newspaper strip "Thimble Theatre" is disappointing. Popeye for free use will be a weak, stuttering sailor man, with no spinach, and obnoxiously bulging triceps that are of little help.

Fortunately, many other works of art will also be free to use from January 1, 2025. This includes the beloved Belgian reporter Tintin (from Hergé's *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets*), masterpieces by William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Virginia Woolf and the earliest sound films from Alfred Hitchcock, Cecil B DeMille, and John Ford. As with Popeye, only the earliest version of Tintin will be available in the public domain, which excludes his red hair that didn't appear until years later. Even so, Tintin's Soviet adventure could perhaps be modified to erase some of the anti-socialist propaganda behind it. His first and only depiction of actually writing a newspaper report is also in this comic.

Every January 1, along with a fresh set of New Year resolutions, there are more free-to-use icons up for reinterpretation. Last year was Mickey and Minnie Mouse from Steamboat Willie. That some of the most beloved characters are now in the public domain means endless creative possibilities. However, at a time when film franchises like Marvel are producing movies with minimal original storytelling, drawing on characters created several decades ago, it may be useful to have newer voices and give unconventional narratives a chance. Mickey Mouse and Winnie the Pooh are endearing on T-shirts — but when it comes to movies, a Maui Moana or a Miguel from Coco trumps any day.

Real basic structure question

Constitution's main task is to protect individual dignity. Can it do so in face of politics of ascriptive identities?



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THE DEBATE ON the Constitution in Parliament turned out to be bitter and partisan over whether the Congress or the BJP was the greater threat to the Constitution. At one level, this process exemplifies democratic accountability. It would be wonderful if each party held the other's feet to the fire on core constitutional values. But that bluster did not give us more confidence that core constitutional values will indeed be maintained.

This column will not go into the track record of the BJP and the Congress on the Constitution. But we ought to reflect on how to negotiate the deeper paradoxes of modern constitutionalism. First, we need to put aside irrelevant issues in this debate. The most irrelevant is the question of "authenticity" of the Constitution. The genius of our framers was that they did not burden the Constitution with questions of faith, history and identity. It is not because they did not think these were important. But precisely because they are important, we have to create the conditions where we can freely come to judgements about these matters. Encumbering the Constitution with these questions is a dangerous path. For one thing, it will make the Constitution a zero-sum game. For another, they realised these questions are best addressed outside the context of the application of state or legal power. And finally, they understood that the question of authenticity is a fool's errand. Who decides the yardstick of authenticity? Is authenticity to be measured in relation to our past or our future selves? The question of identity is simultaneously too protean, too constricting and too important to be left to the mercy of constitutional lawyers.

The core aspiration of constitutionalism is simple: The entrenchment of individual rights to protect the basic freedom and dignity of individuals; the affirmation of at least the political equality of all citizens; the creation of institutional checks and balances; formally defined limitations on the power of government; the preservation of institutions and practices that allow citizens to exercise political agency (democracy) and engage in practices of political justification for all decisions that affect their common life. This, broadly speaking, is the basic structure of any modern constitutionalism. The rest is diversion.

Lack of trust in people, and measuring each against compulsory identities whether on caste, religion or nation subverts freedom. Most of our significant assaults on free speech and individual freedom are in the name of community identity. The exaltation of executive power subverts checks and balances, and neither party has been vigilant on executive power. The fairness of the franchise so that each one of us can act as political agents has been preserved enough and we still engage in slivers of political justification, though both are under threat.

The real question is vigilance towards all the forces that subvert this aspiration. Lack of trust in people, and measuring each against compulsory identities whether on caste, religion or nation subverts freedom. Most of our significant assaults on free speech and individual freedom are in the name of community identity. The exaltation of executive power subverts checks and balances, and neither party has been vigilant on executive power. The fairness of the franchise so that each one of us can act as political agents has been preserved enough and we still engage in slivers of political justification, though both are under threat.

The puzzle about constitutions is deeper though. What is the constitution's relation to time and society? And one ought to recognise that constitutions are very peculiar things. The tension between individual rights and groups rights, for example. But if we are to overcome these tensions they have to be driven by the lodestar of individual freedom and dignity applied to all communities. The puzzle about constitutions is deeper though. What is the constitution's relation to time and society? And one ought to recognise that constitutions are very peculiar things. The tension between individual rights and groups rights, for example. But if we are to overcome these tensions they have to be driven by the lodestar of individual freedom and dignity applied to all communities.

a way it is a testament to the power of the Constitution that both parties have to act as if the Constitution was this quasi-eternal truth. But like Sanatan Dharma, does it just become a matter of convenient invocation? Or is there genuine allegiance to its substance?

This is related to a second question. Historically, constitutions explicitly embodied social power. Whether it is pre-modern European constitutions, Roman, or even our own princely constitutions, the function of a constitution was to represent social power. Originally, the concept of checks and balances was one form of actual social power checking another, not formal institutions checking one another. The constitution was effective because it could channel social power. Constitutional change was understood to be a change in the social power it represented. Constitutions were not eternal forms: They were a way of channelling social forces. Modern constitutions self-consciously abstract away social forms. There are no natural social forms to be represented, no natural classes or ascriptive groups. Social power is just a series of contingent coalitions carved through politics under conditions of universal suffrage. Modern constitutions therefore rely on pure legal forms for their authority. India makes a concession on this score on the question of caste — it is a social form that has to be represented. Whether this is true provisionally, as a way of creating conditions to include groups to be oppressed, or a permanent condition is a debatable question. But the form of a modern constitution works only when no social force can claim to be a permanent majority. In fact, society is not conceived in terms of majorities and minorities with permanent identities. But the irony is that the Constitution itself partly entrenched this. Now, we have a politics that has created the sense of a permanent ascriptive majority and minority, with the latter demanding that the Constitution represent it as a social force. Whether we can survive this contradiction, between a Constitution that was meant to liberate individuals, and a politics that pushes them into ascriptive identities is still an open question.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



PRAVIN THIPSAY

GUKESH DOMMARAJU BECOMING the World Chess Champion at the age of 18 is a great record — one that is sure to last several decades, at least. Eighteen is very young to be a world champion. If you compare this with athletics, it's like winning the 100 m race two seconds quicker than others. With Gukesh's title, I must say the era of Indian chess prodigies is here.

His win tells us that chess is going to be a youngster's game. We will now see "fighting chess", as aggression has increased. Games are no longer boring, dry — like the world championship match between Garry Kasparov and Vladimir Kramnik in 2000. That was arguably the worst world championship match in history. This was because the games were played only to try and get a winning position in the opening. Less than 10 per cent of the thinking was left for the board.

Contrast this with the final game between Gukesh and Ding Liren: It's 100 per cent over the board. If the 14th game between Gukesh and Ding was being played 20 or 30 years back or 24 years ago, when Kasparov and Kramnik were on the hot seats, the two Russians may have agreed to a draw at an earlier stage. But now chess has become a fight. You are not going to give in to a draw even in a drawn position.

This is now going to be the norm because the youngsters have energy. Their physical and mental strength are enormous. What makes Gukesh stand out is that he's a

TRAILBLAZER, TRENDSETTER

D Gukesh's success represents India's vibrant chess ecosystem

Gukesh has the ability to find a plan in a position which otherwise looks dead and with an accuracy of calculation. Originality is like art. And calculation is mathematics. Gukesh is good at both: He is artistic and imaginative. At the same time, he is accurate. Not to forget that he has immense confidence in himself. But he is not overconfident. He is not afraid of big names. And he has an absurd grasp of the position, which perhaps other players at his level don't.

very original player. He is like the architect and engineer of his own position. He thinks of a position, then builds it himself. In that way, he can be compared with young Anatoly Karpov. In any position, Gukesh has the capacity to not be forced into a draw. If you're playing for the pleasure of the game, trying to win the game on every occasion, you play well. If you think, "I don't know what to do, I'll try to make a draw", like Ding did in the last game, you'll lose. As the Russian proverb goes, "the easiest way to lose is to play for a draw".

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All over the world, the atmosphere we see in India is missing. There are phenomenal players in other countries too. Kazakhstan, for example, has Bibisara Assaubayeva and Uzbekistan has Nodirbek Abdusattorov who won the World Rapid Championship at the age of 17, defeating Magnus Carlsen. But somewhere, these talents halt at that stage. What has happened — particularly in the case of Gukesh and Arjun Erigaisi — is that they

are progressing continuously, without a stop.

There are a few reasons for this. Indian players seem to be very devoted and hardworking. They work 10 to 11 hours everyday. This is not because of the system. It's a product of the hard work of the parents of players and the players themselves. Only in specific regions of India are players getting sponsorships. That also mostly comes from private effort. Sponsors are backing players who belong to a particular region or speak a particular language. There is no system supporting players until they have proven themselves.

Before the Covid lockdowns, we had 1,06,000 registered players. But only 36,000 registered players play in tournaments. So maybe it's an earthquake. But it's happening in a very limited area. This is not the way the USSR was doing it. When Kasparov won the World Championship, I was in Moscow. He mentioned there that they had 4.5 million players playing in tournaments.

Despite these barriers, the day is not far when the world championship match will see two Indians playing against each other. I expect Gukesh to be challenged by an Indian player in 2026. I feel there's a high probability of this happening. At the moment, Erigaisi looks like the most probable candidate.

Thipsay is the third grandmaster from India, an Arjuna award-winner and chess coach

DECEMBER 18, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIRA GANDHI'S NOTE

"IF I DIE a violent death as some fear and a few are plotting, I know the violence will be in the thought and the action of the assassin, not in my dying," said the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in a note she left behind. Written in her own handwriting without a date, the note was found among the papers she left. It was released by the AICC (I) on December 17.

RETURN TO BHOPAL

THE GHOST TOWN started regaining normalcy on December 17 as eight tonnes of the remaining deadly methyl-isocyanate gas was

converted to pesticide at the Union Carbide plant. The safe conversion of MIC has restored the people's faith in the scientists' ability to carry out the "zero-risk" operation successfully. They have started trickling back into their houses. However, most of the commercial establishments continued to remain closed.

KAPIL DEV EXCLUDED

THE FIVE-MEMBER selection committee of the Board of Control for Cricket in India, dominated by skipper Sunil Gavaskar, dropped a bombshell saying they excluded Kapil Dev, one of the world's leading all-rounders, from the Indian team for the third Test against

England at Kolkata. Dev, who played a stellar role in winning the World Cup in 1983, has been dropped on "disciplinary grounds".

PM ON PUNJAB

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi said that the government was ready to consider the Anandpur Sahib resolution, provided it was within the framework of the Constitution. Addressing an election meeting in Baleswar, the last in a series of six meetings in the districts of Orissa, Gandhi claimed that the government had always been keen on solving the Punjab impasse and changing the Opposition with "scuttling efforts."



The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Addicts not demons

Prioritise rehabilitation in battle against drugs

INDIA aspires to be drug-free ('Nasha Mukti') by 2047. A lot of things must fall into place for the nation to come anywhere near achieving that lofty target. An attitudinal change, in particular, can make a big difference on the ground. The Supreme Court has rightly observed that demonising victims of drug abuse is a wrong approach — the focus should be on rehabilitating them. Various stakeholders — Central and state governments, civil society, families, educational institutions — should pay heed to the suggestion of holding frank discussions to tackle this scourge. The drug users have to be brought out of the shadows. Otherwise, stigma and ostracisation will make them sink deeper into the mire.

At stake is the nation's future as the youth are most vulnerable to the lure of substance abuse. Handling young addicts with sensitivity and compassion can make them see reason. In any case, they are only the small fry. The big fish are the drug traders and traffickers who are part of a thriving international network. They have to be targeted incessantly by the law enforcement agencies. This is especially true for Punjab, which is bearing the brunt of cross-border narcotic smuggling. The state, which was rocked by a spate of drug overdose deaths earlier this year, is struggling to combat the menace.

The initiative to involve mothers and sisters of youngsters in the battle against drugs is praiseworthy. The emotional support of family members can prevent many juveniles from going astray. The recent murder of a Barnala sarpanch, who reportedly took a firm stand against drug dealers, shows that the noble path is fraught with dangerous consequences. However, such an incident should not deter people from holding firm. Nothing less than a mass movement can stem the rot.

Celebratory firing

Khap shows the way to end deadly custom

THE dangerous practice of celebratory firing has once again turned joyous occasions into tragedies, claiming lives and leaving families shattered. Over the past month, three harrowing incidents in Punjab and Haryana highlight the grave consequences of this reckless tradition. In Charkhi Dadr, Haryana, a 13-year-old girl tragically lost her life while her mother sustained injuries during a wedding procession. In Punjab's Ferozepur, a bride was critically injured when her brother accidentally fired a pistol during the *vidai* ceremony. An incident in Amritsar left a woman with a bullet wound at a wedding resort.

These senseless tragedies underline the urgent need for decisive action, and the Sarv Jyoti Athgama Khap Panchayat's recent decision to ban celebratory firing is a welcome step. The ban, imposed after the teenage girl's death in, reflects the khap's commitment to eliminating social evils. Its resolution includes reporting offenders to the police, imposing fines and even enforcing social boycotts, signalling zero tolerance for this dangerous practice. Crucially, the khap has also announced plans for awareness campaigns about the risks of celebratory firing. Such initiatives are vital for changing public attitudes and dismantling the normalisation of gun use at weddings. Communities across Punjab and Haryana must follow the khap's example, showing a collective resolve to end this deadly custom.

While grassroots efforts are crucial, the responsibility also lies with authorities. The Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasised the illegality and dangers of celebratory firing, calling it a 'reckless endangerment of lives' and ruling that such acts should attract charges of culpable homicide. Gun regulations must be strictly enforced and violators should face swift legal action. Additionally, gun licensing norms should mandate education on safety protocols to prevent misuse. Society must unite to ensure that festive occasions remain moments of happiness, free from the shadow of preventable mishaps.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.
LAHORE, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1924

The Hindu-Sikh position

OF the three communal positions enunciated at the recent informal conference at Lahore and summed up by Mahatma Gandhi in his article in *Young India*, the simplest is that of the Sikhs. They said that they were not in favour of communal representation at all, but that if communal representation was to remain, their 'special position and importance in Punjab required special treatment' — i.e., excessive representation. There is at least as much to be said for special representation as for the similar plea of the Muslim minorities in other provinces. The statement that the Sikhs want this special representation, only if communal representation to which they are themselves opposed, is to remain, makes the Sikh position as a whole much more reasonable than that of the Muslim minorities. We would only place two considerations before our friends and trust they will give them the attention they deserve. In the first place, it is impossible for the Sikhs, under any system of democratic or representative government, to have such a number of seats in the Legislative Council and local bodies as would enable them by themselves to hold their own against either of the other communities. The root idea of representative government would entirely exclude such a possibility. It is true that communal representation and representative government are themselves incompatible. But communal representation is admittedly a compromise and accepted by the Hindus, at any rate, only as a necessary evil for the time being. It is neither necessary nor desirable to add another evil to it that would be just as inconsistent with democratic government as communal representation itself.

When misinformation is weaponised

This is part of the new cognitive warfare that aims to erode a country from within



TARA KARTHA
EX-DIRECTOR, NATIONAL SECURITY
COUNCIL SECRETARIAT

THESE are very strange times. According to a sudden spate of polling activity, we are now told that we suffer from severe unhappiness, a disinformation deluge and the worst airlines in the world. Certainly, some of this is true. We do have some of the top-10 ranks in the world in terms of air pollution, but the deluge of negative polling is suspicious, especially when no one bothered to point out any of these in the pathetic 1970s when our cities were even dirtier and we had few airlines to speak of. It's curious that when we start reaching somewhere near the top of the financial mountain, there are many hands pushing us back. Some of those sources are interesting and their methodologies even more so.

The first is the puzzling polling. The World Happiness Report puts India below war-torn Mali and Liberia. This report uses data from a variety of sources, including Gallup, with a sample size of 2,000-3,000 for each country. India has a population of some 1.4 billion. Then there was an index that put an Indian airline — the third largest in the world — at almost the bottom, while an airline that is struggling to have even 50 more aircraft in a decade was the top gun.

According to the World Air Quality Index, India accounts for some of the most polluted cities across the globe. That's fair enough, given that most of us are gasping for breath. But here's an interesting snippet. Air quality in Beijing was red-



AGENDA: Disinformation is affecting India's internal stability, going by the fake videos linked to the Sambhal incident, in

flagged by the US embassy in 2008, leading to a strong demand for action. China literally threw out polluting industries from the capital and imposed strong environmental restrictions in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. That led directly to losses totalling 408.7 billion yuan (about 6.5 per cent of the regional GDP), with manufacturing dropping significantly. US action did allow the Chinese to breathe, but that's another story. The point is, public information matters. The trick is how to put it there.

The Global Risks Report, made by the World Economic Forum, ranked India the highest in terms of misinformation and disinformation. Strangely, respondents put disinformation as the highest risk, at a time of the (then) upcoming elections, well above disasters, crime and climate change. But go carefully into some details. Those polled are 'global leaders' across academia, etc. The data reflects what they think, and the most polled are from Europe (38 per cent), while 7 per cent are from South Asia.

To be seen as backing transparency and rooting out corruption is something even the public will appreciate and defend against all comers.

Interestingly, the report doesn't say that disinformation originates from India, but that it is rife in the country. The report nonetheless takes exception to new government rules, obliging all concerned to make 'reasonable efforts' to disable misinformation. That's a bit puzzling. Apparently, one is expected to just grin and bear it.

Meanwhile, that disinformation is affecting our internal stability is a given, with fake videos most recently linked to

the Sambhal mosque incident. Others related to Bangladesh are damaging to foreign policy. Yes, there is a problem. The question is where it originates or is being turned from.

A research report by Drop Site is now public knowledge, exposing the workings of the OCCRP (Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project), which works with dozens of major newspapers to collaboratively publish major political scoops. Its single largest donor is the US State Department, but it also works with other governments. Funds for the OCCRP originally came from counter-narcotics departments, while a top intel officer negotiated its 'relationship' with the private sector. Such a complicated overlay of intel, government and private players did the Panama Papers leaks, targeting adversaries like Russian President Vladimir Putin and members of the Chinese elite, leading eventually to a massive purge in Beijing.

Another was the Pandora Papers, which released 11.9 million documents that exposed offshore accounts of the rich and powerful, including India's Ambanis and a shifty Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Yet the biggest billionaires in the US remained untouched. In this period, US President Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden, for instance, was spending some \$683,000 on women and \$189,000 on adult entertainment.

Far more secretive and pervasive is a huge Chinese disinformation campaign. New research points to the creation of shell companies, including in the UK, that then run blogs and websites using plagiarised news articles, fake pages and accounts. More seriously, news reports cite 'spamouflage', the world's largest known online disinformation operation run by China to harass US politicians and others — at times threatening its targets with violence — as part of a well-organised intimidation campaign targeting people in the US. Another report cited China's information operations to affect regional stability in South-East Asia and India, also using 'content farms' (content that is designed as clickbait) in Malaysia to spread disinformation.

The upshot of all this is that a barrage of polling, data and misinformation is being used in what seems to be a new regime change methodology, which is faster and easier to run than easily exposed ground intelligence operations. This is only a part of new 'cognitive' warfare being fought that aims to erode a country from within, eroding its faith in itself and its leadership. As India rises, expect more of the same. The only way to counter it is to win the trust of your people, at all levels. It's actually easy. To be seen as clearly backing transparency and thereby rooting out corruption is something even the twittering public will appreciate and defend against all comers. In that case, all that polling data and leaks may actually end up doing some good.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Public opinion is a chaos of superstition, misinformation and prejudice. —Gore Vidal

Dietary advice and otherwise

ATUL JOSHI

IN ayurveda, healthy food is termed *maha bhaisajya* — the best medicine. It is emphasised that 'with appropriate diet, medicine is not needed, and without proper diet, medicine is of little use'. Dietary advice, therefore, forms an integral part of a doctor's prescription. During my training days, I was told that the diet should be mentioned right at the top. However, the kind of response such advice gets is often determined by the patient and his/her peculiar circumstances.

My surgery teacher would narrate a story with a hearty laugh. A fellow from a rural area came for a follow-up after his surgery. It was apparent that he had gained weight. On being confronted about this development, he innocently admitted that he had been advised a 'light diet'. He disclosed that he was reluctant to ask the doctor about the details and was unable to figure out himself what would constitute a 'light diet'. Once back home in his village, he went to the sarpanch for guidance. The headman pondered over this vexatious issue and then opined, 'Desi ghee floats in water. Pakoras, in turn, float in ghee. Therefore, desi ghee pakoras or puris would be an appropriate healthy 'light diet.' After hearing this amusing tale, I became very wary of recommending a 'light diet' to anyone.

I took pains to impress upon a patient with a heart ailment to reduce the consumption of pinnis and other sweetsmeats, which he was extremely fond of. On his next visit, he whispered in my ear in a conciliatory tone, 'Sir, you had firmly forbidden me from eating desi ghee pinnis last winter. Therefore, this year, we have made pinnis in refined oil.' His logic left me speechless, while I wiped beads of sweat off my brow.

Even as I take the moral high ground about 'permissible edibility', I realise that I am no less vulnerable than my patients. Soon after we got married, my wife was startled to see me gorge on nearly half a kilo of *solehi*. She later asked my cousin, 'Bhaiyya, you are also fond of eating like him?' He quipped, 'No, not eating... but overeating perhaps!' The message was eloquently driven home.

Once, I happened to accompany my wife to the neighbourhood *apni mandi*. After buying *bhindi* (okra) and putting it in my bag, I pleaded with her to get *masala bhindi* cooked for dinner. While she was busy making purchases, I animatedly demonstrated how to get the vegetable sliced, fill it with *masala* and then keep it aside for some time before deep-frying it. I was rudely jolted out of my reverie by her sharp reply, 'Would you let me reach home first?'

I was startled by her apparent disinterest in this culinary subject. However, I could now empathise better with my patients.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Farmers must mobilise support

Refer to 'Perilous fast track'; dialogue and debate, the essence of democracy, do not lead to policy-making these days. That agrarian distress needs to be redressed fast is highlighted by the continued anger and agitation of farmers and their deaths. Jagjit Singh Dallewal must understand that his life is as valuable as that of the farmers he is fighting for. He must end his fast-unto-death immediately. What farmers need at present is leadership, unity and mobilisation of a strong public opinion in support of their cause. If the people's elected government does not listen, the only alternative is to go to the people.

HIRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Focus on better economic ties

Apocryphal 'Modi-AKD meeting'; it is heartening to learn that Sri Lanka is keen to develop conlial ties with India. President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's first visit to India after assuming office bears testimony to the fact that Colombo is relying upon Delhi to rebuild its economy after the crisis of 2022. India had come to its rescue by extending \$4-billion aid. The meeting between the two leaders is significant because of the shifting geopolitical sands. Both focused upon deepening economic cooperation, exploring new investment opportunities and bolstering regional security. Sri Lanka seems to have realised that India is more dependable than self-centred China. By advancing mutual interests and focusing on sustainable solutions, both countries can strengthen their relations.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

Select judges free from biases

Apocryphal 'Crossing the line on the judicial front'; recent remarks made by Justice SK Jadhav of the Allahabad High Court at a public event are akin to an attack on the fundamental philosophy of the Indian judiciary — *Yato Dharmastato Jayati* (where there is righteousness, there is victory). The judiciary is the guardian of the Constitution. If the protectors themselves possess such vices as prejudice, discrimination and religious bigotry, how can they deliver justice? To uphold judicial integrity, the judiciary must prioritise the selection of judges who are free from biases.

Only then will the sanctity of the judiciary be maintained in the eyes of the masses.
JITESH MORI, KUTCH

Address root cause of migration

Reference to 'Illegal migrants are alibi for electoral gains'; the issue of illegal migration is often raised for electoral gains, serving as a political alibi rather than a genuine concern. Political parties exploit the topic to evoke fear, blame migrants for unemployment, economic distress or cultural dilution, and polarise voters along regional, religious or ethnic lines. Instead of focusing on the root cause of migration or implementing fair policies, leaders use migrants as scapegoats to deflect attention from poverty, unemployment, hunger and corruption. Such tactics harm social harmony, sidelining meaningful dialogue and effective policymaking.

DEVINA BACHAWAR, ROHTAK

Capital punishment for rape

Reference to 'What porn has to do with post-Nirbhaya world'; despite stringent laws enacted after the Nirbhaya case, nothing seems to have changed. Many horrific incidents of assault on women can be attributed to easy access to porn and even some TV serials or films. Existing laws should be made more stringent. The provision of capital punishment for the perpetrators of heinous crimes such as rape, especially if kids are the victims, makes sense.

CL SENGAL, JALANDHAR

Better infra for concerts

Actor-singer Diljit Dosanjh recently announced during his performance in Chandigarh that he would not hold concerts in India until the government improved the requisite infrastructure. India has many talented singers who deliver phenomenal performances at international concerts. However, they face the absence of basic facilities in their own country. This is a matter of concern because well-organised concerts could serve as a significant source of revenue and provide livelihood to thousands. It is high time the government invested in developing world-class infrastructure to support artists and their audiences.

JAKIR HUSSAIN, KANPUR

Why taxing super-rich is an outmoded plan



SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

INEQUALITY in this country is a highly visible phenomenon. In urban areas, luxury cars drive past the homeless, who live in shanties right next to shiny malls and high-rise condominiums. Even rural areas are divided into areas of privilege and scarcity. And the contrast between urbanised areas and rural hamlets is startling. There is equally a sharp divide between states in the north and those in the south. The western region, with the highly industrialised states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, is in a different league from West Bengal in the east, highlighting the regional imbalances in development.

This does not take into account the rise of the youthful information technology industry in Bengaluru and Hyderabad, that has sparked the creation of what is now known as India's Silicon Valley. Even these cities have seen clashes stemming from inequality, as affluent IT professionals from around the globe are resented by local residents, who seek refuge in promoting regional identities through

language and culture.

Having said this, the reality is that the country is changing rapidly in multiple ways owing to the economic growth having trickled down to the masses, albeit in an uneven manner. So, when eminent French economist Thomas Piketty speaks of growing inequality in India, he is merely describing what we all know about this emerging economy. As co-director of the Paris-based World Inequality Lab, he has earlier also presented data showing that India is one of the most unequal countries in the world.

His solution is that higher taxes must be levied on the super-rich. This is meant to garner resources needed to provide adequate public services for the entire population.

The focus on taxing billionaires comes at a time when there has been a rapid proliferation of the super-wealthy. The latest UBS Billionaires Ambitions Report puts India third in the global list of billionaires, though it is far behind the US and China in terms of numbers. Family-owned businesses are said to comprise many on the list, but the emergence of the new-tech czars is another factor for the spurt in those at the top of the heap.

Piketty's argument is that the imposition of a wealth tax on assets over Rs 10 crore and an inheritance tax of 33 per cent on property over this threshold will enable the



INEQUALITY: The poor live in shanties next to rich, shiny malls and high-rise buildings. REUTERS

exchequer to raise enough resources to improve public services like education and healthcare. He also points to the fact that China similarly imposed such a tax and it created greater equality in terms of the distribution of public goods.

A significant flaw in this thesis is that it puts the spotlight on raising resources as a magic bullet to resolve the issue of poverty and inequality. The reality is that even with sufficient resources, it is not always possible to achieve the goals of sustainable development.

It has been apathy rather than shortage of funds that has led to the neglect of public educational institutions ever since Independence. The state-run school system has been avoided by both the bureaucracy and political leadership for the

Capital outflows by the super-rich could be an unwelcome result of raising their taxes, which are already at the level of 43 per cent for the topmost income strata.

education of their own children. In fact, the civil services even established a separate private school for their own offspring, highlighting the indifference towards building infrastructure and improving the teaching content of the state-run institutions.

This is not the only infirmity in the proposal. Those who have become billionaires over the past decade are also wealth creators in terms of having made substantial investments in a growing economy. These entrepreneurs have made the best use of the deepening reforms, which have created an enabling environment in both the manufacturing and services sectors.

In a globalised world, corporate leaders can easily shift capital to numerous international tax havens.

Capital outflows could be an unwelcome result of raising taxes, which are already at the level of 43 per cent for the topmost income strata.

The previous wealth tax was done away with in 2015 on the grounds that there were more administrative costs in implementing the levy than the actual revenue inflow.

The concept of taxing the rich and paying the poor was appealing at the time of Independence, when the majority of the population was under the poverty line. A wealth tax was, thus, introduced in 1957. It did little to ameliorate the lot of the weakest sections of society.

The abolition of the tax was part of the sweeping changes to simplify tax laws and procedures, in tune with the altered economic reality.

The fact is that liberalised economic policies have brought millions of people out of the grip of poverty in recent decades. A large aspirational middle class now exists and it would view any inheritance tax with dismay.

It is also an anomaly to compare equality in the contemporary era with that of the British Raj, as has been done in one study by the World Inequality Lab. During the colonial times, there was less inequality simply because there was only a small segment of the population that could be considered affluent. The fruits of economic development have now filtered down to the masses due to

new innovative policies, many of which are anchored in technology.

The direct benefits transfer schemes, for instance, have ensured that the weaker sections of society are able to gain from schemes meant for their uplift. It is also technology that has enabled millions to open bank accounts and access them through a simple touch on their mobile phones. Financial inclusion has become a reality for even the poorest of the poor.

Piketty's tax proposals, thus, seem outdated for an India that has emerged into the digital era. Instead, the economy needs to utilise the technological skills available in the country to uplift the public services in the country.

A beginning has been made to create the digital infrastructure that will upgrade the quality of life, especially for those at the bottom of the pyramid. A benign environment is needed to ensure that both domestic and foreign investors are able to push through the regulatory cholerster and set up more manufacturing projects. This, in turn, will provide the jobs urgently needed in the coming years to enable the shift in labour from agriculture to industry.

These are among the important tasks before the country as it seeks to move on to a path of sustained growth and development. Taxing the super-rich is not one of them.

The right medicine for Pakistan's ailing economy



AASIM M HUSAIN
EX-DEPUTY DIRECTOR, IMF

PAKISTAN'S long history of fiscal mismanagement has saddled the country with a crushing debt burden. Interest payments on the public debt consume a staggering 60 per cent of government revenue. And external-debt repayments coming due over the next five years amount to nearly \$70 billion, dwarfing the \$11 billion in foreign-exchange reserves held by the central bank.

No wonder that some experts have started calling for a default and restructuring. Many others are still urging strict adherence to the three-year austerity programme approved by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in September to balance the books.

Neither default nor austerity is likely to work, however, and both would inflict unnecessary pain.

External debt restructuring is the wrong medicine for Pakistan, because the problem is not the external inter-

est burden but rather the volume of repayments falling due. Only 10 per cent of interest payments go to private creditors, given that almost all—more than 85 per cent—of Pakistan's external debt is owed to official creditors at concessional rates.

So, even if the Pakistan government stopped paying interest to external private creditors altogether, this would barely make a dent in its overall bill.

Around half of Pakistan's public-debt stock is owed to multilateral creditors such as the IMF and the World Bank, and thus cannot be restructured unless these institutions launch a new debt-relief scheme like the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative of the 1990s.

And with remaining obligations to bilateral creditors (mainly China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) already being rolled over under the IMF programme, halting repayments would provide little benefit. It could entail high costs in terms of damage to diplomatic and trade relations and access to future financing.

Restructuring domestic debt, on the other hand, could lower Pakistan's interest bill, but would cause severe economic pain.

Nearly two-thirds of the government's domestic



NO SAFETY NET: Only around 1 per cent of Pakistanis pay any income tax. The government's revenue collection is among the world's lowest. REUTERS

obligations are held by banks, where these securities comprise around 60 per cent of assets.

Even a modest haircut of 10 per cent would wipe out the banking system's capital, though the impact would vary from institution to institution. Banks would be unable to repay depositors, triggering financial turmoil and a sharp economic contraction.

If restructuring won't help, what about the new IMF austerity programme, which seeks to increase the tax-to-GDP ratio by three percentage points over three years?

To be sure, addressing the

The Pakistan government must raise tax revenue by 1 per cent of GDP annually over five years by implementing aggressive structural reforms to broaden the tax net.

country's chronic revenue shortfalls is of paramount importance. Only around 1 per cent of Pakistanis pay any income tax at all, and the government's revenue collection—at around 12 per cent of GDP—is among the world's lowest. The agriculture, retail and real-estate sectors, which constitute the bulk of the economy, are effectively outside the tax net. No country can function like this.

But the IMF programme aims to raise the tax-to-GDP ratio by two percentage points in the first year alone—a breakneck pace that is wildly unrealistic. Pakistan

has never achieved an adjustment of just rolling over the debt coming due.

Liquidity relief would boost economic growth by increasing public investment and crowding in private investment.

To ensure that these funds are well spent, creditors must condition their lending on reform progress and be involved in selecting and implementing public investment projects.

Lastly, to facilitate coordination, the IMF should regularly publish data on actual and projected loan flows and interest paid to each major official creditor.

This information is currently not available. A creditor will be more likely to provide new concessional lending if it knows that other creditors are doing so as well.

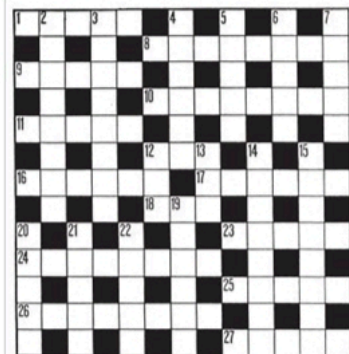
In its current form, the austerity programme will almost certainly fail, causing Pakistan's economic conditions to deteriorate further and delivering a reputational hit to the IMF.

But if policymakers reduce the dose now, and creditors provide more liquidity by enhancing coordination, Pakistan is more likely to grow out of its debt problem.

Such an approach could then be broadened to address debt overhangs in other emerging economies.

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QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Series of degrees (5)
 - Be inclined towards (4,4)
 - Strange (5)
 - To desert (3,3,2)
 - Pursuit (5)
 - Section of relay race (3)
 - A domed roof or ceiling (6)
 - Fit for crop cultivation (6)
 - Immense (3)
 - Postpone (5)
 - For the whole time (3,5)
 - Abundant proceedings (5)
 - If justice were done (2,6)
 - Impressively large (5)
- DOWN**
- Involved (6,2)
 - A gamble with little hope (4,4)
 - Study carefully (6)
 - To baffle (5)
 - Merriment (5)
 - Money resources (5)
 - Boy (3)
 - Interval (3)
 - Be cautious (4,4)
 - Sharply defined (5,3)
 - Set along (6)
 - Possibly (5)
 - Magnificence (5)
 - Captain of the Bounty (5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Under water, 6 Rasp, 10 Lower, 11 Duplicate, 12 Bulldoze, 13 Treat, 15 Indoors, 17 Scallop, 19 Heretic, 21 Besides, 22 Aloof, 24 Delicacy, 27 Disbelief, 28 Abode, 29 Dash, 30 The likes of.

Down: 1 Ugly, 2 Down under, 3 Rural, 4 Arkous, 5 Express, 7 Adage, 8 Pretty pass, 9 Virtuals, 14 High-handed, 16 Out of bed, 18 Ladicrou, 20 Caddish, 21 Baleful, 23 Oasis, 25 Crack, 26 Deaf.

SU DO KU



HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 18, 2024, WEDNESDAY			
Shaka Samvat	1946		
Margshirsh Shaka	27		
Posh Parvisha	4		
Hijari	1446		
Krishna Paksha Tithi 3, up to 10:07 am			
Indra Yoga up to 7:34 pm			
Pushya Nakshatra up to 12:59 am			
Moon in Cancer sign			
Gandmoola start 12:59 am			

FORECAST

CITY	WEDNESDAY 17-26 MS		
	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	24	06	
New Delhi	24	06	
Amritsar	19	04	
Bathinda	24	04	
Jalandhar	21	04	
Ludhiana	21	04	
Bhiwani	23	04	
Hisar	23	02	
Sirsa	24	03	
Dharamsala	20	04	
Manali	18	-01	
Shimla	17	05	
Srinagar	07	-05	
Jammu	19	05	
Kargil	03	-13	
Leh	04	-11	
Dehradun	22	06	
Mussoorie	19	08	



DECCAN HERALD
ESTABLISHED 1948

Wetland revival: No room for false starts

The Supreme Court's order on wetlands last week shows its concern over the threat to a natural feature of the environment that is under serious threat. The court ordered the protection of about 30,000 wetlands over the 201.503 protected by an order which it issued in 2017, and asked states to ensure their demarcation and ground-truthing which involves closer verification, within three months. The order covers wetlands that are more than 2.25 hectares in size. The number is based on satellite data provided by ISRO, and these wetlands need to be located and verified on the ground. The court also ordered the suo motu monitoring of 85 Ramsar sites, wetlands identified as important under the Ramsar convention of 1971.

The orders were based on a PIL that said the Central government had abdicated its functions under the Environment Protection Act, 1986, to protect the wetlands. The petition also sought the identification and protection of around 5,55,557 wetlands which are less than 2.25 hectares in size. The court is likely to consider the proposal in March. The Central government had submitted an affidavit to the court about the number of wetlands. The petitioners noted that wetland rules were amended in 2017, giving states the powers to not only identify and notify wetlands within their jurisdictions but also keep a watch on prohibited activities. States had to complete the verification of wetlands under the 2017 rules but most of them have failed to do that in the last seven years. Many of the wetlands have deteriorated and have become waste-dumping and construction sites. There is no trace of many others.

The existence and survival of wetlands is crucial for the health of the planet's ecosystem. They include marshlands, fen, peatlands or water bodies of all kinds; they support rich biodiversity and are habitats of many flora and fauna. Wetlands have an important role in flood control, prevention of land erosion, and protection against cyclones. They also help in groundwater recharge and provide livelihood to large numbers of people. It is unfortunate that the highest court's intervention is needed to ensure their protection. Since the task is huge and calls for attention to detail on a very large scale, it is doubtful whether court orders will be enough to accomplish it. Governments, at the Central and state levels, and local bodies, should consider it their responsibility to restore wetlands that have deteriorated and ensure that the others are protected. It is also the duty of the people to care for and protect wetlands in their localities.

Subsidy diversion calls for tighter checks

The Karnataka government's power subsidy scheme for irrigation pump (IP) sets was designed to support small and marginal farmers but it has become a significant drain on the state's exchequer. An internal government analysis has revealed that at least Rs 5,000 crore of taxpayer money is being misused by wealthy farmers who neither need nor qualify for the subsidy. This growing misuse has resulted in poor farmers being deprived of the assistance they need. The financial commitment to subsidise IP sets has gone up from Rs 10,118 crore to an estimated Rs 22,387 crore in 2023, an increase of 121%. Currently, over 34 lakh IP sets receive subsidised electricity, up from 20 lakh in 2012. Although this expansion may appear to benefit a broader segment of agriculturists, in reality, the advantages of the subsidy are disproportionately accruing to wealthy farmers with large holdings and multiple IP sets. Alarmingly, 2.7 lakh Above Poverty Line (APL) families with 4.32 lakh IP sets are receiving subsidies, diverting resources from those who need them the most. This highlights a deeper issue: the absence of a robust monitoring system.

The subject of farmers is highly sensitive, with every political party eager to position itself as their champion. The government's move to identify and remove affluent beneficiaries from the subsidy scheme is both necessary and laudable. By doing so, it can ensure that resources are redirected to the small and marginal farmers who genuinely rely on them. It is crucial that the opposition refrains from politicising this issue and instead supports the government's efforts. The primary focus should be on ensuring that the benefits reach those who need them, rather than exploiting the situation for political gain.

To address this, stronger enforcement and auditing measures are essential. However, it is equally important to rethink the sustainability of the scheme. One promising solution is the transition to solar-powered IP sets which would not only reduce the financial burden of subsidised power but also promote environmentally sustainable farming practices. Solar-powered IP sets can also reduce the strain on the state's power grid and decrease long-term subsidy commitments. The misuse of Rs 5,000 crore is a stark example of how the rich are benefiting at the expense of the poor. The government must act quickly to thoroughly audit the subsidy scheme, tighten the eligibility criteria, and transition towards green energy solutions. Until these reforms are implemented, the poor will continue to be denied the benefits they deserve, while taxpayers foot the bill for a scheme that has lost its way.

Stringent audits must ensure that subsidised irrigation pump sets reach only the deserving farmers

Profits cannot be allowed to drive the health sector where care should be currency. Is India watching?

JAGDISH RATTANANI

The killing earlier this month of Brian Thompson, the CEO of a leading health insurance provider in the United States called UnitedHealthcare, has led to an outpouring from the American public. There is sympathy for the shooter, even praise for the act, and an embracing of the message of the killing in three words marked out on the bullets that took Thompson's life: "delay", "deny", "defend".

The three d's have become a shorthand, almost an anthem for critics who note that insurance companies are failing patients by denying or delaying claims and defending their actions with all their corporate might so that people in the midst of medical issues give up. This is part of the corporate strategy that drives profits of insurers, high salaries to employees and bonuses for CEOs like the late Brian Thompson. Teams reportedly work on denials at the back end while the front end employs people with designations that paint a caring picture — like Chief Affordability Officer in the case of UnitedHealthcare.

This is the rough edge of a healthcare system that is overly complex, largely privatised and intensely competitive with profits that make it among the top two or three most profitable sectors in the US economy. Health and medical insurance and hospitals together had total profits of an estimated \$267 billion in 2024, jointly making it the third most profitable industry in the US economy, according to the global research firm IBISWorld. McKinsey in a report put out in January 2024 estimated that "healthcare profit pools" would grow at a 7% CAGR, from \$583 billion in 2022 to \$819 billion in 2027.

This is a system India and the world need to be wary of. An overly profit orientation in a sector where care should be the currency points to all the things that should not be the way the health sector operates. It is instructive that the

rage that is now pouring out was under the surface and seen in bits and parts for a long time.

Consider that two years ago, the slain CEO posted a message on the platform LinkedIn that said: "Making health care more affordable... (is) more important than ever right now. Reducing drug prices and improving price transparency are two ways we are working to lower costs for UnitedHealthcare members." The comments below that post were eye-popping. One wrote: "...I have stage four metastatic lung cancer. We've just left UHC because of all the denials for my meds. Every month there is a different reason for the denial. As is today,



we are well over our max out-of-pocket for the year with having spent well over \$20,000. Since we are in our 60s — we don't have time to recoup that." Many others echoed the anger though the post also recorded several "likes".

Officially, UnitedHealthcare has dismissed reports that it has the highest denial rate of all insurers in the US. The company said it approves and pays about 90% of medical claims upon submission. But other surveys and reports have pointed to frustration and worries over rising costs and growing denials, and of insurance companies in general turning the process into a roadblock that requires special efforts to cross. However, the group CEO Andrew Witty has now agreed that the system is "flawed".

A broken system

The frustrations in the US on health-

care carry important lessons for India because of worries that we may be tilting to the US model. This will be (if it is not already) disastrous in India, where the healthcare system is even more broken. Here, claimed world class care and high standards with the best doctors delivering services that bring care for the rich and leave out the rest. As such, the Indian system carries many more burdens than that seen in the US. According to India's National Health Accounts Estimates 2021-22, the Out-of-Pocket Expenditure as a percentage of Total Health Expenditure is almost 40%.

To be sure, the American system still works quite well for many. Medications are prescribed and paid for, unlike in the Indian system. No hospital can turn away an emergency, irrespective of insurance or the capacity to pay. Hospitals do not demand an advance as is actually the norm at almost all hospitals in India. In the US, it is entirely possible for an emergency case to be operated on, including critical or high-cost surgeries like cardiac interventions, with recovery of bills set for a later date.

None of this is the way it works in India. The frustration of Indians is first at the denial of care for those who cannot afford the high fees. For others, it is the inflation of doctor consultation charges, the rising room rents in hospitals and in many cases, the growing disenchantment with the profession itself and the way patients are treated. Insurance costs have grown dramatically, and the elderly are routinely denied coverage, or the coverage costs are prohibitive.

If an avowedly individualistic, free market, capitalistic order that obtains in the US can see a revolt the way it has this time, then at the very least India needs to be wary of going close to the US system. Consider Japan at the other end of the scale, where universal healthcare coverage arrived in the 1960s. Almost all treatments are covered, most services are inexpensive with a systematic long-term care insurance system.

There are lessons we must reject and new ones we need to learn in India when it comes to critical areas like health.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPIJMRH Syndicate. The Billion Press)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Drunken dramas under the banyan tree

When actors are in high spirits, unexpected twists in the script are guaranteed

ASOK KUMAR A J

Most villages in India are familiar with *Banyan Nataka* (literally, field drama). This form of traditional entertainment usually began around a lamp and wrapped up by 4 am and was performed outdoors, often under a banyan tree, during village festivals. The themes were invariably drawn from the Mahabharata, and the actors — hailing from various localised classes — put on quite a show. Men played all roles, both male and female. Adding to the charm (or chaos), the actors were typically heavily drunk.

In one performance, the scene depicted Bhima in disguise as a woman, luring and ultimately killing the *rakshasa* Kichakasura. The characters were painted with heavy makeup, with villains distinguished by their cooling glasses — a shorthand for evil, as sunglasses were considered a mark of dubious character in those days.

In the story, Kichakasura demands Draupadi meet him at a specified time and place. Bhima, disguised as a woman, takes her place to execute his plan. This drama was scheduled to be performed over two consecutive days.

On the first day, the actors portraying Bhima and Kichakasura — close friends in real life — delivered a crowd-pleasing performance. Their wives, sitting together in the audience, watched until the climactic scene, where Bhima triumphantly killed Kichakasura. The crowd showed Bhima's actor with praise, much to the chagrin of Kichakasura's wife.

Back home, she fumed, telling her husband, "You're stronger than the man playing Bhima. Tomorrow, I want you to defeat him!"

The next day, during the climactic scene, both actors, predictably drunk, took to the stage. But instead of following the script, Kichakasura, egged on by his wife's instructions, overpowered Bhima and began hitting him.

Bhima protested, "I'm Bhima! I'm supposed to beat you!"

To which the *rakshasa* replied, "Bhima or Bhima's father, I don't care. Today, I have to defeat you!"

The crowd was in splits, cheering this

unintentional plot twist.

In another performance, the scene portrayed the disrobing of Draupadi by Dushasana. For dramatic effect, seven colourful saris were tied together, with Krishna instructed to step in when the last green sari slipped. But things took a comical turn. All the actors, including Draupadi (played by a man), Krishna, and Dushasana, were drunk. Krishna, deciding to smoke a beedi backstage, decided he'd only enter after finishing his smoke.

Onstage, Dushasana began pulling off the saris, one after the other, while Krishna was still puffing his beedi. Meanwhile, the intoxicated Dushasana kept pulling until Draupadi was left standing in undergarments — a long *kachha* and a white vest, complete with false. The audience erupted into laughter.

When Krishna finally sauntered in after his beedi break, Draupadi glared at him and exclaimed, "Oh Krishna, have you come now to pull my underwear too?" *Banyan Nataka* thus offered entertainment that was as unpredictable as it is unforgettable. For those lucky enough to witness it, the laughter echoes long after the curtains — or saris — fall.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The tabla maestro who weaved magic with every beat

Ustad Zakir Hussain's passing has left a void in the vast expanse of Indian classical music. A master percussionist, he created magic with his fingers and took the tabla to new heights. Zakir Hussain was more than an artist; he was a rhythm genius and a custodian of a rich musical heritage. His innovative approach, rooted in tradition, ensured that the classical discipline met modernism. His tabla spoke in

a language that went beyond the ordinary, weaving intricate patterns of *bent* and *taals*. In every beat he captured not only his incredible skill but also the essence of India's rich cultural fabric. Though he's gone, his artistry will continue to inspire. Let's celebrate his legacy and the rich cultural heritage he embodied.

Mudgal Venkatesh, Kalaburagi

Focus on regional allies

A section of L.N.D.L.A bloc party members demand Mamata Banerjee as leader due to her seniority and success against the BJP in Bengal. The L.N.D.L.A bloc was formed to fight the NDA in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. However, Nitish Kumar's exit and the alliance's internal conflicts have weakened it. The members of the alliance had in many states fought against each other which goes against the alliance's purpose. The Congress, a national party, may struggle to accept regional leaders. Given Rahul Gandhi's limited experience and the party's poor performance in recent polls, it may be wise for the L.N.D.L.A bloc to

forgo a national leader and focus on strengthening regional alliances.

K.R. Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Needless controversy

The controversy surrounding Nehru's letters has taken an ugly turn. The BJP's attempts to tarnish Nehru's image are pointless and provocative. Their projecting Patel and Ambedkar appears to be part of a plan to belittle the achievements of the maker of modern India. We have not witnessed such pointed and sustained bashing of a deceased leader in any other country. The Nehru family should make the letters public, except for personal ones, to end the controversy and

allow researchers to access these historical documents.

S.V. Venkatakrishnan, Bengaluru

Balanced approach

I refer to 'Recourse for a hushed workers' bill is a step in the right direction, but its rigid approach may hinder industry growth. A balanced legal framework is necessary to ensure fair treatment without stifling flexibility.

Anushree Neeralakeri, Bengaluru

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

SPEAK OUT



We have to bring the One Nation One Election bill because you (Congress) toppled elected governments in states, and elections had to be held.

J.P. Nadda, Union Minister

Introspection! I hate it.

Ethel Kennedy

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Dalai Lama: Succession and beyond

The uncertainty around his successor is significant because Tibet is central to India-China ties

BHASHYAM KASTURI

The 14th Dalai Lama realises that he is not getting any younger and yet when asked about his successor, he says he will live beyond 100 and a decision on the matter will be taken then. While one wishes the Dalai Lama a long life, that his institution and persona go beyond Tibetan Buddhism into the realm of geopolitics and more pertinently to India-China relations merits a look at what India's plans to safeguard its interests. The lack of clarity over his succession creates challenges because China has already made plans. The Chinese set the precedent in the case of the Panchen Lama. The Dalai Lama had, in 2011, outlined his plan on how his successor should be chosen. But even today, he holds his cards close to his chest on this strategic issue. Furthermore, the lack of clarity within India on how this issue will be dealt with is quietly a ticking time bomb.

Resetting India's policy on China from the Tibet angle, however, has its challenges. For instance, there is a suggestion to rename India's border with China, as the India-Tibet Border. This would certainly be in line with the 1914 Simla Agreement. But post-1951 when China occupied Tibet and after the 1962 border war, a Line of Actual Control divides India and China. Thus, an entire review of India's policy towards China must occur. That a political will to move forward on ties with China exists was demonstrated with the October agreement on Demchok and Deshpande. As the EAM noted in his speech in the Lok Sabha on December 3, non-alternation of the *status quo* unilaterally, respect and adherence of the LAC by both the sides, and the need to respect and adhere to the agreements that were arrived at earlier remain the key principles for India.

The boundary questions, therefore, at the forefront of the bilateral relationship between India and China. Other aspects that demand equal attention include the growing trade deficit and Chinese investments in India. While most of these are covered by different stakeholders in the government, the presence of the Dalai Lama and Tibetans in India has remained mostly the domain of the intelligence agencies, MHA and MEA. While the China Study Group regularly discuss policy options, it is time for a thorough political review at the highest level of the government on India's stand on the Dalai Lama's succession. (The writer is a former Director, National Security Council Secretariat)

On the move: Ensuring accessible transportation for everyone

BHUMIKA MODH

Accessible transportation is not just a convenience; it is a fundamental human right. On November 8, 2024, the Supreme Court of India reaffirmed this by declaring accessibility essential for upholding the dignity and equality of persons with disabilities (PwDs). Achieving inclusive cities and spaces for PwDs requires addressing transportation as a key element of accessibility.

Global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasise inclusive and accessible transport. SDG Goal 11 aims to make cities safe and inclusive, and Target 11.2 focuses on accessible, safe, and affordable transport for all, particularly vulnerable groups such as PwDs. However, existing guidance, such as the UN-Habitat manual, inadequately addresses critical infrastructure requirements like ramps, tactile signage, tactile paths, and audio announcements. This highlights the gap

between policy aspirations and practical implementation.

In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 provides a comprehensive framework for accessibility. Section 40 mandates the Central Government to create accessibility rules for infrastructure, and Section 41 specifically focuses on making transport infrastructure and vehicles accessible, requiring features like ramps, lifts, and modified vehicles. Additionally, Section 42 ensures digital accessibility, which extends to transport-related websites and apps. Despite these robust legal provisions, there are significant gaps in their implementation, which often leave PwDs struggling to access public transport independently.

One major issue is the limited scope of Section 41, which mandates accessibility at bus stops, railway stations, and airports but focuses only on parking, toilets, and ticket counters. This narrow focus excludes essential elements such as fully accessible

vehicles, comprehensive station layouts, or adequate signage. For example, many buses in India still lack hydraulic ramps, making them unusable for wheelchair users. Similarly, while some railway stations have accessible toilets, the absence of tactile flooring or audio announcements can make navigation challenging for visually impaired passengers.

It is important to note that the implementation of accessible transport is quite tricky as compared to other aspects of public spaces, as it comprises three different components: the mode of transport itself, the terminal of transport, and the personnel in these various mediums.

Another challenge stems from the fragmented management of India's transport systems. Different modes of transport—such as buses, railways, metros, and airlines—are governed by separate ministries, leading to inconsistent implementation of accessibility guidelines. For instance, Gujarat has introduced buses with hydraulic

ramps and kneeling features, while Bihar relies on manual interventions like porters. Similarly, Bengaluru's metro includes tactile flooring and visual displays, but metros in other cities, like Chennai, lack these features. This patchwork implementation leaves PwDs dependent on personal advocacy or informal solutions.

Budgetary constraints and mismanagement further exacerbate the problem. Despite funds being allocated for accessibility projects under initiatives like the Accessible India Campaign, many states fail to utilise them effectively. In Karnataka, unspent resources from the campaign in 2019-20 remain unaccounted for, raising questions about transparency and prioritization. At the same time, many states focus on providing travel concessions for PwDs instead of addressing systemic issues like infrastructure upgrades or staff training.

The lack of trained personnel adds another layer of complexity. Although the RPwD Act emphasises the importance of

assistance services, transport personnel often lack the training needed to assist PwDs effectively. Even where physical infrastructure is available, untrained staff can make it difficult for PwDs to use these services efficiently or with dignity. Digital accessibility also remains a challenge, as many transport-related websites and apps fail to comply with web accessibility standards like WCAG 2.0, leaving PwDs unable to access essential services like ticket booking or real-time travel updates.

The Supreme Court's 2024 ruling, coupled with its directive to the government to draft minimum mandatory accessibility guidelines, represents a significant step forward. This ruling provides an opportunity to address long-standing gaps in India's transport system and move towards a more inclusive approach. Achieving this requires a holistic strategy that integrates robust infrastructure, digital accessibility, trained personnel, and effective monitoring mechanisms. For instance, transport

infrastructure must go beyond terminals to include accessible vehicles and comprehensive station designs. Additionally, digital platforms must be made fully compliant with accessibility standards, ensuring that PwDs can use online services seamlessly.

Accessible transport is about more than mobility—it is about enabling PwDs to participate fully in society. It connects them to education, employment, healthcare, and community life. Addressing the gaps in implementation and bridging the divide between the RPwD Act's provisions and on-ground realities is vital to making accessibility a lived reality. By prioritising accessibility, India can create a transport system that ensures no one is left behind. This is not just a legal obligation; it is a moral imperative to uphold the rights and dignity of every citizen.

(The writer manages the Yes to Access project at the Association of People with Disability)

As the country grapples with recession, migration debates, and a faltering economy, it's clear that Germany is facing an existential crisis. But what led to this downfall?

EDGAR SANDOVAL

When I recently picked up a rental car in Las Vegas—I was in America to cover the elections—the agent at the counter handed me a BMW. "So you feel at home," he said, looking at my German driver's licence, smiling. I took the keys and made a mental note: Outside Germany, Germany is still intact.

I often find this when I travel. Outside Germany, Germany is still a car country, home to a flourishing economy. Outside Germany, Germany is still a prosperous country, where everybody drives a BMW or the like. Outside Germany, Germany is still a well-ordered country, a pleasant place both politically and socially. I smiled back at the agent. But inwardly, I winced. Because in Germany, Germany doesn't feel like Germany anymore.

On December 16, Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost a vote of confidence at the Bundestag, Germany's parliament, officially ending his government. It was a formality: The three-party coalition had fallen in early November when Scholz dismissed the justice minister, Christian Lindner, prompting his Free Democrats to quit. The move left Scholz, a Social Democrat, with a minority government alongside the Greens.

At first glance, the story of the government's breakdown looks like a rather dull "House of Cards" political thriller, centred on a budget fight. Underneath the noise, however, there is an existential crisis. The economically prosperous, socially cohesive and politically stable Germany's gone. And this government, ideologically torn and rocked by outside shocks, proved unable to cope. How did we get here?

It was the fall of 2021, a year very different. After Angela Merkel decided not to run again after 16 years in office, Scholz defeated her Christian Democratic successor and formed the first three-party government in recent German history. Younger politicians like Annalena Baerbock, the foreign minister, and Lindner came in. It was the first time the Greens, an economically left-leaning party rooted in the ecological movement of the 1980s, had shared power nationally with the Free Democrats, a pro-civil liberties and pro-business party.

In interviews for a book I was writing, many of those younger politicians talked about overcoming their ideological barriers to modernise Germany after Merkel's long reign, which they saw as overly attached to the status quo. They talked enthusiastically about digitising the economy and promoting green industries. The energy felt genuine. Led by the steady, moderate Scholz, the government looked well set to tackle the country's challenges.

But problems soon stacked up. The first was Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which threw the new government into crisis management mode: frantically buying gas on the international markets to replace Russian energy, trying to procure weapons and organising weapons deliveries to Ukraine. After Scholz announced a "Zeitenwende," a turning point in foreign policy, the government allocated 100 billion euros to rebuilding Germany's military.

All that came as the economy was faltering. While other G7 countries are growing, Germany is about to register



ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

Germany we knew is gone

Government collapses at a perilous time for Europe

The German government collapsed Monday as Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost a confidence vote in parliament, deepening a crisis of leadership across Europe at a time of mounting economic and security challenges.

The war in Ukraine has escalated, with Russia issuing increasing threats against the country and its supporters. President-elect Donald Trump is set to take office in the United States, raising new questions over Europeans' trade relations and military defense. The government of France—Germany's partner in leading Europe—fell earlier this month. And now, Europe's largest economy will be in the hands of a caretaker government, before elections early next year. On Monday, German lawmakers voted to dissolve the existing government by a vote of 394-207, with 116 abstaining.

Coming just nine months before parliamentary elections had been scheduled to happen, the vote was an extraordinary moment for Germany. The elections, now expected Feb. 23, will be only the fourth snap election

in the 75 years since the modern state was founded. The moment reflects a new era of more fractious and unstable politics in a country long known for durable coalitions built on pitting class interests.

Scholz had little choice but to take to the unusual step of calling for the confidence vote after his three-party coalition splintered in November, ending months of bitter internal squabbling and leaving him without a parliamentary majority to pass laws or a budget. But the country's political uncertainty is likely to last a month or more, with a new permanent government not forming until parties have agreed on a coalition.

The German economy has stagnated, narrowly avoiding recession this fall, and its parties will spend the campaign arguing over how best to revitalize it. Disagreements over how to balance the budget—and over whether to increase government borrowing or implement further austerity measures—helped to deepen the fissures in Scholz's government before it split apart. NYT

thetic: Frustration with the government is widespread, its parties roundly disliked. In this febrile atmosphere, a newly formed pro-Russian party, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance, has prospered and the far-right Alternative for Germany has cemented itself as the second-most popular party in the country. If the three-way coalition was

an experiment in coping with the country's fragmented politics, it failed. The timing, with Donald Trump ascending and Europe in disarray, could not be worse.

Not all is lost, though. Germany's crisis is real, but it is as much a crisis of confidence as anything else.

The New York Times

Goodbye, Mr Krishna

GAYATHRI NIVAS

SM Krishna, who decorated many elective as well as political positions, was first and last an exemplary human being. If he wished to help someone who approached him and did not intend an official or a distant intrusion, he could dismiss the imposter with just a glance, a stern word, or a wry smile.

At Krishna's funeral in his native village, Somanahalli, in Mandya, Karnataka's Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar bent low, placed his forehead at the foot of the coffin in total submission, and shed a tear. The credit for taming DKS from a feisty Zilla Panchayat member to a more amenable legislator goes to Krishna. As Speaker of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly, Krishna only had to call out "Shivakumar" in a stern voice, and DKS would quietly retreat to his seat. DKS had free access to Krishna's home, like a son to the latter never had. That was the privilege, indeed, the essence of the suave statesman was never one to mingle freely. He kept his professional and personal life clearly demarcated, though his wife, Premakka, as she was popularly known, was an unobtrusive presence always. The one time when questioned her photo being flashed across media channels and newspapers was when she brandished a broom as part of a cleanliness drive.

Though Krishna's foreign education was touted by critics to not favour his ascent to a "mamma maga" (son of the soil) as any other "mandyadha gandu" (mandya's scion). Hailing from an agrarian background, he was fully conversant with rural customs and traditions. He once enlightened journalists about the practice of "hechhal." Whenever grain was measured for sale or to be given as wages to labourers, a handful was always put back into the granary, saying "hechhal," meaning "may the stocks increase." I have found that custom ever since, in the hope that my finetune kitchen stocks may multiply.

Krishna earned the title 'gentleman' politician with his unwavering civility code. When Kannada film thespian Rajkumar was kidnapped, he enlightened Veerappan and kept captive in the Sathyamangala forests, Krishna, as chief minister, visited Rajkumar's wife Parvathamma in her Bengaluru home. A tight security ring was thrown around the house by jurisdiction.

The shock appeal by the chief minister to the brigand to free the prisoners was a landmark. A colleague and I, representing The Printers (Mysore) group publications *Deccan Herald* and *Pragathi*, managed to gain entry with due permission. Inside, an All India Radio team was recording the appeal. The chief minister to the brigand to free

Rajkumar. Radio was the only line of communication with the fugitive. Krishna began his appeal with "Veerappanavare..." and continued on a polite note. We were flabbergasted. A head of state negotiating with an outlaw? Not acceptable. But that was Krishna's inborn style. He could be incisive but would never trespass civility.

After the actor's release, retired DGP-IGP C Dinakar wrote a book titled *Veerappan's Prize Catch Rajkumar*, chronicling the kidnapper and its aftermath. Only *Deccan Herald* and *The Times of India* got a copy each, late in the evening. The police-ex-chief, who had promised to "tell all," feared a government ban on his book and made sure no other copy was available. Around the midnight, we got a request from CM's office to share the book, as any government is duty bound to safeguard public order. *DH* did not oblige as our source had requested confidentiality. Krishna respected the "gentleman's agreement" and did not pursue the matter.

Notwithstanding his non-partisan outlook, Krishna was reluctant to appoint a non-Karnataka officer to the post of Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, which had been vacated. When questioned, he replied, "How long should we neglect the interests of state officers?" But when the senior-most officer, Shobhnath Rai, moved court on the basis of a *Deccan Herald* report questioning the CM's stance, Krishna appointed him PCCF without any qualms.

Father to two daughters—Maalavika and Shambhavi—Krishna made the welfare of the girl child and women his government's priority. Much later, as Governor of Maharashtra, Krishna refused to promulgate an ordinance seeking to ban dance bars in Mumbai. The instant closure of the 700 odd dance bars across Mumbai at the time would halt the livelihood of thousands of women who come from abject poverty, was his concern. He asked the government to move a bill in the legislature instead and pass a law after due discussion, ensuring the interests of all parties concerned.

In December 2022, Krishna graciously accepted the request of his one-time ministerial colleague Nafes Fazal to release her biography even though he had just recovered from illness. Reminiscing about how he dropped out from his ministerial life, he said, "I was asked to 'dance' at a party, the former chief minister openly regretted his impulsive action: 'I should not have punished my minister without giving her a chance to speak,' confessed Krishna, who was waving his hand in applause from the guests.

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: DECEMBER 1974

Sonia, an insurance agent

New Delhi, Dec 17

A licence to function as an insurance agent was granted to Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, elder daughter-in-law of the Prime Minister, by the Controller of Insurance under Section 42 of the Insurance Act, 1938. Deputy Finance Minister Suhagrah told the Rajya Sabha today. The licence was effective from February 2, 1973. On the strength of the licence, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi was registered as insurance agent with the Oriental Fire and General Insurance Company Ltd. and the United India Fire and General Insurance Company Ltd., she said.

25 YEARS AGO: DECEMBER 1999

US lifts sanctions on 51 Indian firms

Washington, Dec 17 (PTI & UNI)

The United States today announced lifting of post-Pokhran sanctions on 51 Indian entities from a list of 200 "to more tightly focus the embargoes" on those enterprises "most directly involved in proliferation activities of concern," but made no such exceptions in case of Pakistan. However, the US will continue its ban on dual-use item exports to entities in India and Pakistan, US Commerce Assistant Secretary for Export Administration R Roger Majak said.

OASIS | JAYANTHI CHANDRASEKARAN

Believing in self

The power of positivity cannot be overstated. Our biological system reacts to everything our mind dictates. Our mind is a powerful instrument capable of producing astonishing feats as illustrated here. Two young boys, Ramu and Somu were close friends and spent most of their time together. One day on an adventure they went a little too far away from the village. While they were running around and exploring, Ramu fell into a well. He started screaming as he didn't know swimming and thought he would drown. A terrified Somu looked around for help but found no one. Suddenly, his eyes fell on a bucket tied

to a rope lying nearby. At once, Somu threw the bucket into the well and asked Ramu to hold it. He started pulling up the rope with great difficulty until Ramu was out of the well. When they ran home and told their families and the villagers about the mishap and rescue, nobody believed them because Somu was too young and weak to even lift a bucket full with water. They all wondered how he could have pulled out Ramu from the well, but only his uncle, a learned senior man believed the boys. The

villagers demanded an explanation as how Somu would have performed this feat. The wise uncle explained that during the time of the crisis, there was no one around to tell him he couldn't do it. As his mind was focussed on saving his friend from negative thoughts surging in his mind, he succeeded. The shock appeal by the chief minister to the brigand to free the prisoners was a landmark. A colleague and I, representing The Printers (Mysore) group publications *Deccan Herald* and *Pragathi*, managed to gain entry with due permission. Inside, an All India Radio team was recording the appeal. The chief minister to the brigand to free



Interestingly the power of personal belief exploits the power of the mind by the trainers. The trainers use a thin rope to tie the baby elephants from one of their legs to a pole on the ground. At that age, the rope is strong enough to stop them from escaping. They grow up like this, believing they can never break the rope. So even as adults they stay put, when they are tied to a pole with the rope, even though they are strong enough to break the rope. Believing in oneself is a powerful, transformative mindset. It means trusting in one's abilities, strengths, and resilience.

Private aviation is releasing more than its 'fair share' of emissions

Scientists analysed flight data from the ADS-B Exchange platform and focused on five recent global events which were accompanied by international travel. They found some 47% of all these flights were for distances shorter than 500km and around 19% were in fact for distances shorter than 200km. About 5% spanned less than 50km

Monika Mondal

If the aviation sector were a country, it would be among the world's top 10 greenhouse gas-emitting nations. Air travel is one of the most polluting modes of travel for its relatively higher carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions and the effects of vapour trails and gases it deposits in the atmosphere. But even within air travel, private jets and chartered planes have a higher carbon footprint per passenger. According to a 2021 report of the European Federation for Transport and Environment, private jets are five- to 14-times more polluting per passenger than commercial flights and 50-times more than trains. A recent study in *Nature* reported emissions increased by 46% between 2019 and 2023, especially thanks to private aviation. The number of aircraft increased from 25,993 in December 2023 to 26,454 in February 2024 and is expected to grow further. According to the paper, "Private aviation contributed at least... about 3.6 tonnes of CO₂ per flight."

More millionaires in India

As of March 2024, 112 private planes were registered in India. According to the paper, India has very few aircraft per lakh population (0.01) compared to Malta (46.51), the U.S. (5.45), Switzerland (3.76), the U.K. (0.78), Brazil (0.43), France (0.36), and Russia (0.1). China has a comparable 0.02. "But India is actually among the top 20 countries in terms of private aircraft ownership and the highest among low-middle-income countries," Ramya Natarajan, a research scientist at the Centre for Study of Science, Technology, and Policy (CSTEP), a think-tank in Bengaluru, said. "This isn't surprising because India, while still a developing country, has the third highest number of billionaires in the world and also has a rapidly growing millionaire population." Despite nascent efforts to decarbonise the aviation industry, solutions like sustainable aviation fuels (SAFs), hydrogen, and electrification haven't been easy to implement at a large scale.

Private flight usage

In the study, researchers from institutes in Sweden, Germany, and Denmark analysed flight data from the ADS-B Exchange platform and focused on five recent global events accompanied by international travel. These events were the World Economic Forum in Switzerland; the Super Bowl in the U.S.; the COP28 climate talks in the U.A.E.; the Cannes Film Festival in



As of March 2024, 112 private planes were registered in India. Representative photo. CHRIS LEIPOLD

France; and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. In many cases, the researchers found the same aircraft units were used for these events.

Some 47% of all these flights were for distances shorter than 500km. Around 19% were in fact for distances shorter than 200km; many of them were actually empty or used to deliver goods. About 5% of the flights spanned less than 50km – a distance otherwise easily covered by road or rail.

The study also reported that the use of private aircraft for leisure destinations like Ibiza in Spain and Nice in France peaked in June-August, which is summer in the northern hemisphere, and especially over the weekends.

Around 69% of private aviation was concentrated in the U.S.

The researchers also estimated that another 8,500 jets will be delivered to private parties in the next 10 years, although how many will end up in India is unknown. "How many additional private flights might be added every year as India becomes a wealthier, developed country? Can India afford to take the U.S. route? What would the overall impact of such lifestyle choices be?" Natarajan asked.

Air travel and India's emissions

In the last decade, the Indian government launched the policies 'Ude Desh Ka Aam Nagrik' (UDAN) to enhance rural connectivity and 'Nextgen Airports for



In India, the alcohol-to-jet pathway seems most likely in the medium term. However, planning is needed to avoid negative land-use change and groundwater implications. Demand for SAF should not incentivise sugarcane or maize

Bharat Nirman' (NABH) to increase airport capacity by more than five times.

Indian airplane operators have also been testing low-carbon fuels. In 2018, for example, SpiceJet operated a flight from Uttarakhand to New Delhi on aviation fuel blended with oil from seeds of the jatropha plant, to the tune of 25% by volume. In 2023, Air Asia flew a flight from Pune to New Delhi powered by SAF blended with aviation turbine fuel (ATF) based on indigenous feedstock and supplied by the Indian Oil Corporation, Ltd. But these attempts have not translated into the commercialisation of SAF due to its limited availability and efficiency. According to one April 2024 estimate, it also costs "at least 120%" more than conventional jet fuel for reducing emissions by at least 27%.

Apart from SAFs, both experts and lawmakers have discussed hydrogen and electrification as possible alternatives to kerosene, which is used in aviation for its

high energy density. Hydrogen packs three-times more energy in the same mass but handling it is a nightmare. Engineers will need to redesign, remodel, and restructure aircraft bodies as well as the fuel storage, transportation, and fuelling facilities at airports to use hydrogen-based fuels in aviation. Likewise, electrification is currently a poor solution due to issues of battery weight, flight stability, and its dependency on other economies for its raw materials, industry experts have said.

"In India, the alcohol-to-jet pathway seems most likely in the medium term, given that we already have a good ethanol production supply chain," Natarajan said. "However, this should be carefully planned to avoid negative land-use change and groundwater implications. A demand for SAF should not incentivise increased cultivation of sugarcane or maize. Instead, only surplus sugar should be used."

However, Natarajan added, the work of her and her peers at CSTEP suggests there is hope. "If by the year 2050, only surplus sugar is converted to ethanol and ethanol is fully used to make aviation fuel, instead of blending with petrol as we do currently, then we can meet almost 15-20% of the aviation fuel demand of 2050," she said.

(Monika Mondal is a freelance science and environment journalist. a.monikamondal@gmail.com)

THE GIST

Private jets are five to 14 times more polluting than commercial flights and 50 times more than trains. *Nature* reports emissions increased by 46% because of private aviation

India is among the top 20 countries in terms of private aircraft ownership. India though a developing country has the third highest number of billionaires and a rapidly growing millionaire population

Hydrogen and electrification are being discussed as alternatives to kerosene. Hydrogen packs three times more energy but handling is a nightmare. Electrification is beset by issues like weight, flight stability, and raw materials

BIG SHOT



Jesus Alvarado of the Pílares Marino Foundation holds a structure with tiny coral pieces to create a coral farm in a project with Venezuela's government to repopulate reefs and diminish the effects of global warming, in Santo Domingo, Venezuela. REUTERS

QUESTION CORNER

Keypad protocol for numbers

Q: Why are the rows on a calculator or number keypad arranged with the lowest numbers at the bottom when we normally read from top to bottom? And why are phone keypads arranged with the lowest numbers at the top?

A: Mechanical adding machines, based on rotating wheels, always have the '0' button adjacent to the '1' button.

By convention, most old adding machines had the numbers increasing in value from the bottom and this may be a hangover from when the machines had levers on the wheels rather than buttons. When the numbers were put onto a pad arranged as a three by three grid with one left over, the order of the numbers, as far as possible, kept the same, according to a report in *New Scientist*.

On a rotary telephone dial the '0' comes adjacent to the '9' because a '0' in the telephone number is signalled by ten pulses on the line.

When telephones acquired push buttons in a grid, the ordering of the buttons was carried over from the old



Representative image of a digital calculator. DOSTON NABOTOV

telephone dial.

- The Hindu Bureau

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