

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Habitual offenders
externed by the Delhi
Police in 2024**

1,100 Done under the Delhi Police Act, the externment process which is aimed at maintaining peace is used to keep criminals away from specific areas for a set period. Data reveals that in 2022, the Delhi Police externed 716 people and in 2023, 619. PH

**The five-year rubber
plantation target that
Tripura surpassed**

30,000 hectares. The target was set under an initiative of the Automotive Tyre Manufacturers' Association (ATMA), and Tripura is now aiming to increase the plantation to 69,000 hectares. PH

**Number of farmers
who ended their
fast-unto-death protest**

121 Dallewal (70), who has refused any aid since he sat on a fast-unto-death on November 26, agreed to take medical aid following the Centre's invitation for talks on February 14 to discuss farmers' demands. A group of 111 farmers had joined Dallewal's fast on January 15. PH

**Number of TikTok
users in the U.S., as the
app shuts down**

170 million. TikTok users in the U.S. are no longer able to watch videos on the social media platform as a federal ban on the immensely popular app takes effect. The company's app was removed from prominent app stores, including the ones operated by Apple and Google. AP

**French champagne
shipments drop in
2024**

10 In per cent. Economic and political uncertainties hit consumers' appetite for the sparkling wine in key markets. Producers had called for a cut in the grapes harvested this year after sales fell more than 15% in the first half of 2024. REUTERS

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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How is TRAI and the govt. combating spam?

How will blockchain technology effectively counter spam? What are some of the steps being taken by the government against unsolicited commercial communications? Have some of the measures already taken been effective against unwanted calls and messages? What is a do-not-disturb registry?

EXPLAINER

Aroon Deep

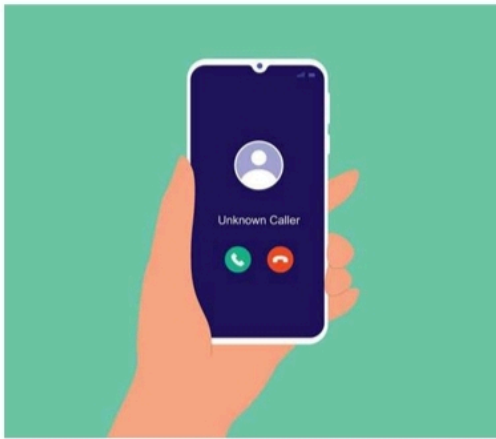
The story so far:

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) will be using distributed ledger technology (DLT) to register spam preferences from customers, TRAI chairman Anil Kumar Lahoti said. Spam rules will be tightened to make commercial messages traceable, the TRAI has indicated.

What is TRAI's role in fighting spam?
The TRAI regulates the telecom industry, and its main role is in regulating Unsolicited Commercial Communications (UCC), the official name for spam. Starting in 2007, the regulator implemented a do-not-disturb (DND) registry, which would force telemarketers to abide by customer preferences when it came to commercial calls.

If a telecom customer signs up to the DND registry, they are not supposed to get any spam calls or SMS messages. TRAI had also worked with an external agency to develop a DND app, which would allow customers to register their DND preference, and accept complaints. Under the Telecom Commercial Communication Customer Preference Regulation (TCCPCR), 2018, telemarketers who called or sent messages to DND-registered customers would receive warnings, and if enough warnings accumulated, they would be blacklisted from sending messages to telecom operators.

The DND app has not always been maintained by the TRAI, and was briefly unavailable from 2022 onwards. An SMS reporting facility where users would have to report messages in a particular format was available, but further steps were taken to make the process more user friendly. In 2024, TRAI mandated that DND reporting be made available on every telecom provider's app.



GETTY IMAGES

What role does blockchain play?

In order to fight the deluge of spam messages, TRAI mandated in the TCCPCR that telcos use a blockchain ledger, also known as a distributed ledger, in order to store a constantly-updated list of approved senders of SMS messages. Telcos would also be required to approve specific formats of messages. For instance, an OTP message that goes, "Your OTP is 433212," would be stored in the blockchain as "Your OTP is ..." with space for a variable. These messages have been required to be sent from sender IDs, and not phone numbers.

This has been one of the most stringent rules that have been issued to fight SMS spam anywhere in the world. Blockchain as a technology allows for so-called immutability, which means that every stakeholder involved in a transaction has

a reliable, un-tamperable version of the same data. At the time of the 2018 regulations, the necessity to use blockchain for the purpose of maintaining a spam exemption database was debated, as enthusiasm about the technology's potential had spilled over beyond cryptocurrencies, where it continues to be a mainstay.

In 2024, the regulations were tightened to ensure "traceability" of messages, thus making sure that telcos would have a complete record of who issued a message before it is sent to an SMS gateway. This was aimed at plugging a crucial flaw in the system that would allow anyone to register on the blockchain solutions implemented by telecom operators and send out fraudulent or spam messages in spite of the systems in place to combat them. These, Mr. Lahoti has said, will be

further tightened in the coming year.

Have these measures been effective?
For those who have registered their DND preferences, communications from legitimate businesses that follow the rules may have reduced. However, spam has a constantly changing character. While much of spam is merely commercial messages that may be annoying but harmless, the wave of digitisation has increased incentives to get around the protections against commercial messaging and calling. A wave of fraudulent calls have also emerged, with cyber frauds seeking to ensnare Indians in financial scams. Many of these operations are done outside the framework of SMS sender IDs, and are run through disposable 10-digit phone numbers, making it hard for real-time enforcement of anti-spam regulations.

There is also the issue of spam and scam calls from international numbers, which can be leased from certain online Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) providers, but appear as legitimate international call traffic.

Which are the other steps taken by the government to end spam?

The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) has launched the Sanchar Saathi portal, which has a reporting site called Chakshu. DoT has partnered with law enforcement, banks, and other stakeholders in order to accept reports of "suspected fraudulent" calls and messages, and has moved to cancel lakhs of numbers that are associated with unauthorised telemarketers and scammers.

It also set up the Telecom Security Operation Centre at its New Delhi headquarters to monitor suspicious internet traffic in real time. Meanwhile, firms like Airtel have taken steps to declare suspicious calls using Artificial Intelligence as "Suspected Spam," a move that is being replicated by other telcos as well. The telco has also started labelling international calls on smartphones.

THE GIST

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What did the ILO report state about international migrants?

Why are there more male international migrants in the global labour force than women? Which are the countries that have absorbed the most international migrant workers?

Garimella Subramanian

The story so far:

Addressing labour market shortages in host nations and contributing remittances to home countries, International Migrants (IM) continue to make contributions to world economic growth, the fourth edition of 'Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers', released by the International Labour Organization (ILO), said.

What did the ILO state?

In 2022, IMs made up 4.7% (167.7 million) of the global labour force, defined as both employed and unemployed (but available for work); over 30 million more than in 2013. An estimated 155.6 million were employed and 12.1 million unemployed. The share of IM men in the total employment for males globally was

estimated at 4.7% and that of IM women at 4.4%. However, between 2019-2022, the rate of growth dipped annually to less than 1%, influenced among other factors by the pandemic.

What about age and gender?

A higher proportion of IM males were employed – 61.3% out of a total of 102.7 million. Conversely, only 38.7% female IMs were employed out of a total of 64.9 million in 2022. All the same, the number of women IMs has steadily risen ever since the ILO began compiling global estimates in 2015.

One explanation for the smaller proportion of women in the global labour force is their lower representation in the total population of IMs.

At 74.9% (125.6 million), prime-age adult IM workers – those aged between 25 and 54 years, both men and women – constituted the largest majority of IM

workers in the labour force in 2022. Less than one out of 10 IMs were below 25. Way behind the above category, at 9.3% were young IM workers, aged between 15-24 years, numbering 15.5 million, in the global labour force. IMs aged between 55-64 years were 12.5% and those above 65 at 3.4%.

Which economic sectors attract IMs?

The largest proportion of IMs, 68.4%, were concentrated in the services sector, even higher than non-migrants. Women IMs held the dominant share in this arena at 80.7%, as against 60.8% among their male counterparts. The corresponding figures for non-migrant women and men in the services industry were 59.4% and 46.3% respectively. Significantly, the dominance of IMs in this sector has remained consistent over the decade, upwards of 67% between 2013-2022. In industry, the proportion of IMs was 24.3%

and that of non-migrants 24.2%. In agriculture, IMs accounted for 7.4%, whereas non-migrants were at a significantly higher share of 24.3%.

Which are the main host countries?

High-income countries absorbed the largest number of IMs, accounting for 68.4% (114 million people), in key sectors such as services, especially in the provision of care. At about a quarter of this share, 17.4% (29.2 million), were distributed among upper-middle-income countries. For an entire decade between 2013-2022, high-income and upper-middle-income countries have consistently remained primary destinations for IMs.

The share of IM workers in northern, southern and western Europe in the year 2022 was at 23.3%, increasing by less than one percentage point after 2013. In Northern America on the other hand, the share of IMs in the labour force in 2022 was at 22.6%, a more than one percentage point decrease over the same decade. The Arab states accounted for 13.3% of IM workers in 2022, down three percentage points over 2013. A combination of ageing populations, growing demand in the care economy and greater economic opportunities means that high income countries will continue to remain attractive destinations for the bulk of IMs.

The writer is Director, Strategic Initiatives, AgnoShin Technologies.

THE GIST

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Recasting insolvency resolution

The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016 (IBC) is one of India's most significant economic reforms, introduced to address the challenges of insolvency resolution in a structured and time-bound manner.

At the time of its introduction, the IBC was seen as an important tool that would help India's standing in the business world and bring bad borrowers and big defaulters to book. Yet, as the law matured, certain issues have cropped up that demand attention, particularly regarding institutional capacity and procedural efficiency. The recent Supreme Court of India judgment in *Jet Airways (State Bank of India & Ors. vs The Consortium of Mr. Murari Lal Jalan and Mr. Florian Fritsch & Anr.)* has laid bare the many structural infirmities that are plaguing India's insolvency regime.

A double burden

The effective implementation of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) hinges on the performance of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) and its appellate body, the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT). These tribunals face the dual burden of handling corporate insolvencies under the IBC and cases under the Companies Act. This institutional architecture, however, suffers from what might be termed "temporal disjunction".

Conceived in 1999 based on the Eradi Committee's recommendations and operationalised in 2016, the NCLT's structure reflects the economic realities of a bygone era, leaving it ill-equipped to meet contemporary demands. With a sanctioned strength of 63 members — many of whom divide their time across multiple benches — the NCLT has become a bottleneck for insolvency resolutions and corporate transactions such as mergers and amalgamations.



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is an advocate in the Madras High Court

Compounding the issue, several NCLT benches do not operate for the full working day, even when not tasked with handling cases from other benches.

As a result, delays have worsened. According to the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI), the average time for insolvency resolutions increased to 716 days in FY2023-24, up from 654 days in FY2022-23. This is despite the Supreme Court's repeated calls for adherence to the specific timelines provided in IBC, including in the *Jet Airways* case, where the Court has stated that the "NCLTs/NCLATs need to be sensitised of not exercising their judicial discretion in extending the timelines...in such a way that it may make the Code lose its effectiveness thereby rendering it obsolete".

The need for domain expertise

The current framework's deficiencies are manifest across other dimensions. What stands out the most is the qualitative dimension of institutional capacity. The current method of appointment ignores the need for domain experience. As the Court noted in the *Jet Airways* case, "Members often lack the domain knowledge required to appreciate the nuanced complexities involved in high-stakes insolvency matters...". This creates a paradox where an institution tasked with resolving complex cases is hindered by a lack of specialised knowledge.

However, the problems run deeper than capacity limitations. There is also the bureaucratic labyrinth. There is no effective system in place before the NCLTs for urgent listings. And as noted by the Supreme Court, the staff of the Registry is given wide powers to list or not to list a particular matter. Perhaps most troubling is what the Court has termed a "growing tendency" among NCLT and NCLAT members to ignore or defy its orders, which threatens the very foundation of India's judicial hierarchy.

This is not merely about institutional efficiency. It is about institutional integrity.

Sparse use of alternatives

The procedural framework further exacerbates these constraints. The requirement for a mandatory hearing for all applications including for progress reports, which is not in any way necessary from the standpoint of natural justice, results in considerable delays. The limited use of alternative dispute settlement methods adds to the problems of an already overworked system.

Various jurisdictions across the globe contend with similar challenges pertaining to institutional capacity and procedural efficiency. Nevertheless, the magnitude of India's scale, its endemic corruption and its economic ambitions necessitate solutions that transcend mere incremental enhancements. The recent reform proposals, including the initiative for mandatory mediation prior to the submission of insolvency applications, present a degree of optimism.

Further, there needs to be a hybrid model that values judicial experience and domain expertise. Also, the time is ripe for procedural innovations that go beyond piecemeal changes. The creation of specialised benches for different categories of cases could enhance both efficiency and expertise and ensure that mergers and amalgamations are cleared in time.

Pertinently, infrastructure must not remain an afterthought. Adequate courtrooms and a qualified, permanent support staff are critical to sustaining these institutions within the broader economic framework. Above all, India's insolvency regime must evolve beyond mere debt resolution to serve as a proactive driver of economic rejuvenation, especially as the country aims to attract greater foreign investment. At this very important point in time, the choice is clear. The time for a bold reimagining is now.

Parties and their 'presidential' problems

The crucial post of 'State unit President' has ignited much political activity

STATE OF PLAY

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Over the past few weeks, political circles in Karnataka have been abuzz with intense discussions on the post of the State unit presidents of all the three major political parties, i.e., the Indian National Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Janata Dal (Secular) or JD(S).

Both the ruling Congress and the Opposition BJP have been besieged with dissident activities to unseat the incumbent chiefs, while the JD(S) is anxious about the appointment of a new president amid rumours of the Congress making efforts to poach JD(S) legislators. Ironically, the leaders of all parties are taking potshots at rival political leaders on the issue of party leadership. There are some curious subplots too, such as the fact that the Belagavi-based Jharkholi brothers — Ramesh and Satish — being in the forefront of seeking changes in the BJP and the Congress.

The key issues

In the Congress, the intervention of central leaders seems to have had a limited impact on the discussion of replacing Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) President D.K. Shivakumar, who is also the State's Deputy Chief Minister. Senior cabinet Ministers from the Congress continue to make statements in the public domain, and these include K.N. Rajanna, Satish Jarkholi and G. Parameshwara. Battered by the veiled attacks from his detractors, a miffed Deputy Chief Minister went to the extent of saying that "the president post was not sale in any store".



The Ministers have been speaking about the party's "one man one post" formula and Mr. Shivakumar being saddled with two important portfolios that is affecting organisational work. Internally, however, it is being speculated as the effort by those loyal to Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah to unsettle and weaken Mr. Shivakumar's hold on the party, who is waiting in the wings to helm the government.

The Chief Minister's loyalists have argued that Mr. Shivakumar, who took charge of the party in March 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, has completed his tenure and what is in place now is only an interim arrangement. A full-fledged president is required to lead the party into the taluk panchayat and zilla panchayat elections. The statements and counter-complaints have been so intense that the All India Congress Committee President, Mallikarjun Kharge, has asked all to "shut up and do their jobs".

The BJP too has been facing rebel trouble, with a section of veteran leaders opposing the first-time legislator and BJP State President, B.Y. Vijayendra. Appointed in November 2023, he is the son of former Karnataka Chief Minister and Lingayat strongman B.S. Yediyurappa.

Not only is the group led by the senior legislators Basanagouda R. Patil Yatal and Ramesh Jarkholi openly defying

the party's diktats but it is also attempting to undermine Mr. Vijayendra's authority by making personal allegations, ultimately seeking his removal. The dissident group has accused Mr. Vijayendra of making compromises with the Congress on political issues, thus diluting the BJP's core ideology. Both groups have made multiple visits to New Delhi to meet central leaders, and Mr. Yatal has been issued notice for his actions.

The lack of unity and effective leaders besides perceived groupism have affected the BJP. The saffron party is seen as having lacklustre outings in the legislature sessions where the ruling Congress's powerful Ministers and leaders have successfully defended the government despite there being major allegations of corruption and scandals. Though Mr. Vijayendra has been appointed for a term of three years, Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that a BJP State unit President will be elected soon. Mr. Vijayendra has expressed his readiness to face this election just as the dissident group has said it is.

The JD(S), whose fortunes seem to be plummeting with each election, is also looking for a new president since the incumbent, H.D. Kumaraswamy, who is the Union Minister for Heavy Industries and Steel, is unable to find the time to carry out his duties. A perceived move to promote his son, Nikhil Kumaraswamy — he has, so far, faced three consecutive electoral defeats — has been put off for the time being. The party has announced that the new president will be 'elected' by April 2025. In the past, the first family headed by the party supremo and former Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, had a say in appointing the presidents.

What the ceasefire deal means for Palestine and Israel

The process, with effect from Sunday, is to involve the freeing of hostages, the increasing of aid and the beginning of the extensive reconstruction of Gaza

DATA POINT

Gautam Nirmal Doshi
Godhashri Srinivasan

After over a year of war, a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas took hold in the Gaza Strip on Sunday. Among other things, the ceasefire process would involve the freeing of hostages on both sides and increasing aid as well as a reconstruction of destroyed buildings and a cessation of attacks. The charts show the scale of the humanitarian crisis. The Gaza Strip's access to food and other supplies deteriorated sharply after October 7, 2023, the day of the Hamas attack. The number of humanitarian aid trucks entering the area plummeted from around 500 to 600 a day to a fraction of that (Chart 1). The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification reports show that at least 85% of Gaza's population was categorised as facing 'crisis', 'emergency' and 'catastrophic' levels of food insecurity ever since December 2023 (Chart 2). As of January 15, 2025, there were around 98 hostages. Even fewer were confirmed to be alive. This is of the 251 people taken hostage by Hamas on October 7 (Chart 3).

Analysis by the United Nations Satellite Centre (UNOSAT), showed that 69% of structures were damaged in the Gaza Strip, as of December 1, 2024. UNOSAT identified that 60,368 structures were destroyed, 20,050 were severely damaged, 56,292 moderately damaged, and 34,102 possibly damaged (Chart 4). Since September 6, 2024, when the earlier analysis of UNOSAT was carried out, the governors of North Gaza and Rafah have experienced the highest rise in damage. Around 3,138 new structures were damaged in North Gaza and around 3,054 in Rafah. Within North Gaza, Jabalya municipality had the highest number of newly damaged structures, totalling 1,339 (Map).

Deaths, displacements and hunger

The data for the charts were sourced from United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification reports, Reuters, AP and the United Nations Satellite Centre

Map: Damaged structures, by municipality, in Gaza (as of December 1, 2024)

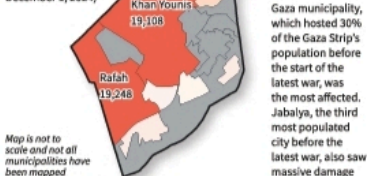


Chart 1: Fewer humanitarian aid trucks reached Gaza after the war



Chart 2: Food insecurity levels in Gaza

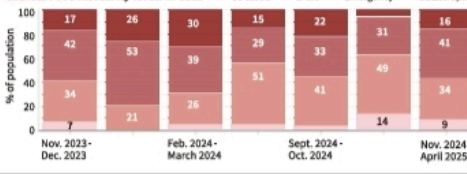


Chart 3: Status of hostages held by Hamas (251 in total)

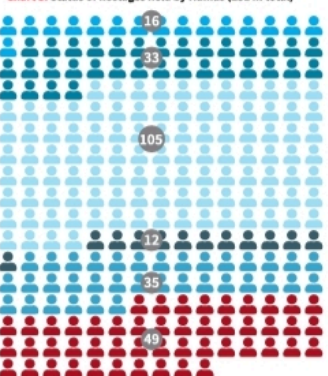
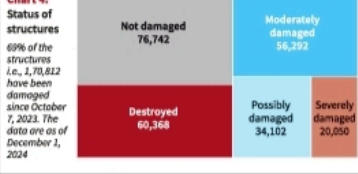


Chart 4: Status of structures



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindustan

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 20, 1975

Dock Workers Call Off Strike

NEW DELHI, Jan. 19. The four-day-old strike of the port and dock workers was called off to-night following an agreement between workers' representatives and the Government.

The announcement of withdrawal of the strike with immediate effect was made by workers' representatives after the 11-hour marathon discussions with the Union Shipping Minister, Mr. Kamalapati Tripathi. Workers will be paid by way of interim relief an amount of Rs. 120 for the period January 1, 1974 to July 5, 1974 and an amount of Rs. 180 for the period July 6, 1974 to December 31, 1974. For the period commencing from January 1 this year the workers will be paid by way of interim relief a sum of Rs. 50 a month. All these interim reliefs would be subject to the provisions of the Additional Emoluments Compulsory Deposit Act, 1974. The workers' representatives will meet the Minister again after one month to discuss how this interim relief should be treated. Under the agreement the Government accepted the demand of the port and dock workers that the proposed wage revision should come into effect from January 1, 1974.

The President of the Indian Dock Workers' Federation, Mr. S.R. Kulkarni, later said that half of the amount would be paid to the workers in cash. He congratulated the port and dock workers on the peaceful manner in which they conducted the strike. He also expressed his gratitude to Mr. Tripathi for his enlightened approach during the negotiations. Mr. Tripathi expressed his happiness at the termination of the strike. He also thanked the workers for conducting the negotiations in a cordial manner. He said: "I believe that now the work will go on in ports as usual and the backlog will be cleared soon. It is always good to settle things by negotiations instead of resorting to strike."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 20, 1925

Queen Mother of Nepal

(Associated Press of India)
Her Majesty the Queen mother of Nepal and party left Madras last night at 7-40 by special train for Rameswaram. According to programme they will arrive Rameswaram on Thursday early morning. Enroute to Rameswaram they will halt for six hours at Trichinopoly and about eight hours at Madurai. From Rameswaram they will pay a visit to Dhannuskodi on the 23rd. They leave Rameswaram after staying there for about 5 days on 26th instant reaching Arkonam on the morning of 28th instant.



Pyrhic peace

A united administration under the Palestinian Authority must be in place

After 15 months of war, which saw the deaths of tens of thousands of people, the destruction of much of Gaza and multiple rounds of painstaking negotiations, Hamas and Israel have agreed to a ceasefire. As soon as the news was out, thousands ventured out on the streets in Gaza, hoping that the daily bombardment and shelling would come to an end. Uncertainty still lingered, but both sides resolved their last-minute differences over details about Israel's partial withdrawal from Gaza and the names of the hostages to be released on day one and the ceasefire came into force on Sunday. This is not a permanent end to the war. But given the violence that Israel and Gaza have witnessed since October 7, 2023, even a pause in the war is a great relief, especially for Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians. The agreement is expected to be implemented in three phases. In the first phase, Hamas will release 33 hostages, while Israel will release about 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners. The second phase would see more exchanges of hostages and prisoners and both sides are required to announce a permanent end to the hostilities. The third phase will involve discussions on the 'day after', including who should be in charge of Gaza.

As of now, both sides stay focused on phase one. Trouble could arise when negotiations for the next phases begin. When Israel launched the war, it set two objectives for itself – the destruction of Hamas and the release of hostages. In 15 months of war, Israel has degraded Hamas's militant infrastructure, but the group has survived and reinvented itself as an insurgency. According to Antony Blinken, the outgoing U.S. Secretary of State, Hamas recruited as many fighters as it had lost during the war. Israel's inability to destroy Hamas or secure the release of the hostages through the offensive raises serious questions about the IDF's military tactics in Gaza. This could probably be one of the factors that persuaded Benjamin Netanyahu to accept the ceasefire. But he has not committed to bringing the war to an end. Hamas, on the other side, demands a complete withdrawal of Israel from Gaza. Despite the possible roadblocks, the fact that a ceasefire came into force is welcome news. It provides a desperately needed relief for Gaza and a platform to build further talks. Israel, Palestinians as well as the international mediators should now work towards bridging the gaps in the post-war scenario. Israel must not accept a situation that would leave Hamas as a ruling force in Gaza. A more pragmatic solution is to form a united administration of all Palestinian factions under the leadership of the internationally recognised Palestinian Authority, and then shift the focus towards the reconstruction of Gaza. But for this plan to work and peace to prevail, Israel should be ready to withdraw all its troops from the Gaza Strip.

Murder most foul

Making India safe for all must be a priority for State authorities

The conviction on Saturday of a former civil police volunteer in the rape and murder of a second-year postgraduate trainee doctor in Kolkata has brought some closure to her parents, but the struggle to make systemic changes to make the workplace safe for women continues. The District and Sessions Court, Seal-dah, found Sanjay Roy guilty of the horrific crime at the State-run R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital on August 9, 2024, while on duty. Pronouncing the verdict in the presence of the parents and the accused, Judge Anirban Das said the accused was found guilty based on evidence put forward by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The accused is being held guilty under Sections 64 (rape), 66 (causing death), and 103(1) (murder) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. Reading out the verdict, the judge said the crime carries the highest punishment of a death sentence and the lowest of life imprisonment; the terms of the sentence will be announced today. In his observations, the judge also put the spotlight on the functioning of the hospital administration, saying that the actions of the college's principal and other senior members had "created some confusion" in his mind. In widespread protests after the crime, doctors, the parents, and civil society had alleged that it could not have been the handiwork of only one individual.

Sandip Ghosh, principal of the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital at the time of the murder, was arrested by the CBI on charges of evidence tampering and the delay in filing the first information report (FIR), but was released on bail as the charge sheet had not been filed in 90 days, as is the rule. Inefficiencies in policing have also come to the fore; there was an inordinate delay in filing the FIR, for example, and other lapses. The parents of the doctor said they respect the judgment and sought the highest punishment for the accused but expressed hope that the investigation would not be halted so that all the culprits are nabbed, a sentiment echoed by protesting doctors, activists – and also the Opposition. There are cases pending in the High Court and the Supreme Court of India, which began hearing it *suo motu* after the uproar over the rape. It should not need a rape and murder to wake up to appalling working conditions, such as the lack of basic amenities and a safe room to rest. Kolkata's State-run hospitals are stretched thin and reports of corruption are rife. The State government announced a slew of measures for the protection of health workers, and the onus is on the administration to follow through with the promises.

A surge in radical governments, the hope of democracy

One thing seems fairly certain now. If an Islamic radical group were to seize power by force, then the world will be willing to legitimise it and forgive its past deeds. But till the time such a group does not capture power, it will either be fought tooth and nail and/or treated like an enemy.

We had Afghanistan in 2021. We now have Syria in 2024.

When the Taliban captured power on August 15, 2021, 13 members of the United States troops were killed in an Islamic State (IS) suicide attack, and \$71 billion worth of U.S. weaponry was left behind in Afghanistan. However, the U.S. and the West as well as China and Russia bent backwards to work with the Taliban. The West justified this by saying that this would wean the Taliban away from supporting terrorism and help in the protection of women's and minorities' rights. They talked about "inclusive government" but democracy was not uppermost in their minds. The then UN Special Representative to Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, even told the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that the Taliban was "misunderstood".

Treated with kid gloves

The ultimate irony was how "karma" had come full circle. In the days preceding the Taliban's capture of Afghanistan, the "Troika Plus", of the U.S., China and Russia with Pakistan, had tried to coordinate their efforts in Afghanistan to keep India completely out and ignore our vital interests. In the UNSC, even an innocuous reference to the Heart of Asia Conference on Afghanistan was deleted from the draft statement because India was one of the countries attending it.

But when the events of August 2021 unfolded, India was the president of UNSC that month. Any text or resolution required India's concurrence. When UNSC Resolution 2593, after the Taliban takeover, was passed on August 30, India left its imprint particularly in the paragraph relating to Afghan soil not being used for terrorist activities. The express reference to terrorists and terrorist organisations in the UNSC Resolution 1267 sanctions list was inserted at India's behest, where it coordinated closely with the U.S. side. This was necessary to remove any ambiguity about Pakistani terrorist organisations associated with the ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda, including the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed – listed in 1267 – from using Afghan soil to launch terrorist attacks on India.

In December 2021, the UNSC allowed the Taliban to get donor money directly into its coffers. With no political will among the P-5 or the West to demand accountability for implementing UNSCR 2593, the Taliban soon



T.S. Tirumurti

was Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations (UN), New York (2021-22) and President of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for August 2021.

The last thing India needs is the revival of Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh

denied girls school education, imposed restrictions on women, and stopped all moves for an inclusive government. Now, the world looks the other way.

Now, Syria and Bangladesh

And now Syria in 2024. We have just witnessed a radical Islamic leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani or Ahmed al-Sharaa of the Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) seize power, culminating in the toppling of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Al-Jolani was earlier leader of the al Qaeda in the region, with links to international terror groups. His radical outfit, the HTS, which was earlier an al Qaeda wing in Syria called the Jabhat al-Nusra, still features in the U.S. State Department list of terror groups. Mirroring what they did with the Taliban, the U.S. and the West have lined up behind the HTS and its leader. The first move of the U.S. was to remove the bounty of \$10 million on al-Jolani's head for his capture. Capturing power can help evade capture also.

This is wonderful news for Islamic terrorists and extremist groups gaining ground, especially in Africa such as in Mali, and adopting IS and al Qaeda techniques to topple governments. But the world is preoccupied with Ukraine and West Asia. Now, India has a situation brewing closer to home, in Bangladesh.

Even if the collapse of the elected government in Bangladesh has been largely due to an autocratic government stifling democratic freedoms and losing the plot, under the guise of supporting regime change, the U.S. clearly downplayed the interests of its "strategic" partner India. It is propping up the interim military-led government of Muhammad Yunus, which is seen as tolerating, even encouraging, Islamic radical groups in Bangladesh and is a threat to its minorities. The last thing India needs is the revival of Islamic radicalism in Bangladesh, where the last 16 years have seen the two countries and its peoples come closer in a variety of ways for mutual benefit.

When Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League came to power in 2008, it was seen as free and fair elections with a cleaned-up electoral list and the Bangladesh Army staying on the sidelines. The people overwhelmingly rejected the violent past of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Khaleda Zia and their Islamic radical partners such as the Jamaat-e-Islami. Just when one thought that the Jamaat-e-Islami stood discredited for siding with Pakistan in the 1971 war and rejected by the people of Bangladesh for causing mayhem and disrupting lives, the popular student protests of 2024 and the ensuing military coup have given them a fresh lease of life.

While there is no doubt that the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) – affiliated to the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the

Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, the Islamic Chhatra Shibir, the Hefazat-e-Islam, the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) have taken advantage of the situation, it is not as if the people of Bangladesh have embraced them wholeheartedly. Consequently, these radical groups have tried to shore up support for their extremist ideologies by attacking the minority communities, forcing the interim government to release Islamic extremists from prison (such as like Jamshuddin Rahmani, head of the ABT), and adopting shrill anti-India rhetoric, conflating the dismantling of Sheikh Hasina's legacy with attacks on India. India should be careful not to fall into this trap.

Religious hate has been on the rise around the world. It was when this writer was India's Permanent Representative to the UN that India brought up, for the first time, in 2021-22, the rise of religio-phobia against non-Abrahamic religions, including against Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. India condemned all forms of religious hate, whether in the U.S. and the West or in Bangladesh and the neighbourhood. While India may have taken its eye off the ball when it came to the Sheikh Hasina government, it cannot ignore Islamic extremism again rearing its head in Bangladesh and posing renewed danger to India's national security – something which New Delhi successfully prevented over the last 16 years.

The larger picture

However, for both sides to view the unfolding events purely through a religious lens – be it an Islamic lens or Hindu lens – would be a mistake. This has been counterproductive before and will be so now. In fact, Islamic radicals are baiting India, and, unfortunately, so are the officials who have been appointed as advisers to Mr. Yunus, precisely to polarise forces within their own country. On the other hand, India has the larger perspective in mind to protect its bilateral relations from damage. It has reiterated its readiness to do business with the interim government. India has removed most irritants in its bilateral relations in the last two decades, except maybe for the sharing of Teesta river waters. What is forgotten is that when Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) revolted in February 2009, just after the first clean elections of Bangladesh in December 2008, it was India which gave its rock solid support to the newly-elected government and helped save democracy.

It is in Bangladesh's own interest that this military coup does not translate into an Islamic coup and goes the way of Syria or Afghanistan. The silver lining is that, having tasted the power of democracy in 2008, and now in 2024, it will be difficult to put the clock back.

The historian must note that the past has many layers

It is of course the historian's professional responsibility to bring knowledge of the past back to life academically for which a rigorous training in the norms and the methods of the discipline is imparted in institutions like universities. The discipline requires the historian to imbibe its basic premises: evidence is the primary basis of one's research; each statement must be supported by evidence which itself has to undergo a critical evaluation for its authenticity, its proximity to the event or phenomenon under review, and its context and compatibility with other bits of evidence which might be corroborative or contradictory. The inferences drawn from the evidence must conform to the test of reason rather than providence or any explanation outside the realm of reason.

The other layers

So far so good. But the past has other layers not susceptible to evidence from the archives, texts, manuscripts or archaeology. One such layer is memory not captured in texts, manuscripts, documents or on the dug up field. It survives in popular memories of events, persons and happenings, often at variance with the accounts given by professional history. The crucial difference is that while the historian has bestowed an image of a person, event or phenomenon meticulously sticking to the prescribed modes and methods of research, popular memory is not bound by any such constraints. It does not have to adduce empirical evidence or even follow it up with an inference that is subject to rational analysis. Yet, its power as an image of the past remains undiminished.

Let us take some examples. Have we not heard of Emperor Akbar's court adorned with the nine jewels (*Nav Ratnas*)? No one had in Akbar's time. The ones counted in the group of nine included some fake ones, but the notion of *Nav Ratnas* is a much later popular creation, perhaps not before



Harbans Mukhia

taught history at the Jawaharlal Nehru University

Today's historians must engage with the 'facts' as well as what has been habitually dismissed as 'fiction'

the 18th century. It does not alter history very much but lends some colour to the past. But some other memories do alter history as well, a little or drastically. The story of Jodha Bai, for instance. One can shout oneself hoarse, as historians might, that there was no Jodha Bai in Akbar's harem and that Jahangir's mother was Harkha Bai, a princess of Amer, but Jodha Bai does not disappear from sight.

But these memories are more colourful diversions from the rather dry narrative of historical 'facts'. There are others that have proven to be far more powerful than the historians' version. The Babri Masjid case is an outstanding instance of this power.

The example of Ayodhya

Several historians, with help from archaeologists, had argued during the 1980s that there was no evidence of the existence of a Ram temple which was demolished to construct the Babri Masjid. Evidence from a large number of sources from the 16th century on was unearthed to strengthen the argument. The first authentic evidence of a link between Lord Ram and the construction of the masjid dates to 1822 in a Persian-language court document which mentions a small platform within the four walls surrounding the masjid as Ram Janmasthan; although no temple is mentioned but Sita Ki Rasoi is. A lot of accretion to this bare mention occurs during the 19th century – some violence is recorded as is the intervention of the Awadh state.

Clearly, some sort of the memory of the association of the site of the masjid with Lord Ram had begun to grow, perhaps a few decades before it got recorded in 1822, and a lot was added on to it – some by its own evolution and some by deliberate action.

In the end, the Supreme Court of India, in its final judgement of 2019, put its stamp on the historians' evidence that no Ram temple, indeed

no temple of any kind was demolished in 1528 to construct the masjid, and recorded the masjid's demolition on December 6, 1992 as a heinous crime and recommended prosecution of those guilty. Yet, going against its own finding, it gave away the small piece of land where the masjid stood for the construction of a Ram temple. In the end, memory proved far more decisive than 'history'.

On a holistic reconstruction

Historians have, in the pursuit of their reconstruction of the past, insulated the memory recorded in archives, texts documents and archaeological data, from popular memory and popular versions of history – which, in reality, are much older, besides personal events. A holistic reconstruction of the past requires the historian to concern herself with popular memory as much as with archival data to investigate the social/cultural/political context of the origins of this memory, the process of its evolution, including its manipulation for given ends.

If history and social memory had been evolving through their own dynamics in the past, the present is a watershed moment when social media has created a massive space for, on the one hand, real common people's intervention in recollecting the past as well as for the grossest distortions of both the historian's version of the past and inflicting similarly distorted versions of memory.

Thus, today's historian, the professional custodian of the past, must engage with 'facts' as much as with what she has habitually dismissed as 'fiction' comprising the vast array of layers of the past. She must treat these as historical data: popular cultures of the past, gossip, conversations, silences, absences... History speaks most eloquently and consequentially only when it speaks in its entirety.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

R.G. Kar case

The verdict may have been pronounced in the R.G. Kar case, but there is still one question to ask – what about the others who were involved, directly or indirectly? This has been a case that led to a wave of protests by medical staff and students, with the demand for justice for the victim and better security for medical staff.

The statement by the parents (Inside pages,

January 19), "... But we believe the investigation will go on and more culprits will be caught", is enough to prove that the case has still to be closed.

Manya Sharma,
Bangalore

The conviction of Sanjay Roy has reinstated the confidence of the public in the judicial system to some extent. But the fact that the other alleged perpetrators still remain at large shows

that only half the battle has been fought.

Aanya Singhal,
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Animal welfare

I write to express concern and indignation regarding the recent decision to prohibit the feeding of dogs within the site of the Kukkara Halli lake, Mysuru. Let the University of Mysore set an example of progressive governance by upholding compassion,

legality, and ethical responsibility. This directive not only contravenes established legal frameworks but also disregards the basic principles of humanity and animal welfare, thereby warranting immediate revocation. This prohibition violates the guidelines issued by the Animal Welfare Board of India, which uphold the fundamental right to feed and care for stray animals in

public spaces. The Supreme Court of India has, on multiple occasions, reaffirmed the importance of ensuring the welfare of stray animals while maintaining the delicate balance of coexistence.

Tom Hoppel,
Mysuru

'Lit for Life'

The 'Lit for Life' festival was a great effort which will be a harbinger of the reading habits of people, on the

wane now due to digital intrusions. The session by David Williams (I attended it with my grandson), which saw many children enjoying the programme, will be richly cherished by them. The only disadvantage was the overlapping of the programme – at the main hall and the pavilion.

Dr. V. Purushothaman,
Chennai

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

CACHE

The impact of H-1B visas on the tech industry in U.S.

Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, both immigrants and Mr. Trump's picks to overhaul the U.S. government, are supportive of the skilled foreign worker visa programme

John Xavier

The last week of 2024 didn't exude the holiday spirit for several folks in the tech world. A section of billionaires, politicians, and tech workers were piqued by a specific U.S. immigration policy that allows skilled foreign workers to work in the country.

A verbal mudslinging began after President-elect Donald Trump appointed Sriram Krishnan as his senior policy advisor on Artificial Intelligence (AI). Within days after the announcement, Laura Loomer, a prominent MAGA supporter, wrote rancorous social media posts against the decision, calling Indian immigrants "third world invaders." The right-wing influencer then doxxed Mr. Krishnan, sharing his election details scooped from the U.S. Federal Election Commission (FEC). While Ms. Loomer apologised for doxxing Mr. Krishnan, she remains rooted in the idea that the number of skilled foreign workers must be reduced in the U.S. as the programme is negatively impacting native workers.

Mr. Krishnan, an Indian immigrant who came through the ranks of top tech firms in the Silicon Valley, supports simplifying the legal process for tech workers to enter the U.S. His stance has been echoed by several tech billionaires. His to-be-peer in the Trump administration, former PayPal executive David Sacks, came in support of the a16z's general partner and clarified that Mr. Krishnan did not advocate for the removal of restrictions for a green card but was only seeking the removal of country-specific caps.

Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, both immigrants and Mr. Trump's picks to overhaul the U.S. government, are supportive of the skilled foreign worker visa programme. The world's richest man even said he would "go to war" to defend the programme. In an X post, he wrote: "The reason I'm in America along with so many critical people who built SpaceX, Tesla, and hundreds of other companies that made America strong is because of H-1B." The H-1B issue has not just split MAGA supporters; it has also turned some prominent Democrats, who were pro-immigration during the election season, into H-1B programme bashers. For instance, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders said the main function of the H-1B visa "is not to hire 'the best and the brightest' but rather to replace good-paying American jobs with low-wage indentured servants from abroad."

Heated debates on the H-1B visa programme are not a new phenomenon. It helps to know the programme's brief history – at least from the time it went through a major revision in the 90s – and its net impact on wages and productivity in the U.S.

A brief history

In the early 90s, the U.S. enacted the Immigration Act of 1990 to increase the number and diversity of immigrants coming into the country and to adapt to the changing economic and social needs of a globalising world. The legislation significantly revised and expanded the H-1B visa programme.

Apart from mandating employers to file



ISTOCKPHOTO

an application with the labour department that hiring H-1B workers will not adversely affect wages and working conditions of U.S. workers, the law established an annual cap of 65,000 new H-1B visas for each fiscal year.

These changes led to a substantial increase in the number of H-1B visas issued and made the programme more accessible to U.S. employers seeking high-skilled foreign workers. This, in turn, contributed to the programme's role in attracting skilled workers at a time when American companies were facing intensifying global competition, especially from Japan in high-tech and manufacturing sectors.

Silicon Valley was emerging as a global tech hub, creating unprecedented

demand for scientists, technology professionals, engineers, and mathematicians (STEM workers). Traditional industries in other parts of the country were also undergoing rapid computerisation, requiring STEM talent that wasn't readily available in the domestic workforce.

The cap on H-1B visas were hiked to 1,95,000 during the dot-com boom before returning to the base cap. Then, in 2004, an additional 20,000 slots were added for advanced degree holders from U.S. universities. Since 1990 to 2019, roughly 4.5 million H-1B visas were issued, and in the fiscal year of 2023, 72% of approved H-1B petitions were for beneficiaries born in India, and 65% of all approved H-1B petitions were for workers in

computer-related occupations.

The impact of H-1B workers

A 2015 study, titled 'STEM Workers, H-1B Visas, and Productivity in U.S. Cities' by economist Giovanni Peri, found that H-1B workers had a positive impact on the wages of native college-educated workers and overall productivity in U.S. cities.

The study examined the influx of foreign STEM workers through the H-1B visa programme and their impact in 219 cities between 1990 to 2010. It noted that H-1B-driven increases in STEM workers boosted wages for native college-educated workers. A one percentage point increase in the foreign STEM share of a city's employment led to an increase of around 7-8 percentage points in the wages of native college-educated workers.

Also, wages of non-college-educated native workers saw a positive, though smaller, increase. These workers experienced a 3-4 percentage point increase in wages for every one percentage point increase in the foreign STEM share of employment. The study estimates that the growth in foreign STEM workers may account for 30% to 50% of aggregate productivity growth in the U.S. between 1990 and 2010. Fast forward to 2024, and the impact of foreign workers on U.S. wages and productivity continued to be positive.

In a follow-up study, titled 'Immigration's Effect on US Wages and Employment Redux', economists Alessandro Caimi and Giovanni Peri note that immigrants and native workers complement each other in the labour market. In their research that examines the broader impact of immigration on the U.S. labour market between 2000 and 2022, they found that immigrants often specialise in different and complementary occupations compared to native workers.

In a separate study that documents the impact of H-1B workers on innovation and product commercialisation, Harvard Business School Professor William Kerr notes that skilled immigrants have contributed significantly to U.S. patent activity, particularly in emerging technologies. Jennifer Hunt, Professor of Economics at Rutgers University, has shown in her research that H-1B workers who transition to permanent residency tend to be particularly innovative and entrepreneurial, often founding companies that create jobs for U.S. workers.

Talent conundrum in the age of AI

Despite the positive impact of H-1B workers on the U.S. economy, opponents of the visa programme are clamouring for restrictions and lowering the number of legal immigrants. Some critics, particularly the ones against Indian tech services companies like Infosys and Cognizant, are well-laid.

These companies developed a business model that combined offshore development centres in India with on-site presence in the U.S., facilitated by H-1B visas. This model, sometimes called the "global delivery model," transformed how technology services were delivered to U.S. companies, but it did not truly make a path-breaking innovation for the U.S. economy.

These companies typically rank among the top H-1B sponsors annually. For instance, in many years between 2005-2019, Indian companies accounted for a substantial portion of all H-1B visa petitions. This has raised concerns about the programme's concentration among top IT services firms.

It will do well for the incoming Trump administration to look into these practices and redraft a skilled worker immigration policy that prioritises the skill and educational background of an individual over a company's profit-making interests.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

She isn't pulling her weight in the team

Everyone was supposed to have their hair in two plaits. Please start braiding your hair now

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of 'pull one's weight'? (K. Natarajan)

The idiom 'pull one's weight' is mostly used in informal contexts to mean to do one's share of work; you cooperate with the other members of your team to complete a job. You achieve this by working as hard as them; your contribution towards an enterprise is the same as the others.

Your manager tells me that you haven't been pulling your weight. What seems to be the problem?

He accused several members on the team of not pulling their weight.

'Pull one's weight' is an idiom which has been around since the 19th century. According to scholars, it originated in the sport of rowing. In this sport, several people sit in a boat and attempt to row it as quickly as possible. In order to achieve this, teamwork is essential. The participants need to ensure they are all in synchrony while rowing, and also, that every individual puts in the same effort as the others. Each individual 'pulls his weight' by applying all his strength to each stroke. If a member fails to do so, he becomes a burden on the team. Nowadays, the idiom is mostly used while discussing the value of an employee.

How is the word 'plait' pronounced? (R. Sangeetha, Nellore)

How this word is pronounced depends on which side of the Atlantic the individual is from. An American would pronounce it like the word 'plate'. An Englishman, on the other hand, would rhyme the word with 'flat'. 'Plait' comes from the Old French 'pleir' meaning 'to fold'. As children, most girls in our country, get their hair plaited by their mother. What is it that mothers do? They take two or three strands of hair and cross them over each other and create a pattern of some sort. This process is called plaiting. Any string like material can be plaited.

The three-year-old had fun plaiting her grandfather's beard.

Americans prefer to use the word 'braid' – rhymes with 'trade' and 'grade' – rather than 'plait'. They talk about 'braiding one's hair', rather than 'plaiting one's hair'!

The mother spent a lot of time teaching her daughters how to braid their hair.

What is the meaning of the expression 'to nix something'? (J. Hamsa, Mysore)

The word 'nix' rhymes with 'kicks', 'fix' and 'ticks'. When you 'nix' someone's plan, what you are doing is to prevent it from happening. You put an end to it by saying 'no' to it. This informal expression can also be used to mean 'refuse to accept' or 'veto' something. I asked for a raise, but my boss nixed it. upendrankye@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

Late American filmmaker David Lynch was born on January 20, 1946. Here is a quiz on the acclaimed director and his works

Abhinaya K

QUESTION 1

Lynch made his first experimental short film while he was a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The short film is a continuously looping animation of human figures. Name the film.

QUESTION 2

After watching Lynch's first feature film *Eraserhead*, the creator of this very popular space opera wanted the former to direct the third movie of the franchise. Lynch is said to have turned down the offer. Name the franchise and the movie.

QUESTION 3

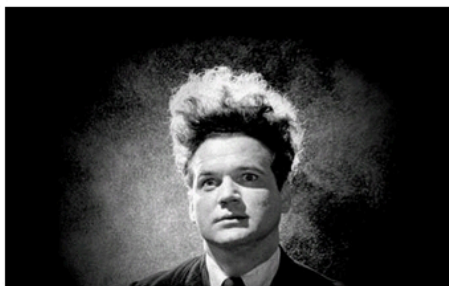
Lynch appeared in an award-winning film directed by Steven Spielberg. Identify the movie and name the character Lynch played.

QUESTION 4

Lynch was awarded an honorary Academy Award in 2019. How many times has he been nominated for an Oscar and which film earned him his first Oscar nomination?

QUESTION 5

Name the writer who co-created an iconic surrealist mystery-horror drama television series along with Lynch.



Visual question: Identify this actor who is a long time collaborator with Lynch. He played the lead Henry Spencer in *Eraserhead*

Questions and Answers to the January 17 edition of the daily quiz:

1. Name the three Bronte sisters. **Ans: Anne, Emily and Charlotte Brontë**

2. The second novel of Anne Bronte. **Ans: The Tenant of Wildfell Hall**

3. The three of them have worked on a collection of poems, 21 from Anne and 21 from Emily and 19 from Charlotte in this book. **Ans: Poems by Currier, Ellis, and Acton Bell**

4. Along with Anne's *Agnes Grey*, name the two well-known novels of the other two sisters. **Ans: Jane Eyre by Charlotte and Wuthering Heights by Emily**

5. This sister publicly revealed the real identities of all three sisters. **Ans: Charlotte**

Visual: Identify this place. **Ans: Brontë Parsonage Museum**
Early Birds: Siddhartha Viswanathan [K.N. Viswanathan] Tito Shaliditay [Pyali Tulji] Dodo Jayaditya

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

Word of the day

Widget: something unspecified whose name is either forgotten or not known; a device or control that is very useful for a particular job

Synonyms: appliance, contraption, convenience, gadget

Usage: These widgets are now more technologically advanced.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/widgetpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /wɪdʒɪt/

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Trump in the Oval Office

As Trump begins his second term, he is likely to reshape domestic policies and redefining America's role in the world

Donald Trump will begin his second term as President of the United States today, marking a significant moment in US political history. The swearing-in ceremony has dignitaries from around the world in attendance. Notably, Chinese Vice President Han Zheng will represent China, highlighting the importance of US-China relations in the coming years. President Trump's second term is anticipated to commence with a series of decisive actions. Reports suggest that he plans to issue approximately 100 executive orders on his first day in office, targeting areas such as immigration, trade and energy. These orders aim to deport illegal immigrants, end birthright citizenship and reinstate the 'Muslim ban.' Economically, he plans to raise tariffs, cut taxes and eliminate regulations. Trump seeks to boost fossil fuel production by reducing green energy initiatives. His cultural policies include banning transgender women from female sports and restricting hormone treatments for minors.

In the international arena, President Trump's approach to China is poised to be assertive. He has proposed imposing tariffs ranging from 10 per cent to 20 per cent on imports, with the possibility of escalating to 100 per cent for BRICS countries like China and Russia if they move away from using the US dollar. Additionally, Trump has indicated a focus on addressing issues such asentanyl trafficking and the operations of Chinese companies like TikTok in the US. A recent phone call between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping covered topics including trade,entanyl and TikTok, suggesting a complex and potentially contentious relationship moving forward. Another area which is more relevant to us here is his attitude towards Indian companies and tech professionals working in the US with H1-B visas. The relationship between the United States and India is expected to experience both opportunities and challenges during President Trump's second term. The personal rapport between President Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi may facilitate continued cooperation. However, Trump's 'America First' policies could lead to heightened trade barriers, especially in sectors like information technology and pharmaceuticals, where India has significant interests. Despite these potential hurdles, India's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific region and its role in diversifying global supply chains away from China may provide avenues for strengthened collaboration between the two nations. As President Trump embarks on his second term, the global community will be closely monitoring how his administration's policies unfold, particularly in relation to major economies like China and India. The decisions made in the coming months will have profound implications for international trade, security and diplomatic relations.

PICTALK



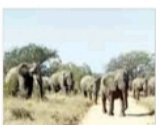
A farmer prepares an agricultural land for paddy cultivation, in Haidi

PTI

When elephants roamed beyond: A remarkable journey through China

A historic event captivated the world as a herd of 15 wild elephants embarked on a 500-km journey from Xishuangbanna to the bustling city of Kunming

Some time back an extraordinary event unfolded in China: for the first time in recorded history, a herd of 15 wild elephants embarked on an unprecedented journey. Leaving their natural habitat in Xishuangbanna (commonly referred to as Banna), the elephants traveled over 500 kilometers to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. Xishuangbanna, an autonomous prefecture for the ethnic Dai people, lies in the southernmost part of Yunnan, bordering Myanmar and Laos. This remarkable migration captured the attention of the world, with live 24/7 broadcasts and drones following their every move. The Chinese authorities, committed to the conservation of these majestic creatures, responded with care rather than confrontation. However, their journey caused panic among local residents, who abandoned their homes in fear. Despite trampling crops and cornfields along the way, the elephants did not harm any humans. In some instances, curious jumbos ventured



into deserted homes, with one even slipping under a bed. Yet, they remained peaceful throughout their expedition. During their long journey, the elephants maintained their routines, munching on leaves, bathing in mud, and sleeping. In a touching moment, a calf was born mid-journey. Eventually, after weeks of gentle coaxing and careful management, the herd returned to their home in Xishuangbanna. The reasons behind this unusual migration remain unclear. Experts speculate that an inexperienced leader might have led the herd astray, or that they were seeking a new habitat due to environmental changes. While conservation efforts in China have resulted in a gradual increase in the elephant population, these efforts are complicated by

human activity. Large-scale commercial rubber cultivation, introduced to Banna, has significantly disrupted the region's rainforest ecosystem. These plantations, consisting of monocultures of Brazilian rubber trees, replace diverse habitats, further encroaching on the elephants' range. Asian elephants, an endangered species, number only about 300 in the wild in China, primarily in Banna. Protecting these animals is a national priority. Emergency workers and volunteers were mobilised during the migration, providing tonnes of corn, pineapples and other food to ensure both the safety of the elephants and the local population. Trucks and drones were deployed to guide the animals along safe paths, offering them a feast akin to a celebratory banquet. Xishuangbanna is a biodiversity hotspot, home to a wide variety of flora and fauna. The region's tropical climate and historical isolation have preserved its rich ecosystems. In addition to Asian elephants, the area supports other endangered species

such as green peacocks, wild oxen, and monkeys. The Wild Elephant Valley Forest Park, located 47 kilometers north of Jinghong city, serves as a key conservation site. Spanning 369 hectares, this park provides a haven for wildlife and a unique opportunity for visitors to observe elephants. The reserve features observation towers, allowing visitors to watch wild elephants bathing, playing, and strolling. A cableway provides breathtaking views of the valley, while the park's elephant-domestication school entertains visitors with performances by trained elephants, including dancing, headstands, and football tricks. Looking ahead, the Chinese government plans to establish an Asian Elephant Breeding Centre in Banna to further conservation efforts. These initiatives aim to protect not only the elephants but also the rich biodiversity of this unique region, ensuring a harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife.

(The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)



C K NAYAK

SELECTORS RETAIN ROHIT SHARMA

Madam — The news that the selectors have retained the Indian skipper Rohit Sharma for the upcoming series against England for ODIs and for the Championship Trophy. While Rohit was averaging 6 runs in his last six innings, on the other side, the Karun Nair is waiting for his chance by having proved his immense worth with 752 runs in 7 innings with an average of 752 with 5 recent unbeaten centuries to his credit at the much-acclaimed Vijay Hazare Trophy, still waiting for his place potentially. It is also disproving the Board's statement that the players must play the local games to prove themselves to claim their place at the international level was not considered in Karun Nair's case. One can expect that during the crisis in the upcoming series, when the team struggles in the name of injury, Nair may get a call back from Rohit to join the team, as we have seen such inclusions in the past. One thing is evident that the selection criteria lack complete transparency and without the godfather, finding a place is becoming increasingly difficult in the team. Ironically, Sanju Samson was dropped for the series by assigning reasons that the board was not happy because he didn't play the local games. Stranger than fiction of selection won't do good for the sport and currently for the Indian cricket.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

JOBS OVER FREEDOM

Madam — The Delhi assembly elections have transformed into a marathon race for freebies without realising the negative impact on the state's economy and the diversion of massive funds for turning the potential workforce passive. Delhi loses its charm if the development, infrastructure, education, health, job creation and entrepreneurship are sacrificed. Delhi people should not ask for jobs as the parties are promising enough for their sustenance. Alas! After all, votes appear to decide their lives. The taxpayers pay taxes for the development, security and growth of the nation but virtually provide funds for freebies.

Need for a unified global strategy against terrorism

Nations must come together to share a common vision and adopt a multilayered approach that prioritises security, innovation and collaboration



SUDHIR HINDWAN

IN A GLOBALISED WORLD, THE IMBALANCE OF POWER AND INEQUALITY IN THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY OFTEN FUEL TERRORISM

and their practical application in countering terrorism. Regional political actors must engage in rigorous policy analysis and embrace innovative approaches to address these shortcomings. More integrated programs that support both military and law enforcement agencies are necessary to strengthen their efficiency in combating propaganda and terror. Community development within regional alliances like the Quad can also foster resilience against destabilising forces. Addressing Underlying Socio-economic Factors In a globalised world, the imbalance of power and inequality in the international economy often fuel terrorism. Socio-economic disparities create fertile ground for non-state actors to exploit psychological vulnerabilities and propagate extremist ideologies. To counter this, nations must dismantle the mechanisms that enable the spread of false narratives and ill-intentioned ideologies. Specialised Counter-Terrorism Frameworks A robust counter-terrorism strategy must include spe-

cialised think tanks and talent development programmes. These institutions can provide tactical expertise, real-time feedback, and innovative solutions to address evolving threats. Interactive communication between intelligence, law enforcement and military branches can further enhance operational efficiency. A modern, vigilant, and assertive network of military, police, and paramilitary forces must replace outdated systems to address the complexities of modern terrorism. The Path Forward To combat terrorism effectively, nations must overcome entrenched mindsets and outdated practices. Strategic planning should evolve to address the realities of state-sponsored terrorism and propaganda. Establishing a new consensus on international security and fostering a collaborative global environment are vital for achieving long-term stability. (The author is a recipient of the Bharat Gaurav Award, is a professor and expert in international relations; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Centre announces 8th Pay Commission



In a major decision, the Union government has announced the 8th Pay Commission to revise salaries and pensions of over 1 crore central government employees and pensioners. With more money in the hands of the employees and pensioners after the implementation of recommendations of the next pay commission, the gov-

ernment is expecting a boost for overall consumption and demand in the economy. Though every employee deserves more, the appointment of a pay commission is an exercise against fiscal prudence.

At a time when 60 per cent of revenue expenditure is spent only on salary, pension, interest and subsidies, leaving only 40 per cent for development activities, the implementation of the 8th pay commission will further shrink the share of development activities in revenue expenditure. Every pay commission brings inflation to the economy, which affects the poor most. In addition, the financial condition of the states is not ready to bear the burden of another pay commission.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

Delhi is one of the biggest sources of revenue collection in income tax and GST. At least the taxpayers should have the option in their IT returns to invest or spend their taxes towards national security, education, industrial and civil infrastructure, health and welfare schemes.

All the welfare schemes and freebies are funded at the cost of higher electricity, water and municipal taxes paid by the non-eligible class besides taxes paid by them. In the long run, the taxpayers may be demotivated to pay taxes honestly as the political parties are squandering their hard-earned money on freebies, which are the antithesis of growth and development. At least the BJP was expected to promise jobs to the youth and empower them instead of turning them into dead weight like other parties. We should not lose the demographic dividend by parajising the youth.

Vinod Jhri | Delhi

EXPECTATIONS BURDEN WOMEN

Madam — Refer to The Silent Struggles of a Daughter-in-Law. A call to change

(January 18). The natural shift in family roles where elders move from decision-makers to mentors (less responsibility, less freedom) and younger generations take on more responsibilities and more freedom in decision-making can become complicated when societal pressures interfere. High expectations with society's rigid rules on newer generations often result in rigid roles, particularly for daughters-in-law, who are expected to navigate complex expectations. This situation may hinder the balance within the family.

To achieve the ultimate goal of love, care, and empathy, families must embrace internal management and communication rather than following society's rigid rules that allow shared responsibilities and individuality. This fosters understanding and reduces the generational gap, creating harmony and mutual respect among family members. The ultimate goal is a stable and loving society.

Riti Dwivedi | Indore

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Indian cryptography research gears up to face the quantum challenge

Areas where Indian researchers are working extensively include communication complexity, the amount of communication required to complete a computational task; proof complexity, the computational resources required to prove or disprove statements; and algebraic coding theory

T.V. Padma

Fundamental research in cryptography that's used worldwide to facilitate internet banking, e-commerce services, and secure messaging systems is now taking root in India as well.

The principal goal of those developing or using cryptographic systems is to improve system security. Cryptography – from the English roots of “hidden writing” – is the name for techniques that secure information by converting plain text into ciphertext. It is concerned with the creation and use of encrypted messages that only the sender and the receiver can understand and which a malicious actor who interferes with the communication can't.

Sending secret messages isn't new. Archaeologists have unearthed clay tablets made by the ancient Mesopotamians in which they wrote down cryptic formulae to make ceramic glazes. In the first century BC, the Roman dictator Julius Caesar used the eponymous Caesar cipher to relay messages of strategic value to his generals.

More recently, many Polish codebreakers fled their country after Adolf Hitler invaded it in 1939 to work with reputed British mathematicians, including the father of modern computing, Alan Turing, to crack Germany's famed Enigma cryptosystem. Turing's work in particular established much of the foundational theory for modern algorithmic computing.

Scientists have devised many sophisticated methods to prevent adversaries from cracking secret codes and gaining unauthorised access to sensitive information. These methods achieve their goals by using algorithms and protocols to protect some data's confidentiality, integrity, authenticity, and non-repudiation.

‘Hard’ problems

Cryptographic algorithms convert messages in ways that make it very difficult, very expensive, or both to decode them. A common way to achieve this has been to place some sensitive information behind the answer to a very difficult problem. An agent can access the information by solving the problem, so the harder the problem, the more inaccessible the information.

“Hence the search for harder and harder problems – for instance, even those that quantum computers may find hard to solve,” R. Ramanujan of the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai, said.

As computational techniques evolve, particularly with advancements in quantum computing, the interplay between complexity and cryptography will continue to be a crucial area of research and development, he added.

Modern cryptographic systems are built on problems that demand far too many resources to be solved.

“As they say in the crypto community, if your cryptosystem is broken, either a spy is dead or a million dollars is missing,” Ayan Mukherjee, an assistant professor at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune, said. “Such is the seriousness of the effect of a broken cryptosystem. Thus, oftentimes, people use the old and the trusted to secure their communications.”

This is also why, he added, “The field of cryptography is very slow-moving.”

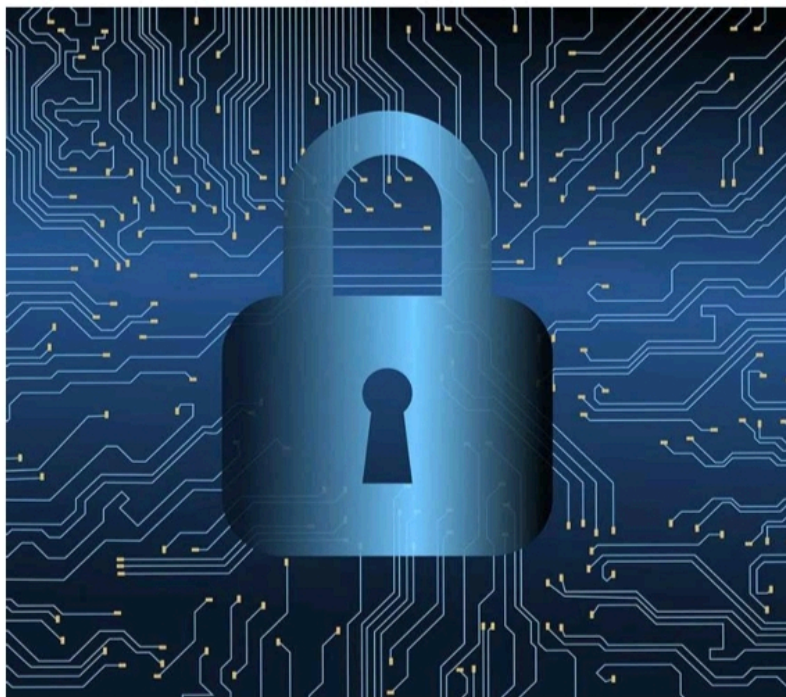
“There is a close connection between complexity theory and cryptography, hence many [researchers] work on these connections, clarifying notions and building finer techniques,” Ramanujan said.

Areas where Indian researchers are working extensively include communication complexity (the amount of communication required to complete a computational task), proof complexity (the computational resources required to prove or disprove statements), and algebraic coding theory (using algebra to encode and decode data).

Locks and keys

The goal is to make sure an adversary, especially one with enormous computational resources, can't crack the code. At the heart of any cryptosystem is the key: a secret value an algorithm uses to encrypt or decrypt data.

The Caesar cipher is a simple example. It works by mapping the existing alphabet to one where the starting letter is offset by some number of letters. This number is the key. For example, if the key is 14, the encrypted alphabet begins with the letter O (the 14th letter) rather than A. Thus the



At the heart of any cryptosystem is the key, a secret value an algorithm uses to decrypt, or unlock, data. JAYDEEP_PRAKASH

words FIGHT FOR ROME become TWUVH TCF FCAS.

When the sender encrypts data with a key, only someone who knows the key can decrypt the message and read it. More sophisticated systems use two keys – one each for the sender and the receiver – and map them in a separate secret way.

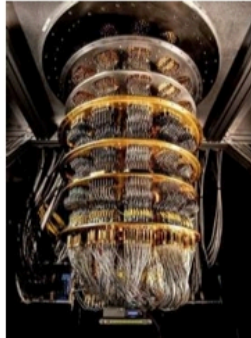
A famous example is public-key cryptography, which is used to secure information over the internet. The receiver uses a single algorithm to generate two keys called the public key and the private key, and shares the public key with the sender. Any message the sender encrypts with the public key can be decrypted by the private key.

Researchers prefer the algorithms that generate keys to be one-way functions, a name in mathematics for functions that are simple to use but hard to crack. In cryptography, this means they can be used to easily encrypt messages but can't be cracked without knowing the key. As Ramanujan put it, the challenge is like protecting a house with a strong alarm system that the house's residents can still use without tripping.

Some one-way functions are very difficult to crack and thus very secure – but they also take a long time to decrypt messages. This is one of the principal reasons mining for bitcoins has become a very energy-intensive process. The bitcoin system uses a one-way function that has required more computational resources to decrypt messages as the size of its blockchain has increased.

This is why some cryptography researchers in India and abroad are working on simplifying the decryption side in particular. Researchers are also considering whether shorter proofs (of the hard problems) can be used to verify the integrity of data in artificial intelligence and large language models.

Cryptography isn't just a mathematical



A cryostat refrigerator for cooling quantum computing chips at Google's Quantum AI lab in Santa Barbara, California, U.S. REUTERS

or academic curiosity but is of considerable practical interest, Yael Kalai, whose work on proofs won her the 2022 Turing Award, told the 11th Heidelberg Laureate Forum in September (the author was in the audience). “In today's world, the biggest problem we have to solve is trustworthiness,” she said.

Since researchers have solved the problem of authentication and security in communications, she added, the current problem is computation.

“People are computing things for us. How do we know that they are computing correctly? How do we certify the huge and often crazy computations people are coming up with? That is a huge new research problem now.”

Possibility of disruption

Two research areas that could disrupt current cryptographic systems with significant economic and social consequences are homomorphic encryption and quantum information technologies, per a recent paper by the Organisation of Economically Developed Countries (OECD).

Homomorphic encryption is a cryptographic method that allows certain calculations to be performed on encrypted data without the need to decrypt it first and without accessing the secret key. The result of such computations remains in encrypted form and can be revealed later, when necessary. According to the paper, this technique could surmount the problem of processing encrypted data without decrypting it first, which increases risk.

Second, a mature quantum computer could easily break some encryption methods widely used today. Some researchers are thus working on algorithms that can resist attacks powered by a quantum computer, an enterprise called quantum resistant cryptography (QRC). In fact, marrying cryptography with quantum physics paves the way for encryption technologies based on the laws of quantum physics, which can be more convoluted than mathematical concepts alone.

Researchers worldwide have been working on QRC since 2006, including in publicly funded research projects in the European Union and Japan. In India, Mukherjee's group at IISER Pune, and those at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and the Raman Research Institute (RRI), both in Bengaluru; the Centre for Development of Telematics, New Delhi; and at Pondicherry University are working on it as well.

A huge deal

Cryptography research in India is taking off in other aspects, too, catching up with that in the European Union, the U.S., and China. The National Quantum Mission the Cabinet approved in 2023 includes a research hub for quantum communication. The mission is to enable

A mature quantum computer could easily break some encryption methods widely used today. Some researchers are thus working on algorithms that can resist attacks powered by a quantum computer, an enterprise called quantum resistant cryptography

satellite-based secure quantum communications between ground stations over 2,000 km, long-distance secure quantum communications with other countries, inter-city quantum key distribution over 2,000 km, and multi-node quantum networks, among other outcomes.

The Indian Space Research Organisation is also planning to launch a satellite with ultra-secure quantum communication capabilities.

In July, a team of Indian scientists from RRI, IISc, IISER Thiruvananthapuram, and the Bose Institute in Kolkata published a paper describing a way to generate true random numbers that are crucial to making secure private keys and nearly unbreakable passwords.

“This new method offers the enhanced protection we all need in our daily lives by using truly random numbers to generate keys that will be used to encrypt the passwords,” the Department of Science & Technology said in a statement. Apart from the Ministry of Science & Technology, major government funders for cryptography research in the country include the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Department of Telecommunications.

“The present status of quantum cryptography is to build quantum-secure cryptosystems,” Mukherjee said. “It's based on the idea that, in the near future, we will have quantum computers. When that happens, the current cryptosystems will fail. This is a huge deal.”

The consequences will also affect India's cryptography policy. According to a recent study commissioned by the Thales Group, the volume of sensitive data in the cloud could surge from 51% of all organisational data to 68% by 2027. As more data enters and lives in the cloud, “encryption techniques for data at rest, in motion, and in use are becoming more pervasive, evolving into a standard practice for protecting cloud-resident sensitive information against emerging cyber threats,” the report said.

There is widespread data loss as well: the report said almost three-fourths of all organisations have faced multiple data breaches in the past year, foremost due to inadequate encryption. Some 71% initiated formal cryptographic programmes and 81% have dedicated encryption teams.

(T.V. Padma is a science journalist in New Delhi. tvpadma.10@yahoo.co.in)



A boat carrying domestic tourists passing through hyacinth in Lake Naivasha last December. AP

Water hyacinth threatens the livelihoods of fishers on Kenyan lake

Associated Press

For someone who fishes for a living, nothing says a bad day like spending over 18 hours on a lake and taking home nothing.

Recently, a group of fishermen were stranded on Kenya's popular Lake Naivasha for that long and blamed the water hyacinth that has taken over large parts of it.

“They did not realise that the hyacinth would later entrap them,” said fellow fisherman Simon Macharia. The men even lost their nets, he said.

The water hyacinth is native to South America and was reportedly introduced to Kenya in the 1980s “by tourists who brought it as an ornamental plant,” said Gordon Ocholla, an environmental scientist at Mount Kenya University.

Water hyacinth was first sighted on Lake Naivasha about 10 years ago. Now it has become a large, glossy mat that can cover swathes of the lake. To fishers, the invasive plant is a threat to livelihoods.

Usually, the presence of water hyacinth is linked to pollution. It is known to thrive in the presence of contaminants and grows quickly and is considered the most invasive aquatic plant species in the world, Ocholla said.

It can block sunlight and impact airflow, affecting the quality of aquatic life. This has caused a drastic drop in the population of fish in Lake Naivasha and some other affected areas.

The East African Journal of Environment and Natural Resources estimated in a 2023 study that the invasion of water hyacinth in Kenyan

The water hyacinth is native to South America and was reportedly introduced to Kenya in the 1980s by tourists who brought it as an ornamental plant

lakes – including Lake Victoria, Africa's largest – has led to annual losses of between \$150 million and \$350 million in Kenya's fishing, transport, and tourism sectors.

The fishermen at Lake Naivasha know that well. “Previously we would catch up to 90 kg of fish per day, but nowadays we get between 10 kg and 15 kg,” Macharia said. This means daily earnings have dropped from \$240 to \$35.

There are several ways to deal with the plant, including physically removing it, Ocholla said. Another method is introducing organisms that feed on it. Or chemicals can be sprayed to kill the plant, “but this is not favorable as it would harm other aquatic life.”

Recently the fishers, through a Kenyan start-up called Hyapak, began using a method that converts water hyacinth into biodegradable packaging.

Hyapak started in 2022 as a project at Egerton University in Kenya. Hyapak founder Joseph Ngũthuri said the company is trying to use one problem, the hyacinth, “to solve the plastic waste pollution” problem.

Hyapak has entered into a partnership with the fishers, who harvest the water hyacinth and sun-dry it for a negotiable fee. Then it is transported to a Hyapak facility to be converted into biodegradable paper material.

The company works with 50 fishers at Lake Naivasha and processes up to 150 kg of water hyacinth per week, converting it to 4,500 biodegradable packages.

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



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Whether Trump's tariffs will aid or harm the US is far from clear

Indiscriminate tariffs that don't fit into a larger strategy can hurt the barrier-erecting country more than its trade partners



DANI RODRIK
is a professor of international political economy at Harvard Kennedy School, and the author of 'Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy'.

The world economy awaits with dread the arrival of Donald Trump's trade tariffs. Trump clearly loves import duties and has promised to raise them for goods from China, Europe, Mexico and even Canada. How much havoc this will wreak depends not just on the tariffs' scope and magnitude, but also on the purpose to which they are put.

Economists dislike tariffs for a variety of reasons. Like all barriers to market exchanges, they create inefficiency: they prevent you from selling me something I value more than you do, leaving both of us worse off in principle. Economic theory does recognize that this inefficiency can be offset by gains elsewhere. For example, tariffs can do some good in the presence of infant industries, knowledge spillovers, monopoly power, or national-security concerns.

Even then, economists will argue, tariffs are a blunt instrument. After all, an import tariff is a specific combination of two different policies: a tax on consumption of the imported good and a production subsidy for its domestic supply, at equal rates. Any economic or non-economic objective can be met more effectively by deploying these policies separately and at customized rates, targeting them at desired outcomes more directly. To economists, tariffs are a pistol aimed at one's own foot.

Trump's view could not be more different. In his imagination, tariffs are like a Swiss Army knife, a tool that can simultaneously fix America's trade deficit, enhance its competitiveness, foster domestic investment and innovation, shore up the middle class and create jobs at home.

This view is almost certainly fanciful. Tariffs will have highly uneven effects on US manufacturing, benefiting some while hurting those that depend on imported inputs or foreign markets. Even where they boost profits, there is no guarantee this will lead to more investment in new technologies or job creation. Corporations that get richer can choose to distribute the proceeds to managers and shareholders instead of increasing productive capacity.

If Trump insists on his view, the good news, for the rest of the world at least, is that the economic costs will be borne mainly by Americans. That is another key insight from economics: just as the benefits of opening up to international trade accrue mostly at home, so do the costs inflicted by protectionism. Hence it would be a tragic mistake for other countries to overreact and retaliate with their own tariffs. There is no reason for them to replicate Trump's error and raise the risk of an escalating trade war.

Trump could, of course, adopt a more limited approach. He has often made a narrower case for



tariffs, as a weapon to extract concessions from trade partners. Importantly, this implicit rejection of across-the-board tariffs also seems to reflect the view of this nominee for Treasury secretary, Scott Bessent.

Before the US election, for example, Trump had threatened Mexico and Canada with 25% tariffs if they failed to "secure their borders." In principle, such threats do not need to be carried out if other countries comply with Trump's demands.

But it is unclear whether using such threats to change others' behaviour will be effective. China, India, and other large countries are unlikely to be swayed by them, given the risks of appearing weak. In any case, tariffs are a poor threat regardless of whether one views them as a faulty pistol or a Swiss Army knife.

On the conventional view, because tariffs are harmful to the domestic economy, they lack credibility as punishment for others. On the alternative Trumpian view, tariffs are inherently desirable, which means they are likely to be used regardless of what trade partners do.

There is a fourth, more realistic conception of tariffs that has been effective in some significant instances. Advocates of this perspective view tariffs as a shield behind which other, mainly domestic policies can work more effectively. Traditionally, trade laws have allowed countries to use tariffs to protect vulnerable sectors or regions under specific conditions, effectively supplementing

domestic social policy.

An even more significant example is infant-industry protection, which has worked best when it exists alongside other instruments to incentivize domestic firms to innovate and upgrade. Some notable cases include the late-19th-century US, post-1960s South Korea and Taiwan, and post-1990s China. In each of these cases, industrial policies went far beyond trade protection, and it is unlikely that tariff barriers on their own would have produced the gains each of these economies experienced.

Similarly, green policies often require some trade barriers to make them economically and politically viable, as in the case of the EU's carbon tariffs and the local-content requirements of the US Inflation Reduction Act. In all these cases, tariffs play a supporting role for other policies that serve a broader purpose, and can be a small price to pay for the larger benefit.

Unfortunately, Trump has not offered a domestic agenda of renewal and economic reconstruction in any of these areas, and his tariffs will likely stand (and fail) on their own.

When tariffs are moderate and are used to complement a domestic investment agenda, they need not cause much harm; they can even be useful. When they are indiscriminate and are not supported by purposeful policies at home, they do considerable damage—and more so at home than for trade partners.

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Indigenous approaches to fire control hold lessons for the US

America must adopt traditional techniques deployed in Australia



DAVID FICKLING
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Controlled fires have long been used by Australia's original inhabitants

The devastation from California's wildfires is unique in its horror—but it has precedents elsewhere. And some time-honoured solutions that deserve a comeback. So far, some 23 people have been killed and more than 12,300 structures destroyed. It's a similar picture to Australia's catastrophic 2019-20 bushfire season, which resulted in 33 deaths and more than 3,000 homes burnt. In each case, a landscape transformed through thousands of years of Indigenous fire agriculture has proven deadly to a modern society more averse to burning vegetation.

There's just one crucial difference. The Australian fire season lasted five months and burnt 24 million hectares. The damage in California has taken place over a smaller time and area—one week and 16,500 hectares. Are there lessons from the far side of the world that could have reduced the catastrophe in the US?

A wildfire is unpredictable in its effects and Australia's experience may have been as much a matter of luck as strategy. Its Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 killed 173 people within days. At the same time, in a world where wildfire is becoming more frequent and devastating as a result of climate change, there are lessons to be learnt from how other countries handle the same combustible mix of parched vegetation and dry windy weather.

One thing Black Saturday taught Australia was that evacuation is better than the then-common strategy of staying behind to defend your property. If it had followed the example of California, where around 500,000 people were ordered from their homes during a 2007 fire disaster, more lives might have been saved.

Here are three examples that could be applied to avert future disasters.

Find geographic similarities: Australia and the US have a lot in common. The two are roughly similar in size, and eastern Australia and the western US are both fertile densely-populated strips of land sandwiched between the ocean and a more arid interior. Los Angeles is far drier than any major Australian city, with about half of Melbourne's rainfall and one-third of what you'd expect in Sydney. But vegetation in both southern California and Australia is dominated by sclerophyll plants—adapted to hot dry weather, they often depend on wildfire to germinate and spread.

There are historical similarities, too. In both countries, Indigenous populations practiced a form of fire agriculture for millennia before Europeans arrived. Verbal accounts and paintings by early colonists in

both countries are quite consistent in their description of a landscape reminiscent of the parklands around an 18th-century English country house—widely-spaced trees, separated by grassy expanses. Those practices were largely stamped out in the 19th and 20th centuries as emergency departments focused on suppressing fire, rather than working with it.

Harness Indigenous know-how: Australia's history of bushfire disasters helped it learn the lessons of Indigenous fire control early. Government inquiries into catastrophes in the mid-20th century enshrined the idea of managing rather than eliminating fire, by deliberately burning off undergrowth during cool, damp parts of the year to get rid of the fuel that infernos feed upon. These 'prescribed burns' mimic the Indigenous practice of 'cultural burning,' and are far less damaging. A wildfire can easily hit temperatures sufficient to melt aluminium and move faster than a person can run, but a well-managed prescribed fire is slower and cooler, causing less damage and releasing less carbon into the air than intense blazes that inevitably break out under a fire-suppression regime.

The US is moving towards prescribed burning and using Indigenous expertise. But progress is slow—not least because a warming climate is reducing the number of cool damp days when it can be done. Over the six most recent years for which we have comparable data, Australia conducted planned burns over three times the area seen in the US. A more proactive approach has improved matters in the Southern Hemisphere. Others should follow.

Pay it forward: Managing a wildfire over a vast landscape is beyond the ability of professional emergency departments. In Australia, volunteer fire services are key local institutions outside big cities, with nearly 800,000 people giving their time to such agencies—roughly 5% of the rural population. That helps manage fire in sparsely-populated areas.

The US has similar organizations. About two-thirds of its firefighters are volunteers. But recruitment is weak, with numbers falling about 17% between 2015 and 2020. A third of firefighters in communities of less than 2,500 people are aged 50-plus. They're the first line of defence. America needs more of them.

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THEIR VIEW

Capital markets require more Hindenburgs, not fewer

SRINATH SRIDHARAN



is a corporate advisor and independent director on corporate boards. His X handle is @ssmumbai

In 2017, Nathan Anderson established Hindenburg Research with a purpose as pointed as its name: to uncover corporate disasters of human making and hold them accountable. Over the years, Hindenburg became a lightning rod for controversy, dissecting companies and exposing everything from accounting fraud to undisclosed conflicts of interest.

Last week, much to the glee of many in the corporate world, Anderson announced that he was stepping away from the firm he built, citing the unrelenting pressure of the work. His departure feels symbolic—a reminder of how fragile the fight for corporate accountability can be when left to a few determined to wage these battles.

Despite decades of financial regulation globally, we need more Hindenburgs, not fewer. Businesses are the lifeblood of modern economies, but without checks and balances, they can also be their undoing. Regulators, while necessary, operate within the constraints of bureaucracy and politics.

They are reactive, not proactive. Investors, particularly large institutions, often find it easier to look the other way than confront the companies they bankroll. Governance, transparency and ethical behaviour are often hash-tagged with the brute force of influence and profits.

Yes, Hindenburg profited many times from its reports. The veracity of its claims has also been doubted. But still, short selling is legal. It operates within the same framework that lets us purchase and hold securities. Yet, the practice is often vilified as though it's nefarious. While short sellers like Hindenburg are not infallible, they contribute far more to market efficiency than they're given credit for. By challenging valuations and exposing fraud, they prevent bubbles that can destabilize economies when they burst.

Why is it that we celebrate those who sing the praises of our favourite companies but demonize those who challenge them? Short sellers have long been maligned, labelled 'vultures' that thrive on the carcasses of companies they bring down. If a short seller uncovers accounting fraud, do we fault them for revealing the truth or the company for hiding it? When they raise uncomfortable questions about inflated valuations or governance failures, are we outraged because

they destabilize markets or because they disturb our illusions? Much of the investing world and many global corporate owners may cheer Hindenburg's closure, but ironically, many of them have used similar short-selling tactics when it served their interests.

This caricature ignores the vital role short sellers play in exposing the rot before it metastasizes. Anderson's Hindenburg meticulously built its cases, publishing reports that could withstand public scrutiny. Sometimes better than what market regulators are expected to do. The resultant self-calls were the market's natural response to the truths that were missing in the first place. None of this would be necessary in a world where humans could truly govern themselves earnestly without doing anything they'd want kept hidden.

The importance of what short sellers do goes beyond financial markets. Their investigations are designed to make profits, but with principles. By shining a light on corporate misdeeds, they remind us that govern-

ance is a non-negotiable pillar of capitalism. For every scandal they exposed, there were likely dozens of boardrooms that felt the ripple effect, forcing businesses to recognize that the cost of opacity and deceit had gone up. In a world where trust is both a currency and a victim, Hindenburg raised the price of misdeeds.

Short sellers hold businesses to account, raise the cost of opacity and make markets more efficient

Corporate opacity leaves deep scars, disproportionately hurting those who can least afford losses. Hindenburg's work may have ruffled feathers, but it served as a necessary counterweight in a system that often tilts against the little guy. At its core, the debate about Hindenburg's methods isn't merely about short selling or market reactions, but corporate morality.

Can capitalism coexist with integrity? Can companies balance the drive for profit with doing the right thing? The message is clear: companies that cannot meet basic standards of governance should not be rewarded with blind trust. This stance isn't anti-capitalist. It's pro-accountability. Hindenburg's work, however controver-

sial, offered a counterbalance in a system often skewed against them. It raised a simple question: If a company has nothing to hide, why fear scrutiny? Isn't it a fundamental expectation of governance to defend damaged truths, even if it requires additional time and effort?

Anderson's decision to open-source his techniques would perhaps be his most enduring contribution, an invitation for others to step into the fray and continue the work. Yet, one cannot ignore the personal toll such activism takes. Holding power to account is rarely glamorous. It is exhausting, relentless and often thankless. While we celebrate movies that hero-worship individuals who take on the high and mighty, when it comes to our own investments, we often cry foul when anyone asks questions.

Without watchdogs willing to call out malfeasance, society risks sliding into a reality where profits are prioritized over principles. Accountability should not rest on the shoulders of a few brave individuals. It's a shared responsibility—of regulators, investors and corporate boards. The question is whether we will leave this task to a few activists in the hope that they'll do what entire systems often fail to. Markets don't need perfection, but they do need accountability.

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Today, we are connected not just by the bonds of friendship but by the threads of technology



RAVI VALLURI

Three decades ago, we were perhaps merely a group of motley friends and acquaintances. We were a bunch of strapping youngsters and petite women who had flowered from their teens, all tutees in an estimable institution. Three decades back we professed and cherished a heterogeneity of political ideologies spanning the left, right and center spectrums, in an era of a controlled economy and what also was the pre-globalisation era. This was a generation ago. Meanwhile, the Soviet economy crumbled and disintegrated, the Berlin Wall collapsed and diverse countries swiftly embraced consumerism and capitalism. A talismanic Zuckerberg bought a contrivance called WhatsApp from Jan Koum. All the technology and gadgets have provided seamless connectivity and people across the globe have been moored, and so it was with us. In a trice, we were all trussed up through WhatsApp. A few months of endless chatting on WhatsApp resulted in a clarion call for a reunion. This was followed by frenetic preparations and a homecoming took place at the opulent Rajputana Sheraton, Jaipur. The assembly and the bonding were indeed amazing. For three days and four nights we were to shed our past baggage and live another life. The friends of yesteryears conducted themselves as a group of children rediscovering their roots. This is purely a physical pining. The geometry and architecture of the human mind are unmindful, unsuspecting and unaware of the exalted, elevated and lofty state it is capable of. This is the pining and longing for the Divine. The same longing that Radha Arjuna or Sudama possessed for Lord Krishna. This is true of all religions, faiths and spiritual masters. Like Yusuf, Dawud, Sulayman, and Ibrahim beckett Allah. Akin to what the apostles, and more recently, Saint Teresa felt for Jesus or Ananda for Buddha. This is divine love without any attach-



ments and entanglements. This is not an emotion of craving but that of five Es. What are these five Es? The devotee, seeker and devout are subsumed with exhilaration, ecstasy, euphoria, elation, exultation and ebullience. This is the authentic and genuine pining for the Divine. It is a meditation state in which the seeker or the disciple basks in the glory of the Master and utters his name with the doctrine of the three Cs: credence, confidence, and conviction.

Yes, the enlightened Buddha does say nothing is permanent in life, and impermanence is the only constant factor. However, the heart and mind aching for the Divine is voracious. It transcends all boundaries and frontiers. Feelings and emotions encompass the human mind with constructive and efficacious thoughts, where it becomes intrepid to scale and surmount any misadventure. To elaborate further, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar poses a teaser, "Do we give quality time to the Divine?" He goes on to add, that we do that only after partying hard, watching some tantalizing movies and entertaining guests. The remainder or balance of our time is set aside by the mind to pine for the Divine.

The universe thus showers upon us only that quantum of benediction and bounty, depending upon our tapas or the tractive effort of the mind. However, through methodical and punctilious practice of techniques like yoga, pranayama, meditation and the unique rhythmic breathing technique of Sudarshan Kriya, the mind can achieve the state of continuous communion with the Divine by remaining in the present moment. So, what happened to the group that met after thirty years? They are in abiding and sustained touch. Perhaps a dash of spiritual sparkie is required to cement the bonding from within and without.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

LPG subsidies: Give it to the poor and needy

As state-owned oil companies grapple with massive losses from selling LPG below cost, the Govt is set to allocate Rs 35,000 crore in subsidies to mitigate the financial burden



UTTAM GUPTA



During the current financial year (FY) 2024-25, the state-owned Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) are expected to incur an under-recovery of Rs 19,550 crore, Rs 10,400 crore and Rs 10,570 crore respectively on sales of LPG to household consumers. To make up for this loss totalling Rs 40,500 crore, the Union Government is likely to provide a subsidy of Rs 35,000 crore. In the Budget for 2025-26, to be presented on February 1, 2025, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will make a provision of Rs 10,000 crore in the revised estimate (RE) for the current FY and the remaining Rs 25,000 crore in the budget estimate (BE) for 2025-26.

The under-recovery arose because these corporations sold LPG for Rs 803 per 14.2-kg cylinder against the cost of supplying at the retail point being higher. The cost is calculated as the refinery-gate price or RGP (taken as import parity price or IPP and export parity price or EPP in the ratio of 80:20) plus freight, marketing costs, marketing margin, dealers' commission, and taxes and duties. During the current FY, the cost is Rs 1043 per cylinder, and the loss is Rs 240 per cylinder which on total sales of 169 crore cylinders would be Rs 40,500 crore. Modi - government had stopped giving subsidies on LPG during FY 2021-22. Then, how come, it continues to make huge payments from the budget? LPG is an environment and human-friendly fuel that meets the needs of millions of households (HHs).

Subsidy on LPG ought to be given only to those HHs who are poor. The government also needs to track the income status of the beneficiaries and withdraw support from those who become better off and can pay cost-based prices. Ignoring these cardinal principles, the subsidy was given to anyone who had an LPG connection. It went to all and sundry including the rich. The poor who alone should have got it sat at the bottom. According to the Economic Survey (2015-16), only 0.07 per cent of LPG subsidies in rural areas went to a fifth of the



LPG IS AN ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN-FRIENDLY FUEL THAT MEETS THE NEEDS OF MILLIONS OF HOUSEHOLDS (HHs). SUBSIDY ON LPG OUGHT TO BE GIVEN ONLY TO THOSE HHs WHO ARE POOR. THE GOVERNMENT ALSO NEEDS TO TRACK THE INCOME STATUS OF THE BENEFICIARIES AND WITHDRAW SUPPORT FROM THOSE WHO BECOME BETTER OFF AND CAN PAY

poorest households. In urban areas, the poorest fifth got only 8.2 per cent.

A lot of subsidies went to fake beneficiaries or the diversion of stocks (albeit subsidised) of LPG cylinders to hotels, restaurants, and other commercial users. Despite lacking sound justification, sheer populism drove politicians to give subsidies to all and sundry. They found ways to give it without taking the burden on the Centre's balance sheet. Initially, the subsidy on LPG (besides petrol and diesel) was cross-funded/subsidised by charging more on the sale of other products such as fuel oil, naphtha, ATF, etc. hence, no burden on the budget. In 2002-03, the Vaipayee-led NDA government ended the above system and decided to give subsidies on these products directly from the budget with the intent to eventually disband them. But, that was not to be.

The UPA government which took charge in 2004, even while continuing with subsidised sales, used disingenuous methods such as the issue of oil bonds to IOCL/BPCL/HPCL (instead of losses incurred by them due to selling these products at below-cost prices), and sale of domestic crude oil by state-owned upstream oil and gas companies viz. Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Oil India Limited (OIL), etc. at a discounted price to these fuel refiners-cum-retailers. In June 2010, petrol was decontrolled followed by diesel in November 2014. As for LPG, the Kelkar Committee recommended the removal of 25 per cent of the subsidy in 2012-13 and 75 per cent in the following two years. Modi Government which took charge in May 2014, started acting on it but in a calibrated manner. On January 1, 2015, it launched a direct benefit transfer (DBT) of subsidy.

Under DBT, oil PSUs deliver the cylinder to the beneficiaries at a full cost-based price and follow it up by depositing a subsidy in the beneficiary's account.

In turn, they claim reimbursement of the subsidy amount from the Centre. This helped in eliminating fake beneficiaries and curbing misuse that was inherent in the erstwhile system wherein subsidy was embedded in the price. But, the government couldn't muster the courage to trim the number of beneficiary HHs sans Modi requesting the rich to give up on their own.

The FY 2020-21 was a boon, viewed from a subsidy angle. In that year, there was a steep decline in international prices (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) leading to a fall in the cost of supplying an LPG cylinder to a low of Rs 600; hence, it could be given to all HHs at Rs 600 requiring no subsidy support. The BE of Rs 36,000 crore for that year was used largely to clear past dues of oil PSUs and provide free gas connections under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY). During 2021-22 when the international price rose due to waning COVID and demand revival, the cost of LPG zoomed to over Rs 900 per cylinder.

This prompted the government to give subsidies but only to the PMUY beneficiaries. They were 9.6 crore out of a total of 33 crore HHs. It spent Rs 14,000 crore during that year. During 2022-23, it spent Rs 9,170 crore. But, this doesn't tell the full story. From June 2020 to June 2022, the government had asked the three fuel retailers namely IOCL/BPCL/HPCL to sell LPG at a price below cost and gave them a one-time grant of Rs 22,000 crore to compensate for the losses incurred in 2021-22 and 2022-23 (against under-recovery of Rs 28,250 crore).

This was nothing but subsidy (albeit 'hidden') given to all and sundry, and not just PMUY beneficiaries. In the Budget for 2023-24, it kept the BE for LPG subsidy at Rs 2,257 crore. As in the previous two years, that allocation was meant to cover subsidy to PMUY beneficiary HHs @ Rs 200 per cylinder for up to 12 refills per year. However, to benefit all the 33 crore HHs, on August 29, 2023, the Union Cabinet approved a reduction in the price by Rs 200 per cylinder effective from August 30, 2023, thereby enabling the PSU retailers to sell it at Rs 903 per cylinder (Delhi). Taking 4 fills per HH, @Rs 200 per cylinder, the annual burden comes to Rs 26,400 crore (200x4x33).

Since the decision was effective from August 30, 2023, for the remaining seven months of FY 2023-24, the outgo would be around Rs 15,300 crore. On March 9, 2024, the fuel retailers namely IOCL/BPCL/HPCL were asked to cut the price by another Rs 100 per cylinder (countrywide, of general elections) to Rs 803.

During the current FY 2024-25, the price has remained unchanged despite the cost remaining at an elevated level. The under-recovery for 2023-24 and 2024-25 thus comes to over Rs 40,000 crore of which the Centre now wants to reimburse Rs 35,000 crore. This and the earlier payment of Rs 22,000 crore for loss incurred by IOCL/BPCL/HPCL during 2021-22 and 2022-23 could have been avoided if only it had stuck to its earlier stance of restricting LPG subsidy only to the poor HHs and keeping it transparent. But, this is unthinkable in the current political climate wherein all decisions based on sound economic logic are hamstrung by populism.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

The silent epidemic: The untold story of gender inequality against men in India

Indian society, long entrenched in patriarchy and gender inequality against women, is now grappling with an overlooked dimension of the issue—gender inequality against men

Indian society has always been dominated by patriarchy and gender inequality against women. However, the two recent suicides of a techie and a head constable, both alleging extortion and harassment by their estranged wives and families, point to a highly skewed, female-oriented and obsolete legal framework. Gender inequality largely remains a half-told story, deprived of the male counterpart. The legal system in India favours women with the dowry laws in India being specifically highly discriminatory. As per section 113B of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 (now Bharatiya Saksham Adhyam, 2023) if a married woman commits



KAJLEEN KAUR

suicide within 7 years of marriage, it is assumed that the husband or his family abetted suicide, while the same does not apply to women. Marriage litigation experts claim that when women file complaints against their husbands and families, the dynamics of abuse and unclear documentation frequently make

these cases highly complex and a woman's statement is usually considered at face value, creating a significant imbalance in the legal process. Additionally, females also get a preference in the custody of children especially in younger ages below 5 years, in most divorce cases, as per the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2022 data, men accounted for 1,22,724 suicides out of a total of 1,70,896. This is 71.81 per cent of all suicides. The data also highlights that a man commits suicide every 4.45 minutes while a woman every 9 minutes. Moreover, the rate of

suicide among married men is thrice that of married women. In 2021 as many as 81,063 married men committed suicide while the women's figure stood at 28,660. Family problems and marriage-related issues were the leading causes of suicide in metropolitan cities, accounting for 32.5 per cent of the cases. Gender inequality towards men finds limited discussions both culturally and in academic research, not just in India but globally. However, a closer look at the facts reveals a biased feminist societal structure predominantly. According to the founder of a Delhi-based organisation, Purush Ayog, society stereotypes assume that 'males



cannot be victims', which leads to ignorance and neglect of the issues facing them. A study by Stoen and Geary, 2019 for 134 countries claimed that men were more disadvantaged in 91

(68 per cent) countries than women. They argued that the Global Gender Gap was flawed, due to lopsided measuring techniques, which did not include situations where men are disadvan-

tagged, due to the absence of literature. Another study in France found that discrimination against men in female-dominated workplaces is more prevalent than discrimination against women in male-dominated workplaces. Similar examples of reverse sexism, with anti-male prejudice are vastly prevalent, but ironically barely quoted. The mental health research is also focussed on women, and scholars warn of the problems faced by men as a silent epidemic. In the legal framework, the female culprits are less likely to have longer and more stringent imprisonment for similar crimes. Women's liberalisation and empowerment are necessary

for a progressive social structure and developed economy. Still, a gender-equal status should not be thrived at the cost of male exploitation. In modern-day society, with evolving gender roles and relationships; better education and awareness; and a feminism gaining force, balanced matrimonial laws are more pertinent than ever. The government must consider amending marriage laws to include prenuptial agreements to address financial complexities, disputes, and legal rights.

(The author is assistant professor at Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi; views are personal)



● **BUDGET PLEA**
Congress leader Jairam Ramesh
...the Budget must eliminate "raid raj" and "tax terrorism", protect Indian manufacturing jobs, and take decisive action to boost wages and purchasing power. This will incentivise Indian businesses to invest

Trade partner or adversary?

India must think beyond China-Plus-One strategy as the world trade order is rapidly changing

CHINA IS REPORTEDLY imposing restrictions on exports of certain key industrial inputs and capital equipment to India, and commentators have warned against the potential adverse fallout of the move on some of India's sunrise sectors. Foxconn's iPhone unit in India, electric vehicle manufacturer BYD, etc. could face delays in component sourcing, as also Tata Electronics, which has manufacturing ties with Apple. The move by the world's largest trading nation, which is set to cross an incredible milestone of having a \$1 trillion trade surplus with the rest of the world in 2024, exposes several fallacies and myths. Despite the rhetoric of New Delhi being restrictive and chary about imports from the bigger neighbour, not just its industry and consumers but even its manufacturing ambitions remain heavily dependent on imports from China. These inward shipments have been rising relentlessly, with no real policy impediments by India. In FY24 alone, China registered a merchandise trade surplus of \$85 billion with India.

To be sure, going by China's data, that surplus may be even higher at \$103 billion in 2024, far higher than the \$57 billion reported in 2019. Beijing's curbs on exports of industrial intermediary goods to India may be meant to force India to withdraw its "restrictions" on Chinese investments and issuance of visas to Chinese professionals. However, that is at best half the story. The Chinese move also betrays that it is quite affordable for Beijing to curb certain exports to India, if it thinks these could serve to enhance India's tech-intensive manufacturing capabilities. With India having a share of less than 5% in its total exports, it doesn't make much difference for China if exports of certain chosen goods to the country are restricted for a specified period. In short, China's move goes beyond trade strategy, and may well be guided by hostile motives.

China seeks to use trade as a weapon. The reality is that this plan hasn't seen any serious setbacks, despite the pushback by the west. Even the US's imposition of high tariffs on Chinese goods in 2018 hasn't slowed China's ascendancy on the global trade landscape — its exports rose by \$1.1 trillion between 2017 and 2023, even as annual shipments to the US in 2023 was down \$80 billion or 16% from the 2017 level. What is to be noted is that while the much-touted China Plus One (C+1) supply chain strategy, of which India will supposedly be a big gainer, is stumbling, China has already made much headway with its coherent counter-strategy. It is using a host of countries like Mexico, Vietnam, and ASEAN members as willing conduits for indirect shipments to the US, and the European Union.

This strategy by the world's second largest economy, which still contributes the most to global growth, and accounts for a third of global manufacturing, is only likely to intensify with the new Trump administration expected to sharply raise tariffs for Chinese goods. India would do well to position itself more strategically in this virtual warzone. It has to focus much more on export sectors, where it is relatively easy to make a quantum jump, and sew up more alliances for tech-intensive production with Japanese, Korean, and European firms. The rupee should be allowed to move more freely to find its real value. Import substitution and tariff policies ought to be well-informed, supplemented with creation of domestic capabilities, and guided more by self-interest.

Diplomacy just as vital as expertise to run restaurant

IHAVE TWO pieces of past advice for anyone rash enough to approach me for counsel. First, *never speak to the press*. Second, *don't open a restaurant*.
Over the last three decades, I've seen a lot of restaurants open and either flourish or fail — or, heartbreakingly, flourish then fail. About 17% don't survive their first year; and only slightly more than 50% get past the five-year mark. I suspect the statistics are different, perhaps harsher, for the category of big city fine-dining establishments where I tend to hang out. So, if you want to start a restaurant with ambitions beyond burgers, pizza, or bubble tea, I can sketch out a couple of lessons, with the caveat above that I've never dared run one myself and the fact that others will have better advice on money and accounting. I'll focus on more social aspects of the endeavour.
First, remember that your business isn't being launched into a vacuum — especially in a big city. You'll be part of the so-called hospitality industry and it's best to be welcomed by your peers, who will also be your rivals. In 2016, before Junglyung and Ellia Park — immigrants from South Korea — opened Atoboy, their first Manhattan restaurant, the couple went around New York to dine at established restaurants, befriending chefs, managers, servers, and, just as importantly, the kind of customers that tend to become regulars. It was smart diplomacy: introducing themselves as affable, not hostile, arrivistes and raising curiosity around their project. The neighbourhoodness generated lots of goodwill. Atoboy was and continues to be a success. Since then, the Parks have opened several spots, including Atoboy, which now has two Michelin stars and is consistently listed among the world's best restaurants in several rankings.

Entering a market full of talented competitors is daunting. A three-star Michelin chef in Europe told me that, at his prime, he turned down several opportunities to open a shop in New York because all the friends he had in the city would turn on him as an interloper out to grab their business. It's all very cut-throat, and you've got to have drive and a ruthless streak to succeed. But being openly bilious about the rest of the field is bad form — and word about your ill will inevitably gets around.
Once, at an after-hours bar, I sat within hearing distance of the chef of a very well-reviewed restaurant and a couple of his deputy cooks. I'd been to their place a couple of times. While I enjoyed the food, the service was dismissive of customer concerns. I couldn't help but eavesdrop on the conversation — and it was clear the spirit of the place descended from the top. The chef was crudely and contemptuously of his rivals, other restaurants, and of his clients. I have never gone back.

Lesson two is a corollary. Unless you're a tiny artisanal four-seater in Kyoto, you really can't run a restaurant solo. You'll need people to make guests feel welcome when they walk in and await their food, or to cook at the various stations in the kitchen, or make sure the provisions arrive on time; and the accounting isn't a mess. The hiring process is tough enough: The composition of your team and the division of labour is another. The best way to keep things under control is to learn to give up control — to the right people.
Finally, decide what you really want. Michelin stars? If so, there's a way to get on that ladder. Just be aware that once you've achieved the stars, you will have to earn them each year. A restaurant with three can always fall to two — and the stress of maintaining the status or losing it can be murderous. Being part of a larger, well-funded restaurant group may lessen anxiety over finances, but the big-money folks can just as easily swamp a kitchen they don't think is working — replacing it with less ambitious cuisine to shore up the bottom line.

Even if the quest is to establish a low-key restaurant that can serve as a place small business, you — especially if you are the chef and creative centre of the place — still need to put yourself out in regular and social media to make sure diners know to want to get to your establishment.
So why do this? I couldn't tell. To make people happy, you've got to be nice. That's hard work. However, making people happy can create an enthralling feedback loop of endorphins: You feed people and raise their internal, that is natural, morphine levels. I know chefs who've left the kitchen — retiring or choosing to focus on making their restaurant corporations generate growth — and I can detect a wistfulness. They'd rather be cooking to make someone happy. The endorphin high is priceless.



HOWARD CHUA-EOAN
Bloomberg

Free up pricing of agriculture

MSP FRAMEWORK NEEDS A REVISIT, IN TERMS OF FREEING UP PRICES OF PRODUCTS AS ALSO MAJOR INPUTS

PRICING OF AGRICULTURE outputs or inputs is no different from the pricing of other products. In a market economy, they are decided by the free play of demand and supply. Many times governments intervene to control prices, and they often mess up the system leading to huge inefficiencies. That does not mean that governments don't have any role. Their major role should be to make sure that markets work well. And for that, they need to invest in information symmetry and physical infrastructure. They can also invest in facilitating the creation of efficient value chains through institutional innovations that minimise the price spread between farmers and consumers. They can help promote futures markets and options that try to minimise the risk, and help farmers take planting decisions based on what future prices are likely to be rather than basing them on the previous year's prices. This is the forward-looking scenario that will align well with what India chose to bewith the 1991 reforms.

If Manmohan Singh will be remembered for one great thing that he did for India, it would be freeing up the industrial policy from the controls and licence raj, freeing up the exchange rate, and gradually reducing import duties and opening up trade. This gave India a new direction. He did not touch agriculture as he thought it was a state subject. The only thing he did was to try to raise urea prices by 30% in one go as he felt that it was absurd to keep them frozen over long periods of time when costs were rising. It was resisted by many in the Congress party, who feared losing their vote base.
If agriculture is truly a state subject, as most of the activists cried when the National Democratic Alliance government brought in farm reforms, then why are they asking the Centre to make the minimum support prices (MSPs) legal? Let the states choose the option of making it legal and pay for the consequences. The Centre should leave agri-market reforms, including the MSP business, to the states.
It may be worth recalling that the system of MSP was introduced by the Centre with the setting up of the Agricultural Prices Commission in January 1965. It was meant to focus primarily on wheat and rice as India was hugely short of basic staples. India was importing 10 million tonnes (MT) of wheat in the mid-1960s under Public Law 480 from the USA against rupee payments. It did not have enough foreign exchange to buy food from global markets. Food aid from the US had its political undercurrents, a taste of which was experienced when food shipments to India were suspended for 72 hours by Lyndon Johnson as India issued a statement in favour of Vietnam when the US was at war with the Southeast Asian nation. In 1966, India also imported high-yielding varieties of wheat seeds from Mexico (18,000 tonnes), which ushered in green revolution. It was in that backdrop that the policy of MSP for wheat and paddy came into existence. India's population was roughly



ASHOK GULATI
Distinguished professor, ICRIER

500 million in 1965.
Today, India is not facing the situation it did in the mid-1960s. Despite having 1.43 billion people, India is giving free wheat and rice (3 kg per person/month) to more than 800 million people. India is the largest exporter of rice in the world. The Food Corporation of India has mountains of rice that are almost three times the buffer stock norms. The MSP basket of goods has expanded over time, largely due to political pressure. MSPs were always supposed to be indicative prices, and the government would come to procure only if there was a serious crisis. The legacy of open-ended procurement of wheat and rice in some states, most notably in Punjab and Haryana, has continued till day. It has created an imbalance in the production basket. Too much rice is being produced primarily because of free power pricing and highly subsidised fertiliser prices. This is leading to the depletion of groundwater, soil degradation, and greenhouse gas emissions — an ecological disaster in the states of Punjab and Haryana.

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also its major inputs such as fertilisers and power. In fact, land markets also need to be opened up, starting with land lease markets. A highly regulated land market, and pricing of inputs and some output (rice and wheat), with massive procurement, is leading to huge inefficiencies in the system. Part of the problem stems from the public distribution system that gives free wheat/rice to almost 57% of the population with the government claiming that it has brought 248 million people out of poverty in the last 10 years. It has become a chicken-and-egg problem. Since India has locked itself in free grain distribution, it has to procure roughly 60 MT of grains each year to deal with that system.

Given that India has digitalised much of the food system, both at the level of consumer as well as the farmer's end, it will be much more frugal and efficient to move towards direct cash transfers to targeted beneficiaries who really deserve support. It implies a larger food subsidy to the extremely poor (antodaya), and less to those who are above the poverty line. Similarly, aggregate input subsidy support to deserving farmers on a per hectare basis, and free up pricing of food as well as inputs like fertilisers and power. The efficiency gains and savings are going to be large, which can be ploughed back into agri-R&D and extension, education and skills, irrigation and water management, physical infrastructure of roads and markets in rural India, etc.

That is the nature of reforms that India needs for realising its dream of *Viksit Bharat* by 2047. The competitive pollution to give free food, power, or highly subsidised fertilisers, or even pocket money in the name of *kadi behna*, etc. is a race to the bottom. It is not welfareism. It is simply bribe for votes.

Views are personal

PLFS reflects positive employment trends



SUMITA DAWRA
Secretary, ministry of labour and employment

INDIAN, The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) captures employment trends across age, gender, education for rural and urban populations on quarterly and annual basis. Its launch in 2017 was a key government reform. Pre-2017, the National Sample Survey Office used to conduct employment and unemployment rounds quarterly, leading to estimates with significant time lag. The PLFS offers more frequent and granular data, supporting evidence-based policy-making.

Broad employment trends: Based on PLFS data, employment in India broadly shows an improving trend 2017-18 onwards in indicators like labour force participation rate (LFPR), worker population ratio (WPR), and unemployment rate (UR) for people aged 15 years and above. For instance, the LFPR has increased from 49.8% in 2017-18 to 60.1% in 2023-24. Similarly, the WPR has increased from 46.8% in 2017-18 to 58.2% in 2023-24, and unemployment rate has declined from 6.0% to a low of 3.2%.

Rise of female workforce: The most important aspect of employment growth has been the rise of women workforce. Facilitated by government schemes, women have taken up self-employment and entered the workforce in an impressive scale. Data shows female WPR almost doubled from 22% to over 40% and UR dropped from about 6% to around 3% between 2017-18 and 2023-24.

Upward shift in self-employed: A noticeable trend in the PLFS data is an upward shift in self-employment. Data shows a decline in casual labour by about 5%, accompanied by a decline in regular wage/salary jobs at about 1%, with an upward shift in self-employment by about 6%. The shift is therefore attributable more to an increase in the total workforce and decline in low-quality casual labour employment, rather than a decline in the regular wage/salaried workforce per se.

Self-employed are also employed: According to the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, the International Labour Organisation's definition of employment is of people who "were

engaged in any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit". This definition covers all forms of employment: employees, self-employed, family help (seen as contributing members), whether the employment is declared or not.
On the other hand, PLFS data includes self-employed, regular wage/salaried and casual labour. In this context, the PLFS also covers "helpers in household enterprise" under the self-employed category as they are engaged in economic activity. About 37% of the female workforce in India fall in this category, and are categorised as employed.

Changing landscape: India has seen remarkable economic growth over the past decade, rising from the 10th largest economy in 2014 to the fifth largest in 2024, and transforming the employment landscape. Services, construction, trade, manufacturing and the micro, small and medium enterprise sector are the major drivers of employment growth, while the job market evolves rapidly. New roles are emerging in start-ups, gig economy, and key industries like healthcare, hospitality, and education. Both domestic and global markets are seeing a surge in opportunities, particularly in technology-driven roles. In this scenario, analytical thinking and creativity are among the most required skills.

Trends in employability: Studies such as India Skills Report 2024 show that the skill sets of our graduates have been catching up with growth trends and employability. Among graduates, employability shot up from 33.95% in 2013 to 54.81% in 2024. The QS World University Skills Index 2025 shows India's favourable position especially with respect to the "ready-to-recruit" market in digital roles, integrating artificial intelligence into the workforce, and green jobs. Emerging roles in smart manufacturing, logistics, hospitality and tourism, and healthcare are giving a fillip to the female workforce too.

Start-ups and GCCs: India has the world's third-largest start-up ecosystem, with over 1.57 lakh department for promotion of industry and internal trade-registered firms directly employing 16.6 lakh people. India has become the GCC (global capability centre) capital of the world with the highest number of units after the US. Also, 17% of global technology capability centres have set up offices in India. Around 1,700 GCCs operate in India, creating jobs particularly in healthcare and technology sectors. Nasscom, in its latest report, estimates that around 19 lakh jobs have been created in GCCs.

Education, skills, and employment: With a 51.25% employability rate of India's youth (Economic Survey 2023-24), the future looks promising, especially with government's focus on aligning education and skills with industry needs. By prioritising ease of doing business through visionary policy reforms, the government has paved the way for India to emerge as a prominent global manufacturing hub.
As India strides towards the vision of *Viksit Bharat*, empowering youth with the right skills and work experience, through schemes like the PM Internship Scheme, employment-linked incentive, continues to be a priority.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Need for ethics-based AI framework

Apologies of 'AI's rise: Progress, power and ethical peril' (FE, January 18), in the Indian context artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to augment growth and innovation in sectors like health care, finance, and innovation. Yet, ethical concerns surrounding its growth must be addressed since they could lead to bias and discrimination, and job

displacement, erode individual privacy, and possible manipulation of personal data in the absence of accountability and transparency. AI growth may deepen the digital divide and hurt sensitivities in a diverse country like India. Designing an ethics-based AI system and bringing in regulations that prioritise humanity over efficiency are ways in which the technology could become a boon for growth.
—N R Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Optimise freebies

Freebies are now utilised by major political parties to influence the voting preferences of especially the lower strata, who outnumber everyone. It may bring relief and lift them out of poverty, fostering a sense of participation and empowerment along with their welfare. But it will negatively impact long-term solutions by creating dependency on government support, inhibiting self-

reliance of individuals, and potentially leading to the destruction of the democratic process and policy reforms. This trend may lead to fiscal deficit straining the national budget, and unsustainable government debt that may impact long-term economic stability. If the ascending graph is to be maintained, freebies should be avoided to their optimal limit.
—RS Narula, Patiala

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Stop making sedition accusation casually

The recent statement by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat that India achieved "true independence" only with the consecration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya is problematic at multiple levels. Bhagwat's remark, made during a speech at Indore, amounts to a serious undermining of India's freedom struggle and its national movement, which culminated in its independence from colonial powers on August 15, 1947. His statement contradicts the very adoption of India's Constitution, which has at its core democratic, federal, and secular principles. The Indian Republic was founded on the Constitution; the enduring significance of the document was evident during its 75th anniversary celebrations in November last year that transcended party lines.

Bhagwat's statement would seem to suggest that he does not accept our times as a period of true independence. The RSS has, in the past, had reservations about the Constitution. Do those reservations exist now? India is a secular country, and it cannot accept the building of a temple as a marker of its independence, though it may be considered a political landmark by parties and organisations. The RSS chief would also be seen as party to a larger attempt to rewrite the country's history. Opposition parties have condemned the statement. Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge has termed it "shameful," and Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee has described it as "anti-national".

Bhagwat's take on India's independence is in conflict with the spirit of the Republic

Demands for legal action have also been raised. The import of Bhagwat's words has been ignored in the intense political exchanges that followed, with the ruling BJP and its allies training guns on Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for his statement—made in response to Bhagwat—that his party was "fighting the BJP, the RSS, and the Indian State itself". The Congress leader's comment has attracted accusations of sedition and attempts to delegitimise the country. An FIR has also been registered against him in Assam in connection with the matter. The distinction in political science between the State, the nation, and the government is not always easily comprehensible. As the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul cannot claim ignorance about the distinction between outraging against a government and countering the State. However, it should be clear that in this situation, he meant the government.

The row and the political heat it is generating could prove a setback for the opposition LNDIA bloc, already reeling under internal strife, as it tries to take the fight to the BJP. These are times when statements by Opposition leaders, especially Congress leaders, are often dubbed seditious and anti-national. Sedition and anti-national conduct are among the worst crimes in the statute. In a democracy, they should not be invoked so casually to further political ploys.

Future skills survey brings good tidings

It is a recognition of the potential of India's growing economy that the QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World Future Skills Index has ranked the country's job market as second only to the US. The survey looked at readiness in future skills, especially in the areas of AI, digital, and green technologies. This is the first ever survey of the position of various countries, with respect to their need and preparedness for emerging technologies. The index ranked India globally in the Future of Work indicator, with a score of 99.1, just behind the United States. It placed the country 25th overall across four indicators, identifying it as a Future Skills Contender. The indicators include the alignment between skills and employer needs, academic readiness, and economic transformation. The assessment of the 'future of work', where India is ranked second, has been done largely from the demand side, which reflects job postings. While this indicates the potential, there is much to do to realise it.

On some parameters, the country's performance is poor. While it got 100 marks on account of economic capacity, it scored low on parameters like innovation, where G-7 countries are far ahead and some African countries have fared better. The report has identified gaps in investment and innovation capacity which could slow down long-term growth. It said that "India's overall 'skills fit' score is lower than that of its counterparts in APAC, with a particularly large skills gap in 'entrepreneurial and innovative mindset'." The APAC (Asia-Pacific) region is known for its skills in these areas and will pose challenges to India.

India is second only to the US in potential, but can we realise it?

The report specifically says that "employers across India are highlighting a critical gap in the work force's ability to meet the demands of a rapidly changing economic landscape" and that the "shortfall underscores a broader challenge for India's higher education system, which is struggling to keep pace with evolving employer needs." That underlines the need for aligning the country's education, especially its technical education, with future needs. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has welcomed the ranking of India as the top job market in the survey. He said that over the last decade, "the government has worked on strengthening our youth by equipping them with skills that enable them to become self-reliant and create wealth." He believes they have leveraged the power of technology to make India a hub for innovation and enterprise. There is much more to be done to realise his claim. The criticism that most of the country's technical graduates are unemployable still stands. The country needs to improve the quality of education to welcome the future knocking on its doors.

Sustainable land management is the need of the hour to arrest aridification, which has the potential to devastate livelihoods, ecosystem health, and GDP

K N NINAN

Land degradation, along with climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, are the major environmental crises facing humankind.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) at its COP-16 meeting held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, recently released a report titled "The global threat of dry lands: regional and global aridity trends and future projections", which highlights the risks posed by land degradation and desertification to human and natural ecosystems.

The report reveals that about 78% of the earth's land has experienced drier conditions since the 1990s, compared to the previous 30-year period.

Over the same period, drylands expanded by about 4.3 million sq km, equal to an area nearly a third larger than India, the second largest country. Drylands now cover about 41% of all land on earth, excluding Antarctica.

The number of people residing on dryland doubled from 1.2 billion in 1990 to 2.3 billion in 2020. Projections suggest that this may rise to 5 billion people by the end of this century.

Between 2007 and 2017, droughts affected more than 1.5 billion people globally, costing \$125 billion. About half of the world's dryland inhabitants are found in Asia and Africa, including large parts of India and north-eastern China.

Climatic factors, especially the exponential rise in human-induced greenhouse gas emissions, and non-climatic factors, such as unsustainable land use practices, overexploitation of natural resources are major factors contributing to this rising trend of land degradation.

The adverse environmental and socio-economic impacts of increasing aridification, i.e. change of landscape from a wet to dry status, are immense, leading to loss of soil fertility, rising poverty levels, poor soil fertility, losses in crop and land productivity, biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, intense sand and dust storms, wildfires, poor health and large-scale human migration.

Rising aridity has been blamed for a 12% decline in the gross domestic product (GDP) of African countries between 1990 and 2015. According to the UNCCD, droughts affect the livelihoods of

1.8 billion people worldwide and cost an estimated \$300 billion per year, threatening key economic sectors and sustainable development.

Reducing the vulnerability of populations and ecosystems to aridity requires both broad and large-scale measures to mitigate global climate warming, and more regional or local approaches focused on vulnerable communities and countries. Poverty and limited economic resources can significantly increase vulnerability to climate change and aridity.

Undertaking vulnerability assessments to map populations and areas that are vulnerable to aridity is crucial for devising sustainable adaptation policies. The availability of financial resources



education, supporting governance structures, education, capacity-building, effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms are important.

There is also a need for sectoral adaptation approaches linked to sustainable agriculture and water management, as well as for education, awareness and governance of aridity and aridity responses.

For instance, in the food sector, adaptation efforts should focus on increasing the resilience of crop production to climate change by proper crop and water management, livelihood diversification and protection against losses, such as index-based insurance.

For the livestock sector, emphasis should be on adaptive practices, such as changes to livestock species, compositions and changes in grazing practices, such as switching to goats for dairy production, to ensure that livestock are more resilient to heat stress and adapted to desert or dry environments.

Given that crop production in drylands is largely rainfed, practices such as rainwater harvesting and water harvesting are crucial for increasing agricultural productivity without compromising water availability for other sectors.

Adaptation practices, such as re-greening degraded landscapes, implementing sustainable land management (SLM) and forest restoration, can

reduce risks from desertification by improving tree cover, which will reduce wind speed, prevent soil erosion and increase soil moisture.

There are a few good examples from around the world to promote sustainable land management. The Three North Shelterbelt Development Program (TNSDP), a progressive afforestation programme in China's drylands, has helped accelerate large-scale greening of drylands in China with several environmental benefits.

Another greening adaptation effort in the Sahel region of Africa began in response to the ongoing desertification in rural areas of southern Niger. Through this effort, about 200 million new trees have been raised in Niger, which has increased soil fertility, provided substantial amounts of biomass for household energy and enhanced food security for about 2.5 million people.

The Great Green Wall Initiative in Africa aims to halt the advance of desertification and extend greening efforts along the 8,000-km length of the pan-African Sahel Belt, from Djibouti to Senegal. The initiative has been successfully implemented in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan.

The UNCCD report provides a blueprint for a sustainable future in which proactive aridity and drought resilience measures are undertaken in synergy with measures that cut greenhouse gas emissions, reduce land degradation, safeguard livelihoods, protect ecosystems and simultaneously encourage development for communities.

These include strengthening aridity monitoring and threshold identification; adapting a global to local aridity impact standard; integrating aridity adaptation and drought planning into national adaptation plans; implementing comprehensive and integrative strategies to combat land degradation and enhance drought and aridity resilience; and promoting cross-sectoral aridity governance and collaboration through the UNCCD.

The global nature of the aridity problem calls for international cooperation and ready access to funds and technologies for developing countries to implement SLM strategies.

Given that developed countries have failed to meet the financial targets of international environmental agreements, such as the Paris Climate Accord, prospects for any substantial financial commitments are not bright. However, it is gratifying to see that more than \$12 billion was pledged at the COP meeting to tackle desertification, land degradation and droughts around the world, especially in the most vulnerable countries. (The writer is lead author, GEO-7, United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The 'what if' haunt

A question looms as I think of the surging crowds at the Puri temple

SUBHASHINI DINESH

On the evening of December 31, I was in the temple town of Puri in Odisha. The temple complex is a rather large one, with four imposing gates named after four animals: Lion, Elephant, Tiger and Horse. What was fascinating was the arrangements outside the temple precincts for the "New Year season". A large posse of police personnel was posted in the temple complex, with barricades and bamboo structures for people to queue up. A temple source said there is no concept of a special darshan ticket. Of course, like any system, if one has contacts of anyone inside the temple, it may be a tad easier for "the Lord to see you" (as they say). But during this year-end season, no one could slip past the rising tide of policemen to navigate the sea

of devotees inside.

We stood in the queue, which was deceptively disciplined till the barricaded corridors led us to a spot just outside the main temple. "We are seven steps away from darshan," said a fellow devotee, even as the war-cry of "Jai Jagannath" rent the air.

However, the barricaded corridors ended, and suddenly it was a "free for all" moment, where one had to jostle and push past one another to reach the next set of corridors to queue up. Once the queue reached the steps, the corridor barricades abruptly ended, and there was a sudden rush. It was the survival of the fittest. Those who could jostle well, and fight their way could climb the steps and reach the zone for darshan. The crowd was suffocating; there were children, and even infants in this turbulent sea of devotees. Parents suddenly lifted their children onto their shoulders to prevent them from being asphyxiated. I noticed a man with his mother, a small, frail lady with a stoop. "How is she going to manage this?" I thought.

As we were pushed and jostled along the seven steps and into the area from where one could see the deities, people had begun pushing and yelling with more force for that nano second of darshan. I really do not know how many actually managed to see the deities because what happened in the area was sheer madness.

I kept looking back for that frail woman, only to see her a few waves later, descending from the steps, looking frazzled. Just then, a thought crossed my mind. "What if there is a sudden rush? How will all of us cope, especially the old, infirm, and children?"

A week later, a stampede in Tirupati claimed lives. It took me back to that evening at the overcrowded Puri temple: the push, the shove, the stamping of the feet, and people gasping for breath along the darshan point. The frail woman, the infants and children, pregnant women... all of them queuing up with hope to see the Lord and not really thinking about "what if" that day. But the "what if" does send a shiver down my spine today.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fight against fake news must continue

The decision to discontinue fact-checking programmes on social media platforms like Meta is deeply concerning, particularly for a country like India, where misinformation spreads rapidly. Fake news, often fuelled by WhatsApp forwards, has already caused immense damage, dividing communities, inciting violence, and misleading citizens. Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg recently defended this move to stop fact-checking,

stating that people should be able to see for themselves what politicians and others are saying. However, this approach ignores the devastating impact of misinformation. Fact-checking plays a crucial role in curbing these dangers, ensuring accountability and safeguarding public discourse. Without it, social media platforms risk becoming breeding grounds for misinformation.

Sheshgiri Kukarni, Hubballi

Rise of southern screen

The article "Screens turn south: Regional films thrive" (Jan 19) provides an insightful view of the Indian film industry's status. The south is slowly dominating the position previously held by Bollywood films. The revenue boost, audience viewership, and cross-pollination of languages have contributed to the success of regional films. The natural, village-based content, semi-urban settings, and political dramas have been well-re-

ceived by viewers across linguistic boundaries. Even the heroes and characters from south and north comic films have become common, unlike in the past. The financial crunch faced by southern films has changed, with producers now opting for higher budgets.

S Sundaresh, Bengaluru

Stop freebies

It is painful to see political parties promising numerous freebies

SPEAK OUT



...There is no one in this country who indulges in abusive politics more than Arvind Kejriwal.
Ramesh Bidhuri, BJP leader and candidate from Kalkaji

Hypocrisy annoys me, people need to look into mirrors. Let me hold a mirror in front of your face.

JoyBell C

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Meta's fact-check exit and its impact

Mark Zuckerberg seems to be boarding the free speech ship, with Elon Musk already at the helm

STUTI AGRAWAL

Meta's move to discontinue its fact-checking programme and replace it with Community Notes, a system already implemented by X (formerly Twitter) under Elon Musk's leadership, has sparked widespread reactions. What is particularly

striking is the timing of this announcement, with Donald Trump all set to be sworn in as the US President for his second term. Meta's justification of bias in the functioning of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and its motive to champion free speech loses ground as one considers the underlying intent to prevent the censorship of right-wing content that had been affected by the fact-checking programme in place earlier.

Meta introduced its fact-checking programme in response to widespread criticism for allowing the proliferation of fake news during the 2016 elections. The shift to and reliance on the Community Notes system is being questioned, as it has failed to curb the spread of misinformation and disinformation on X. Community Notes utilises platform users as fact-checkers who add notes and react to existing ones under posts. This approach contrasts with the now-suspended programme that employed independent, certified third-party fact-checkers to review and rate content. While the new model claims to include safeguards to prevent bias, the potential for polarising posts and fake news to slip through or even be amplified by the current algorithm cannot be ignored. Given the critical role social media platforms play in shaping public discourse, this development has significant implications for users of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

When platforms shift their responsibility to moderate content effectively, the consequences extend beyond individual users and undermine democratic processes. In response to Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg's announcement, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk reiterated that regulating hate speech and harmful content online is not censorship. This view stems from the understanding that while free speech is fundamental, it is not absolute and must be balanced against other rights, such as protection from hate speech, discrimination and access to adequate resources. Inaction under the guise of free speech disproportionately impacts marginalised groups, amplifies divisive narratives and creates an electorate swayed by falsehoods rather than informed debate. The situation is worsened by the authority's failure

(The writer is a fourth-year law student at Jindal Global Law School)

Our readers are welcome to email letters to letters@deccanherald.com (only letters emailed - not handwritten - will be accepted). Letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

Congress power struggle threatens governance in Karnataka

B S ARUN

It has happened as anticipated. When assertive Congress leader D K Shivakumar was appointed as the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) president and Siddaramaiah, an 'Ahinda' leader, was chosen to lead the 2023 Assembly elections campaign, many feared potential turmoil if the party came to power. It did, in a telling fashion, and the brewing tensions between the two power centres—Siddaramaiah and DKS—became evident during the tussle over the chief ministerial post.

Less than two years into its tenure, factionalism in the state government shows the signs of reaching a climax. A glimpse of it was played out in Bengaluru over the last two weeks, forcing the party high command to intervene. However, this did little to ease tensions as demands for power sharing and calls to replace DKS as KPCC chief gained momentum.

The crux of the discord is the power transfer issue—the unofficial understanding that DKS would be the CM after Siddaramaiah completes 30 months in office in December 2025. However, there is no clarity over this—whether there was an agreement at the time of making Siddaramaiah the CM or not. For fear of triggering internal party war, the high command, Siddaramaiah and DKS have maintained silence on this issue.

In an indirect move against DKS, party members have also called for implementing the Udaipur resolution of the 'one person, one post' formula. DKS currently wears many hats: KPCC president, deputy CM, water resources minister, and Bengaluru development minister. Relinquishing the party chief position will leave him weaker. DKS and the high command, which has a soft corner for him, know this well. If the party leadership takes this up, questions will arise regarding the party's national president himself Mallikarjun

Kharge too holds more than one post—he is also Leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha.

For now, Siddaramaiah appears to be on a strong wicket. The second time CM enjoys strong support from Ahinda (Kannada acronym for Advaita, backwards and Dalits) MLAs, as well as some Lingayat and Vokkaliga legislators. If power-sharing is to occur, Siddaramaiah is likely to set the terms.

The most vocal critics of DKS are all senior ministers who belong to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups: G Parameshwara and H C Mahadevappa, and K N Rajanna and Satish Jarkiholi, respectively. Jarkiholi, from a powerful political family in Belagavi, recently hosted a dinner attended by Siddaramaiah and other Congress MLAs. The group is seething with anger that DKS prevailed on the high command to stop a dinner meeting of Dalit leaders to be hosted by Parameshwara, even questioning if the high command was 'anti-Dalit'. As

regards the Vokkaliga strongman, he was upset as the CM too attended the Jarkiholi dinner. The dinner fuelled reports of fresh efforts to tip DKS's wings.

Siddaramaiah has already hinted at retirement and said he will not be in electoral politics henceforth. Hence, his followers are involved in cementing their own places in the party and are looking to emerge as leaders in their own right. Also, the CM's confidants are said to be of the view that the power that the Dalits-backwards have secured should not be squandered allowing a member from a forward community to grab it. As for DKS, he is completely dependent on the high command—in other words, Sonia and Rahul Gandhi—to be made CM.

Historical precedents in Congress suggest that power struggles within the party are nothing new. In the 1990s, power shifted from Lingayat leader Veerendra Patil to S Bangarappa, representing backward communities, and later to M Veerappa

Moily, another backward, in 1992. Also, it is not that the one with the backing of the majority of MLAs will get to be the CM. In 1990, K H Patil (father of current minister H K Patil) was said to enjoy majority support of Congress MLAs, but the high command favoured Bangarappa. When he was removed, it was S M Krishna, who had majority support, but the high command favoured Moily. But in 2023, it was Siddaramaiah, a backward, who enjoyed majority support, and DKS knew it well. But DKS also knew if he bargained hard, he may get what he wanted later. Parameshwara and Jarkiholi have realised this too.

The party's and the state's record with the power-sharing formula is also poor. In Rajashankar and Chintamani in 2023, promises to hand over the chief ministerial position to Sachin Pilot and S Singhdeo, respectively, were never fulfilled as the then CMs, Ashok Gehlot and Bhupesh Bhalgal, respectively, refused to vacate the chair. Similarly, in Karnataka, H D Kumaraswamy refused

to honour an open agreement to transfer power to B S Yediyurappa in 2007.

The high command is wary of removing Siddaramaiah due to his strong Ahinda backing. Forcibly replacing him with DKS risks alienating Dalit and backward-class voters, akin to how Lingayats turned against the Congress in 1990 after Veerendra Patil was unceremoniously removed as CM. The Lingayat votes later shifted to the BJP. So, the leadership favours a smooth transfer of power.

Amid intensifying infighting, governance in Karnataka has suffered. Frequent discussions about power transfer, factional meetings, and corruption allegations—including the alleged MUDA scam—among other issues have shifted the government's attention away from administration. It is time the Siddaramaiah dispensation and the party put petty politics aside and focused on getting the administration back on track.

(The writer is a senior journalist)

Despite decades of mutual suspicion between the two countries, departing US ambassador to India Eric Garcetti sees little that might threaten a currently strong relationship

MUJIB MASHAL

Over the past year, a pair of legal bombshells have put India's growing relationship with the United States to one of its biggest tests yet. Just as the two sides were announcing unprecedented expansions in defense and technology ties, US prosecutors accused Indian government agents of plotting to assassinate a US citizen on US soil.

Months later, the Justice Department filed fraud and bribery charges against India's most prominent business mogul, whose enterprises have soared to dizzying heights on the back of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's power.

Still, the relationship has held. After decades of mutual suspicion between the two countries, said Eric Garcetti, the departing US ambassador to India, the fact that now nothing seems to derail their ties is proof of their strength.

"I don't think there is anything out there big enough to threaten the trajectory of a US-India relations," Garcetti said on January 18 in an interview at the embassy in New Delhi, two days before President Joe Biden leaves office and Donald Trump is sworn in as his successor.

"This is incredibly resilient and almost inevitable," Garcetti added. "It's really the pace and the progress that's not inevitable, like how quickly we get there."

The Biden administration's doubling down on the relationship with India came after nearly two decades of efforts to shed Cold War-era suspicions that had culminated with US sanctions on India's nuclear programme in 1998.

Washington sees great potential in India as a geopolitical counterweight to an increasingly assertive China. Already the world's largest democracy, India took over from China as the world's most populous nation in 2023. India's demographic advantages and growing technological capacity could help diversify global supply chains away from China, a priority of the United States and other major powers.

Now comes Trump's second presidency, with its America-first orientation and threats of steep tariffs on trading partners. While leaders of many countries are unnerved, Indian officials insist that they are not among them.

S Jaishankar, the foreign minister, has said India enjoyed "a positive political relationship with Trump" that it hopes will only deepen. As he attended the opening of a US Consulate on January 17 in the tech hub of Bengaluru Jaishankar quoted Modi as saying that the two countries were overcoming "the hesitations of history."

Modi has enjoyed a strong rapport with Trump, an important factor because of the incoming president's personal approach to international relations. During Trump's first term, Modi hosted him at a grand rally in his home state, Gujarat, as well as at a large gathering in Texas of the Indian diaspora—an increasingly crucial extension of the Indian influence in American politics.

But some analysts cautioned that Trump's unpredictability and transactional approach could pose risks for India. Two issues in particular are bound to test the relationship, an analyst likely said. During the campaign, Trump criticised India as gaining an unfair advantage in trade by maintaining high tariffs. And India could be swept up in the controversy if Trump follows through on his promise of mass deportations of illegal immigrants.



Large cutout images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and then US President Donald Trump in Ahmedabad ahead of an official visit by Trump in February, 2020. FILE PHOTO/NT

Trump's return has unnerved world leaders. But not India

Indians make up the third-largest group of illegal immigrants in the United States, according to the Pew Research Centre. If Trump sends large numbers of Indians back to their home country, it could be a major embarrassment for Modi.

Amrita Batra, a New Delhi-based economist and trade expert, said that India should see warning signs in Trump's threat of higher tariffs even against America's traditional allies, as well as his stated will to unravel deals with countries like Mexico and Canada that his own first administration had put in place.

"You may say we are on great terms with Trump, we have an easy relationship with the US, but how Trump views that at a particular time is a different question altogether," Batra said at an event at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress in New Delhi. "India has to be very cautiously approaching Trump 2.0."

During the interview, Garcetti described the bilateral relationship as "the most compelling, challenging and consequential" for both countries.

A former Democratic mayor of Los Angeles, Garcetti arrived in New Delhi in April 2023, after the mission had remained without an ambassador for two years. His confirmation process had hit a wall over accusations that he had overlooked complaints of sexual harassment by an aide when he was mayor.

He made up for the time lost with a burst of energy and outreach like that of a politician in campaign mode.

He was everywhere, from cricket grounds to cafeterias to cultural programmes. Sporting a leather jacket, he even got behind the piano to open for jazz legends Herbie Hancock and Dianne

Reeves, who had come to perform at the Piano Man Jazz Club in New Delhi.

But by the time Garcetti tried his hand at dancing to a viral Bollywood tune at a Diwali celebration, relations between the two countries had hit major obstacles.

In India, right-wing trolls had seized on the US allegations of Indian government involvement in a plot to assassinate a US citizen advocating a separatist cause in India. That, along with the US indictment of Gautam Adani, the business mogul, was evidence that the United States was trying to dampen India's inevitable rise, the nationalist online voices argued.

The Biden administration appeared intent on addressing the assassination episode quietly with New Delhi, demanding accountability without allowing it to become a major diplomatic sore point.

"On Capitol Hill, within the White House, I think with those in the know was a real moment of reflection and pause," Garcetti said of the assassination case. "It didn't pause the momentum—you know, relations between countries are always multifaceted and simultaneous and not just between governments. But I think it was an immediate gut check."

Garcetti said that the Biden administration had been reassured by India's response. New Delhi had accepted the US demand, he said, "not just for accountability but for systemic reform and guarantees that this will never happen again."

An Indian government inquiry that concluded last week recommended legal action against an unnamed person with "earlier criminal links." It said that the action "must be completed expeditiously," in what analysts saw as an attempt to begin the Trump era with a clean slate.

"If we want to cooperate in other areas that are important to us, intelligence sharing, etc., trust is the basis of everything," Garcetti said. "But I've been pretty blown away with how trust can deepen through a challenge."

One question hovering over the deepening ties between the two countries is whether India can truly emerge as an alternative to China in global supply chains—something that Garcetti also wondered.

India has reaped only a small part of the windfall from the moves away from China, with businesses preferring places like Vietnam, Taiwan and Mexico, where it is easier to set up operations and where tariffs are lower.

Garcetti said India had made dramatic leaps after opening up its economy only in the 1990s, years after China. He picked up his iPhone to illustrate a widely highlighted recent success: About 15% of iPhone manufacturing now happens in India, a figure that could continue growing rapidly, he said.

More broadly, though, India still struggles to enhance its infrastructure and improve its infrastructure and some streamlining of regulations. Manufacturing is not growing quickly enough to bring India the jobs it desperately needs.

"Where India's leaving a lot of progress and jobs and growth on the table is figuring out a better way to make it seamless and frictionless to invest here for export," Garcetti said. "Because it's still, you know, for so many components of manufacturing, one of, if not the, highest tariffed economies."

"They're not wrong to look and say it used to be 95% worse," Garcetti said. The New York Times

Multimodal AI: The next tech frontier

PRASAD KALE

While many argue that artificial intelligence poses significant challenges to the job market, it has also set the stage for the next technological revolution. A key development in this domain is multimodal AI, which represents a significant leap forward. This innovative area of AI combines text, sound, images, and sensory information to give users a more engaging and dynamic experience. Multimodal AI outperforms single-mode systems by merging many data streams, providing unmatched contextual comprehension and accuracy.

The global adoption of AI is evolving rapidly, and while India is establishing itself as a leader in this space, there is scope for further progress. With its robust ecosystem of talent, innovation, and policy support, India is well positioned to shape the future of multimodal AI on a global scale.

India's AI industry is poised for exponential growth, with projections estimating a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of over 20% in the coming years. This growth is driven by a combination of factors, including government policies promoting AI adoption, a thriving startup ecosystem innovating in deep tech, and established tech giants scaling AI-driven solutions.

Generative AI (GenAI) has been a key growth driver, enabling creative applications that were once unimaginable. According to a recent study by Pearson, GenAI alone could save the Indian workforce over 51 million hours a week by automating routine tasks. However, its potential extends far beyond time savings. When combined with multimodal capabilities, GenAI becomes a transformative tool across industries.

As digital interactions grow more complex, the limitations of single-mode AI systems are becoming evident. Text-only chatbots often fail to grasp intricate human queries, while speech-based systems struggle with contextual understanding. Multimodal AI addresses these shortcomings by integrating diverse data types.

Multimodal systems contribute to enhanced accuracy by cross-referencing data from various modes, delivering more accurate responses and a deeper understanding of user intent. They also offer enriched user experiences across diverse applications—from virtual classrooms to immersive retail environments.

In a country as diverse as India, multimodal AI can significantly bridge linguistic, cultural, and technological gaps.

For example, a healthcare app powered by multimodal AI could analyse a patient's symptoms via

text, assess anomalies through visual cues like photos, and provide speech-based instructions in over 20 regional languages—creating inclusive, effective solutions.

Multimodal AI has transformative potential across industries:

- **Healthcare:** Integrates patient records, diagnostic images, and real-time health data to support doctors in making informed decisions.

- **Education:** Enables adaptive learning experiences in virtual classrooms by combining text, audio, and video inputs.

- **Entertainment:** Facilitates AI-generated scripts, visuals, and soundtracks, creating immersive narratives and transforming the film and gaming industries.

- **Retail:** Powers virtual try-ons, personalised shopping experiences, and augmented reality-based solutions to redefine consumer engagement.

- **Agriculture:** Combines satellite imagery, weather data, and on-ground sensors to deliver actionable insights for precision farming.

From personalised learning to precision farming, multimodal AI will reshape how industries operate, offering solutions that are smarter, faster, and more inclusive.

Despite its promises, adopting multimodal AI in India faces significant challenges. High computational costs, limited access to quality datasets, and concerns over data privacy and security remain key barriers. Ethical considerations, such as addressing biases and preventing misuse, also require proactive engagement.

Government policies and public-private partnerships will be instrumental in overcoming these hurdles. Initiatives such as India's National AI Strategy (NITI Aayog) and the establishment of AI research hubs are promising steps. Collaboration among academia, industry, and government is crucial for fostering innovation and ensuring equitable access to AI technologies.

India's growing AI ecosystem is at a pivotal juncture. The rise of multimodal AI represents technological advancement and a shift in how machines interact with humans. As the global multimodal AI landscape evolves, India has an opportunity to lead by investing in innovation, strengthening collaboration, and addressing challenges such as infrastructure and skill development. By doing so, multimodal AI can become a cornerstone of India's digital future—one that is inclusive, impactful, and globally influential.

It has the potential to empower India's diverse population while driving equitable growth.

(The writer is the founder of an Indian AI platform that unifies multiple AI tools)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

Indo-Iraqi expert panels formed

Baghdad, January 19

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Iraqi Vice President Saddam Hussein will resume discussions on bilateral relations to morrow when they will have before them reports of two expert committees. The committees were constituted at today's meeting. External Affairs Secretary Kewal Singh heads the committee on bilateral economic relations while the Joint Secretary for West Asia, Mr. Bhutan, leads the committee on bilateral political relations.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2000

Govt to scrap Trai

New Delhi, Jan 19

In a move to make telecom services consumer-friendly, the government today decided to reconstitute the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) and to set up a quasi-judicial tribunal to resolve disputes among licensees and licensors. The Union Cabinet at its meeting tonight decided to promulgate an ordinance to effect this. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Mahajan Pramod told said all recommendations of the new quasi-judicial body would be mandatory.

OASIS | CHITRAIYER

The essence of pilgrimage

he travelled by train all alone and came all the way to bless my son on his Upanayanam. I had to go to my last respects.

As our father lay semi-comatose in the hospital, his distraught family did the best they could. No time for any emotions, we took care of him, fetching medicines the doctors ordered, moving him from one ward to the other, getting different tests done, all the while trying to take care of ourselves, too.

Each one of us seemed to be on his own, trying to drain, mentally and physically.

We were exhausted, dazed and numb as his mortal remains lay in front of us, trying hard to make sense of what had happened. We didn't get a chance to bid a proper goodbye to him. And it took a while to process it and move on. Though Periappa was not physically present with us all the time, it was assuring to know someone had our backs.

Now with his passing away, it felt as if we had lost all over again. My husband and I drove from Delhi to Haridwar to pay obeisance to the departed soul. And when I touched his feet one last time, I silently wished, "So long Periappa, please tell Appa when you meet him that his family is doing just fine." It was a rite of passage that helped me get the closure I had been seeking all this while. That's the essence of a pilgrimage, my brother remarked. Any pilgrimage requires you to put in some effort. And you made that effort.

OUR VIEW



Government pay hikes: Fiscal prudence please

The 8th Pay Commission is being set up to revise the salaries of an already-privileged class of employees. Unless kept modest, pay hikes are sure to hit the government's finances hard

The government's decision to set up the 8th Pay Commission for salary revision is hard to reconcile with its oft-vocalized stance in favour of fiscal prudence. Agreed, the period of the 7th Pay Commission, which came into effect in 2016, will end in 2026. So there was a case for setting up a new one. Also, acting a year in advance will give the Centre sufficient time to consider its recommendations. But the timing of the announcement, just three weeks before Assembly polls in Delhi, where India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party is trying to dislodge the Aam Aadmi Party from power, suggests an attempt to win brownie points with the electorate. Delhi houses many central employees and even the state government's staff can expect pay hikes in tandem with theirs. What is far from clear is whether these salaries should be raised at all and if the public exchequer can afford to bear the burden of this largesse.

Take these one by one. Is there really a case for another Pay Commission? No, according to economist and former chief statistician of India, T.C.A. Anant. In an op-ed for *Mint*, he recently pointed out that the typical entry-level wage in government is much higher than at a comparable level in the private sector. As he put it, a case could well be made that "most government employee salaries need to be adjusted downwards to align their standard of living with what they might reasonably have expected when they joined government service." Add to that perks like free or subsidized access to medical care, job security and pension—even under the New Pension Scheme, government employees have an edge over their private-sector counterparts—and the case for a wage hike gets even

weaker. This is not to say that salary structures in general should not be reviewed periodically. As chief economic advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran has argued, bigger private sector pay cheques would stoke demand and aid the economy. The same could be said of all remuneration in India. But why should sarkari salaries mechanically be raised, rather than rationalized, every decade without a comprehensive review of productivity levels? Also, why should positions, once created, continue in perpetuity? Pay scales ought to go by market principles. One way would be to trace what economists call an 'indifference curve' between private-sector and public employment that takes differences in perks and work pressure into account.

At the macro level, large jumps in government pay could play havoc with its finances, forcing budget cutbacks on essential developmental needs that cater to all Indians, rather than just privileged government employees. Especially since public sector units and state governments usually follow suit. According to a study by the Institute of Economic Growth for the 15th Finance Commission, "There is a positive and significant impact of salary and pensions on the fiscal and revenue deficit of the central government. A similar association is observed for states where the salary/GDP ratio is found to be positively and significantly associated with the fiscal deficit." Since the Centre is committed to a fiscal deficit of less than 4.5% of GDP in 2025-26, down from the 4.9% budgeted for the current fiscal year, and plans to keep that gap small enough for its debt burden to decline as a proportion of GDP from 2026-27 onwards, there is no space for extravagance. The 8th Pay Commission should bear that in mind and keep its salary increases modest.

THEIR VIEW

Trump and the threat to global trade: Much ado about nothing?

His past moves won little success even as key changes since have made world trade less vulnerable



MANOJ PANT
visiting professor, Shiv Nadar University

As Donald Trump prepares to be sworn in as US president on 20 January, an issue uppermost on the minds of policymakers around the world is how to respond to his policies. What will his declared unilateralism do to world trade? If he carries out his tariff threats—particularly *vis-à-vis* America's largest trade partners Mexico, Canada and China—will we be back to the doomsday scenario of the 1930s, when world trade shrank due to tariff wars between countries? What happens to countries like India that see world trade as a key factor in their pursuit of high economic growth—of 7% or more? These are all legitimate questions. But the world has changed structurally in the last 50 years and the damage to world trade is likely to be limited. In addition, going by past events, it's unlikely that Trump will succeed in his tariff threats.

Consider the last issue first. It is often forgotten that Trump's tariff-levying authority is given by the US Congress. While it is likely that the new Congress will endorse Trump's tariffs, this is by no means a foregone conclusion. Already, on legislation to increase debt limits and a couple of appointments, the Congress has voted against Trump's proposals. More importantly, the tariff war that Trump unleashed in his first term achieved very little. Consider his well-publicized tariff war with China

that started in 2018. Of the \$200 billion increase in US exports to China negotiated by Trump, less than half was achieved. Most tariffs on countries like Mexico were suspended by 2019—in Mexico's case after it signed an agreement to limit immigration to the US across its border. Success here too was limited, though Trump fought the 2024 US election on the same issue. Similarly, tariffs on automobiles aimed at the EU and Japan were delayed in May 2019 and then the 2020 election followed.

Some Trump policies were endorsed by Joe Biden as president, such as protective tariffs on items like steel and aluminium and technology export curbs. So, it is unclear what new measures Trump will bring in, except renewing the Biden administration's tariffs that are set to expire in 2025.

The last time, most of Trump's tariff threats were bluff and bluster. Even for arch foes like China, these were either softened or suspended, perhaps in response to the harm they would have caused US consumers. Yet, Trump campaigned on the same measures he had proposed four years earlier and found largely ineffective. But then, voters tend to have short memories.

Second, and even more importantly, there has been a structural change in global trade over the past few decades. Will Trump's tariffs disrupt trade? As far as commodity trade is concerned, this fear is overblown. For one, according to data from World Trade Monitor, in 2022, the US share in world imports was down to about 13% from about 20% in 2000. For another, as beautifully brought out in a brief of the Geneva-based Global Trade Alert, in 2022, only a few countries had a dependence on US-bound exports greater than their overall export dependence. If both numbers are high for a country, it would indicate that a closed US market would severely impact its GDP. Only a few, like Cambodia and Nicaragua, are in this category, though countries like Canada and Mexico are also highly dependent

on exports to the US. Interestingly, China and Germany are not. In addition, the briefing shows that for most countries, exports to non-US markets grew faster than to the US between 2012 and 2022. So, most countries have grown out of their dependence on the US market and Trump may actually encourage greater interdependence of the non-US world. Can we have a World Trade Organization without the US? The idea is not entirely unrealistic, at least for merchandise trade.

Third, it is in services trade that the US is still dominant. How will that change? A well-known equation of balance of payments tells us that a country's savings-investment gap equals its balance of trade in goods and services, adjusted for net factor income from abroad and international transfers (remittances). If the US merchandise trade balance improves (due to raised tariffs), then, so long as long-term factors like the investment and savings behaviour of US residents do not change, its services trade balance must deteriorate. This would be beneficial to major service exporters to the US. Three countries come to mind: the UK, Switzerland and India. While goods trade disruption is likely, global commerce will not change dramatically. Major US trade partners like Canada and Mexico may seek relief, but India need not. What India loses in goods trade may well be made up by gains in service exports.

What Trump is likely to achieve is an end of multilateralism. In global trade, this may not matter. But, for India, regional trade agreements with the EU, UK and others are critical. In international politics, Trump's disposition may actually lead to an end to both the West Asian and Ukraine conflicts, which are perpetuated by multilateral involvement. The biggest loss will be in climate change negotiations, which cannot succeed without multilateralism. Hopefully, US civil society will show Trump's administration the error of its ways.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

As we learned after President Herbert Hoover signed the Smoot-Hawley tariff at the outset of the Great Depression, vibrant international trade is a key component to economic recovery; hindering trade is a recipe for disaster.

ASA HUTCHINSON

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

What protects us from being stabbed in our own homes?

MANU JOSEPH



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

As always, it is about us. If film star Saif Ali Khan can be stabbed by an intruder in his home, that too in a Bandra flat, what does it say about our safety and those whom we love? Hours after the attack, there was a familiar sight outside the hospital where he was recovering. His family and friends emerged from cars. There was a glow about them and their clothes looked unusual as they walked through a parted crowd of onlookers who looked like the rest of India, poorer and more provincial, and with no glow. This India is also what protects India's elite from criminal dangers that lurk not far from where they live. Like Saif Ali Khan, many of us live in secure buildings, with cameras that probably work and guards in fancy-dress paramilitary costumes. They do protect us, but our primary protection, the thing that really guards us, is something else, something fundamentally Indian.

The attack on Khan is an aberration. Generally, India is safe for its urban middle class

and the affluent. Safe as in safe from criminal danger. You could end up dead on the road because of Indian road design or how Indians drive, or lose your life to lax enforcement of safety protocols in buildings, but the middle class and rich do not usually need to worry about criminals. In some aspects, we are safe not only compared to middle-income countries in Africa and Latin America, but also in comparison with the West. And that is because of an Indian quality that is not exactly noble, which is also why it works.

India's rich live in a way that is more risky than they would like to accept. We depend on people rather than systems. Home security here is more cheap labour on stools than hard tech. Also, we are served by a whole lot of crowd of maids, cooks, gardeners and drivers; we live with strangers in our homes, who have access to us every inch, who have their own lives, their own mobile phones and their own acquaintances with whom they probably discuss us. And a police verification can be procured for ₹500. Even if the house help is of sterling character, we have no idea about her boyfriend, or brother, or someone she met on Instagram. Yet, we are safe. We face more dangers from our peers than India's poor. And in some inner recesses of the mind, we are aware of a force that protects us

What protects us, to the extent it can, is the brutal side of India. If at all there is anything worse than poverty, it is an Indian jail and to be caught in the Indian judicial system for criminal activity. It is a deadly deterrent. India extracts a very heavy price for hurting its elite. Even Mumbai's organized city's rich, had to go.

Gangsters flourished when they gamed the judicial system. Professional lawyers would get them bail. Even if they were jailed, they would run their operations from inside. So, a section of the police decided to kill them, at least those who were useless to them. Organized extortion ended in Mumbai because of a suspension of human rights for those the cops marked as criminals. It was generally popular, and greatly encouraged by powerful people. The daughter of a businessman who was once abducted by the underworld and who had to pay a lot of money in ransom for his life told me about her vehement joy at the elimination of the

gangsters and how much she despised films that glorified them.

The same brutality, or its potential, raises the stakes for all criminals. Not just in cities, but even in dangerous places, there appears to be a line that criminals should not cross for they would be eliminated if they did. Now and then, we hear of rapists

of minors who are shot dead by the police, and society is not interested in investigating the circumstances that led to their "encounters."

What India cannot do with competent legal systems, it accomplishes in informal ways. But this way of keeping us safe has a flaw. It is a flaw that all security systems have, including clean official systems and even technological systems. They are rational. They are meant to protect us from a rational criminal who has common sense. But there are people who are not rational. They might be mentally disturbed, or they might be desperate drug addicts who do not think rationally. Often, the guy who manages to breach secu-

rency and walk into a building does so in the most irrational way. He just walks in. Most of the time, irrational criminals get caught, but it is of little consequence to the victims.

Even in this regard, India's roughness protects the upper class. Indian life is a natural filtering process. People who are dangerous, especially if they are poor, do not survive too long. They are killed or apprehended soon after they become a danger. Or, they just die alone of neglect and disease. In comparison, more just societies like the United States and Europe appear to have more empowered dangerous people.

A few weeks ago, a man walked into a New York subway train and burned a woman alive, a woman he had never known. A few days after that in New York, a man pushed another onto the subway platform. It's not as though these things cannot happen here, but for a nation of this size, Indian cities appear to witness far less mindless crimes.

But I wonder how long Indian cities can maintain their relative safety in a changing world where there is more compassion for the poor and the unlucky and the dangerous among them can survive far longer than before. And India will find it hard to be as brutal as before in those unseen rooms where parallel justice is dealt.

India extracts a very high price from those who hurt its rich and middle class but this shield could weaken

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Custodial hell

Conviction of HP cops sends strong message

THE conviction of IGP Zahur Haider Zaidi and seven other policemen in a custodial death case serves as a grim reminder of the tragic events that unfold when cops take the law into their own hands. The Kotkhai gangrape-murder of a schoolgirl had jolted the peaceful hill state of Himachal Pradesh in 2017. The horrifying crime led to a public outrage that prompted the state government to set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by Zaidi. The SIT managed to arrest six suspects but it came under sharp scrutiny itself when one of them died in police custody. Now, a special CBI court has found the probe team's members guilty of murder, torture in police custody for extracting a confession, fabrication of evidence and other serious offences.

Under pressure to produce 'quick results', the SIT crossed one red line after another. It's true that public anger over the gruesome gangrape-murder had reached a crescendo, but this was not reason enough for the cops to resort to 'instant justice'. This is a cautionary tale for police personnel around the country who let their overzealousness get the better of them during investigations. They are emboldened by the acceptance of violence as par for the course at police stations. A suspect in a lock-up often finds himself at the receiving end of police brutality. In 2021, then Chief Justice of India NV Ramana had rightly stated that police stations posed the biggest threat to human rights as custodial torture and police atrocities were prevalent despite constitutional guarantees.

Several states and UTs continue to drag their feet on implementing the Supreme Court's order about installing CCTV cameras at police stations. The onus is on the respective police top brass to ensure that there is no laxity on this count. It is a must to crack down on cops who brazenly abuse their authority. At stake is the credibility of the law enforcers.

Middlemen & bribes

Haryana's corrupt patwaris under scrutiny

THE exposure of corruption in Haryana's Revenue Department has laid bare a systemic rot. A government report implicates 370 patwaris and 170 middlemen in widespread bribery, with demands ranging from Rs 200 to Rs 10,000 for essential services like land partition and property mutation. Kathal, Sonapat and Mahendragar districts lead in the number of corrupt officials, while Gujratgarh is home to the highest number of unauthorised middlemen who exploit citizens for profit. The September 2022 findings in Panipat exemplify the extent of the problem. Over 1,500 applications were found pending during a surprise inspection, unauthorised individuals were managing official work and infrastructure deficiencies were glaring. Similarly, a patwari in Kurukshetra was discovered with disproportionate assets, a reflection of unchecked graft in the system.

The Supreme Court's December 2022 judgment in *Nevraj Dutta vs State (NCT of Delhi)* offers a glimmer of hope. By lowering the bar for evidence in corruption cases, it empowers agencies to secure convictions even when witnesses turn hostile. This landmark ruling should embolden the Haryana authorities to take decisive action against those involved in the revenue scandal. Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini's reiteration of a zero-tolerance policy must be matched by concrete action. Reforms like digitising land records, introducing biometric attendance systems, installing CCTV cameras in offices and conducting regular audits are critical. Moreover, swift punitive measures, coupled with citizen awareness campaigns and effective grievance redress systems, are essential to curb exploitation and build accountability.

India's 93rd rank in the 2023 Global Corruption Index underscores the urgency for reforms. Corruption in public offices erodes trust and tarnishes governance. Haryana must seize this opportunity to revamp its revenue administration, inspired by the Supreme Court's robust stance. Restoring public trust is not just a goal but a necessity for ensuring a fair and transparent system.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, JANUARY 20, 1925

In favour of the Congress

THE growing tendency among leading men in the country to participate in academic discussions on subjects exercising the public mind deserves to be sincerely welcomed. Such discussions are a common feature in university life in England, and this is clearly one of those matters in which India may do worse than take a leaf out of England's book. Of late, two such discussions have been held, one at the Benares University on the subject of the spinning franchise, and the other at the Nagpur University on the subject of the utility of Swamiji tactics. It is worthy of note and is, indeed, of no small significance that in both cases, a substantial majority of those who took part in the discussions were found to be in favour of the view represented by the Congress. Nothing could show either more clearly or more convincingly that of all the organised parties in the country, the Congress is still far and away the most influential and authoritative. That does not mean, of course, that the practical support which a particular view represented by the Congress finds in the country is necessarily proportionate to the vocal support that it finds at a public gathering. The failure of the more aggressive items of the non-cooperation programme is itself a sufficient refutation of any such idea. Not only were all these items adopted by three successive sessions of the Congress, but we venture to think that if a poll were taken at a public gathering at any place within the orbit of the Congress on the day the Mahatma practically sounded their death knell and if the predominant party in the Congress were still prepared to support them, it would be the easiest thing for it to obtain a majority in its favour.

Challenges galore for Trump

Retaining global edge in science and technology his main concern, not immigration



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

As he takes the presidential oath today, for the second time, Donald Trump has the potential to become one of the most influential holders of the world's most powerful political office in recent history. He not only won the electoral college but also a majority of the votes cast nationwide in the election.

His Republican Party controls the Senate and the House of Representatives, though only with a thin margin. The conservative majority in the Supreme Court, in an important decision on presidential immunity, has made the office stronger. Trump's conviction on felony charges has done no political damage to him, either domestically or abroad.

In the light of these factors and his unorthodox ways, the world waits with anticipation and apprehension, some fuelled by his comments since his victory in November, on how he will use his authority to address domestic and US foreign and security policy issues as well as the existential risks faced by humankind.

Trump made illegal immigration one of the leading issues of his campaign. Hence, it will be essential for his credibility to send some illegal immigrants out of the US to their home countries at the earliest. He will also increase his rhetoric against illegal immigration. But the fact is that despite Trump's electoral posturing and the rhetoric which may come henceforth, the US economy needs both low-level workers and high-end technical professionals. It will, therefore, be compelled to eventually become



NOT CLEAR: Will Trump seek to bluntly thwart Xi's ambitions or try to reach an accommodation with him? REUTERS

pragmatic, but not before Trump causes turbulence domestically and externally on this issue.

In the long term, though, it is not immigration that is the major internal issue for the US but manufacturing and retaining a decisive global edge in the frontier areas of science and high technology. There is consensus in the US on retaining the leading country in science and digital technology innovation. That led the Biden administration, in its dying days, to announce "controls on advanced computing chips and certain closed artificial intelligence (AI) model weights, alongside new licence exceptions and updates to Data Centre Validated End User authorisation".

The obvious intention is to deny China capacities in advanced AI innovation, though it's capabilities in sophisticated tooling cannot be effectively curtailed. How will Trump handle this important aspect of US efforts to retain its primacy in science and technology, with China having become a 'scientific power' with growing technological competence? This will be Trump's challenge for his entire term because of the great speed in the development of digital technology.

Trump's announcement of wishing to acquire Greenland bears the mark of the first-term

The real geopolitical challenge before Trump lies in managing the continuing rise of China.

Trump making outrageous remarks, unconcerned with the canons of conventional diplomacy. His approach to the Ukraine war will attract great media attention worldwide.

However, the real geopolitical challenge before Trump lies in managing the continuing rise of China. That has been the main foreign and security policy issue for all US presidents since the closing years of the first decade of this century. By then, it had become clear that China's rise had been far deeper and wider and rapid than US calculations.

With Xi Jinping becoming China's undisputed leader and showing a firm determination to take on the US, Obama, Trump 1.0 and Biden have had to handle his ambitions. He is relentlessly pushing forward.

It is not clear if Trump will seek to bluntly thwart Xi's ambitions or try to reach an accommodation with him. Trump's choice of Cabinet colleagues who have a hardline approach on China gives one indication, but his inviting Xi to his inauguration marks a softer touch. Naturally, the chance that Xi would have personally accepted the invitation instead of sending a representative was never there.

Indeed, the basic dynamics of the US-China Great Game will inevitably lead to even greater competition. It will need great statesmanship in both countries to ensure that this does not lead to conflict.

Trump wanted the Gaza war to end and issued dire threats to Hamas and, no doubt, behind-the-scenes pressures on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israel-Hamas ceasefire will lead Trump to claim how effective he will be on all issues. It is too early to predict how the ceasefire will pan out. Hamas has not been finished.

Outgoing Secretary of State

Anthony Blinken has noted: "Indeed, we assess that Hamas has recruited almost as many new militants as it has lost." What can be assessed, though, in the context of the larger West Asia is that Trump's implacable opposition to Iran will continue. What is not clear is how much of an investment he will make in addressing the basic Arab-Palestinian issue. The chances are that it will have a low priority for him.

Trump will continue with the Indo-Pacific approaches developed during his first term and taken further by Biden. He will seek to strengthen Quad. India is an essential component of the grouping. But that will not diminish the pressures he will put on India, especially on trade issues. But he will avoid raising human rights concerns with India. On the India-Pakistan front, he will remain indifferent, unless there are chances of a major conflict.

Where Trump will show little or no interest is in addressing the existential issue of our times: climate change. He is a climate sceptic who took the US out of the Paris pact. Extreme weather events, too, have not changed his outlook. This is particularly a major negative for the global fight against climate change at a time when world temperatures are breaking the 1.5°C threshold. Trump is unlikely to back off from his decision to allow drilling for hydrocarbons or seek to reduce its proportion in the energy mix.

However, whatever an incoming US President may consider to be his agenda, it has often been seen that he has had to amend it to address unforeseen challenges. George W Bush had to confront the tragedy of 9/11; he responded with a global war on terror. Barack Obama had to face the consequences of the global economic crisis of 2008, which began with the collapse of the Wall Street. Trump 1.0 faced the Covid pandemic and did poorly, while Biden had to face the Ukraine and Gaza wars. What unforeseen developments will Trump 2.0 have to deal with?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles. — Jimmy Carter

The mishap and the blame game

COL TIRATH SINGH RAWAT (RETD.)

It started as a tranquil afternoon, the kind that tempts you to believe the universe has finally aligned in your favour. My government vehicle, helmed by a driver whose calm could rival a monk's, breezed through the winding mountain roads of a state famed for its warmth and hospitality. What could possibly go wrong? A lot did.

Three hours into this postcard-perfect drive, we entered a quiet hill town. The sun was sinking gracefully, the roads were as silent as a meditation retreat, and I was busy appreciating the rare calmness of life. And then — bam! — a jarring collision brought us back to reality, our peace shattered like a dropped clay pot.

We jumped out to inspect the damage. Behind us stood a civilian car, its front crumpled into the rear of our vehicle. Out stumbled the driver, visibly drunk, dishevelled and wobbling as if gravity was a personal enemy. As is customary in small towns, a crowd materialised out of thin air. It's one of life's constants in India — like cricket matches on Sundays or chai breaks at work. Our inebriated friend, undeterred by the solid evidence of his guilt, decided to argue. His logic? If we hadn't been on the road, his car wouldn't have hit us. A true masterclass in creative reasoning!

Fortunately, a policeman arrived, drawn to the commotion like a bee to nectar. With a calm efficiency, he began taking notes as we explained what had happened. Just when it seemed that the matter was straightforward, the crowd chimed in with their expert analysis.

"Yes, he's drunk," one proclaimed, "but weren't you in your senses? Shouldn't you have avoided him hitting you from behind?" Apparently, in the local version of traffic laws, a sober driver is somehow responsible for preventing a drunk driver from ramming into him. Their logic was as twisted as a mountain road, but they presented it with such conviction, you almost wanted to applaud their audacity.

A senior police officer of the district reached the spot to restore sanity. He ordered a breathalyzer test, which confirmed what everyone already knew: our friend was drunker than a wedding banquet. For added entertainment, the officer asked him to walk in a straight line. What followed was less a walk and more an avant-garde *Naagin* dance.

Finally, the police officially declared the drunk driver at fault. However, as expected, the man's finances couldn't cover the damage to our vehicle. With no other option, we left him in the custody of the local authorities and resumed our journey, our vehicle slightly battered but our sense of humour intact.

The lessons? One, mountain roads may be picturesque, but they are never without surprises. Two, in India, even the simplest incident can turn into a full-fledged drama, complete with twisted logic, a lively audience and plenty of laughs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Artistic licence matters

Refer to 'An Emergency in Punjab' (*The Great Game*); a ban never serves any purpose. Seeking a ban on a movie or a book just gives it free publicity. If a movie heightens the sentiments of individuals or groups, they have the freedom to avoid it rather than forcing others not to watch it. No movie or book can be an accurate representation of facts and history. Some artistic licence is bound to be conceded. The time has come for us to act as a mature democracy and allow freedom of expression and speech to flourish. Let us cherish this freedom rather than make a mockery of it.

GURNOOR GREWAL, CHANDIGARH

Focus on Kangana's acting

Apropos of 'An Emergency in Punjab'; Kangana Ranaut's 'Emergency' is facing protests from Sikh groups. Punjabis are up in arms over her comments on the farmers' protests. People are accusing her of distorting facts and highlighting blasphemous content. Kangana is a versatile actor and the audience must focus on her acting. We must not forget that films are made for the sake of entertainment. The film has received mixed reviews, but it must not be banned and the people must see it to form their own opinion.

SONALI MUKHERJEE, MOHALI

Accept others' perspective

With reference to 'An Emergency in Punjab'; the Kangana starrer has generated a lot of controversy because many people think that the movie portrays Sikhs, especially Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, in a bad light. This movie only aims to portray the Emergency era. We must be ready to accept each other's perspective. So, we should watch the movie without taking it as a threat to any religion or community.

RAMANDEEP, JALANDHAR

Efficient monitoring system

Refer to 'Shun corruption'; keeping in view the plight of the underprivileged in society, the CJI has candidly expressed concern that corruption breeds inequality and the disadvantaged are the worst hit. These citizens generally lack confidence, so they are scared of

complaining. The grievances of the public should be attended to and addressed promptly to the satisfaction of the complainants. An efficient monitoring system needs to be established to have latest information about the disposal of cases. This is one of the remedies to make the system efficient.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

Top players not spared

With reference to 'BCCI talks tough'; the BCCI has taken the right decision to let the cricket players to follow rules and regulations during matches. As the team lost the recent Australia series 1-3, the board was compelled to take harsh decisions and even top players were not spared. The BCCI has told them to avoid taking families along on tours as far as possible so that their performance is not affected. Sports persons should give due priority to the sport.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURGRAM

Simplicity in mourning rituals

With reference to the news report 'Panchayat prohibits jaljalea, pakoras at bhog ceremonies'; this move rightly aims at discouraging wasteful expenditure on bhogs, which are primarily held to pray for the peace of the departed soul. This step would go a long way in promoting simplicity in mourning rituals. It would ease financial burden on the bereaved families and lessen the unhealthy competition on such occasions. Even more laudable is the decision to use the fine collected for welfare projects.

NK GOSAIN, BATHINDA

BJP's hypocrisy

Refer to 'BJP vows Rs 2,500 aid for women, LPG at Rs 500 in Delhi manifesto'; the Prime Minister's criticism of freebies offered by Opposition parties falls flat when his own party adopts the same tactics. This glaring hypocrisy highlights the need for politicians to lead by example and abandon unsustainable practices. Perhaps India is the only democracy where such blatant voter appeasement overshadows meaningful policy debates. Parties must focus on sustainable reforms in education, healthcare and employment to ensure real progress.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR